

the vacuum exerts its power over finite-being and contests its right to exist.

Now, the value and legitimacy of a sacrifice may be assessed and debated within the infinite world, but the annihilation of finite-being is something that can never be subject to any evaluation. In sacrificing myself, I produce effects in a world that I cannot ever really be certain will outlast me, and which in any case will lose all consistency for me, since I will no longer exist. It's a truly impossible bargain. To sacrifice oneself is to act nonsensically, in a way that is literally absurd for finite-being. Yet this is a transaction that has been the basis of numerous civilisations. It is the original act of faith.

Sacrifice, then, heralds the final stage in the disjunction between two becoming, and the potential elimination of one in the name of the other. The dissolution of finite-being is not quite the same thing as the destruction of the individual, however, since the individual can very well flourish in its absence, simply allowing itself to be swept along by the becoming of others. When the disjunction is so extreme that finite-beings are effaced, it is its very *relationship* to the world that is altered. This decoupling, this tearing of the individual in two—into a finite-being that constitutes it and a projected-being cast into a world that defines it—doesn't come out of nowhere. It is not a product of gravity or arbitrary terrestrial forces. It is the result of social apparatuses, the fruit of convergent ideologies, and even though its effects can be traced all the way back to the emergence of the very first societies, having always been employed in religious apparatuses and in the fabrication of transcendence, its near-perfection and widespread propagation is a recent historical achievement. Let's look, then, at the mechanisms that today occasion and sustain this division.

NO MORE FEELING

Many attempts have been made to establish a symptomatology of postindustrial society, and especially of its spectacular aspects. What seems to emerge out of these different approaches, although paradoxically it is rarely mentioned as such, is a phenomenon that encompasses a broad spectrum of behaviours related to the dominance of the immaterial (images, knowledge, information) in social organisation. This phenomenon is *anaesthesia*. And this anaesthesia in fact offers another way to detect the division described above—the advent of a split between finite-being and social or projected-being.

Situated finite-being affirms itself through a confrontation with a potentially infinite and eternal spacetime. Projected-being, on the other hand, defines itself through the interactions it enters into with everything else. Anaesthesia does not result from the deepening schism between finite-being and projected-being but rather contributes to it. It is not a product of the division so much as one of the various mechanisms that may lead to it. We must therefore examine the conditions that produce and intensify this anaesthesia, and its immediate consequences.

But first of all we must determine exactly what we mean by anaesthesia. In the sense we are using here, it is not a purely physiological phenomenon, although the inevitable psychological changes caused by the decoupling of finite- and projected-being do indeed have immediate corporeal effects. But neither is it simply symbolic or metaphorical. It describes both a deficit of sensations and a growing inability to feel.

As such, anaesthesia, given its effects upon interhuman networks, could be defined as an inverted autism. Where autism inhibits the individual's ability to comprehend

communication systems (verbal or otherwise) as well as their capacity to participate in and be absorbed into interrelational networks, promoting instead a 'pathic' relationship to things (i.e., a relationship based on intuition and immediacy), anaesthesia implies a dedication to the putting into words, exchange, and networking of what is perceived, at the cost of a more direct sensory relationship to it, a relationship with the world less invested in social signalling—or one less structured by the signs that surround it.

The anaesthesia of postindustrial societies translates, therefore, into an apathy toward anything that cannot be the object of an exchange, symbolic or otherwise. The logical evolution of the transformation of use value into exchange value has moved to the next stage here: it no longer just concerns commodities, raw materials, and concrete objects, but also knowledge and information. Of course, knowledge has always been used as a tool of domination, offering a strategic advantage to whoever possesses it. And of course it has always been convertible into tangible wealth (from Judas's thirty denarii to the fortunes made through industrial espionage and the sale of personal information collected by social networks). But something new is unfolding in the 'digital age': the becoming-autonomous of the economic circuit of information, which has less and less need to 'descend' into the material sphere in order to see its value appreciate, since it is now assessed on the basis of the *influence* and *hold* it exerts, whether measured by audience figures, traffic, or the 'buzz' that it generates.

And so the individual themselves becomes an agent in the circulation of information, sometimes as a producer, but mostly as a consumer. Caught up in the exploitation of sensory experience (sensory, because information, before

becoming an intelligible 'immaterial substance', is always vectorised by a sense-complex, i.e. a set of perceptions that are witnessed and then reported), the individual begins to suffer a growing indifference toward any sense experience they do not want to, do not know how to, or cannot integrate into the flow of information. Over the last fifty years in particular, an entire information economy has been established thanks to the advent of telecommunications technologies. And along with it there has developed a whole new relationship to information, which is in fact a relationship to the world, operating through diverse channels but always relying on the same mechanism and bearing the same hidden message.

For example, the dream of the advertising world, where everyone is forever young, doesn't just suggest an excessive reliance on the logic of marketing that exploits the seductive nature of youth in order to stimulate consumption. It also expresses a preoccupation common to postindustrial societies: the displacement of limits and, above all else, of the ultimate limit (at least for the time being), that of death.

Every society shapes itself around what should be said and must be shown as much as what cannot be said and must be concealed. The symbolic theme of death remains a serious adversary of the logic of the infinite world, since it refers precisely to the terminal condition of each one of us and brings our finite-being into view, thus underlining the inextricably separate nature of human beings.

For behind the rise of the information empire there lies a secret dream of community. It may only be a community of 'remote individuals'; but it is a community all the same, one that seeks to amalgamate everybody onto the surface of the sayable, an undifferentiated plane of expression that belongs to the world beyond being.

Society seeks Eternity. It enlists us all in this quest and encourages us to believe in the limitlessness of our existence, our purity that surrounds them, their pristine condition, and their construction as glorified bodies living in a hyper-vital world all indicate the same objective: the symbolic eternalisation of the human body, or, to put it another way, its abstraction. Of course, youth isn't reducible to a mere ideological construction. And it does indicate a state of vitality that is desirable. But it is precisely desirability that this appeal to youthfulness never fosters. The promotion of youth in no way constitutes an invitation to enjoy it. The imagery is detached, and even though it may be right there in front of you, it is always simultaneously postponed. Because if youth implies eternity, then there will always be time to enjoy it later—which is to say, never. Youth, as such, must not be consumed, it cannot enter the domain of fulfilled desires, for then the young bodies would become tarnished and corrupted, and susceptible all too soon to an imminent, yet still distant, death. Youth is invoked less for what it can concretely offer than for what it can imply: the expulsion, to the most distant horizon, of what it end.

This means that the role played by youth in the work of warding off death is especially revealing, for it is part of a diversionary technique that is derived from anaesthetic operations. This diversion distances the individual from their terminal state of finite-being and transplants them into a space structured by the immutable and artificial signs of a phantasmatic youthfulness, an omnipresent figure adrift in the empire of images.

One might think that anaesthesia, if it occults the sensible, entails an abandonment of the world, folding being in upon

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itself and shutting off its interface with the outside. But in fact, exactly the opposite takes place: in subjecting our sensory experience to a filter that retains only what can be rendered into a tradable signal, we forego any direct, pathic relationship to the world and to ourselves, as the latter become masked by images of sensations. This is why the sensory imagery of youth is always so sanitised and evacuated of any real pleasure. It *signifies* desire, but never actualises it. In this sense, we can say that *anaesthesia is a regime of sensory abstraction*. It corresponds less to an absence of sensation than to its pre-determination by an interpretive grid that contributes to the conditioning of sensory information by administering sensation, framing it, and ensuring its exchangeability.

As we are subjected ever more vehemently to structural pressures and to the forces of homogenisation, simply being able to feel becomes an increasingly complex affair. Everything experienced by the anaesthetised individual is manufactured into a sign, and must immediately be invested in a social relation, otherwise it will be neutralised and dissipate just as swiftly as it arrived. This type of anaesthesia, therefore, does not result from a diminution of the sensible. It cannot be understood as a kind of sensory deprivation. Rather, it arises out of an indifference to sensation. And this indifference is by no means the consequence of a deficit; on the contrary, it results from an excess of sensory solicitations.

FORGETTING

Indeed, anaesthesia is brought on not by a lack of sensations but by a sensory overload that ultimately renders all sensations identical to one another. Sensory commerce has had as its direct consequence the proliferation, large-scale distribution, and accumulation of sensations. This first

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began to emerge with the production of cultural commodities and the development of a mass art—for 'masses' that never existed except as a phantasmatic marketing ploy designed to carry out the very massification it was supposedly a product of—and has since led to the ignition of an undying flare of flickering sensory information, whose legitimacy resides solely in the fact that it appears, perfectly instantiating the maxim of the spectacle: 'What appears is good; what is good appears.' In all places and at all times, images and sounds are projected, presented to our eyes and ears at an ever-accelerating pace—capturing us, captivating us—across all communication channels. Moreover, the 'speciation' of the sensible into different carrier media is now being reversed, as the predominance of traditional media (such as radio, television, and print media), along with access to cultural commodities (such as music and films), shifts toward concentration into a single, globalised, audio-visual vector: the internet. This hegemony is all the more striking given that the usage of the term 'internet' appears to be in decline. It is increasingly rare to say that we are 'going' on the internet, or that we are connecting to it, since we are always already there—perpetually connected and subject to the solicitations of an uninterrupted flux of sensations.

Anaesthesia is therefore related not so much to the intrinsic quality of what is given to be felt, as to an absence of any resonance between sensations. The atrophy of the sensible that is anaesthesia is effectively caused by the increasing difficulty we find in allowing sensations, or more precisely

1. G. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, tr. K. Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2004), 9–10. (\$12).

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sensory experiences, to unfold over time, as the attention spans of perceiving subjects contract and the time spent on any one sensation becomes ever more fleeting. In the relentless sensory flux of networked postindustrial societies, one sensation displaces another before it has had a chance to 'bloom'. We turn away from one sensation to make the most of the next, which is just as likely to be neglected as the one that came before it, and so on. In this sense, the pervasive anaesthesia of the contemporary world is also a form of *amnesia*—a return to an infantile state where every event effaces the previous one, preventing the emergence of any kind of 'epigenetic' perspective, i.e. eradicating the possibility of coherence.

Indifference and incoherence turn out to be two faces of the same operational complex, where anaesthesia is derived from amnesia, and apathy tends toward forgetting. The motor driving this amnesia becomes more conspicuous the more the sensory flux accelerates, a snowball effect that owes itself primarily to the progressive overcoming of the technical constraints (bit rate and storage capacity) limiting the exchange of dematerialised sensory information. This acceleration is therefore caused by the well-known effect of entrainment, in which increased availability and access modify behaviours and create new needs (a strategy known as 'technology push'). It is quite striking to see how the generation born at the beginning of the twenty-first century, having grown up in the era of ubiquitous and continuous access to sensory flows, is developing advanced skills for the parallel management of simultaneously-appearing layers of information. These capacities have been heavily solicited and fostered by the 'multitasking' approach of the computational technologies that are now central to every operating system. However, this new ability

to switch between flows invariably brings with it an increasing inability to restrict oneself to a single flow and follow it through to its end. The many bifurcations of the sensory current generate a powerful undertow that proves increasingly difficult to resist as they accelerate and become ever denser. Irrespective of time or place, layer upon layer, the multiple streams of a sensory realm free of all physical constraint drag us along with them.

Lately, a new threshold has been crossed by the film industry. Disney has been working on a concept they call 'Second Screen', designed for use in traditional movie theatres with the intention of generating 'added value' by augmenting the basic experience of watching a projection, which is apparently no longer an adequate substitute for watching a movie at home. The 'Second Screen' format requires the resequencing of existing feature films so that 'breaks' can be integrated into the narrative, during which interactive games related to the themes of the film can be played using touchscreens. The fact that this project is being undertaken by the great giant of the children's entertainment industry is quite revelatory: in an attempt to adapt to our youngest generation's habits of sensory reception and consumption, Disney is actively participating in a radical paradigm shift in access to the flow of information, which is to say access to the sensible itself: a shift that is inducing new behaviours among a young generation of consumers who, faced with the mediatisation of sensation, prefer action and interaction over dreaming and imagination. No doubt Disney fears it will 'lose' its audience if it doesn't continually grab their attention at the pace they are accustomed to outside of the cinema, outside the temporary parenthesis that watching a film has now become.

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After all, access to the sensible is inextricably linked to the time allocated for its unfolding. The administration of time, or more precisely the *rhythmics* involved in the release of the sensations it fabricates, has become central to the culture industry, which has therefore started to devise temporal strategies to optimise the dissemination of its products. These strategies revolve primarily around two axes that seem contradictory at first glance but are in fact complementary: forgetting and repeating.

Forgetting is solicited more and more often, and is now being operationalised to create novelty. The tactics of starting over or rapidly reconfiguring a familiar situation are becoming more highly prized because they are increasingly feasible. The logic of the reset is now employed everywhere, but the film and video game industries are in the vanguard. In endlessly rewriting the same film with the same plot, the same characters (but not the same actors, although they usually embody the same stereotypes), Hollywood seems to have discovered a new resource to exploit: forgetting. A perfect illustration of this would be the astonishing number and the increasingly rapid arrival of reboots, especially of blockbusters, and their continuing success at the box office. At a lower cost and with less risk, Hollywood launches new productions based on old ones that have proven their value but that the public has already forgotten. A new era seems to be upon us: the era of the stuttering of the sensible.

Repetition surfaces as a complementary strategy to forgetting, for forgetting allows repetition free rein. As well as being a well-known method of captivation (from Pavlovian conditioning to advertising slogans to playing pop songs on a loop), repetition becomes a tool of temporal capture, as it 're-instantiates' perception multiple times over in the same way.

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Repeating things and forgetting them has a dual purpose. Of course, repetition and forgetting ventilate the sensorial field, providing free spaces and a rhythmic appropriate to the consumption and distribution of cultural products. But at the same time—and this is undoubtedly what makes the whole operation work—by transfixing us, by anaesthetising us, they reaffirm an eternally identical, unalterable present, thus contributing to the decoupling of finite-being and projected-being. They therefore participate in the projection of being into a symbolic space that distances it from death.

As we have said, death is in decline. Advances in bodily reconstruction techniques and the modelling of human brain function are made every day, despite their risky prospects. Some are already preempting the moment when the body will be fully reconstructible, redrawing the boundaries between the living and the dead. What is properly backed up will live, and what is forgotten will die. If resurrection were actually possible, would a cryogenically preserved human being still be 'alive' if it turned out that, once returned from the dead, they had lost their memory? Or would that person have been replaced by a new, as yet unknown being, a biological blank slate? Should such things come to pass, forgetting will subsist even in death, taking over death's function—that of redrafting the limits of finite-being, of destroying its continuity and the permanence of its integrity. This operational equivalence between death and forgetting leads us to the following paradoxical state of affairs: by establishing forgetting as the primordial function for the warding off of death, we betray a deeper intuition of their equivalence, and effectively realise this equivalence. The forgetting of death becomes death by forgetting.

and petitions it in a unilateral manner. Where repetition can operate as a matrix of difference so long as there is some degree of thickness or duration between two identical occurrences, making the moment of its reappearance into a moment of difference, amnesiac repetition, in so far as it eliminates any thickness between subsequent instances of its recurrence, erases all possibility of difference. For the amnesiac, there is nothing that is not caught up in the cycle of repetitions.

The barely concealed dream of these combined strategies is to reduce the sensory horizon to a single, monopolistic stimulus that can be repeated as many times as necessary before a 'new' avatar with the same qualities arrives—as promptly as possible—to succeed it. In other words, the technique of planned obsolescence that has been employed on a grand scale since the beginning of the twentieth century, from the automobile industry to nylon stockings to batteries for electronic equipment, is now also being applied to cultural products (i.e. to the sensible), churning through tighter and tighter cycles of appearance and disappearance until stupefaction sets in.

But, again, it would be a mistake to see these practices and tendencies—which are leading to a widespread homogenisation of the sensations arising from these modes of apprehension—as a primary cause. The technologically-enabled overburdening of the human sensorium that produces sensory amnesia is itself only an effect. The cause lies elsewhere, and it is only indirectly connected to the sensible relationship to things. Forgetting and repetition may have become sensory functions, tools for the erasure and rewriting of sensations, but they fulfil another, more profound function within the apparatus of the apprehension of time.

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What becomes ever clearer here is that amnesia is not an end in itself. Beyond simply making us forget, amnesia makes us more *present*. Just as paradoxically, it appears that this enhanced presence corresponds to a deficit in the intensity of experience, and so, in a way, it corresponds to an *absence*. In a currency that is ever more current, everything has the same value as everything else. The postindustrial era's spectacular anaesthesia/amnesia is intimately linked to a domain of the present, the current, that is ever more condensed, ever more instantaneous. Amnesia has perhaps brought to light a newfound inability to disconnect ourselves from what is right in front of us, an inability to perceive in any way other than through a relationship with a hyper-current world.

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THE PERPETUAL PRESENT: A LIFE SENTENCE