

(Manuscript at Denoel's)

On reading the manuscript one cannot escape the feeling that here a proposal is being made that, if and when translated into reality, will be come either an important weapon in the fight for human dignity and freedom, or one more element in an ever more oppressing situation. A penetrating mind has grasped here some of the most perturbing facts of the present, and a creative imagination goes with that mind: an explosive combination. Schoeffer sees clearly that a totalitarian society is menacing us in the form of mass culture. And he proposes to do something about it. But his proposals are ambiguous and might easily be utilized by those who hold vested interests in that mass culture for purposes opposed to Schoeffer's intentions. This is why the manuscript should be read with utmost attention, both for the danger it may represent, and for the hope it may offer.

A very revealing statement on page 4 may serve as a point of departure. Schoeffer says there that "by miracle, an artistic apriori has dominated the conception of the town of Brasilia". He seems to think that this was a good thing. But was it? Assuming that the statement is true, (and that precedent and posterior demographic and political considerations did not influence the "artistic apriori"), did the decisive part artists played in the building of Brasilia really make it a good place to live in? The evidence is doubtful. One may see it as a place where terrifyingly efficient fonctionnaires of the future are being bred, and where psychoanalysts have an extremely high number of clients. Now this is the danger inherent in the Tower.

This paper proposes to consider some of the reasons for this danger, and some of the ways by which they may be avoided. The aesthetic quality of the Tower will not be discussed in itself, it will be taken for granted.

(1) Symbol: Schoeffer insists on the symbolic character of his Tower. Yes, but what is a symbol? It is a phenomenon that represents another phenomenon which is either present or absent. The phenomenon represented is "the meaning of the symbol". The relation between symbol and its meaning is always based on convention, although we do not always know about the convention. In the case of symbols like "H<sub>2</sub>O" we are conscious of the convention, in the case of symbols like those that occur in our dreams we are unconscious of it. With conscious symbols we are free, because we can "see through them" and decode them. With unconscious we are unfree, because we are determined by the convention which has established them as symbols. (I.e. the convention loses for us its conventional nature.) This is why the psychological and sociological sciences try to decode unconscious symbols. Now it is by no means clear what sort of symbol Schoeffer has in mind for his Tower. If its convention is to be forgotten, if it is to become myth (like Miss Bardot and Mr. Lenin), God help us. But if it is programmed in

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such a way that it remain always fully conscious, it may become a powerful element for the de-mythification of our surroundings. (By the way, the symbols in Brasilia have become mostly mythical by now.)

There is however more to this point. The Tower is not so much a symbol in itself, as it is a place wherefrom symbols are broadcast. This is in fact its main function. Now one does not see at all clearly what sort of symbols Schoeffler proposes to broadcast. To understand the problem, the following must be stated. The relation of symbol to meaning may have one of two forms: (a) it may relate in a <sup>uni-</sup>univocal way, (each symbol having one meaning, and each meaning having one symbol), and such a code is called "denotative"; or (b) it may relate in an aequivocal way, (each symbol having more than one meaning, and each meaning having more than one symbol), and such a code is called "connotative". In the case of ~~connotat~~<sup>denot</sup>ion, (like in science or propaganda), we must accept the meaning of the message, or we do not get that ~~meaning~~<sup>message</sup>. In the case of connotation, (like in art and myth), we are free, within a certain parametre, to give the message our own meaning. (In science the denotation is conscious, and in art the connotation is conscious. In propaganda the denotation is unconscious, and in myth the connotation is unconscious.)

Now our situation is dominated by denotation, through science for the élite, through propaganda for the masses. This is an important aspect of the totalitarian system. Connotation is becoming rare, which means that our myths are false and that our art is in a crisis. If the symbols to be broadcast from the Tower were to be denotative, (as the idea to broadcast for instance traffic conditions suggests), it will become one more element to strengthen the system. But if the symbols to be broadcast were to be connotative, (likesome other ideas put forward seem to suggest), then indeed the Tower would have a liberating effect. In order to do so, however, the whole population of Paris would have to learn consciously the codes with "open meaning" to be emitted by the Tower. This is difficult, but possible. Then the Parisian population could give various meanings to the Tower broadcast, (it would be, in truth, "artistic" in this sense), and each Parisian, within purposely wide parametres, could "read each message his own way".

(2) Information: It is quite unclear from the manuscript whether the Tower is to emit information, or information structures, or both. To understand the problem, we have to look at the situation. It is marked by over-information. Mass media and élite media, (for instance TV and scientific publications), provide us with a number of disconnected items which we are unable to digest, let alone organize. If the Tower is to become one more potent source of information items, it will aggravate the situation. It will increase the alienating impression that we dispose of information, where, in fact, we are determined by information. But in the

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Tower there is a virtuality to break through this totalitarianism of information. Namely thus:

The information items, if analyzed, reveal that they consist of elements, (symbols), organized according to certain structures, (syntax). (For instance: the information item "Drink milk!" consists of symbols, (English words), organized according to the structure of English grammar.) Information is a product of elements on structure, and may be calculated. Now the number of elements, (words, visual and accoustic forms and other types of symbols), is extremely great, and this is the reason why we cannot even hope to digest information. But the number of structures, (syntaxes), is surprisingly small and manageable. (This is why primary schools no longer teach multiplication tables, but theory of groups: the amount of numbers being enormous, but the amount of arithmetic rules being restricted.) Therefore: if instead of information items we are given information structures with a very few suggested connotative elements within them, (so-called "open information"), we may overcome the present information flood by being able to organize the few given elements within learned structures. (This is what the so-called "generalists", as opposed to "specialists", in the American Universities try to do.) Now the Tower seems a very good instrument in this sense. It offers several structures, (for instance the syntax of rhythm, color, and direction), which, if codified, can be easily learned by everybody, and it offers the possibility for the establishment of a carefully selected small number of connotative symbols. In such a case the Tower may indeed become a "hole in the information world".

(3) Memory: Schoeffler does not seem to see clearly this very important problem. His remarks on pages 13, 14 and 22, (and elsewhere in the manuscript), seem to contradict each other. The situation is as follows: Human memory is being outmoded by artificial memories like computers, magnetoscopes, microfilms and the like. ("Human memory" includes not only the brain, but also the "genetic memory" which Schoeffler mentions.) Therefore virtually everything is at present being memorized and kept for eternity: every silly TV program, (on magnetoscopes), and the yearly income of each one of us, (on computer cards at the Office of Internal Revenue). Not only art has become immortal, (including every Kitsch), but the most sordid details of our private lives have past into the public domain through memorization. (This invasion of the public sphere into the private sphere is the exact contrary of "politisation", it is totalitarian terror.) Now if the Tower is to become one more memory, and a very easily accessible at that God help us. (And some of Schoeffler's remarks seem to suggest this). But if it is to become, (as some other remarks seem to point to), a place of ephemorous and rapidly forgotten events,

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ent a "hole in the memory of Big Brother", and have a potent liberating effect.

(4) Dialogue and discourse: Here again Schoeffler gives the impression of not having thought the problem through, althou he is quite aware of it. In various instances, (like on pages 18, 19 and so forth), he seems to propose a dialogical structure for the Tower. But on page 35 there is unfortunately a very revealing passage: "dialogue between those who determine in quantity and quality the surroundings". Now, of course, here lies the center of the whole problem which the Tower poses. Namely thus:

At present communication is structured the following way: Within the élite a scientific discourse prevails, and it proposes progressively models for knowledge. Part of the élite, (the holders of political, economic and social decisions, and the manipulators of mass media), dialogues over these models and changes them into models of behavior for the masses. These models are then communicated to the masses through the mass media in a strictly discursive structure. Basically, these models provoke in the masses the behavior of consumption. (By the way, Schoeffler is mistaken in his believe that this consumption concerns mostly material goods. It concerns certain ideal goods, ("ideologies"), just as well.) Now this discourse through mass media is what characterizes mass culture. It does not allow for any dialogical answer to the messages it broadcasts. (You cannot answer a TV program, a poster or an illustrated magazine in any meaningful form.) Where there is no possibility for response, there is irresponsability, and this is happening in fact.

Now the Tower may become, God forbid, one more powerful discourse with previous dialogue among the élite, as Schoeffler seems to suggest on page 35 of his paper. But it may also become a place were each Parisian may enter into meaningful dialogue with each other Parisian through the public domain which is the Tower, (not a private place like the telephone network). He can therefore respond meaningfully to the messages he is receiving through other (totalitarian) channels. This would involve technical difficulties, (not to mention difficulties of a different sort), but the structure of the Tower permits this. One would have to program the Tower carefully for that purpose, and Schoeffler, in some places of his paper, seems to think in this direction. In that case, the Tower would become indeed a liberating element of the first order. An element for democracy. if by "democracy" we do not mean the rule of the "majority", but the right of every minority to articulate its message. Seen from this angle, the Tower becomes a source of enthusiastic inspiration.

(5) Conclusion: The four points mentioned do not exhaust the problem. The Tower is fascinating, and one ought to discuss it in detail and from every point of view, a task for a great number of people. Schoeffler

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himself says quite correctly that the time for the lonely artist in splendid isolation is over, and that group activity is now called for. It is quite clear from Schoeffler's explanations that he is a great artist, with enormous imagination, with a deep grasp of the problems, as with pure intentions. But he should be assisted by communicologists, informationists, sociologists, and many others. (Not only by technicians.) It is no good to call the Tower "cybernetic" to give it scientific standing. But if he is assisted by scientists, and if he has a great deal of good luck, the Tower may become an enormous event with unforeseeable consequences for the fight for freedom. (Unforeseeable, and to hell with futuration and with cybernetics!) We must wish all the best for Schoeffler's noble endeavors.

One has the impression that what Schoeffler wants is a sort of church tower for the universal village. This would be a wrong model. He should try to build for us a drum, like they use in Africa and on the Brazilian hills, a drum that liberates by emitting messages, because these messages are deliberately conventional, connotative and have a dialogical structure. If he succeeds to build such a "cybernetic drum", he will become in truth a cathedral builder. Because cathedrals are not only towers, but ships in which the whole community sails in quest of dignity, and in quest of meaning.