

"Video World and Fractal Subject"

Jean Baudrillard

Am I a Man or am I a machine? There is no more answer nowadays to this question: in reality and subjectively I am a Man, but virtually and in fact I am a machine. This is the original state of anthropological uncertainty; and on another level it can well be compared to a state of sexual uncertainty as well as with the radical uncertainty of micro sciences as to the status of subject and object. In the relationship between worker and machine there is no uncertainty: The worker is always in the position of an alien towards the machine in some way, and he is always somewhat alienated by the machine: He thus retains the quality of an alienated man. Through the virtual machines and the new technologies, however, I am not alienated. They make an integrated circuit with me (which is the principle of the interface). Giant and microcomputers, TV, video and even the photographic camera are like contact lenses, they are to such an extent integrated in the body that they almost belong to it in a genetic manner, such as a cardiac pacemaker (or as Philip K. Dick's famous "Papula": a machine for advertising, implanted in the body of a new-born person acting as a quasi-biological alarm signal). The connection with an intelligent terminal is — whether desired or not — somewhat of the same kind: there is a structure of subordination (not alienation), an integrated circuit. What makes the quality of man or of machine in it, cannot be distinguished. The virtual in general is neither real nor unreal, neither imminent nor transcendent, neither inside nor outside, it merely sweeps these distinctions away.

Does not the incredible success of video culture and of artificial intelligence come from this exorcising function, from the fact that the eternal problem of freedom is not even present any more? Am I object, am I subject? Am I free, am I alienated? No more problems with the virtual machine! Neither are you objects nor subjects, neither free nor alienated.

Man is fantasizing about intelligent machines or even producing them, because Man is secretly doubting his own intelligence or because he is breaking down under the bulk of a monstrous and useless intelligence: So Man is chasing it away and implanting it into the machines to be able to play with and laugh at them. To entrust the machines with this intelligence frees us to a certain extent from any assertiveness of overall knowledge, just as we may laugh at the assumption of ruling people, when we entrust the politicians with all the power.

Man — against every understanding — is dreaming of genial and creative machines just because he doubts his own creative powers, or because he prefers to get rid of his creativity in order to become its user via the machine. For, what these persons have to offer is just a performance, a set-up of thinking, and Man certainly prefers watching thinking performances to thinking by himself.