

When words fail. International Colloquium, New York February 19, 82

1. Designing the Future. B. Technological Facts and Fictions (a) Industrial "Reconstruction".

One aspect of the present painful transition from the industrial to the post-industrial society is that words are indeed beginning to fail. Spoken and written words are no longer an adequate code for the transmission of many of the messages concerning the world and man's position in the world. For reasons some of which I shall mention. Other codes, and technical images are the most important ones, are taking over. This implies a radical change in the way we experience, conceive and evaluate the world of objects and of people. During the industrial period, which was one of more or less generalized alphabetisation, imagination was primarily the capacity to make pictures out of the concepts which texts transmitted. Images were primarily text illustrations. In the future it will be the other way round: conceptualisation will become the capacity to make concepts out of the images which the technical media like photos, TV, cinema and video transmit. Texts will become primarily image explanations. This reversal of the relation between imagination and conceptualisation is both a liberating factor and a grave danger. It is liberating from the fetters of discursive reason, and dangerous, because it is this kind of reason which keeps us from falling into barbarity.

Words are becoming an inadequate code for the transmission of scientific knowledge, precisely at the moment when science is becoming the only generally accepted source of knowledge. The verbally coded ideological discourses are being less and less trusted. Books, and the paper libraries which they constitute, are no longer very efficient stores for information. Logical and symbolical analysis have shown that verbal messages are inadequate for the articulation of concrete experiences. The same analysis has shown that imperatives, which means verbal value statements, are in fact incomplete, badly constructed statements. But those reasons for the failing of words, which I have enumerated at random, are not at the root of the present image revolution which the invention of photography has inaugurated.

Every mediation suffers from an internal dialectics. It is meant to bridge a gulf between separated entities, for instance between man and the world. But it tends to constitute a secondary barrier which separates the entities it is meant to link even more than before. When this secondary aspect of mediation prevails, it is no longer useful, and it becomes "alienating". This has happened to the image code about three thousand years ago: instead of mediating between man and the world, the images began to constitute a secondary world which became opaque to the world the images were meant to represent. The images were "adored" for their own sake. And this was the reason why writing was invented: to pierce the opacity of images, to explain them away, and to mediate between man and world. But the same thing happened to the texts themselves about two hundred years ago: they became themselves opaque to the world, and they began to be adored for their own sake. This is why photography and the other technical images were invented: to pierce the opacity of texts and to open the way toward the world.

Now every mediation has its proper structure. Images are surfaces, verbal discour-

se is linear. The world, as it is mediated, shows the structure of the mediation. The world mediated by images is twodimensional, a "magic" world. The world, mediated by verbal discourse, is onedimensional, a "historical" world. When writing prevailed over image making, concept over imagination, the world was de-mythified and became processual. A tissue of chains of cause and effect. This is what is called "historical consciousness". Now that technical images are beginning to prevail over verbal discourse, a similar restructuring of the world we live in is to be expected. This is the true "reconstruction" we are witnessing, it is truly revolutionary, and we are not yet capable of grasping its impact.

But the contemplation of photographs can help. It will prevent us from believing that we are about to submerge into pre-historical magic. Photos may be similar, in many respects, to traditional images: they emanate the same sort of fascination which makes us look at them for their own sake. But they are different from traditional images in two decisive respects: they are produced by an apparatus, and they are multipliable, and therefore almost worthless as objects. I suggest that if we analyse this distinctive aspect of photographs, and of the technical images in general, we shall discover more easily the "design of the future". We shall then be able to distinguish better between technological "facts" and "fictions". In other words: we shall be able to at least suspect the structure of the world to come, a world in which words will fail more and more, but will become ever more necessary.

Many are at present engaged in such an analytical effort. I myself am trying to do my bit by participating in two concrete experiments: One is at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Marseille, which will organize a Meeting on "Science, Technology and Creative Art" in October. The other is at the Sao Paulo Bienal, which will organize an exhibition on "Utopies" next year. I invite you to think about this, and I shall be glad to give further details to those who are interested.