

The Mediterranean and images.

(For "Photographic Springtime", Barcelona 14-17/3/84)

An event crucial for the emergence of "history" in the strict sense has happened 3.500 years ago on the shores of the Mediterranean: the invention of linear, "alphabetic" writing. If "history" be defined as a sequence of acts which consciously aim at changing nature into culture, a sequence which permits to be counted, then the invention of linear writing may be seen as the very foundation of human historical conscience. Thanks to the invention of linear writing it became possible to count, (to enumerate and to report), it became possible to order phenomena into linear series, to transform scenes into events. Thus the Mediterranean is the cradle not only of Western history, but of historical consciousness of humanity.

Now the gesture of writing linear texts, (that historical gesture par excellence), is a gesture aimed against images. The commitment of litterati, of scribes, of clerks, of intellectuals is one in favor of the one-dimensionality of processes and against the bidimensionality of scenes. To write is to pluck phenomena from out of their scenic, (relational), context, in order to align them according to deliberately established mathematico-logical, syntactical, causal rules, and thus to be able to count them (to add them, to calculate them, to compute them). To write is a gesture which aims at tearing <sup>out</sup> the relational tissue of the scene, (of the "Sachverhalt"), and at ordering the elements thus loosened upon arrow-like threads: it is a gesture which produces chains, abacus, bead necklaces. To write is to unthread the tissue of scenes, to pick up the loose elements, and to align them upon new threads which might lead the elements onward. Now the gesture as I described it is what may be called the "explanatory" gesture. It explains that which was implicitly contained within the scene. The scenes which are to be explained by literate historical consciousness are scenes imagined. To write is thus to explain images. The original scribes were people who tore images up in order to explain them. They attacked the opacity of the images, in order to render them transparent. Their stylus was a weapon aimed against the image surface.

To understand the violence of this anti-image commitment of the original scribes, (at Ugarit, in Crete), and to evaluate that commitment in subsequent scribes, (in the prophets, in Platon, in present Islam), it is necessary to consider the power which images hold upon society. Images are surfaces meant to represent the world. They do so by abstracting time and depth from the world. They are bidimensional maps of the world. As such they model the perceptions, the evaluations, the understanding we have of the world, and the acts we execute in the world. However, owing to the dialectics inherent in every mediation, the images do not only represent the world, but they also substitute themselves for it. They thus become veils which obstruct our access to the world. Instead of mediating between ourselves and the world, they alienate us from it. It is precisely against this image alienation, against such an "idolatry", that the scribes were committed.

An image thus changed from map into shield inverts the vector of meaning which connects it to the world. It no longer means the world, but it is now the world which means the image. Society no longer uses images to grasp the world,

it now lives in the world for the sake of an image. Now what characterizes an image surface is that its elements relate circularly to each other. Each element gives a meaning to all the others, and it is rendered meaningful by all the other elements in its turn. This reversible relation, (the cyclical time of eternal return, and the density of meaning), is now being projected out from the image into the world. The world thus becomes a reversible context, and it is being experienced, evaluated and understood as such. Now this is mythical experience, evaluation and understanding. And the acts which follow from this is magics. Images thus rendered opaque project their own mythical and magical structure upon the world. And it is against this that the scribes are committed. Thus, after the invention of linear writing, the Mediterranean becomes the place of commitment against myth and magic.

This commitment assumes in early Judaism and in Pre-socratic philosophy the form later called "humanism". Linear writing replaces the circularity of eternal return, (characteristic of images), by irrevocable linearity, (characteristic of texts). Time becomes a flow which comes from the past and aims at the future, and every instant becomes a unique opportunity which may be lost for ever, (Heraclitus, Jesaiah). Thus comes about that feeling of urgency and drama which characterizes historicity. Historical existence is not so much characterized by the fact that everything may be explained rationally, (mathematically, logically, causally), but rather by the fact that man is held responsible for his decisions and actions. In sum: the revolution against images which began in the Mediterranean 3.500 years ago is not only an insistence upon conceptual reason as against magico-mythical imagination, but it is, in its essence, a proclamation of human freedom from the occult powers which, according to pre-historical thought, govern the destiny of man.

But this does not mean that the Mediterranean will become the stage of the victory of freedom over destiny, of reason over imagination, of texts over images. On the contrary: it will become the stage of the struggle between the two. And it is precisely that struggle which will distinguish the Mediterranean, (and those regions fertilized by it), from the rest of the world. Because the images and imagination do not surrender to texts and to reason: they resist, on the contrary, textual thought during the whole of Western history, during all those 3.500 years which stand between ourselves and the invention of linear writing. This struggle between imaginistic, (pre-historical, pagan), existence, and rational, (historical, judeo-christian, islamic) existence is the very dynamics which propels Mediterranean civilisation. In the course of that struggle a dialectics between imagination and reason, between image and text, will come about, by which both those opposed tendencies will reinforce each other. Imagination will become ever more conceptual, and reason ever more imaginative. This is so, because the texts, by explaining the images, challenge the images to illustrate the texts which explain them. As the concepts de-mythify imagination, they challenge it to imagine the concepts, and thus to re-mythify rational discourse. Western history as a whole may be seen as this struggle between text and image.

When Mediterranean history begins, society is divided into two levels: one of the litterati which are informed by texts and which live historically; and

the other of the illiterate mass which is informed by images and lives pre-historically. The literates govern, they "decide", and the illiterates sustain that history without any active participation. But there is constant feed-back between the two levels. The images of the illiterate level penetrate into the elite to be recoded into texts, and the texts which the elite elaborates are recoded into images, in order to penetrate the masses. We can observe this "text-image" interpenetration in all the mediterranean cultural phenomena previous to the emergence of Christianity.

That emergence is prepared by the coming about of two "sacred" texts: the Jewish Bible and Homer. Almost simultaneously the two forms of historical thought, (the Jewish one and the Greek one), are thus codified, and they will give rise to the two distinct ways to live historically: the one as a political and ethical commitment, the other as a pursuit of philosophy and science. Both those ways of life are opposed to magic and myth, the Jewish one more so than the Greek one. But, as may be seen in the Greek occupation of Palestine, and in the Jewish penetration of the Roman empire, they are also violently opposed to each other. Christianity may be seen as an effort to synthesize Jewish and Greek, (and also Latin) discourse, in opposition to the imagistic, magico-mythical paganism which prevails in the Mediterranean masses. But this synthesis will never be achieved, Mediterranean culture will never be perfectly integrated, and will continue to be torn by contradictions. There are three main factors which obstruct Mediterranean integration, and which are responsible for the explosive dynamism so characteristic of all things Mediterranean: the incompatibility between Judaism and Hellenism; the invasion of the Mediterranean by the Arabs and the Germans; and the irrepressible power of pagan imagery. It is the last factor which is of interest in the present context.

After having "conquered" the Mediterranean and adjacent regions, Christianity tries to submit the imagery and the myths of the masses to its linear discourse of individual salvation and of the collective Last judgement. To do so, Christianity absorbs the images, integrates them within its discourse, and re-interprets them in the sense of its discourse. We may observe this process very early in the Coptic images and in the texts of the Church Fathers, but the most glorious example of this effort is the Romanesque period where the capitels imagine biblical texts, and where the illuminures illustrate biblical manuscripts. However, by thus absorbing the images, Christianity itself becomes re-mythicized and re-magicized. Examples for this re-paganisation of Christianity are too numerous to have to be cited. In sum: the conquest of the Mediterranean by sacred texts provokes an explosion of images, of myths and of magic which characterizes the whole of the Middle ages. And many of those images will come from the very monasteries, those islands of literacy.

However, this dialectical process, by which magical imagination and discursive reason reinforce each other, will itself explode by the end of the Middle ages, during "Renaissance", (this phenomenon which has no parallel outside the Mediterranean). It is a complex explosion, and I shall only mention two factors which are of interest here: the "Reconquest" and the invention of printing. Islam, which had submitted large parts of the Mediterranean for centuries, had succeeded better than Christianity in repressing the images and in submitting them to Jewish and Greek texts.

Now that Islam was itself submitted to Christianity, a space opened itself for the re-emergence of repressed imagination. As for the invention of printing, it rendered the texts cheap, which in turn rendered possible the alphabetisation, and thus the historisation, of a new social level, the bourgeoisie. Thus the Renaissance is a simultaneous increase of both imagination and rational discourse. And the dialectic "image-text" attains a new level.

What happens is this: the texts, which are now accessible for a new type of litterati, (no longer monks, but bourgeois), absorb the almost unchained imagination, and the result is modern science and technology; and the images, which are now unfettered by textual censorship, do not participate in the linearly progressive process inaugurated by science and technology, and the result is "art" in the modern sense of that term. Thus Modern age is the period when, having divorced technology from art, it will become possible to eliminate images more efficiently than medieval Christianity did, by shutting them up in glorified ghettos of the type "museums". During Renaissance proper this tendency at marginalizing images is not yet neat: in Leonardo, for example, there are seeds for an "uomo universale" who imagines in function of reason and reasons in function of images. But during Baroque, (that first typically modern period), this modern tendency will crystallize: imagination will be absorbed by texts, (there is nothing more imaginative than are the scientific, technological, philosophical or theological texts of the Baroque), and the images, though luxuriant, will become marginal, "academic", degraded.

Now with the Baroque the slow transfer of the center of Western culture away from the Mediterranean and toward the north-west sets in. The Mediterranean, which had been for 3000 years the almost "natural" center, will become itself marginal, and the center will migrate through France, the Low countries, Germany, England toward somewhere in the United States. This migration toward protestantism, that anti-imaginistic Christianity which produces images "de luxe", and which concentrates its imagination in scientific and technological texts, suggests that the Mediterranean is incapable of digesting the divorce between technology and art. It suggests that the Mediterranean will wither when artisan and artist are no longer synonymous, and when technology, that textual imagination, becomes dominant. Apparently the Mediterranean can only be itself when imagination and reason, image and text, discourse and magic, face each other immediately, as they did in the Middle Ages. The Mediterranean will lose itself in a situation of progressive specialisation.

There are however symptoms which suggest that Modern age, (in the sense above), is about to expire. One of the phenomena which suggest this are the technical images, which overcome the divorce between technology and science, and of which photography is the first example. Photos are the result of scientific texts, (optics, chemistry, mechanics), and the products of technically advanced apparatus, but nonetheless they are images. Imagination and scientifico-technical reason contest each other and co-imply each other within the photos as they did within the illuminures, although on a new level. It is thus possible that this meeting of ours, which has Mediterranean photography as its subject, become an event which testifies to a new "Renaissance" of the Mediterranean, although in a way which it

is as yet difficult to understand fully. To be sure: this statement may provoke a sort of dizziness in our minds, because it contains so many undefined and undefineable implications. Let the subsequent discussion contribute to a better understanding of such an inebriating perspective.