

## Chapter 10

### Tele-Visions of the Otherworldly: The Seductions of Media Culture

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Formerly constituting a secret, the real now talks constantly... Not even the ministers of the gods ever *made them talk* in such a continuous, detailed, and imperative way as the producers of revelations and rules do these days *in the name of* current reality. Narrations about what's-going-on constitute our orthodoxy... The combatants no longer bear the arms of any offensive or defensive idea. They move forward camouflaged as facts, data, and events. They present themselves as messengers from a 'reality'.

(Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*)

On *RPA*, an Australian 'reality-based' TV hospital show named for the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney, the body becomes a medico-visual spectacle. Cameras zoom-in as a surgeon lifts the lower portion of a cancerous esophagus and the entire resected stomach from a patient's chest cavity and upper abdomen. The image stream then cuts to a post-operative segment, where the surgeon lays the newly removed body parts on a table, slices the esophagus and stomach down the middle so they can be spread wide open, and runs his hand along the malignant regions at the juncture of the organs as he describes the hardness and rough textures of the abnormalities. In another *theater of operations*, a surgeon inserts a long probe into a patient's nasal cavity and narrates. The end of the probe contains two mutually supportive technologies: a tiny video camera, and a 'soft-tissue eating' implement that the surgeon calls a 'pac-man'. With the surgeon, I examine the deepest interior reaches of the patient's sinus as the video camera searches out the numerous grape-like, yellowish polyps whose widespread growth has prevented the patient from breathing through his nose. Each newly discovered polyp is ground to bits in the metallic teeth of the mechanical pac-man and sucked from the patient's body through the long, flexible tube that wends through his nostrils and nasal cavity. In yet another room, a

surgeon pokes his fingers through the long incision in a patient's neck and out through her mouth as he displays the area where a second surgeon will use a chunk of flesh from the patient's arm to replace the malignancy that has been removed from her tongue and surrounding soft tissues of the oral cavity.

Such moments both exemplify an impulse to spectacle and express a certain will to visual truth. After all, as Michel de Certeau (1984: 186-7) notes, the contemporary age has largely rejected the premodern tendency to locate the *real* within the *invisible*, in the realm of that which stands behind mere appearances, and instead prioritises that which can be visualised. Hence, as many others have pointed out, metaphors of visibility dominate our epistemological landscapes from the (aptly designated) Age of Enlightenment to the present. If premodern societies insisted upon belief in what cannot be seen, contemporary ones demand that we accede to all that can. For de Certeau, the twin and mutually supportive processes of visualisation and narration become central mechanisms for the production of 'facts' and thus the fabrication of our contemporary reality. For 'what can you oppose to the facts?' he asks. 'You can only give in'. In other words, the visual establishment of 'facts' displaces the politics of contestation over competing discourses and knowledges onto the purported revelation of the definitive and incontestable. Hence, 'the fabrication of simulacra.... provides the means of producing believers', and 'the establishment of the real' becomes 'the most visible form of our contemporary dogmas' (de Certeau, 1984: 186-7).

Similarly, Jean Baudrillard (1990a: 151) calls attention to the 'ideology of the concrete and facticity' that characterises contemporary media systems and, by extension, our mediatised world. My opening, down-under example from the globally ubiquitous genres of so-called 'reality-TV' is aptly illustrative of what Baudrillard (1990a: 27, 146-8) names the 'excess of reality' whose 'vertiginous phantasm of exactitude' constitutes a form of 'dis-illusion and objectivity' whereby 'the true ... shines with all the power of the false'. 'Hyperrealism' is one well-known designation he has given to this mode of fabrication that pertains not to the *imaginary* but rather 'to the order of too much reference, too much truth, too much exactitude'. This 'modern unreality', the *hyperreality* we inhabit, thus stems from a drive to visualise the 'absolute reality' of things.

In his analysis of hard-core porn, Baudrillard delineates the hypervisualising imperative of our mediatised age. Pornography's 'terroristic visibility of the body'

belongs, Baudrillard avers, not to the order of sexuality but to that of representation, where it exemplifies our contemporary 'orgy of realism'. Writing in 1979, and therefore some years before the appearance of shows like *RPA*, Baudrillard asks,

Why stop at nudity, at the genitals? Shouldn't the very interior of the body and its viscera be explored? Who knows what profound pleasure in visual dismemberment, in mucosa, and in smooth muscles awaits to be uncovered there? Our definition of porno is still quite restricted. But obscenity has an unlimited future. [1990a: 149]

Baudrillard's concept of *obscenity* thus conveys not the term's traditional meaning of that which is prohibited or excluded; rather, it signifies a culture of rampant and expanding visual transparency and hyperrealism, an 'enforced extraversion of all interiority' whereby 'everything is materialised in its most objective form' (Baudrillard, 1990a: 149-51, 197).

In light of this analysis, Baudrillard (1990a: 183) writes that 'against the truth of the true, against the truer than the true... against the obscenity of manifestness... we must reforge illusion, retrieve illusion — that ability... *to tear the same from the same*'. Baudrillard names this ability 'seduction'. In relation to hyperrealism, seduction is a destabilising counter-principle whereby 'the false shines with all the power of the true' (Baudrillard, 1990a: 184).<sup>1</sup> However, this secretive counterforce is weakened under conditions of expanding technovisualisation and profuse media transparency, which 'immobilizes seduction by sheer visibility' (Baudrillard, 1990a: 147). Nevertheless, I wish to argue for seduction from the standpoint of an increasingly widespread mode of the televisual imagination that I shall call the 'otherworldly'. That is, I will argue that contemporary TV, perhaps the core apparatus of hyperrealism, is also, paradoxically, a site where the ultimately irrepressible force of seduction reasserts its destabilising energies.

### **Disenchantment, Obscenity, Seduction**

Seduction mobilises the vitality of self-conscious illusion, which is not simply equivalent to *falsity*. Mike Gane (1991: 134) notes that by *illusion*, Baudrillard means, 'that which enchants' through its use of artifice and is 'more subtle than the real' while yet remaining 'more false than false'. Both the 'real' and 'illusion' are then fabrications, albeit differently oriented ones.

Seduction entails a critique and disruption of essentialism and identity. To ‘tear the same from the same’ suggests a convergence between Baudrillard’s seduction and Michel Foucault’s (1984: 88) ‘genealogy’, which famously ‘introduces discontinuity into our very being — as it divides our emotions, dramatises our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself’. Both seduction and genealogy therefore seek to recover the play of imbricated differences and multiplicities within the self/same that essentialist notions of identity and modernist accounts of the ‘real’ obscure and repress. Both seduction and genealogy target the presumptive unities that constitute both the subjects and the objects of modernist truth and knowledge.

It is increasingly common to refer to both modernity and modernism in the plural rather than the singular, for there are multiple and alternative modernisms and modernities that differentially embody and reflect the various pre-existing sociocultural frameworks within which historical developments occur (Taylor, 2000: 367-8; Gaonkar, 2001). At the same time, it is equally well understood that such formations of modernity develop, however differently, within the force fields of certain dominant characteristics and tendencies, such as the realist epistemologies associated with modernist ‘enlightenment’. These epistemologies are largely responsible for the success and endurance of the presumptive unities that are targeted by the concepts of genealogy and seduction. Attempts to pin-down the essential properties of things-in-themselves — whether subjects or objects — necessarily obscure the flux and fluidity that continually constitute and reconstitute identities from an ongoing play of differences.

Such essentialising tendencies run rampant in cultures of disenchantment, which, as Max Weber (1958: 139) observed, substitute the principle of unlimited mastery through instrumental rationalism and calculation for the ‘mysterious incalculable forces that come into play’ in the premodern world and the ‘magical means’ whereby ‘the savage’ entreats ‘the spirits’. As Weber’s racialised language implies, this substitution of mastery for mystery is a core issue for contemporary power/knowledge relations, for it authorises a strikingly broad range of colonising gestures under the rubrics of the new rationalities. These colonising gestures extend both inward to the deepest reaches of the body, as visualised in programmes from *RPA* to *Middlemore* (from Aotearoa New Zealand) and *Hopkins 24/7* (from the US), and outward to the most distant regions of space capable of visualisation by the Hubble telescope and other technologies for the prosthetic extension of human eyes.

‘Disenchantment’ thus serves as a suggestive figure for the distinctive conjuncture of power relations, ways of knowing and representing, and technologies of vision that attain predominance in the contemporary world. It names a political strategy that aims to master the mob and its alterities by contracting and controlling the unruliness of the popular imagination through the effective demarcation and designation of the ‘merely illusory’ (see Latour, 1999). It names, as well, a technoscientific strategy that aims to master the ‘natural’ world of both bodies and ‘things’. These strategies naturalise the ways of knowing and seeing that are appropriate to each and thus produce dominant regimes of truth and of visualisation that are themselves agents of the control thus established. Hence, for Foucault (1979), the modes of power/knowledge generated by the human sciences and the practices of examination, super-vision and surveillance conducted in a variety of institutional contexts become central components of contemporary domination, while for Baudrillard (1990b: 177), the expansive transparency of obscene visualisation has decisively terminated the modes of ‘secret understanding’ associated with enchantment and magical thought, so that we now inhabit ‘a universe of forces and relations of force, ... an object of mastery and not seduction’.

By contrast with the will to mastery that is characteristic of a disenchanted world, seduction works precisely by enchantment. It is a ‘form of absorption or potential engulfment’, a ‘fateful distraction from which no one or no [particular] “reality” can ever be completely safe’. Baudrillard writes, ‘to seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion’ (1990b: 69, 175). In Foucauldian terms, ‘illusion’ attains its status by its *exclusion* from a given society’s dominant regime of truth/power/knowledge. Seduction poses inevitable challenges to such regimes. Moreover, Baudrillard’s notion of seduction suggests that subtle strategies, and not just brute force, can subvert modern systems (Sim, 1999: 355). ‘Seduction lies in wait for systems at their point of inertia’ (Baudrillard, 1990b: 128). It is ‘a principle of the disruption of dominant orders’ (Bogard, 1994: 333, n. 51).

In her study of Baudrillard’s often neglected (or rejected) importance for feminism, Victoria Grace notes that some feminists have objected to both the term ‘seduction’ and Baudrillard’s conceptualisation of it on the grounds that they invoke gender stereotypes and suspect sexual practices. Grace (2000: 141-71 *passim*) argues extensively, however, that this objection is premised on a misunderstanding of Baudrillard’s ideas, for his theory of seduction is first and foremost a powerful

critique of the forms of identity upon which the objectionable implications of the term rely in conventional Western discourses. Chalk the misunderstandings up, perhaps, to Baudrillard's well-known penchant for both provocation and outlandish, Nietzschean comments about 'the feminine' and women. Nevertheless, A. Keith Goshorn, like Grace, argues that Baudrillard and feminism share 'a common opposition to the excesses of phallogocentrism and the extant pathologies of masculinist behaviors and institutions in contemporary Western culture' (1994: 260). While Baudrillard's notions of hyperreality and simulation have been widely discussed and influential in media and cultural studies, it seems somewhat curious that his theoretical explorations around seduction have received much less attention in these arenas. Perhaps this can be explained in part by the controversies around the gender politics of some of Baudrillard's remarks pertaining to seduction, of which I remain mindful.

Nevertheless, television's narrative and visual techniques often seductively unsettle distinctions between realism and imaginative depictions of the otherworldly — a trait that is reminiscent of the literary movement contemporary critics have called *magic realism*. Magic realist fiction generates *enchantment effects* that revive 'the mystery inherent in things' (Angulo, 1995: 3, 10, citing Roh, 1925, and Chiampi, 1980) and thus challenge the drive toward *mastery* rooted in modernist *disenchantment*. I would like to explore similar processes whereby the popular imagination puts dominant formations of truth and identity under pressure, into play and up for grabs onscreen, and I propose therefore to appropriate Baudrillard's distinction between 'obscenity' and 'seduction' for this purpose. For while the 'natural real' may well have imploded in societies of technovisual saturation, as Baudrillard argues, the power-bearing discourses of *realism* have yet to abdicate their power and flee the scene of this implosion, as much of Foucault's work implies. As any fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* knows, that which is dead does not yield its ground so easily, but rather persists in haunting the living.

There is a certain irony involved in the appropriation of 'seduction' for the analysis of contemporary TV, since for Baudrillard, television is structurally situated on the side of *obscenity*, which is to say on the side of the cold fascination of information systems. Which is in turn to say that television stands *against* the ritual, enchanting and mythic dimensions of seduction (see, for example, Baudrillard, 1990b: 154-78). Nevertheless, I want to suggest that television remains one of our culture's important sites of imaginativity and challenge. After all, from Baudrillard's point of

view, all systems, even cold, digital, electronic information systems contain within themselves some of the very elements of seduction that these systems seek in general to foreclose.

Baudrillard's *obscenity* is the bastard offspring of modernist impulses to realism and mastery that are on some level desperately antagonistic toward any trace of enchantment or magical thinking (Baudrillard 1990a: 152, 182). As that founding father of modernity, René Descartes, noted in his *Discourse on Method*, even 'fables' ultimately pose a threat, for they 'make us imagine many events as possible when they are not' (1985: 113-4, quoted in Cascardi, 1992: 30). The 'magical' is antithetical to Cartesian rationality, which dominant modernist epistemologies uphold as the definitive human attribute and chief weapon against superstition, illusion, merely conventional belief systems, and the unruliness of nature (Cascardi, 1992: 60-1). For Baudrillard, however, the realist attack on illusionary impulses sets modernity on an ill-fated course, for illusion is crucially of the order of the 'scene': a theatrical space with depth wherein secrecy is possible and consequential events can play out. *Obscene* mediatisation, by contrast, favours a kind of post-semiological, depthless and all-embracing transparency whereby all becomes at once visible and meaningless as distinctions between sign and referent, signifier and signified are progressively liquidated. Baudrillard (1990a: 194) explains that

for something to have meaning, there must be a scene; and for a scene to exist, there must be illusion, a minimum of illusion, of imaginary movement, of *challenge* to the real, one which transports you, seduces you, revolts you. Without this strictly aesthetic, mythic and ludic dimension, there is not even any scene of the political, where something might cause a stir (Baudrillard 1990a: 30 [my emphasis]).

The *loss of the scene* (in favor of the *screen*) thus exacerbates modernity's drive toward *disillusionment*, in the (interlinked) senses of both the incapacity to nurture illusion *and* dissatisfaction or disappointment. At stake in the difference between the competing cultural impulses that obscenity and seduction respectively express are the different modes of imaginative engagement that are promoted by the seductive as compared to the obscene, and the different epistemo-political consequences that stem from these respective imaginative modalities. For obscenity manifests nostalgia for the *categorical* 'reality' that succumbs under conditions of pervasive media networking and image saturation; it thus ironically both feeds on and

fuels the modernist discourses of realism that stubbornly persist even in Baudrillardian hyperreality.

The now prodigious body of theoretical and empirical work within cultural studies on television and other media audiences should caution us against a too-literal acceptance of Baudrillard's idea that contemporary media obscenity creates 'voyeurs without illusion' (1990a: 194). But we should be equally wary of facile dismissals of Baudrillard's analysis, which does indeed grasp something of the ascendant logic of the culture of (post)modernism. One key aspect of this logic concerns the question of reversibility or reversion, which modernism deters. Indeed, Baudrillard's corpus (in multiple senses: his body of work, *the hypervisible body* of obscene media saturation, the corpulent body social) can be understood as a testament to the distended, hypertrophic and inertial culture that results from modernism's preclusion of reversibility or reversion in favor of the ideologies of an onward march of linear progress and an ongoing continuity of various accumulations (of wealth, of knowledge, of technological gadgetry, and so forth). Hence,

We are no longer in a state of growth; we are in a state of excess. We are living in a society of excrescence, meaning that which incessantly develops without being measurable against its own objectives. The boil is growing out of control, recklessly at cross purposes with itself, its impacts multiplying as the causes disintegrate. That is leading to enormous congestion of the systems, to their deregulation through hypertely, through an excess of functionality, through virtual satiation. This process can be compared to cancerous metastases — conditions in which a body's organic rules of the game are lost, enabling such a formation of cells to manifest its invincible and fatal vitality, partially leading it to stop obeying its own genetic commands, and finally to grow rampantly instead of following an organized pattern of development (1989: 29).

Baudrillard goes on to note that

something escapes us; we escape ourselves in a process of no return, we have missed a certain point for turning back, a certain point of the contradiction in things, and have entered a universe of noncontradiction alive, of blind rapture, of ecstasy, of amazement



about the irreversible processes that nevertheless have no direction at all (1989: 32).

If this style of analysis sometimes lends what might be called an air of one-dimensionalism to Baudrillard's work, it is in part because he clearly favors a strategy of critique by ironic means. Nevertheless, one source of contradiction that Baudrillard has identified and theorised is *seduction*. While obscenity entails the hemorrhagic loss of scenes in 'rituals of transparency' and hypervisibility, seduction recovers illusion as it diverts the will to truth from its course. For Baudrillard notes that this hemorrhaging should not be presumed 'fatal in the negative sense of the term, such as "nothing can be done about it"'; people *can* 'discover scenes or fragments of scenes *in totally unexpected places*' (1990a: 30, [my italics]).

Seduction counters disenchantment with ritual, challenge and the dare. It never aims to *master*. It substitutes the play of appearances, with all the artifice this entails, for the transparency of the obscene. It supplants the principle of linearity, which pushes systems to their extreme forms, with that of the cycle, and therefore reversion. Seduction's 'sudden reversibility' (Baudrillard, 1990b: 2) undoes processes of accumulation and annuls 'pretences to establish and fix the truth, real, desire, power' (Grace, 2000: 164). For Baudrillard (1990a: 133-4), seduction's annulment of pretences to reveal the 'truth' of the 'real' unravels both the modernist paradigm of representation and the postmodern model of simulation.

Baudrillard calls seduction 'a conspiracy of signs' that threatens every discourse. It is 'a black magic for the deviation of all truths', the 'intelligible form of non-sense' (1990b: 2, 70). Seduction casts a spell. It always 'seeks to overturn and exorcise a power'. It responds to hyperrationalism with elusive irony. Seduction involves a 'play of signs' that 'weaves and unweaves appearances'. It is 'unrestrained' by the concept of 'natural limits' (1990b: 87-9, 94). Seduction deploys the mythic in an age of anti-mythicism.

The imaginative transformations brought about by tele-visions of otherworldly entities and scenarios address popular dissatisfactions with epistemologies that rigorously exclude the paranormal, the supernatural, the enchanted and the charmed from the ascendant modes of cultural imagination and ways of knowing. Consequently, television's 'otherworldliness' can serve as a mechanism for challenging, negotiating and sometimes restaging or reimagining social realities that are of *this* world. Tele-visions of the otherworldly seductively mobilise (il)(e)lusive

appearances against hyperrealist technovisualisation in ways that undermine rationalistic certitudes, albeit perhaps obliquely rather than through unsubtle, full-frontal directness.

### **Otherworldly Tele-Visions**

Tele-visions of the otherworldly have been prominent in the contemporary global mediaverse and encompass a range of different but related forms. Recent weekly examples include programmes featuring extraterrestrial aliens such as the SF dramas *Roswell* and the various incarnations of *Star Trek*, as well as the sitcom *Third Rock from the Sun*; programmes that re-imagine the postmodern social scene such as the dystopian, twenty minutes into the future ‘tough chick’ SF adventure series *Dark Angel*; programmes that involve supernatural beings from assorted demonic, heavenly or mythic planes and dimensions such as *Charmed*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel*, *Xena*, *Hercules*, and *Millennium*; and programmes that involve both extraterrestrial and supernatural entities and scenarios such as *The X-Files*, as well as various and sundry tabloid TV shows including *Sightings*, *Encounters*, and *The Other Side*. I would argue that all of these textual engagements with the otherworldly involve, in varying degrees and on different levels, interactions between competing formations of knowledge that unsettle the dominant discourses and disenchantments of modernity.

What matter here most, in relation to the question of seduction, are the ways in which certain forms of contemporary television establish sites for the textual enactment of *challenges* to dominant modalities for the production of the ‘truth’ of the ‘real’. Such enactments thus also challenge, destabilise and sometimes transform entrenched, power-bearing knowledges. For, to follow Foucault once again, although the contemporary age of mediatisation may undo modernist realism in its implosion of referentiality, this does not mean that all ways of knowing and understanding become equally powerful and equally available, as if through the triumph of some epistemological liberal pluralism. Rather, the hyperreal works in conjunction with the (stubbornly persistent) discourses (of realism) that establish the dominant regime of (the) ‘truth’ (of the ‘real’). By contrast, seduction defies these discourses and reverses this regime.

There are three levels of seduction at work here. First, at the thematic level, otherworldly tele-visions invoke myth and ritual in ways that disorganise various identities and disturb the process of disenchantment by reviving imaginative figures

barred by the dominant contemporary regime of the ‘real’. Second, this revival of barred figures activates agonistic relations between competing modes of prehension and apprehension through the reintroduction of what Baudrillard has called the forms of ‘secret understanding’ associated with the re-enchantment of the world. Third, this process of reenchantment establishes agonisms between text and audience, whereby the former challenges the latter (and vice versa, in many cases).<sup>2</sup>

Cultural studies has accustomed us to conceptualising the text as a set of dynamic tensions and multivocalities rather than fixed, monovocal significations. From a cultural studies perspective, the text is thus a site of ongoing struggle for and over dominant and oppositional meanings, rather than an apparatus of straightforward ideological transmission. If Baudrillard has drawn our attention to the crucial processes of implosion and simulation at work in contemporary culture, my interest here lies in thinking through what it might mean to understand the *simulacrum* as a site of agonistic contention between competing forces, ways of knowing and modalities of being — for marginalized modes of understanding and cultural energies (such as seduction) can nevertheless *never* be finally rendered socially or politically inert, as Baudrillard knows well. If they could be, the process of marginalization would itself become redundant, irrelevant and meaningless. Put somewhat differently, Baudrillard’s analysis of the contemporary cultural condition focuses on its ascendant logics without presuming that these logics subsume the totality of that condition (see Grace, 2000). It would similarly be mistaken to conclude that those forces and energies that are *not* ascendant can thus be presumed culturally inert.

Baudrillard (1990a: 133-4) argues that by a ‘curious’ ‘coincidence’, both simulation and seduction work by liquidating the distinction between ‘appearances’ and some external or underlying ‘reality’ that such appearances either distort or faithfully represent. That is, simulation and seduction work by similar mechanisms, albeit toward different ends. To what degree can television then be understood as a site of struggle between these competing movements? Vološinov (1973) long ago challenged structural linguistics to rethink the (unitary) sign itself as a multiplicity and therefore a site of micropolitical struggle. Can the Baudrillardian simulacrum, implosive though it may be, similarly bear conceptualisation as a site of contestations?

If contemporary television is a site of contestation between obscenity and seduction, the visualisation of the otherworldly is one of the key modalities of this

contestation. Otherworldly tele-visions transform the excesses of obscene objectivism, stage the dissolution of fixed identities, ‘realities’, and classificatory schemes, and exceed the limitations of established power/knowledges. Distinctions between human and animal frequently dissolve, as do those between human and alien, human and demon, human and god, and god and demon. ‘Natural laws’ are bent through the invocation of powerful magics. Identities melt, re-congeal and hybridise. Humans, gods and demons exchange challenges across permeable thresholds between incommensurable planes of existence. Rationalist certitudes dissolve into indeterminacy. The maelstrom of demonic horrors and dark fantasies supposedly dispelled in the triumph of reason and modernist enlightenment returns with the full force of its nightmarish fury. The supernatural seduces the quotidian through ironic reversals. Demonic entities amble through well-appointed shopping malls and haunt the circuitries of the Internet. Satanic minions attend real estate seminars and queue-up for the latest trendy motivational speakers. Shape-shifting aliens infiltrate government agencies and subvert US democracy. Vampires take cover by day within the banged-up, aluminum-sided landscapes of a Midwestern trailer park; a cult of teenage vampire-worshippers emulates the ‘lonely ones’ and seeks transcendence through transmutation. Another earthly cult worships a deity of a different sort: a worm-like, beagle-sized larva that attaches itself to the lower spinal column of its human host, spreading tentacles upward until they merge completely and irreversibly with the host’s basal ganglia — a striking literalisation of challenge and implosive confrontation between the sacred, the abjectly verminous, and the rationally transcendent. Life seduces death seduces life.

For Baudrillard, as for George Bataille before him (and by whom he was deeply influenced), modernist systems inevitably generate their own Others, their own troubling remainders, their waste products and grotesques, which continuously challenge the very systems from which these unassimilable irritants have sprung, and which continuously deconstruct the boundaries enacted by such systems around themselves. Thus do these tele-visions of the otherworldly continually excavate and reveal the presence of magical thinking within scientific rationality (and vice-versa), the presence of the monstrous within the human (and vice-versa), the presence of the other within the self, of alienness in us, and so on. Moreover, these programmes draw upon the otherworldly to allegorise, defamiliarise, and sometimes critique particular aspects of contemporary sociality: the educational system, domesticity and the family

order, the small town and the suburb, contemporary gender roles and relations, the government and its various agencies, officials and authorities, the military-industrial complex, the media, and even big business in general. The otherworldly is well suited for such purposes because of its denaturalising elements and tendencies.

Space here permits me to offer two extended textual examples that elucidate some of these seductively denaturalising elements and tendencies. These examples come from *Charmed* and *The X-Files*. The US WB Network series *Charmed* is about three sisters who, upon entering adulthood, discover they have inherited powers of witchcraft that have descended matrilineally through their family for centuries. Moreover, they are heirs to an ancient prophecy that foretells of the ‘Charmed Ones’, a triad whose magics, when combined together, have an unsurpassed capacity to vanquish evil. In their weekly adventures, the Halliwell sisters, Phoebe (Alyssa Milano), Piper (Holly Marie Combs), and Prue (Shannen Doherty) encounter a variety of powerful demons and warlocks whom they must defeat with magic in order to preserve the lives of innocents. *The X-Files* chronicles the work of FBI agents Fox Mulder (David Duchovny), Dana Scully (Gillian Anderson) and in later seasons, John Doggett (Robert Patrick) as they investigate both cases that involve paranormal and supernatural phenomena and a corruptly conspiratorial shadow-government that has formed a working partnership with an extraterrestrial race bent on the colonisation of Earth. Mulder is an Oxford-trained psychologist whose passion since boyhood has been the pursuit of the truth of his younger sister’s abduction by aliens. His experiences have endowed him with an open-minded appreciation of the narrow limitations of conventional beliefs and epistemologies. His partner Scully, on the other hand, a medical doctor, is a hard-bitten scientific empirico-rationalist who has been assigned to the X-files to provide a skeptical counterbalance to Mulder’s decidedly non-disenchanted worldview.

My first textual example involves an episode of *Charmed* in which the Halliwells encounter a small American frontier town whose inhabitants have been forced to relive the same day again and again, to re-enact eternally the twisted racial logic of colonialism, in retribution for a colonial atrocity committed in 1873. The sisters discern that time-loops can result from great evil or injustice, and that breaking such loops requires that the injustice be set right through a kind of reversion that undoes the power imbalance that has accumulated. The episode thus deals both allegorically and more explicitly with issues of racial persecution within a colonial

context where magical beliefs and ritualistic activities function both as narrative markers of social difference, of excluded Otherness, from the disenchanting perspective of the cultures of Western modernity, and as counter-practices that can be used to undermine dominant logics and social forces.

We learn that the colonial misdeed that has precipitated the 128-year-old time-loop involves a young biracial Native American, Beau, who, like the Halliwell sisters, is possessed of magical capabilities, known to his people as 'the Gift'. Beau's father was considered 'a great medicine man', but his mother has taught Beau to hide his gift from the townsfolk, as magic is 'considered evil in the white man's world'. Although the white settlers know nothing of his magical abilities, those very abilities facilitate a transdimensional link between Phoebe Halliwell and the parallel plane of existence where the time-loop exists. Hence, Phoebe begins to experience sympathetic 'psychic echoes' of the physical torments inflicted upon Beau after he foments resistance against Mr. Sutter, a greedy and ruthlessly controlling land developer connected to the railroad company that wants to lay tracks through the town. These psychic echoes begin faintly but become increasingly intense as Phoebe's body progressively mirrors Beau's lacerations and contusions. It appears that unless the other Halliwells can intervene and disrupt the time-loop, Phoebe will die with Beau at sundown when Sutter once again lashes the insurrectionary 'half-breed' to death while the townspeople stand idly by, as they have done countless thousands of times before.

When Prue Halliwell arrives to help Beau, he receives a magical vision that reveals to him the nature of the curse responsible for the time-loop. This curse was imposed by the spirits of his father's people in response to the inaction of the townsfolk in the face of the deadly beating doled out to Beau by Sutter. Like seduction, the curse thus poses a kind of challenge: its spell can only be broken by the townspeople, who must choose both to discern and take up the challenge, to intervene and stop Sutter's brutal lashing, to save Beau and thereby save themselves. But the curse also poses a challenge to white audiences through its allegorisation of the slaughter of those who more broadly resisted the colonial holocaust, its explicit linkage of that holocaust with industrial expansion and profiteering, and its overt implication of white non-intervention and passivity, of the settlers' turning a blind eye to imperialisation and racial injustice, as a form of cosmic culpability that carries vast ramifications and transhistorical reverberations. Consequently, when Beau is tied and dragged behind a horse to the central town square, we see through rapid intercutting

that Phoebe's body, located spatially on a parallel plane of existence where 128 years have passed, convulses in violent agony. As the white man's whip strikes Beau's flesh, Phoebe screams, her body lurched forward by the numbing sting of the lash, her own flesh torn with Beau's by its force. As she receives magical visions of the murder perpetrated on her own plane of reality so many years earlier, Phoebe is forced to confront in body and soul the consequences of the sins of her colonial predecessors. Through a magical connection, Phoebe becomes the medium and channel for a kind of anti-Cartesian corporeal empathy that implicates the white body in bygone crimes of colonialism, and thus exposes the basis of that body's contemporary situation in the historical traumas of conquest. The first tentative step of racial reconciliation, the healing touch, comes only when the townsfolk learn to interrogate their own culpability-through-inaction and thus to rise up against Sutter and his men. We have here then both forms of healing and modes of visualisation that differ significantly — because they proceed from a different epistemological and therefore political basis — from those associated with the surgical incisions, excisions, resections, and other interventions envisioned in *realityTV* shows such as *RPA*.

In Phoebe's magical psychic echoes, illusion shines with the full force of truth — a truth that is imprinted on the body. The episode is thus suggestive of the seductive power of magical thought in a disenchanted world. Magics tantalise and seduce all the more because they are charged with the force of that which the dominant culture of Western modernism works hard within itself to expunge and exclude. As this episode of *Charmed* illustrates at the level of its narrative events, magical thought reverberates with echoes of the violent exclusions that lie at the very base of modernisation. It reminds that disenchantment entails much more than the apparent displacement of practices of 'irrationality' by those of its ostensible antithesis. This episode and others like it also testify to and enact the incapacity of supposedly total systems to eliminate alterity, whether such alterity comes in the form of ritual enchantments or painful, deeply repressed cultural memories of genocidal contacts. Even such deeply repressed and rigorously excluded cultural memories find ways to return, to haunt, to unsettle the disenchanted spaces of modernity, just as seduction always manages to insinuate itself through the interstices of any presumptively closed system.

My second extended example is from *The X-Files*, which routinely plays on processes that undermine fixed systems and notions of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’. Indeed, one of the program’s well-known slogans, ‘the truth is out there’, bespeaks this seductive aspect of *The X-Files*. Some commentators interpret this slogan as evidence that the program is finally based upon a traditional, modernist epistemology: there is a truth out there that we can, with good investigative methods, discern — presuming the nonintervention of whatever powers and sinister forces might like to divert us from this truth, *the Truth*. But such an interpretation ignores the playfully seductive elements contained both in the pun ‘out there’ and in the programme’s general orientation. The truth is *out there*, as if in left field, beyond belief, posing a challenge to credibility that isn’t brought to an end by the simple designation, ‘truth’ (Glynn, 2000: 164). The imploded bipolarity that results from the declaration of a ‘truth’ that is ‘out there’ — fantastically outlandish, wildly unbelievable — posits an enchantingly unstable and interminably irresolvable contradiction between opposed concepts compressed into a single locus of intense energy. This compression enacts dual/duel relations between antithetical terms (‘the truth’/‘out there’) locked into an escalating spiral of challenges to each other. It is, I suggest, this ethos of Baudrillardian seduction that gives *The X-Files* its charm.

The episode under consideration here concerns a series of mysterious, viciously violent murders in Idaho. The core mystery around these murders stems from the fact that the evidence fails to point clearly to either a human or nonhuman attacker. Rather, the key challenge posed by this evidence is that it suggests elements of both. To set the backdrop for the investigation of these murders: extraterrestrials have interrupted Agent Mulder’s search for his sister’s abductors by abducting Mulder himself. FBI officials, having grown concerned that her years of fieldwork alongside Mulder have eroded Scully’s rational skepticism, have consequently seized the opportunity created by Mulder’s disappearance and appointed a no-nonsense former police detective, Agent John Doggett, to be her new partner. The fresh pairing retains much of the fundamental dynamic that characterised the relationship between Mulder and Scully. While she remains committed to empirico-rationalist methods as the privileged route to real truth, her experiences with Mulder have indeed left Scully open to modes of understanding and explanation that she would once have dismissed out of hand as unfounded and unmitigated absurdities. For his part, Doggett has little sensitivity to the paranormal, and is puzzled at best by Mulder’s consistent



willingness to entertain the most unconventional possibilities in his investigations — a willingness that now seems to have infected Scully, at least in some limited way.

Upon arriving at the scene of the murders, Scully and Doggett are immediately confronted with the ambiguities regarding the nature of the perpetrator. Bite marks on the badly mauled bodies of the victims appear to be human, although they've been inflicted with a stupefying ferocity that challenges this conclusion. Furthermore, the only two footprints discovered on the scene seem neither entirely human nor animal in origin. Finally, the agents discover what appear to be half-digested and regurgitated fingers that once belonged to one of the victims. These fingers point toward a decidedly otherworldly scenario.

As the narrative develops, a consistent pattern begins to emerge — one that mirrors some of the structuring patterns that govern the series as a whole and which we might read as clues regarding its seductive dimensions. The physical evidence provides a basis for the formation of well-grounded hypotheses that nevertheless compel the agents working the X-Files (and us who are with them in the audience) toward otherworldly conclusions that challenge the very disciplining of the imaginative and the fanciful that is built into the empirico-rational investigative process. In other words, these 'out there' conclusions undermine the principles of disenchantment that are disciplinarily inscribed within the rigorous empirical methods of discovery that are shown to be responsible for the discernment of the otherworldly in the first instance. Thus, ironically, it is the scientificity of the agents' procedural methods that seems to authorise the fantastical findings that, in their turn, challenge the sober perspective upon which those very findings rest and divert the agents from the path toward disillusionment (in both senses of the word; that is, it is the turn toward fantastic explanations that precludes disappointment in the search for solutions to their cases). Within the logic of the programme, then, it might be said that scientific realism dares the otherworldly to exist, challenges it to reveal itself; such revelation then in turn challenges modernist disenchantment. A perfectly seductive couplet. Recall Baudrillard's (1990b: 69) words: 'to seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion'.

Often, the moment of this reconstitution comes in the form of a leap — an imaginative leap that responds to the challenge of difficult evidence by engaging in a kind of one-upmanship that poses a counter-challenge to both the evidence itself and the empirico-deductive investigative procedure. This leap is thus a risk, a type of

wager that lands the player beyond familiar territory and somewhere in the vicinity of the uncanny, where the warrant provided by the challenging evidence has been outstripped and surpassed. The following exchange is revealing:

*Local Sheriff (angrily)*: Honest to God! You just jump at whatever explanation is the wildest and most far-fetched, don't you?

*Scully*: Well I suggest that you jump at it too .... I'm not an expert [in the paranormal]. I am a scientist who happens to have seen a lot. I am just making a leap here...

*Doggett*: I told you I spent the weekend lookin' through that cabinet full of X-Files, and I saw how pretty much every X-File broke with a leap. Now maybe I'm just an old-fashioned cop, but I don't take leaps. In my experience, leaps only get people killed.

The imaginative leap diverts the course of disenchanted rationalism, reroutes things toward a new orientation, seductively redirects the flow of the game by exploiting available openings.

Doggett makes a leap of his own when he uncovers a strange bit of evidence in the form of a newspaper story from 1956. He shows the front-page headline, 'Hunters Kill Human Bat!' to Scully, who notes the half-page photo of a hunting party proudly surrounding a slain man-bat. Scully reads: 'the creature was taken to the county coroner, who confirmed it was neither man nor animal'. The *Montana Press Telegram* appears to be a mainstream newspaper, yet at the same time suggests a subtle pastiche of supermarket tabloids such as the *Weekly World News* and the *Sun*. The scene thus encapsulates on at least two levels (that of the creature itself and that of its documentation) the seductive collusion between polarities that Baudrillard associates with enchantment. As it happens, the perpetrator of the murders is in fact a bat-man descended from an evolutionary lineage distinct from our own and bent on avenging the 1956 killing. When they finally uncover one of the original hunters pictured in the newspaper photo, he offers an explanation that appropriates, reworks and thus seduces the discourses of evolutionary science, yet again subtly slackening Scully's grip on the disenchanted perspective to which she nevertheless clings:

I know on the evolutionary ladder, bats are real close by the apes. And just as we came from the apes, so might a man, sprung from a bat, live and hunt like a bat — but with the cold-blooded vengeance of a man.

The vengeful bat-man, like the curse that Beau represents, is a troubling *rem(a)inder* that existing systems cannot accommodate, assimilate nor exclude altogether, as are the all-too-human actions that have produced these ‘otherworldly’ figures — actions based upon the need to hunt down and exterminate alterity. In this sense these figures challenge and haunt because they represent either actual, intolerable historical events (the atrocities against Beau’s people), or haunting tendencies within the cultures of Western modernism (such as the intolerance toward Otherness that is illustrated and allegorised by the 1956 events that created the elusively vengeful man-bat who continues to insinuate his troubling presence more than 40 years later). The half-digested and subsequently regurgitated body parts that are trademark remnants of the bat-man’s attacks are metaphorically significant in this regard. Like Beau and the bat-man themselves, which have also been swallowed up and spit back by the imperfectly assimilative mechanisms of the cultures of Western modernism, these partially absorbed body part remainders symbolise the indigestible elements that haunt all presumptively self-sufficient systems, be they systems that mark the distinction between the ‘past’ and the ‘present’, the ‘rational’ and the ‘ritual’, the ‘human’ and the ‘nonhuman’, or the ‘real’ and ‘illusion’. Seduction and reversion are among the conceptual figures by which Baudrillard demonstrates the vulnerability of such demarcating systems to constant disruption and unsettlement. From a Baudrillardian perspective, the centuries-long dance between disenchantment and the magical, to which the cultures of Western modernity have borne sullen witness, cannot be adequately explained as the story of the diminishing remnants that will at last gradually vanish as the great modernist systems for the production of ‘truth’, ‘reality’ and ‘rationality’ progressively wipe away the last vestiges of ‘superstition’, ‘ritual’ and ‘primitive illusion’. Rather, this long dance is both symptomatic and emblematic of the futility of a modernist faith in the rationally constructed boundaries thought to surround and protect systems (of truth, of science, of production) from seduction and pollution by their impure and excluded Others.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Baudrillard (1990a: 28), explains, ‘when I say that the false shines with the power of the true, I mean that the true, since we seem to imbue it with a kind of halo, can never be found by seeking it. The only strategy is to do the reverse! You can only attain the true or the beautiful — if they are to be the criteria of accomplishment — by going precisely in the

opposite direction... [I]f something is to be found — but “found” without being sought — this can only really occur by the alternate route of something else. That’s absolutely essential’.

<sup>2</sup> Audience reception practices and fan activities often pose challenges to ‘primary’ television texts (see, e.g., Jenkins, 1992). A vast realm of fan creativity (involving the circulation of heretical, fan-authored counter-texts and other reworkings of ‘primary’ media material) sprawls across the Internet, for example, and often feeds back into the creative process that generates new ‘primary’ media texts. TV producers and actors/characters engage with audience communities in online practices of seduction and counter-seduction, and so on.

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