Postmodern Archaic: The Return of the Real in Digital Virtuality

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> Our entire linear and accumulative culture would collapse if we could not stockpile the past in plain view.
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> —Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* 19

The standard spin given to digital virtuality in our era, and not just by advertising copywriters, is that of naïve optimism. Jaishree Odin, for instance, describes hypertext as effecting a radical shift "from the linear, univocal, closed, authoritative aesthetic involving passive encounters to that of the nonlinear, multivocal, open, non-hierarchical aesthetic involving active encounters," adding that this latter aesthetic is more capable of "representing postcolonial cultural experience since it embodies our changed conception of language, space, and time" (599). While one can certainly endorse the call for more polyglot, less rigidly hierarchical modes of practice, we should be skeptical about the role of hypertext in advancing that project. Indeed, as I will argue here, if we look past the utopian hype we can discern a tendency toward the healthy survival, even flourishing, of realist tropes and mores within digital virtuality, a tendency with a number of disturbing connotations for "postcolonial cultural experience."

Perhaps surprisingly, the digital virtuality industry today often emphasizes its naturalism and realism; it is an industry that currently sells itself less on its ability to abstract than on its increased high-focus representational resolution. In other words, digital virtuality's initial promise to create the new, to reify the imagination, has often led rather toward more reification and objectifiction than expanded imagination. This is not only visible in some digital technology (for instance, "motion capture" in which actual human motion is the original data for "realistic" animation) and in the leagues of advertising copy in the vein of "never seen before," "digital reality creation," "zero defect," "and everyone's invited," but also in the recently prominent quasi-surveillance of home videos and "reality TV"; docu-soapies; documentary films such as *The Great Dance*; films such as *The Blair Witch Project, The Truman Show, The Sixth Sense, Series 7: The Contenders*, and *The King is Alive*; atavistic rhythms in digital techno and trance music; some "new ageism," as in Terence McKenna's *The Archaic Revival*; and so on. I hope that it is clear therefore that I am using virtuality in the widest sense to include any kind of interactive digital cultural products, or any artifacts that utilize digital technology (from miniature cameras to computer games to films to internet web pages). Moreover, I am arguing that virtuality is not confined to technology, but involves a wider set of cultural practices that tend to rework the "real" in the service of commodification. I want to call these cultural practices the "postmodern archaic" because they use the enablements and blandishments of digital technology to test and ratify current notions of virtuality and reality by comparison with a version of the past. How are we to understand this plethora of digital products and practices, all raising in some way reality and realism and the relationship between them?

My sense is that this technology tends to raise issues of representation in the same general way that all technological innovations require cultural adaptation to their potentials. Indeed, it might even be asserted that the quality of cultural production

declines when new technologies are introduced as producers have to spend time exploring, understanding, and integrating those technologies. It is a commonplace, for instance, that when "talkies" were first introduced, they were of low quality contentwise; a similar decline from prevailing standards of quality was all too apparent when computer-generated imagery first came into vogue. So my contention is that cultures are perpetually in oscillation, or at least subject to wave-like ebbs and flows, with the rush to new and potentially less representational forms invariably precipitating a resurgence of normative realisms.

To appreciate this curious give-and-take logic in the forms and technologies of representation, it is helpful to survey the major historical analyses of realism. Many of these are concerned with the genesis of modernity, with Renaissance and post-Renaissance painting, and with the novel—in particular the nineteenth-century realist novel of Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Austen, Hardy, *et al.* Such critics as Lukács, Auerbach, Watt, Levin, and Alter point out that narrative realism in the novel initially took the form of exhaustive, not to mention exhausting, adjectival description, particularly focusing on domestic minutiae. Typically, such novels were located in the lounge, parlor, and kitchen, although they seldom made it into the bedroom. Hence, despite the different manifestations of realism, from the classical geometries of Renaissance realism to the social realism of the nineteenth century, realism tended to take the form of mimesis or objective verisimilitude: imitation, representation, referentiality. Such belief and practice were also manifest in the early days of the cinema with Kracauer, Bazin, and others lauding celluloid for its unprecedented representationality. Television too has been a mimetic form, reflecting the spread of multinational technocracy for Langer, Kroker, and Cook, among others, and is now the format of a peculiarly postmodern form of realism: the illusion of participatory democracy fostered by "reality TV." As Bourdon and Fetveit argue, the *raison d'être* of television is the promise of its being live and therefore authentic, a contract with audiences that involves them in "a specific interpretive community, and, beyond ... a national audience" (Bourdon 550). Thus realism has been characterized, I think correctly, as the belief in the ability of signs to represent an objectively verifiable world accurately.

Of course, the signs that are taken to be realistically representative are culturally specific, so the heritage of realism that concerns us here was not merely an aesthetic phenomenon but was also the cultural aspect of a massive social upheaval beginning in the West but ongoing to this day throughout the globe; ontologically this belief in disinterested representation was termed empiricism, which was reciprocally reliant upon science, industrialization, and colonialism. As Mary Louise Pratt notes, scientific exploration, involving the systematizing of nature and indigene in the eighteenth century as part of the imperial project, relied upon representation. Hence empiricist and realist disinterestedness was not culturally innocent and produced a systematization or mapping under the hegemony of the Western bourgeoisie and the authority of print. A wide diversity of critics has seen both the novel and film as bourgeois genres in thrall to a realist mode which, as Nash remarks, is "anthropocentric" (13). Realism,

at least in its early days, was Western, empiricist, materialist. Readers, viewers, and writers co-founded an ordered and rational world—a world of stability in the midst of industrialism's maelstrom, a secular humanist substitute for religion's ontological reassurance. Realism was fuelled by the desire of the rising and insecure bourgeoisie to embed and reify its ideology, a reification perhaps most evident in the technological media artefact of the imagination of mass consumer culture, the novel, a reification that was arguably to find its most recent apogee in television. The point here about realism is not so much that the form is inherently wrong-headed, but simply that it has a specific history, a history which has not been altogether kind to non-Western worlds.

Now it may seem like a large leap from the nineteenth-century realist novel to virtuality, but the essentially materialist critique of realism can still be legitimately invoked in the context of digital culture. Even in the context of new media, realism serves to provide a coherent and comforting narrative by offering an apparent anchorage in actuality. This recurrence of realism within postmodern culture becomes clear if we perform even a very brief materialist critique of *Survivor*, the exemplary instance of reality TV and "the most popular show in the United States." *Survivor* does not utilize digital technology in particularly overt ways, though it is clearly present in the capture and playback of video and audio, editing and title sequences. Rather, as is typical of hypertext and reality TV, the series utilizes notions of accurate representation, surveillance, fame, and democracy.

Survivor attempts to fuse elements of the soap-opera (a compressed series of struggles over friendship, intimacy, and betrayal within a small community, a lot of close-up emotional-response shots), the tourism show (like *Lonely Planet*), the eco show (wildlife documentaries), the game show (a million dollars are up for grabs in a competitive format), the detective program ("whodunnit," or perhaps that should be "whowinsit"?), and the newer genre of reality show or infotainment docu-soap-opera (in which events and emotions are apparently spontaneous and unscripted). The plot of *Survivor* is rather similar to a pilgrim's progress: via a series of tests and votes, some survive while others are eliminated and eventually, via tasks that supposedly bring the survivors closer to the elements, the environment, and the indigenous culture, the final three are "initiated" into the local tribe, though of course there is only one "sole survivor" who wins the million.

Survivor is not just realistic; its realism has the incontrovertible gravitas of spontaneity under the objective gaze of the unedited lens. So the first aspect of this "new" realism is what I want to call the "illusion of spontaneity." There was a time when the tag "based on a true story" was a lure for viewers, but now that seems no longer enough; what viewers want is the true story itself. What contemporary realism seems to demand is not only density of description, of space, of objects, in order convey verisimilitude, but also spontaneity of time, possibly because spatiality has become so hyper that time is seldom linear. So the early realist emphasis on place and linear time in the novel or on exhaustive texture in the film has shifted to an emphasis on globalized space and

synchronic time, and particularly unmediated time, spontaneity. This is evident if we examine the credit sequence at the end of the show: along with the usual roll-call of post-production and casting for the Africa season were bush managers, psychologists, safety coordinators, as well as fourteen editors, eighteen cameramen, and fifteen audio personnel. At no stage are any of these production personnel or processes foregrounded in the final aired product. The illusion of spontaneity is required for television to appear live and therefore authentic and is an inheritance from the instrumental empiricism that informed the novel. Moreover, credibility fostered by immediacy is further structured by the dramatic tension so germane to novelistic narrative, a dramatic tension that is provided by accidents, revealing comments by participants, and particularly by the tribal council at the end of each episode when participants are voted off the show. The *frisson* of the unexpected, and therefore the live, that these moments provide further fetishizes the epistemological structures of conventional realist narrative; in other words, consumers are programmed by the rhetoric of spontaneous spectacle, the exceptional, and the individualism that underpins realism. Indeed, the placement of the unscripted, unscriptable, moment of tribal council at the end of the show provides a climax that keeps viewers watching.

The second aspect of this realism, inextricably intertwined with the illusion of spontaneity, is its spatiality, which in this case is the archaic surroundings of what the narrator Jeff Probst calls "a land virtually untouched by the modern world." The first point about these surroundings is that they are an actual physical location, a place, and physicality is always the last refuge of the authentic, the real. However, this place is also a space, a space which I want to call the "postmodern archaic." I have chosen the word archaic because it does have a sense of spatiality as well as of time, suggesting the primitive, the old and outdated, as well as ancient habitation, ruins, or simply nature or the bush. Now of course the archaic is nothing new. Indeed, one might say that the archaic is as old as nostalgia, and, therefore, it seems important to keep in mind that the archaic is hardly a new trope in cultural production, particularly Western cultural production, and here one might cite the Bible, through Rousseau to Ruskin, Mollison and beyond. Indeed, nature or "the natural" is an invention of culture and inevitably recurs as culture becomes more and more palimpsestic, recurs as a symbolic ballast to the layered excesses of culture. As Raymond Williams has it:

> By "residual" I mean something different from the "archaic," though in practice these are often very difficult to distinguish. Any culture includes available elements of its past, but their place in the contemporary cultural process is profoundly variable. I would call the "archaic" that which is wholly recognized as an element of the past, to be observed, to be examined, or even on occasion to be consciously "revived," in a deliberately specializing way. What I mean by the "residual" is very different. The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the

cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. (122)

In the case of the postmodern archaic, the archaic *is* the residual, for in its guise as nature and the corporeal it is continually available for the specialized purpose of testing and confirming contemporary culture. To put this differently, we might regard the postmodern archaic as the residual in the guise of the archaic; contemporary re-purposing of the residual makes it appear original, archaic, and incontrovertible. In the theatre of this archaic we discover our "roots," a sense of pristine organic holism, shorn of culture's detritus. As Marianna Torgovnick argues,

> the metaphor of finding a home or being at home recurs over and over as a structuring pattern within Western primitivism... this line of thought about the primitive takes us full circle and returns us to the earliest meanings of the word *primitive* as the original state of something—biological tissue, church organization, social organization. For "going home," like "going primitive," is inescapably a metaphor for the return to origins... For the charm to work, the primitive must represent a common past—our past, a Euro-American past so long gone that we can find no traces of it in Western spaces... The primitive must be available or our 'origins' may no longer be retrievable, re-creatable. (185–87)

So the archaic is a sign of an authentic common past, a home that soothes modernity's homelessness.

The archaic is visible in the forgeries utilized by artists to obtain the appearance of archaic authenticity: artificial worm-holes in wood, oil paintings darkened by candle smoke, outmoded language in novels. The sense of authenticity was to be particularly important in the Modernist primitivism of Picasso, Yeats, Lawrence, and Joyce. At another level, what child has not imagined what would happen if all the technocultural scaffolding and paraphernalia of contemporary life were to disappear? Hence the archaic has been particularly prevalent in depictions of childhood and fantasy, and the corollary is also true, that the archaic is often infantilized. So the archaic has a past, and its present can be identified in any number of contemporary cultural phenomena, including neo-tribalism, neo-paganism, aspects of the ecological movement, conservation, concern for the endangerment of tribals and their lifestyles, certain religions, reality television, and so on. At the postcolonial level, the long history of the archaicization of Africa, for instance, can be traced back to at least early cartography, nineteenth-century imperial romances as in Rider Haggard, the ethnicization of the female primitive in Saartje Bartmann, the fetishized images of the bushman and frontiersman, the work of Laurens van der Post, wildlife documentaries, recreations of dinosaurs and so on. Such archaicization is also prominent in the frontier theme so dominant in America, particularly in the Western. These images and stories tend to

preserve the bush and its aboriginal denizens as pristine, primeval, authentic, and as a commodity for consumption. The archaic can also be found in the reaction of various nationalisms to these imperial images in the valorization of indigenous cultures, traditions and landscapes. Nevertheless, what is postmodern about this archaism in contemporary culture is the extent to which it is reified as a simulation, a Baudrillardian simulation. Jameson notes that

> nostalgia film, consistent with postmodernist tendencies generally, seeks to generate images and simulacra of the past, thereby—in a social situation in which genuine historicity or class traditions have become enfeebled—producing something like a pseudo-past for consumption as a compensation and a substitute for, but also a displacement of, that different kind of past which (along with active visions of the future) has been a necessary component for groups of people in other situations in the projection of their praxis and the energizing of their collective project. (137)

What makes this archaic postmodern is the extent to which it is apparently real, spontaneous, live; the extent that technology has become fast enough to capture or outpace reality. The "postmodern archaic" in this case is the utilization of a reservoir of symbolic archaic value as the backdrop and test for "progress"; in other words, the desert island, the outback, the savannah, are yardsticks to measure how far modern people have come from their "roots," and to determine whether they can still functionally return to them. The pristine is so appealing because in an era of vertiginous change it can be made to be a relative constant, and because it can act as an empiricist, realist litmus test and, hopefully, validation of contemporary hyperculture. In other words, the postmodern archaic might be seen as part of the ongoing human attempt to cleanse and stabilize nature and the visceral, to control the messiness of the flesh, and what is particularly postmodern about this is that it is technology that is the agent of the sanitizing sublimation. Hence I am using a Jamesonian distinction between the postmodern (as in the sociohistorical era) and postmodernism (reflexive cultural production in and about that era) to emphasize Baudrillard's notion of the "simulacrum" that characterizes the postmodern. Indeed, postmodernity or the postmodern has been consistently characterized as a space rather than a place due to its dependency on globalization and simulation. According to this distinction, *Survivor* is definitely an example of a postmodern simulacrum, rather than of critical, reflexive postmodernism (which may well be simulacral itself). As John Langer suggests of disaster coverage in *Tabloid Television*, this simulacrum attempts to forestall the depersonalization and community breakdown that accompanies technocratic postmodernity.

Thus we see that in the *Survivor: Africa* season, many attempts are made to integrate the contestants with the locale so that challenges and rewards partially involve the local flora and fauna and local practices such as bartering and drinking cow's blood (as the Masai do). Hence the postmodern archaic is not merely a test, but is

motivated by a Luddite consciousness, and in particular by what N. Katherine Hayles calls "corporeal anxiety," the fear of dematerialization of the body, and a corollary need for community/family/tribal bonds (800). Thus what is also piquantly postmodern about this archaicism is the apocalyptic anxiety that the archaic, our own roots as externalized in primitive societies and locales, is disappearing at an accelerating pace. Baudrillard similarly links anxiety and panic with nostalgia:

> When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us: a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal. (12–13)

This nostalgia requires that the viewers of *Survivor* consume the genetic substrate of the archaic authentic and thus establish its authenticity; the word is made flesh in an act of ingestion, voyeurism enters the body. Clearly Lukács is hardly enough and psychoanalytic analysis is of utility here. Much has been made of the link between cannibalism, vampirism and consumer capitalism, and here I think that we see the same connection in that capitalism involves incorporation via ingestion. Perhaps we might call this canny capitalism? Sparkle Hayter satirizes *Survivor* as a contained and sanitized capitalism in a short story which postulates that real castaways would have to resort to cannibalism in order to survive. If we consider that money today is virtualized in terms of computer transactions, but we can still make a withdrawal of actual physical cash from the machine and thus confirm the veracity of virtual capital, then via consuming the illusion of spontaneity and the postmodern archaic, the postmodern subject is able to confirm the veracity of virtual culture today.

In the cow's blood drinking scene in Kenya in the *Survivor: Africa* season, for instance, the host Jeff Probst comments, "I'm going to tell you up front, when I first saw this done it seemed very brutal to me, but I spent a lot of time with these guys and found out exactly the opposite, cattle are revered ... cattle are truly a source of life, what's going to happen is something they do every day and how they live." While this might be seen as admirable postcolonial foregrounding of cultural position and prejudice, the prejudicial is immediately re-established by Probst's next comment, "just to assure you, we've tested and quarantined this cow, this one is completely clean," something reinforced by the camera's lingering glance on the blanching face of one of the women contestants when blood is mentioned. This cultural othering is further compounded when Probst pours the blood into a glass jar while saying "pour it into a serving container that suits you guys," which might indeed be a metaphor for the postmodern archaic as a whole. Furthermore, such scenes of ingestion are not only

characteristic of the "eat or be eaten" ethos of capitalism, but have become a trope in reality television, partly because they appear to be live, but also because the trope of the "gross out" is not just an exercise in multicultural tolerance but in sensationalizing the limits of cultural tolerance through stomach-turning. Scandal is required for the maintenance of viewer interest, but the scandal must always be contained within culturally sanctioned boundaries of acceptability. Thus the postmodern archaic has the double function of both critiquing contemporary culture and retroactively ratifying that culture.

Hence *Survivor* might well be accused of tokenism, for not only are there no indigenous inhabitants taking part in the show—all the contestants and backing crew are American (the only locals credited in the Africa production were a location manager and carpenters)—but also the gestures toward the indigenous are almost insultingly offhand and exoticizing. The music in the Australian *Survivor* (composed by Russ Landau and David Vanacore), for instance, alternates between schmaltzy neo-classical in the scenes construed as patriotic to the United States, so that when the contestants chat to their families via the internet in one reward violins swell portentously. On the other hand, indigenous scenes are accompanied by "primitive" indigenous drumming or spooky didgeridoo playing to indicate threatening danger. This contrast is most apparent in the *Survivor: Thailand* season when in one episode the survivors sing the cheery yuletide song "Sleigh Ride" on a sultry summer's night, with the camera panning into the moonlit Thai landscape with eerie accompanying music. In fact, the theme tune to the series is called "Ancient Voices" in the credit sequence. This aural sensationalism exoticizes the archaic and appropriates the other. In fact, Africa, Australia, Asia, and so on in *Survivor* are understood through projections of the repressed of the West, as in Conrad's evergreen *Heart of Darkness.* A necessary background in reading realist media production today would seem to be critical postcolonialism alongside formalism and psychoanalytical theory, at the least.

Of course, it is not my intention to disparage these noble attempts, noble savage attempts, to embrace the other, but I cannot get away from the fact that they are merely a façade amounting to no more than local color, for the narrative of the game itself is a capitalist orgy of "democratic" voting, defeat, accumulation, and victory. The initiation into the local(e), this neo-tribalism, cannot be allowed to interfere with a bigger tribalism, a nationalist agenda; hence the triumphal finale ratifying capitalism with a final vote into millionaire status, the golden calf of America. A central transcultural aspect of the game show is its valorizing of competition, materialism, commodity fetishism, and winning. In game shows the linking of specialized knowledge and skills with material reward instantiates the capitalist ideological underpinnings to American value systems. While the "third world," savage, primitive archaic is apparently there as a test, the game as such is not tested because it embodies the notions of the law of the jungle and survival of the fittest.

Thus the mirage of a test is partially there to quiet the apocalyptic anxieties of a decadent culture; if the United States fell apart or was attacked by its enemies

and became a wasteland, Americans and their culture could still survive and flourish because their culture is natural. As Baudrillard notes, "everything is metamorphosed into its inverse in order to be perpetuated in its purged form" (37). In a sense, then, *Survivor* offers to American audiences not only the opportunity to test and ratify their culture, but also the chance to consolidate a collective identity, the possibility for a Barthesian *plaisir*, a pleasure in self-recognition and hence validation. Unlike many other game shows, *Survivor* does not offer substantial consolation prizes. There was one season in which all the players received a car, and the runner-up always receives one hundred thousand dollars. But these exceptions aside, losers are sent home with nothing to show beyond a chance at some publicity and post-production photo opportunities.

But while the show does superficially offer us survivalism, a narrative that confirms the "law of the jungle," it is carefully scripted and contained. The host, Jeff Probst, maintains center stage as the organizing voice of authority and control, the voice of the father, echoing Chion's claim that television is vococentric in that the voice "orients the viewers decisively in certain directions of interpretation" (Bourdon 541). It is no mere idiosyncracy of style that has Probst affecting frontiersman khaki fatigues and an imperious manner. This is clearly a patriarchal cultural model, with the father as the voice of authority, the "immunity idol" as phallic talisman, and the contestants as Oedipal children jockeying for his divinely impartial approval or disapprobation in the form of extinction. To take this Freudian model further, the archaic landscape may well be the feminine, a primitive oceanic in which the children find home. Moreover, the show is very ritualized; the same routines are utilized in the same places at regimented times. The off-screen props that actually enable this quasi-survivalism were revealed most dramatically when one of the contestants fell into the fire in the *Survivor— the Outback* season and was badly burned: he was airlifted out in a helicopter. No doubt one of the rather ghoulish pleasures that the show offers to audiences is the threat of danger that does accompany even such a scripted and supported trip into the apparently wild. Moreover, the audience revels in any sudden changes in the plot or between the characters, much as it would respond to a change of fortunes in a novel or sitcom.

It is in this way that the game appears "natural" and therefore "unquestionable." In other words, capitalism must be the ultimate culture because it is not a culture as such but in fact unmediated nature, verisimilitudinous naturalism; the divide between nature and nurture collapses. So the totem of the tribe is not the desert island, the outback, or the savannah, but the game itself—competition with winner takes all as its crowning decapitation. The totem is capitalism, the law of the jungle, the constitutive principle of the tribe as such. Indeed, one might be tempted to read this particular brand of hyper-realism as a justification of the *pax Americana* (or should that be *belli Americana*?). This is graphically evident in the *Survivor: Marquesas* season in which Probst informs the contestants at their first tribal council in a picturesque building that "all over the Marquesas there are ancient dwellings like this one, for thousands

of years things have taken place here, everything from sacrifice to other rituals; tribal council is certainly a ritual, the vote definitely a sacrifice, because this is where you are held accountable for your actions on the island." Capitalism must contain the archaic in order both to conceal and to justify its savagery. Here the ancient myths of purification and justice via abasement and suffering are reinforced. As Langer notes of the restoration of order in television news, "these stories reassure us that the social organism has an 'immune system' which can expel untoward and even astonishing interference. Risk to the community ultimately offers us 'faith' *in* the community" (125).

The academic who has perhaps written most extensively about this issue of postmodern archaicism is Dean MacCannell in *Empty Meeting Grounds: The Tourist Papers.* MacCannell makes the point that tourism stages authenticity in order to appeal to exotic expectations that center around temporary escape from the West. He goes on to say that postmodern archaicism which exoticizes the apparently genuine primitive other in an act of identity tourism is not so much a metaphoric guilt expiation, but an actual guilt being expiated, for we have in fact completely wiped out our "savage" ancestors (one might, perhaps uncharitably, construe the neo-tribalism of *Survivor* as more about an American attempt to obliterate guilt at the colonial genocide of native Americans than about embracing a multivalent global). MacCannell says:

The touristic ideal of the "primitive" is that of a magical resource that can be used without actually possessing or diminishing it. Within tourism, the "primitive" occupies a position not unlike that of the libido or the death drive in psychoanalysis, or the simple-minded working class of National Socialism which was supposed to have derived an ultimate kind of fulfilment in its labour for the Fatherland. Or the physicist's dream of room-temperature superconductivity and table-top fusion. These are all postcapitalist moral fantasies based on a desire to deny the relationship between profit and exploitation. Let's pretend that we can get something for nothing. The fable is as follows: The return on the tour of headhunters and cannibals is to make the tourist a real hero of alterity. It is his coming into contact with and experience of the ultra-primitive which gives him his status. But this has not cost the primitives anything. Indeed, they too, may have gained from it. Taking someone's picture doesn't cost them anything, not in any Western commercial sense, yet the picture has value. The picture has no value for the primitive, yet the tourist pays for the right to take pictures. The "primitive" receives something for nothing, and benefits beyond this. Doesn't the fame of certain primitives, and even respect for them, actually increase when the tourist carries their pictures back to the West? It seems to be the most perfect realization so far of the capitalist economists' dream of *everyone* getting richer together. (28–9)

The idea here is to give some guilt-expiating value to the primitive, but not enough to invest in its economic uplift, otherwise even the appearance of it will completely disappear, and not enough for the primitive as an aspect of ourselves to disappear. What the consuming public wants is not the archaic but the image of the archaic, because the archaic itself involves too much suffering. So what is demanded is the

illusion of authenticity, which at the very least is the condemnation of artifice via an unhistoricized simulation of nature. It seems that a community always requires enough guilt to retain its members; postmodern communities find just this amount of guilt in a peculiar version of the archaic.

We might witness this structuring of community around a belief in its own value in a host of cultural productions today. The postmodern archaic is not merely located within the putatively primitive, but manifests in other sociohistorically specific ways that buttress the postmodern community's sense of self: for instance, in the previous generation of technology and culture, within classical and neo-classical "style," inside woman as "the natural," as a form of neo-Luddism, and so on. This form seldom takes the extreme neo-Luddite manifestation of the American Unabomber, Kirkpatrick Sale, or Scott Savage, who have all written technophobic manifestos, but certainly utilizes nostalgic, technoskeptical, conspiratorial, and/or neo-rural ideas. To cite just one mainstream cultural example, the conservative Hollywood film *You've Got Mail* provides a resolution to the challenges of corporate monopoly through a saccharine romanticism enabled by e-mail in which the locus of value is to be found in the individual and the quaint corner-shop which caters to a small community.

Nevertheless, *Survivor* does evince some small degree of postmodernism's reflexivity, a reflexivity which also helps to account for its popularity. The game embodies a sense of doubt about the valency and meaning of progress and modernity, particularly in their relation to the real, a suspicion that the archaic is ineluctable and that ancient cultures are worth sustaining, if only because they have proved to be sustainable and to respect their environments. Thus the postmodern archaic is an embodiment and measure of alienation from contemporary cultures, an instantiation of doubt about the virtualization and digitalization of the real. Moreover, in the *Survivor* show, contestants are essentially posed a moral dilemma: whether to embrace capitalist survival wholeheartedly, and inevitably to deceive and betray, or to take an ethical standpoint via another value system, and thereby inevitably lose the game. This is complicated by the fact that embracing capitalism requires extreme cunning; some facade of moral righteousness is required in order not to rile the morals of the other contestants or jury who might vote you off. It is this moral dilemma, the complexity and ambivalence of morality in a community which is motivated by selfish greed, which is important in the popularity of soap-operas and helps explain the success of *Survivor*.

The show does not end there, for there is a final episode in the Australian season entitled "Back from the Outback," which details how *Survivor* affected the lives of the contestants. Here realism is taken one step further, for the virtual archaic is shown not only to have profoundly affected people's lives, but also to have leaked into the contemporary real. Hence, even if the show is not "real," it has "real," mundane, everyday, effects and ramifications; contestants are never the same once they have been on the show. For some contestants this is a boon, for they are depicted as able to capitalize on their media exposure and become celebrities in their own right: from siege by autograph-seekers, to popular ministry, to busy Hollywood schedules, to proposi-

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tions to pose nude in *Playboy.* For others, this is a nightmare as media exposé renders their private embarrassments public. For most of the contestants, some combination of dream and horror is their aftershock from the show. Further, the show's official website is interactive and contains a number of articles critical of the series. Hence the series and its peripheral media do reflect upon its status as a show and its ramifications upon the contemporary mundane. However, those reflections are, like the show as a whole, genuflections to the real, and as such efface the mechanisms of their artifice. The audience is given no clue as to the intertextuality of this hyper-realism, for instance, and hence the series eschews the self-reflexivity so prominent in the postmodernism of Tarantino and Lynch, for instance. Even the self-reflexive aspects of the show are part of the feedback mechanism of the archaic; the lessons learnt in the archaic are brought back to the present in order to establish continuity with the past and hence ratify that present.

Thus it appears that without a vigilant self-reflexivity, almost any cultural production in any genre can reassert dangerously reactionary tropes and mores. I am not suggesting that *Survivor* is the model for all reality TV, let alone for postmodern digital virtuality, but *Survivor* shows how virtuality can raise issues of "reality," authenticity, voyeurism, censorship, sensationalism, ethics, postmodernity, and postmodernism, without responding to these issues in a particularly probing way.

A rather more self-reflexive Hollywood production that is based upon, and satirizes, reality TV is *Series 7: The Contenders.* Directed by Daniel Minahan, this movie involves contenders having to slaughter each other, a comment on the demands of voyeurism, the quest for an authentic reality, and the supposed appeal of "snuff" movies. The film may also be satirizing special effects films and the notion that the screen may be a cyborg training site. The killing theme suggests that murder is the logical result of the lethal combination of the television networks' desire to make a huge profit (after all, having contestants is surely cheaper than paying a cast in the long term) and viewers' voyeuristic desire for realistic sensationalism. The dangerous combination of sensationalism and profit leads to the egotistical exhibitionism that reality TV encourages, and reinforces the dictum that all publicity is good publicity.

However, there seems to be a deeper psychological underpinning to what is happening in *Series 7: The Contenders.* The heroine, Dawn, is a pregnant pragmatist who will stop at nothing to stay with and protect her baby—a protagonist therefore representing the hapless innocence of the physical archaic in the face of the inhuman progenitors of the game. In other words, the film presents a *Survivor*-type alternative to thrill-seeking blood-thirsty postmodern consumerism in the organic body, female and individualized. The narrative stages the return of our heavily pregnant heroine to her past where she encounters her first, and only, true love, Jeff. The two of them had been the only two outsiders in their middle American school and had collaborated on a school art video project which we are duly shown: to the doom-laden chords of 1980's *noir* band Joy Division's "Love will Tear Us Apart Again," the young pair cavort in full gothic attire until, in true *liebestod* style, Jeff ends up dead on the tarmac. Our heroine,

pregnant with the future, finds that she is still in love with the authenticity of her past with all of its castration-complex, love-death alienation. So the film suggests that the alternative to the brutality of postmodern hypermedia voyeurism is to be found in Hollywood's oldest theme: the triumph of the lonely cowboy, the revenge of the nerd, the justification of the modernist cult of alienation. This version of the postmodern archaic reflexively accepts and ratifies the heart of darkness within the West, and in so doing sublimates that darkness into a noble savagery underlying the palimpsestic layers of culture, nostalgically praising that past while simultaneously killing it. As in *The Truman Show*, the only thing that can save is the authenticity of human reciprocity, a heterosexual love boat that must inevitably drown in the sunset. Thus, while *Series 7: The Contenders*, like *The Truman Show* and a number of other examples of "cinema vérité" which expose the truth via virtuality, ostensibly exposes the dynamics of media hype, but its moral grandstanding and revivification of tropes of archaism tend to replicate the melodramatic individualism of the very hype it critiques. Viewers of such exposés can exult along with the director in their intellectual superiority to the mindless consumers of docu-soap operas.

Another film to treat such themes is *The King Is Alive*, which takes the familiar concept of archaic survival, and runs with it in a characteristic yet challenging way. First, the film, directed by Kristian Levring, is part of the "Dogme 95" concept developed by Levring along with Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and Søren Kragh-Jacobsen: a concept that eschews all post-production and anything that is not found on location. This means that the film, shot chronologically on three handheld digital cameras, is characteristic of the survival genre. The plot consists of the stranding of a bus-load of Western tourists in the dune sea of Namibia; indeed a desert island, but without the relief of a blue sea counterpoint to its sand waves. These castaways, as in the *Robinson Crusoe* tradition, are not alone; the single native inhabitant of a deserted village where they find shelter acts as a choric voice to their attempts to evade the boredom and insanity that accompany their unhingement from modernity and its distractions. These attempts assume an antic disposition via the staging of *King Lear. Lear* seems to have been chosen because it is a play that deals with the loss of a kingdom, but also because it turns around a tragic moment in which the King asks of language that it embody accurately the realm of feeling and imagination when he insists that his inheritance will devolve to the daughter best able to "say" her love:

> Tell me, my daughters
> Since now we will divest us both of rule,
> Interest of territory, cares of state,
> Which of you shall we say doth love us most,
> That we our largest bounty may extend
> Where nature doth with merit challenge. Gonerill,
> Our eldest born, speak first. (Shakespeare, 1.1.48–54)

Cordelia refuses this demand that the language of "rule ... territory ... state" embody love, and in so doing rejects the demand for verisimilitude and institutes the tragic action of the play. Her rejection is motivated not only by a child's rebelliousness, but also by the refusal to use any language, let alone the glossy language of the court, for she feels her experience and love have altogether more gravitas: "I am sure my love's / More ponderous than my tongue" (1.1.77–78). It would seem that this episode from *King Lear* has been chosen to cast a reflexive comment upon the plot of the film itself. Plots of this type hold out the promise of verisimilitude, of testing culture against archaic nature, through the castaway theme. Culture, the play within the play, holds out the promise of a defense against, or triumph over, nature through realistic accuracy and resolution, but is unable to deliver on this promise because it is never able to embody the real in speech. The demand that language, culture, embody the actual inevitably leads to tragic results.

In the play, as in the film, these tragic results are a ramification of the linking of sexuality and identity through language. Confronted with the shallowness of languages, and hence exposed to self-revelation and consequent sexual insecurity, a number of the characters attempt to avoid self-revelation through sexual conquest. In the first case, a Western woman attempts to "make her husband jealous" by seducing the black driver of the bus. Her assumptions here are sexist in the sense that she imagines that all men are instantaneously sexually available, and racist in that black men are imagined as particularly sexual and sensuous. She even has the effrontery to tell the driver that her purposes are entirely selfish and then ask whether she is a "bitch." However, her attempt to elevate her own esteem by subjecting the male backfires when he forces her to her knees in a submissive posture that inverts her original intent, reducing her to anger and further verbal abuse.

In the second case, the woman's husband precipitately beats the black bus driver for sleeping with her, not realizing that the act was unconsummated. He thus exposes his insecurity as well as an outlook no less racist and sexist than his wife's—leading her to reject him as a "pig." These episodes are brought to culmination when the aloof father of the rejected husband sleeps with a flirtatious younger American woman and is deluded by her enthusiastic sexual response into a kind of erotic egotism. In other words, a certain kind of sexualized self-esteem requires realistic embodied confirmations. When she tells him that she faked her response and that she finds him disgusting, his new found inflated ego implodes and he murders her and commits suicide. It is as the other travelers mourn these deaths that their rescuers arrive, an unnamed party of Namibians. The suggestion is, I think, that rescue from the demands for realism, from the external confirmations and embodiments required by eroticized egotism, has as a prerequisite the death of that ego and the silencing of that culture.

While it may be thought that the film takes an arrogantly superior stance to all of these selfish shenanigans, it contrasts with *Series 7* in refusing to grant the intellectual a superior status or elite position. This intellectual, the French woman Romane Bohringer, refuses to play Cordelia and join in the action of the play, but despite her

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critical detachment and skepticism, she is never installed in the position of reliable commentator. The role of commentator falls, rather, to Peter Kubheka, the native inhabitant of the ghost town, who says that the foreigners "speak without speaking to each other" and do so in order to avoid the voice of the desert. In this his commentary is clearly accurate, and is the voice left after the hapless visitors have departed. This is one digital virtuality that offers no easy cultural certitudes for viewers.

The postmodern archaic and hyperrealism are so prevalent in contemporary cultural production, as evident in the especially glaring example of *Survivor* and in these two rather more reflexive examples, partly because of cultural and corporeal anxiety. Modernity and postmodernity instantiate such accelerated change that anxiety and vertigo are inevitable by-products. This anxiety manifests in viewers who, because they are spending so much of their lives in front of the television or computer screen, demand increasing verisimilitude from their reality generators. It also manifests within the media industry, which is keen to establish its credentials as well as to make money and hence foists, as it were, verisimilitude upon viewers. The result of this is that, on the one hand, there is so much actuality on television that it has tainted the less realistic footage, so that people unconsciously absorb much of what they are watching as true; while on the other hand, the fictional material has similarly pervaded the real so that the real always seems to have an element of the bizarre and predictable about it. Indeed this interpenetration of culturally coded perception and reality may be an index of the predominance of visual literacy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

The postmodern audience has become predictable in its demand for unpredictability, yet also requires recognition and comfort as an antidote to anxiety. This demand for the illusion of spontaneity and for comfort is often captured by the collaging of different subtexts, many of them not culturally or historically innocent, in the creation of a "simulacrum" in which a particular consciousness, national in the case of *Survivor*, is technologically embodied and hence confirmed. The illusion of spontaneity normalizes the panopticon, normalizes surveillance, and the postmodern archaic normalizes culture and patterns of consumption. Even where digitalization enters the realm of the fantastic, it is seldom to confirm the existence of realms of the imagination, but rather to reify the products of the imagination, and, ultimately, to sell them. Of course, what is elided by this illusion is the suturing that sews these sub-texts together and the ideological underpinnings of these sub-texts, the dynamic of the links so to speak. So in a sense, traditional film and literary study and criticism, which are all about exposing the ideological underpinnings of suturing, are more appropriate than ever before. Of course, traditional film/literary critical models now need to be more flexible, multivalent, and open to a far greater variety of texts than ever before.

To conclude, the problem with responses to the dispersal of the subject and the ubiquity of surveillance that tend to characterize contemporary cultural production is that the old verities can sneak in through the back door. As fragmentation and dispersal occur, so anxiety and nostalgia flourish; the dream of depth and authenticity

reasserts itself. So virtuality creates its own critique via a postmodern realism, and ironically that critique helps shore up virtuality (indeed, digital communication seems particularly suited to render critique, debate, and difference as display rather than as incommensurability). Within virtuality there is an apocalyptic fear of floating too far from the visceral, and hence ironically a whole strand of current cultural production shies away from the new and shelters within the realist. I think that interest in the archaic is vital at this sociohistorical juncture, because without thinking of ourselves in different spaces in the far-distant past and future we have very little perspective on ourselves now. What we understand by the archaic should not be a romanticized psychological projection, nor a creation of the very corporations whose existence threatens the archaic. Moreover, the future of realism seems assured in the sense that the further away from the archaic and corporeal we move, the more we will need to return to it to ratify our progress. The further from the archaic we journey, the more regular and insistent our trips "back" to it have to become. These trips have to be made because without them we have no sense of "progress"; the body itself enforces them by reminding us of our physicality. As Marianna Torgovnick notes, "our interest in the primitive meshes thoroughly, in ways we have only begun to understand, with our passion for clearly marked and definable beginnings and endings that will make what comes between them coherent narrations. A significant motivation for primitivism in modernism, and perhaps especially in postmodernism, is a new version of the idyllic, utopian primitive" (245). The postmodern archaic is likely to increase in future, and realism is unlikely to disappear. The tribe has spoken.

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