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the categories of public space (in the light of the Romanian revolution)

for: Micsamoc-palace of Exhibitions, Budapest 6/4

The Romanian revolution is of course interesting for its own sake. But the subject of this essay will be this even more interesting question: does the role TV seemed to have played in the course of that revolution permit us to anticipate new political categories for the immediate future? The hypothesis I shall submit to your consideration is this: Originally technical images like photos were used to "document" political events, meaning that they fixed some aspects of those events for future examination. After the second war an increasing amount of political events was aimed at being fixed in technical images like films or television, meaning that those images became the political purpose. And the Romanian revolution suggests that TV images may provoke political events, meaning that those images were the motors for political action. The hypothesis here proposed questions the political categories of our tradition. Indeed it questions whether the term "politics" itself will still be adequate to a situation where images are the dominant code of communication. This is the reason why the hypothesis is here advanced with all possible caution.

Images are very ancient codes, at least as old as our species, and possibly even older. ~~But those pre-historical, pre-political images will not be here examined.~~ They were meant to provide their receivers with a kind of instruction of how to behave in a world experienced to be scene-like. For instance: the wall paintings at Lascaux were meant to show how to hunt horses. It is important to notice that those images had a magical structure: they meant scenes, not events, happenings, not processes, and they were pre-historical in this very radical sense of the term. And for many millennia they functioned well: history, politics were not needed for men to lead a good life. But there was an inner dialectics within those images which finally rendered them no longer useful. It is the inner dialectics characteristic of every mediation: instead of showing the world those images meant, they hid the world. Thus the receivers of those images came to use their experience of the world for orientation within the imaginary world, instead of using the experience of images for orientation within the world. This inversion of the relation "image-reality", which had people live in function of images, is what the prophets called "idolatry", and what modern philosophy calls "alienation". It is important to notice this, because TV images during the Romanian revolution (and elsewhere) may re-assume this magical, pre-historical function.

To counter this alienating magical function of images linear writing was invented. The lines of the texts explicitated the surfaces of the images (they explained them), and by thus describing images the texts permitted their receivers to rediscover the reality meant by the imaginary world. With the invention of linear writing history proper was born. Because the lines of the texts unrolled the magical surface of the image, they transformed the scenes into linear events, and thus linear, univocal historical time came into being. The existential climate was radically changed by this transcoding of surfaces into lines, because life was no longer a circle of eternal return, but now became a series of irrevocable instances which demanded dramatic decisions. Political consciousness was born. It is important to notice that such a consciousness is structurally anti-image, because it is anti-magic.

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... although political consciousness is structurally based on linear texts, (it is an alphabetized consciousness), it also depends on a very specific communication structure. Namely on what is called "discourse", where one may distinguish between a sender and a receiver of information. To put it simply: texts are informations elaborated in private, and then published, and it is in the space of publication (in the "republic") that those informations become available to receivers. This specific communication structure thus establishes private spaces (where informations are created), and public spaces (where informations are received), and it also establishes a very specific rhythm: people leave their private spaces (their kitchens, oikoi) and they enter the public space (the agora, the forum) in order to get informed, and they return home in order to stock and process that information. This is political life, and it is what Hegel called the "unhappy consciousness": if I go out into the world I lose myself, and if I go back to find myself I lose the world. Thus political consciousness is structurally anti-image, and it is dramatically unhappy.

But political consciousness was never left unchallenged by images, by magic. As the texts began to explain images in order to explain them away, the images invaded those texts in order to illustrate them. As the texts unrolled happenings into events, the images re-froze events into happenings, and thus consciousness became a battlefield between historicity and magic. It is this tragic inner tension which provides Western civilisation with its sometimes devastating power. That inner tension, which during the Middle Ages assumed the form of Christianity versus paganism, became even more violent when modern science began to be formulated. Science is an alphanumerical discourse which is elaborated in private (for instance in laboratories) and then published in the open space, and it is radically opposed to magic. Therefore its meaning becomes ever more unimaginable as the scientific discourse advances. In this curious sense science is political consciousness in its pure state. It is true liberation from imposed conditions, and if technically applied, it is the method to create a good life. But since the reality science informs us about becomes ever more unimaginable (although perfectly conceivable), very few can stand it. Very few can live in the public light of reason without the help of private magic provided by the images which infiltrate themselves. This is the reason why technical images (first photos, later films, videos, TV, and lately computer screens) were invented.

Those images are the products of scientific and technical discourse, and in this sense they are political, open-space products. But there is something radically anti-political about them. Not only are those images (like every image) two-dimensional surfaces, and thus mean happenings, not events, but they also destroy (unlike every previous image) all public spaces. They undo previous communication structures, and they establish what is used to be called the "communication revolution". Previously, informations were published in the open space, and people had to leave home to get at them (go to school, to concerts, to lectures, and to supermarkets). Previously, people were "politically committed" whether they liked it or whether they didn't. But now informations are sent directly from private spaces to private spaces, and people must stay home to get them, (to see TV, to learn by programmed courses, and even to buy the goods by minute or similar devices.) People are beginning to be

become "politically uncommitted", because the public space, the fory^um, is becoming useless. It is in this sense the politics is said to be dead, and that history is said to be about to change into post-history where nothing ever proceeds and everything merely happens.

Now this struggle between science and political consciousness on the one hand, and what is now being called the "media" on the other hand is much more complex than here suggested. It may be said that in the beginning (in the middle of the 19th century) it looked as if science and politics were using the new type of images for their own purposes, and it was this why those images were invented. Photos were used to transcode events into scenes, in order to render those events available for memory, and thus for future usage. But even this is a simplification, because photos were taken to be an art form. Thus the new images began to blur the distinction between science, politics and art: photos were scientific products meant to serve politics and to be artistic. This blurring of distinctions is an important factor in the beginning de-politisation. Still: a 19th century observer may have held that technical images, although they need no public space to be received (photos may go directly from the camera into the drawer), still helped to strengthen political consciousness, for instance as illustrations in newspapers and texts of a similar order.

Still, even then some doubts as to the standing of those images was being voiced by careful observers. If I look at a photograph of a political event, I do not see it inserted in a process of cause and effect, but I see it as a distinct scene, and thus my political consciousness is being muffled. Of course: I can read the text which accompanies the photo, and thus regain political, critical understanding. But the fact is that images are existentially stronger than texts, and I do not use the text to understand the photo, but inversely use the photo to imagine the text, and thus become politically unconscious.

In the first half of this century this power of imagination over conception, of magic over history, began to be used by politicians. Historical events began to be manipulated so as to result in pictures, and thus provoke in their receivers a magical behavior in the interest of those politicians. Fascism for instance would have been impossible without such a use of photos and films. As the new images became technically ever more perfected, their political use for anti-political purposes became ever more common. Thus for instance it may be said that the Moon landing or the hijacking of airplanes had for their main purpose to be televised, and thus to provoke a specific behavior in the image receivers. This may be said to be the beginning of the end of history: it now was no longer a linear set of events, but now became the input of image production. And events accelerated ever more, because they precipitated themselves in the direction of images which were to give them an anti-historical, magical meaning. Naively, this was called the "power of the media," and especially of television. Naively, because the images were still being used for the sake of politics, although of politics which were no longer political in the traditional sense of that term.

And at present we are gathered here to try and understand what has happened during the Romanian revolution. If the reasoning here presented is correct, it may be said that the media took over. No longer did the politicians use the images for their own unpolitical purposes, (for the provocation of magical behavior in the receivers), but now the image producers themselves began to use the images for behavior manipulation. If that were a fact (and for curious reasons we cannot know whether it is a fact or not), than indeed we may talk of "media power". However, this poses a few as yet unanswerable questions. For instance: what political purpose can an image producer have, since he stands outside politics by his very practice? Does he use the behavior of the receivers of his images for the purpose of making yet other images, in a sort of "l'art pour l'art" in a post-historical situation? And then there is this question: the Romanian revolution was made by a technically immature television: what would happen if a similar process were set in motion by for instance the American television? Would that be an end to political decisions as we know them? In other words: is the Romanian revolution to be taken as a model for future communications earthquakes? This would indeed render the Romanian revolution a central event of this outgoing century, and an introduction to the new millenium that is waiting for us.

To render this hypothesis even more dramatic, consider the curious reason why we cannot know what really happened. The reason is that the word "really" has no sense where images are concerned. For the image, it is the imaginary which replaces the real, and it has no sense to ask whether in a Lascaux painting the horse is imagined or real. As it has no sense to ask whether the Temesvar bodies in the TV image are imaginary or real. If the images take over, every ontological problem will become a false problem. The concrete fact is what is in the image, and everything else becomes metaphysics. To ask political questions about the Romanian revolution may already now be metaphysics. We can know only what we see on TV, and if we ask people who were present, they also will only tell what they saw on television. Is this a return to pre-historical magic? No, because TV is a product of scientific, political reason. If this hypothesis is correct, we are entering not pre-historical, but post-historical magics.

Everything here said has an hypothetical character, nothing is being affirmed. I accepted the invitation to speak to you in the hope that you will show me the mistakes I am making. Because I dare not face a world were the media take over. It is not, as this symposium tries to say, that the "media are with us". I am afraid it is rather that we are with the media, because there is no other way for us to be, unless we are ready to withdraw into isolation. But of course: I myself, although I think about images, am an alphabetic creature. So you may disconsider everything I just said as so much antiquated, historical, political nonsense. If so, please tell me.