

The Blurring Of Fantasy And Reality In Francoise Ozon's *In The House*

Chung Chin-Yi

Abstract: Germain wants an intrigue, and gets more than he bargained for. A dangerous game starts with the invasion of the family. Is the teacher leading the student, or is the student leading the teacher? Is this fantasy, or for real? Soon the line between fantasy and reality blurs and we eventually see the fantasy has taken over and destroyed reality as Germain is fired for stealing the Math test to feed the fantasy and his wife leaves him for being a voyeuristic predator.

Keywords: Fantasy, Reality, Voyeur, Blurring, Tragedy

Germain (Fabrice Luchini) is a French literature teacher married to Jeanne (Kristen Scott Thomas), who runs a modern art gallery without much success; she insists on showing conceptual art that no one understands, or in fact that everyone understands too well as pretentious claptrap. Germain, disgusted by his students' plebeian efforts at writing, at first comes across as a kind of aesthetic purist who sees literature as occupying some sort of moral high ground; we are gently pushed to this conclusion because we can see he is uncomfortable about telling his wife the truth about her gallery, that merely slapping a picture of Hitler on a blow-up doll is not a real indictment of the tyranny of gender (or the gendering of tyranny – it works either way. Amidst the dross, he is surprised to find a short essay by one of his students (Claude) that captivates him. In simple prose, Claude describes his fascination with the house and family of schoolmate Rapha and how, as a math tutor to help his nice but thick

petty-bourgeois friend (tellingly, he cannot understand "imaginary numbers"), he manages to infiltrate Rapha's house and capture the "scent of a middle class woman", Rapha's mother convincingly played by Emmanuelle Seigner. He ends his vivid account with a "to be continued" (à suivre, in French,)

Germain starts talking to Claude, who until then was an otherwise unremarkable student. He begins tutoring him and encouraging him to write, although he maintains a superior attitude about the relationship (more or less: "it would appear you have some small talent"). Germain becomes so entranced by Claude's treatment of his friend's ultra-conventional and boring middle class family that he begins to suggest which details to emphasise in his accounts. In other words, he starts suggesting plot lines to heighten the narrative drama, which Claude more or less puts into play by manipulating the family; eventually, the division between fantasy and reality is broached. It seems at first the film will insist on being yet another highbrow indictment of middle class banality – young Claude is smarter and better educated than anyone in the Rapha household; even Mommy Rapha's obsession with House Beautiful style decoration is belied by her very banal results. But there's a twist: amidst the semi-snide comments it becomes increasingly obvious that Claude and Germain have other agendas than merely exploring the upper reaches of high art by diving into the world of the petty bourgeois Raphas.

Works cited:

Baudrillard, Jean. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Semiotext, New York, 1988.
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Manipulating the Raphas becomes a power game, in which Germain can flatter his ego that was flattened by his lack of literary talent (we discover he is a failed novelist), and Claude can finally feel something because he comes from a broken home with a paralysed father and a mother who abandoned the family when Claude was young (we get hints later that it was to seek love). At this point, nearly everyone is tainted and morally ambiguous: Germain's wife's gallery fails because she insists on showing highbrow conceptual art that no one buys despite warnings from the building owners (a *deus ex machina* represented by "twins"), but she leaves him when she realises Germain is no more than an emotional voyeur who can only live through Claude's manipulation of the innocent Raphas. Germain gets fired because he stole a math test so Claude could get brownie points with the thick Rapha junior; Claude's alleged talent is revealed to be no more than a fascination with the seedy; at the end, he seems as homeless as the by-now fired Germain. When the Raphas get their act together to take advantage of a deal in China, they unite: Mommy rejects Claude's advances and realises he's just a boy with a boy's childish destructive streak; Daddy grows a pair, stops whining about his richer and more successful partner, and launches his own business; even Rapha junior, thick headed and apparently innocent and naïve, finally realises that Claude is really more of an emotional parasite than a friend and beats him up for making a pass at his mother. In the end, the boring and conventional Raphas are vindicated, and the intellectual and artistic highbrows (Claude, Germain and his wife) are ruined. Germain wants an intrigue, and gets more than he bargained for. A dangerous game starts with the invasion of the family... Is the teacher leading the student, or is the student leading the teacher? Is this fantasy, or for real? Soon the line between fantasy and reality blurs and we eventually see the

fantasy has taken over and destroyed reality as Germain is fired for stealing the Math test to feed the fantasy and his wife leaves him for being a voyeuristic predator.

Hence the implosion of the 'real' and 'reel' as real life and fantasy dissolve into each other and Claude becomes a voyeur and participant in the fantasy. The worst part of this obscene and indecent visibility is the forced enrollment, the automatic complicity of the spectator who has been blackmailed into participating. Yet there is a voyeuristic appeal at work to such programmes. Spectators are empowered as omnipresent voyeurs. Thus, these shows de-center in the sense of exploding our sense of the real, but empower simultaneously by the omnivoyant gaze it grants us. In the House demonstrates Baudrillard's thesis that obscenity and pornography is our fascination, as well as the fact that sexuality is a ritual of transparency (*Ecstasy of Communication* 32). It is over-exposed and overly visible rather than hidden in days of old. Images have become our true sex object. Germain exalts sex in Claude's fantasy because he seeks to reduce it into partial objects and fulfill desire in the technical sophistication of the body, which is a metastatic body, a fractal body which can no longer hope for resurrection. In other words sex is sublimated, objectified and made technologically consumable. Hyperreality threatens to dissolve subjectivity and to control minds; we are subjects of domination by the image and the politics that are encoded within it. The obscene and the spectacle of insignificance finally triumphs in these reality series. This also threatens to undermine agency as real life and television dissolve into one another and the line between hyperreality and reality collapses. The only agency we are assured in these situations is that of omnipresence as a voyeur, but this is an impotent and passive subjectivity.



Pupil and teacher, as both seducer and seduced, enter into a form of conspiracy. Life and literature become almost indistinguishable. They're also tragic, both professionally and personally: Germain heads inexorably for disaster as a teacher and a husband. Germain is fired for stealing the Maths test to feed the fantasy and Jeanne leaves him for being a voyeuristic predator.

For Baudrillard, reality television which is the equivalent of Claude's voyeurism in *In the House* signifies that what people deeply desire is a spectacle of banality. This spectacle of banality is today's true pornography and obscenity. It is the obscene spectacle of nullity (nullité), insignificance, and platitude. (Dust Breeding 1) This stands as the complete opposite of the theater of cruelty. But perhaps there is still a form of cruelty, at least a virtual one, attached to such a banality. At a time when television and the media in general are less and less capable of accounting for the world's (unbearable) events, they rediscover daily life. They discover existential banality as the deadliest event, as the most violent piece of information: the very location of the perfect crime. Existential banality is the perfect crime. And people are fascinated (but terrified at the same time) by this indifferent "nothing-to-say" or "nothing-to-do," by the indifference of their own lives. Contemplating the Perfect Crime — banality as the latest form of fatality — has become a genuine Olympic contest, the latest version of extreme sports. Indeed, as we see with reality series such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, it is existential banality and the boredom of our own lives that we desire as spectacle. Very little happens that would not take place outside the context of the indifference of our own lives. In elevating the banal to spectacle, we are elevating ourselves as media objects. We are allowing hyperreality to reign over reality and hence celebrate

reality as interplay of signs and the collapse of the signified. Reality television demonstrates Baudrillard's thesis that the obscene lies in the fact that there is 'nothing to see' and that the spectator, rather than desiring difference from others, desires sameness with the subjects that we witness on television. As Baudrillard notes in *Ecstasy of Communication*, all that matters now is to resemble oneself, to find oneself everywhere, multiplied but loyal to one's formula. It is the universe of the fractal subject, dreaming of a formula to reproduce himself to infinity (*Ecstasy of Communication* 41). Consequently, reality television incarnates our desire for sameness and our fascination with the obscenity or pornography of objective reality.

In the *Ecstasy of Communication*, Baudrillard once again reminds us that with the advent of television, as in hyperreality, the subject-object distinction collapses and we are immersed in its reality — "television becomes a control screen" (13). He uses the metaphor of driving to relate our relation to television—no longer controllers of a device, we are now subjected to its control, we become a "computer at the wheel", not a "drunken demiurge of power" (13). He argues that television creates a space of hyperreality that overtakes reality and hence displaces metaphysics. Our subjectivities are dissolved— we are no longer 'subjects of interiority' (13) in control of television but subjected to the controls of multiple network satellites. Television becomes an intrusive actor in our domestic space— that overtakes our lives from work, consumption, play, social relations and leisure. Baudrillard further explains that the hyperreal displaces the real and renders it useless. Social relationships within the home are destroyed. Reality is 'minituarized'— television replaces our desire for human relationships or ideals and renders organic and real bodies and events superfluous (*Ecstasy* 14). The



obscene fascinates us, and replaces the organic with the machinic. In this regard, advertising also becomes an omnipresent reality – materializes its ‘obscenity’-monopolizes public life with its exhibition. This is also precisely what reality television shows are: Simulations and the triumph of the hyperreal and mediated reality.

The most intimate processes of our lives become feeding grounds for the media (the Louds on television – a family which was put under camera surveillance-also might draw a parallel to the current phenomenon of reality TV shows such as Big Brother, Survivor, Temptation Island, The Bachelor and so on). All aspects of life are permeated and infiltrated by the media, subjecting everything to visibility, exposing everything to the inexorable light of communication. In Baudrillard’s terms we live in the “ecstasy of communication”, which is obscene because it renders the private exposed, a pornography of information and communication.

It is the obscenity of the hidden that is suddenly overexposed and visible. In this dissolution of the exterior and the interior, Baudrillard likens the contemporary subject to the schizophrenic – who cannot distinguish between inner and outer and is subject to all the vagaries of the external world (Ecstasy of Communication 14). The subject’s sense of individuality and distinction from external objects is dissolved. He/she becomes obscene, as is the world. The subject is total prey of hyperreality, a pure screen, a switching center for all networks of influence. For Baudrillard, both the body and the ‘self’ (both conform to images) can be divided and commodified, as governed by the capitalist/advertising code (Ecstasy 42). To see the ‘self’ as a technology possessed by the mediascape, as Baudrillard does, is to become schizophrenic. Baudrillard’s subject is therefore, completely de-centred

and dominated by the image. Hence Germain is dominated by the fiction of Claude’s fantasy and pays heavily for it in the end-he loses his job as a teacher for stealing the Maths test to feed Claude’s fantasy and his wife leaves him for degenerating into a distasteful voyeur.

In The House is playfully meta-textual, as Ozon asks viewers to question what’s actually a part of Claude’s story, and what he’s just making up to please his mentor. The teacher is more bothered by Claude’s snide, uncharitable characterizations of the bourgeoisie, given that he and his museum-curator wife (Kristin Scott Thomas) are in the comfortable middle class. So while Germain shows little interest in Claude’s home—where the boy lives with a disabled single dad—he urges the kid to empathize more with his subjects, and to write about how Raffa’s mother (Emmanuel Seigner) covets a more glamorous life, and how the father (Denis Ménochet) is sweating out a business deal to manufacture knock-off products with a Chinese supplier.

Much of *In The House* is about how something that isn’t real—like a fantasy—can still be captivating. Ozon begins with Germain reading Claude’s first paper aloud, letting viewers conjure their own accompanying images. And throughout the film, as Jeanne stresses over her next gallery exhibit, the artists she considers—including one who has patrons put on earphones and listen to him *describe* art—end up having a lot in common with the movie’s theme. Even one of the montages that opens *In The House*—shots of hundreds of students of different classes and races, all wearing the same school uniform—invites viewers to consider how much presentation affects reception. *In the House* thus blurs fantasy and reality and asks us to consider whether it is better to watch or be watched.