SATURATION OF THE IMAGE

Our present condition has been described in terms of an "ecstasy of communication."¹ In the media society of today, technological advances in telecommunications and in methods of visual reproduction ensure that we are constantly being inundated with images. Televisions, faxes, photocopiers, and computers have become the virtual windows of the age of the information highway, conduits of digitalized impulses that link the individual with a global network of communications. The modern office and home are deluged with reproduced images and information: news on the hour, every hour; movies previewed, premiered, released, cloned into videos, and drip-fed through cable TV. It is a culture of the copy, a society of saturation, the second flood. The world has become "xeroxized" to infinity.²

It has generally been assumed that this inundation of images leads to an "information society" which promotes a high level of communication. Yet according to some commentators, this "ecstasy of communication" has precisely the opposite effect: "We live in a world," as the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard has postulated, "where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning."³ It is precisely in this infinite cloning of the image, in this infinite proliferation of signs, that the sign itself has become invisible. The sign no longer has any meaning. This leads him to question what prompts this situation. Is it that information "produces" meaning but the process is
"leaky," so that the system founders like a ship? According to this thesis, "despite efforts to reinject meaning and content, meaning is lost and devoured faster than it can be rejected." Or is it that information has nothing to do with signification, in that information is a purely technical medium, to which meaning is then attached? Or is it finally, as Baudrillard suggests, that there is a negative link between the two, and that information either destroys or neutralizes meaning? In this case "the loss of meaning is directly linked to the dissolving, dissuasive action of information, the media, and the mass media." It is this final model that Baudrillard pursues, one that challenges the commonly held assumption that information generates meaning:

Everywhere information is thought to produce an accelerated circulation of meaning, a plus value of meaning homologous to the economic one that results from the accelerated rotation of capital. Information is thought to create communication, and even if the waste is enormous, a general consensus would have it that nevertheless, as a whole, there be an excess of meaning.

For Baudrillard, then, while we think that information generates meaning, in fact the opposite occurs. It is precisely the surplus of information that denies meaning: "Information devours its own content. It devours communication and the social." Baudrillard ascribes this seemingly paradoxical situation to two factors. First, information, rather than creating communication, "exhausts itself in the process of communication." Thus meaning is itself also exhausted in the staging of meaning. Second, according to Baudrillard, the pressure of information "pursues an irresistible destructuration of the social." Thus information dissolves meaning and dissolves the social, in a sort of nebulous state dedicated not to a surplus of innovation, but, on the contrary, to total entropy. Baudrillard gives the example of a twelve-volume report by the Exxon Corporation, a report so vast that no one could possibly absorb its information: "Exxon: the American government requests a complete report on the multinational's activities throughout the world. The result is twelve 1,000 page volumes, whose reading alone, not to mention the analysis, would exceed a few years work. Where is the information?" This situation is exacerbated by our cultural situation, dominated as it is, in Baudrillard's terms, by simulation and hyperreality. The image itself has become the new reality, or hyperreality—a virtual world floating above the real world in its own sealed-off hermetic envelope. It is a world that has lost touch with its referents in the real world, and where, paradoxically, the term "real" has been hijacked by the multinational conglomerates and turned into an empty advertising slogan, claiming its authenticity against its very absence of authenticity, such that "authenticity" becomes a suspect, counterfeit currency in the hypermarket of hyperreality. It's the "real thing," a Coca-Cola world of industrially manufactured "natural" ingredients, a dream world of commodities seemingly conjured up from nowhere and paid for with computerized, invisible credit.

In a world where the imaginary becomes the "real," there is no longer a place for the real. In the "perfect crime" of the twentieth century, reality itself has been stolen. Nowhere has the cover-up been more obvious than in Disneyland, the archetypal dream-center of this culture of consumption. For Disneyland, as Baudrillard notes, presents itself as an imaginary world, a make-believe kingdom to be contrasted with the real world outside. And its greatest success is to make us believe that it is make-believe. Disneyland thereby lends authority to the world outside; it is an imaginary world that becomes a "prop" to the real, a make-believe kingdom that makes us believe that the world outside is real. Yet it is here that the greatest deceit takes place. For the world outside belongs no longer to the "real" but to the hyperreal. And Disneyland, as Baudrillard observes, is precisely part of that hyperreal world outside. It is the very replication of the values of America; and if the population buys into this myth of the make-believe, it is simply because it wants to buy into it. Disneyification has become the new religion of the twentieth century, where dream and reality are entangled in a never-never world brought to you by Disney Products Plc, purveyors of dreams to the universe.

The corollary also holds true, in that the world outside is equally part of Disney. The whole of Western culture has been consumed by this syndrome. In this context the objections raised against the presence
of a “fake” Eurodisney castle in France, a country whose architectural legacies include the “authentic” châteaux of the Loire, appear somewhat hollow. For the question is not so much whether a castle is “authentic” or not, but whether we can any longer claim the capacity to grasp its authenticity. In a culture where capitalism absorbs our heritage into the framework of commodified tourist “experiences,” the line between authenticity and inauthenticity becomes somewhat blurred. In the age of hyperreality, the Eiffel Tower is appropriated as the “Eiffel Tower Experience” and Notre-Dame as the “Notre-Dame Experience.” And when the authentic engagement with the inauthentic collapses into the inauthentic engagement with the authentic, how can we guarantee that we will ever access the historical “reality” of France? It is in the figure of Eurodisney, then, that we glimpse the essential nature of tourism today. Eurodisney, Eiffel Tower, Notre-Dame, châteaux on the Loire. Roll up, roll up for the hyperreal coach tour of the universe.

The Aestheticization of the World

On the slippery slope into a culture of simulation, the function of the image shifts from reflecting reality to masking and perverting that reality. Once reality itself has been removed, all we are left with is a world of images, of hyperreality, of pure simulacra. The detachment of these images from their original complex cultural situation decontextualizes them. They are fetishized and judged by their surface appearance at the expense of any deeper reading. This culture of reification objectifies the whole act of viewing, such that any appreciation of depth, perspective, or relief is reduced, promoting instead “a gaze which sweeps over objects without seeing in them anything other than their objectiveness.” In the process of reading an object as a mere image, that object is emptied of much of its original meaning. The image is all there is. Everything is transported into an aesthetic realm and valued for its appearance. The world has become aestheticized. Everything has become appropriated as art. As Baudrillard himself comments, “Art has today totally penetrated reality. . . . The
aestheticization of the world is complete.”11 Baudrillard locates this problem within a series of more general symptoms, the transpolitical, transsexual, and transaesthetic condition of contemporary culture. This is the condition of excess, when everything becomes political, sexual, and aesthetic, and, consequently, any specificity in these domains is lost. For just as when everything takes on a political meaning, politics itself becomes invisible, and when everything takes on a sexual meaning, sex itself becomes invisible, so too when everything becomes aesthetic, the very notion of art disappears. As a consequence of this, for Baudrillard, the word aesthetics loses all meaning: “When everything becomes aesthetic, nothing is either beautiful or ugly any longer, and art itself disappears.”12

Baudrillard describes this condition of excess as one of “obscenity,” which he characterizes as “the endless, unbridled proliferation of the social, of the political, of information, of the economic, of the aesthetic, not to mention, of course, the sexual.”13 Associated with this is the notion of “obesity.” Within the “obscenity” of the present, the saturation of the aesthetic has led to a state of “obesity.” And it is this absorption of everything into the realm of art, this swelling and distension of the category, that ensures that all it contains is effectively obliterated.

In a culture of simulacra and simulation, a culture of hyperreality where the image has become a new reality, the domain that governs the image—aesthetics—has come to dominate other domains: “Everything aestheticizes itself: politics aestheticizes itself into the spectacle, sex into advertising and pornography, and the whole gamut of activities into what is held to be called culture, which is something totally different from art; this culture is an advertising and media semiotizing process which invades everything.”14 The model here is a paradoxical one. The very liberation of the notion of a work of art has led to the abandonment of any fundamental rules for a work of art. And if there is no standard against which to measure a work of art, there can equally be no standard by which to appreciate it. Instead of aesthetic judgment we find an obscene fascination with excess. There is a paradox, too, in terms of the art market. The escalation in production of works of art leads to a paralysis of the principles that govern them. Hyperacceleration leads to deceleration. Explosion leads to implosion. Frenzy leads to stasis. And so the art market, for Baudrillard, reaches saturation and becomes stifled: “There is a necessary relation between the rupture with all logic of aesthetic value within the field of art, and the rupture with all logic of mercantile value, within the market of art. The same mechanical racing, the same madness, the same excess of simulation characterize them both.”15

This “racing,” this acceleration by inertia, only leads to its opposite, a cultural meltdown, a state of supersaturation where even anti-art objects become appropriated as art; and no domain of the physical world will escape this process: “The whole industrial machinery of the world found itself aestheticized, the whole insignificance of the world found itself transfigured by aesthetics. . . . Everything, even the most insignificant, the most marginal, the most obscene encultures itself, becomes a museum piece, and aestheticizes itself.”16 And this catastrophe folds back on the art world itself, which, for Baudrillard, is forced to dematerialize itself through minimalism and hence erase itself: “Because the world in its entirety is destined to the play of operational aesthetics, art has no other recourse than to disappear.”17

In sum, the surfeit of the image—the excess of communication and information—implies the opposite, a reduction of communication and information. All this is exacerbated under the condition of hyperreality, whereby content is consumed and absorbed within a general process of aestheticization. The world therefore threatens to be perceived increasingly in terms of a proliferation of aesthetic images empty of content.

The Politics of Aestheticization

The question of how the process of aestheticization robs objects of content seems at first sight somewhat problematic: the popular assumption is that works of art necessarily embody meaning, especially in the case of Marxist art where, as Walter Benjamin has observed, artists are always striving to politicize their work.18 Yet is the question of quite
how art embodies that content so straightforward that anyone not familiar with the intended meaning of a work of art would recognize that meaning, even if it were abstract art? For if we exclude slogans and posters that rely heavily on words and more obvious methods of visual signification in order to communicate specific messages, the primary role of art is not to serve as a literal form of communication. Indeed the bare fact remains that there can usually be no single privileged reading to a work of art. Meaning, in this sense, often becomes a question of symbolic meaning. It is limited to what might be conveyed to a particular individual. And symbolic meaning, as Fredric Jameson has observed, “is as volatile as the arbitrariness of the sign.”

It might be useful here to take up Jameson’s notion of allegory in the context of political content. To view artistic form as inherently “politicized” is, for Jameson, a misguided project: “It was one of the signal errors of the artistic activism of the 1960s to suppose that there existed, in advance, forms that were in and of themselves endowed with a political, and even revolutionary, potential by virtue of their own intrinsic properties.” For Jameson, political content does not reside in artistic form. It is merely projected onto it by a process that is strictly allegorical. To perceive the political meaning, one has to understand the allegorical system in which it is encoded. In the collective imagination, of course, this process of projection on the part of the interpreting agent is somehow overlooked. The very “ventriloquism” of ascribing a meaning to a work of art is never fully acknowledged, so that in the hermeneutic moment that meaning appears to be a property of the work itself.

Jameson stresses the ephemerality of that projection of political content onto form: any political content may subsequently be erased or rewritten. Political content is a question of allegorical content, which depends upon the retention of memory of some narrative explanation of what an artwork is supposed to mean. But this does not undermine the fact that in a given place, at a given time, and for a given group of people, a work of art will inevitably be seen as the concrete embodiment of certain political values. Indeed, while for Jameson form in itself is “inert,” it must be recognized that the artwork is never decontextualized. Art will therefore always have a “meaning,” but this meaning is merely projected onto it and is determined by factors such as context, use, and associations.

What is crucial is the “social ground” of an artwork. When removed from its contextual situation, pure artistic form would be exposed for what it is. Form, as Jameson notes, “would lack all political and allegorical efficacy” once taken out of the social and cultural movements that lend it this force. This is not to deny that art may indeed have “political and allegorical efficacy,” but rather to recognize that it merely serves as a vehicle for this within a given “social ground.” Once a work becomes abstracted from its original context, once it is treated in another manner, it changes its meaning. For to decontextualize a work is effectively to desemanticize it, and, by extension, to recontextualize it is to invest it with another meaning. Moreover, just as a work of art itself might lose its intended meaning when taken out of context, so too an object will likewise take on a different meaning when it becomes treated as a work of art.

Aestheticization therefore leads to a form of depoliticization. This is not to deny the possibility of politicized art, nor to overlook the important secondary role of art as a mechanism for consciousness-raising. Rather it is to acknowledge that the very principle of aestheticization acts as a constant constraint against the process of politicization. To this extent, any attempt to politicize art must in essence be compromised.

The Aestheticization of Architecture

While aestheticization remains a background cultural condition that permeates—to a greater or lesser extent—the whole of present society, its effects will be all the more marked within a discipline that operates through the medium of the image. Architecture is fully ensnared within this condition. For architects engage in a process of aestheticization as a necessary consequence of their profession. Convention dictates that architects should see the world in terms of visual representation—
plans, sections, elevations, perspectives, and so on. The world of the architect is a world of the image.

The consequences of this are profound. This privileging of the image has led to an impoverished understanding of the built environment, turning social space into a fetishized abstraction. The space of lived experience has been reduced to a codified system of signification, and with the increasing emphasis on visual perception there has been a corresponding reduction in other forms of sensory perception. “The image kills,” as Henri Lefebvre observes, and cannot account for the richness of lived experience.

This condition is further exacerbated by the techniques and systems of representation employed within the architect’s office. In a professional culture of parallel motions, set squares, tracing paper, and, ultimately, computers, a culture trapped within the ideological structures and value-laden hierarchies of capitalism, the separation between spatial practices and representations of space has become complete. The very processes of architectural representation, as Lefebvre observes, have contributed to the aestheticization of design itself, a process serving to obscure many of the underlying constraints that govern architectural practice:

As for the eye of the architect, it is no more innocent than the lot he is given to build on or the blank sheet of paper on which he makes his first sketch. His “subjective” space is freighted with all-too-objective meanings. It is a visual space, a space reduced to blueprints, to mere images—to that “world of the image” which is the enemy of the imagination.

As a consequence, then, of techniques and practices within the office, architects grow increasingly distanced from the world of lived experience. The very fetishizing of the image in architectural culture decontextualizes that image and traps the discourse of architecture within the whole logic of aestheticization, wherein everything is divested of much of its original meaning. Architectural culture, therefore, encounters the same depoliticizing urge that affects all discourses which work within the medium of the aesthetic.

It is precisely when architects claim that their work is *inaesthetic*, when they claim that it is governed by utilitarian concerns in which “art” plays no role, that the risk of aestheticization is most acute. The discourse of functionalism provides an obvious example. For when an architectural element so patently *un*functional as a flat roof belongs to a repertoire of features that come under the definition of “functionalism,” the very functionality of functionalism should be treated with some caution. In his incisive critique of the writings of Adolf Loos, the German aesthetic theorist Theodor Adorno has observed that functionalism is little more than an aesthetic category, a form of style. While Loos supported the Kantian distinction between the purpose-free and the purposeful in arguing for a purposeful—or “functional”—architecture, which resists the empty blandishments of purpose-free ornamentation, Adorno notes that the two terms are dialectically related. Supposedly purpose-free arts often have a social function, while there can be no “chemically pure” purposefulness. Even “functional” elements must contain an element of the decorative and cannot remain free of style. “Hence our bitter suspicion is formulated,” he concludes: “the absolute rejection of style becomes style.”

Furthermore the tendency to privilege the image potentially serves to distance architects from users of their buildings, in that it encourages them to adopt a highly aestheticized outlook, remote from the concerns of the users. This in itself might begin to explain the failure of many modernist architects whose “socially aware” designs were never accepted by the public for whom they were intended. Utopian architectural visions came to be seen as abstract aesthetic experiments of an architectural elite out of touch not only with the taste but also, more importantly, with the practical needs of the populace.

It is most especially in the discourse that surrounds movements such as Brutalism that the contrast between the views of a profession forever gazing through aestheticizing lenses and those of the public is made most obvious. For when such a movement can be turned into an aesthetic landscape by the precious language of architectural commentators, the “reality” of Brutalism, its harsh, uncompromising nature, is overlooked. What to the public appears as a grossly insensitive living environment may be re-presented as a highly sensitive piece of architecture.
It is ironic that Alison and Peter Smithson, the very commentators on Brutalism who purport to celebrate an architecture “without rhetoric,” themselves resort to a language markedly rhetorical in its embellishments in order to describe their projects. In this they are caught within their own aesthetic outlook. It is only by adopting a heavily aestheticized language of architectural commentary that they can succeed in dressing up their otherwise uncompromisingly severe architecture. And it is this that allows them to make their extraordinary comparison between the Brutalism of their Hunstanton School project and the simple sensitivity of peasant vernacular architecture:

For us, our Hunstanton School—which probably owes as much to Japanese architecture as to Mies—was the first realisation of our New Brutalism. This particular handling of materials, not in the craft sense but in intellectual appraisal, has been ever-present in the Modern Movement, as indeed familiar of the early German architects have been prompt to remind us. What is new about the New Brutalism among Movements is that it finds its closest affinities not in a past architectural style, but in peasant dwelling forms, which have style and are stylish but were never modish: a poetry without rhetoric. We see architecture as a direct statement of a way of life and in the past, ordinary prosaic life has been most succinctly, economically, tersely expressed in the peasant farms and the impediments of Mediterranean rural life that Le Corbusier had made respectable.26

Commentary on Brutalism is, of course, replete with such comparisons. The Smithsons go on to compare the repetition of their harsh Robin Hood Gardens project in London with the Royal Crescent in Bath and Bernini’s colonnade before St. Peter’s in Rome.27 Meanwhile Denys Lasdun speaks of his National Theatre in terms of the ancient theater at Epidaurus in Greece.28 These comparisons come across as deeply paradoxical. How is it possible for the insensitivity of Brutalism to be compared to the obvious sensitivity of these exquisite works from the past? But the real paradox is that the apparent insensitivity of Brutalism is a direct result of an oversensitivity on the part of the architects. The Smithsons, for example, could hardly be accused of being insensitive about materials, but it is precisely through raising their aesthetic awareness of materials and materiality that the problem has
arisen. A heightened receptivity to the coarseness of materials allows those materials to appear sensitive, while to the general public they appear just plain coarse. Aestheticization can therefore be viewed as a way of distorting reality, by privileging aesthetic sensibilities over other background concerns. This may, of course, prove a successful defensive mechanism by providing an aesthetic cocoon from the harsher aspects of that reality. An unpleasant object may be rendered acceptable by adopting such an outlook, so that a disused abattoir might easily be perceived as a potential art gallery. To aestheticize an object is to anaestheticize it and strip it of its unpleasant associations.

The corollary of this is perhaps also true. It may be that the very brutality of Brutalism is what encourages an aesthetic response, just as a disused abattoir might actually present itself as an ideal gallery space. Hence we might reflect upon an artistic culture in which artists such as Damien Hirst have exhibited sharks and other animals dissected and preserved in formaldehyde. The force of these works does not lie solely in their ability to shock the viewer into some form of response. Rather, the very revulsion that they would ordinarily generate, it could be argued, triggers an aestheticized response as a form of defensive mechanism on the part of the viewer, who is already predisposed by the nature of the setting to read these objects as works of art. Consequently, far from compromising their status as serious art, the gruesomeness of these works is precisely what encourages the viewer to treat them as objects worthy of aesthetic contemplation.

In an era of aestheticization, it is those aspects of life that are grim that have the capacity to promote such a seemingly paradoxical response, to the extent that whatever is originally unattractive may easily be deemed aesthetically appealing. In an age when industrialization becomes chic, when former factories are converted into apartments and power stations into national museums, and when industrial footwear and working overalls are treated as fashion items, what is grim and harsh seems to lend itself to aestheticization.