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Distraction And Digital Culture

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Two Stories Of Distraction

She seemed removed again tonight, dimly preoccupied with something, or someone, else. Entering the room, she pretended I wasn't there, something I hate. Or she would smile indifferently, deafly assenting to whatever remark I made, making her absence all that more glaring. All my miserable attempts to seduce her failed. I noticed that her state of distraction had deepened during the last weeks, and she fell into innocuous habits that betrayed a hidden terror. She had always despised routine, but now her routines never changed. Something had stolen her eyes, as it would eventually take away her hands, her entire body. By degree, her touch became cold and distant. I suspected an affair. And soon, *I* became her distraction, her hated routine, removing her from what had removed her. She could not bear the sound of my voice, the cut of my collar, how I looked at her, how I breathed, having to submit to these ridiculous signs of power. And her irritation and detachment grew daily, until finally one morning she disappeared.

A crowd gathers on the sidewalk. Ten stories above, a child, a young girl, is perched precariously on a ledge, frozen, the wind dancing in her hair. Below a pack of eyes raised to the sky, transfixed in the anticipation of disaster. Trucks with satellite dishes arrive to capture the event live, to be replayed a thousand times on every channel from every angle to the last numbing detail, at least until the ratings drop. Talking heads compare similar events in history. As for the future, computer simulations show how it will look, to the eyes of a child, to fall from a ten-story building or, to the "eyes" of the sidewalk, how brains splatter on concrete from that height; everything is rerun endlessly, blown up, and run again. A miniseries is in the works, we hear... book deals, promotional materials, all set to go. It's not everyday this happens (is it?). The police order the crowd back, then rope off the viewing area. Stands are erected; ambulances stand by; a helicopter hovers overhead, then swoops in low for a tight shot. The stage is set, the suspense is perfect. Now, as if on direction, the child moves closer to the edge, reaches out, falters, then falls. Time expands. The crowd gasps and grows silent; across the country the masses turn to their screens to see the moment of impact. They think: we've seen this before...did we miss it the first time? We *live* here, don't we? The fall is played over again in slow motion, close, closer, the wind in the child's hair, then the terror in her face, her eyes, the instant her head explodes. Every image is so clean, so crisp, so beautiful; the technology has advanced considerably since Zapruder. Since Baby Jessica and even Baghdad. Freeze frame, each shot is meticulously superimposed on its simulation for instant comparison; and they are the same — screen and fall, child and spectator, concrete and blood. And the mass of watchers blinks and stupidly stares until finally it too totters and falls, into the screen of the catastrophe, and disappears.

Escape And Capture

Arthur Kroker used to refer to American media culture as a "civilization in recline" (Kroker and Weinstein 1994:41; also Kroker and Cook 1986:266ff.). The image was certainly apt. The perfect icon for a bored, exhausted, and utterly "removed" American public on the eve of the twenty-first century was someone in the classic Lazy-Boy position, *captured* by the TV screen, oblivious to anything around him (or her) beyond what flickered before his eyes between trips to the refrigerator. This picture, however, seemed to contradict another one of Kroker's — that of *panic America*, neo-fascist and hyper-paranoid, obsessed with death, haunted by the body and its unruly fluids, and using whatever means to *escape* (Kroker 1989; Kroker and Kroker 1987). Now we don't normally associate panic with TV-induced catatonia. But in fact, as Kroker well knew, the two scenes were intimately and even essentially connected. The television, of course, is both the perfect means of capture and the perfect escape device. Its logic has become even more pervasive with the advent of the computer, which is now in the process of absorbing it. McLuhan (1964) was the first to realize that physical capture (or immobilization) does not prohibit, and indeed *smoothes*, the active neural integration of the subject into the medium (cf. also Bogard 2000). This is the whole pleasure — and terror — of television; it induces flight to the same extent it leaves the body behind in "sleep mode." TV is a *panic release technology* that operates by dividing the body and removing all the parts superfluous for experience. It "releases" experience in the same paradoxical way the woman in our story is released, through a kind of habituation (we'll have more to say about this in relation to Benjamin's theory of distraction later). What has changed since TV has met its virtual nemesis in the computer is certainly the intensity of that integration; perhaps it even portends a qualitative shift. Baudrillard (1985; 1983a; 1983b) imagines a time when the masses are

integrated entirely into the media, and the media into them, as in the scene of the falling child, where the difference between capture and escape is meaningless — a seamless integration/habituation of technology and the subject. Someday all you'll need is a brain, if that (!). In the same way, a "recliner civilization" dreams of infinite worlds summoned at the throw of a switch (the ingestion of a pill, the modification of a gene). It imagines merging, body and soul, with the system of digital codes, a time when, without going anywhere, it can live and *be* the images on its screen. When it can disappear.

These ideas can serve as approximate entry points to a study of distraction. This is because distraction is a logic of escape and capture. To distract something is to elude its clutches; but also, as a consequence, to now clutch *it*, secretly and from behind. These qualities of clutching, elusion, of escape and capture, are what make distraction and its related strategies — simulation, disappearance, removal — games of *power*. When we speak about the power of the digital media, we see lines of escape and capture everywhere — mass distraction truly is the *order* of the day. This is not a moral judgement. We assume this has both good and bad sides. Nor is it to claim that our age is any more distracted than any other. There is no reason to think that print is any less distracting than electronic media, or that modern forms of spectacle distract the masses more than ancient ones. Every society re-invents its own regimes of distraction. Every culture develops its own methods of mobilizing (and immobilizing) the masses.

This way of speaking, however, is already too narrowly sociological. Distraction is hardly just a social, or even human, condition. Animals can be distracted, and so can non-living things — geological processes can be described in this way, as I'll suggest below. But this also means that distraction is not a state of consciousness, e.g., attention or inattention. Shifts of attention or consciousness may certainly be *produced* by distractions, but they are not identical with them.

It means, too, that distraction doesn't require a subject, although a subject could be one its effects. Kroker's "recliner" is a subject of distraction only in the sense that its body occupies a space where multiple lines of escape and capture converge and diverge. The *material* scene of distraction is what's important — the proximate relations of body parts (brain, hands, eyes) to the screen, the design and engineering components of the console (inputs, through-puts, outputs), the entire material infrastructure — mathematical, molecular, technological, socio-cultural — of the flow of information. *You* do not watch TV, Baudrillard says, TV watches you (Baudrillard 1983a:53). Or rather, it *removes* you, takes you away, "subtracts" you from your surroundings. It is on this material scene or territory of removal that consciousness is produced and consumed.

To note this extra-human dimension of distraction is in no way to deny that it is one of the elemental features of human experience. In countless forms, it is implicated in the production of life's pleasures (the French meaning of the term is close to "entertainment" or pleasurable "diversion") as well as its irritations and dangers (the English word can convey the idea that distraction is something hazardous, as in the case of being distracted while driving a car or crossing the street). If we could limit its manifestation to living forms — and we cannot — we could even make the case that distraction is a *condition of survival*, that the struggle for existence absolutely depends on finding, managing and adapting to means of escape and capture (for example, for many predatory animals, and even many plants, distraction is an essential means of procuring food, or avoiding becoming food).

attention is normative

Despite the fact that distraction is everywhere in experience, it is not at all difficult to imagine a world without distraction. Such an idea is in fact the norm if we consider it from the point of view of social control. Institutions like the Church, the State, markets, even the mass media, generally do not tolerate distraction, at least when it fosters neglect of duty or responsibility. In Catholic theology, for example, a world without distraction is one where nothing disturbs one's prayers to God — distractions, such as uncontrolled or impure thoughts, are a sign of man's imperfection and inherent sinfulness. For bureaucracy, it is a world of dutiful, law-abiding, on-time citizens; for the school, a classroom of focused and docile students; for Capital, a shop of committed workers. The television and advertising industries, even as they deal wholesale in distraction themselves — e.g., by sexualizing images of commodities — desire watchful, undistracted viewers.

In fact, *all* these institutions develop and perfect their own methods of distraction. They become, to use a phrase of Deleuze and Guattari's, "apparatuses of capture," seeking in their different ways to control movement, order desire and belief, and translate them into habits (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:424ff.). How do religion, Capital, and the State capture their objects? Simple. They generate what appear as lines of escape or removal, as exits, outs, passages, and so on: you too can escape from divine retribution (through the passages of prayer, sacrifice, and confession); escape from work (through money); escape from power (through prestige). The authorities, like *trappers*, know that the lure of escape is usually the most powerful apparatus of capture. Money, prestige, indulgences, sex, these are all traps at the same time as they are means of flight. Although institutional power does not tolerate distraction when it threatens to become unruly — and here distraction *is* conceived morally — distraction is its single most valuable tool. Often, it prepares the way for the use of force, as when the police employ it before making an arrest (the sting operation), but sometimes it can also eliminate the need for force. In an important sense, the distracted object (or subject) has already surrendered to power — it does not *see* power or in any way sense its closeness, thus power can operate behind its back, reserving force for the times when distraction itself threatens to wrest the object from its grasp (parents sometimes use TV to occupy their children's time and create some free space for themselves, but it is a strategy that often backfires, as the TV becomes the more powerful apparatus of capture).

We already sense that power, at least institutional power, does not fully control the forces of distraction. In fact, distraction is a principle that *rivals* power. The authorities not only fear losing control *over* distraction, they fear losing control *to* it. A distracted mass, potentially, owes nothing, not even its life, to power, and the most dangerous groups are always those that could care less about power, i.e., that are too distracted to care about their own survival. As we shall see later, the means of distraction are also those of power's *annulment*. Distraction is what seduces power; power can lose itself there, break into a million pieces, or scatter in a hundred directions. But that does not mean distraction, as a political strategy, can always save us from power, either, that it can always be used to overturn power. Such dreams only mask a more elaborate picture of an unstable mixture of forces and materials. We take seriously Deleuze and Guattari's rule that no strategy once and for all can serve as a guide for praxis. The truth is that as quickly as distraction opens a line of flight, it also opens a line of death
- such is the nature of logics of escape and capture, which for all their strategic character always involve indeterminacy, a measure of luck.

So we don't ask if distraction is a good or bad thing — a question more for the authorities anyway — but rather if it can serve to map the dynamics of various and sundry social processes — wars and militaristic maneuvers, rituals, the emergence of hierarchies, population shifts, market and currency movements, and so on. Can we view things like the evolution of material culture, in particular digital mass media, through the theoretical lens of distraction? Is it possible, more generally, to understand relations of power themselves as effects of distraction? If so, it will be in terms of logics (and paths) of escape and capture.

Distraction Machines

Here we are interested mainly in how distraction functions on the sociocultural and technical planes, but we will often use the term more broadly to refer to a "machinic assemblage" composed of variable matters and relations of force. Following the lead of Guattari (1995:33), we do not intend "machines" in either mechanistic or vitalist terms. He develops a machinism that does not reduce the idea of a machine to a simple construction *partes extra partes* or assimilate it to living beings (or living beings to it). Guattari's model also differs in certain fundamental respects from the cybernetic notion of the machine as a feedback mechanism, and with philosophical notions of techne that link its function to an ontological ground of "unmasking," as in Heidegger (1977). Throughout all these positions, he proposes a concept of "machinic heterogenesis" that would attempt to view the machine not in its various limited aspects, but in its complex totality, in its "technological, social, semiotic and axiological avatars," as well as in its operations in nature. His project, which we can only mention in passing here, involves a basic rethinking of the general idea of a machine in terms of *differential flows of matter and energy*, for example as processes of dispersion and concentration, stretching and compaction, intensification and dissipation, friction and smoothing, etc. (cf. also Guattari 1996; Bogard 2000). Machines are "assemblages" of other machines, which are themselves composed of further machines, in the manner of fractals, to use a mathematical image. Machinic assemblages bring together machines that may differ dramatically in nature (geophysical machines, biochemical machines, technical machines, social machines, desiring machines, concept machines), and combine them in an organized, consistent fashion. Such heterogeneously composed but organized structures are spontaneously generated and destroyed by what he and Deleuze (1987:141-48, 510-14) call "abstract machines" or diagrams,[1] which impart form to variable flows, or again, break their form apart and down. Machinic assemblages do not depend on the actions or intentions of human subjects (which are themselves a collection of differently composed machines). Rather, they form and dissolve "autocatalytically," as effects of their own dynamics (cf. De Landa 1997:62; 1989; cf. also Maturana and Varela 1992).

This, anyway, is the general frame in which we intend to view distraction. Distraction is not an effect of the subject, but a self-organizing machinic assemblage that channels and sorts flows of differently composed matters into relatively consistent layers, much like we see in natural processes of sedimentation and stratification. Our first rule in this investigation is that we must consider distraction in its *geological* (or meteorological) as much as its sociological manifestations, in the language of changing pressures, heats, and speeds (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 1987). What is meant by this is not that the former can serve as metaphors for social processes, as for example when we use terms like social "strata" or social "currents," but rather that both share a common diagram or abstract machine. De Landa (1997:58) notes, for instance, that it is a different thing to say, as Marxists once did, that "class struggle is the motor of history," than to say "a hurricane is a steam motor." While the first example is clearly a metaphorical usage, the second is not. In the second case what is claimed is that "hurricanes embody the same diagram used by engineers to build steam motors — both refer, for instance, to reservoirs of heat, thermal differences, and circulations of energy and matter. Is it possible, De Landa asks, to find a diagram (or abstract machine) that operates across geological, meteorological and social formations? Over the last several decades, chaos theory has proposed a language that perhaps makes such a convergence possible (cf. Prigogine 1984; Gliek 1987). The ways in which ordered structures or flows emerge from chaos may be the same across fields with formally different contents. More, chaos theory examines processes of self-structuration (or autocatalysis) and suggests that they may not be exclusive to living materials, but may extend to inorganic processes as well, such as the formation chemical clocks, veins of minerals in the earth, cyclonic movements in the atmosphere, etc., raising the possibility that more than analogies may exist between natural and social phenomena. All this fits in well with much of what we have already indicated regarding Guattari's machinism.

"Distraction" of course is not a theoretical concept in geology. But we can ask alternatively whether it makes sense to describe geological processes in terms of escape and capture. De Landa (1997:60) once again suggests that certain geologic structures like strata beneath the ocean floor may be a function of *sorting* mechanisms that separate differently sized materials into relatively homogeneous size-groups before depositing them in layers. Rivers, for example, are recognized by geologists as one such sorting mechanism, moving groups of smaller rocks faster, larger rocks slower, in bundles of differentially paced lines of flow. It makes sense to describe these dynamic mechanisms as systems of escape and capture (certain rock sizes are "passed" quickly in the sorting process, others are held back in the flow). Another example of such mechanisms at the geological level might be the ways volcanic flows organize surface features of the earth's crust as a function of different speeds of deposition.

Chaos theory suggests that such dynamic systems are nonlinear, nonequilibrial, and self-regulated. The question is whether the same sorting diagrams can be located in the social and cultural spheres, despite vast differences in form of content from geological structures. De Landa (1997: 257ff.) believes this to be so, referring to "slowing down" or "hardening" (crystallization) processes in the formation of normative social structures, where the production of those structures refers not simply to human decisions but, for example, to how those decisions follow from spontaneous changes in rates of flow of food, money, bodily fluids, etc. Social structures, in this view, are seen in terms of relative speeds of mixtures of different kinds of materials undergoing sorting and crystallization processes. Formal social hierarchies run at relatively slow or fixed speeds, generally by force of habit, compared with more fluid, improvised groupings that De Landa (p. 32) calls "meshworks." In terms of speed, the difference between a hierarchy and a meshwork is like that between a solid and a liquid, or a liquid and a gas — both move, but at different rates. Alternatively, we might characterize one movement as molar (large-scale), the other as molecular (cf. Guattari and Alliez 1984). We do not have to "humanize" these ideas to apply them to the social sphere. In fact, they allow us to view "human being" as a variable organization of differently paced flows of matter and energy. To be "really" human, as excluded groups in any social order know well, means to have the right flow of blood, currency and equipment, to bear the right series of distinguishing marks (eye color, skin color, hair color), maintain the proper rhythms, habits, routines, and so on (cf. Guattari 1996:95-108; 1995:1-32; 1992; also Lingis 1994).

We don't ask who organizes these flows, but rather what machines inaugurate a change of state, what *thresholds* are crossed and how (e.g., from a liquid to a gas, from non-human to human, from uncoordinated individuals to a pack, as in animal groups, or from non-social to social aggregates); where certain flows break off from or reconnect with others (steam flows, or the places where the pack splits off from the larger group (cf. Canetti 1960:93-124). Such thresholds, in the case of liquids to gasses, refer to specific heats. In animal groups, they may involve caloric levels, densities, carrying capacities, etc., which above or below certain limits may provoke organized action. Again, what matters in the immediate context is that we can conceptualize all this in terms of escape and capture, and from there as various forms of distraction.

Before leaving these ideas, we need to reiterate the importance of *speed* as a mechanism of escape and capture (Virilio 1986; cf. also Der Derian 1990). In the old military formula, either you're "quick or your dead" (Munro 1991). Speed is also a sorting function. It is by virtue of their relative speeds that elements in a mixture, whether geological or social, sort themselves into distinct flows. In this way of viewing things, the "escape velocity" of objects has as much meaning in the social as the natural sphere, i.e., if it makes sense to describe as social the operations through which bodies are captured and sorted into homogeneous groupings which are made to flow at similar rates of speed. Foucault (1979), for example, does not describe the prison in "institutional" or bureaucratic terms — viz., as systems of abstract rules and fixed relations of authority — but as spaces of bodies organized around the homogenization and routinization of specific flows (again, of food, waste, tasks, information). Certain flows are slowed down (i.e., hardened) in specific locations and during specified times, others are speeded up — prison routine is the outcome of relatively paced lines of movement. Foucault often writes of the importance of architectural arrangements in determining the organization of bodies in prisons, specifically as they affect conditions of perception. But alongside this Foucault also gives us a kind of "geomorphology" of the penitentiary that is at the same time a depiction of its social order from the point of view of controlling rates of material flows, that is, a model of relative speeds, thinnings and thickenings, gravity sinks and acceleration points, capture and escape. *Perception is organized via the channeling of flows in engineered space.* But this is precisely nothing more than a definition of distraction. (We will return to these points below in our discussion of Walter Benjamin.)

We should further note, to anticipate our remarks below, that an important effect of speed is *stealth.* In social terms, we cannot ignore the fact that distraction is a strategy of disappearance or invisibility. Distraction allows a second event to take place behind or "to the side of" the first one — it enables a close approach. The classic pickpocket scheme is an example, provided we are willing to characterize it, not in terms of the diversion of the mark's attention or consciousness, but as series of flows, subtractions and interruptions, slowings-down and speedings-up. Not attention, but rather, "one hand moves faster than another to the pocket, a mark is subtracted from his money." To capture or elude a thing by stealth is to move at a different rate — to fall behind the thing, to outpace it, to approach it transversally, as with predatory animals or their prey (keeping in mind that both predator and prey draw upon the same set of strategies). Virilio (1991; 1989; 1986; 1983) has intensively studied the connections between speed and strategies of disappearance, their relations in politics, war, and modern telecommunications systems, and outlined their internal relation to power. The power to capture one's enemies by stealth may involve making them look where they shouldn't, but that often translates into moving faster. In the same way, the power to elude one's predator by stealth is, in some

cases, to move slower (standing still as it passes, falling back). The assemblages that best regulate relative speeds, in the social sphere at least, are also the ones that are usually the most stealthy — those that order the flows of traffic, money, sex, food, information. Like Foucault (1980:92-102), we have to look not just for specific "agencies" within society that enforce laws relating to speed — e.g., the police — but to "impersonal strategies" and criss-crossing lines of force, to open and closed pathways, acceleration points, bottlenecks, regions of stretching and contraction, and so on. The central role of the image of the Panopticon in Foucault's (1979:195ff.) history of the prison is not simply a matter of how it describes a complex structure of visibility and invisibility, but how that structure emerges through minute adjustments of speed that supply the prison's specific "texture" of activity (the prison is a "hard" social space indeed, but one where certain flows may periodically escape — riots, streams of contraband, drugs, etc.).

Perhaps we can begin to glimpse from these reflections new ways to develop the idea of distraction as a social-machinic assemblage, and perhaps from there suggest a different way of viewing its importance in the production of contemporary culture ("recliner culture"). Distraction is a machinery that generates differential rates of flow of matter and energy. It is an "abstract" machine in the sense that it coordinates elements circulating on very different planes of intelligibility (geological, meteorological, biochemical, sociological, political). It opens lines of escape and capture, of approach and invisibility. This machinery leaves behind *deposits* of various sorts, hardenings or thickenings (sediments, strata, scars), but it can also generate, within these structures, liquid or gaseous conditions, zones of turbulence.[2] Distraction, in one sense, may even describe a crucial event in all self-organizing processes, i.e., the production of *singularities*. It is singularities that initiate changes of flow and the emergence of qualitatively new states — things like bifurcation points, thresholds, pinch points, edges, holes and cracks, strange attractors. A distraction, in its deepest sense, *is* a singularity, and not simply in terms of an event that draws one's attention because of its rarity or uniqueness, but an event that *because* of its rarity and uniqueness causes a flow to break away, to subtract itself, from a mass of materials to which it had formerly adhered. Distraction generates, to refer this again back to Deleuze and Guattari, a *multiplicity*. One is only a member of a multiplicity, they say, via subtraction, as N-1 (1987:6). Distraction is what subtracts one from a collection to create a multiplicity — it is what causes the lone individual to break away from the randomness of a milling crowd and generate a "pack," the unique event that pulls a particle off-track and causes other particles to follow. It is in this sense above all a *gravitational* force before it is a conscious one.

"To distract" literally means "to draw in different directions" or "to pull apart," and we will feel free to exploit all the rich connotations of these terms. While "to draw" has the gravitational sense we just assigned to it, we will also pay close attention to its *graphical* meaning. To distract something is to *mark* it, and thereby make it vulnerable. A distraction creates a target; it makes a thing *traceable*. Sun Tzu (1963:90-101, 142-49), in *The Art of War*, lists the military benefits of distracting an enemy — it dislodges him, isolates him from his main forces; he is marked by his very separation and thus rendered visible and open to attack. For Sun Tzu, it is a matter of one's superior use of the landscape, the exploitation of pinch points and higher ground along the route of march, the strategic employment of diversions of all sorts (false information, double agents, etc.).

Foucault's analysis of Panoptic power, again, is full of allusions to spatial and temporal devices that distract the subject and thus allow for his more efficient control "from another direction." In Foucault, power often operates through the creation of a host of "blind spots" and lighted spaces, structural devices for keeping the prisoner under surveillance and occupied with everything but the real lines of his capture, which always intersect him from the side or behind his back. In that sense, to distract is not only to reveal the prisoner-enemy, *but to make the object that distracts disappear.* That is, we must also consider the reverse graphical function of distraction, viz., to unmark or erase. The first rule of disappearance is always to create a diversion, hence its importance as a strategic tool not only in war but in magic (and, we'll see, in electronic media, which has elements of both). This happens through a process of bifurcation or breaking apart: the magician makes an object disappear by a double movement that separates it from a set of objects of which it had formerly been a member. One movement creates a zone of intensity to divert the spectator's eye, the other whisks the object away, the two lines, one of capture (the eye), one of escape (the "erased" object), separated by a singularity, the distraction, that pulls in different directions at the same time. In Foucault, if power operates imperceptibly, it is because it initiates this double flow of escape and capture — we should not forget that Foucault's concept of power relations includes their resistance — and this is possible only through the organization of elaborate machineries of distraction, means of dividing perceptual space (and time), technologies of dispersion, of pulling apart, splitting, breaking off, etc. If we conceive of mass media in terms of distraction, we are essentially asking how it functions in all these diverse ways — as a force of gravitation, as a means of making visible or traceable (surveillance), and as a machinery of erasure or unmarking.

double movement

bifurcation. ...nonsense

Distraction In An Age Of Mechanical Reproduction

Let us now examine the matter more closely, as it relates to the question of social control and cultural patterning, with an eye to contemporary electronic media as distraction assemblages. Before proceeding, however, we must give two qualifications:

First, despite its ubiquitousness and its character as an abstract machine, there is no universal or unitary mode of distraction. Politically and culturally, it is useless to talk about distraction in a global sense. It is characterized rather, as we have seen, by its

singularities and bifurcations, by the concrete mixtures of heterogeneous elements it coordinates. Although its lines intersect with those of human decision, belief and desire, distraction, we have said, is not "human." If anything, "human being," the "subject," the "person," the "individual," "consciousness," "attention" — all these things are so many effects of distraction, which is not to deny their strategic role in how distraction games play out in a given society. Again, distractions manifest themselves as zones of turbulence where flows of matter and energy are intensified or dissipated, where disjunctions occur and new structures emerge. In society they may often appear as the expression of intentional choices, but this would be to seriously misunderstand their chaotic nature — the production of singular events, the unpredictable bifurcation of lines. We are not looking for essences here; it is the actual mixtures that are interesting and constitute the dynamics of distraction.

Second, we will not define distraction as a social or cultural totality. There is no "society or culture of distraction," as if society was only this and nothing else. It is one among many traits of contemporary media culture. As we have indicated, it has oppressive and liberating qualities, often both simultaneously. You can be distracted by the police, but the police can be distracted, too. It is possible that everyone in a given society is distracted in a certain way, though unlikely (Kroker's recliner is undoubtedly only a convenient fiction to draw attention to a more complex state of affairs).

Finally, although distraction seems to explain certain relations of activity (or inactivity) in a population in an external way, in fact it is immanent to them. For an investigation into the social organization of distraction, we should look, following Foucault again on this point, to the concrete relations themselves to discover the distraction in them rather than invent a principle that occupies a space below or outside them. Distraction manifests itself in innumerable scenes of escape and capture, traps, ruses, surprises, catastrophes, encirclements, blockages. We must not turn all this into a "theory" of distraction, but examine it, as Foucault says, from the point of view of its political anatomy, the ways it distributes bodies and coordinates their movements.

Walter Benjamin (1968:217-251), in The *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Production*, is really the first to raise the question about the role of distraction in societies dominated by the mass media. Typically, he does not frame this question as a matter of attention, but in terms of how a population, or rather a mass, distributes itself in relation to material culture, in this case to technologies of aesthetic reproduction. As we shall see, Benjamin locates the problem of distraction in its connection to the formation of *habits*, not to a state of consciousness. Specifically, he asks how art integrates or is integrated into the performance of routine but socially necessary tasks. Whereas the traditional work of art perhaps demanded thoughtful contemplation on the part of an individual spectator, modern mass-produced art, most paradigmatically film for Benjamin, is appropriated not by engaged individuals but by the masses in a mode of distraction. Benjamin noted that it was commonplace in his time to hear social critics lament the masses' distraction and blame the cinema or other elements of mass culture for promoting it. We still hear this charge leveled in various quarters today, typically from the moral Right, not just against Hollywood but against media in general. Whatever its morality, however, the relation between distraction and aesthetic media is not a new situation according to Benjamin, and demands a closer investigation.

Since earliest times, the most important case of the connection between distraction and art involves the social appropriation of architecture, which generally functions not as an object of contemplation (except perhaps for tourists), but as a taken-for-granted background of human activity (p. 240). It is not simply the fact that architecture is seen but rarely thematized as people go about their daily business that constitutes the meaning of distraction for Benjamin. The masses appropriate architecture not just visually, but *tactilely*. In an important sense, tactile appropriation is not just another mode of reception on par with visual or optical appropriation. Rather, Benjamin argues, it constitutes the conditions of possibility for the latter, in the sense that habitualized behaviors which develop around the use of dwelling spaces, as routinized practices, *organize perception*. Architectural arrangements, in the social as much as the physical sense, determine what can and cannot be seen. We should remind ourselves again of Foucault's analysis of the prison here. Insofar as these arrangements control the conditions of perception, they foster routinized forms of behavior. The prisoner in Foucault's Panopticon unconsciously regulates his own behavior and is thus perfectly predictable. He becomes a creature of habit to the extent that he does not see the real lines of power that control him, i.e., by virtue of the fact that he is distracted in and by the relation to the ordered spaces in which he finds himself, and in which he must function. Let us return to how Benjamin describes it (240):

"Buildings are appropriated in a twofold manner: by use and by perception — or rather, by touch and sight. Such appropriation cannot be understood in terms of the attentive concentration of a tourist before a famous building. On the tactile side there is no counterpart to contemplation on the optical side. Tactile appropriation is accomplished not so much by attention as by habit. As regards architecture, habit determines to a large extent even optical reception. The latter, too, occurs much less through rapt attention than by noticing the object in incidental fashion."

That is, as a function of distraction. Despite Benjamin's fall back into the language of consciousness ("noticing the object in incidental fashion"), it is clear that distraction has a far wider political sense for him.[3] It is, in a word, a means of *training*. Even, and perhaps especially, when art is appropriated in a mode of distraction, it exercises a "covert control over the extent to which new tasks have become soluble by apperception," i.e., through the adjustment of the conditions of perception, through architectures of visibility and invisibility. "Since, moreover" Benjamin continues, "individuals are tempted to avoid such tasks [for example, those necessary for the reproduction of Capital], art will tackle the most difficult and important ones where it is able to

mobilize the masses," where it can convert those tasks into habits. In our terms, this is a view of art as, potentially, a means of capture. Benjamin sees this potential existing not only in modern film, but increasingly as an imperative behind all mass produced art whose reception, like architecture, becomes a matter of distraction.

Habits are not just subjective states or psychological structures. They involve the initiation of repetitive flows, the construction and placement of material blocks, obstacles, corrective devices; the partitioning of space; the functionalization of time, and the normalization of specific behavioral trajectories. They are "hardenings" or "contractions" of activity, sedimentations and stratifications of planes of conduct, condensations of matter and energy.[4] But they can also be "softenings" — one only forms new habits, after all, by breaking old ones. The distracted person could just as easily fall into bad as good habits, from the authorities' point of view. In prisons, as in workshops, schools, homes, etc., distractions always threaten to divert flows away from their desired (moral) ends and must therefore be rigorously controlled. Hence, a whole system of rules and practices evolves around their strategic placement — a wall is erected to keep the eyes from straying (the worker's cubicle), an opening closed to prevent any leakage to or from the outside (the locked door). Temperatures are adjusted to insure maximum peak performance (climate control), pressures are adjusted relative to threshold values to guarantee that distraction will smoothly and predictably serve the interests of power (deadlines, quotas, production schedules, grading and ranking schema, etc., so many forms of pressure). All of these in themselves constitute "capture-distractions," but only in the sense that they attempt to short-circuit "escape-distractions." One must assemble a distraction machine that develops the right repetitions, the "good" habits, and disassemble those machines that generate the bad repetitions, the habits that upset the power structure, which is to say, the dominant system of distractions (Regarding this, the droning and "distracting" mantras of one's parents — don't eat between meals, be in bed by ten, do your homework before watching TV, pick up your room... And do this without being told, make it your routine. Don't fall into bad habits. On and on. How many of these repetitive flows are channeled around one's living space, one's negotiation of passageways, open and closed doors, in short, one's *habitat?*).[5]

Digital Distraction

We can perhaps now begin to see mass media, and particularly electronic media, along similar lines, i.e., in terms of an "architecture," the adjustment of conditions of perception and the formation of habits. But precisely what kinds of perception and habitualized modes of behavior, in relation to what architecture, are we dealing with here?

Benjamin's (230-236) remarks are again instructive. He notes that the technology of film places the observer in the role of a passive critic. This would be a subjective way of putting it. More to the point, cinematic equipment, and particularly the film camera, modifies, in an historically important way, the social conditions of perception.[6] Because film can be speeded up and slowed down, because the camera can zoom in and out, because it can move around its object, take various angles, etc., the traditional reception of the work of art has been replaced, Benjamin says, by one of "testing." The audience, in effect, *becomes the camera and sees as it sees*. In an age where power is increasingly exercised through the mechanical reproduction of images, the "aura" of the traditional art object — its cult value, its "authenticity," its unique origin in space and time — is sacrificed to the modern value of testability. One can now view the object up-close; from any and all sides; and at any place and time (since it is now mass produced and distributed). The cinema, a distraction-assemblage and in Benjamin's hands the model of a technology which once and for all strips the image of its traditional functions, inaugurates a new mode of perception and, one would have to say, a new set of habits. Henceforth, everything is subjected to the test. Testing — i.e., measuring, dividing out, selecting, ranking, *sorting* — becomes the order of the day, and this is manifest in a specific way of manipulating the image, of producing it in each and all of its possibilities, in every one of its multiple perspectives, the better to *capture its object definitively*. "Every day," Benjamin writes, "the urge grows stronger to get hold of the object by its likeness, its reproduction" (223). Baudrillard (1983a) has an apt image along these lines: all this — endless examination, continuous inspection, the effort to penetrate and reproduce the object in itself by detailed analysis, re-magnification and over-magnification of parts, etc. — signifies the cultural dominance of the *hyperreal*, i.e., the substitution of signs of the real for the real itself, which increasingly disappears from the stage of perception (Benjamin notes that the perfect image in cinematic society is one from which the technology which captures it is absent, i.e., disappears, leaving only "reality" in its purest form) (Benjamin:234). The hyperreal, we will say, is our current mode of distraction, and our current mode of capture, since, no less than everything else, it subjects us to the test as well.

We should not think, however, that the hyperreal is something insubstantial or immaterial. The urge to test, to convert objects into signs, provoked and supported by technologies like the camera and increasingly by digital information systems, it comes down to sorting and re-depositing material flows. Deleuze and Guattari (1987; cf. also Guattari 1996, 1992) insist that any system of signs must be examined not only in terms of its meaning, but in its "asemiotic" or arepresentational component as well, i.e., as a regime of desire and affect, an organization of force relations, rather than as a linguistic or "mental" structure. This is Foucault's position as well, who in affirming the connection of language (discourse) and the sign, denies the sign's assimilation to representation and the signifier: "Of course discourses are composed of signs; but what they do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this 'more' that renders them irreducible to language (langue) and to speech" (1972:49). Foucault's "more"

refers to discourse as a practical deployment of forces on bodies, in ways that harness their energies, hierarchize them, functionalize them, etc. The sign is not just representation, but power; not just indication, but *dividing practice*.

Here we return full circle to distraction in the material sense of the test — signification as dividing practice (or sorting-machine). This is not by any means a new idea. It has long been a matter of practice and a condition of knowledge in military organizations. We have already hinted that distraction utilizes signs to divert the enemy — false appearances, lures, feints, ruses, decoys. Such signs divide the enemy's forces, separate him from his lines of support, and render him visible. The military employs these tactics on their own soldiers to establish the order of rank. The enlistee in the American armed forces, for example, is immediately forced into practices that divide him from his cohort and fit him to a system of rank. Shaving the head, rising before dawn, early morning exercises, unison marches, on and on. These can only be called forced distractions.

Distraction, of course, is not unique to the military, and it is not the property of a military elite — in its multiple forms, it is a tactical element in all conflicts, and on all sides, military or not. It is not, we have seen, solely the possession of the stronger force, nor can it be limited to the conditions of capture. One can distract power to escape it. To distract power is to elude its grasp and, potentially, to *overpower it by blocking its sense*. Unable to sense its object or to *make sense* of it, i.e., to signify it, distracted power is rendered powerless.[7] It cannot locate or name its object, or assign it a place in its code (thus distraction is not just sign, but anti-sign, anti-code). It is not surprising that this overpowering potential of distraction, which originally aims to destroy power, immediately becomes power's strongest ally. As soon as they appear, as soon as they are seen in their role as productive of the conditions of perception, the means of distraction are harnessed to the Law, which then employs them to normalize behavior, to reinforce or modify habits, to channel desire and belief along appropriate paths. But these same means, at any time, can once again become methods for mocking the Law — then it is the "bad" habits that they generate, the illicit desires, and the "evil" signs (cf. Baudrillard [1993b; 1987] on the "evil demon of images").

Because distraction is both a signifying and anti-signifying power, it is a diagram of ritualized, social behavior. It is the basis of both the sedimented character of ritual enactments (forms of habit) and the *challenge* ritual throws up to the very forces which authorize and sanction those enactments. Ritual power is nothing more than the distraction of a superior power — a god, a demon, death itself. This is how we should view the practices of sacrifice, prayer, and sacrament, as so many distractions to divert a dangerous force and divide it from its supports. In all these practices we witness the sign as dividing or sorting strategy, a machine for the purpose of weakening and strengthening, but a machine that ultimately obeys no master and can as easily turn on the very forces that seek to employ it.

Today, we perhaps must radicalize Benjamin's question about distraction to account for changing technical conditions. It may no longer be adequate to frame this question in terms of theses regarding art in an age of *mechanical reproduction*. Rather, we must consider the possibility that mechanical techniques of reproduction are being supplanted by digital technologies, and that this signals at least an intensification of their dynamics, and possibly a qualitative shift. That is, we must think about moving from an industrial to a post-industrial or informational model of distraction. At issue in this question is not so much the notion of "reproduction" which still assumes that it makes sense to distinguish an "original" from its copies, but *simulation*, which implies, at least in theory, the essential meaninglessness of that opposition (cf. Baudrillard 1993a; 1990; 1983a; 1983b). Benjamin, we have seen, notes the loss of the artwork's "aura" in contemporary culture — its originality and spatiotemporal uniqueness — as it increasingly is subjected to the imperatives of mass production. But it is the principle of production (and reproduction) itself that is challenged by simulation. When art is simulated, its status *as* art becomes problematic in a way that is different than if it is merely mass produced. Not only is its originality lost, but so is its value as a copy, i.e., as a "reminder" of uniqueness, situatedness, realness. The same is true of architecture — computer technology, for instance, has made it possible to speak of "virtual" architectures, cyberspaces, and so on (cf. Benedikt 1992). Baudrillard (1993b) believes we have entered a time of "trans-aesthetics," where everything becomes art even as art itself disappears (in the same sense that the "real" disappears into the "hyperreal"). The notion of "simulated architectures," then, would refer not to constructions of steel and concrete, but to the (no less material) information structures that now form the background (noise?) of daily life; not to negotiated spaces, but to digital "environments" or "climates"; not simply to tactile or visual appropriation, but to seamless neural integration.

The purpose of these reflections is not to analyze simulation, which would take us too far afield, but to think how distraction might operate in an age where simulation has become a dominant strategy of social control. Distraction, it would appear, impacts the body today by organizing its flows at a molecular level, at the interface of the cellular structure of the organism and the system of information. To use language from Donna Haraway (1985), distraction has gone "cyborgian." It is no problem to see the forces of distraction at work in the connection of any kid's fingers to the buttons of his or her video game controller. Can we imagine a time when our brains are wired directly to those buttons, when the brain itself is a distraction-machine that can call up its own diversions at the merest thought? When we no longer appropriate the scene tactilely but through our nervous system (cf. Taussig 1991)? Pure escape, or pure capture? Who could tell? This would be "trans-art" and "trans-architecture" at their logical, and nightmarish, limit.

Benjamin's thesis that modern art mobilizes the masses to convert socially necessary tasks into habits is undoubtedly still salient. So is his theory that increasingly those tasks converge on the practice of testing. If anything, we could say that testing as

a social imperative is raised to the *nth degree* in simulation societies. Simulations are, in fact, not just tests, but *pre*-tests — one uses simulation as a favored tactic whenever possible to eliminate the very need for tests (Baudrillard 1983a:115-117). The army simulates battle scenarios on its computers to avoid having to "test" any one of them in a real conflict; the police utilize profiles to narrow the range of possible suspects; schools utilize models of performance to prescreen and sort students into appropriate tracks; advertisers test their images on sample populations, which are themselves derived from simulations; parents select their children from a range of genetic options. Computer simulation technologies as a whole could be seen as sorting and selection assemblages of the most radical kind, channeling flows of matter and energy by virtue of pre-testing the outcomes of those flows. In fact, their essential function is nothing more than to sort materials into testable aggregates (pre-sorting, pre-dividing). Money, sex, food, blood, genes, words... whatever flows can be captured in terms of information and fed into simulation models to better control absolutely the ranges of possible outcomes. It is becoming increasingly apparent today that few flows indeed can escape these widely distributed methods of tracking and diversion (cf. Bogard 1996).

Can it be said any longer that we "inhabit" these spaces of information, these pre-test, pre-sorting, pre-dividing zones where it is no longer a matter of tactile but molecular and genetic integration? Do information architectures generate habits? Or do they in fact eliminate the requirement of habituation to necessary tasks? When things can be distracted — marked, drawn off, diverted — before they even begin their trajectories (as is the plan for genetic engineering technologies), when their flows are captured in advance, what role does habit play? Does a cyborg or a clone fall into habits? Or is it, rather, one *big* habit, *only* habit, the utopia of perfect habituation which the control societies of the West have been aiming at for the past one hundred years (Beniger 1986)?

Such speculations could easily make us forget that distraction must still be linked to questions of power, that it operates as a means of escape as well as capture. Guattari (1996, 1995), for instance, is not willing to identify information systems strictly with systems of domination or subjectification, although clearly that is how he would characterize a great deal in the contemporary situation.[8] Virtually everywhere we turn in information societies, where information is channeled for commercial purposes, distraction functions to arrest flows, to harden them into permanent structures and functions. Where are the information strategies that offer escape, that break down hardened systems, that destratify and remix layers of sediment? Hacking technologies for breaking and distributing computer codes should remind us that no system of domination is permanent or seamless, and that even virtual architectures are subject to sudden breakdowns and catastrophes. What else is hacking than an elaborate game of distraction (breaking and entering, covering one's tracks, drawing off flows of information into banks other than those which were intended for their deposit)?

It is no doubt that modern systems of information control threaten to eliminate both the dangers and the charms of distraction as escape. "Recliner" civilization increasingly finds itself caught up in grand delusions of escape, only to discover itself bound ever more tightly to the images on its screens, and to the channels of information which now threaten to restructure it at the molecular level. The political question today remains: what modes of distraction, operating at the most micro-scales of the body, can transform such delusionary escapes into real ones?

Notes

1. The term "diagram" is used by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1979) to describe the organization of the modern prison not in terms of a rational schema, but as a consistent space of differently composed matters, some architectural, some imported from military, educational or religious institutions, some linguistic, etc. The diagram, which he formulates under the broad heading of "discipline," is not unique to one field or plane, but organizes qualitatively different fields in similar ways (the school, the barracks, the asylum, etc. — all effect disciplinary regimes in their specific characteristic arrangements) (Cf. also Deleuze [1988:34] on Foucault's use of "diagram."

2. Again, we are trying not to speak metaphorically. The phenomenon of crowd formation, for example, could be considered from the standpoint of chaos theory as the spontaneous organization of turbulence, i.e., the self organization of flows of heterogeneous elements breaking out from within relatively hardened structures. Canetti's (1960) work, to which we have already alluded, is important in this regard as it relates to the movement of packs. Bill Buford's book *Among the Thugs* (1992) offers an interesting and important interpretation of crowd behavior in terms of "threshold" events (sudden noises, concentration and density limits, spontaneous breakaways of atomic elements that initiate collective movements, etc.). We could easily call such initiatory events "distractions."

3. Percepts, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1994:163-199), are not mental states of a subject, but power arrangements, desiring-machines, etc. Again, insofar as distraction involves perception, it is in the sense of organizing its conditions, i.e., its material environment.

4. Cf. Deleuze (1994:70-82) on the notion of habit as contraction.

5. Of course, the work of Bourdieu (1977) is central here, though his work remains "sociological" in the narrow sense, rather than "machinic."

6. Cf. also Virilio on this point (1991; 1989). Virilio makes important connections between the development of modern cinematic equipment and strategies of disappearance.

7. On sense and regimes of power and desire, cf. Deleuze (1990).

8. Nor would he accept the idealist assumptions of Baudrillard's analysis of simulation (in this he agrees with Virilio [1995], who views simulation as a matter of material substitution of technical practices rather than the hyperrealism of signs). Distraction, too, we must insist, can only be adequately grasped as a material practice (machine-assemblage).

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