

The Future of Writing.

This article will not consider the problems concerning the future of teaching the art of writing in the face of the growing importance of non-literate messages in our surroundings, although these problems will become ever more important both in the so-called "developed" countries and in societies where illiteracy is still widespread. Instead it proposes to consider a tendency which underlies these problems, namely the tendency away from linear codes such as writing, and toward two-dimensional codes such as photographs, films and TV, which may be observed if one glances even superficially at the codified world that surrounds us. The future of writing, of that gesture which aligns symbols to produce texts, must be seen against the background of that tendency.

Writing is an important gesture, because it both articulates and produces that state of mind which is called "historical consciousness". History began with the invention of writing, not for the banal reason often advanced that written texts permit us to reconstruct the past, but for the more pertinent reason that the world is not perceived as a process, "historically", unless one signifies it by successive symbols, by writing. The difference between pre-history and history is not that we have written documents which permit us to read the second, but that during history there are literate men who experience, understand and evaluate the world as a "becoming", while in pre-history no such existential attitude is possible. If the art of writing were to fall into oblivion, or if it were to become subservient to picture-making, (as in the so-called "script-writing" in films), history in the strict sense of that term would be over.

If one examines certain Mesopotamian tiles one may see that the original purpose of writing was to facilitate the deciphering of images. These tiles contain images impressed upon them with cylindrical seals, and "cuneiform" symbols scratched into them with stylus. The "cuneiform" symbols form lines, and they obviously mean the image they accompany. They "explain", "recount", "tell" it. They do so by unrolling the surface of the image into lines, by unwinding the tissue of the image into the threads of a text, by rendering "explicit" what was "implicit" within the image. It may be shown through text analysis that the original purpose of writing, namely the trans-coding of two-dimensional codes into a single dimension, is still there: every text, even a very abstract one, means, in the last analysis, an image.

The translation from surface into line implies a radical change of meaning. The eye that decipheres an image scans the surface, and it thus establishes reversible relations between the elements of the image. It may go back and forth while deciphering the image. This reversibility of

the relations which prevails within the image characterizes the world for those who use images for the understanding of the world, who "imagine" it. For them all the things in the world are related to each other in such a reversible way, and their world is structured by "eternal return". It is just as true to say that night follows day as that day follows night, that sowing follows reaping as that reaping follows sowing, that life follows death as that death follows life. The crowing of the cock calls the sun to rise just as much as the rising sun calls the cock to crow. In such a world circular time orders all the things, "assigns them their just place", and if a thing is displaced it will be re-adjusted by time itself. Since to live is to displace things, life in such a world is a series of "unjust" acts which will be revenged in time. This demands of man to propitiate the order of the world, the "gods" it is full of. In sum: the "imagined" world is the world of myth, of magic, the pre-historical world.

The eye that deciphers a text follows its lines, and thus establishes the univocal relation of a chain between the elements the text is composed of. Those who use texts to understand the world, those who "conceive" it, mean a world with a linear structure. Everything in such a world follows from something, time flows irreversibly from the past toward the future, each instant lost is lost for ever, and there is no repetition. Each day is different from every other day, each sowing has its own characteristics, if there is life after death it must be a new sort of life, and the links of the causal chain cannot be exchanged one for the other. In such a world every human act is unique and man is responsible for it. The elements of such a world are, at least as a thesis, distinct from each other like the beads on a string, and they can be counted. On the other hand, the string which orders the beads, the "univocal flow of time", is what holds such a world together. In sum: the "conceived" world is the world of the religions of salvation, of political commitment, of science and of technology, the historical world.

One may well ask why, six thousand years ago, the effort was made to substitute the world of conception for the world of imagination, why writing was invented? One may ask this at present, precisely because a "new civilisation of images" seems to be dawning. The answer is, of course: because, six thousand years ago, some people thought that some images need explaining. Images are mediations between man and his world which has become inaccessible for him immediately. They are tools to overcome human alienation: they are meant to permit action within a world within which man no longer lives immediately, but which he faces. Cavé paintings are meant to permit hunting of ponies, cathedral windows to permit praying to God, road maps to permit motoring, and statistical projections to permit decision making. One must learn how to decipher these

images, one must learn the conventions which give them their meaning, and one may commit mistakes. For instance: it would be a mistake to decipher road maps as if they were cave paintings, (magics for hunting tourists), or as if they were projections, (proposals to build roads). The "imagination" which produces road maps is not the same as the "imagination" which produce cave paintings and projections. Explaining images with the help of texts may therefore be useful.

But there is yet another, and more profound, reason for the invention of writing and of historical consciousness. There is in images, like in all mediations, a curious inherent dialectics. The purpose of images is to mean the world, but they may become opaque for the world and cover it, ever substitute for it. They may come to constitute an imaginary world which no longer mediates between man and the world, but on the contrary imprisons man. Imagination no longer overcomes alienation, but becomes hallucinatory double alienation. No longer are such images tools, but man himself become a tool of his own tools, he "adores" the images he himself had produced. It is against this idolatry of images, as a therapy against this double alienation, that writing was invented. The early writers in our tradition, the Prophets for instance, knew this by committing themselves against idols and idol making. And so did Platon when he announced his hatred of what we now call the "plastic arts". Writing, historical consciousness, linear, rational thought was invented to save mankind from "ideologies", from hallucinatory imagination.

Now if we consider history to be the period of writing, which implies that history is a development of pre-history, a rendering explicit of what was implicit in pre-historical myths, we find that it is a slow and painful, not to say, tragic process. For most of its course historical consciousness was the privilege of a small élite, whilst the vast majority continued to lead a pre-historic, magico-mythical existence. This was so because texts were rare and expensive, and literacy the privilege of a class of scribes and litterati. The invention of printing cracked this clerical class open, and it made historical consciousness accessible for the rising bourgeoisie, but it was only during the Industrial revolution and through the public primary school system that literacy and historical consciousness may be said to have become common in the industrialized countries. But almost immediately a new kind of image, the photography, was invented, which began to threaten the supremacy of writing, and it now looks as if the days of historical, rational, conceptual thinking were counted, and as if we were approaching a new type of magico-mythical age, a post-historical image culture.

The reason why rational, conceptual thinking, (and acting), is an exceptional form of existence, why history seems to be a brief inter-

lude within the ageless "eternal return" of myth and magic, is that writing, just like images, is torn by an internal dialectics, and that it take in writing a more pernicious aspect than even in image making. The purpose of writing is to mean, to explain, images, but texts may become opaque, unimaginable, and they then constitute barriers between man and the world. The vectors of meaning of such texts turn around and point at their authors, instead of pointing at the world. This inversion of writing may be observed very soon in the course of history, but during the nineteenth century it becomes obvious: scientific texts, (which are the most characteristic form of writing, and therefore the "aim of history"), tend to become explicitly unimaginable, (one reads them erroneously if one tries to imagine their meaning), and scientific research "discovers" the rules which order its own texts, (mainly logic and mathematics), "behind" the phenomenon it is explaining. Such unimaginable explanations which mirror the structure of literate thought are existentially devoid of meaning, and in such a situation texts begin to constitute a kind of paranoid library walls which triply alienate man from his world. It is against the threatening lunacy of formal rationalism, of a meaningless existence amidst speculative, opaque explanations, that the rise of the new image culture must be seen.

However it would be an error to suppose that life amidst posters, traffic signs, TV programs, illustrated magazines and movie pictures will be like the life before the invention of writing, that illiteracy will be restored. The new type of images are unlike their pre-historic predecessors in that they are, themselves, products of texts, and that they feed on texts. They are products of history. The essential difference between a TV program and a tapestry is not, (as one might believe), that the one moves and talks whilst the other stands still and is mute, but that the TV program is the result of scientific theories, (texts), and that it needs texts, (for instance telegrams), for it to function. The new type of images is best called "techno-images", and the convention it is based on is best called "techno-imagination", if one is to distinguish the world of the future from pre-historic existence. No doubt: techno-images are a sort of image, and they therefore mean, like every image, a world of myth and of magic. But life in the threatening future will be mythical, magic, in a sense quite different from pre-historic myth and magic. This difference may be stated as follows: Pre-historic images mean the world, post-historic ones mean texts, pre-historic imagination tries to seize the world and post-historic imagination tries to be text-illustration. Therefore pre-historic myths mean "real" situations and post-historic myths will mean textual prescriptions, and pre-historic magic is meant to propitiate the world, whilst post-historic magic will be meant to manipulate people.

The easiest way to imagine the future of writing, if the present

trend toward a culture of techno-images goes on, is to imagine that culture as a gigantic trans-coder from text into image. It will be a sort of black box which has texts for input and images for output. All texts will flow into that box, (news about events, theoretical comments on this, scientific papers, poetry, philosophical speculations), and they will come out again as images, (films, TV programs, photographic pictures). Which is to say that history will flow into the box, and that it will come out of it under the form of myth and magic. From the point of view of the texts that will flow into the box this will be a utopian situation: the box is the "fullness of times", because it devours linear time and freezes it into images. From the point of view of the images which will come out of the box this will be a situation in which history will become a pre-text for programs. In sum, the future of writing is to write pre-texts for programs while believing that one is writing for utopia.

It is not important for the understanding of such a future of writing to try and whiten the black box, to try to understand how it works. The attempt to "de-mythify" the transcoding apparatus of the future is, of course, one of the most important challenges of "forecasting and planning for futures". But it is not indispensable where writing is the problem. One may disregard the wheels and screws which constitute the apparatus, (the countless "media", "programmers", and other human and quasi-human operators which compose it), and concentrate upon the images as they come out of the box left black, if one wants to see what it will mean to be a "writer" in such a future. In other words: it is not necessary to analyze the whole hopelessly complex system which stands behind a TV program, if one wants to understand the present crisis of rational thinking and acting. It is sufficient to analyze that program.

If one does so, one discovers the root of the present crisis: it is an inversion of the historical roles of reason and imagination. History may be said to be the attempt to submit imagination to the criticism of reason. Texts are meant to be critiques of images, and writing, as a code, is an analysis of surfaces into lines. Therefore, during history, imagination was the source of reason: the stronger the imagination, the greater the challenge to critical reason, and rich images permit more powerful linear explanations. There is something iconoclastic to historical reason: the better the icons against ^{it} advances the stronger is reason. But now writing is becoming subservient to image-making, reason to imagination, and one can observe this while analyzing any TV program. The better the reasoning, the richer becomes imagination. Planning has become a highly rational process at the service of highly irrational aims. The crisis is therefore not one of oblivion of the art of writing, of decadence of reason. It is one of prostitution of reason, of a "treason":

of the clerks". One may sum this up as follows: when it became obvious that reason may be a kind of paranoia, the clerks stopped being iconoclasts and became idolatrous, and present TV programs are among the results of that conversion.

TV programs are not, of course, the most impressive examples of what happens when reason betrays itself and serves imagination. Nazism is a better illustration. Still: it may be held that Nazism is one of the cruder advances in the direction of a future culture of images, or that the future techno-image culture will be Nazism perfected. This is why the battle-cry "l'imagination au pouvoir!", which shook so many intellectuals out of their dogmatic slumber in May '68, has such a dubious ring to it. No doubt: rebellion against paranoic reason, against meaningless explanations, is necessary and healthy. But intellectuals are writers. They are committed to clear and distinct concepts, to reason. They are the historical consciousness of their society. If they adhere to the claim that imagination should take over, the dignity of man as a free actor, which means "history", will be over.

It may be asked, however, what else writers can do in the immediate future but serve imagination? If all the texts are going to be devoured by the gigantic transcoder to become images, how can this trend be resisted? Is it not so that if a text deliberately resists the trend, it becomes even better fodder for the transcoding apparatus? Actions committed to history and against the apparatus, like monks burning themselves to death or students being killed in riots are even better pre-texts for TV programs than are deliberate scripts made by TV programmers. It may look as if the trend, in which writing is becoming subservient to image making, planning to irrationality, and reason to magic, is increasingly automatic and autonomous of individual decisions.

This would be a perniciously wrong interpretation of the present crisis of writing. The purpose of writing is to explain images, and the task of reason is to criticize imagination. This is doubly true in the present crisis. At present, the purpose of writing is to explain techno-images, and the task of reason to criticize techno-imagination. Of course: this implies a sort of qualitative jump onto a new level of meaning on the part of reason. In the past writing explained images of the world. It will have to explain illustrations of texts in the future. To write meant, in the past, to render opaque images transparent for the world. It will mean, in the future, to render opaque techno-images transparent for the texts they are hiding. In other words: reason, in the past, meant analysis of myths, and in the future it will mean des-ideologisation. Reason will still be iconoclastic, but on a new level.

Nothing guarantees that reason will be able to perform such a

jump, although there are some symptoms, (for instance cybernetics and structural analyses), which point in such a direction. It is perfectly possible that the general trend toward techno-images will become irresistible, and that reason will degenerate into the planning of programs. That to write will mean not to make "grams" but "programs", and that all texts will become pretexts. Thus, in fact, we may discern, at present, two possible futures of writing: it will either become a critique of techno-imagination, (which means: an unmasking of the ideologies hiding behind a technical progress become autonomous of human decisions), or it will become the production of pretexts for techno-imagination, (a planning for that technical progress). In the first alternative the future will be unimaginable by definition. In the second history in the strict sense of that term will come to an end, and we may easily imagine what will follow: the eternal return of life in an apparatus which progresses by its own inertia.