In Lies Begin Responsibilities

TEXT BY D. GRAHAM BURNETT

In the spring of 2011, I participated in a symposium in Berlin on the history of rationality. The brief for our gathering? To sort out, if we could, how a capriciously Kantian conception of “reason” (think of that late Enlightenment confidence in the socially embedded powers of the human mind) wandered across to the peculiarly mechanistic, algorithmic notion of “rationality” familiar to any student of the social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century: the counting-machine calculus of a nautical self-manipulator, that erstwhile Machiavellian posited by game theory and evolutionary biology alike. How in the world did we all get from such a deliciously robust idea of cognition to such a strangely calculating creature? How did so many of us come to think about so much of thinking as something like the navigation of infinite topologies of savage self-interest?

Across three days we reviewed a lineup of plausible suspects. Darwinism, the Turing machine, psychoanalysis, eugenics, Cold War non-proliferation strategy, macroeconomic modelling, cybernetics, and so on. I was pretty jet-legged, but I stayed with things and gradually persuaded myself that there was a logic to the emergence of such a disparate logic across a century that saw so much scorched earth.

Scorched earth had been much on my mind that year, since I had been collaborating with the artist Lisa Young on a film project that dealt with the strategic bombing campaigns of World War II. Firefall, The Life and Times of Bud “Crosshairs” Cantius was a somewhat unusual undertaking from the start. Presented as a videoogue for a fallen bombardier-veteran, the film wove together documentary footage and factual information about changing bombsites and aviation physiology in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. The armature of the story, however, lay in the obituary of an invented character, whose psychospiritual displacements in the aftermath of World War II were intended to represent an argument about the origins of the characteristically sadomasochistic scientific research practices of the Cold War. In a number of ways the film—a false history, a braiding of truth and lies—was centrally concerned with changing ideas about rationality and self-interest across the very years at issue in the conference.

But sitting in the handsome seminar room of the Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, I grew increasingly uneasy about mentioning the project. After all, I was among scholars—my esteemed colleagues. Disciplined thinkers each. And deception, the rise of the very art world represented in More Real? Art in the Age of Truthiness. I mostly kept my own experimental appetites off the table, sketching instead the genealogy of artists and artworks familiar to readers of Carrie Lambert-Beatty’s stimulating essay “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility.” I talked about Walid Raad. I talked about Zoe Beloff. I talked about Michael Blum. I talked about work of this sort that we had published in Cabinet in recent years. Above all, I tried to emphasize the powerful way that, for me, the best of these works reimagined the historical imagination and teasingly tested the traditional distancing modes of critical inquiry. This was, I argued, a kind of Dionysian historicism—scholarship not afraid to mingle promiscuously with its subject matter, a fearlessly exuberant, postpositivist ethnography of our usable past. And I tested my claim that this work could be understood not merely as a brave new world of postmodern anything-goes-ism but rather as the reanimation of a number of significant premodern historical practices.

Nothing doing. I met a bracingly cold and refreshingly serious “no.” Both my interlocutors voiced a clear and forceful concern about the tendencies that they perceived in this body of work, with which they were by no means unfamiliar. In a world weathering an unprecedented destabilization of traditional forms of textual authority and historical documentation, the aestheticization of disorientation by the intelligentsia could only be understood as a trahison des clerks of the worst sort. Sure, it was all fun and games when the Museum of Jurassic Technology parodically undermined the apodictic semiotics of the museum. But a decade or two later those lessons had been returned to us with interest in this or that “museum of creation science.” And the forging of historical documentation might offer a certain frisson on the biennial circuit, but what about George W. Bush’s military records? Didn’t we need to see them? And know that they were real? Could a free and democratic polity survive the proliferation of technologies (from Photoshop to Dreamweaver) that allowed each of us to make and inhabit imagined histories?

I was not exactly persuaded by their jeremiads. But I was wobbled. These were not reactionary types. They were elastic and progressive thinkers, deeply learned individuals who were committed to the arts, to scholarship, and to politics. They knew their history, to be sure, but there was nothing dusty about their perspective. They were thinking about the present and the future—and they did not like what they saw in the swampy region lying at the anastomosing tributaries of the really real and the finely fictive.

On the flight back to New York, I set to the task of putting my mental house back in order: No reason to get excessively concerned. Probably a generational thing. They were, after all, both of them, sixty-eighthers, basically. No wonder they were uneasy. They remained mired in a world in which political progress...
meant speaking truth to power. But did it? Little reason to think so. I recalled with some discomfort the moving lecture given by a political philosopher friend in the immediate aftermath of 9/11: swelling to her theme, she told us that we were on the side of the truth tellers and that only a politics of democratic openness would permit us to survive the years ahead. The next day the newspapers revealed that the CIA had been disseminating doctored pictures of Bin Laden gussied up like one of the Bee Gees for a night of cruising discotheques. Ahem.

Indeed, for those of us right around forty—we who flipped shruggingly through Baudrillard and Deleuze with a sense of déjà-vu; we whose political lives took shape across the long decade from Reagan’s Hollywood accession to the POV smart-bomb footage of the first Gulf war—it was hard to fall in behind the speaking-truth-to-power standard. It felt, somehow, a little nostalgic, a little tainted by the solemnities of “the Sixties.” That world (the political world of our parents—itself, perhaps, a reaction against the slicker image world of the 1950s) was gone. Goodness was not gone. Virtue was not gone. But it wasn’t clear that sit-ins were going to solve anything. Or heartfelt folk music. And it wasn’t so clear that the truth was going to make anyone free. Nothing less freeing than the truth, come to think of it. Imagination—now there was some freedom.

Still, something slightly worrisome about the specter of a collective retreat into fantasy and play, no? Hmmm. Well, perhaps. I stared at the game console-multimedia port on the back of the seat in front of me. The touch screen. The rocker buttons of the handset. The world was not Donkey Kong. Fair enough. And yet who said a generation wholly raised in the flow spaces and game worlds of the Internet—not my generation, exactly, but that of our younger sisters and brothers—needed stern tuition on how to sort the real from the simulacral? Least of all from mature sages steeped in the culture of the book—a culture that was, of course, for all its charms and powers, most unlikely to survive the next few decades (except, perhaps, in some rump form, some exotic, pseudomonastic clique of future opt-outers).

In fact, the whole thing might cut quite the other way: my senior colleagues worried that an intellectual culture committed to something like perpetually ludic postproduction on reality represented a frightening evacuation of the public sphere, a simulationist secession that put the very idea of participatory politics at risk; but if, increasingly, actual politics operated operationally (privileging everywhere image, performance, and spectacle), then wielding a little schizophrenic irony—indeed, mastering the veritable arts of collective deception—might well be the twenty-first-century equivalent of registering to vote.

Or so one might hope.

I settled back in my cramped seat. Onward and upward, as they say...

Actually, though, the plane had to land. And by the time it began its descent, I had transmuted my lingering unease (for it did linger) into a pedagogical program. It was time to take up these problems in earnest. The result was a graduate seminar, “The Art of Deception: Aesthetics at the Perimeter of Truth,” which I taught at Princeton in the spring of 2011. The course aimed to make sense of the intersection of aesthetics and epistemology since the Renaissance. Which is to say, I set out with a dozen grad students (from art history, architecture, theater, English, comp lit) to try to understand how questions of truth and falsehood had functioned to
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torical, the course threaded its way back and forth between very current issues and telling texts from the past. We began, for instance, with the juxtaposition of contemporary trickster artists (the Yes Men, Aliza Shvarts, Goldin+Senneby) and Herman Melville’s cosmological trickster novel *The Confidence-Man* (1857), before reaching all the way back to Plato and Pliny (to set up the classic formulations of art as illusion). By the end we had wended our way from Reformation Nicodemites to Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida on the lie in politics, with

I brought to the project the verve of a fresh convert. We were going to learn to *play*. And a workshop-style final assignment gave students the chance to experiment in a formal way with learned and gamesome falsification. By late April, however, there was—in the increasingly oppressive air of our high-ceilinged, wood-paneled seminar room—the vague feeling of a hangover. The anarchic exuberance of mutual tuition in the mechanics (and analytics) of artistic transgression had gradually resolved itself, at least for some of us, into a sickly miasma of genuine fear. I believe that this

afflектив arc speaks in significant ways to the challenges presented by the work in the exhibition *More Real?*—the work presented and discussed in this catalogue. If I went into “The Art of Deception” intending to arm myself more effectively for a redux of my challenging
conversation
in Berlin, I came
out of the se-
mester properly
shaken. If you en-
ter the exhibition
with the jaunty
step of the will-
ing conspirator, I
would argue that
you should prob-
ably exit with a
furrowed brow.

Why? I’ll
get there. For now,
suffice it
to say that
there is
no wink
that does
not leave
us, how-
ever fleet-
ingly, blind in
one eye.
Blind in one eye. One could argue that that is the perfect conceit for thinking about art and illusion. In book 35 of his relentless Natural History, the first-century Roman encyclopedist Pliny the Elder drops an offhand comment about the origin of the illusionistic space of two-dimensional representation. Discussing the great gifts of the (presumably apocryphal) ur-painter Apelles, Pliny alludes to a portrait of King Antigonus, who had only one working eye. The painting represented a shocking innovation: Apelles, we are told, “devised an original method of concealing the [king’s] defect, for he did the likeness in an oblique perspective, so that the feature wanting in the subject might be thought instead merely wanting in the picture; thus he showed only the part of the face that he could show in its integrity.”

We are left to understand that this move—twisting his sitter into a three-quarter view, rotating one side of his face “into” the canvas and away from the viewer—was unprecedented—
One thinks immediately of chapter 4 of E. H. Gombrich’s classic *Art and Illusion* (1960). There, recall, we get a sweeping argument that the origin of illusionistic representation (the “Greek Revolution,” the “conquest of space”) is inextricable from the origins of the narrative arts (epic poetry, tragic theater) and, more generally, from a kind of upsurging emergence of an existentially exigent human person: you might even call it the birth of “man.” How so? Well, instead of mere cookie-cutter iconography pasted flat on cave walls, we suddenly get individuated individuals strutting the stage-space of life. For Gombrich, the implicit action-worlds of illusionistic three-dimensionality enjoin reflection on something more than the conceptual/schematic/bean-counting “what” of three soldiers or two nymphs (picture stiff figures arrayed like hieroglyphs); rather, with the feinting into the picture plane, we are thrust irreversibly into the sinuous, philosophically vexing world of cause and effect, of “how” and “why,” of veritable people and the decisions they make.

Of course, they aren’t that veritable. On the contrary. This epochal Gombrichtian aesthetico-metaphysical ensoulment trades precisely on sleights of hand and eye: illusions of depth, tricks of foreshortening and shadow, the whole repertoire of painterly mimesis. It was precisely this unstable superposition of deep truth and deep falsehood, Gombrich suspects, that made Plato so uneasy about the domain of artistic representation.

There can be little doubt that the formulations of *Art and Illusion* feel dated in certain ways: the grandiosity rankles, the implicit occidental exceptionalism looks provincial, the hunt-and-peck use of 1950s-era sciences is distracting (i.e., maybe better to skip the stuff about Australian Aboriginals). And yet as demanding a contemporary critic as W. J. T. Mitchell has continued to find inspiration in wrestling with this material. Mitchell’s felicitous notion of “illusionism”—which he defines as any array of culturally specific techniques for gaming the problem of illusion—owes much to Gombrich and is intended to help parse what Mitchell takes to be a conflating confusion in *Art and Illusion*. illusion proper, Mitchell argues, is really just error—false belief, mere defect of our faculties. *Illusionism*, by contrast, is “playing with illusions, the self-conscious exploitation of illusion as a cultural practice for social ends.” It is here that things get interesting, since by these lights illusionism can function as a technology for revealing the bad conscience of ideology, which must forever cultivate illusion.

With this in mind we can return to that suggestive Apelles portrait. By twisting Antigonus into the canvas, Apelles pried open the illusionistic space of perspectival representation. How are we to interpret this moment? There is, to be sure, something touching in the fact that this new illusion-space has been conjured, in this first instance, precisely to create a hiding place for a human weakness or defect. It is thus tempting to sense, in that slightest rotation of the sitter, a gesture of human sympathy—even a kind of secular redemption: We are broken. But perhaps art can make us whole. The cost? The artist must use the Archimedean lever of illusion to raise the real world off its foundations—creating, in the process, that little cache wherein to secrete all our blemishes and failures.

Sniffle. One senses that Mitchell would not be satisfied with this sort of tremulously symbolic interpretation. After all, we are talking about a picture of the king of Macedonia, for heaven’s sake. Can we bring the politics back in? How is Apelles’s gesture anything other than a spin job on the Prince?
out of) the domain of deception. The sharpest formulation of this central problem came in the sleeker book of the semester: Julia Abramson’s Learning from Lynyrd, a detailed study of the genre that manifested and particularly of the high. Enlightenment origins of this very particular form of literary-artistic play. As Abramson shows, the term itself, mystified, was a novel coinage of mid-eighteenth-century Paris, and though it first came into use to describe the cricket practical jokes played by slightly wicked reactionaries in the period, it was soon appropriated by the philosophers, who expanded and transformed its meaning. In the hands of Diderot and Rousseau (and even Grimm and Goethe), mystification ceased to refer to the hazing rituals of the jockeys and became a term to embody a distinctively didactic species of textual two-step. The paradigmatic case was a work set to “spring” (instructively) on its readers. So, for instance, you might think that Prosper Mérimée’s La Paz (1857) was a genuine collection of Dalmatian folk lyrics translated into French. You might think that its chief desire was to be a forger of Illyrian French. You might think that the Sandman, a doppelganger who appears in the dreams of the reader, is an attempt to teach readers about “the art of deception”—your path in, and from, and back to their presence under the chang- ing artistic modalities on which they trade. This trajectory is not merely our problem as viewers. It is a problem that can be understood to rely, in the artwork and the artist’s process as well. And we might go one step further: this epistemological choreography is, I believe, something more than a “feature” of such works; it is also inextricable from the ethical styles of these artistic practices. ***

We come here to the crux of the matter, to the hand question from which we began this discussion. Are the artistic practices that we might group under the rubric “true illusion aesthetic illusion”—the art of deception—properly (ethical and politically) acceptable? Or to put it another way: Where do we draw the lines? Over the course of the term this issue became increasingly urgent at the forum of our collective seminar. We got there in different ways, but by the end of the term we had a shared understanding of the crisis of our moment. It was the tenth week of the term. We had not only watched Christopher Nolan’s Inception (2010), but had also read both Irving’s Elmyr de Hory and Irving’s story, making the woman into the perpetrator of cyber-extortion—your path in, and from, and back to their presence under the changing artistic modalities on which they trade. This trajectory is not merely our problem as viewers. It is a problem that can be understood to rely, in the artwork and the artist’s process as well. And we might go one step further: this epistemological choreography is, I believe, something more than a “feature” of such works; it is also inextricable from the ethical styles of these artistic practices. ***

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