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Snap Shot: Mushroom Cloud

The setting: the Nevada Test site, Nye County southern Nevada, January 1951 to October 1958. Of course the 'cold war' extended everywhere, including the South Pacific and Australia, but at that particular place hundreds of members of the US military gathered to watch the spectacle of 'Able', 'Baker', 'Charlie', 'Dog', 'Easy', 'Sugar' and the rest detonating in the atmosphere and sending up that fetish-image of military might, the 'mushroom cloud'.

Protected by nothing except eyeglasses – as though the eye was all that breached the distinction between sign and world – they watched these 'tests', feeling privileged, momentarily instructed on detonation to turn their backs on the 'oven door opening on a Sunday roast'. Bodily proximity deservered, the shared air, earth, ambience structurally ignored by the worlding of the world picture. What was seen were not dynamic reactions, the forcing of matter into form rising fourteen kilometres high and the

displacement of millions of tons of earth. Not the slow motion fall-out of fine radioactive particulate stretched out over the years, nor the release of ionising radiation into the future of plant, animal, atmosphere, earth, bone marrow, skin tissue and children yet to be born crippled and with heart problems. Not the sign of these propensities carried home (in)visibly to excited dinner-time conversations, but just the ‘thing’, the form, a spectacle folding in on itself before us, the sign now of the paucity of our vision: the ‘beautiful’ mushroom cloud.

In our age of the televisual image and the ‘aesthetic eye’, the mushroom cloud is a sign both of awesome, destructive power and of inexorable human error (in turning back to gaze upon the mushroom cloud rising over Hiroshima, Enola Gay pilot Colonel Paul Tibbets famously logged the comment, “my God, what have we done?”). Its cultural presence lies in this defused history, made virtually quaint by endless televisual replay, and has recently stormed back into the cultural imaginary in full colour as a possible future. In the incredible perpetuation of the threat of annihilation, we can sense a deep cultural blindness, a key agent of which is the televisual.

We who live within the orbit of television tend to lose sight of the fact that the televisual image that describes worldly relations so coherently, can only do so by obscuring its relation to those relations. It brings relations into being, but is structurally incapable of recognising them. We assume the capability of witnessing world events, yet this depends on a certain deprivation of the sensory aroundness of the world.

Televisual images of war are a particularly devastating sign of this anaesthesia. Among the most powerful of recent times are the aerial impressions of the burning Kuwaiti oil wells that punctuated the war in the Persian Gulf for Western television audiences in 1991. The apocalyptic, memorial spectacle of these images – after Herzog’s ‘Lessons’ eternally scored by Mahler¹ – were a focal reality in a televisual war dominated by ‘Nintendo’ aesthetics, and they burn still in our shared, cultural memory. These images bring into view the complex ecology of the televisual image, binding us ‘here’ to a mental and historical ‘there’. Henceforth we do not ‘see’ events of conflict in the Middle East or elsewhere, we recognise them. When we watch these ‘events’ take place, we do not see them as intensive yet cursory glances that obscure a much more complex reality, rather we see and share a common sense view: that we have never seen more. Conversely, the ecological damage travelling into and out of such a televisual event, while of its own catastrophic measure, escapes the televisual eye.²

When we locate the burden of this televisual insensitivity with the event of war, or more broadly with the ‘military-industrial-media complex’, we underplay the ecological contribution of

television itself as it generates ways of being fundamentally insensitive to ecological relationality. Televisual objects of recognition communicate a sense of irrepressible abundance, vitality and proximity. They banish the shadows of the unrepresentable and demonstrate a blithe indifference toward the specific context of their appearances, as well as to the differences these appearances make.

Heidegger said television abolishes from common sense “every possibility of remoteness.”³ Rather than being brought close to television’s promise of trans-historical and trans-cultural worlds, what we witness in the televisual environment is *foreclosure*: the resolution of things into a particular kind of figure-ground distinction deprived of multi-sensorial location. The televisual subjugates the ‘other’ “to a stringent economy of the *same* which operates according to the criterion of *commensurability* and accordingly strives to achieve ‘the greatest possible use at the smallest expense.’”⁴ The self-certain orientation that is brought out in things enframed in the televisual environment is at the same time our impression of them. Heidegger tells us that the *gestalten* (Figures) of vision are not just the spatial things encountered, “but the whole characteristic form impressed on a being from which we read off what it is.” This impression is registered as the stamping together of *eidōs* and *Gestalt* that takes place *through our vision*.⁵ We are conjoined with an indifferent/inhuman eye that participates in televisual production, what Avital Ronnell has called ‘the production of corpses that don’t need to be mourned.’ When we watch television, we learn to watch out for the ongoing promise of the closure of ambiguity. Unfolding into presence, decanting form into form, tracing relationality into erasure, (re)affirming the apparently impassive and inert nature of things, the televisual image violently secures objectivism.

Those who are concerned about television’s place in the world vastly underplay this operational rather than representational violence.⁶ The televisual image *intervenes* in the world transgressing its constraining media, animating ecologies beyond itself. The image stakes a claim on the imagination, and at the same time “opens a dimension that can never again be closed.”⁷ Every televisual ‘repetition’ is also a bringing into being *for the first time*. This is the ‘secret dimension’ of the televisual, its generative, productivist ability.⁸ The anaesthetic and sedative consequences of the televisual are in these terms not effects of the attenuation of reality, rather they are *designing* relations. The televisual image throws forward into the world not simply cultural models, but in Marshall McLuhan’s evocative words, actual ‘tactile promptings’ for configuring mind, body and environment.⁹

The ontological collusion between vision and thing in Heidegger is given an ecological resonance in the cross-disciplinary work of Gregory Bateson, whose ecology of mind sends the ‘Idea’ back

into the world. Thoughts, perceptions and things are dynamically related – the things human beings make *actualise* ideas. Bateson puts it thus: an idea is “a difference that makes a difference”.¹⁰ The idea of transcendent mind, for example, prevails in institutions, infrastructures, processes and products, all of which then find their own habitual momentum, like industrially emitted poisons toxically, invisibly flowing through the ‘food chain’ willed on by an industrial culture increasingly immunised against its environment by technology. Systems designed by rationality – like television – increasingly speak at ecological ‘cross-purposes’ with their environments, yet they continue to work assuredly and influentially. What is produced is an ‘ecological pathology’ that becomes reinforced by “thousands of cultural details”.¹¹

Bateson’s ideas offer important insights into the *mediage* of design, and have been recognised as such.¹² Designed things embody ways of thinking, making them sensible. Designed things then go on to create worlds within human experience, becoming part of the salient milieu of designing, but also *beyond* human experience.¹³ Television is a human-designed, non-human thing that acts in this way, we might say ‘environ-mentally’. In its intersection of so many frames of our existence, ‘here’, ‘there’, ‘then’, ‘now’, ‘nowhere’ it is a *difference that makes a difference*.

Yet the televisual image reaches out blindly. It does not open onto particular situations or environments, it opens within itself an objective assumption, producing an uncanny, one-way communication that is blithely unaware of those co-present. This is something that Jean Baudrillard has indicated as a key aspect of mass media. He says the media ‘speak’ in such a way as to “*exclude any response anywhere*.”¹⁴

This idea links to another of Baudrillard’s – the notion of simulation and his extraordinary and provocative claim that ‘the Gulf War did not take place’. Baudrillard’s ideas have generated some degree of bemusement and anger. Verena Andermatt Conley for example remarks that Baudrillard “questions the physicality of an intervention such as that of Operation Desert Storm. It might be said that humans did not die; that oil wells in Kuwait were not exploded; that tons of smoke never swept over India and the East...”¹⁵

Conversely, I think Baudrillard challenges us to develop a sense for the anaesthetic impact of the televisual. Rather than marking the disappearance of reality, simulation is an insight into the designing of reality – the designing impetus of the sign. In ‘The Precession of Simulacra’ Baudrillard utilises the relation between map and territory to illustrate the fictional division between sign and world. In this text the sign legitimates the real world at the same time as the real world is founded by the sign. This correlative legitimation is no simple reversal, as Baudrillard attempts to show. Simulacra – sign forms – *precede* the real world, determining

our relation to what is encountered in the same way as the map precedes the territory. In this light I read the following famous affront to reality as an explication of design agency:

Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory – PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA – it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but of our own. The desert of the real itself.¹⁶

Baudrillard is trying to show this operational rather than representational real, a real from which the 'naïve charm' of representation has been extinguished.¹⁷ And here Baudrillard can be seen in light of the systemic thought of Bateson and also Niklas Luhmann, who mobilises an *operational* constructivism to evoke the reality of the mass media, in which the self-referential system is operationally closed but structurally open *at the same time*.¹⁸ This is what Baudrillard means by simulation: simulation brings the world into being, it operates, it is world-making. The 'desert of the real' that is 'our own' refers to the actual though vastly unintelligible designed surfaces of the everyday.¹⁹ Baudrillard here marks the simulacrum with the operative ignorance of productivism. The sign is the *actual*, is what literally makes sense when so much of the world is and is made, '(in)visible'.

Following this, I read Baudrillard's version of the 'truth of simulacra' instead as a 'de-sign' tool, as a way to read the 'becoming-natural' of the designed world. The 'vestiges of the real' are the irruptions of ecological 'impact' that design works so hard and generally with great efficiency, to 'take care of'. The 'map'/simulacra is not merely benignly inauthentic. The simulacra as a designed thing that 'thinks' it follows the real is attended by an entire and distinctive aesthetics of transparency, lightness, thinness, false perfection, not only 'unreal' but with reality-depleting capabilities. These are however ecological matters: the endless, intoxicating material streams of designed things – simulacra – are indeed capable of depleting the future of 'reality'. Baudrillard in a sense here takes on the 'point of view' of the simulacra vis-à-vis 'the real'. The 'poverty' and destructive capability of simulacra are measures therefore of the 'self-understanding' and agency of the simulacrum itself. The domination of sign value does not indicate the closure of materiality or a disregard for it, but rather its dangerous (in)visibility.

The danger subsists in the generation of simulacra, which re-install the representational 'difference' and the 'charm of the real.' Thus a new form of environmentality is staked out, forged upon the atomistic sign value of things. The sign entails a "whole labour of disassociation" and a remobilisation of 'environment' in terms of its own rhetorical logic.²⁰

Television gives us in these terms a very particular kind of 'environmental awareness', one that 'begins' with the environment as a 'place' constituted in objective terms, immune from our involvements. The televisual image – such as that of the burning Kuwaiti oil wells against the apparent nothingness of the desert background – revokes intimacy, memorialising objects for our vision. Yet it also fills this place where we are. Television does not merely 'bear witness' to 'natural' or 'cultural' disasters such as events of war, it engineers them: the horrors that television communicates are also horrors that television designs. We 'witness' that which would not have happened in a world that would not have existed without television.

Imagining this (in)visible operation of the televisual image prompts new questions about design and our ongoing environmental irresponsibility. Products of design are compelled to 'make sense' in the televisual milieu. Thus they share this object-orientation, teaching us in our daily uses to habitually ignore the relationality of the systems we depend upon. 'Telegenic' products actualise and promote ways of living that in Bateson's terms speak at ecological cross-purposes with their environments. Yet far from taking care of the burden of environmental ignorance, design bent on securing the ongoingness of the 'economy of the same' intimately involves us in a trajectory of destruction that we fail to see, even as the damage explicitly unfolds.

The task of responsible design in these conditions might be seen as restoring what Bateson calls 'systemic wisdom': a sense for causes and consequences and for the differences design makes.²¹ We need, he suggests, to *learn to learn*; learn to receive new signals in an adaptive way, a way attuned to these differences.²² The designer who 'learns to learn' is not learning to revise choices within an unchanged set of alternatives; rather, to change the *attitude* of the system, its 'setting'. Products or services of design are largely destined for actual, habitual use rather than for being witnessed and rehearsed at a comfortable distance. As such, design has an intrinsic capability, if not yet the capacity, to intervene in the resolute flow of televisual anaesthesia.

Notes

1. I refer to Werner Herzog's documentary film on the visual aftermath of the Gulf War *Lessons of Darkness* (*Lektionen in*

- Finsternis*) Germany, 1992 (35mm colour 52 minutes. German with English subtitles).
2. Andrew Ross makes this point in 'The Ecology of Images' *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 91:1, Duke University Press, 1992, 218.
 3. In 'The Thing' Heidegger tells us that television is the peak of the abolition of every possible remoteness. "Yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance." *Poetry, Language, Thought* trans. Albert Hofstadter, New York: Harper and Row, 1971, 165.
 4. This is Samuel Weber's translation of a passage from Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology' which we find particularly illuminating in considering the ecology of the televisual. Weber 'Upsetting the Setup' *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* ed. Alan Cholodenko, Sydney: Power Publications, 1996, 69.
 5. Martin Heidegger *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* trans. Albert Hofstadter, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, 106.
 6. The view shared by the American empiricist social science school, the regulatory environment and 'public opinion' is overwhelmingly that televisual violence contributes to violence in the real world correlative with the degree of 'exposure'. Barrie Gunter and Jackie Harrison *Violence on Television 2nd ed.* New York: Routledge, 2001, 281.
 7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* trans. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995, 151.
 8. "World War III is a secret dimension inherent to our own technology." McLuhan quoted in Christopher Horrocks *Marshall McLuhan and Virtuality* Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000, 17.
 9. Marshall McLuhan *Understanding Media: the Extensions of Man* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967, 316.
 10. Gregory Bateson *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, 272.
 11. Bateson *op cit* 493.
 12. Ezio Manzini uses Bateson's critique of the systemic imposition of 'purposive thinking' to consider how design might lose its ecological blindness. Manzini, 'Prometheus of the Everyday' in *Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies* ed. Richard Buchanan and Victor Margolin, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.
 13. In the words of Augustin Berque "the space of human territory has a physical and measurable dimension, but it always deploys itself *beyond* that dimension." Augustin Berque

- 'Ecumenal Ethics' lecture given at the Faculty of Architecture, The University of Melbourne, 15th July 1997.
14. Jean Baudrillard 'Requiem for the Media' *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* 169–70.
 15. For Andermatt Conely, Baudrillard had, by *Simulations*, departed reality and with it his "nascent critique of environmental damage", carrying "his readers off into a world of simulacra that leaves matter far behind." Verena Andermatt Conley *Ecopolitics: the environment in poststructuralist thought* London and New York: Routledge, 1997, 29.
 16. Jean Baudrillard *Simulations* trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Phillip Beitchman, New York and Brooklyn: *Semiotext(e)* 1983: 2.
 17. "Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between (the map and territory) that was the abstraction's charm." Baudrillard *Simulations* 3.
 18. Niklas Luhmann *The Reality of the Mass Media* trans. Kathleen Cross, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, 5. Luhmann's understanding of a system's 'self-referentiality' is based on the concept of 'autopoiesis', which as his translator tells us, he was introduced to through the work of theoretical biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. Luhmann *Ecological Communication* trans. John Bednarz Jr, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989. xi.
 19. Manzini extends Baudrillard's critique of the object world in *The System of Objects* (1968) in his exploration of the culture of materials. While some thing might be here before us and could not possibly be more objectively present, it is at the same time quite often *not* – materially if not semiotically *indeterminate*. "An object is now made of what it seems to be, and of the performances which it offers." It is therefore as Manzini tells us the *intelligibility* rather than the *reality* of things that is increasingly at stake. Manzini *The Material of Invention* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986.
 20. Baudrillard 'Design and Environment' in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* trans. Charles Levin, St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981, 187.
 21. 'Lack of systemic wisdom' is essentially for Bateson a problem of the bias or 'attitude' of the system, which is substantially augmented by the 'set' of technological systems that conform to the bias. Bateson *op cit* 440.
 22. "Learning denotes change and change denotes process which is itself subject to change." Bateson *op cit* 283.