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THE GAMES OF FOUCAULT

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Cynical Sex

Cynical sex: this is what we have at the end of the world. For sex no longer exists as a privileged referent of the Real nor as the locus of a suppressed subjectivity, but as postmodern sex, fascinating now only on its reverse side — the Bataillean side of expenditure, waste, and excess. A *sacrificial* sex, then, that exists only parodically and schizoidly because sex has entered into its third order of simulation: the ideological mise-en-scène where the postmodern body promises its own negation. Here the previously reflexive connection between sexuality and desire is blasted away by the seductive vision of sex without organs — a hyperreal, surrogate, and telematic sex like that promised (but *never* delivered) by the computerized phone sex of the Minitel system in France — as the ultimate out-of-body experience for the end of the second millenium. Here the terror of the ruined surfaces of the body translates immediately into its opposite — *the ecstacy of catastrophe and the pleasure of sex without secretions as a final, ironic sign of our liberation.*

In his recent schizo-biography, Jean Baudrillard said this about the invasion of the body, under the double signs of the pleasure of catastrophe and the terror of the simulacrum, by the logic of exterminism — that is, the implosion of the postmodern body into an indifferent sign-slide between the hermetic self and the schizoid ego:

> And if reality under our eyes would suddenly dissolve? Not into nothingness, but into a real which is more than real (the triumph of simulation?). If the modern universe of communication, the space of hypercommunication through which we are plunging, not in forget-

> fulness, but with an enormous saturation of our senses, would consume us in its success — without trickery, without secrets, without distance? If all this mutation did not emanate, as some believe, from the manipulation of subjects and opinion, but from a logic without a subject where opinion vanishes into fascination? If it would no longer be correct to oppose truth to illusion, but to perceive generalized illusion as truer than truth? And if no other behavior was possible than that of learning ironically how to disappear? If there were no longer any fractures, lines of flight or ruptures, but a surface full and continuous, without depth, uninterrupted? And if all of this was neither a matter of enthusiasm nor despair, but fatal?[1]

A 'logic without a subject' in the late 1980s is sex without a body, a sex that is interesting as every advertiser knows when it is about the death of seduction (like the *New Look* in Paris fashion where what counts is "innocence not experience," or, as Dorothy Vallens says in *Blue Velvet* about sexual encounters of the hyperreal kind: "you have put your disease inside me"); or, more than this, a sex which is about the liquidation of the body and the cancellation of desire itself — like the TV sex of *Videodrome* or the "smart sex" of the New York art scene because it's neo-geo to excess in an age of the death of desire and the spreading out everywhere of a pervasive mood of indifference. Hyperreal sex, therefore, is a violent edge between kitsch and decay, between violence and inertia, between cyberspace and hyper-subjectivity. No longer Foucault's "local bodies," "effective history" and "subjugated knowledge," but the ideological production of cynical sex energized from within by subjugated knowledge, by the constant recycling of local histories, and by the endless reprise of difference.

It is ironic. 1986 was the 350th anniversary of the publication of Déscartes' *Discours de la méthode* and, with it, the production of the epistemological menu for the emergence of the modernist, geometrically centered perspective of the thinking head, framed within the discursive space of the liberal body. All of the key tendencies of contemporary French thought — from Michel Serres' bleak vision of *Le parasite* (where the positions of predator and parasite are the regulatory poles of hypermodern experience), and Bataille's meditations on the *solar anus* and the *pineal eye* as the privileged signs of the general economy of excess, to Michel Foucault's early philosophical reflections on madness as an indifferent absence, to, finally, Jean Baudrillard's hologram of the postmodern scene — represent the fatal implosion of the Cartesian subject. No longer the Cartesian thinking self, but *fractal subjectivity* in a hypermodern culture where panic science is the language of power; not ratiocination to excess, but *parallel processing* as the epistemological *reçit* of postmodern consciousness; not the local body, but *technologies for the body immune* as key features of a libidinal economy that

produces toxic bodies and designer aesthetics as its necessary conditions of operation; and not univocal (grounded) perspective anymore, but the fascinating implosion of perspective into the *cyberspace of virtual technology*. For when we already live beyond gravity (in hyperreal bodies) and beyond representational space (in the mathematical reality of *fuzzy sets* where individual particles have no determinate meaning apart from their random patterning within larger and more abstract statistical totalities), then the Cartesian self no longer exists except, perhaps, as an optical afterimage of the present condition of the post-Cartesian body as *dangling subjectivity in quantum reality*.

What, then, of the *post*-Cartesian body? This is the imploded body of postmodernism that has been traced in all of its detrital residue, in all of its exhaustion as it disappears into the suffocating, dark density of the schizoid sign; the missing body that has been marked as the sutured absence of Derrida's *trace*, of Lacan's *misrecognition*, of Irigaray's *speculum*; the hypermodern body that can be thematised now as the ventilated remainder of dangling subjectivities in quantum reality because its existence has been reduced to the threefold trajectory of a cynical power.

1. *Technologically*, the postmodern body is both objective remainder and subjective constituent of the technical interpellation of identity by dead and spectral image-systems. Not Foucault's "technologies of the self" whereby the modern self constitutes itself as the ethical subject of its own sexual conduct (although that too), but a hyper-technology of the self to such a point of violent excess that the self is (ideologically) peeled inside out, exteriorizing all of its bodily parts in society as cyberspace. Like the "world strip" of quantum physics, music, images, language, all of the sideral cultural vibrations, pass through the dead space of hypermodern bodies, making of bodies only a topological and surface feature of hypercommunication. The postmodern body, therefore, is a *superconductor* for all of the dying energies of the social.

2. *Ideologically*, the postmodern body is the prime after-effect of its possession by the violent and excessive language of *contractarian liberalism*. Not contractarian liberalism with its reduction of the meaning of justice to a barren equality in the primary goods of the industrial heartland of North America, but a contractual theory of justice that focusses on *body invasion*; from the Baby M case where the natural mother is reduced to a "hired womb" and the surrogate father (he was, anyway, always just borrowed sperm) is consecrated anew as the real, living Daddy, to all the recent cases of *fetal appropriation* whereby the state intervenes (supposedly on behalf of the rights of the unborn baby) to take juridical possession of the body of the mother; and the conflation of the private property principle and genetics, wherein the reproduction of new life forms is rendered a matter of market-determination with the newly legislated power of business to

acquire patent rights on the genetic creation of new life-species.

3. Finally, in the language of *fashion*, or in the semiotics of visual pleasure and transgression, the postmodern body is tattooed by all of the signs of the death of seduction. In a postmodern culture dominated by the disappearance of the Real and by the suffocation of natural contexts, fashion provides aesthetic holograms as moveable texts for the general economy of excess. If fashion cycles appear to move towards greater and greater speed, violence, and intensity of circulation of signs, that is because fashion, in an era where the body is the inscribed surface of events, is like brownian motion: the greater the violence and circulation of its surface features, the greater the internal movement towards stasis, immobility and interia. A whole postmodern culture, therefore, under the double sign of culture where, as Baudrillard has hinted, the secret of fashion is to introduce the *appearance* of radical novelty while maintaining the *reality* of no substantial change. Or is it the opposite? Not fashion as a referent of the third (simulational) order of the real, but as itself the spectacular sign of a parasitical culture that, always excessive, disaccumulative, and sacrificial, is drawn inexorably towards the ecstacy of catastrophe. The fashion scene, and the tattoed body with it, as a Bataillean piling up of the "groundless refuse of activity" because the sign of the Real has now disappeared into appearance. Consequently, the fashion scene, like pornography before it, must also give the appearance of no substantive change, while camouflaging the reality of radical novelty in a surface aesthetics of deep sign continuity. Fashion, therefore, is a conservative political agent complicit in deflecting the eye from fractal subjectivity, cultural dyslexia, toxic bodies, and parallel processing as the social physics of late twentieth-century experience.

Three Games

Even as I speak of the postmodern body as both object and privileged after-image of a colonizing power, the words begin to fade into a laconic and fatal disintegration. I remember, I *must* remember, the bitter words spoken by Foucault in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* that "(P)ower as a pure limit set on freedom is, at least in our society, the general form of its acceptability:"[2] the limit, that is, which makes bearable our instatiation within a cynical and indifferent freedom.

But perhaps it is no longer, as Foucault theorised, the radical play of domination and freedom with the *self* as a contested space of absence (the famous recovery of an "unspoken subjectivity"), but domination now under the sign of cynical power as a *mise-en-scène* of the truth of the postmodern body as a Bataillean site of recklessness, discharge, and upheaval. When we have already passed beyond the first two orders of sexuality, beyond *organic* sex and *discursive* sexuality, to the third stage of a

hyperreal sex (where the body is doubled in an endless labyrinth of media images, where transgression is the law, and bodies alternate between hermeticism and schizophrenia), then even Foucault's privileging of the second order of discursive sexuality (where we must pass through what is *said* about our sexuality, its *discourse*, in order to finally know the truth of our sex) works now only to suffocate the grisly implications of a hyperreal, cynical sex.

This would be to claim, though, that Foucault's fate was to be the last and best of all the Cartesians: the theorist who on the clinical grounds of medicine, power, sexuality, and science thought through the bitter analytics of the "thinking subject," of ratiocination to excess, even as rationality secreted into the very constitution of the ethical subject, and emerged finally as the enucleating horizon of western experience. If Foucault could never think beyond the dark side of Kant, could never escape — whether in his interpretation of science as cynical truth, medicine as cynical power, or the panoptic space as the cynical gaze — the full horizon of the trap Kant had laid for him (just as Nietzsche could never break beyond a modernist entanglement with the question of the death of God); if Foucault could never free himself from a resolutely modernist entanglement with Kant's nominalism on the question of the death of truth; and if Foucault could not finally avoid the complicity of his own theory with the unfolding disaster of the "games of truth"; this is not to deny that there is everything to be gained, and everything at stake, in meditating anew on the games of Foucault. For the games of Foucault are simultaneously the limit and possibility of his theoretical legacy.

First, a theorist of political transgression *par excellence* whose meditations on "relational power" could evoke such an impassioned mood of political resistance (the emancipation of subjugated knowledge) because all his reflections on power were leavened with the hard knowledge that transgression, far from representing an experience of rupture, works now only to confirm the impossibility of traversing the limit experience.

Second, a historian of the quantum kind — ironic, ambivalent and paradoxical on the question of the irreality of the historical moment — who could simultaneously refuse historical totalisations as a will to power and nothing besides, and then work to create a double recuperative moment: the famous method of historical genealogy with its privileging of zones of knowledge with low epistemological profiles; and a marked preference for plural histories of local subjectivity, a hyper-materiality of pleasures and desires, not value. Ultimately, Foucault was of that peculiar order of a reluctant historian: a historian who refused history as a game of truth, only to install in its place the game of *effective history*, a "history which descends."

And third, an anti-epistemologist who could be so relentless in

tracking down the discursive networking of the "games of truth" — in sexuality, in science, in penology, in psychiatry — since he was all along only the latest of the philosophical exponents of the logic of quantum science, of a quantum epistemology which functions by the mirroring of *code elements* (the constitutive conditions of possibility of a structural sex, a structural power, and a structural madness) *and local historical practices*. Probably against his own theoretical intentions, Foucault's thought was the breaking-edge of the advanced liberal mind with its full aestheticization of knowledge. His discourse was also that of the dying days of an episteme: the liberal episteme with its relational power, relational truth, and regulatory ethics achieving, finally, self-reflection on itself. A murderer of the old humanist author, Foucault was also an inscribed "local subject" who fulfilled Unamuno's precept: "I am I in the human circumstance and the human circumstance is I."

Foucault's then was the fully modern liberal mind at the height of his times. In him alone you see them all, because this was the aestheticized liberal mind at its most intense and acute point of auto-critique, brilliance, and ambiguity: simultaneously a master parody of the fate of the panoptic body and an ironic meditation on the fate of a relational, sideral, and topographical postmodern scene. Consequently, in Foucault alone there are to be found all of the key panic sites at the *fin-de-millenium*:

Panic Science: Foucault's early encounter with Canguilhem where science is forced to confess its secret: that it never was anything more than an irreal cosmology, and one in which moreover the object of scientific investigation was, in the deployed form of power/knowledge, a prime after-image and constitutive condition of justification for the scientific episteme itself.

Panic Medicine: Foucault's genealogy of the discourse of the clinic revealed the great epistemic shifts in medical discourse for what they always were: the inscription of a shifting social physics and its associated hieratics of the body and exclusionary power strategies onto the purely fictional and topological terrain of what French intellectuals these days like to call — *Quel Corps?*

Panic Madness: Not just the suppression into silence of the imagination by the will to truth of psychiatry, not just, that is, Blake's dark dream of the sleep of reason begetting monsters of *Madness and Civilization*, but all of the panic suppressions:

— the *panic power* of Discipline and Punish where the prisoner entombed within the gaze of the panoptic is reduced to a silhouette, and the jailer also is entangled in a deep complicity with the eye of power, of which he is also a necessary rhetorical function.

— the *panic gender* of Herculine Barbin, the real story of which is not so much about the normalization of sexuality under the patriarchal

medical, religious, and psychiatric gaze (as Foucault will claim), but about a gender and a body — the *woman's body* of Herculine Barbin — that is not allowed to be spoken, and about the dream of another sex which must be suicided because it is insurrectionary.

Panic Erotics: Foucault's last two books — *The Care of the Self* and *The Use of Pleasure* about the reduction of the body, in Athens and Rome, to an "aesthetics of existence," to a tutelary regime of the moral problematization of pleasure — are texts that can be so disappointing to some because they recover (brilliantly) the erotic subject only to reveal this erotic subject as a panic site. For Foucault's erotic subject is colonized from within by the publicisation of dream life in Artemidorus, where dreams are also empty sign-systems waiting to be inscribed by all the primitive myths; inscribed from without by an *aphrodisia* — an "aesthetics of experience" — that was regulatory not only of the care of the *bodily humours*, of pleasure under the sign of high aesthetics, but also of marital relations and the erotic *réçits* of "boys loving boys." *The Care of the Self* and *The Use of Pleasure* are texts about panic erotics: that moment when the body disappears into an empty sign, interpellated by all the ideologies, tattooed by the pleasures of a fully aestheticized sexuality, and inscribed by the languages of medicine, philosophy, and *oneiroheureutics*.

Waiting for Augustine

In short, *Panic Foucault*: a thinker, whose particular brilliance is that he actually becomes what he sought to describe: a *sliding signifier*, oscillating between the suffocating antinomies of modernist discourse, sliding between a grisly and clinical examination of the production of cynical power, cynical truth, cynical sex, and cynical language; and a famous, but ultimately futile, attempt to recover the *truth of sexuality* in a meditation on Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem. Like Freud's Michelangelo before him, Foucault woke to find himself in the midst of the nightmare he thought he was only dreaming. He was a thinker, in the end, with no exit. Because in his meditations on the truth of sexuality (an aesthetics of pleasure), Foucault could never think through, finally, the truth of the Christianity of Augustine. Like the Roman stoics before him, and that peculiar strain of Greek skepticism before them, Foucault ended his life with the melancholy resignation of intellectual futility; that is, the consciousness of much but no exit from the nightmare of the infolded technologies of self to which he had awoken.

Fourth century Christiantity was not a continuation of Greek and Roman theories of the self, nor their simple and abrupt reversal, but, at least in the writings of Augustine, a *solution* to a fundamental crisis of the self that neither the Greeks with their "aesthetics of existence" nor the Romans with their reduction of the self to a purely juridical and corporative

concept rooted in *dominium propertium* could resolve.

What Foucault in his last writings avoids, and as a fallen-away Cartesian *must avoid*, is that neither rationalised ethics nor materialistic conceptions of bodily pleasures could provide a directly experienced mediation of the antinomies of existence.

Consequently, when calamities arose, whether in the form of the Athenian plague of the fifth-century B.C. or the failure of the Democritean ideal of democracy or the bitter sense of fatalism and intellectual futility that swept the Roman imperium when, at the height of its power, the corrosive question arose: now that we have conquered an empire, now that we have become the sign itself of empire for whom the spear is our symbol, a restless will to survive at any cost is our dominant psychology, and the acquisite spirit of private possesion our most cherished belief, what are to be the ultimate ends of empire?[3] How, that is, and why go on willing when there are no longer substantive purposes to the ends we choose, in a universe indifferent to the choices we will in full freedom?

While the Greeks and the Romans moved ultimately in the grip of fatal necessity, the Christians, and Augustine specifically, solved the crisis by making the self an *individual psychology*; and, moreover, producing a vision of the self, not just the confessing self but also the ecstatic self, as a directly experienced mediation for summoning into a new *episteme*, a new unity, all the divided antinomies of the classical experience of Athens and Rome. Against Athens and Rome with their purely *external principles* of unity — the moral problematisation of the pleasures into an aesthetics of experience on the one hand, and the reduction of the self to an instrument of private property on the other — the early Christian thinkers held out the possibility of a hyper-material theory, not only of bodily pleasure, but also of bodily suffering. In their eschatology, the principle of the unity of western experience was finally rendered internal to the psychology of self. Indeed, in the Augustinian vision, metaphysics *secretes* into the bodily tissues, making the body a *will* and nothing besides. It was from Jerusalem, not Athens or Rome, that the self as a constitutively nihilistic will to power began to spread out. Foucault's "confessional self" as an early warning system of panopticism misses the whole point of the Christian negation that subordinated the body — will, intelligence, and feelings — to the exterminist sign of the trinity. Ultimately, the directly experienced trinitarian body — the western body — with its breaking of the will into itself, with its new starting-point in individual psychology, is the real truth of Christianity, of which Foucault's theses on the confessing self and the panoptic are sociological diversions, reflecting as they do only the reified manifestations of the already exterminated body.

Because Foucault missed the secret of the truth of Christianity (reading the Christian body under the sign of the panoptic, the "confessing

self"), he was condemned to recapitulate in his own life and death the fatal necessity, the tragic sense of futility, and the last dark laughter of the parodist, of Greek enlightenment. If *The Care of the Self* could end bleakly by noting the sterility of the philosopher's virtue for "boys loving boys,"[4] this was because Foucault's mind was, once again, an outbreak of the (classical) dialectic of enlightenment. In his thought, the melancholy play of chance that ultimately dashed the best intellectual hopes of the Athenians and made intellectually futile the militant and imperial ambitions of the Roman stoics is recapitulated with such intensity that Foucault must have known that he was only awaiting another Augustine.

The game of Foucault was a daring and brilliant one. As a philosopher whose thought transgressed the white space of indifference, Foucault always said that his intention was

> to examine both the difference that keeps us at a remove from a way of thinking in which we recognize the origin of our own, and the proximity that remains in spite of that distance which we never cease to explore.[5]

This is the game of the intellectual imagination, of life and death, to such a point of melancholic excess and brilliant intensity that thought begins to fold in on itself, making of Foucault a marker of the postmodern fate.

His is the self-confession of the fully exhausted late modernist mind, the mind of the dying days of aestheticized liberalism, which functions only to confirm the impossibility of the mythic legacy of the dialectic of enlightenment. If, for example, Foucault could end his life with two texts on the constitution of the sexual self as an ethical subject and an analytics of sexual austerity, this is because, in these last works, Foucault finally came home to his Kantian self. Permitting himself the discontinuity he had always permitted others, Foucault's meditation returned to the project which runs through all of his theorisations on medicine, science, power, and psychiatry: that is, studying intently the "conditions of possibility" for our enucleation within the will to truth, the will to sexuality, and the will to power as our own *primal*.

Having reflected on cynical power and cynical truth too deeply ever to be content with the phenomenological reductions of Merleau-Ponty and too much a tragician on the matter of the discursive infolding of power ever to make his peace with Sartre's moralising historicism, and too much a floating signifier to be content with Irigaray or Cixous, Foucault, finally, was that rarity: an unfinished, radically discontinuous, and ambiguous thinker.

The lasting fascination and seduction of the games of Foucault is less philosophical or political than, perhaps, purely literary. It may someday be

written that reading Foucault is perceiving how the liberal mind at the *fin-de-millenium* liked to think of its history (genealogical, but with possibilities for rupture), its epistemology (nominalist, but later nomist), its ethics (a little cynicism, a little piety), its theory of politics (the Kantian regulatories), its power (relational and topological), and its theory of the self (trapped in a continuing debate among Athens, Rome and Jerusalem).

Foucault's legacy would then be that he is the latest of the elegant tombstones of the dying days of aestheticized liberalism. If he could be so deeply evocative, it is because his entire theorisation with its brilliant meditations on the cynical analytics of power, sexuality, truth and madness is also a clonal after-image of an age that has already ceased to exist.

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Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, *L'Autre par lui-même*, (Paris: 1987), pp. 53-54.
2. Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*, trans. by Robert Hurley, (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 86.
3. Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), chapters 2 and 3.
4. Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3*, (New York: Pantheon, 1986), Part 6, "Boys", pp. 187-232.
5. Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2*, (New York: Vintage, 1986), p. 7.