

Habit: the true esthetic criterium.

English version of "Gewohnheit etc."

Everything that is new is terrible, not for being such and not otherwise, but for being new. And the degree of terror may be taken as a measure of novelty: the more terrible, the newer. In fact this statement is nothing but a translation of the Second Principle of Thermodynamics into English. It states that novelty is an improbable inversion of the general tendency toward ever greater probability, and that it is "terrifying" precisely because it is an inversion. But implicitly it also states that whatever is new must of necessity grow old (return toward the general tendency toward growing ever more probable). However, if the statement just quoted were nothing but a translation from mathematics into English (one among numerous possible translations of the Second Principle), its interest would be limited. The statement is radical, because it proposes quantifiable esthetic criteria: it states that mathematical categories may be applied to art criticism. It translates the Second Principle from an algorithm into an English sentence, in order to use that algorithm as a criterium to judge art by. This is indeed interesting and needs some consideration.

Whoever experiences the tremor of beauty (which means: every one of us) knows by intuition what is implied in the terror of newness. Rilke for instance says that we admire beauty so much because it despises with nonchalance to destroy us; each one of the angels is terror. But it is quite different to understand a thing by intuition (empirically) and to understand it exactly (theoretically). It is quite different to speak about terrible angels or about measurable amounts of noises. In this age of computation we begin to learn that exact theoretical understanding is not necessarily less "human" than is intuition, and that measurable amounts of noises are not necessarily less "beautiful" than are terrible angels. On the contrary: since noises are newer than angels, they are, according to Rilke himself, more beautiful than angels. This needed saying.

The word "new" means here objectively any situation which emerges from the tendency toward ever growing probability, and such an improbability may be exactly quantified by probability calculus. Thus an atom of Helium is four times newer than an atom of Hydrogene, or inversely: hydrogene is four times older than is helium. (This is what the carbon test is about.) And the word "new" means subjectively any situation which makes us tremble, because it is unexpected. Thus a cow with a horse's head (Russel's example) is newer than is an ordinary cow, because it makes us tremble more. The problem here is to have the objective and the subjective meaning of "new" coincide: to calculate exactly how much more we tremble in the sight of a cow with a horse's head. If this should succeed, exact art criticism would become feasible: any art work could then be subject to a carbon test. This is not yet feasible for the time being, but we may even now guess how the structure of such a future art criticism might look like. Probably as follows:

"Art" is any human activity which aims at producing improbable situations, and it is the more artful (artistic) the less probable the situation is it produces. Such a "new" situation is terrifying, if seen from the context it emerges from, because it is unexpected, and therefore it is experienced as something hateful, ugly. Thus "art" is that human activity which aims at producing hateful, ugly situations, situations which cause terror. Such a definition of "art" may recall romanticism, but it is nonetheless

quite unromantic. Because any future art criticism will start from the assumption that anything improbable will of necessity remerge within the tendency toward ever growing probability, and that therefore any deliberately produced improbable situations will of necessity grow more probable with time. In an esthetic context like this one it is more adequate to say "habit" instead of "probability", so that any future art criticism will start from the assumption that even the most improbable situations created by art will in the long run become habitual, no longer be experienced as being hateful and ugly. Thus future art criticism will be structured by the measuring of the various phases of ugliness as it grows habitual; it will measure exactly how one gets accustomed to ugliness, how the new grows old.

Obviously, "habit" here means the esthetic equivalent of "entropy" in physics. And as entropy is a basic category in physics (and in ontology in general) so habit must become a basic category in esthetics. "Art" is that which opposes habit but must of necessity return into habit. However in esthetics there prevails a different non-ontological climate than in physics. "Esthetic" means "capable of being experienced" and "habit" implies anesthetic; that which has become habitual is no longer experienced at all. Thus habit as a fundamental category in esthetics is a measuring rod for experiences, for perception. For instance: the less habitual the more it may be experienced (perceived), and the older the less existentially interesting. In other words: habit (ordinariness) as a future carbon test for esthetic evaluation. Or, to say the same thing in more acoustic and informatic terms: everything esthetic begins as a terrifying enormous noise ("big bang"), and as it grows more habitual ("redundant") it ends in an ever more silent whisper ("whimper"). Thus one succeeds not only to make coincide objectivity with subjectivity, and not only the sciences of nature with the sciences of culture, but even Eliot with Rilke.

The problem for such a future art criticism will be how to scale the measuring rod of habit. To solve it, informatics (that mirror of the algorithm for entropy) will become useful, but it will not be sufficient. The two extremes of such a rod are immediately obvious: the one is total noise, total improbability, meaning a situation which approaches the impossible; the other extreme will be total redundancy, almost total probability, meaning a situation which approaches tautology, the absence of information. Both extremes are unattainable, and they constitute the two horizons of the universe of esthetics. Close to the first extreme one will have to localize those works of art which which were previously absolutely unexpected and which thus transform our lives. Close to the second extreme one will have to localize the great mass of the habitual ordinary products which surround us day and night and which we hardly perceive. This is the easy part of the problem of scaling.

But the problem is not the the two extremes of the scale of values, but rather the fact that the scale will have to be dynamic. The esthetic phenomena will have to glide from one extreme to the other. It will become necessary to show that the value of works of art is not "eternal", but that all works tend to slide in the direction of habit. To put this differently: it must be shown that habit rises like a flood of slime along the scale of values and that it swallows all values. Such a

relativistic vision of the universe of the arts poses a problem, because it is inhabitual; we do not usually consider the so-called "great works" to be provisional and it is difficult for us to accept that they all tend to become redundant, (which is the case for instance with some compositions by Mozart). It is difficult to admit that the flood of habit is about to devour even Mozart's chamber music. Such a view is inhabitual, which means that that future art criticism is at the present moment felt to be detestable, ugly.

This dynamics of the scale of values demands that it be marked not with clear and distinct segments like a meter rod, but rather with zones which overlap, to permit that the sliding of esthetic phenomena be measured. Thus uppermost there should be a zone for the entirely inhabitual, for pure terror. Possibly within that almost invisible zone those phenomena should be located which we call "sacred". Such a zone for the consuming irradiation which the Ancients call "hierophania" (the appearance of the sacred), may also be named "wonder", since it points beyond the esthetic universe. From where we stand, down here where art criticism is located, it cannot be made out whether there are works of art which merit to be included in that zone, although we sometimes do speak of "wonderful" works of art.

Much more interesting (more graspable) however is the imprecise passage between that extreme zone and the one which we can just stand without cracking. It is that grey zone wherein we say of a Schubert melody that we can hardly stand it because it is too beautiful for us. Therein a few passages from Shakespeare and Dante, a few Chinese drawings, possibly some Hindu ragas should be located. It is that grey zone wherein terror turns into enthusiasm, ugliness into beauty. Or, to put it differently: wherein that thundering noise begins to turn information, because a minimum of redundancy has infiltrated. And there is yet another way to put it: this is that grey zone into which those artists have climbed who have attempted, at the risk of their lives, to utter that which is unutterable, to render audible that which is ineffable, to render visible that which is hidden.

If one slides along the scale of values somewhat more down to earth, one needs no longer to stammer and one can speak reasonably. This is because the grey zone of beauty grows ever more grey, and thus beauty changes imperceptibly into prettiness. Theoretically this process may be measured exactly, and informatics offers the tools to do so. The more convenient is the reception of the information contained within a work of art, the prettier is that work. If one applies the basic law of communication, which states that information and communication are inversely proportionate, one may measure how much a specific work communicates; the better it communicates, (the more redundancies it contains), the less it informs. In other terms: the easier it is to decipher a work of art, the prettier it is, and therefore the more successful. Thus one may measure (although indirectly) the sliding of a work from beauty toward prettiness by the success of that work. As it grows habitual, it deranges less and gets ever more pretty.

This sliding from beauty toward prettiness, from the unexpected toward habit, from the difficult toward the easy, comes finally up against a critical point,

at which it turns against itself. This critical point (this "catastrophy" in the precise sense of that term) may be exactly quantified. It is that point from where on the amount of redundancies exceeds the amount of noise, so as to render impossible the transmission of any information at all. Such products which transmit no information communicate perfectly and without any effort on the part of their receiver, (he may insert them without effort into his habits), but he can no longer perceive them. Since their reception is effortless, they cannot be experienced (they are covered up by habit). Such products "anesthetize" their receiver. Such products are called "Kitsch", and with them the sliding along the scale of values is over. Those products re-plunge into the ocean of habit, of redundancies, of entropy and they drive thanks to inertia toward "thermic death". By far the largest segment of the scale of values (as used by future art criticism) will have to be reserved for that black and noiseless zone of Kitsch.

However: the considerations so far advanced have not yet really touched the problem of habit, if taken to be the basic criterium for art criticism. Because it now looks as if the problem were to build a linear scale of values marked by zone to be called "ugly", "beautiful", "pretty" and "Kitsch", and to have the phenomena glide along the scale in order to evaluate them. It is true: such a scale permits the notion that values are provisional ("historic"), because phenomena tend of necessity to glide toward habit, and thus no "eternal" values can be stipulated. Still such a linear criticism is no longer feasible where habit is the criterium of judgment. The novelty about such a criticism, its terror, its ugliness is not so much the fact that it denies absolute values, but rather that it can no longer be linear, and thus confounds the upper with the lower, the sublime with the infernal.

There is a passage in Sartre where the circularity of the esthetic universe is clearly articulated. There a honey pot is described wherein we are merged, and wherein we spend our time licking that sweet stuff. Up to the point when we are taken by nausea with regard to the honey and to ourselves, and when we begin to vomit. The nausea which extirpates us from sweet habit into terror, which shows us our own emptiness as opposed to the excessive fulness of Kitsch as precisely what we may call our "humanity". We are hollow, the world is full, and the moment we become aware of it we begin to vomit that fulness from out of our hollowness. And this vomit is not only a sign for our becoming human, but it is also what we mean when we use the word "art". "Art" and "human" are synonymous and they both mean that we deny the fulness of the world (its being such). They both mean that we are not animals governed by habit, but men, meaning artists.

This is the central point of any future art criticism. That point at which habit turns into terror, Kitsch into what is ugly. It is too easy to say that we must imagine our scale of values to be a loop wherein Kitsch turns ugliness again and then glides on from beauty to prettiness to return into Kitsch. This is too easy because such a loop is the esthetic equivalent of the negatively entropic epicycles in physics and in cosmology which sit upon the straight line that points at entropy. And this will not do in the realm of esthetics. Because if all art is motivated by

that nausea caused by habit, by ordinariness, by vulgarity, how can we account for that quite different terror which shakes us when we face the totally unexpected? Is there a dialectics which includes both extremes (the extreme probability and the extreme improbability), and which has those two extremes coincide and then fall apart? Is there a dialectics which includes both the true and the false, the un-art and the art, and which has both coincide and then fall apart? This is the kind of question which cannot be faced without the danger to fall into religiosity, or even into mysticism. It is, to be sure, an unavoidable kind of question, but not a "good" one.

Therefore this is where these reflexions must be interrupted. In spite of that interruption they may have resulted in something useful. Namely in the discovery that a quantifying art criticism will become possible in the future, because it will become necessary to abandon the notion of eternal unchangeable values. Such a quantifying criticism, which will use both physical and informatic theories, will measure all art works with a loop which will contain zones marked "ugly-beautiful-pretty-Kitsch-ugly", and the measurement will grasp the slide of art works toward habit. Thus it will answer questions of the type: "how long will this specific work remain within the zone of beauty, before it will slide into pretiness, as it is being licked by habit?" Those may not be very grandiose questions and answers, if compared to those formulated by present day criticism, but they spring from the experience of terror in the face of the totally unexpected and of the totally habitual. In other terms; it may be that in the future art and art criticism will again, like during the Middle Ages, be dedicated "ad maiorem Dei gloriam", although obviously under quite different presumptions.