

The Last Judgment

Chapter one of . *Lies - Imposture - Stupidity*

My eyes fell recently on a new reproduction of Hieronymus Bosch's "The Last Judgment." Above is Christ as judge surrounded by the Virgin Mary, John the Evangelist, and the apostles. Below, the punishment of the damned, painted in somber colors. These castigations are eagerly carried out by a rough crew of monsters crawling across the country like insects on a piece of rotten meat. We witness how the damned are burned, speared, impaled, hung on butcher's hooks, forced to eat excrements or thrown into bizarre machines that look like gigantic meat mills, and more of that fun. But one specific scene caught my attention. In the midst of all this cheerful violence, there is discernible, at a crumbled brothel and in a place that probably should have housed a blacksmith, one of these crazy figures nailing a horseshoe to a woman's heel. I couldn't believe my eyes. I came across descriptions of this horrible ordeal in books talking about the torture that the Armenians had endured before and during the 1915 genocide.¹ But these facts are also told by historians and by witnesses whose experiences were recorded. "Hence, it was all true."



I assume that this vicious barbarity was already applied in the time of Hieronymus Bosch. But the presence of that particular scene in "The Last Judgment," painted around 1485, reinforced the reality of what I had read about that form of torture more than four centuries later. This fact confirms the trivial idea that art is better equipped to reveal the truth about some facts, and with an intensity that objective reports can rarely match. There is nothing in the scene that could disturb or distract attention from this clear and distinct representation. This atrocity, as painted in this work, is charged with such an intensity, is packed with such profound meaning, that it compresses a whole world of indignation, persecution, and blatant cruelty. From now on, I thought, one can still deny and reject these facts, but no one can ignore their truth any more. It is not the case that there are

only interpretations and no facts. Rather, there is no interpretation that does not relate to facts. We don't invent the latter. Our imaginations are not powerful enough for that. Certain facts may only appear through their embedding in the imagination, but the imagination dilutes these facts into images that become weak and empty over time. This weakness and emptiness are the fate of the liar. There is no concealment of the truth without imagination. But that imagination moves the liar far beyond the lie.

CONTINGENCY, FREEDOM, AND IMAGINATION

Facts in history manifest a remarkable ambivalence between pure contingency and necessity. At the occasion of some event, you cannot get rid of the impression that things could have been otherwise, that things could have gone differently. A small, contingent little detail could have put the entire outcome of history on a different track. On the other hand, *what's done is done*. This small detail is overloaded with meaning precisely because it did *not* derail the fatal consequences of history. Something happens without reason – and what happened becomes indelible or irreversible. Hence, facts occur to us in a certain place at a certain time. A fact is not just a mechanical or natural “thing.” After all, you do not simply accept or submit yourself to facts passively; rather, you consider facts from a very specific angle and a kind of distance. That distance is freedom – the freedom, according to Hannah Arendt, “to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ [...] to things as they are given, beyond agreement or disagreement.”²

This combination of coincidence and necessity can therefore be a source of remorse (“If only I hadn't...”) or gratitude (“What luck happens to me!”). A fact therefore affects someone within a certain context that is marked by the structure of the action: it does something to you or you do something with it. On the basis of what happens to you and “could have been otherwise” you cherish the desire to do something else – and that desire itself is fed by the insight that what happened cannot be undone. In her text on “lying in politics,” Arendt aptly expresses the affinity between freedom and action as follows:

A characteristic of human action is that it always begins something new, but this does not mean that it is ever permitted to start ab ovo, to create ex nihilo. In order to make room for one's own action, something that was there before must be removed or destroyed, and things as they were before are changed.

Such change would be impossible if we could not mentally remove ourselves from where we are physically located and imagine that things might as well be different from what they actually are. In other words, the ability to lie, the deliberate denial of factual truth, and the capacity to change facts, the ability to act, are interconnected; they owe their existence to the same source, imagination.³

The ability to take distance and imagine that things could be different from what they are today, these are also the two structural properties of the dynamics of the imagination as such. It is not for nothing that Sartre defined the imaginary as *a consciousness in so far as it realizes its freedom*.⁴ The imaginary cannot reductively be “psychologized” into the mental function of forming images; it represents a global attitude towards reality. The power of the imaginary lies in the quasi-magical ability that we have to deny facts - “to say ‘no’” - in favor of a fictional narrative. The imaginary thus affirms itself as a refusal to accept what is happening or as a distance from reality in favor of the possible or the unreal. It is this internal structure of a “double néantisation” that, as Arendt suggested, is characteristic of freedom and action. Acting means ignoring something in reality or neutralizing its impact in favor of what does not yet exist and what I would like to change, adapt, replace.

I would argue, in line with Sartre’s phenomenological thinking, that facts are never recorded or registered passively. They appear within a context as an event, a moment, an object, on the basis of which a set of possibilities is generated. In this context, Deleuze aptly spoke of “voyance,” a kind of clairvoyant seeing by which, in what is usually understood by our perception, one discovers a specific detail that can push the course of the circumstances into a totally new and unexpected dimension and direction.⁵ Think of a comedian who quickly and sharply detects and exploits ambiguities in words and unexpectedly “translates” the meaning of statements into a different register. A fact or event is therefore a kind of snapshot, a central point in which a minimal distinction is condensed between the real and the possible. This distinction is based on the imaginary. A fact therefore never appears objectively and naked, but, like everything that appears, is (to use Sartre’s expression) “pregnant with the imaginary.” This imaginary gives implicit meaning to the real. The richer your imagination, the sharper your clairvoyance, i.e. the more details will have the power to evoke in the world moments where “everything could have been different.” Or, conversely,

the power to get some flexibility and contingency into what has happened and is experienced as irreversible.

IMAGINATION AND LYING

Sartre thus suggests that the imagination functions as an implicit horizon within which the real can appear as meaningful. It is a way of transcending (neutralizing) the real "*en le constituant comme monde,*" or *constituting it as a world*. What you see and what you value betrays the nature of what you can imagine. The world is deepened by the internal richness and complexity with which your representations try to grasp and understand things. What Sartre suggests is that depth determines the value of what you expect to be true or false. "Truth" as a concept only makes sense, then, within a context that determines whether what you say and think, what you claim or apprehend as true, is meaningful or not. In his famous 1899 essay "The Decay of Lying," Oscar Wilde denied that art imitates nature and asserted rather that it is nature that imitates art.⁶ No one in London had actually "seen" anything in the mist before the existence of Turner's paintings. This "natural factuality," i.e. fog, suddenly acquires a value that it did not have before. And if a tourist were to claim that fog in London is ugly and unhealthy, he or she would say something that for Turner's admirers would sound untrue. Why? Because it goes against the value that the fog had suddenly acquired. This is the domain of action, experience, or life.

Moreover, the fact that our imagination implicitly influences our perception and our actions is in itself a rather banal thought. For example, the way in which we think about hygiene strongly depends on the images we sometimes unconsciously use about the body. In the 16th Century, a newborn was completely rubbed with fat and bound in wraps, because some doctors thought that diseases (e.g. the plague) seeped into the body through small cracks in the skin. This idea was partly formed by the fact that in their representations of the human skin, probably without knowing it, they borrowed images from architecture. They saw the skin as a kind of wall: In a house with cracks, water will seep in, and infiltrations cause mildew and weaken the entire structure. Descartes would probably have laughed very hard at these ideas, but the machines that he himself had in mind when he described the body as an automaton also have their limitations (at least, his models showed new possibilities vis-à-vis the way in which we can think about the body and imitate its functioning). Much of what he said today sounds untrue, yet,

as a matter of fact, no one assumes that he was lying or trying to deceive us.

The idea that truth itself is dependent upon a context and a criterion of meaning implies, among other things, two points. On the one hand, as we will see in the next chapter, some truths, however scientific, sometimes appear worthless, inappropriate, or stupid in response to what they wish to prove. On the other hand, lies and scams sometimes illuminate true aspects of reality and enter into history as unshakeable truths. Think of the example of what Arendt said about the banality of evil. No one will question that thesis. But it was inspired by the swindler and imposter Adolf Eichmann whose appearance at the famous trial turned out to be a great spectacle, a conscious deception - in short, fake.⁷

Finally, what is a lie? Recall Arendt's point about how "the deliberate denial of factual truth - the ability to lie - and the capacity to change facts - the ability to act - are interconnected: they owe their existence to the same source: imagination." A lie therefore points to an internal and strict affinity with imagination. Not so much so because we need a lot of imagination to fantasize (about) "alternative facts" - for, as we will see further, many liars and imposters betray themselves precisely not because of their lack of imagination - but because lying and imagination have the same structure. After all, they are both expressions of the freedom to refuse to accept something and therefore the desire to change it - in short, to act.

That's why you chiefly, if not exclusively, lie about a "fact" or an event that is pregnant with imagination and by itself refers to other possibilities, i.e. facts for which the distinction between the real and the possible seems condensed and contained. Hence, it makes little or no difference to us if the content of a lie does not relate to matters that concern us. Our supposedly natural love of truth is in itself very selective: It is especially awakened in those circumstances where what is true affects our life or our belief in its value. Seen in itself, there is little at stake in facts that are irrelevant to what drives us in our actions and lives. There is no latitude or room for leeway between their factuality and the imaginary. We lie about things that "matter," that *do* something to us, and if we want to do something, especially if we want to act, then we must, as said, deny an aspect of the real in favor of what we want to see as different. Well, this structure of "double néantisation" is the structure of lies.

"Lying," said Augustine, "is having a thought in your head and, by words or other

means of expression, expressing another," with the intention of deceiving.⁸ The liar is double-hearted or has "a double heart" (*duplex cor*), that is, "a double thought" (*duplex cogitatio*). He has "a thought that he knows and judges true, but keeps to himself; and he has a second thought that he knows and judges false, but which he expresses instead of the first."⁹ The hallmark of the lie is its *duplicity*, a game of dissimulation and simulation: You dissimulate what is true, and you simulate what is untrue. Or, put otherwise, "dissimulation is pretending not to be what one actually is, whereas simulation is pretending to be what one actually is not."¹⁰

This interplay of lying and deception requires a certain skill, as Socrates suggests in the "Little Hippias": Those who deliberately do not tell and distort the truth must be able to do more than those who always and everywhere speak the truth. Indeed, it comes down to being able to deny a part of reality or neutralize its impact in favor of the evocation and simulation of something that is not real and does not exist. Which does not mean that any form of fiction is untruthful. A lie would be a kind of fiction with the intention to deceive, that is, to fraudulently change reality or to adapt its meaning. Traditionally, therefore, the condemnation of the lie was focused either on the subjective aspect - the intention to deceive - or on the objective aspect - to replace reality with fiction. But in both cases this reaction is an attempt to conjure, control, or neutralize the ambivalence proper to factual reality. You do this either from the inside/interior, i.e. the mental realm, or from the outside/external, i.e. the facts themselves.

If you put the emphasis on the inner self, you condemn the lie not for your impact on reality, since this is something over which you lack any control (it could always turn out differently); the lie is condemned as a lack of sincerity, i.e. your attitude towards your own thinking. On the other hand, if you emphasize the effect, you are mainly referring to the destabilizing consequences of the lie on the outside world. By firing out ambiguities in the world, you are unravelling the ground on which you yourself stand.

LYING AND INTENTION

Emphasizing the *intention* of the lie means searching for its origin in the inner world, the "interior intimi meo." In the end, it may eventually not matter what your sincerity does to the world: Apart from that collateral damage, the

relationship to yourself – or, better, to the Divine in yourself – takes precedence. In the Augustinian tradition, someone like Thomassin (1693) would go so far as to say that “if the whole human species were to be exterminated, and it were possible to save it by a lie, the lie should be avoided, and the whole human species should perish.”¹¹ The lie must be avoided because of the ambiguity or duplicity that is part of its internal structure.

In his confessions, Augustine at one point asks himself why he still has to confess his whole story anyway. God already knows everything, doesn't he? If you confess, it is because the truth may not only be claimed in the heart and the mind, but has to be communicated and spread among many witnesses. Of course, there is also a risk that as soon as you bring out the truth you finally expose it to the ambiguities specific to the world, the language, and the facts. In this context, I involuntarily have to think of what a faithful friend once told me about reciting the “Lord's Prayer”: He never pronounced the first sentence (“Our Father who art in heaven”) to its end because, he said, the Devil couldn't resist to add a blasphemous “F” before the “art.”

It is interesting to note the use that the casuists made of those ambiguities in order to assuage the Augustinian prohibition of mendacity. The very existence of ambiguities (see their “theory of equivocation”) created a space in which to develop techniques to *deceive without lying*.¹² The use of these techniques was therefore subject to strict conditions, especially when telling the truth represented high danger or would lead to disaster, and not saying anything was seen as a form of betrayal.¹³ The casuists developed very imaginative ways of dissimulating the truth by using the ambiguity inherent to certain propositions (“not *est hic*,” meaning “he is not here” or “he *eats* not here”)¹⁴ while other casuists made use of the “*restrictio mentalis*,” where it was claimed that a false statement can be made true by adding a mental reservation (e.g. after speaking the words “he's not here” you mentally add the clause “for you,” or “today,” etc.). Another famous example of what is also called the *oratio mixta* and appeared in many manuals and discussions on mendacity is the following: St. Francis of Assisi, when asked by some pursuers if the fugitive they were looking for had passed his way, put his index finger in the sleeve of his mantle and said “he had not passed here,” meaning through his sleeve.

Characteristic of these methods is the form of deception or deceit that helped to bypass the lie. Pascal, in his “provincial letters,” would fulminate: “C'est dire la

vérité tout bas, et un mensonge tout haut” (to be telling the truth in a low key, and falsehood in a loud one).¹⁵ In fact, one could summarize the whole setup of the casuists using the motto: *You get the lie that you deserve on the basis of the truth that you expect.* Their theories are very relevant inasmuch as they show that the emphasis Augustinians placed on “intention” and interiority was based on a *subjectification* of the truth according to which the final meaning of reality was sought in God and inwardness rather than in the contingent field of the world. This trend was of course continued in the 17th Century by the Jansenists and by thinkers such as Malebranche. The meaning and effects of what we do and say are beyond our control; in the world we are seldom free because – to speak with Spinoza – we are not an adequate cause of what we set in motion. In short, the lie is condemned in the name of the ambiguity inherent in every act and fact. Lying amplifies this ambiguity and injects it into a domain that is destined to be clear and distinct (thinking). This ambiguity is precisely the work of the imagination, the *simulatio*. You need it in order to dissimulate the truth, but the more you call upon it the greater the risk of going astray.

Mendacity is also condemned for its effect on reality, or at least for the perception we have of it. The unreal weakens the real. By lying you deprive yourself of any solid ground. Mark Twain would have said: “If you tell the truth you don’t have to remember anything.” This sentence perfectly sums up what Montaigne writes about liars in his *Essays*. People with a bad memory would do well not to try to lie. The truth is very precise and well-defined, it has one face. The lie doesn’t.

Lying means undermining real facts and replacing them with an imaginary version. Facts are what they are. Once they happened, you cannot get around them. But since they could have been otherwise, there’s nothing that hinders you from inventing another version of them. And this is exactly where the danger lies. On the one hand, that you yourself start to drift and lose solid ground. On the other hand, that you get the urge to not only ignore what is fixed and what offers resistance but to destroy it, to erase or eliminate it.

The danger inherent to any lie exists above all in the ingenuity or inventiveness required to simulate. While inventing all kinds of things, the liar gradually loses contact with the facts. In addition to the fact that lying is morally “*un mauvais vice,*” or a bad wickedness, Montaigne also condemned it for the destabilizing influence it has on our grip on the world. While concealing the true content of facts in favor of a fabrication or pure invention, the liars often break adrift (“il se

desferre”), they slip and start to lose control over the situation they themselves have created. Their statements lack the gravitational power or the “stubbornness” of a true fact.¹⁶ For what he or she fantasizes is a body without consistency that erases the memory of the truth against which this deceit fought.

Hence, the lie is condemned not only for moral principles (lack of sincerity), for undermining mutual trust between people, but also for an “ontological” reason: It disrupts the cohesion and coherence of the world we share. When lying, the risk is always too great that the simulation aspect takes precedence and makes both the liar and the interlocutor hopelessly drift away.

In her essay “Truth and Politics,” Arendt tells the following anecdote. Shortly before his death, Clémenceau would have been involved in a discussion with a representative of the Weimar Republic about the question of responsibility and guilt for the outbreak of the World War I. To the question “What in your opinion will future historians think of this troublesome and controversial issue?” he would have replied “This I don’t know. But I know for certain that they will not say Belgium invaded Germany.”¹⁷

It goes without saying that establishing a falsehood of this magnitude requires more than the whims of a frivolous historian or “revisionist.” In order to succeed, an enormous number of traces, documents, stories, and witnesses would have to be eliminated. And to achieve this would require “no less than a power monopoly over the entire civilized world.”¹⁸ But isn’t that what some of the swindlers or imposters on the political scene dream of? Given the very conditional and ambiguous nature of facts, there is indeed nothing that could prevent a “man of action” from changing the story or erasing the traditional view of it. Today, we know that the trademark of totalitarian states is the desire to rewrite history, and possibly even before the eyes of those who were its witnesses. Moreover, these revisions of history often sound more convincing than reality, for they confirm what the public wants to hear and believe. Or they help to suppress collectively things that we don’t want to know. In short, in order to distort the truth at such a level, it is not enough to propagate a few false statements from time to time; you have to be able to impress, *you have to be an actor*.¹⁹

A liar has to simulate, and therefore above all be able to play, be able to seduce and deceive, be able to set up a whole *mise-en-scène* and, on the basis of propaganda, enforce the false as a substitute for the true. The lie must be part of

a global strategy aimed at imposing a more or less complete replacement of a part of history. But that is exactly where the problem lies. Such a substitute is never finished, plus it lacks the stubbornness and firmness of the facts. And that stubbornness can never be completely overcome. There will always be a detail or an unforeseen event that can cause everything to vacillate and collapse. Lies only survive as a continuous rearrangement of the untrue, never as a definitive replacement of the true.²⁰

A fake version of facts can only impress thanks to repression, mutilation, or even destruction of the original. There is something violent about lying or pretending. But this unlimited destruction also affects the liar. The deceiver himself or herself often gets caught in the web of his or her own lie. However, this drifting of the imagination leads to nothing. The more the lie dismisses the facts, the more it revolves around emptiness. Being “adrift,” as we will discuss in ensuing chapters, is exactly the fate of the imposter. What usually starts with one small and innocent lie often ends in tragedy. A lie simulates in a very specific context a world that does not correspond to the facts. As a liar, you have to make all kinds of turns in order to be able to neutralize, deny, or literally eliminate that which refutes your fake story. For 15 years, the false doctor Jean-Claude Romand had been telling his family and friends that he worked as an expert for the *World Health Organization* in Geneva. But this was based on a fraud: He was not a doctor. He drove his car into the woods every morning and waited there until the hour that it seemed reasonable “to come home from work.” In order to preserve his lies, he always had to adapt his role. He read and became an expert in highly specialized literature in medicine. Or he had to go to conferences, so to speak. But this whole staging increasingly served less and less to hide a truth (contrary to the lies of spies, secret agents, lovers). The simulation broke loose and lost the connection with a truth that had to be repressed. The problem is exactly that behind this deceiver’s lie: There was nothing left, there was no “real” Jean-Claude Romand. This is the fate of many lies: They drift away from what they originally wanted to dissimulate and end up gravitating around nothingness or the *unreal*.

Until now, I have tried to show how the lie is structurally based on the ambiguity inherent in facts. A liar exploits this duplicity by playing with the distinction between truth and fiction. But this is playing with fire. In his or her practice, the distinction between dissimulation and simulation becomes blurred and the imagination is set adrift; it is no longer fed by anything and circles around a void.

In what follows, I would like to examine to what extent this duplicitous exploitation of facts can inadvertently turn someone into an imposter. The urge to control the ambiguity probably explains our love of the truth. Claiming that truth has a sense or meaning is therefore only one possible way of supervising the limit between the true and the false and of controlling or, if necessary, manipulating possible shifts. I will conclude this chapter with a suggestion for our situation today. Through new developments in the (“social”) media, the “man in action” has found a better way to deal with the distinction between the true and the false: Just blow it up.

The previous discussion of the liar’s fate, namely the situation where someone is overtaken by his or her own lies and simulations and loses all contact with and feel for the facts, was based on the assumption that the liar’s intention is at the origin of the duplicity: He or she has exploited the ambiguity inherent to facts and fell under the spell of the pure possibilities at the expense of the truth. But facts can of themselves, through internal reorganizations, impose new possibilities and destroy existing interpretations. Situations are often so complex and intricate because of public or historical circumstances that, despite any and all good intentions, someone can still end up in a position that turns him into a swindler or an impostor. Political revolutions illustrate this fact. Today’s leaders are the traitors to tomorrow’s authorities. However, a good example of such a revolution in a not exclusively political sense can be found in the following example from a collection of *gekigas* (a *gekiga* is a comic strip for adults, . a “manga”) by Yoshihiro Tatsumi.

During World War II, just after the explosion of the atomic bomb, a certain Sato, at that time working for the Japanese Ministry of War, was sent by his superiors to Hiroshima. He was supposed to record the damage caused by the bomb dropped on August 6, 1945. Completely upset and armed with his camera, he made his way through the rubble and painfully crossed what was left of the city. In the middle of all the debris, he discovered two shadows printed by the flash of the bomb on the wall of a house. At the very moment that the bomb exploded, a son apparently kindheartedly and graciously was massaging his mother’s shoulders. The photograph that the reporter was able to take of this scene will become famous: A symbol of devotion, love, and peace. A statue will even be produced that will travel around the world to contribute to the “Never Again” campaign.

But the story – like all the stories in Tatsumi’s book – gets darker. The next day, the grey wall section seems to have been destroyed. The real son is still alive. As it happened, the boy printed on the wall was his friend, whom he had asked to kill his mother. Without knowing it, the reporter had turned a murder into a symbol of devotion and love. Moreover, since the confession made to him by this unworthy son, he himself has been transformed into an imposter: His photo, the content of which grows out into a symbol for all the orphans of the atomic bomb, is “false” – not in the sense of being Photoshopped or being a “deep fake” but in the sense that it has led to a misinterpretation of the facts in many parts of the world. Of the true meaning of this scene projected on the wall, there is only one witness left, the son. And he’s trying to blackmail (and intimidate) the celebrated reporter.

What is specific about “facts” is that they can take paths “behind our backs” that deceive or derail our good intentions. But at the same time, it is precisely this ambiguity that gives meaning to facts and the truth. The boundary between what is true and what is not is therefore constantly shifting. Hence our frantic efforts to get this shift under control. We then claim the truth, often with a lot of fuss, but it is too late – a bit like a doctor who finds a cure for his patient who has just died.

Lies, I said, derive their power from the ambiguities present in the facts. Today, the nature of this ambiguity itself has changed considerably under the influence of the new media. Through these media, the very idea of dissimulation seems to disappear (everything is present at the same time). And this can be exploited in two ways: By openly lying or by blowing up any distinction between the true and the false. Putin’s political practice is a good example of the first. He lies in order to embarrass and openly challenge those for whom truth still has or is some value. Machiavelli thought that lies were justified in order to gain power, but for Putin, the possession of power is his justification for lying. When he told the West that there were no Russians in the Ukraine, he did not want to convince us. Above all, he wanted to claim that he had the power to humiliate the Western democracies and their media. The public display of his lies was not intended to be believed, but to undermine people’s confidence in the value of truth and sincerity, for he was well aware that we knew that what he was saying were lies. Most of all, he made us feel that our truths did not have the power possessed by his lies.[Europe has still not been convinced to intervene. See Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (London: The Bodley Head 2018), p.

159 sq.]

But a more radical solution is the one where the duplicity itself is blown up like a bridge. Duplicity is based upon a play between the implicit and the explicit, between facts and imagination, dissimulation and simulation. This play forms the ground for lying as a strategy to conceal the truth by simulation in an attempt to convince us of the false. This game rests on the power of credibility: You put your trust in the lie, or you remain faithful to what you believe to be true. In this way, you will continue to seek a foothold. But the proliferation of fake news points to another phenomenon: Here every form of duplicity is mutilated by making the distinction between implicit and explicit explode. You do this by claiming a statement and its opposite in synchrony. "I never said this. But in fact I did."

Isn't this the practice of *double-thinking* to which Orwell refers in his now, again, so popular novel *1984*? Myriam Revault d'Allones concludes her book on *La faiblesse du vrai* ("the weakness of truth") with the following striking description: "Pouvoir du 'doublepenser' - pouvoir garder simultanément à l'esprit simultanément deux énoncés contradictoires et les accepter tous les deux" ("Double-thinking - being able to keep two contradictory statements in mind simultaneously and accept them both").²¹ When double-thinking, you claim two completely opposite opinions at the same time with the same aplomb. In other words, you don't even bother to dissimulate one for the benefit of the other. Like the slogans that appear in the novel on the front of the Ministry of Truth: "War is peace," "freedom is slavery," "ignorance is power." This paralyzing juxtaposition is the biotope of so-called "alternative facts."

The subject that is submitted to such a discourse, as Revault d'Allones aptly writes, "est englué dans la juxtaposition paralysante de deux positions contraires, il est littéralement pétrifié faute de duplicité, d'équivoque, d'ambiguïté" ("is stuck in the paralyzing juxtaposition of two opposing positions, it is literally petrified for lack of duplicity, equivocation, ambiguity").²² The Jesuits manipulated the ambiguity to cheat without lying. The Jansenists condemned any form of deception as an expression of mendacity. But both played with the link that the untrue kept with the true. Today that link itself is irrelevant. "Does the truth matter anymore?"²³ But then you may ask further: How can potential fraudsters still persuade and deceive? The answer is simple: They don't! The ability to convince someone of something false presupposes the ability to conceal something true. But now there is nothing to hide, because the true and the false

are equally explicitly and simultaneously posited or “posted.” So there is nothing that can call into question the interpretation of a fact, because that question itself is already circulating along with the fact itself.

I also said, faithful to Diderot’s adage (“c’est surtout lorsque tout est faux qu’on aime le vrai”, it is in circumstances where everything seems false that we love the truth),²⁴ that our interest in the truth is primarily if not entirely a response to feeling deceived. The driving force of that interest, at least since Descartes (“malin genie”), was doubt, suspicion, and mistrust. Today, everyone feels deceived and cheated - by car makers, politicians, the media, etc. But that feeling is no longer based on the suspicion that (a/the) “truth” is being concealed. Perhaps (a/the) “truth” is itself false. After all, no one can really feel deceived by anything anymore because nothing is concealed or hidden anymore. You’ll find an explanation for everything everywhere and a version of a fact that refutes its official interpretation. This brutal, simultaneous omnipresence has something of the obscene. The political scene takes advantage of this obscenity, like the liars of duplicity. Ambiguity is the driving force of humor - the obscene that of sarcasm and cynicism.

CONCLUSION

The gruesome scene in Hieronymus Bosch’s “The Last Judgment,” with which we introduced the analysis of the present chapter, is of course itself only a detail within the whole panel. After a while, your attention will eventually be distracted by all those devilish creatures crawling over the scene below. When you look at it, you have no choice in being overwhelmed by some form of enthusiasm, a cheerful fascination and curiosity for all these frivolous, funny, and silly creatures. The impact of their presence is so strong that it begins to dissolve and cheer up the dramatic, heavy, or tragic atmosphere of the tortures: Death and torment suddenly appear as burlesque and foolish, with the carnivalesque lightness that you can see in Ensor’s paintings or in a Monty Python movie.

Paradise, on the other hand, seems as boring as it is pious. One wonders whether the chosen ones, in their “Grandeur” (to speak with Pascal), did not fantasize the spectacle of human misery themselves in order to be distracted from their impassive contemplation. Every monster has something unique, something singular - two large flat feet with a head on them, a dragon with a trumpet’s

mouth, a flap-eared bird – at which you cannot stop looking. But most of all, they turn the whole scene into something festive, something clownish, as in a circus. In this way, they illustrate, in their own way, how a single detail can turn a tragic and intensely charged situation into something comical. As we saw, this ambiguity is characteristic of every fact. Humor also consists in using this ambiguity and exploiting it by evoking or echoing the implicit or possible in what is explicit. But what strikes me most in this scene is that the distinction between the implicit and the explicit no longer works: The tragic and the burlesque are manifested in an eternal simultaneity. This is a spectacle for the chosen ones where humor makes way for sarcasm. The sarcasm of someone like Tertullianus who, in his *De Spectaculis*,²⁵ after having written off circus and theatre as pagan anticipates with unambiguous enthusiasm the true spectacle: That of the last judgement, the day the pagans didn't believe in, the day where the old world would go up into flames and we the chosen ones, finally freed from our monotonous contemplation of the Truth, would feast our starving eyes on it...