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## Dialectic of Deception

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In Book XII of Homer's *Odyssey*, one of the founding texts of Western culture, we find Ulysses' successful encounter with the Sirens. In Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, one of the founding texts (however reluctantly) of cultural studies, we find the Sirens episode again, this time read more ambiguously as an "allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment"—that is, an allegory of how Western culture has gone wrong.<sup>1</sup> My theme in this essay is that central to contemporary culture and to cultural studies is what the Sirens' song emblemizes so powerfully and enigmatically, namely the problematic of fascination.

What is fascination? Is it merely a state of illusion and passivity characterised by the loss or suspension of the critical faculties? Such a view sees fascination as essentially an instrument of indirect control and domination, all the more dangerous for its indirection, as when Susan Sontag speaks about "fascinating fascism" in her essay on Leni Riefenstahl, filmmaker to Hitler, or when W. F. Haug in *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* speaks of "the fascination of aesthetic images" in the technocracy of media culture.<sup>2</sup> "Fascination," he writes, "means simply that these aesthetic images capture people's sensuality. In the course of dominating one's sensuality, the fascinated individual is dominated by his or her

1. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 34.

2. See Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), and Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*, trans. Robert Bock (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

own senses."<sup>3</sup> Hence, there are both ethical and political objections to the deceptions of fascination, which must then be overcome or demystified by critique, including the critique of media technologies. While some of these objections are certainly valid, they tend to take a too one-sided view of fascination, with the result that certain possibilities in contemporary culture are overlooked. What I want to propose, therefore, is a different problematic—not so much a critique of fascination-as-deception but a reconsideration of the implications of fascination for critique.

We can think of fascination as any experience that captures our attention without at the same time submitting entirely to our understanding. It is a term we come across almost everywhere today, from soap operas to esoteric scholarship. In ordinary discourse, fascination connotes simply the highly attractive, as when we speak of a fascinating man or woman or of a fascinating book or film. It is a favourite term of approbation, especially when we do not have very much else to say. In contrast, when there is *too much* to say, we also speak of fascination. Explicitly or implicitly, fascination has for some time been the subject of intense investigation and speculation: in literary and film theory; in philosophy, sociology, and anthropology; in psychoanalysis and the critique of political economy; in architecture and urban studies—in other words, in some of the more significant attempts to analyse the contemporary. This “double genealogy” suggests that fascination is neither knowledge nor ignorance: It is an enigmatic relation to what we do not know, a response to other imaginaries, other musics, other strange gods. We can call it, in a first approximation, a *paracritical* mode of attention.

Of course, there are many forms such enigmatic experiences could take; at this point, it is perhaps enough to say that in today’s globalised world of speed and information we are put more and more in touch with such experiences on a daily basis, if for no other reason than the mere fact of living in cities. Louis Aragon had already intuited in the 1920s how “our cities are peopled with sphinxes,” close cousins of the Sirens, who never give straight answers to our questions.<sup>4</sup> Closer in time, Mario Perniola suggests with fine hyperbole how the space of the contemporary “informational city” has some resemblance to Steven Spielberg’s film *Jurassic Park*, where dinosaurs from prehistory are re-created in all their hyperreality with futuristic computer technology—that is, where past and future come together to produce a confused and confusing present.<sup>5</sup> This is the present as a kind of Benjaminian *Jetztzeit*, or apocalyptic Now, where fragments of past

3. Haug, *Commodity Aesthetics*, 45.

4. Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Picador, 1980), 28.

5. Mario Perniola, *Enigmas: The Egyptian Moment in Society and Art*, trans. Christopher Woodall (London: Verso, 1995).

and future collide to disrupt the continuum of history.<sup>6</sup> The anachronisms or, better still, *achronisms* so produced are responsible for what Perniola, a reader of Benjamin, calls “the Egyptian effect”: a novel kind of mummification made possible by new technologies and marked not by the preservation of a physical body from the ravages of time, but by the confusions and interchangeable nature of temporal events.<sup>7</sup> In this situation, which is more or less our own whether we live in New York or Hong Kong, Shanghai or Paris, the “real” typically produces an experience of trauma, dislocation, and fascination all at once; it is an experience of elusive and ambivalent spaces that lie always just beyond our grasp or just beneath our articulations, fascinating spaces no longer reducible to any of the specular or discursive models we are familiar with.

Cultural critique today, it seems to me, will have to address again the problematic of fascination that Horkheimer and Adorno alluded to in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a problematic whose working out, however, they left tantalizingly incomplete as they pursued the critique of domination. Let me begin then by turning to that complex text, specifically to the famous analysis of the Sirens episode in Homer’s *Odyssey*.

### The Sirens of Enlightenment and Deception

We remember that in the *Odyssey* the Sirens are merely one of many obstacles that Ulysses needs to overcome before he can find his way home, one more test of his ingenuity. The witch Circe forewarns him about the Sirens’ irresistible song. Whoever listens will “nevermore draw near / his wife, his home, his infants . . . the Sirens lucid song / will so enchant him as they lie along / their meadow”; ominously, Circe adds in the same breath: “Round about them lie heaped bones / and shriveled skin of putrefying men.”<sup>8</sup> Jean Pierre Vernant has described the scene with admirable cogency as “pure desire, pure death; without any social adjustment.”<sup>9</sup> Put another way: The scene suggests the collocation of fascination and trauma not cushioned by any kind of social mediation. This is because the story so far has the ring of myth about it, and in the realm of myth, no one fails

6. On the *Jetztzeit*, see Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Books, 1973), 263.

7. Perniola, *Enigmas*, vii–viii.

8. Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 244.

9. Vernant also points out that “*leimon*, meadow, is one of the words used to designate female genitalia.” Jean Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, ed. Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 104.

to be fascinated by or escapes the Sirens. Myth itself is defined by repetition, by events happening again and again without change. However, Homer's poem already has one foot outside myth, because Ulysses, helped by Circe, devises and executes a plan that allows him not only to hear the Sirens' song but also to avoid the fate of all his predecessors: He stuffs his oarsmen's ears with wax and has himself tied to the ship's mast. Thus, the encounter results in difference, not repetition. By his clever stratagem, Ulysses escapes from the Sirens—an escape that also represents a movement from myth to history, as represented in the epic poem that is the *Odyssey* with its hero displaying at all times (presence of) mind over (mythic) matter; an escape that is a triumphant event in the phylogenesis of culture as enlightenment understood as the overcoming of myth.

But is Ulysses' stratagem so triumphant? Or, as Perniola asks, What do we fear most? repetition or difference? myth or history? In their reading, Horkheimer and Adorno bring out the episode's many ambiguities, from the ambiguous fascination of the Sirens' song to the ambiguous implications of Ulysses' escape. Let us look again at the Sirens' song.

Horkheimer and Adorno point out that Homer's Sirens are no longer just the deceptive temptresses of myth who lure through the sensuousness of their song alone. The source of their fascination is that their song holds a powerful secret: It promises not merely mindless delight but "delight and knowledge of so many things." But it is knowledge of a special kind:

We know the Argives' and the Trojans' griefs:  
 their tribulations on the plain of Troy  
 because the gods had willed it so. We know  
 all things that come to pass on fruitful earth.<sup>10</sup>

What is the nature of the Sirens' knowledge? The Sirens know the past, but they demand the future as the price of that knowledge; that is, the euphoria that comes from losing the self in the past has to be paid for by a deathlike sleep. As expressed in the myth, all those who listen to the Sirens' song have to die. In other words, the knowledge of the Sirens is absolute but also traumatic, in fact, fatal. It threatens to show up the hollowness of social life (home, family, work) by confronting it with what Jacques Lacan calls the trauma of the "Real," a "Real" that undercuts all our constructions.<sup>11</sup> If this is so, the problem then becomes one of how to listen to the Sirens. How can we engage the promise and

10. Homer, *Odyssey*, 250.

11. On the traumatic Real, see Jacques Lacan, "The Unconscious and Repetition," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 17–64.

the threat of the Sirens' song to best ensure both our pleasure and survival? It is at this point that Ulysses' actions demand close scrutiny.

As Horkheimer and Adorno read him in their brilliantly sardonic commentary, the cunning Ulysses knows only two ways of dealing with the dangerous fascination of the Sirens' song, both of which turn out to be ways of socializing and domesticating it. One he chooses for his men: He plugs up their ears with wax, a form of sensory deprivation. He makes them deaf to fascination and inured to distraction in order to make them good, practical workers: "Whoever would survive must not hear the temptation of that which is unrepeatable, and he is able to survive only by being unable to hear it. . . . The labourers must be fresh and concentrate as they look ahead. . . . They must doggedly sublimate in additional effort the drive that impels to diversion. And so they become practical."<sup>12</sup> The other way Ulysses, the seigneur, reserves for himself: He listens while having himself bound impotently to the mast. The greater the temptation, the more he has his bonds tightened. Ulysses takes his pleasure without risking anything and without accepting the consequences. He listens to the Sirens as if he were at a concert, in the best seat in the house. In this way, "their temptation is neutralized and becomes a mere object of contemplation—becomes art. The prisoner is present at a concert, an inactive eavesdropper like later concertgoers, and his spirited call for liberation fades like applause."<sup>13</sup> The result is a double enervation: Both practical life and art suffer as a consequence.

On the basis of this reading of the social and cultural implications of Ulysses' actions, Horkheimer and Adorno go on to make their crucial point about domination. They show that when Ulysses escapes the Sirens, he indeed overcomes one form of domination—that of myth and "the irrational"—but this disenchantment of the world also surreptitiously introduces another form of domination, that of instrumental reason. For example, they compare Ulysses' famous cunning, which allows his escape from the Sirens, to an escape clause in a contract, "where the contract is fulfilled and yet the other party is deceived." This introduces rationality as a form of control and manipulation, where knowledge itself is cynically used as a means of deception. It has disastrous consequences. "The Enlightenment," they write, "has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant"—an example of how the cure can be worse than the disease.<sup>14</sup>

12. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 34.

13. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 34.

14. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic*, 61.

What is left then of the problematic of fascination in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*? When Ulysses evades the fascination of the Sirens' song—a fascination, let it be noted, *necessarily* linked to trauma and death, to the impossible and unsymbolizable—he also turns it into something else and something less. Fascination itself is enervated into the mindlessness of the culture industry, and, with the emergence of this concept, fascination, while still present in Horkheimer and Adorno's thinking, becomes henceforth an ally of domination and political manipulation. Adorno was to write in *Minima Moralia* and elsewhere about the sensational use fascism made of the media to fascinate the German masses: "Fascism was the absolute sensation. . . . Goebbels boasted that at least the National Socialists were not boring."<sup>15</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the direction the argument will take is toward a critique of how the instrumentalization of reason produces new forms of domination, such as bureaucracy, culture administered by the culture industry, fascism, and so on. But then the powerful problematic of fascination is left unfinished, as Horkheimer and Adorno pursue the critique of domination and instrumental reason. Interestingly enough, it is in Adorno's writing on aesthetics, particularly in his monumental *Aesthetic Theory*, where the artwork is seen as essentially *enigmatic*, that the problematic of fascination is implicitly taken up again.<sup>16</sup>

While the critique of domination is undoubtedly essential, the question I want to pose is somewhat different, namely: What happens in critique to fascination, where danger and promise are imbricated? In pointing out the danger, critique sometimes loses sight of the promise. The Sirens of deception *and* enlightenment are now only Sirens of deception—witness Adorno's dismissal of jazz and cinema, these quintessentially twentieth-century forms, as regressive. There is, it seems to me, a *prima facie* case for taking the dialectic that critique introduces a little further, in a more constructive rather than deconstructive direction. If enlightenment is not just one thing—if in some cases knowledge itself can be deployed for deception—then perhaps we need to construct the possibility that "deception," too, is not one thing and that there might even be special cases where we can know and act only through the detour of the "false" or the meretricious. This suggests that there is a dialectic of deception concerned with the complexities of fascination just as much as there is a dialectic of enlightenment

15. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), 235, 238.

16. On this point, see particularly the section "Enigmaticalness, Truth Content, Metaphysics," in Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1997), 118–36.

concerned with the critique of rationality. To follow this suggestion, we will need to consider how others have listened to the Sirens.

### Nietzsche, Kafka, and the Dialectic of Deception

First, let's look at two other texts that, perhaps not coincidentally, also allude to or rewrite the myth of the Sirens. I begin with Friedrich Nietzsche's famous essay, "The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music."<sup>17</sup>

I will skip over the argument involving the famous opposition between the Apollonian and the Dionysian to focus on the point that interests me, Nietzsche's portrait of Socrates as the antagonist of music. For Nietzsche, Socrates is the paradigm of the interesting but unmusical philosopher, for whom the beautiful is synonymous with the intelligible. He is the archetypal "theoretical man" who believes the most worthwhile activity to be that of "laying bare the workings of nature, of separating true knowledge from illusion and error."<sup>18</sup> The Socratic spirit is optimistic and serene. Armed with the belief that "thought, guided by the thread of causation, might plumb the farthest abysses of being and even *correct it*," Socrates becomes preeminently a teacher who teaches a method of guarding against fascination.<sup>19</sup> Having "wax in one's ears," Nietzsche writes sardonically in *The Gay Science*, becomes "almost a condition of philosophizing; a real philosopher no longer listened to life insofar as life is music; he *denied* the music of life—it is an ancient philosopher's superstition that all music is Sirens' music."<sup>20</sup> Music, like the Sirens, is in this context a figure of deception, of the unintelligible.

What makes Socrates such a complex figure, however, is that he is not always guilty of putting wax in his ears; he, too, was open to fascination. We remember Socrates' famous daimon, that divine voice that spoke to him during those moments when even his magnificent intelligence faltered. For the most part, the Socratic daimon is a negative inhibitory agent, speaking only to dissuade. Nevertheless, in one important instance the voice spoke to him in a positive way. During Socrates' last days, the voice said to him in a dream: "Practise music, Socrates!" These words, Nietzsche comments, "are the only indication that [Socrates]

17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golting (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956).

18. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 94.

19. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 93.

20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, with a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), sec. 372.



ever experienced any uneasiness about the limits of his logical universe.”<sup>21</sup> It is said that in prison, Socrates did practise music. He composed a song to Apollo and versified several of Aesop’s fables.

We might wonder, with Nietzsche, what a music-practising Socrates would be like and how such a figure differs from a non-music-practising Socrates. Looking again at Nietzsche’s portrait of the philosopher, we might say it is the difference between the *fascinating* and the *interesting*. The interesting is always associated with the intelligible, and it does not go beyond the limits of the intelligible. Beyond the limits lies either boredom or deception (not coincidentally, two common reactions to much of contemporary art). By contrast, the fascinating is, to be sure, not simply the unintelligible; rather, it is that which the intelligible forecloses. This is why we can say, still glossing Nietzsche, that the fascination of music or of the Sirens lies not in their mere intelligibility or unintelligibility but in the way they provide access, on the far side of deception, to what the intelligible forecloses. Such access is provided by means of the enigma, which is as different from the puzzle as the fascinating is from the interesting. The puzzle, we expect, will at some time clarify and become readable. By contrast, the enigma has the deceptive, oxymoronic quality of being always clear *and* illegible at the same time, like the figure of music. It is in this “spirit of music” that Nietzsche, the antithesis of the tone-deaf philosopher, refers in *The Will to Power* to a “profound aversion to reposing once and for all in any one total view of the world. Fascination of the opposing point of view; refusal to be deprived of the stimulus of the enigmatic.”<sup>22</sup> I will come back to the implications of this dialectic of deception in a moment.

Meanwhile, let me turn to the second text, Kafka’s little fable entitled “The Silence of the Sirens.”<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin called Kafka’s stories “fairytales for dialecticians,” and it is indeed a dialectic of deception that we find. Kafka’s rewriting of the myth is made up of a number of falsifications and dissonances. Firstly, in a departure from Homer, his Sirens have a weapon even more powerful than their song—their silence: “It is conceivable that someone might have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never.”<sup>24</sup> Secondly, Kafka’s Ulysses prepares for his encounter with the Sirens not only by having himself

21. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 90.

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 262.

23. Franz Kafka, “The Silence of the Sirens,” in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 430–32.

24. Kafka, “Silence of the Sirens,” 431.

bound to the mast, as in Homer, but also by stuffing his own ears with wax, “and in innocent elation over his little stratagem sailed out to meet the Sirens.”<sup>25</sup> So when the Sirens unleash their ultimate weapon on him, their silence, he “did not hear their silence; he thought they were singing and he alone did not hear them”—because of the wax in his ears.<sup>26</sup> “Proof,” Kafka writes in a little preface to the fable, “that inadequate, even childish measures, may serve to rescue one from peril.”<sup>27</sup>

But this preface, which suggests that Ulysses has the luck of the fool, is contradicted in the fable’s final paragraph by “a codicil to the foregoing that has been handed down.” This codicil is not a coda that closes on a harmony; rather it introduces a dissonance. The codicil presents Ulysses as in fact a man full of guile, a dissimulator who only pretended he thought the Sirens were singing. “Perhaps he had really noticed . . . that the Sirens were silent, and opposed the aforementioned pretence to them and the gods as a sort of shield.”<sup>28</sup> This forces on us a very different reading of the story from the one proposed in the preface. If the ultimate objectification of voice is silence—as exemplified in Kafka’s Sirens—it is also true, as Slavoj Žižek points out, that the ultimate horror and fascination is an encounter with this voice-as-object.<sup>29</sup> Kafka’s Ulysses avoids the traumatic encounter with voice-as-object not indeed by the simplistic solution of wax in the ears (“it was known to all the world that such things were of no use whatever”) but by turning it into “music”—not unlike Horkheimer and Adorno’s Ulysses. He hears the Sirens with his eyes and in so doing distances their voice with his gaze: “For a fleeting moment he saw their throats rising and falling, their breasts lifting, their eyes filled with tears, their lips half-parted.”<sup>30</sup> Another strange twist is that, in turn, his distancing gaze captivates the Sirens, who now look on *him* with fascination. In other words, Ulysses avoids the fascination of the Sirens’ voice through the distance of the gaze, and this distancing turns him into an object of fascination in their eyes. They watched him as “he fixed his gaze on the distance.

25. Kafka, “Silence of the Sirens,” 431.

26. Kafka, “Silence of the Sirens,” 431.

27. Kafka, “Silence of the Sirens,” 430.

28. Kafka, “Silence of the Sirens,” 432.

29. Žižek writes: “We can now answer the simple question ‘Why do we listen to music?’: *in order to avoid the horror of the encounter of the voice qua object*. What Rilke said for beauty goes also for music: it is a lure, a screen, the last curtain, which protects us from directly confronting the horror of the (vocal) object.” “‘I Hear You with My Eyes,’ or The Invisible Master,” in *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*, ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 93.

30. Kafka, “Silence of the Sirens,” 431.

. . . They no longer had any desire to allure; all that they wanted was to hold as long as they could the radiance that fell from Ulysses' great eyes."<sup>31</sup>

Kafka's fable has the clarity of an enigma, not of a hermeneutic object, especially if we read it as an allegory of fascination. As Adorno said of the artwork, it is its "incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended."<sup>32</sup> Everything happens at the level of misperception and misconception, of missed encounters of voice and gaze. Between Ulysses and the Sirens there is a double deception: The Sirens' ultimate song (their silence) is what Ulysses does not hear in what he hears ("music"); Ulysses is what the Sirens do not see in what they see. There is, to use another of Adorno's terms, blockage everywhere. All we find is a narrative constructed out of falsities and dissonances, out of deceptions. And yet there appears to be the promise of meaning somewhere, as the parable form seems to suggest. "Whether the promise is a deception—that is the enigma"—and the fascination.<sup>33</sup>

In both the Nietzsche and the Kafka texts, then, there is not only a relation between deception and fascination but also a sense that these point indirectly to what we would otherwise ignore. Deception in the sense I am giving it signifies not a love of trickery or obscurantism; it indicates that cultural phenomena always appear to us, to begin with, without the stamp of approval, with no clear value, unrecognized or misrecognized. The originality of Kafka's fable is that both Ulysses and the Sirens are adrift on the sea of the voice and the gaze. The paracritical function of fascination is that it prompts us through the enigma to attend to what our culture or even we ourselves do not want to recognise. It is a propaedeutic, even if it is not in itself a hermeneutic—a propaedeutic associated as we have seen with limit experiences. The moment of fascination is the borderline moment before the cultural dust settles and judges and adjudicators appear. In Nietzsche, it is the moment when Socrates confronts the limits of his rational universe and "practises music." In Kafka, fascination is deception in the sense that deception problematises both perception and conception: That is to say, between the percept and the concept lies waiting—to risk a neologism—the decept.

### Language and Fascination

Reading Kafka and Nietzsche together suggests how much of a simplification it would be to think about the decept as having a closer affinity to "art" than to

31. Kafka, "Silence of the Sirens," 431.

32. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 118.

33. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 127.

“thought.” In fact, what both art and thought—literature and philosophy—share is the problem of how to represent the world’s fascination, however inadequately. Let us turn now to two further readings of the Sirens, Renata Salecl’s Lacanian reading and Maurice Blanchot’s. Both address in different ways the question of language and fascination and allow us to take the dialectic of deception a little further.

Renata Salecl begins by asking whether the Sirens actually sang to Ulysses.<sup>34</sup> In the *Odyssey*, we do not in fact directly hear the siren’s song. Formally speaking, what we hear is Ulysses’ report or paraphrase of it after he has returned safely home. There is, then, an empty point in the narrative, and in Lacanian terms this empty point is the real, “the unsymbolizable kernel around which the symbolic forms itself.”<sup>35</sup> The real is unsymbolizable and therefore traumatic, or traumatic and therefore unsymbolizable, and like the Sirens it both draws and repels. (Maurice Blanchot calls the traumatic real “the right to death,” a right which literature draws on.) Salecl suggests, in a comparison of the Sirens and the Muses, that there are essentially two different ways of dealing with the traumatic real. One consists of the non-remembering of the trauma. The Muses are the daughters of memory but in a specific sense: It is said that when they sing about the past, we will forget our troubles. In other words, this memory of the past is associated with forgetfulness. Like what Benjamin in his discussion of Baudelaire calls the *mémoire volontaire*, the function of this kind of memory is to protect against shock, in much the same way that the replicants in *Blade Runner* need memories to cushion them against a schizophrenic present.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, the Sirens are associated with knowledge, not, of course, knowledge of the real, which is unavailable, but what Lacan calls *knowledge in the Real*.<sup>37</sup> This is knowledge that we don’t want to know anything about, yet that we keep returning to, without ever quite reaching it. “When we tell stories,” Salecl comments, “it is at the point when we touch the real that our words fail, but fail so as to always come back to the trauma without being quite able to articulate it.”<sup>38</sup> This knowledge in the real, which resists symbolization and which is associated with the compulsion to repeat, Lacan calls *drive*, and in the final instance drive is always the death drive.

34. Renata Salecl, “The Sirens and Feminine *Jouissance*,” *differences* 9 (Spring 1997): 14–35.  
35. Salecl, “Sirens,” 16.

36. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1973). See also Ridley Scott, dir., *Blade Runner* (Blade Runner Partnership and The Ladd Company, 1982), 117 min.

37. Quoted in Salecl, “Sirens,” 18.

38. Salecl, “Sirens,” 17.

Salecl's Lacanian gloss on the Sirens also tells us something about language and fascination, which the work of Blanchot will develop. The knowledge that we do not want to know anything about but which we nevertheless repeat to ourselves because there is something absolute about it—this could be a definition of fascination. To hold on to this knowledge, something will have to happen to language. It will become essentially indirect—in other words, deceptive—even though it reads like the most limpid and straightforward prose. “To write is to arrange language under fascination and, through language, in language, remain in contact with the absolute milieu,” Blanchot writes, and in his own essay on the Sirens, we see how death and trauma, language and fascination, are articulated.<sup>39</sup>

In Blanchot's version of the story, the Sirens' song lies at the centre of the *Odyssey*, but it makes this centre an absent centre. The song hollows out a space (like the Lacanian *objet a*) into which the subject/sailor is invited to disappear—that is, to change, to metamorphose. In Blanchot's terms, it stages an encounter with the imaginary, another example of which is Ahab's encounter with the white whale in Melville's *Moby Dick*. But Ulysses, through his stratagems, insists on preserving the interval between the real and the imaginary that the Sirens' song invites him to cross. He triumphs over the Sirens and lives, whereas Ahab succumbs to the white whale and dies. Ulysses' triumph, Blanchot says, echoing Horkheimer and Adorno, to a certain extent is an act of “happy and confident cowardice”: “Ulysses' attitude, the amazing deafness of a man who is deaf because he can hear, was enough to fill the Sirens with despair.”<sup>40</sup> But unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, Blanchot's concerns remain with language and fascination: “After the test, Ulysses is just as he had been before, and the world is poorer, perhaps, but firmer and more sure. Ahab is no longer, and for Melville himself the world keeps threatening to sink into that worldless space towards which the fascination of one single image draws him.”<sup>41</sup> If for Blanchot fascination is in the image, it is because the image is that part of language that still remembers and repeats the trauma of the real.

### On Method

As both Lacan (via Salecl) and Blanchot show, fascination is this indirect remembering through language of the nonsymbolisable; a linguistic condition

39. Maurice Blanchot, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press, 1981), 76–77.

40. Blanchot, *Gaze of Orpheus*, 107.

41. Blanchot, *Gaze of Orpheus*, 111.

related to what Giorgio Agamben calls *infancy*.<sup>42</sup> The nonsymbolisable is not, Agamben points out, the ineffable; on the contrary, it is on the “basis” as it were of this nothing that speech proliferates and memory unfolds. We can read this in the famous lines of Wordsworth’s immortality ode: “Though nothing can bring back the hour / Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower.”<sup>43</sup> Here it is as if the “nothing” is the agency that both produces and hollows out the splendour and glory of a (retroactively constructed) past. This nothing/thing *can* paradoxically “bring back the hour” and all the rest. On this point, Lacan and the poets agree: There is fascination because there is the (nonsymbolisable) Real.

If this is so, then the language of fascination may be obscure, but it must be distinguished from obscurantism; it may be deceptive, but it must be distinguished from the merely deceitful. These distinctions have important implications when we consider questions of method. Instead of trying to devise methods of guarding against fascination (like Ulysses or like Nietzsche’s Socrates), it will henceforth be necessary to begin the task of imagining conditions under which it might be fostered. And this will lead, as I shall try to show, to the social and political project of fascination.

One methodological suggestion, precious for its rarity, comes from a remark of Walter Benjamin’s that I want to quote at some length: “Sundering truth from falsehood is the goal of the materialist method, not its point of departure. In other words, its point of departure is the object riddled with error. . . . The distinctions with which the materialist method, discriminative from the outset, starts are distinctions within this highly mixed object, and it cannot present this object as mixed or uncritical enough. If it claimed to approach the object the way it is ‘in truth,’ it would only greatly reduce its chances.”<sup>44</sup> To take as the point of departure the “object riddled with error” is perhaps not an orthodox view of the “materialist method,” but it is close to what I think of as the method of fascination, which directs attention to what may not initially seem like very promising material. However, it should be underlined that to begin with error in the manner Benjamin is suggesting is not to idealise the badly made: Being badly made in itself may make an object camp, but it will not make it fascinating. Rather, what attending to “the object riddled with error” foregrounds by implication is the fact

42. Giorgio Agamben, “Infancy and History,” in *Infancy and History*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), 11–63.

43. William Wordsworth, “Ode,” in *William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 302.

44. Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 103.

that the criteria for what is well made can very quickly be revealed to be shot through with ideological assumptions.

In this connection, Raul Ruiz's comments on filmmaking outside metropolitan centres are revealing. He tells us how, when he was studying theater and film in Santiago with the aid of American textbooks, he was surprised to learn "that the films we loved the most were badly made"—because they were not made according to the set of assumptions about action and behaviour formulated in "Central Conflict Theory."<sup>45</sup> This led him to theorise that "every film is always the bearer of another, a secret film" and that "the strong points [of the inexplicit film] are found in the weak points of the apparent one."<sup>46</sup> This argument seems to be not just about how fascination presents itself in film; it also suggests that fascination (Ruiz calls it "the gift of double vision that we all possess") is not just an aesthetic project: It is, above all, a social and political project.<sup>47</sup>

As such, I believe that fascination as a direction of attention is particularly important for comprehending the cultural practices of emergent cultural sites in the context of globalism. We are all aware that globalism with its economic and communication networks means that the cultural practices from these sites are quickly disseminated and known almost everywhere in the world, but it does not ensure that they are given their due. More often than not, the response to the music or dance or cinema from these sites is marked by a suspicion that they are either not "authentic" enough (they have gone commercial) or that they are not "modern" enough (they remain crude and derivative). The differences of such cultural texts therefore go unrecognised or misrecognised. The irony of the global, then, is that the more culture becomes globalised in a communicational sense, the more the cultural endeavours from emergent cultural sites will seem secondary and derivative. Globalism means also the globalisation of discrimination. The transnational does not translate easily into cultural parity, and no amount of "me too-ism" can change that. Of course, there have been attempts at finding redress to this unsatisfactory situation, particularly in the various discourses on cultural marginality and subalternity or, conversely, in the arguments for the existence of cultural avant-gardes in Asia on a par with avant-gardes elsewhere. What I want to put forward now is a different argument for fascination as a critical/political mode of reading, which begins not with readily acceptable objects but with "objects riddled with error." And I propose to use as my example

45. Raul Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema*, trans. Brian Holmes (Paris: Edition Dis Voir, 1995), 11.

46. Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema*, 109, 111.

47. Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema*, 109.

a highly mixed object: the Hong Kong cinema, which I think about as neither marginal nor avant-garde but as a site where the issues of culture and transnational politics meet.<sup>48</sup>

### Fascination and the Hong Kong Cinematic

To begin with, Hong Kong films are currently enjoying a kind of vogue. It seems counterfactual to suggest that such films are unrecognised. The United States—along with Britain, Europe, and Australia—is captivated by the Siren song of the Hong Kong cinema but not necessarily by listening to it. What the global media does not want to hear *it makes successful*, which is to say intelligible on its own terms. Consider in this regard the still dominant image of Hong Kong cinema exemplified in the latest successful export to the United States, Sammo Hung, erstwhile sidekick of Jackie Chan and now the star of a hit TV series called *Martial Law*.<sup>49</sup> Hung is predictably presented by the media as a character who is as adept with his fists as he is clumsy with English. TV critics enthuse over *Martial Law* by drawing on the by now standard repertoire of rhetorical phrases like “intricately choreographed fight scenes” and “frenetic ballets of comic mayhem.” In other words, the image projected is that of the good old days of silent movies, before the advent of sound. Or take the case of the film director John Woo, hired by Hollywood precisely for his ability to produce these “frenetic ballets.” In Woo’s film *Face/Off*, Hollywood added an “ironic” script about the good guy and the bad guy switching faces.<sup>50</sup> It is to be sure an easy to follow kind of irony, because the characters change faces without identity being affected. Woo’s Hong Kong films, however, like the popular series *A Better Tomorrow*, are conspicuously lacking in irony.<sup>51</sup> That is why *Face/Off*, exactly because of its comparatively articulate script, comes over like a *dubbed* film. In both examples and in different ways, “sound” and “voice” are not so much suppressed as neutralised.

What is left out of Hong Kong cinema when it undergoes this neutering of “sound” and “voice”? What is omitted is *the cinematic* in all its elusive difference.

48. What follows cannot in any way be more than a suggestive account of Hong Kong cinema. I have written in greater detail on Hong Kong cinema elsewhere: Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), and Abbas, “The Erotics of Disappointment,” in Jean-Marc Lalanne, David Martinez, Ackbar Abbas, and Jimmy Ngai, *Wong Kar-wai* (Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 1997), 39–81.

49. *Martial Law* (CBS Worldwide, Inc., 1998).

50. John Woo, dir., *Face/Off* (Paramount Pictures, 1997), 140 min.

51. John Woo, dir., Tsui Hark, prod., *A Better Tomorrow* and *A Better Tomorrow 2* (Cinema City/Golden Princess, 1986, 1987), 95 min. and 100 min.



I stress the cinematic, because it is not synonymous with cinema. The cinematic is not pure visual presence and hence largely eludes the kind of formalist analysis that sees film as, in its essence, a visual medium. It is not necessarily found in cinema—witness the many commercial Hollywood films that have no need of the cinematic. As I am defining it, the cinematic exists in cinema only under very special circumstances, for example, during periods of social and political crisis resulting in the change of cultural paradigms. Such moments have produced the cinematic achievements of the early Soviet cinema, neorealism, the *nouvelle vague*, and, I would add, the recent Hong Kong cinema. If this cinema grew intriguing in the 1980s, after the announcement of Hong Kong's return to China, I believe it was largely because it had to confront a new cultural and political space that was both complex and hard to define, where the problems of colonialism were overlaid with those of globalism in an uncanny way. Such uncanniness could not be caught through straight documentation; it was left to the cinematic to define it. One classic example is Stanley Kwan's *Rouge*, which draws on the unrealistic form of the ghost story to evoke something of the uncanniness of Hong Kong's urban space.<sup>52</sup> A more recent example is Fruit Chan's ironically titled *Made in Hong Kong*, which plays with images and stories of Hong Kong from television, cinema, and advertising in order to interrogate the very nature of the city and pursue the possibility of its redefinition.<sup>53</sup>

This space evoked by the cinematic in the best Hong Kong cinema (which will have to include all six of Wong Kar-wai's films to date)<sup>54</sup> is not a space of places and events but a space of non-places and non-events and the fascination they exert. What we find in the Hong Kong cinematic is that crisscrossing and undercutting the history of events in Hong Kong is another history, at once real and nebulous—a secret history of spatial transformation, reminding us once again of Ruiz's statement that "every film is the bearer of another, a secret film." In this "secret film" the city becomes not just a geographical setting but, like the Sirens, a protagonist: alluring, deceptive, ungraspable, perceptible only in fragments, metonymies, displacements. Especially fascinating are all those non-places that these films, particularly Wong Kar-wai's, evoke so obsessively—for example, in images of the city as made up of vectors of transport, in shots of dingy interiors

52. Stanley Kwan, dir., Jackie Chan, prod., *Rouge* (Golden Way, 1987), 99 min.

53. Fruit Chan, dir., Andy Lau, prod., *Made in Hong Kong* (Teamwork Production House Ltd., 1997), 108 min.

54. The following were directed by Wong Kar-wai: *As Tears Go By* (1988), *Days of Being Wild* (1990), *Ashes of Time* (1994), *Chung King Express* (1994), *Fallen Angels* (1995), and *Happy Together* (1997). For criticism, see Lalanne et al., *Wong Kar-Wai*.

filled with high-tech electronic equipment, and in the leitmotif of a space that enforces physical proximity but forbids intimacy. The fascination of these non-places is that they are like the city's reverse image, its negative representation. We can go even further. It is this negativity, precisely rendered, that constitutes the political "voice" of the Hong Kong cinematic, insofar as this negativity can be related to the problematic nature of a colonial space making the transition from imperialism to multinational capitalism, a space where all the rules have quietly and deceptively changed.

It is attending to the fascination of the cinematic that brings out the political "content" of Hong Kong cinema. Even though there are almost no directly political films from Hong Kong that are equivalent to, say, *The Battleship Potemkin*,<sup>55</sup> the innovative Hong Kong cinema is political in the way in which it explores cinematically the problematic space of the city that Hong Kong people inhabit—inhabit if not as a home, at least as a haunt. But then where are these "Hong Kong" people in the Hong Kong cinema? Where do we find the representative voices either of political protest or of idealism? And if the answer is, perforce, nowhere (because of censorship or commercial pressures), then what does this mean? In his essential writings on cinema, Gilles Deleuze distinguishes between an earlier kind of political cinema and the modern political cinema of Alain Resnais. The difference between them, Deleuze says, is that in the latter, "the people are missing."<sup>56</sup> But this, he goes on to say, implies a renunciation not of political cinema but of the basis on which it is founded, for it means that a people will have to be invented. Like "non-places," "missing people" are also a way of accessing what actuality itself forecloses. The importance of this idea of a missing people or place for cultural politics is that it acts against a double colonization: by stories from elsewhere (like narratives of the trajectory of the modern) and by one's own myths (like superannuated notions of cultural identity).

In the end, even while the global city (both as place and people) remains ungraspable, the fascination of the cinematic makes it a little more inhabitable.

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55. Sergei Eisenstein, dir., *The Battleship Potemkin* (Moscow, 1925), 74 min.

56. See Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 215–24.