

De-centered subjectivities in Pynchon's Vineland and theorists on television

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Abstract:

We have seen how television assaults our subjectivity and de-centers us. 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. However, the path out of this radical de-centredness, as Derrida argues, is an awareness and vigilance towards the politics of memory and to politicize events alternately in a way that conceptualizes the image and thought. Our only hope for reclaiming agency hence, is a critical awareness and distance from the image that Derrida argues for.

Keywords: Hyperreality, Subjectivity; De-Centredness; Television; Control.

In Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, television destroys authentic relationships. The Thanatoids spend their time watching television incessantly and imitate television models in *Celebrity Roast*. They model their behavior after television shows as Hector Zuniga never stops talking about the family he wanted to create in *I Love Lucy* with his

former wife Debbi and Debbi named the television set as a correspondent in the divorce. Television mediates and alienates the characters in *Vineland*. A friend of Frenesi's son Justin says that dealing with television is easy: "Pretend there's a frame around 'em like the Tube, pretend they're a show you are watching. You can go into it if you want, or you can watch and not go into it." (*Vineland* 351) This mediation extends into even family when Sasha trying to reunite Prairie with Frenesi insists their grandchild sings the theme song from *Gilligan's Island*.

In *Vineland* the characters are dominated by television: from the imitation of TV personalities to the acceptance of televised reality as real to actively changing experiences to meet standards set by television. Hector is an extreme case of 'Tubal Abuse' a Tube crazed escapee from NEVER, 'National Endowment for Video Education and Rehabilitation.' Though Frenesi sees how TV affects Hector and the cause behind it she fails to apply the same reading to her own reaction to media stereotypes. She explains her betrayal of the Protest in apolitical personal and sexual terms as the consequence of an inherited weakness for men in uniform. As she prepares to masturbate to a TV rerun of *CHiPs* she experiences the 'primal Tubefreak miracle' of discovering her favourite TV character come to life in the form of a US marshal standing at her door. She does not connect television's sexualizing of authority with her own docility to an authority she knows is perverted. Frenesi stubbornly keeps to media

stereotypes of her condition: the hardbitten professional betrayed by her sexual indulgence. She blames herself not the system for her experiences.

Isaiah recognizes the dominance of the Tube and the problem of commodification and mass media for resistance politics. Typically for Pynchon one of the novel's wisest most insightful perceptions comes from Vomitome:

Whole problem 'th you folk's generation, Isaiah opined' Nothing personal is you believed in your revolution put your lives right out there but you sure didn't understand much about the Tube. Minute the Tube got hold of you folks that was it that whole alternative America, el deado meato, just like th' Indians, sold it all to your real enemies and even in 1970 dollars – it was way too cheap “ (Vineland, 373)

Reality television explodes the division between the hyperreal and the real, but what it ultimately represents is the triumph of the hyperreal and the manufactured image. As Derrida argues, it is an 'artificiality' that is produced and made rather than a record. (Echographies of Television 41). It also serves to satisfy our thirst for voyeurism, invasion of privacy and as Baudrillard states, it increases our fascination with the obscene (Ecstasy of Communication 33). It is an exercise of 'desiring to be seen' and desiring the Other to return our gaze, as we desire the mock celebrity that reality television affords. In witnessing the privation of its participants, we are also simultaneously celebrating our comforts, so that there is a sadistic element to taking pleasure in watching the sufferings of others at work as well. In coming across as 'more real than real' and in our fascination with the hyperreal and manufactured image,

Baudrillard's statement that we no longer watch television and it is television that watches us seems remarkably prophetic in the surge and success of reality television programmes (Ecstasy 31). Reality television appeals because of its 'live' element, its telepresence, and in Derrida's terms, the space it allows for the 'arrival' of an event, whose expectation is made of a 'nonexpectation,' in so doing it offers a certain variety, diversity and spontaneity that we cannot find in scripted television programmes. Derrida also argues for a 'messianism' that guides the event, the promise of futurity, hence perhaps it is the open-ness and heightened anticipation that we take pleasure in (Echographies of Television 13). There is also an element of 'testimony' and truth to live television which separates it from scripted programmes. As it happens only once in live real time there is a precious singularity and uniqueness to the moment. Derrida once again explains that it captures the irreplaceable present and bears witness to the fact that "this was there" (Echographies of Television 94). One might also argue that the addressee enjoys its status of 'being addressed' in reality television, thus enabling the addressee to participate in production of meaning as the confessional scenes in reality as well as reporting in broadcast programmes are directed towards engaging the audience in a being 'participants' of an event. There exists an ineluctable 'reality effect' when the specters on television seem to be watching us (Derrida 123).

One might also argue with Derrida, that reality television takes its market into account in its production; artificiality is determined by market forces as journalists and reality television actors seek to project an image that is pleasing and appealing to audiences as consumers. Derrida however argues that this also leads to falsification, as so called 'live'

images, rather than being reality, are often edited, cut and recontextualized with a certain politics in mind (49). We can tie this in with Virilio's idea of televised news as production that is theatrical and manipulative.

Both Derrida and Virilio argue that the liveness of 'real time' is an illusion. For Derrida any image that is technically reproduced involves deferral, and thus inscribes a certain difference. Perhaps this difference is precisely the space we need to free ourselves from being enslaved by the image. Virilio likewise argues that live television is actually presented in slow motion, representing a subtle deception (57). Difference might thus free us towards appropriating images and escaping de-centredness. Furthermore, Derrida also claims that television hones subjectivity rather than dissolving it. Derrida analyzes the effects of television on subjectivity and states that, at "every moment [television] introduces the elsewhere and the world-wide into the home. I am thus more isolated, more privatized than ever in my home with this permanent intrusion, desired by me, of the other, of the stranger, of that which is far away, of the other language. I desire it and at the same time I enclose myself with this stranger, I want to isolate myself with him without him, I want to be at home (with myself)" (80). Although television constructs a relation of hospitality toward perfect strangers, i.e. those you see on screen, this imaginary companionship unsettles the subject while, at the same time, precipitating an increased desire for psychological borders, the subject longs for a clearer definition of himself. This state of unhinged subjectivity fosters an oscillation that is not likely to end peacefully but leads to a frenetic search for selfhood.

Baudrillard and Reality TV

For Baudrillard, reality television 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 ‘minutuarized’- 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.

While hyperreality performs an act of de-centering and impinges on our identities, is there not some sense in which we derive identities (albeit simulated and virtual ones) from the virtual worlds we inhabit? Is it not possible that the hyperreal also functions as our ontological frame of reference, an interpretive framework from which we derive our sense of agency? I would argue that television in a way functions as an existential

source of meaning, a source of agency for characters. While Baudrillard certainly does make a strong case for the destruction of subjectivity, we will see with Derrida there is a possibility that we are in a position, via difference and selection, to appropriate and compose our perspective on images.

Derrida, Reality Television and Agency

In *Echographies of Television*, Derrida contrary to Baudrillard, argues that the subject has never been simply a passive viewer. Derrida occupies a middle position, arguing that while images have a politics that threaten to determine us, we are also in a position to have strategies of appropriation, selection, and critical thought with regards to the image. While it is a fantasy to believe that the consumer will completely reappropriate the images which come to him, Derrida states that the addressee does not become completely passive. A relative reappropriation is under way, what Derrida calls “exappropriation” (58). According to Derrida, we are in a state of quasi-illiteracy with respect to the image. We must learn to discriminate, compose, paste and edit images to gain mastery over them. This is a skill which must be developed within and without schools. For Derrida this involves developing a new relation to the politics of memory. Derrida contends that any politics of memory would imply the intervention of the state – a state that legislates and acts with regard to nonfinite material to be stored (59). While today we can almost claim to archive everything, Derrida wonders if it is ultimately the state that decides what is worthy of preservation, and will always privilege the national and the public. If we were to delegate this responsibility of the politics of memory to a state institution, then it will be a minority or a fraction of the nation rather than “integral” or “general will” that preserves this memory. Although Derrida says that a politics of memory might exist, he

also emphasizes that it is nevertheless necessary to educate citizens, subjects, or televisual audiences to be vigilant with regard to the politics of memory: to be alert that it was a particular politics, as well as essentially a politics. One must simultaneously practice and be critical of a politics of memory (*Echographies of Television* 63). In Derrida’s view this means developing an awareness of selectivity (63). Derrida argues that this awareness will never be a spectatorial critique, or a theoretical vigilance. To politicize these technical events alternatively and to democratize them, one must also be wary of politicization. Here, Derrida’s reading of developing a critical stance towards a politics of memory proves to be immensely liberating in light of Baudrillard and Virilio’s pessimistic assessments of the potential for agency with regards to television. This is the most optimistic reading of the three, developing a meta-awareness of a politics of memory in order to politicize it alternatively.

Virilio: Reality and Subjectivity

Virilio’s subjectivity comes close to Baudrillard’s in being passive and manipulated, but he also argues that as voyeurs we are granted powers of the divine, and that we are made partners in the propaganda that we choose to believe. Virilio also argues that the media authenticity which ‘real time’ television seeks to promote is an illusion and a deception. Virilio provides the instance of the Gulf War and likens its media spectacle to theatrical production – arranged by directors of media channels (41). News channels skillfully construct the theatre of ‘real time’- we take as true, the mediated reality of ‘real time’ in place of live spectatorship. Virilio likens such a presentation of war to a game played in a stadium where audiences take sides, keep track of goals scored between the two countries at war. He discusses the notion of ‘telepresence’, where our positions as

voyeurs allow us to simultaneously participate in events that take place on screen. This phenomenon is similar to us being metamorphosed into divine beings, having gained powers of omniscience (Virilio 42).

Television now controls public opinion and replaces the public space of politics. It is the forum of all emotions and opinions. Interestingly, as Virilio explains, democracy takes place via television and incites one to vote – not accidental that these images are also controlled and manipulated. Hence, the entire world is under tele-surveillance and we become passive witnesses of an orchestrated production. As Virilio says, one does not discuss a live image, one undergoes it. Derrida, however, offers a solution to the hegemony of this artifactuality – by promoting, through discussion, education, culture, occasions for preferring alternative productions in the consumers or addressees, who are beginning to participate in production and undermine the politics of mainstream media. Derrida terms this the ‘cultural exception’ – the pursuit of singularity and identity against hegemony.

Interestingly, novelty of the war coverage is the communication with worldwide viewers by satellites – instantaneous retransmission in homes around the world. Tele-spectators are constantly being emotionally manipulated in what Virilio calls a “publicity clip” (Desert Screen 51). As mentioned earlier, Virilio argues that mass communication possess traditional attributes of the divine: omnivoyance and omnipresence. War is no longer a war of images but one of waves, war that takes place at the speed of light, this indirect light which illuminates and blinds the minds of a dumbfounded public. News channels alerts the entire world to their version of real time conflict – presents their version of the truth of events (Desert Screen 52). Thus, Virilio argues that we become

victims of television. Virilio makes a convincing case, like Baudrillard, for de-centred agency in it being passive and manipulated by images which are deceptively produced and orchestrated. Finally, in the essay, “Realuty Gulf” Baudrillard states that the virtual war which takes place on television usurps the place of the actual war in our minds; it desensitizes us to the actual horror of war and replaced actual war in our minds (100).

Hence the implosion of the ‘real’ and ‘reel’ as real life and television dissolve into each other and we are simultaneously voyeurs and the subjects being watched by television. In other scenes, many arguments take place as characters grate on each others nerves due to excessive time together. There does seem to be a greater realism than most scripted television shows. 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. How else is one to explain their massive success on the television market? The rest of Big Brother, which documents rampant flirting, exhibitionism and sexual innuendos, even characters stripping their clothes off in front of the camera, 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. We exalt sex on a screen because we seek 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.

We have seen how television assaults our subjectivity and de-centers us. 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. However, the path out of this radical de-centredness, as Derrida argues, is an awareness and vigilance towards the politics of memory and to politicize events alternately in a way that conceptualizes the image and thought. Our only hope for reclaiming agency hence, is a

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