

Wilful Amnesia

We were all together once and kind of stuck. We thought we had another condition for 'simultaneous collective reception' in television. After all, there we all were glued to the set. But the actual experience was different. Like the telephone we were connected only as we were separated by the apparatus itself.

But we were still stuck, wanting it, something. When we turned it on, and even when switching the channels, we wanted it. But what was it?

I kept going off on a tangent. I ran into my favourite renaissance scholar, realizing once again how much the desire for 'simultaneous collective reception' is tied to development of state-craft and the deployment of subjectivity. A monarch without a subject simply cannot be. And before that, too, religion, icons. But then nothing is ever comparable, and it is the differences that are important. And then asking a question: how is television not like 16th century masque balls in the English court of James, designed by Inigo Jones? That isn't a question so much as another kind of invention, history I did not trust. Of course, there were public processions as well - court poets, painters and sculptors whose job it was to construct a symbology that could be read by the general public - Charles IX comes into Paris. That was 'simultaneous collective reception' in the 16th century, except the term didn't exist then and there are too many exceptions. There was for example a very different class structure both within the private domain (courtiers and not 'politicians') as well as the public (mercantile/peasant, but not bourgeois).

So where does that get us in terms of an analysis? And the term 'simultaneous collective reception' with its utopian optimism dating from the incidence of socialist revolutions.... that too, is something else. Benjamin Buchloh notes as he describes

this reception that entirely new forms of audience address had to be constructed if new 'masses' were also to be constructed. But who is making the construction; and in what sense are artists culpable? Unanswerable in terms of iconicity, unmanageable in terms of a present critique.

A riddle - like the history of the romance - beginning its life during the reign of Elizabeth I in the Ascension Day Tilts, where Elizabeth decided that she must replace the Church Festivals and be worshipped by her knights. It is not surprising then that the 'romance', becomes the 'romantic' with the triumph of wit in the 17th and 18th centuries - the mocking imaginative voice that could enjoy a form of social mobility, depending on who was in ear-shot. That was a romance, a fairytale: words were not things. Something for nothing, not contaminated by origins. But then monarchs were masters of rhetoric, too. You had to look the part and see your look reflected everywhere. Statehood consisted, in part, of being able to inhabit the role of the monarch, in the skilful reworking of popular mythology and the staging of dramas that could provide a lived experience (for a select audience of nobility) under specific conditions for a form of 'simultaneous collective reception'. James I's masques provided a seamless allegory which, as they were performed, took on the status of mythic truth. In the end, the monarchs came down off the small stage, real people were ennobled by the experience of the spectacle, and the king's story became everyone's.

This form of narration would ultimately find its way into the first person narrative of the novel and become democratized, as the romantic tradition took over the heroic figure and institutionalized the imagination. But it is still a riddle, how wit leading to the novel could point to a realm of experiences imaginable but not yet materialised; how a text could set into motion schemes for varieties of differing unimaginable outcomes.

How the text functions is, of course, through the psychoanalytic construction of one omnipotent presence of mastery and control allowable to the subject who can identify and find a place within the text. This is the transcendental subject philosophically inscribed throughout this system of representation, of metaphysics, of psychoanalysis and so on - we all know this and it is an old story.

It is the *collective* in 'simultaneous collective reception' that is important. That is what was at stake in the development of the cinema, particularly as a self-perpetuating machine. Yet in understanding the cinema's ability to mimic the unconscious, to literally re-enact its mechanisms and produce specific and predictable effects, it is not to a collective experience that reference is made, but rather to

a model that proposes and assigns a place to the spectator from which the 'hallucinated satisfaction' of infantile pleasure is recoverable. There is something else here as well. The cinema would have died out as just a curiosity had it not been able to be joined to the narrative tradition and tell a story. Once again it is the same story; a hero on a quest over and over again. And it is the same quest, for mastery and control. He must be master; and sadism demands a story - the ritual continuously presented for re-enactment, a strange form of worship.

Does TV provide a 'simultaneous collective experience' or is its power located in its ability to deliver the comfort of narrativity right into the home?

With our remote control devices, we ceaselessly change channels, looking for something, rarely stopping.

If we are unable to consistently watch something, does that mean that we no longer desire the kind of narrative closure implied by the format of the same story; the story of the hero and his quest? Perhaps. If the feelings of mastery and control usually associated with the autonomous ego's investment can be delayed or are no longer important concerns of subject positions, does this mean that other subject positions are possible? Or do we just exist in a timeless state suspended, waiting for something, some new chance for mastery and control. Certainly we are still looking.

There is, amid all the operations performed on a unified subjectivity, one figure, a remnant from the Romantic period that is still powerfully a part of contemporary imagination in much the same way as it was in its own time. That figure is the vampire. That this figure could survive several centuries in a basically unchanged state, (at least in terms of how he is understood) cannot be seen as a failure of imagination so much as a testament to the profound separation at the core of post-modern experience between a lived historical past and the continuing present. Consider the case of Baudrillard's schizoid subject stuck in front of his screen, seeing no separation between the private and public and having the experience of neither since he is schizoid and therefore, by definition, outside the bounds of the psychoanalytic remedy. How different Baudrillard's position is from Foucault's in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault states: "He who is subjected to a field of visibility and who knows it assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself, he inscribes himself in a power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles, he becomes the principle of his own subjection." Baudrillard assumes, however, that this network is neutral and, rather than examine the void, he prefers to float. This leads to the 'final apathy', which to quote from Freud, is a condition wherein treatment is resisted. In one

sense, Baudrillard's concept of the 'hyper-real' might be said to function in much the same way that language functions for the schizophrenic. "In schizophrenia words are subject to the same process as that which makes the dream-images out of latent dreamthoughts - to what we have called the primary process. They undergo condensations and by means of displacement transfer their cathexes of one another in their entirety. This process may go so far that a single word, if it is specifically suitable on account of numerous connections, takes over the entire representation of a whole train of thought." Obviously, I am not saying that Baudrillard or his theory are exactly schizophrenic - I am only pointing out the neatness of a theoretical tautology from which for him there appears to be no escape. Schizophrenia is, according to Lacan, a failure of the subject to accede fully into the Symbolic, and results in psychosis. This formulation parallels notions around establishing a different order of subjectivity. However, it is precisely this order of subjectivity as difference definable as madness' which has always been located (since psychoanalysis) as 'other'. Octave Mannoni notes: 'What is truly Freudian is the discovery that the ego is the object of narcissism, that it belongs to the Imaginary order, that it can in some way be 'other' than ourselves, an image in which we can alienate ourselves, particularly in psychosis.' The crux of the argument both for different kinds of subjectivity and especially for those marginalized groups of others who include women, minorities, and any non-male groups or entities, revolves around the formulation of all differences as a kind of psychosis. That is the legacy of legitimation.

That said, what is so appealing about the vampire? Surely metaphor is no excuse for political practice. In turning, however, to one of the last great sentient beings of the Romantic imagination a reconsideration of the vampire myth from the vantage point of late 20th century capitalism may provide some insight into the possibilities for other formulations of subject positions.

The symbology of the vampire contains a cross-section of irremediable contradictions that lie at the heart of modernism. We all know the most obvious one: the vampire is not dead, yet he is not alive. He sucks life through the blood-kiss, yet he cannot bleed, except after 'feeding'. He cannot experience pleasure because he is no longer human; and of course, cannot procreate through the sex act, although he can make others like him, but they cannot assuage his loneliness. He lives outside of time and, as such, has no history, no memory, nor is he bound by the conventions of daily life. He must live at that time when all else is dead, at night. He lives in a dreaded state of anticipation and anxiety which carries with it a profound emptiness

and loneliness not remedial even by death for he cannot easily die. He must spend his time watching the lives of others who are unconscious of his very existence. He cannot stand his reflection because it reminds him of his situation. He cannot constitute himself as an 'other' through the mirror phase. He is doomed to be what he is, he cannot change the fact that he does not exist. The mirror does not lie here, does not allow him that feeling of mastery and control essential even to adult survival. It insists on showing him precisely the state he is in.

Most vampire stories describe the plight of the vampire, not as a victim, but as a member of the last vestige of the aristocracy, an aristocracy which feeds on the masses, inciting them to such a feverish pitch that they stalk the vampire and attempt to either burn or murder him in his crypt. He is portrayed usually as a male who feeds on the not quite sexually innocent females, those females who evidence desire, whom he seduces as he enters their bedrooms at night. He offers a sensuous pleasure and the possibility of surrender to something that is impossible to confront, creating in his victim, at first, a fervourous anxiety which sets up in the victim a particular kind of desire, and, in later stages, gives way to seeming apathy and delusions. Exactly what the configurations of this desire are, remain as always tied to particular plots, yet in most cases the victim ultimately desires to make into a vampire those that it most love.

In considering aristocratic social relations in terms of the control of images, one thing is clear. The aristocrat had culture and produced images, while it was often the peasant or artisan who was commissioned to *make* the images. In democratizing these images, the bourgeois wanted to claim them for his own, to make them over, in a sense, into his own image. In a certain sense it could be argued that the vampiric symbol represents to the enlightened bourgeois the fear that something evil and horrible is at the core of bourgeois consciousness from the older aristocratic regime, and that it will forever be a part of the new consciousness, impervious to history or the passage of time. To be reminded of these social relations around the image sets up an angst that is only partially alleviated by proprietorship.

The early history of the bourgeois as a collector of images is well documented, but with the growth of mass cultural images a different hierarchy of the image emerges. And something of the old aristocratic regime returns. To begin with the images of mass culture are not democratic, but autocratic. One controlling image serving many people. Here the duality inherent in the relationship of the image to the masses recurs - the question of which it is - democratic or autocratic—hovers around each popular image. The question seems unresolvable and creates an

anxious tension by virtue of its impossibility and promise. The image works on the masses when, to refer to Metz's *Imaginary Signifier*, the spectator is in a certain kind of trance. And like the aristocrat, the image demands that a certain fealty be extracted. The nature of this fealty is a hunger, a hunger so powerful that it creates in the spectator the desire not only for more images, but for that state of mind produced by the images themselves.

This state of mind is a surrender to those conditions imposed by its regime - the reign of 'lifestyle'. This is not a state of being synonymous with the 'infantile pleasure' produced by narrative structure in the cinema. It is arguable that the pleasure of cinema is the pleasure experienced by the adult (as though he were an infant) as 'hallucinated satisfaction'; in taking up this position, or being served by these images, the consumer performs that double movement, the suspension of disbelief. Unlike conventional narrative, which sutures the consumer's place with its reliance on closure, switching channels allows for no such hallucinated satisfaction. The consumer is forced to confront the impossibility of his position. The place that is set is not necessarily for him. Desire is unrelieved and the non-narrative condition is characterized by a tenuousness, making sure that he (we) cannot exist on the other side of the screen, no matter what our desire, try as we might. Humanistic liberalism calls this state anxiety.

This is that state of anxiety produced by the conscious realization, on the part of the spectator, of the utter alienation and lifelessness of his or her position in front of the screen. 'Lifestyle' is unobtainable. Consumption brings no relief. McLuhan's message - that the medium is the actual action, or event - can be seen in one sense as the medium that is able to inhabit or take on the properties of a variety of forms. This echoes the process not of the construction of the symbol, but the locus of the space from which the present can be interpreted. This could again be the soothing seductiveness of textual analysis where, to give one example, the Symbolic can be reduced to a code, and read as that code which cannot be reduced beyond its binary oppositions - beyond, as Barthes states, the 'articulation of two face to face warriors engaged in a ritualized battle!' This symbolic code can be seen as inscribing into culture all of the central binary oppositions, the antitheses, that maintain the social order.

Yet what can a code tell us about the incidence of its own failure when any number of possible readings are available? The crisis of disbelief which surrounds the producer/reader of the television text is familiar to everyone. It is a legacy that characterizes the conscious relationship of the spectator to the television text. It is

also the same relationship that is characteristic of any would-be producer of a television/mass media broadcasted and received image. We watch consciously or surrender, no longer struggling but giving up to the images a level of criticality that Barthes called the pleasure of the analysis. Unfortunately, this surrender does not produce satisfaction, but only the fervourous dreams of the possessed. The remedy for this condition as de Palma has shown in the film, *Body Double*, is action. It is only by *producing* images that the subject of mass culture begins to feel some measure of control over the alienation produced by this condition. The vampiric position becomes the position of the spectator in the face of mass culture. Simultaneously it must be embraced by the maker at the moment of action for the activity itself is horribly contaminated. Yet always in this ritual, there is the hope for another ritual of shared communion utopianistically defined as 'simultaneous collective reception' - a religious experience exchanged in alienation, at the site of a desire wholly mediated by this state.

So the images of mass culture might be said to construct a vampiric consumer. Like the vampire, the spectator cannot recover by consuming the images, or by avoiding them either. Just as the vampire cannot come back to life again as he was before, but only look forward to the nothingness of the present, rather than final death. The bourgeois has finally ingested the last traces of the vampiric condition, and become a kind of vampire himself. It is this crisis on *this* side of the screen, and not at the mirror, where this vampiric condition might be said to be felt most in all of its historical uneasiness. And it is this crisis in consciousness, what Freud called 'disavowal' which might be said to most characterize the vampiric state.