

Jean-Marie Straub and
Danièle Huillet

Writings

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57. DEBATE ON IMAGES AND VIRTUAL REALITY

Philippe Quéau:¹ I was speaking about abstraction. It seems that for some observers...

Jean-Marie Straub: But what are you selling, you represent what? You're a salesman! You're from the CIA or the World Bank?

PQ: ... Civilization's progress comes from the capacity to distance itself; you go outside of yourself to become more aware of yourself.

JMS: I know of only one abstraction; it's that of Cézanne.

PQ: With the virtual, we have an additional capacity for abstraction that is going to help us move forward.

JMS: Progress again! But good god, it's the biggest lie in the history of humanity! You're running into the abyss; those are future generations that you are programming, and that is barbaric. You're a publicity agent!

PQ: I don't believe in the prophets of the "Big Day," with this outpouring of spiteful

anger, bile, and hatred.

JMS: I have neither anger, nor bile, nor hatred; in fact, it's precisely because I care! The only thing we have is the planet; I love life and it's out of love that I'm telling you what I'm saying.

PQ: You're full of hatred, and me, what I want to give is a message of love. I have three children and they are going to live that! You have simply a dump truck full of hatred and insults to unload; you don't even know who I am and you treat me like a CIA agent, and you speak German with a kind of incredible hatred; never have I been treated like that; I'm beside myself... Too many people believe themselves made of the same fabric as the world; we are spiritual beings. Virtual technology allows us to democratize this fundamental intuition that we came here by accident but that we are perhaps called to manage; the virtual is a way of saying to ourselves that the real is only the real, only the thing.

JMS: The planet is all that we have; when it is laid to waste,

what will remain?

PQ: Shakespeare already said it; there are many other things in the world that are not in your philosophy.

JMS: Well, then, let's go. I'll cite Hölderlin for you: "*The cradle of the children of the earth,*" what is it? It's the earth!

PQ: Well, that's an immanentist philosophy, very German by the way, with all the danger that that can have.

JMS: You have something against the Germans, you!

PQ: No, but I'm against Immanentism.²

Danièle Huillet: Are you certain that each thing that you consider progress doesn't make us lose as many things as it brings us?

PQ: There's good and bad.

JMS: The pro and the con, the good and the bad...

PQ: It's a new *écriture*; it offers a new landscape of abstractions, and thus new ways of creating the imaginary and of creating ourselves.

JMS: In short, what he dreams of, is the liquidation of Thomism,³ for me the soul is the form of the body and nothing more.

PQ: I am a Platonist, a Neoplatonist.⁴

JMS: Me, I'm a Thomist.

Paul Virilio:⁵ I believe that we cannot find a way out of the current situation in accepting that the world is catastrophic, apocalyptic, and marvelous all at once. It is both; everything is going faster; everything is more rewarding, and everything is more tragic. The day when we have understood that, we will finally be in a Shakespearean era, where the heroes will be great in the drama. The world will be there, but it will be abandoned. When the elevator was invented, we lost the staircase; we lose the staircase, which becomes the "emergency exit"...

JMS: The world in which we live manufactures invalids, substitutes, and legless cripples!

PV: The overriding danger is that there exists an emergency reality and humanity, which exists but no longer has the right to its story.

JMS: Briefly, without controversy and nicely, there, you disappoint me: in a report of a colloquium, *Le Monde diplomatique* criticizes you for having been the only one to be negative; all the others saying “*the pro and the con, yes but it can’t be done differently.*”

PV: I’m a critic in the sense of an art critic, not a destroyer.

Enki Bilal:⁶ Imagine a visually impaired person today, completely cut off from images, what would he tell us?

PQ: We showed *Imagina* to a blind person equipped with a stereo headset connected by satellite. He could go for a walk in the real world, guided by sounds. He existed in a kind of virtual soundscape corresponding to the real. The opposition between virtual and real is infantile and simplistic. Today the virtual is a kind of angel over the real that comes to help the real.

Laure Adler:⁷ Angel or devil?

PQ: It’s also a little what happened during the First Gulf War.

JMS: [begins to sing]... carry my soul deep into the heavens. What you’re saying there confirms the fact that Goebbels won the war; it’s worse than the Nazis!

PQ: Madame Adler, it’s unbelievable, this kind of statement is really unbelievable!

LA: I didn’t really understand that.

PQ: It’s a frightening cynicism!

JMS: The situation of this kid that you describe is worse than the Nazis!

PQ: You greatly disappoint me, Monsieur Straub!

JMS: But it’s not you, it’s not you...

PQ: When I think that I saw a film like *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* and that it’s you who says that to me today, you can’t imagine how much you disappoint me.

JMS: [...] In Bach’s music, there are several centuries of peasantry.

LA: Okay, let’s come back down to earth, and even with our feet

in the mud: we will live in a sterile universe. How will our relationship with reality function?

PV: By battle. There is a great battle in the Bible, that of Jacob with the angel. For Jacob to remain a man and not to grovel before his god—you remember that he is one of the inventors of monotheism with Abraham and Isaac—he wrestles with the angel. If we don't struggle, if we grovel before technology, we'll no longer be men. Technology only advances by exposing what is negative in it. With the appearance of photography, Cézanne diverges, he is going to paint reality differently, because he is going to fight against this figurative reality that is no longer possible to represent as such.

LA: Before, between reality and the image, there was harmony, beauty, gentleness, and the pleasure of the image...

PV: All the new technologies emerged from a deterrent. We couldn't wage war because of bombs, that was frightening. As there was no war, we made technology: it's continuing the war by other means.

LA: Who's in charge?

PV: Fear. The fear of being poor, of being lost, defeated. Fear is the Grand Master of the world.

DH: The civil war in Yugoslavia...

LA: Images become a servant of our collective fear?

PV: We inherited images that are a kind of deterrent, from an era of terror, and even of a balance of terror; we're going to have to clean this technology of this imperialism of deterrence, of this result of the military-industrial complex. Listen to Deleuze! We're headed towards monitored societies!

JMS: I agree completely! What you have said just now is very fine; it's the first time that there are clear and sensible things [said] since the start of this conversation. This imperialism, where does it come from? How are we going to get rid of imperialism? We're going to allow Silicon Valley to prosper? We're completely colonized!

1997

Original language: French

Excerpts from a televised debate on the French cultural program “Le Cercle de Minuit,” broadcast as “Le Destin des images: allons-nous devenir prisonniers?” (The future of images: Are we going to become prisoners?) Moderated by Laure Adler with Jean-Marie Straub, Danièle Huillet, Paul Virilio, Enki Bilal and Philippe Quéau, February 18, 1997, 1 hour 10 minutes.

NOTES

1 A specialist in Information Science, Philippe Quéau was the founder and program director of *Imagina*, a forum for new images and virtual reality at the Institut national de l’audiovisuel (INA) between 1981 and 1995. —Ed., this and all subsequent notes.

2 Immanentism: the belief that God or an abstract mind or spirit permeates the world. The influence of immanentism on German philosophy can be seen in the work of German Idealists such as G.W.F Hegel and F.W.J. Schelling, and can be traced to the work of Baruch Spinoza through infamous “pantheism controversy” between F.H. Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn.

3 Thomism: philosophical school of thought inspired by Saint Thomas of Aquinas (1224/5–1374) whose most renowned work, *Five Ways of Proving the Existence of God*,

maintains that reason and faith are not in conflict, because both originate in God and lead to the truth.

4 Neoplatonism: enduring philosophical tradition initially founded by Plotinus in the third century AD and whose ideas were influenced by Plato and the Platonic tradition. As a religious philosophy, it combines idealistic monism with elements of polytheism.

5 Paul Virilio is a French cultural theorist and urbanist, particularly well-known for his study *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London:Verso, 1989).

6 Enki Bilal is a French comics artist, graphic novel author and film director. In 1983, he collaborated with Alain Resnais on *La Vie est un roman (Life Is a Bed of Roses)*.

7 A historian by training, Laure Adler has had a long and prolific career as a journalist and writer. In 1989, President Mitterrand appointed her as a cultural advisor. In 1993 she took over the cultural program “Le Cercle de minuit” on the France 2 television channel. She has written biographies of Hannah Arendt, Françoise Giroud, Simone Weil and Marguerite Duras.

In February 2016, President François Hollande wanted to name Adler the new Minister of Culture, but Adler thought the call was a hoax (*Le Canard enchaîné*, February 24, 2016).