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Returning to the Scene of the Perfect Crime, Or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Virtual

The disaster ruins everything, all the while
leaving everything intact.

--Maurice Blanchot

1. “The perfect crime,” Baudrillard writes, “is that of an unconditional realization of the world by the actualization of all data, the transformation of all our acts and all events into pure information; in short, the final solution, the resolution of the world ahead of time by the cloning of reality and the extermination of the real by its double” (25). At a certain point, reality “implodes leaving no trace, not even the sign of its end. For the body of the real was never recovered. In the shroud of the virtual, the corpse of the real is forever unfindable” (46).
2. What if Baudrillard were right? What would it mean to take him at his word, and to take up his challenge? Indeed, what if the perfect crime has already been committed? What if the virtualization and informatization of the world has not only already taken place, but has even effaced its own traces, erased the evidence of its ever having-taken-place? What would the consequences be, and how would we ever know?
3. Some definitions. For Baudrillard, the murder of the real is not a loss of actuality, not a fall into illusion. It is rather the opposite: the extermination of illusion, the absolute actualization of everything, thanks to “the ceaseless feedback of all information to all points of the globe” (53). The murder of the real means that everything in the world has been measured, quantified, and informatized. There is no more otherness, because everything has been homogenized, reduced to sameness, traded against a common measure or universal equivalent. There is no more mystery, and no more uncertainty, but only a blinding, universal transparency. There is no past and no future, but only an eternal Now, in which all times are present at once. There is no more waiting, no more anticipation, no more sense of duration, for everything now unfolds immediately, in “real time.” That is what it means to have murdered the real.
4. Why is the murder of the real a perfect crime? This follows from the very nature of the act. “In this grim record of the disappearance of the real,” Baudrillard writes, “it has not been possible to pin down either the motives or the perpetrators, and the corpse of the real itself has never been found... there is neither murderer nor victim.” Every real event leaves its traces behind. These traces are themselves perfectly real; they are the material signs, and guarantees, of the event’s having actually taken place. The act of murder, for instance, leaves a body behind. The person of the victim is absent, but his corpse is all too eloquently present. If the corpse of the real were ever to be found, therefore, its very existence would mean that the real was not dead after all. Conversely, the murder of the real is a perfect crime – indeed, the *only* perfect crime – because, in abolishing the real altogether, it also abolishes whatever

worldly traces it might have left behind. The murder of the real does not *take place*; for it effaces, retrospectively, the fact of its ever having happened at all.

5. Described in this way, the “murder of the real” sounds like a scenario from a science fiction novel or film. Think of all those Philip K. Dick novels, in which the protagonist discovers that everything he has taken to be real is in fact a simulation (*Time Out of Joint*, *The Penultimate Truth*), in which the supposed reality behind this simulation turns out to be another simulation in its turn (*A Maze of Death*, *Ubik*), and in which the protagonist is therefore compelled to search for signs, not of the presence of some higher or more vital reality, but of its absence (*Valis*). Or think of the 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, in which people in a small town are replaced by their doubles, who resemble them precisely, and who act just like them, except that they are devoid of passion and desire. Or think even of *The Matrix* and its sequels, despite the fact that Baudrillard has disavowed these films for allegedly distorting his thought.
6. In a recent interview, Baudrillard says that what’s wrong with *The Matrix* is that “the new problem posed by simulation is confused with the very classical problem of illusion, already found in Plato. Here there is a true misunderstanding.” The world of simulation, of the perfect crime, is not the illusory world of Plato’s Cave. It is rather a world in which Plato’s allegory no longer makes any sense, because this world no longer offers us any grounds upon which to make a distinction between the illusions of the Cave and the truths of the real world outside the Cave. This is why the murder of the real proceeds by the extermination of illusion. We live in a situation in which, as Nietzsche put it: “We have abolished the real world: what world is left? the apparent world perhaps? ... But no! *with the real world we have also abolished the apparent world!*” But whereas Nietzsche celebrates this situation as the “zenith of mankind,” Baudrillard views it with unmitigated horror. The question I want to ask is: why?
7. Baudrillard explains his problem with *The Matrix*, and with modernity and postmodernity in general, as follows: “the world seen as radical illusion is a problem has been posed to all the great cultures, and they resolved it through art and symbolization.” (We have art, as Nietzsche said, lest we perish of the truth). But in contrast to all previous cultures, Baudrillard claims, “what *we* invented in order to endure this pain is a simulated real, a virtual universe cleansed of everything dangerous or negative, and which henceforth supplants the real, for which it is the final solution.” Instead of “art and symbolization,” today we have the culture industry, with its relentless cheerfulness, and its machinery of publicity and hype. Instead of poets and shamans, we have the Disney Corporation’s imagineers. Instead of risk and danger, we have safe sex and child-safe spaces and no-smoking zones. And instead of epic poetry, or tragic drama, or the realist novel, we have... science fiction?
8. The reference to science fiction is appropriate, because the situation that Baudrillard describes – the “technological transfiguring of the world, its accelerated end, its immediate resolution... triggering the code for the world’s automatic disappearance by exhausting all its possibilities” (25-26) – is precisely what science fiction is about. Or better, this situation is what science fiction *is*. One way to define science fiction is to say that it not only envisions rapid, radical technological change, but also naturalizes this change, making the fantastic commonplace, the magical routine, and the alien familiar. But this is precisely what our new informational and biological technologies are doing, as they efface traditional distinctions, and actualize extreme possibilities. As Donna Haraway puts it, “the boundary between science fiction and social

reality is an optical illusion.” The results are at once fantastic and banal. Fantastic, because, as Arthur C. Clarke maintains, “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” Yet banal, because it is only for *us* that these technologies are strange and radical. As Bruce Sterling writes, “the posthuman condition is banal. It is astounding, and eschatological, and ontological, but only by human standards.... By the new, post-Singularity standards, posthumans are just as bored and frustrated as humans ever were.”

9. Baudrillard may dislike *The Matrix*, but he turns to science fiction all the same in order to explain the murder of the real. He cites Arthur C. Clarke’s classic story, “The Nine Billion Names of God,” as an allegory of the perfect crime. The story is about a group of Buddhist monks whose centuries-old task is “compiling a list which shall contain all the possible names of God.” Once all the names have been written down, they believe, existence will come to an end: “God’s purpose will be achieved. The human race will have finished what it was created to do, and there won’t be any point in carrying on.” The monks hire a computer to automate the process. (The story was first published in 1953, in the age of mainframes, long before the invention of personal computers). And indeed, as soon as the final name of God is printed out, the universe starts to disappear. As Baudrillard summarizes the story, “the history of the world is completed in real time by the workings of virtual technology” (25).

10. Baudrillard takes “The Nine Billion Names of God” as an allegory of the murder of the real. But this is far from an obvious reading. Clarke’s story is more plausibly understood as an affirmation of what Baudrillard himself calls “the world’s own ceaseless revolution, the ironic trajectory of particles and the chaotic turbulence of natural systems” (10). For the computer in the story accomplishes nothing on its own account; it merely speeds up a process that would happen anyway. “Patiently, inexorably, the computer had been rearranging letters in all their possible combinations, exhausting each class before going on to the next.” But this dreary computation is ironically harnessed for aims that its programs (and indeed, its programmers) cannot comprehend. For the monks press the computer into the service of what Baudrillard might well call the objective destiny of the universe, independent of human intervention. As the head lama tells an engineer at one point, what is at stake in this computation is “nothing as trivial as” the mere end of the human world. The story contrasts the narrowmindedness of the American engineers who run the computer with the metaphysical profundity of the Tibetan monks who commission its use. The engineers are slaves of instrumental reason; they prefer TV commercials to meditation, and they are aggressively “not impressed” by the “vertiginous” mountain vista before them. The monks, on the other hand, are not the least bit interested in the “realization of the world,” its “transformation... into pure information.” Rather, they are attentive to what Baudrillard calls “the ruse of the world” (19), or the “irony in all extreme processes” (70). The monks know, just as Baudrillard does, that finally there is nothing rather than something, and that “we shall add nothing to the nothingness of the world, since we are part of it. But we shall add nothing to its meaning either, because it does not have any” (10). Clarke’s story celebrates the power of illusion, the power of the void; and it suggests that – despite its own pretensions – digital and virtual technology can do nothing but further this illusory power.

11. My point in all this is not to quibble over close readings of the Clarke story. I want to suggest, rather, that Baudrillard’s Manicheism, his demonization of digital technology, is deeply problematic, from the point of view of his own metaphysics. And he himself is aware of this, at least to some extent. Beyond his vision of “the extermination of all the world’s

illusion by technology and the virtual,” Baudrillard offers a contrary “hypothesis”: “an ironic destiny of all science and all knowledge in which the world – and the illusion of the world – would survive” (74). Perhaps the perfect crime is inevitably “doomed to fail” (151); “perhaps indestructible illusion awaits us at the end of the process” (62). Even though science has always tried to “[keep] destiny and death at bay,” by “forcing material objectivity upon [the world],” now “it is destiny which is surging back towards us through the screens of science” (42). “We cannot achieve” the perfect crime, “because we leave traces everywhere – viruses, lapses, germs, and catastrophes – signs of imperfection” (40). So the virtualization of the world might itself only be “a ruse of the world,” so that, in spite of itself, the “rationality and perfection” of postmodern technology “might merely be implementing [the world’s] irrational decree” (19). And again: “Is technology the lethal alternative to the illusion of the world, or is it merely a giant avatar of the same basic illusion, its subtle final twist, the last hypostasis?” (5). In passages like these, Baudrillard comes close to the cosmic, Buddhist irony of the Clarke story.

12. On the other hand, when Baudrillard writes about computers, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence, this irony seems to abandon him entirely. What he says about computers, in particular, is so caricatural that I am tempted to doubt whether he has ever used one. How are we to respond, other than with exasperation, when he claims, for instance, that “computer chips have already outstripped any possible use that can be made of them, and are leading the system into insane applications” (49)? Or when he ridicules “hyper-brains glued to their computers, which, though already considerably underused, diminish themselves even more by having a machine function in their stead” (48-49)? Or when he argues that, if the full reign of information processing were to come to pass, “the whole system of thought would soon be aligned to the system of the machine. Thought would end up thinking only what the machine can take in and process, or would think only when the machine requests it” (32)? Or when he denounces “the promiscuity of all signs and all values,” adding that “the worldwide broadcasting and parading of everything and anything over the networks is pornography” (*Paroxysm* 12-13)? It all sounds rather like Allan Bloom on steroids, bemoaning the decadence of a world that has abandoned the classical ideals of measure and rationality.
13. In fact, Baudrillard’s objections to digital technologies are not new. They were already being made when writing was invented, and again when movable type and the printing press were invented, and yet again when the telegraph was invented, and the telephone, and radio, and television. Indeed, I imagine that, when language first came into being, and our ancestors first became fully human, among the first sentences anybody uttered were complaints that language was denaturing thought, that it was perniciously substituting stereotypical formulas for actual ideas, that it was promiscuously exposing everyone’s private mental lives to the world, that the power of language far exceeded any possible use it might have, and that our ideas would henceforth be constrained by the system of language, so that we would end up thinking only what language can take in and process, or would think only when language requests it. And, of course, all these objections are more or less correct; Nietzsche was not the only one to observe how our minds are held hostage in “the prisonhouse of language.” But this is not *all* you can say about language. And Baudrillard is far off the mark when he imagines that qualms like his are somehow unique to the digital era, or that virtual simulation, word processing, and digital imaging will exterminate the real any more than language, writing, the alphabet, printing, and broadcasting have already done.

14. It's telling, I think, that in the same breath with which Baudrillard denounces the new digital and virtual technologies for being useless, he also says that the *real* problem with them is that they are not useless enough, for they are trying to suppress play and expenditure: "all margins, all free zones, are being wiped out. There are no longer any reserves of uselessness: these are threatened with intensive exploitation. Insignificance is under threat from an excess of meaning... Death itself is under threat of death..." (49). Instead of looking at how these digital technologies actually work, and (just as important) fail to work,¹ Baudrillard bases his critique on the most extreme hype of the most naïve, enthusiastic proponents of these technologies. He is not wrong to be suspicious of the utopia of total communication, and of the drive to reduce everything in the world to the form of digital information. But he is mistaken to take at their word people like Bill Gates, with his fantasies of "business @ the speed of thought," or Ray Kurzweil, with his vision of a world in which we download our minds, and abandon our bodies, in order to become celestial entrepreneurs. For Kurzweil is all idle talk, and Gates still cannot deliver an operating system that doesn't need to be rebooted at least once a day. If Baudrillard spent a bit more time with actual computers, he'd discover that every program crashes sooner or later, that time lags and service outages are a big part of online experience, and that far more computing resources are expended on strange obsessions, futile quests, and useless passions, than are devoted to gathering data and generating simulation models.
15. Baudrillard is panicked by information overload, by the sheer plethora of words and images continually streaming through the media and over the Net: "the info-technological threat is the threat of an eradication of the night, of that precious difference between night and day, by a total illumination of all moments... A torment equivalent to that of eternal daylight – a kind of epilepsy of presence, epilepsy of identity. Autism, madness" (53). These are beautiful, incisive words; but what exactly do they portend? The madness of the day is as splendid, excessive, and mysterious as the abyss of the night. Why does Baudrillard love the one, and excoriate the other? As a champion of the night, he writes of imperfection, error, and disproportion. The night engenders monsters; it contains the principle of Evil. It is the kingdom of the negative, the matrix of every illusion. The night is Georges Bataille's *part maudite*, the accursed share, the expenditure that haunts every economy, and denies it closure. When he writes of the night, Baudrillard is a Bataillean general economist; which is also to say, a poet. But when he writes of the day, he is strangely transformed into a classical moralist, denouncing the excesses of unreason, deploring the contagiousness of images, and contesting the powers of the false. He suddenly finds himself on the side of restraint, propriety, and measure. He becomes phobic about the risk of contamination by the feverish, wasteful excesses of the light. Baudrillard is unable to discern the delirium of unproductive expenditure that subtends this hypertrophic "epilepsy of presence, epilepsy of identity." When Baudrillard is nauseated by online hardcore pornography, or computer games, or recursive programming languages, or reality television shows, he is really just expressing a kind of snobbery, a prejudice endemic to what Donald Rumsfeld calls "the old Europe." We must be corrupt, he seems to be saying, but not *that* corrupt. Baudrillard is a proponent of "viral, pernicious thought, corrosive of meaning, generative of an erotic perception of reality's turmoil" (104) – as long as the virus, or the erotic *frisson*, is tasteful and refined enough. We

¹Baudrillard does write, at one point, of the "good fortune" of a computer crash: "what a relief to see twenty pages that had been stored in memory wiped out at a stroke, at a whim of the computer." But this serves only to show how it is all "a zero-sum technological equation" (41); Baudrillard has no sense of how affectively charged our relationships with our computers actually are.

must affirm the *part maudite*, he tells us, but only if it is the *proper sort of part maudite*, one that isn't too coarse and vulgar.

16. For example – though it is more than just an example – consider the case of human cloning. Cloning is an abomination for Baudrillard, almost as much as it is for the Church. And on almost identical grounds. Cloning, Baudrillard says, is one form of “the extermination of the Other... It is the equivalent of an ethnic cleansing which would not just affect particular populations but unrelentingly pursue all forms of otherness” (109). It’s the culmination of a long process of technologized objectification of the flesh: “cloning is thus the last stage of the history and modeling of the body, the one at which reduced to its abstract and genetic formula, the individual is destined for serial propagation” (*Simulacra and Simulation* 99). Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church rejects cloning because it subordinates human beings to “the logic of industrial production,” because “the basic relationships of the human person are perverted,” because it reduces sexual reproduction and sexual difference to “a purely functional left-over,” and because it leads to a situation in which “some individuals can have total dominion over the existence of others, to the point of programming their biological identity – selected according to arbitrary or purely utilitarian criteria.” For both the Church and Baudrillard, cloning is an instance of the perfect crime, because it represents a radical and hubristic denial of human contingency (of original sin in the one case, and of negativity, mystery, otherness, and death in the other). And in equally denying the singularity of copulation and birth, cloning effaces its own origin, the very trace of its ever having occurred. The only substantial difference between the Church and Baudrillard is that the former at least recognizes the empirical limitations of cloning, the fact that “this duplication of body structure does not necessarily imply a perfectly identical person, understood in his ontological and psychological reality.”²
17. Of course, Baudrillard focuses quite deliberately upon the mythical resonances of cloning, rather than upon its actual, empirical limitations. This follows from his strategy of “radical thought,” whose value “lies not so much in its inevitable convergences with truth as in the immeasurable divergences which separate it from truth” (94). Which is to say, in the terms that I have been using here, that Baudrillard is writing science fiction, and that therefore he cannot and should not be judged by the outmoded criteria of the realist novel. Now, both the Church and Baudrillard condemn cloning on the basis of its immoral means, or more precisely – in Kantian terms – on the basis that it uses Man (or Woman) merely as a means, rather than as an end. This might be called the “realist” objection to cloning. But Baudrillard goes further, and condemns cloning on the basis of its transcendent end as well: its pretension to conquer death. “No more death: the immortality of the clone” has its place in Baudrillard’s list of the horrors of simulation, right alongside “no more other, no more enemy, no more predators, no more negativity, no more seduction, no more illusion, no more secret, no more destiny” (109-110). This I will call the science fictional, or speculative, objection to cloning. Even if cloning could be carried out perfectly, without any of the dangers and limitations that we are worried about today; and even if it could be done in so sensitive and democratic a manner that it would not treat human beings as mere means: even then (or especially then) Baudrillard would still view it with horror.

²Pontifical Academy for Life, “Reflections on Cloning,”
<http://www.petersnet.net/research/retrieve.cfm?recnum=238>.

18. I must admit that, in this respect, I often think of Baudrillard as being a lot like Captain Kirk. On episode after episode of *Star Trek*, Kirk and the crew of the *Enterprise* come upon a planet whose inhabitants are living an idyllic existence, in a utopian society. And in every case, in direct violation of the Prime Directive (“Do not interfere with the development of foreign civilisations”), Kirk ends up destroying the utopia, ostensibly for the inhabitants’ own good. For without pain and suffering, life is not worth living. People need impediments, they need absence and lack, in order to spur them on to continual striving and self-overcoming. Human dignity depends on deprivation. Utopia means stagnation, and the total suppression of the *part maudite*. In paradise, Baudrillard says, “the irony, the challenging, the maleficence come to an end, as inexorably as hope dies at the gates of hell. And it is indeed there that hell begins, the hell of the unconditional realization of all ideas, the hell of the real” (102).
19. William Burroughs, in contrast to Baudrillard, welcomes the prospect of human cloning. He rejoices in it for the very reason that Baudrillard detests it: because it implies an economy of abundance and multiplicity, rather than one of negativity and lack. Cloning is indeed the road to immortality, as Baudrillard fears; but this is immortality of a different sort. Burroughs urges us to get rid of “the tiresome concept of personal immortality... predicated on the illusion of some unchangeable precious essence that is greedy old MEEEEEE forever... The illusion of a separate inviolable identity limits your perceptions and confines you in time.” Cloning, on the other hand, “is the end of the ego.” It opens the way to “human non-selfness,” and allows for a kind of impersonal immortality, “no longer identified with one special Me Machine.” As the Buddhists tell us, “there is no ego only a shifting process”; and cloning extends this process, in multiple bodies, throughout space. Far from being (as Baudrillard suggests) the cancerous proliferation of sameness, the viral dissemination of a simulation model, cloning according to Burroughs shatters identity, leading us “in the direction of increased flexibility, capacity for change and ultimately mutation” (*The Adding Machine* 131-135).
20. Clones are inhuman, make no mistake about it. They are a pack, a swarm, a military attack force. Behold the parade of the clones, as Burroughs describes them: “something is lacking in these faces, something that we are accustomed to see. The absence is as jarring as if the faces lacked a mouth or a nose. There is no face prepared to meet the face that it meets, no self-image, no need to impress or assert. They blend into the landscape like picture-puzzle faces.” The absence that Burroughs evokes in the faces of these clones is precisely, for Baudrillard, the missing real. Baudrillard loathes the postmodern deconstruction of identity, its celebration of multiplicity and mutation. All this play of “identity and difference,” he says, is a cover for the radical extermination of otherness (110). Cloning is simulation: repetition without identity, the mad proliferation of copies for which there is no original, no referential, no real. The clone does not imitate or resemble some already-existing being. Rather, by its very existence, it obliterates anteriority, assassinates whatever came before it. A world of clones is a world that has been “created only a few minutes ago but peopled with a humanity which remembers an illusory past,” to use a paradoxical suggestion of Bertrand Russell’s that Baudrillard cites with glee (20). That is what makes cloning a perfect crime.
21. An important philosophical issue is at stake in this debate about cloning. Shall we celebrate, with Burroughs, Nietzsche, and Foucault, the death by cloning of *Homo sap*, its transmutation into new and different forms? Or shall we mourn, with Baudrillard and Francis Fukuyama, the passing of an essential “human nature,” the end of a certain sort of self-

consciousness, the loss of that “face prepared to meet the face that it meets”? There is no authority to guide us in this choice. Roughly, the alternative is between dialectical antagonism on the one hand, and non-binary multiplicity on the other. Burroughs imagines virile boys transmuted into innumerable new forms; Deleuze and Guattari challenge the dualism of phallogocentric logic, and urge us to let a thousand sexes bloom. But Baudrillard – together with the Lacanians, and with some orthodox Marxists – regards this multiplicity as nothing more than a niche marketing strategy. It is a set of irrelevant distinctions: of differences that don’t make a difference,³ and that have no critical force. “Events, discourses, subjects or objects exist only within the magnetic field of value, which only exists as a result of the tension between two poles: good or evil, true or false, masculine or feminine” (67). But today, in the world of postmodern multiplicity, which is to say in the global marketplace, values and relations have all become “depolarized,” so that they “are beginning to swim in the undifferentiated field of reality... Everything which stood in a fixed relation of opposition is losing its meaning by becoming indistinguishable from its opposite as a result of the upsurge of a reality which is absorbing all differences and conflating opposite terms by promoting them all unreservedly” (67). Without the continuing antagonism of opposites, the system is given over to entropy. And this is why Baudrillard is so particularly disturbed by transvestism, bisexuality, and androgyny, as well as by the feminist movement of the last thirty-five years. “Female and Male,” he writes, “are two incomparable terms” (122). They are not even equal in the sense of opposites, for “woman is, in fact, more different than man. And not only more different than him, but more than different. Man is only different, but woman is other: strange, absent, enigmatic, antagonistic” (119). Feminism therefore stands guilty, in Baudrillard’s eyes, of “an extermination of femaleness – a terrifying allegory of the extermination of all otherness, for which the feminine is the metaphor, and perhaps, more than the metaphor” (111). In its deconstruction of the “feminine mystique,” feminism would then be yet another avatar of the perfect crime.

22. Am I just taking a cheap shot at Baudrillard – or worse, imprisoning him in the straightjacket of “political correctness” – when I thus harp on his dubious gender politics? I can plead, albeit a bit disingenuously, that I am merely trying to show that his position on gender is of a piece with his general critique of multiplicity, his insistence on duality and dialectical antagonism.⁴ But let me adopt a less snarky tone, and conclude this talk by thinking through what it might mean to fully incorporate Baudrillard’s diagnosis of postmodern simulation and multiplicity. I want to return, as it were, to the scene of the perfect crime, and look at what life is like after the murder of the real. For Baudrillard, “Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulation... Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America, which *is* Disneyland” (*Selected Writings* 174-175). One may argue (as I have done elsewhere) that there is no such ruse, that nothing is hidden, that every American knows that “America *is* Disneyland.” But what would it be like to actually live in Disneyland – or better, Disney World? What is it like to live in a world where *everything* is Disney World?

23. Cory Doctorow’s 2003 science fiction novel *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* gives

3I am thinking here of Gregory Bateson’s definition of “information” as “any difference that makes a difference.”

4Admittedly, there are feminists who insist on maintaining the privileged status of the gender binary, against the general affirmation of Deleuzian multiplicity, without falling into Baudrillard’s tiresome rhetoric about feminine otherness. See, for instance, Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*. But Braidotti maintains the gender duality for specific strategic reasons, not out of a metaphysical commitment to any sort of dialectics or Manichean dualism.

one answer to this question. The book is set in a future world that in many ways is Baudrillard's nightmare. The narrator tells us this right away: "I lived long enough to see the cure for death; to see the rise of the Bitchun Society, to learn ten languages; to compose three symphonies; to realize my boyhood dream of taking up residence in Disney World; to see the death of the workplace and of work" (7).⁵ The world of the novel, the Bitchun Society⁶, is predicated, not just on the death of work and the workplace, but also on "the death of scarcity, the death of death" (96). It has achieved what Baudrillard calls the "final solution": it has eliminated all forms of negativity. Since every conceivable material good is available in abundance, there is no mandatory labor, and no money. Since the network is direct-wired into everybody's brain, there is no distance and no time lag, but total transparency. If you ever feel depressed or in a bad mood, you can take care of it easily, by adjusting your neurotransmitter levels. Death itself has been overcome, because people back up their memories at regular intervals, and download the data as needed into newly cloned bodies. If you are killed somehow, or if you get sick or injured, or even if you just feel a bit worn down, you can have yourself cloned, and thereby return to perfect health, in a fresh body, at whatever apparent age you desire. The only glitch in this process is that the new "you" doesn't remember anything that happened after the date of your last backup; but you can fill in the missing time with the help of "various third-party POVs," like video surveillance footage, other people's "synthesized memories," and even "a computer-generated fly-through" of crucial events (35). And if you're really tired of your life, you can "deadhead," or go into deep storage, to be revived years, decades, or even centuries later, or whenever certain pre-established criteria have been met. In such a world, "people live pretty recklessly"; for they know that they can always be "refreshed" if anything goes wrong (32). Nonetheless, there is little overt conflict in the Bitchun Society; people spontaneously cooperate most of the time. In the absence of money, wealth is measured in *Whuffie*, which is something like a weighted average of your reputation among your peers. Everyone is always evaluating everyone else, and the results are continually being updated in real time. In short, Doctorow imagines a society in which many of the last decade's utopian fantasies about bio-, nano-, and digital technology have come true. In Baudrillard's terms, this is a society in which the perfect crime has already been committed. The real has been exterminated, and no traces of its passing have been left behind.

24. Appropriately enough, and as its title implies, *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* is set almost entirely in Disney World. The narrator is a "castmember," also known as an "ad-hoc"; he spends his days as a volunteer at the Haunted Mansion, "arguably the coolest attraction to come from the fevered minds of the old-time Disney Imagineers" (27). In the Bitchun Society, Disney World is taken to be a pinnacle of aesthetic achievement, the highest accomplishment of the human spirit. In a world of abundance, where everything comes easily, people have an insatiable appetite for simulation. Disney World is always "jammed with happy guests, bright and cheerful and ready for a day of steady, hypermediated fun" (118). There isn't really that much else to do.
25. Doctorow doesn't undermine this judgment of Disney World with cheap irony; he presents it on its own terms, as a simple given. Baudrillard writes that "irony is the only

⁵I think that this ranks with "Call me Ishmael" and "I can feel the heat closing in..." and "A screaming comes across the sky" and "I was born in a house my father built" as one of the great opening passages in North American literature.

⁶So named, I presume, after the slightly rancid, out of date surfer slang word *bitchin'*.

spiritual form in the modern world, which has annihilated all others”; he adds that this irony “is an objective function, that of the artificial object world which surrounds us, in which the absence and transparency of the subject is reflected” (73). But in *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom*, artifice and transparency have reached such a point that even this objective irony no longer functions. Instead, the novel is permeated by a slightly creepy sense of effusive sincerity and the desire to please. All the characters in the book display a sort of dampened affect: a distant, impersonal warmth, unburdened by any hint of tragedy, or even anxiety. Unhappiness is pathologized in the Bitchun Society; this means that it is not taken seriously. Anyone who persists in his or her misery – as the narrator himself does at one point in the book – is regarded in much the same way that we would regard someone who complains incessantly about a headache, but refuses to take aspirin. Castmembers at Disney World “can’t help but be friendly” (98); they have a “look of chirpy helpfulness... at their instant disposal” (22). Sometimes older folks, including the narrator, who were born before the founding of the Bitchun Society, complain that “there’s not much fire in [the younger] generation... Not a lot of passion” (77). And we, the readers, are likely to feel this way as well; it’s Doctorow’s sly way of providing an external perspective on his narrative. But the complaint is simply unintelligible to those who have grown up with the Bitchun Society, and spent their entire lives in Disney World.

26. None of this means, however, that the Bitchun Society is free of deviousness and conflict. The competition for Whuffie can get quite heated. Indeed, the plot of *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* turns upon the narrator’s disputes with other ad-hocs over how to manage, and how and whether to upgrade, the rides in Disney World. Although “the whole point of the Bitchun Society was to be more reputable than the next ad-hoc, to succeed on merit, not trickery,” the latter is more the rule than the exception, even including “assassinations and the like” (83-84). And this is where the novel stages its own version of the perfect crime. Julius, the narrator, is murdered early in the book; revived from a backup, he spends the rest of the story looking in vain for proof that Debra, his Disney World rival, was the killer. As it turns out, his suspicions are justified: but Debra cannot be judged guilty because, after setting the killing into motion, she “had herself refreshed from a backup – no memory of the event” (196). So: a murder in which the victim is not dead, and the perpetrator is not guilty. Julius cannot even recall being killed; he only knows about it from hearsay, and from seeing it on video. For her part, Debra never actually did it, because – in terms of her memory and personal identity – she is not the same Debra as the one who plotted the crime. Shall we say, with Baudrillard, that this trivial evacuation of meaning, this denial of fatality, only aggravates the crime? Or shall we rather say, with Nietzsche, that “with this alone is the innocence of becoming restored”?

27. “Though the consequences of the crime are never-ending,” Baudrillard says, “there is neither murderer nor victim... The secret, in the end, is that the two are merged.” For Doctorow, to the contrary, the victim and the murderer never merge; and yet the consequences of the crime are vanishingly small, and get ever smaller as time passes. This holds both for the perfect crime depicted in the novel, and for the perfect crime that the Bitchun Society in its entirety *is*. The Bitchun Society has gotten rid of such malefic realities as “dying, starving, freezing, broiling, killing, cruelty and ignorance and pain and misery” (11). But in the process of doing so, it has created a world of “twittering, Pollyannic” people (80), who can’t remember (or never knew) “how the pain made the joy sweeter” (11). This, I think, is what the murder of the real comes down to for Baudrillard. For his part, Doctorow is fully aware of

the costs of the transaction. But he differs profoundly from Baudrillard, in that he refuses to condemn such a trade-off in advance. And that is what I really mean by saying that, for Doctorow, the consequences of the perfect crime are vanishingly small. Everything is changed, and yet everything remains intact. In the Bitchun Society, just as in the world we live in today, people get bored and frustrated, and feel the need to change their lives, and sometimes even decide just to check out of it all. If anything, such feelings would be far more common in the Bitchun Society than they are today, because nobody would be distracted from them any longer by things like poverty and disease and the fear that death squads might show up on your doorstep at any moment. Doctorow thus demystifies the utopian hype of true believers in the latest and greatest technologies; and in doing so, he also demystifies the dystopian dread that is the simple mirror image of that hype. Doctorow's *description* of a disillusioned, hypertecnologized future is not much different from Baudrillard's; what differs is his *evaluation* of that future, or better, his holding back from making an evaluation.

28. I would like to conclude with a brief nod to Emmanuel Levinas, who also (and well before Baudrillard) theorized the perfect crime. Every action in the world leaves material traces behind: footprints in the sand, fingerprints on a murder weapon, words and sentences in a book, ones and zeroes on a hard drive. These empirical traces are signs; they point to something that has gone, but they themselves are present, part of the order of the world. In contrast, what Levinas calls a real (capital-T) Trace is non-present and non-empirical. For it "disturbs the order of the world. It occurs by overprinting. Its original signifyingness is sketched out in, for example, the fingerprints left by someone who wanted to wipe away his traces and carry out a perfect crime. He who left traces in wiping out his traces did not mean to say or do anything by the traces he left. He disturbed the order in an irreparable way. For he has passed absolutely" (*Basic Philosophical Writings* 62). This absolute, irreparable passing-away, this absolute disturbance of the real in the non-existence of any empirical traces, is the paradoxical mark – the signature – of the perfect crime. It does not signify in the manner of the differential signs of Saussure and structuralism; it is not governed by what Baudrillard calls "the symbolic rule of exchange" (31). For it cannot be exchanged for, or against anything else; it cannot be circumscribed by the negative. Rather, it haunts precisely the lethal "ultra-positivity" (113), the obscene transparency, that Baudrillard identifies as the defining characteristic of post-modernity. The perfect crime has always already taken place; the world is always already virtual. The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact.