

Schizophrenic Euphoria

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There is no doubt that our society has become increasingly focused on the all consuming images, as described by Stuart Ewen, that are prevalent throughout our culture. Logos are increasingly used by marketing campaigns to capture the consumer; films are increasingly becoming the de facto Saturday night escape; and video games are increasingly replacing board games. These images, however, are but the superficial manifestations of a deeper problem, of a two dimensional society merely existing in an increasingly discontinuous hyper-reality, a reality, if such a generous term can be even used, that promises a double-clickable shortcut to bringing our narcissistic dreams to existence, but only leaves a more painful void when the pleasure poison runs out.

This postmodernistic death begins soon after birth. Rather than reading a book, which requires the faculties of the imagination to be enjoyable, or solving a logical problem, which requires the faculties of the mind to be enjoyable, young children begin their drugging by watching Mickey Mouse on television, which requires no faculties at all to be enjoyable, but serves as a more immediate source of enjoyment. This watching of cartoons is quickly expanded to music videos, video retellings of fairy tales, and sitcoms. No imagination, no questioning of life, no thought required. The scantron answers are presented on the screen before the questions can even be formulated.

Of course, some toddlers still play with plastic green Army Men and Barbie dolls. How-

ever, why stop at imagining toys come to life and watching Mickey when one can start watching toys come to life and touching Mickey? As Naomi Klein confesses in *No Logo*, “when I was growing up, these strange creations awakened something in me that I’ve since come to think of as deep longing for the seduction of fake; I wanted to disappear into shiny, perfect, unreal objects.” (143) Films such as *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2* along with theme parks such as Disneyland and Disneyworld provide a quick shot of endorphin for this longing of young children, who seemingly want to ever so quickly grow up and escape the boredom of utopia that is suburban homogeneity. These fakes are the quick, temporary answers.

The second round of drugging begins in the teenage years with the iconoclastic poison, the video game. As Klein aptly observes, “Plenty of Saturday-morning-cartoon kids have grown up into Saturday-night-club kids, fulfilling their longing for plastic fantasy with earnestly ironic Hello Kitty backpacks and Japanimation-inspired helmets of blue hair. You can see some of them at the Sega Playdiums, which are filled with grown-up games on weekend nights — no one under eighteen is even allowed to enter these roaring carnivals of virtual reality, especially on South Park theme nights.” (145) The longing for the seduction of fake, for escape into a pleasurable hyper-reality, is taken one step further with this interactivity, with this arcade virtual reality. Teens can now experience ever more realistic (please pardon the blatant irony) video gaming experience. Virtual reality, faster computers,

anti-aliasing of graphics, complex vector meshes, dedicated video graphics cards...all postmodern technology that serves as a postmodern poison. But this virtual fantasy, illusion, nonexistence, deadness, whatever be the antonym for reality that you choose, is not only made available to teens through technology. Entire television channels and regional video gaming conferences such as E3 (see <http://www.e3expo.com>) allow teens to live their games. Here, teens can have their pictures taken with any number of scantily clad sexy models, hired to dress as game characters in order to cater to the teenage boy's sexual fantasies, or with the latest, largest game weapons, replicated to allow the teenage boy to become "the man" that he is ordinarily not.

However, the teens are not simply seeking a quick pleasurable escape from their mundane existence. They are also seeking a rapid way to be important in the eyes of their peers, what Arjun Appaduri in *Modernity at Large* calls aspirations for community. As Appaduri keenly observes, "apparently simple technical uniformities [in video games] often conceal an increasingly complex set of loops, linking images of violence to aspirations for community in some imagined world." (41) Within modern video games, players have profiles in online communities dedicated to the game where they may post messages for other players to read (see <http://www.battle.net>). Though a very small minority chooses a photograph of themselves in reality for their profile logo, the vast majority choose a logo such as The Vigilante, a mechanized 15-foot tall biomechanical warrior that could terrorize a city. It is "as though, for some reason, [these teens are] unable today to focus on [their] own present, as though [they] have become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of [their] own current experience." (Fredric Jameson 117, *Postmodernism and Consumer Society*).

The reason that Jameson seeks is repetition, both an addiction and resistance to this

instant gratification pleasure poison of desire, always wanting more, but always needing a higher dosage to be shocked. In fact, Jameson himself mentions this point:

"Again, in normal speed, we try to see through the materiality of words (their strange sounds and printed appearance, my voice timbre and peculiar accent, and so forth) towards their meaning. As meaning is lost, the materiality of words becomes obsessive, as is the case when children repeat a word over and over again until its sense is lost and it becomes an incomprehensible incantation." (120)

Similarly, the repetition of exposure to the virtual fantasy of video games, television, and films anesthetizes, yet addicts, the children, teens, and adults, to the video game themes, to the blood and gore, to the desensitized killing and carnage. One example of this is from an analysis of military combat. During World War II, American soldiers were largely trained to shoot, bayonet, and kill on sacks of hay. As a result, during real combat, ten percent of the soldiers were doing ninety percent of the killing. Most were shooting up into the air. During the Vietnam War, soldiers were trained on lifelike human mannequins and life-size photographs. The repeated conditioning resulted in seventy-five percent of the soldiers doing ninety percent of the killing. Today, there is a video game called *American Army*, in which teens and adults play the role of a soldier, as opposed to the general, who kills people and completes missions. The more kills and the more completed missions, the more points. I find it not difficult to imagine that the teens and adults who play this game would find killing in actual combat much easier. And herein lies the chilling effect — the repetitive exposure to these virtual worlds desensitizes individuals to the reality, to the life, to *their* life, which surrounds them. It is what Jameson calls "the transforma-

tion of reality into images.” (125) Life becomes not something that we live, but something that we see, an all consuming image.

With so many addicts, creating an escape from reality into fantasy, or bringing fantasy into reality, whichever way you look at it, is a lucrative market. Video game companies are marketing more video games after movies. For example, Electronic Arts released a game called *007: Nightfire*, an interactive version of the movie *James Bond: Die Another Day*. Another company released an interactive game version the movie *Toy Story*. Furthermore, more companies are releasing interactive games featuring their products on their websites. It is only a matter of time before Nintendo, Sony, or Microsoft make a theme park where people can experience the games first hand. Companies are even marketing educational videos and interactive games as replacements to “old-fashioned” education. However, as Jean Baudrillard in *America* points out:

“Just look at the child sitting in front of his computer at school; do you think he has been made interactive, opened up to the world? Child and machine have merely been joined together in an integrated circuit. As for the intellectual, he has at last found the equivalent of what the teenager gets from his stereo and his walkman: a spectacular desublimation of thought, his concepts as images on a screen.” (36)

These companies are not opening up children to the world, they are becoming the world.

Now the problem becomes apparent. We live in a culture who’s infrastructure consists of rapidly rewarding solutions, of, as Thomas Frank says, paper cars, where everyone is searching for happiness, importance, and excitement. Since finding happiness, importance, and excitement in reality (for example, out of a scientific dis-

covery) is difficult, to be generous, people create these precious commodities. These commodified replacements for the higher virtues in life replace life itself, triggering an addiction, always needing more to prevent from being depressed, meaningless, and bored. However, what is easily gained is often easily lost, and when this schizophrenic euphoria wears off, all that is left is a nostalgic meaninglessness of the life that could have been, but never was. . . more than a mere existence.