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— Big Brother, or, the Triumph of the Gaze over the Eye

A funny thing happened not long ago to a friend of mine in Slovenia. Returning to his office late in the night to finish some work, he noticed in the office across the courtyard a senior (married) manager and his secretary copulating passionately on his big desk – their passion made them oblivious to the fact that there is a building accross the courtyard from which they can be clearly seen, since their office was brightly lit and there were no curtains on the large windows. What my friend did was to call the phone of this office, and, when the manager, interrupting his sexual activity for a brief moment, picked up the phone, he whispered ominously into the receiver: “God is observing you!” The poor manager collapsed and almost had a heart attack.

The intervention of such a traumatic voice which cannot be directly located in reality is perhaps the closest we can come to the

experience of the ublime – why? Because it is not that the poor manager was simply unpleasantly surprised; quite the contrary, the surprise for him was to see the innermost fantasy of being observed realized in such a direct way. This brings us to the core of the psychoanalytic notion of fantasy. Fantasy proper is not the scene itself that attracts our fascination, but the non-existent imagined gaze observing it, like the impossible gaze from above for which old Aztecs draw gigantic figures of birds and animals onto the ground, or the impossible gaze for which details of the sculptures on the old aquaduct to Rome were formed, although they were unobservable from the ground. In short, the most elementary fantasmatic scene is not that of a fascinating scene to be looked at, but the notion of “someone out there looking at us”; it is not a dream but the notion that “we are the objects in someone’s dream.”

Milan Kundera, in *La lenteur*, presents as the ultimate sign of today’s false aseptic pseudo-voluptuous sex, the couple feigning to make love anally close to a hotel pool, in view of the guests in the rooms above, faking pleasurable cries but effectively not even accomplishing the penetration – to this he opposes the slow galant intimate erotic games of the eighteenth century France. Did not something similar to this scene from *La lenteur* effectively take place in Khmer Rouge Cambodia where, after too many people died from purges and starvations, the regime, eager to multiply the population, ordered each first, tenth and twentieth day of the month the day for copulation? In the evening, the married couples (who otherwise had to sleep in separate barracks) were allowed to sleep together, compelled to make love. Their private space was a small cubicle isolated by a half-transparent bamboo curtain; in front of the row of such cubicles, Khmer Rouge guards were walking, verifying that couples were effectively copulating. Since the

couples knew that not making love was considered an act of sabotage to be severely punished, and since, on the other hand, after a fourteen hours working day, they were as a rule too tired to effectively have sex, they pretended to make love in order to dupe the guardian’s attention: they made false movements and faked sounds. Is this not the exact inverse of the experience from the pre-permissive youth of some of us, when one had to sneak into the bedroom with the partner and do it as silently as possible, so that parents, if they were still awake, would not suspect that sex was going on? What if, then, such a spectacle for the Other’s gaze is part of the sexual act – what if – since, as Lacan put it, “there is no sexual relationship” – it can only be staged for the Other’s gaze?

Internet has been recently flooded by the “– cam” web-sites which realize the logic of Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show*. In these sites, we are able continuously to follow some event or place: the life of a person in his/her apartment, the view on a street, etc. Does this trend not display the same urgent need for the fantasmatic Other’s Gaze serving as the guarantee of the subject’s being: “I exist only insofar as I am looked at all the time”? (Similar to this is the phenomenon, noted by Claude Lefort, of the TV set which is always turned on, even when no one effectively watches it – it serves as the minimum guarantee of the existence of a social link.) What we obtain here is the tragi-comic reversal of the Bentham-Orwellian notion of the Panopticon-society in which we are (potentially) “observed always” and have no place to hide from the omnipresent gaze of the Power: today, anxiety seems to arise from the prospect of NOT being exposed to the Other’s gaze all the time, so that the subject needs the camera’s gaze as a kind of ontological guarantee of his/her being.

This tendency reached its peak in the outrageously popular TV shows ironically called *Big Brother*, first produced in the

Netherlands in 1999 by the Endemol company. Now there is already a tell-taling term established for it: “reality soap,” a kind of soap opera counterpart to the amateur porn. What is so uncanny is that this show goes even further than *The Truman Show*: the naivety of Truman is that he still had to be duped into really believing that he lives in a real community, since the whole dramaturgy of the film relies on the rising doubts that start to gnaw him about what is actually going on around him. Although, in contrast to *The Truman Show*, the subjects/actors of *Big Brother* act their roles in an artificially secluded space, they act them “for real,” so that, literally, fiction becomes indistinguishable from reality: subjects get involved in “real” emotional conflicts, and when they consult people from the “real” outside, it is not so much a gesture of returning to “real life,” as rather a way of magically stepping OUT of it, treating “real life” as a virtual game from which one can acquire a temporary distance and ask consultants what should one do. (There are also time-slots when actors directly discuss with the public what they should do in their roles, so that the game is literally interactive, i.e., spectators can co-determine what will happen.) The distinction between real life and acted life is thus “deconstructed”: in a way, the two coincide, since people act their “real life” itself, i.e., they literally play themselves in their screen-roles (here, the Benthamian paradox of the self-icon is finally realized: the actors “look like themselves”).

And is not something strictly homologous going on in Celebration, the (in)famous Disney city in Florida, the real-life recreation of the small idyllic American town of “human” dimensions, in which inhabitants also “play themselves” or “lead their real life on a stage”? The circle is thus closed: TV was supposed to offer – as the ultimate escapist entertainment – the fictional world far from our actual social reality. However, in “reality soaps,” reality

itself is recreated and offered as the ultimate escapist fiction.

So what is so unsettling about the “reality soaps”? The horror that sensitive souls experience regarding Big Brother is of the same order as the horror many of us experience regarding cyberspace virtual sex. The hard lesson of virtual sex is not that we no longer have “real sex,” intense contact with another person’s body, but just a stimulation engendered by substanceless images which bombard us from the screen; its lesson is rather the much more uncomfortable discovery that there never was “real sex.” Sex was already a game sustained by some masturbatory fantasmatic scenario. The common notion of masturbation is that of the “sexual intercourse with an imagined partner”: I do it to myself, while I imagine doing it with or to another. Lacan’s “there is no sexual relationship” can be read as an inversion of this common notion: what if “real sex” is nothing but masturbation with a real partner? What if, even if I am doing it with a real partner, what ultimately sustains my enjoyment is not the partner as such, but the secret fantasies that I invest in it? And the same goes for the utter exposure to Big Brother’s gaze: what if Big Brother was already here, as the (imagined) Gaze for whom I was doing things, whom I tried to impress, to seduce, even when I was alone? What if the *Big Brother* show only renders palpable this universal structure? In other words, what if, in our “real lives,” we already play a certain role – we are not what we are, we play ourselves? The welcome achievement of “Big Brother” is to remind us of this uncanny fact.

When, days after 11 September 2001, our gaze was transfixed by the images of the plane hitting one of the World Trade Center towers, all of us were forced to experience what the “compulsion to repeat” and *jouissance* beyond the pleasure principle are: we wanted to see it again and again, the same shots were repeated ad

nauseam, and the uncanny satisfaction we got from it was *jouissance* at its purest. It is when we watched on the TV screen the two World Trade Center towers collapsing, that it became possible to experience the falsity of the “reality TV shows”: even if these shows are “for real,” people still act in them – they simply play themselves.

The standard disclaimer of a novel (“characters in this text are fictional, any resemblance with real life characters is purely contingent”) also holds for the participants of the reality soaps: what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for real.