

## The Multiplication of the Media

A month ago the TV gave us a chance to see again a classic we remembered with admiration, affection, and respect; I refer to Kubrick's *2001*. After this revisitation, I talked with a number of friends, and their opinion was unanimous: They were disappointed.

That film, which had stunned us only a few years ago with its extraordinary technical and figurative invention, its metaphysical breadth, now seemed to repeat wearily things we had seen a thousand times before. The drama of the paranoid computer still maintains its tension, though it no longer seems amazing; the beginning with the monkeys is still a fine piece of cinema, but those non-aerodynamic spaceships have long lain in the toybox of our now-grown children, reproduced in plastic (the spaceships, I believe, not our children); the final images are kitsch (a lot of pseudo-philosophical vagueness in which anyone can put the allegory he wants), and the rest is discographic, music and sleeves.

And yet we considered Kubrick an innovator of genius. But that is the point: The mass media are genealogical, and they have no memory (two characteristics that ought to be incompatible).

The mass media are genealogical because, in them, every new invention sets off a chain reaction of inventions, produces a sort of common language. They have no memory because, when the chain of imitations has been produced, no one can remember who started it, and the head of the clan is confused with the latest great grandson. Furthermore, the media learn; and thus the spaceships of *Star Wars*, shamelessly descended from Kubrick's, are more complex and plausible than their ancestor, and now the ancestor seems to be their imitator.

It would be interesting to enquire why this process does not occur in the traditional arts, to ask why we can still understand that Caravaggio is better than the Caravaggeschi, and that *Dallas* cannot be confused with Balzac. It could be said that in the mass media it is not invention that dominates but technical execution, which can be imitated and perfected. But that isn't the whole story. For example, Wenders's film *Hammert* is technically much more sophisticated than Huston's classic *The Maltese Falcon*, and yet we follow the former only with interest and the latter with religious devotion. So a system or a horizon of expectations operates in us, the audience. When Wenders is as old as Huston will we perhaps see his work again with the same emotion? I'm not up to handling here so many and such formidable questions. But I believe that in *The Maltese Falcon* we will always enjoy a certain ingenuousness that in Wenders is already lost. Wenders's film, unlike the *Falcon*, already moves in a universe where these relationships have inevitably mingled, where it is hard to say that the Beatles are alien to the great musical tradition of the West, where comic strips enter museums via pop art but museums' art enters comic strips via the far from ingenuous culture of men like Crepax, Pratt, Moebius, and Drouillet. And for two evenings in a row the kids pack into a Palasport, but on the first night it's the Bee Gees and the next it's John Cage or a performer of Satie; and the third evening they would go (and, alas, can go no more) to hear Cathy Berberian singing a program of Monteverdi, Offenbach, and—in fact—the

Beatles, but sung like Purcell. And Berberian added to the Beatles' music nothing that it was not already quoting, and only in part without knowing, without wanting to.

Our relationship with mass-produced goods has changed and also with the products of "high" art. Differences have been reduced, or erased; but along with the differences, temporal relationships have been distorted, the lines of reproduction, the before and the after. The philologist is still aware of them, but not the ordinary consumer. We have achieved what the enlightened and enlightenment culture of the '60's was demanding, that there should not be, on the one hand, products for helot masses and, on the other, difficult products for the cultivated, refined public. The distances have been reduced, the critics are puzzled. Traditional criticism complains that the new techniques of enquiry analyze Manzoni and Donald Duck with the same precision and can no longer tell them apart (and it's a cheap lie, contrary to all the printed evidence) without realizing (through lack of attention) that it is, on the contrary, the development of the arts itself, today, that tries to obliterate this distinction. To begin with, a person of scant culture today can read Manzoni (how much he understands is another question) but he cannot read the comic strips of *Metal Hurlant* (which are sometimes as hermetic, specious, and boring as the bad experimenters for the "happy few" in previous decades could be). And this situation tells us that when such shifts of horizon occur, they don't have to mean things are going better or worse: Things have simply changed, and even value judgments must be formed according to different parameters.

What's interesting is that, instinctively, high school kids know these things better than some seventy-year-old pedagogue (I refer to arterial, not necessarily calendar age). The high school teacher is convinced that the boy is not studying because he reads *Batman*, and perhaps the boy isn't studying because he reads (along with *Batman* and Moebius—and the difference between them is the same as that between Barbara Cartland and Ivy Compton-Burnett) Hesse's

*Siddharta*, but as if it were a gloss to Pirsig's book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. It is clear at this point that the school must also review its manuals (if it ever had any) on how to read. And on what is poetry and what is nonpoetry.

But the schools (and society, and not only the young) must learn new instructions on how to react to the mass media. Everything that was said in the '60's and '70's must be re-examined. Then we were all (perhaps rightly) victims of a model of the mass media based on that of the relationship with authority: a centralized transmitter, with precise political and pedagogical plans, controlled by Authority (economic or political), the messages sent through recognizable technological channels (waves, wires, devices identifiable as a screen, whether movie or TV, radio, magazine page) to the addressees, victims of ideological indoctrination. We would only have to teach the addressees to "read" the messages, to criticize them, and perhaps we would attain the age of intellectual freedom, of critical awareness. . . . This was another dream of '68.

What radio and television are today, we know—incontrollable plurality of messages that each individual uses to make up his own composition with the remote-control switch. The consumer's freedom may not have increased, but surely the way to teach him to be free and controlled has changed. And, for the rest, two new phenomena have slowly progressed: the multiplication of the media and the media squared.

What is a mass medium today? A TV program? That, too, surely. But let's try to imagine a not imaginary situation. A firm produces polo shirts with an alligator on them and it advertises them (a traditional phenomenon). A generation begins to wear the polo shirts. Each consumer of the polo shirt advertises, via the alligator on his chest, this brand of polo shirt (just as every owner of a Toyota is an advertiser, unpaid and paying, of the Toyota line and the model he drives). A TV broadcast, to be faithful to reality, shows some young people wearing the alligator polo shirt. The

young (and the old) see the TV broadcast and buy more alligator polo shirts because they have "the young look."

Where is the mass medium? Is it the newspaper advertisement, is it the TV broadcast, is it the polo shirt? Here we have not one but two, three, perhaps more mass media, acting through different channels. The media have multiplied, but some of them act as media of media, or in other words media squared. And at this point who is sending the message? The manufacturer of the polo shirt? its wearer? the person who talks about it on the TV screen? Who is the producer of ideology? Because it's a question of ideology: You have only to analyze the implications of the phenomenon, what the polo-shirt manufacturer wants to say, and what its wearer wants to say, and the person who talks about it. But according to the channel under consideration, in a certain sense the meaning of the message changes, and perhaps also its ideological weight. There is no longer Authority, all on its own (and how consoling it was!). Shall we perhaps identify with Authority the designer who had the idea of inventing a new polo-shirt design, or the manufacturer (perhaps in the provinces) who decided to sell it, and to sell it on a wide scale, to make money, as is only right, and to avoid having to fire his employees? Or those who legitimately agree to wear it, and to advertise an image of youth and heedlessness, or happiness? Or the TV director, who to characterize a generation has one of his young actors wear the polo shirt? Or the singer, who, to cover his expenses, agrees to sponsor the polo shirt? All are in it, and all are outside it: Power is elusive, and there is no longer any telling where the "plan" comes from. Because there is, of course, a plan, but it is no longer intentional, and therefore it cannot be criticized with the traditional criticism of intentions. All the professors of theory of communications, trained by the texts of twenty years ago (this includes me), should be pensioned off.

Where are the mass media? In the festival, the procession, the conference organized by the Culture Commissioner on Im-

manuel Kant, which now finds a thousand young people seated on the floor to hear the stern philosopher who has taken as his motto the admonition of Heraclitus: "Why do you want to pull me in every direction, ye unread? Not for you did I write, but for those who can understand me." Where are the mass media? What is more private than a telephone call? But what happens when someone hands over to an investigating magistrate the tape of a private phone call—a call made to be taped and delivered to the magistrate, and then leaked by someone in the government to the newspapers, so the newspapers will talk about it, thus compromising the investigation? Who produced the message (and its ideology)? The idiot who spoke, unawares, over the phone? Or the one who delivered it? The magistrate, the newspaper, the reader who failed to understand the game and who, in passing the message on to others, assured its success?

Once upon a time there were the mass media, and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives, for those who were not prisoners of the mass media.

Well, it's all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what's going on.

1983

Two Families  
of Objects

TRAVELS IN HYPERREALITY  
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What would be a better way to initiate a column devoted to signs and myths—which we will try to carry forward without any obsession with regularity, responding instead to the suggestions that arrive from all sides—than by making a devout pilgrimage to one of the sanctuaries of mass communication, the Milan Trade Fair? And with the awareness that we are going there on a specific mission. Because it's one thing to enter as an economic operator: For him the Fair doesn't spout any false talk, it gives him a chance to find what he's looking for, touch it, buy it. This is a game with no double meanings, at least as honest as any commercial competition is honest in a market economy. But it's another thing to go there as spectator (as most visitors do): For him the Fair is a great kermesse of triumphant merchandise, and it takes on the characteristics, to a minor degree, of the big international expos, the world's fairs. If—as Marx said—“the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as an ‘immense accumulation of commodities,’” then world's fairs are the temple in which this merchandise loses all real contact with its

value in use and most of its contact with its barter value, to become a series of pure connotative signs, at an emotional fever pitch. The goods almost lose their concrete individuality to become so many notes in an anthem to progress, a hymn to the abundance and happiness of consumption and production.

But a trade fair is an international expo only halfway, because the merchandise is there to be sold. The products are signs of an undifferentiated desire, but they are also objective terms of an individuated and precise desire. The immense population of objects collected here refers us to that "sociology of objects" that is developing in France, of which we will speak on another occasion. But a sociology (or a semiology) of objects means that they must be seen within the concrete system of the society that creates them and receives them, so they must be seen as a language listened to as it is being spoken, and of which we try to discern the regulating system. Here, on the other hand, the objects appear lined up as if in a dictionary, or in a grammar, verbs with verbs, adverbs with adverbs, lamps with lamps, tractors with tractors. Wouldn't it be right to conclude that this collection of objects, which is a trade fair, actually leaves the visitor free, because it imposes on him no logic of the accumulation of objects and allows him to gaze coldly, to choose? On the contrary, however, the ideological message of a fair emerges only at second glance, when we have almost been taken in by the persuasive game it establishes.

The objects are of two types. The first are the "beautiful" objects, desirable, fairly accessible. They include easy chairs, lamps, sausages, liquors, motorboats, swimming pools. The visitor loves them and would like to own them. He cannot perhaps buy a motorboat but he can think of the remote possibility—one day, who knows?—of making such a purchase. But there is one thing he doesn't desire: to accumulate objects of a single type. He may want an ashtray, but not a hundred ashtrays; a rubber boat, but not a thousand rubber boats. So his desire is keen but not frantic; it can be postponed, but its difficulty never creates the drama of impos-



sibility. When you think about it, these "beautiful" objects are all consumer goods.

Then there are the others. They are "ugly," because they are cranes, cement mixers, lathes, hods, excavators, hydraulic presses (actually, they are very beautiful, more beautiful than the first, but the visitor doesn't know this). Since they are ugly and cumbersome, they are undesirable, also because they seem strangely de-functionalized, with their wheels spinning pointlessly, their blades striking the air without slicing anything. . . . They are inaccessible, but the visitor doesn't care. He knows that even if he could buy a machine tool, it would be of no use to him. Because these objects, unlike the others, function only if they are accumulable. A thousand ashtrays are useless, but a thousand machine tools make big industry. At the end of his rounds, the ordinary visitor believes he has chosen. He desires beautiful objects, accessible, and not accumulable, and rejects those that are ugly and accumulable (but inaccessible). In reality, he has not chosen; he has only accepted his role as consumer of consumer goods since he cannot be a proprietor of means of production. But he is content. Tomorrow he will work harder in order to be able to buy, one day, an easy chair and a refrigerator. He will work at the lathe, which is not his because (the fair has told him) he doesn't want it.

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