

# The Politics of Wonder

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*A note on what follows:* Social life cannot proceed without meaning. And yet what passes for social life in informationalised societies is no longer dependent on meaning but on data. What do we mean by meaning? I suggest below (albeit in a rather fragmented, thinking-aloud way) that it is an assemblage – the once-natural sequence of being, knowing, interpreting, judging, willing and acting – and that this assemblage no longer operates as it did in earlier times. Toward the end (but also dotted through the paper) I argue that we have some possible tools to hand to escape this problem: the internal contradictions of technologies, especially media technologies; and the contradictions generated by the subsumption of agency into the biopolitical, especially the exclusion of pre-individual bodily impulses from instrumental rationality.

Consider David Hall's installation *A Situation Envisaged: The Rite II (Cultural Eclipse)*, (1988/1990; see [www.davidhall.com](http://www.davidhall.com)). A monolithic black wall – some memory of Kubrick's monoliths in *2001* which, as Ed Strickland (1993) pointed out, were already minimalist sculptures – surrounded by a multicoloured corona of light that flickers and changes incessantly. It is a wall of television receivers turning their backs on their audience, a black box that hides the aerial and powerleads. The programmes they receive play with a score by David Cunningham but without broadcast sound, too close to the wall to catch a glimpse of the screens, far enough away to allow the light abstracted from them to scatter. The only image visible is a screen mounted on the monolith, on which there plays a vertical-scan image of the full moon, produced using a reconstruction of the first Baird Televisor. Chrissie Isles wrote of it

It is mysterious rather than spectacular; an ominous, authoritarian presence.. challenged only by the single picture of the moon panning silently across the sky at the centre of its shadow. Nature emerges from the eclipse of technology to deny its physicality. The 'aura'.. is here given physical manifestation through a construction of democratic mass media . . . By placing the moon, ruler of the irrational and the psychic, in the central position around which the technological aura revolves, not only the authority of broadcast television but also the perception of the physical nature of the sculpture itself is called into question... (Isles 1990).

"These are the days of miracles and wonder". Nature will only emerge from the eclipse of the media, but the media themselves form the corona of that eclipse. *A Situation Envisaged* negates the instruments and the network it is built out of. It gives us nothing from the promise of endless

consumption. Though it doesn't carry what the Americans refer to as 'messages' or 'commercials', and though it offers none of the usual pleasures of television, the installation radiates the possibility of meaning, a possibility just out of reach, a possibility which it achieves by negating the flow of usual meanings, meanings that have become so banal and interchangeable that they no longer *mean* in any recognisable sense. Meaning is, however, intrinsic to social life. Without meaning there can be no society. To make meaning possible, Hall has negated the society that should give rise to it.

Sociology tells us that individuality is a construction of society, which itself is an aggregate of individuals, which stands over against the individuals, which it constructs. This moebius argument can only be overcome by ditching the terms in which it is cast. Society is intangible, and individuality is unknowable. It makes sense to start from something tangible and knowable: media. It might appear that media are a derivation of another intangible and dubious category, communication. This is not the case. Mediation precedes communication, historically and logically. There is no communication without a material medium and these material media, from gesture to money, can be held in the palm of your hand, poked, tasted, relished – and analysed.

To say that media are material is to say that they exist in time as well as space. To say that media exist in time is to say that they have histories. They have histories because they act and interact, change and are changed. Change itself has to be mediated. Media are the medium of change, as the hammer is the medium of the blow. Mediation is the fabric of history. If we can understand the changes occurring in our media today, we will understand the historical process of our time. A small but significant point: 'media' is a plural term. There is no one medium whose study will illuminate everything. The study of money as medium (economics) is a case in point. It follows that the historical process is plural. So the thesis that mediation is the fabric of history does not reduce history to a single process. But it gives us a way to understand the changing relations between people, and between people and their artefacts and their natural (or post-natural) environments with something like a material and realist basis. It gives us the chance to appreciate the media arts as addressed to fundamental properties of human life.

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In 1948 at the age of 69 the American poet Wallace Stevens concluded his speech on *The Effects of Analogy*

Thus poetry becomes and is a transcendent analogue composed of the particulars of reality, created by the poet's sense of the world, that is to say, his attitude, as he intervenes and interposes the appearances of that self (Stevens 1951: 130)

In the speech, Stevens describes two kinds of poet, clearly aligning himself with the second: the poet for whom mysticism of imagination is origin, but who struggles towards reality as the highest goal. He is then a realist. At the same time, he is a phenomenologist, insistent that the specific calibre of the poet's life inflects every choice of metaphor. The 'particulars of reality' are not simply things but the aspects of things that give themselves to analogy: men are not sheep, but a multitude of men without direction may *appear* to be, as they are in one of his examples from Matthew's gospel, 'as sheep having no shepherd'. He might have added that the same person who appears as a shepherd here will appear as a lamb elsewhere. Analogy is not logic: it permits of multiple identities and none, or rather, of the non-identical. For analogy, metaphor, to operate, two non-identical things meet in a particular sensibility to reveal something about at least one of them. Analogy in Stevens' talk is the gathering of meaning in a human consciousness through a process of experienced relations between specific qualities of distinct objects or processes. Poets come to speak before and to the world in words that 'have made a world that transcends the world and a life livable in that transcendence' (Stevens 1951: 130). The world requires these words, these analogies, if it is to be habitable. Analogy is the power to construct an identity shared by elements in the world and the poet who inhabits the world. The alternative is

a land in which none of our problems had been solved after all, and nothing resembled anything we have ever known and nothing resembled anything else in shape, in color, in sound, in look or otherwise. To say farewell to our generation and to look forward to a continuation in a Jerusalem of pure surrealism would account for the taste for oblivion (Stevens 1951: 77).

Though this slightly earlier presentation addresses a rather different problem – the nature of the afterlife and its relation to history – Stevens here indicates the limits of analogy. The risk of analogy is that it might produce an endless equivalence of atomised and dispersed fragments of reality in any order and therefore none. This is the risk we face most especially now in the first years of the 21st century.

Analogy may proceed on any level: in Proust, the scent of a *madeleine* can evoke a world. Stevens gives an example of twelve 'casual exfoliations' of a pineapple, among them

7. These lozenges are nailed-up lattices.
8. The owl sits humped. It has a hundred eyes.
9. The coconut and cockerel in one.

('Someone Puts A Pineapple Together' in Stevens 1951: 86)

These 'Apposites, to the slightest edge, of the whole/Undescribed composition' are anchored by their reference to the pineapple, without in any sense exhausting it. In the game of wit, we move from the pineapple's scales as shuttered windows and as opened eyes, from owl to cockerel, in short we move between incommensurables. This is both the power and the downfall of analogy. The pineapple proliferates analogies beyond the point at which they are capable of producing identities. But more positively, they indicate the possibility of bringing together things which cannot be measured by the same rule. This is critical for us, in an era in which our every move is counted, mathematised, abstracted as number and compiled in algorithms. The introduction of a commonality which is not numerical is an achievement in its own right, even if it risks the fatal surrealism of a world without any resemblances, and therefore any identities at all.

It is important that analogies are mutually illuminating. When one islander calls another 'coconut', because he is brown on the outside but white on the in, the metaphor works as a slur because it is droll, but fails as analogy because it reveals nothing about the coconut; in fact deprives the coconut of its actuality by reducing it to the same level of caricature as the object of the slur. Sri Sathya Bai Baba asks instead 'Who poured the water inside the coconut?' Here the coconut – a ripe, tender coconut, a specific fruit, not just the species – and an action of pouring are brought together into a question with no answer. No-one could pour water into the closed fruit. The impossibility sheds light on the coconut just as it does on the implicit 'who', God, for whom the impossible is possible, and who is also ripe, tender, full and specific. We can of course supply a more rational explanation, but only at the expense of losing the wonderful discovery of water in the coconut, whatever mechanism brought it there. Before the powers of the universe that care for even this marginal corner we should feel an appropriate generosity. Perhaps, as Stevens implies, that is the generosity of the author of the question. The analogy makes the world habitable, by illuminating not only the coconut but the reader.

We might contrast Sri Sathya's question with the information that between 1990 and 2005, the Philippines increased its production of coconuts from 11,941,960 to 14,824,585 metric tons (Philippine Coconut Authority, <http://pca.da.gov.ph/vop.html>, retrieved 17 September 2007). Though the information is undoubtedly of value to someone, that value can only be measured statistically, for example in the form of money. Moreover, it makes no sense on its own. It must be implicated in a vast ocean of comparable statistics concerning population growth, price, competitors, export markets, value added, other crops and an endless chain of data, because what is risked by analogy is already true of statistics: they are already endless, and to that extent

each datum is without significance. Meaning, if it is to arise at all, must arise elsewhere. The modernist analogy analysed by Stevens (critiqued by Eco and defended by Stafford) is now in crisis as a result of the triumph of statistical data over knowledge and meaning. The significance of this crisis is clarified in Derrida's analysis of why 'responsibility, freedom and justice can never form the object of a determinant form of knowledge' (Derrida 2001: 229), explaining

As to a decision that is guided by a form of knowledge – if I know, for example, what the causes and effects of what I am doing are, what the program is for what I am doing, then there is no decision; it is a question, at the moment of judgment, of applying a particular causality. When I make the machine work, there is no decision; the machine works, the relation is one of cause and effect. If I know what is to be done, if my theoretical analysis of the situation shows me what is to be done, – do this to cause that etc. – then there is no moment of decision, simply the application of a body of knowledge, of, at the very least, a rule or norm. For there to be a decision, the decision must be heterogeneous to knowledge as such (Derrida 2001: 231)

The philosopher here points towards a situation which appears to him integral to the very idea of a decision. It appears so to him because he lived in a time in which the making of decisions was increasingly difficult, because the extension of knowledge had become general. In terms of moral and political action, statistical analysis has already encompassed the vast majority of our actions. Even apparently aberrant actions are accommodated – as crime statistics. Meaning is lost when, as Akhil Gupta pointed out in a lecture at Melbourne in September 2007, we congratulate ourselves that only ten million children died of preventable causes last year. To make decisions truly worthy of the name is only possible if we can escape from the network of endless information chains constituted in the datasphere, the space of data, of what is given. Data is the enemy of decisions. The data accumulated in a bureaucracy makes it almost impossible to make a decision: all decisions have been foreseen, and there is a rule to apply in every situation. To act decisively, that is, beyond the rules, requires acting beyond the given. It requires a meaning which is not given; that is, it requires interpretation:

The deepest promise interpretation makes to the mind is perhaps the assurance that it gives that what exists is not the ultimate reality – or perhaps we should say: what exists is not just what it claims to be. We might say then that the negativity of natural history – which always discovers what phenomena used to be, what they have become and, at the same time, what they might have been – retains the possible life of phenomena as opposed to their actual existence. In this sense, the interpretative stance in philosophy is the prototype of a utopian stance towards thought (Adorno 2006: 138)

Because it is not given, meaning escapes the bureaucratic reduction of knowledge to data. Considered as interpretation, knowledge produces not actuality but potentialities; not data, givenness, but the possibility of change, of decision in Derrida's sense, of action. Data is not known but processed. What passes for given is not knowledge at all, but it has so deeply substituted itself for knowledge that we must now pit meaning and knowledge against data, the given, information. We must do so not only to restore meaning, but, if Derrida is right, to restore the capacity for action: our potential, as potency, not only to mediate but to mediate change. Acting ignorantly is not enough: that would be merely the irrational obverse of the same unaltered system. The contemporary decision arises from contemplation of the situation in all its aspects but especially from what is unknown in it, what in it has the capacity to be other than what it claims to be. Perhaps in earlier epochs, when information was neither so comprehensive nor so deeply standardised, unified and fragmented into individually meaningless units as at present, decisions were commonplace. Perhaps they are still possible when we are outside of our home turf: strangers in a strange country having to guess which street to go down and what food to eat. Stevens notes that the man who has passed his life indoors who goes out on a clement day is more likely to feel the weather deeply than someone who lives outdoors all the time. A certain freedom then is necessary, a certain strangeness. A certain escape from the given, the processed..

Such was the strategy of Stevens' analogies. Shklovsky's *ostranenie*, Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekte*, Bazin's realism. Such assaults on habitual attitudes, perceptions and thoughts, like Benjamin's optical unconscious shattering the everyday with the force of 24 frames a second or Pound's 'Make it new', were the stock in trade of the avant-garde moment of modernism. Shock, however, as Benjamin already knew, was not the exclusive property of the avant garde. In Valéry's essay from which Benjamin drew his epigraph the shock of electronic media is already announced. In the 1960s there appeared two books which tore apart the aesthetics of shock, both by Marxists, both deeply informed by Hegel, but otherwise radically different. Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* savaged the erasure of reality by ever more radically dissociated images:

This is the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by "intangible and well as tangible things", which reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence (Debord 1977: ¶36)

In our period of history, the dominance of spectacle has been overtaken by the new universal medium of exchange, data, which replaces the tangible world for its administrators. This change has

one crucial additional factor: it strips out from the world the capacity to be otherwise than it seems to give itself to us, of its potential to become other. In Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* too, the administration of culture reduces culture to commodity form. The sole remaining aesthetic strategy is neither shock, nor even to imagine the world differently, but to negate the present in all its givenness, and thus hold open the possibility of difference. For both authors, the aesthetics of shock had failed, and worse still had betrayed art itself. Where Benjamin wanted to see the 'author as producer' teaching other authors, Debord and Adorno saw her teaching the culture industry how to amaze, to induce a slack-jawed awe at the spectacular cornucopia of consumerism, and to use that amazement – already oppressive in its erasure of judgement, will and action – as a means to oppression.

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An odd corollary of the informationalisation of the world arises in ethics. We no longer seek the Good: our Western ethics are based on the defeat of Evil, an absolute Evil without further motive or history. The opposite of Evil is not Good but innocence. Innocence serves as ideal in an administered society because it is passive, accepting of what happens to it; because it demands protection, because it is incapable of acting on its own behalf. So innocence forms the alibi for the unimaginable violence of contemporary war. Innocence is innocent of having made a decision, and so it is innocent of meaning. Only the deaths of the Evil mean anything ethical (but they never die). We say the deaths of the innocent are 'meaningless', *and* that the violence that causes it is 'meaningless', and while the ideological contradiction is obvious, the two meaninglessnesses meet in the belief that such deaths are almost beyond mourning because the acts that bring them about are not given, not information. The killing is meaningless because it is the necessary obverse of information: the irrational to information's triumph of the rational. The deaths of the innocent are meaningless because they escape from the regime of information by their sheer unexpectedness.

This innocence of the dead becomes a raw material for politicians to ascribe to their citizens as they prepare for endocolonisation: the innocence of the suburbs that must be protected from every threat, real or imaginable. That innocence is of course a construct. So too, after a while, is the innocence of the victims, which is reconstructed as an image of the apolitical, the non-military, the uninvolved, so that the politicians and the military have a purpose in life. Such considerations may be needed in order to rethink the negative aesthetics of Debord and Adorno. If, as Derrida asserts, decision, as the well-spring of action, is not bound to knowledge, then it is not the knowing subject

that decides and acts. How then are we to restore the potential for ethical action? We find this assertion in Adorno:

If we behave spontaneously we are no more simply blind nature than we are suppressed nature. We feel that we are ourselves. But at the same time we feel that we have been released from the spiritual prison of mere consciousness and this impulse enables us to enter, to take a leap – call it what you will – into the realm of objects that is normally barred to us by our own rationality (Adorno 2006: 237)

Just as Hamlet only finally strikes out after he has been wounded in the duel, and then lashes out in all directions, so the act that proves freedom is in some sense atavistic, but is so in the framework of reason that shapes the objectification – and latterly the probabilistic objectification – of the world that confronts us as rational beings.

In *The Intelligence of Evil*, Baudrillard asserts 'We live in terror both of the excess of meaning and of total meaninglessness' (Baudrillard 2005: 134), arguing that as a result

We experience the simultaneous attraction and repulsion of the event and the non-event. Just as, according to Hannah Arendt, we are confronted in any action with the unforeseeable and the irreversible.

But, since the irreversible today is the movement towards virtual ascendancy over the world, towards total control and technological 'enframing', towards the tyranny of absolute prevention and technical security, we have left to us only the unpredictable, the luck of the event (Baudrillard 2005: 136)

Baudrillard's pessimistic take on the contemporary suggests that the only alternative to the administered society, one that enacts Heideggerian technological dominance through a politics whose goal is to prevent *any* event from occurring, is the random act of violence typified by 9/11.

Adorno offers a counter argument:

what is needed for a willed act or for practice in general is the coincidence of two antagonistic elements that do not become completely fused. On one hand there is the intellect, reason, which presupposes the idea of the unrestricted, highly progressive theoretical consciousness. On the other the bodily impulse that cannot be reduced to reason (Adorno 2006: 239)

Here is the specific place where action might occur: at the interface between the rational and the embodied. But reason has defined itself apart from the body and its instincts; and mounted its claim to glory on the triumph of logic over history. Logic, the grammar of reason, sets itself up as a universally valid system apart from time; but Adorno argues that it is also an entirely historical creation. Both in and out of history, logic strives to find a way to effect its will on the world it has

rejected, and too often setting instrumental reason against the natural world with the most destructive results on the environment and on human bodies subjected to technologised rule. As long ago as 1947 it was already apparent that 'Power and knowledge are synonymous' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973: 4), and that 'the identity of everything with everything else is paid for in that nothing may at the same time be identical with itself' (Horkheimer and Adorno 1973: 12). The translation is ambiguous: inadvertently perhaps it recalls Frege's definition of zero as the non-identical: 'Since nothing falls under the concept "not identical with itself", I define nought as follows: 0 is the number which belongs to the concept "not identical with itself"' (Frege 1974: 87). In Horkheimer and Adorno's double negation, everything is non-identical, and as a result nothing is self-identical. Even the specificity of zero disappears under commodity capitalism. The commodification which makes everything exchangeable even reaches out to deny the fundamental, even metaphysical negativity of the void. Reversing Frege, for the authors of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the one thing that is identical to itself and so cannot be exchanged is nothing, zero, null. The long reach of the administered society reaches even into the roots of being, and proves, in the most disheartening way, that even being is altered in the movements of human societies. This is why David Hall's installation must negate the societies and the media assemblages that have negated meaning, the Good and being.

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A pallid sepia sky covers the battlefield of Thermopylae. The warriors are caught in poses of utter stillness, blood sprays over them, and detonations hurtle past their shields. Time spurts forward then curdles into slow motion. In Zack Snyder's adaptation of Frank Miller's graphic novel *300* (2006) the Spartans driving a Persian force over a cliff, a blast of sunlight outlining their figures as they fall in slow motion. A cut, and we are looking down the precipitous cliffs watching their fall in real time. The camera tilts upwards to show the Spartans gazing at their beaten foes on the rocks below. We realise the camera is positioned in mid air. We are in the place of the dying and the dead.

Deep focus and the long take have taken centre stage in a cinema of spectacle and illusion despite Bazin's attempts to secure those techniques for realism. Bazin (1971: 26-7) had already expected this quality of formal innovation when he articulated the necessary illusion integral to cinematic realism, and the generative contradiction which that produces: no technique is free of the temptation, indeed the internal necessity, of producing illusion, and when pursued for its own perfection, loses the reality it sought to grasp. Deep focus and the long take may have ushered in, with neo-realism, an epochal realism: today they usher in an integral illusion. In a similar way, *découpage* no longer serves

its classical function of orientation and coherence, not least when the reverse angles show relationships between CGI characters and actors, and do so not on the horizontal but on the vertical axis. A clearer example of modernist paradigms becoming postmodern pastiche – a 'blank parody' in Jameson's terminology (1991: 17) – could scarcely be imagined.

This blankness echoes a line of Walter Benjamin's concerning the 17th century. Referring to the split between Catholic and Protestant, he reflects

For all that the increasing wordliness of the Counter-Reformation prevailed in both confessions, religious aspirations did not lose their importance: it was just that this century denied them a religious fulfilment, demanding of them, or imposing on them, a secular conclusion instead.

Religious doctrine was safe from heresy, the old hallmark of mediaeval rebellion, because the baroque's rebellion, if there was one, was secular, and would not choose a religious form of expression.

Since therefore neither rebellion nor submission was practicable in religious terms, all the energy of the age was concentrated on a complete revolution of the content of life, while orthodox ecclesiastical forms were preserved. The only consequence could be that men were denied all real means of direct expression' (Benjamin 1977: 79).

The Counter-Reformation was the era that invented maritime empires, overseas colonies, North and South. It was the age that perfected the archetypal media of modernity: the map, the filing-cabinet, double-entry book-keeping and the new, vast apparatus of propaganda. It was the age of the Inquisition, of institutionalised torture justified by the goal of maintaining stability. The baroque was also an immensely playful period: a play of liquid and fluid shapes, of the irruption of the natural into the artificial, the play of fountains and trompe-l'oeuil, the play of practical jokes, an era of great comedies. That comedy, in Jonson, Molière and Calderón, plays endlessly on the risk of failure and the exposure of frauds: the baroque was 'like postmodernism today, at once a technique of power of a dominant class in a period of reaction and a figuration of the limits of that power' (Beverley 1993: 64). Our era likewise is dominated by displays of power and wealth, by an apparently insatiable cruelty, and by an immense (and immensely pleasurable) playfulness. The neo-baroque is as addicted to games as the old baroque. In Snyder's movie, playfulness and cruelty are reunited in an account of the madness of absolute power. Like the older epoch, the neo-baroque's central concern appears to be with the approximation to absolute power, and the anxiety which that approximation conjures up as its dialectical counterpart: absolute disorder. Now, as then, the place of the individual is in deep crisis.

The illusion of individuality is a critical ideological task of capital. On it depends the regime of property, the self-discipline of crowds on which the risk management of our infrastructures depend (obedience to the rules of the road for example); the discipline of consumer lifestyle marketing, which addresses the individual agent of purchasing with the instruction to become the self you always were through the accumulation of the right commodities. Individualism is the reverse of the equally central task of maintaining (the illusion of) meaning. In this context death appears as the negentropic at its most absolute, and it is therefore not surprising that death should provide the structuring visual language of monstrosity, perversion, and the mode of absolute Evil on which what passes for a contemporary moral code is premised. Reality TV acts to maintain the ideological truth that 'we are all individuals' by encouraging the eccentric, idiosyncratic and extravagant. Neo-baroque Hollywood plunges us into worlds where the capacity to act, to live, to die a justified death after a fulfilled life are achievable. But while evil is clear and present, the immanent world beyond all appearances can frequently appear not as the fullness of the divine but a fatal emptiness. We return to the problem of a nothing that exists as self-identical in place of a foundational non-identity.

Signal is defined by its difference from noise. The random flicker of light around Hall's installation is such a non-identical, noisy channel. But signals are also threatened by repetition: the endlessly repetitive form of television, commodity exchange and data flow. The avant-gardes planned a break-out by stupefying their audiences, but they stand accused, implicitly at least, in Adorno and Debord of pioneering the kind of stupefaction that has become an instrument of domination and rule.

It can also be argued that Bazin's and Brecht's belief that shock might reinvigorate our perception of physical or social reality is at risk in the era beyond the end of the master narratives. Reality we are told is either a construct or is impossible for us to know, and this is the case in both humanistic circles informed by Lacan (*le réel c'est l'impossible*) and among scientists dealing with the 'counter-intuitive' constructs of mathematics and quantum science, where the very shapes that ultimate reality takes cannot be conformed to our normal, even our most imaginative structures of thinking. The sense of wonder that drove the European scientific enlightenment seems to have come up to the limits of the knowable. Nature as object of knowledge is reduced to data. Informatic and probabilistic, scientific knowledge is indistinguishable from its informational and probabilistic object and ceases to be knowledge. In that indistinction, even if we are capable of actions, what actions we take will have consequences which we cannot possibly determine in advance.

In this conjuncture, there is the permanent risk that the spectacular deployment of wonder as an affect among audiences will become merely a tool for engendering passivity, in the typical form of statistically likely behaviours of consumption and social discipline. Aesthetically marvellous productions, even the most rigorously intellectual and perhaps they most of all, risk the loss of physical knowledge, ethical judgement, the agency of will and political action as a result of the loss of convivial communication. Nor is the turn to violence and ugliness a viable opposition, being merely the obverse of the norm. Following Badiou, Baudrillard and Derrida, the once-natural sequence of knowing, judging, willing and acting no longer operates. When wonder becomes the tool of rule, events no longer occur.

And yet, as Richard Dyer (1992) notes, "pleasure and beauty are pleasure and beauty, and I have no intention of giving them up". There remains the utopian potential of wonder, even when it is entangled in the colossal productions of contemporary Hollywood, Las Vegas or the Sydney Olympics. Back in the 1970s, Commolli and Narboni in *Cahiers du Cinema* tried to build a political taxonomy of cinema. Among their types they list category 'e', films which set out to support the dominant ideology but for one reason or another generate internal contradictions which stop them reinforcing the dominant, and allow them to serve towards more progressive ends. The language isn't one we use much now, but for me the concept of the dialectic, of internal contradiction, is the key to a forward movement from the impasse of the politics of wonder.

One of the most Romantic sub-narratives in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy concerns the departure of the elves from middle-earth. When they go, and Gandalf goes with them, the world will be left to men and near-men, hobbits and dwarves. The magic will go. The purpose of all the magic then is to end the magic. Meanwhile the black magic of Saruman and Sauron is depicted in both Tolkien and Jackson as industrial and technological. The elves will sacrifice their good magic to rid the world of technological bad magic. The real contradiction arises from the fact that telling the story requires magic, technological magic. It is a similar contradiction to that addressed in *The Matrix*: we go to see the film in part to witness the spectacle, but the narrative concerns the falsity of spectacle and the hero's quest to overcome it.

We can trace this history of magic and technology back from the old baroque of Athanasius Kircher, through the scientific marvels of the phantasmagoria and Pepper's ghost. Joseph Wright of Derby's *An Experiment on a Bird in an Air Pump* of 1768 can stand as an eloquent testimony to the combination of magic and empiricism, of fascination and horror, pity and cruelty, emotion and illusion that characterises the special effects movie and its audience.

A resolution of this dialectic of wonder and horror might look like Albert Speer's Zeppelin Field at Nuremberg, an experiment that with the benefit of hindsight might now seem clumsy and overblown, but which has its late 20th century avatars in the commercial domain like the Fremont Street Experience described on its promotional website as "five blocks of thrills in the heart of Las Vegas. Ten casinos. 10,000 slots. More than sixty restaurants. Uncountable bars and lounges. All under Viva Vision - the biggest big screen on the planet, 90 feet overhead, blasting state-of-the-art light and sound shows every night" (<http://www.vegasexperience.com/>; that the Fremont Street Experience has also been a venue for significant artists like Jennifer Steinkamp makes the issue only more complex). Or perhaps it will be something like Keiko Kimoto's *Imaginary Numbers* (02 shown here) that will release these senses of wonder from their double role. In one way such animations are already differently dialectical, being careful constructions and presentations of randomised production processes. Unlike Jackson Pollock, for whom the accidental was a route to the internal and unconscious processes of the individual personality, Kimoto's work is impersonal. It is as if it already accepted the conditions of what Foucault, Negri and Agamben call biopolitics: rule by averages, management of populations by indirect disciplines and more recently by the establishment of protocols which control, guide and structure social, political and to that extent media activity. Citing Georges Simondon, Paolo Virno writes

the collective experience, the life of the group, is not, as we usually believe, the sphere within which the salient traits of a singular individual diminish or disappear; on the contrary, it is the terrain of a new and more radical individuation. By participating in a collective, the subject, far from surrendering the most unique individual traits, has the opportunity to individuate, at least in part, the share of pre-individual reality which all individuals carry within themselves . . . Only within the collective, certainly not within the isolated subject, can perception, language and productive forces take on the shape of an individuated experience' (Virno 2004: 79)

The individual capable of action requires the mediation of others to be able to speak, judge and act. To do so, Simondon argues, we require the kind of technological assemblages which constitute the socialisation of the collective: language, broadcast, datanets. In Kimoto's *Imaginary Numbers*, we can see emerging another mode of this connectivity: a connectivity which assumes its own autonomy as subject. In this instance, the non-human data flow is returned to us in a communicable form, and so offers us the opportunity of re-envisaging our situation as nodes in the data matrix in terms which not so much restore as redefine the capacities of individual agents in the world.

But is Kimoto's solution too beautiful? If it is the case that wonder has become a tool of oppression, is it wise to leave so powerful a tool in the hands of those who wish us least good? Are there other modes of wonder, other aesthetics that are as yet unfamiliar to many of us but which already have their amazed audiences, audiences of a new kind. The fact that more person-hours have gone into writing Ubuntu than went into building the Panama Canal, has a certain beauty, backed up with a kind of openness that no previous artform has ever had.

In the old baroque and the new, the immense and immersive spectacle engulfs the viewer-auditor, but also addresses them as individual - individual soul in the old, individual consumer in the neo. By contrast the wireless experience is primarily of isolation, but isolation in perpetual connectivity. The contradiction between immersion and connectivity, mirrors that between the sublime and the communicative. We know that the immersive experience is technically mediated, that there is a host of artisans behind the screen, and that the cinematic experience still has the legacy form of mass entertainment: the actuality of community with the illusion of isolation. The wireless experience, by contrast, offers the actuality of isolation and the illusion of community. If there is to be another turn in the historical narratives traced here, that second half of the equation will have to be brought back into the analysis. Critically, only through an analysis of the relation between immersive and personalised media will we be able to reach a genuine understanding of the ways in which the supernatural – the discovery that we are constantly placed in the place of the dying and the dead, those who are outside of communication, who are in the passive state of the innocent – functions today. In a letter to Benjamin, Adorno (1977) described the problem of high and low as 'the two torn halves of an integral freedom to which, however, they do not add up'. In an era in which high and low culture have been reconciled, the distinction between the spectacular, immersive, collective event experienced in profoundly individual form, and the intensely intimate third-screen portable device with its extraordinary potential for connectivity poses much the same problem in a new form.

There seems to me to be a congruence between this dialectic and another adumbrated above: that knowledge historically was the precursor to action, but data is only processed. To the extent that not only information but people are data in so far as they are data-clouds, information nodes, the collectivity is no longer the possible site of action. And yet knowledge persists, condemned to the marginality of handicraft but ready to be articulated into the networks that now begin to emerge, in this fractured form between the immersive and the wireless. These handheld devices seem incapable of evoking wonder as an affect, and perhaps that will be the next twist: to see the immersive neo-baroque as networked, and the handheld device as an object of wonder.

Arendt (and following her Agamben and others) sees the critical distinction as one between the *zoon* and the *bios*, bare life and the political biography of the citizen. Simondon perceives another

distinction, one he shares with Adorno: the persistence of bare life in the pre-individual, Adorno's bodily impulse, a natural capacity of the human animal which is typically excluded from the full glare of social, cultural and political publication. Technical ensembles like cellular telephony are media in which the pre-individual might yet make its interface with the post-individuality of administered, databased societies, technology actively partnering us in the creation of the grounds for a new mode of networked individuality (Deleuze and Guattari would say 'dividuality'). Cell phones have yet to produce the equivalent of RSS and BitTorrent, machine-to-machine networks which we might read, with Comolli and Narboni, as category 'e' technologies which, unlike film texts, are practices open to intervention and reinvention. The tyranny of spectacle returns upon it in its dependence on bringing its audience to a place where its apparatus can be installed: Vegas, the cinema, the mall. Distributed technologies seem modest in comparison, but their capacities, like the coding of Ubuntu, are cumulative and massive. The neo-baroque confronts us with an impossible choice: the sublime, or despair. Both Debord and Adorno run the risk of the latter, Steven's 'taste for oblivion'. But despair and the sublime are the two torn halves of a single oppression: the removal of the object of contemplation from the realm of what can be communicated. The emergent and internally contradictory agents of our time are capable of generating new analogies, new modes of identity. This is why they are significant, if they are significant at all.

David Hall's intervention not only critiques broadcast TV It is not only the natural and social worlds that do not exist as ultimate reality: technological assemblages like the internet, cellnet and television networks are also not only what they claim to be. Interrupted, television loses its actuality but regains its potentiality, its capacity for action, its affordance of meaning.

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