

New meanings.

(Text of a talk to be held at the BBC, London).

The purpose of the following considerations is to argue that the meaning of the messages irradiated by what is generally, though wrongly, called the "audiovisual media", is not obvious and must be learned by the receivers. That one must learn how to decipher what comes out of a TV box, just as much as one must learn how to decipher what is printed on the page of a newspaper. In other words; it will be argued that the ease with which even small children seem to "understand" what they see and hear while watching TV, listening to the radio, looking at a cinema screen or at posters, is misleading. I believe that such a type of argument is important, because it seems to me that the future holds basically two, and only two, virtualities, as far as the search for the meaning of the world and of life in it is concerned: either we shall learn how to master the new codes which irrigate us constantly with misleading information, or we shall lead lives programmed by those who manipulate these codes, that is meaningless lives within a world become devoid of meaning.

To render such a Manichaistic statement somewhat less difficult to swallow, let me consider briefly what happens while one watches TV. There is a box among the furniture of a sitting room, and that box has a window-like glass and a few buttons. If the buttons are adequately handled, the box will emit cinema-like images and sounds. The handling of the buttons is easy, any child can do it, but the reasons why it works are complex and not even specialized technicians can fully explain them. Now such a type of systems is called "functionally simple and structurally complex", and it is characterized by the fact that it is "magic": one seems to master it, but does not know why, and thus falls victim to it.

Let me add that the TV box seems to occupy the place previously taken by the mother in the family or the teacher in the class room: it emits information, and the receivers sit in a semicircle around it to receive the information. But of course it would be wrong to believe that the TV box is a magical substitute for a mother or a teacher. It is not really an emitter, (like mother or teacher), but the tip of one of the innumerable rays which irradiate from an emitter. The receivers which sit in the sitting room do not really form a semicircle around it, (as they do in the family and the class room), but they form a segment of a gigantic circle around the invisible emitter. Thus the TV box does not really substitute for mother or teacher: it destroys structures of the type "family" and "class room", and it establishes

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a new type of structure instead. A type which is not unlike Roman amphitheatres, only much larger, and thus may be called a "cosmic circus".

Now it is in such a situation of a magical cosmic circus that the images and sounds which emanate from the box reach the receiver. He takes them to mean scenes of the outside world. That is; he makes himself believe that the box is a window, or a telescope, or a periscope, through which he can see the world outside, or the world far away, or the world above the surface. Although, of course, he knows better. He knows that the images and sounds do not penetrate the sitting room coming in from "the world", (as they do in the case of windows), but coming in from an emitter which manipulates them. That they therefore do not mean scenes of the world as do window views, (that they are not "symptomatic" of the world), but that they mean what the emitter wants them to mean, (that they are "symbols" of the world). The receiver knows this, not only because somebody told him so: he can see that it is so. The images shine in cathodic light, which is one of the very rare forms of light which do not stem, even indirectly, from the sun, and therefore have something unnatural, artificial, about them. Still, even in the face of such evidence to the contrary the receiver makes himself believe that the box is a kind of window open toward the world.

This "bad faith" of his is the worse, if one considers how true windows work. They are holes in walls which permit world visions, but they are meaningful only if they are synchronized with other holes in walls, called "doors", and which permit penetration of the world. Windows are instruments to see how things are, and doors are instruments to change the world on the basis of window visions. Windows are places of theory to be applied in door praxis. But TV boxes have no doors to them, they are "doorless menads". The world they show is impenetrable for the receiver, the visions they permit cannot be applied, they offer impracticable theories, in sum: as windows they are "irresponsible" in the true sense of that term.

Although the receiver knows that the TV box is no true window, he wants to believe that it is one, because he wants to participate in the magical cosmic circus. But even so it is not easy to maintain that fiction. The question: "what do the images and sounds mean?" pops up, even if the receiver has decided to make them mean "the world". In such instances the box itself will provide the receiver with a key to the meaning. Among the images which issue from the box there is one, called "announcer", and it announces that the following images will mean "facts", (for instance news), "fiction", (for instance TV plays), or "behavior models", (for instance commercials). The images the selves

do not permit such an ontological distinction between what "is", what "may be", and what "ought to be", precisely because they are symbols, not symptoms. But of course: the key to the meaning which the box provides is misleading. The announcer may be an actor impersonating an announcer, and there is no way in which the receiver might discover this. Thus, having decided that the box is a window, the receiver has relinquished his capacity to ask what the message he is receiving means; he has abandoned his critical faculty and condemned himself to alienation.

But such is a very convenient, even highly pleasurable, alienation. Having decided that he does not care whether what he sees and hears is fact, fiction or commandment, he can now sit down and consume the message, become a true "receiver". The world now concerns him only in as far as it comes in through the box, and whatever may happen "behind the box" becomes "meta-physical" for him. Thus, precisely because he has decided that the box is a window, he has rendered it opaque to what stands behind it, namely the emitter and the manipulation of meanings that go on within the emitter. Having thus transformed, through "bad faith", the emitter into a metaphysical entity, the receiver can now enjoy irresponsibility: consumed sensations. In fact: the acceptance of the box as a window implies the abandon of active life in favor of one of passive contemplation.

Before considering this change of existential climate, from action to passion, from production to consumption, from participation in dialogues to reception of discourses, in sum: from historical to post-historical existence, let us glance at the TV box, no longer from the point of view of the receiver, but from the bird's eye view. The box will then be seen as being attached to an antenna, and a forest of antennas will be seen to grow out of the reefs of our cities, a forest of tentacles which our cities advance into the electro-magnetic ocean on the bottom of which they know to lie without being able to imagine this. Now these antennas are so many mouths through which the cities suck in the unimaginable, and the boxes attached to them are devices to transform that unimaginable into sound and image. The boxes are thus seen to be apparatus which transforms unimaginable, but conceivable processes into easily imaginable but inconceivable (because wrongly deciphered), processes, (namely: electromagnetic waves into TV programs). Such a point of view has the advantage to render visible the ideology which hides behind the TV box, namely: in a world become too highly conceptual to still be imaginable, (in a world composed of electromagnetic fields and the like), the best way to live is to try and no longer conceive and be content with easily imaginable programs. Thus the TV box and its antenna are seen to be instruments of an ideology which advocates imaginative, uncritical thinking as against conceptual critical thinking, and which advocates this for the masses, to be sure, not for the elite that manipulates the box and its antenna.

That the meaning of the images and sounds which issue from the box is indeed a highly conceptual context, (and not the world of scenes), becomes obvious under the following considerations: The receiver makes himself believe that the box makes his "politically conscious", because it connects him with the public realm. The opposite is the truth. Re-translation is that motion by which one steps from the private into the public sphere, by which one "publishes"; it is a "door motion". The box works the other way round: it permits "public figures" to penetrate the private sitting room of the receiver; the receiver knows the Prime Minister intimately and calls him by his Christian name; and the way in which he does not "really" go on in Zaire, but in the sitting room of the receiver. But of course, both the Prime Minister and Zaire are only symbols, made private, and the receiver has no influence on them; inquiries of his intimate knowledge of them. Thus the box not only de-politicizes it pre-emptively the public sphere of any political content for the receiver. Which shows that the images and sounds do not mean the political scene at all, (contrary to what the receiver wants to believe); but that they mean some elaborate concepts concerning that scene, concepts which have been ideologically coded into images and sounds within the emitter. If one clings to the discovery that the images and sounds of TV do not mean scenes, but concepts, and that one misreads them if one takes them to mean scenes, the attention now turns away from the box toward the emitter. Because it is there that the images and sounds are "produced", namely given their meaning. Such an activity which gives meaning to some thing, (in this case to images and sounds), is called "coding". It makes symbols out of things, and it orders them according to specific rules into codes. The consideration of how TV programs are coded in values both technical and ideological aspects which exceed by far the scope of the present talk, but it is not necessary to go into this here. It is sufficient to say that emitters are re-coders; they decipher messages they receive, and translate them into a new code. In a strict sense information does not really originate within them; it flows into them from outside. But in fact it does originate within them, because as every translator knows information depends to a high degree on the code in which it is formulated; a movie does not carry the same information as does the book it is based on, nor does one decipher the meaning of Mozart's "Figaro" if one reads its libretto.

But the trans-coding which goes on within TV emitters is even more radical than these two examples suggest, because it consists in translations from concepts to images, from one form of thought into another. In fact TV emitters are apparatus which devour conceptual think-

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ing and veridical image thinking. To understand this process, it is necessary ^{to ask} what the term "apparatus" means in this case. It means a complex composed of men and instruments which are closely synchronized. Now such is a truly revolutionary situation. In the past, there existed only two relations between man and tool: either the tool served man, and thus "liberated" him from labor, or man served tool, and thus became "enslaved" by the tool or by him who possessed it. In fact it may be held that history is a series of variations on the theme "who owns what tool and who should own it?". But within an apparatus this becomes a meaningless question, which is one of the reasons why Marxist analysis does not seem to be adequate to the present situation.

The men within an apparatus, (let us call them "operators"), do not own the instruments they work with nor are they owned by them. There is in fact no "owner", unless it be the apparatus itself. Thus the tools neither "liberate" nor "enslave" the operators: they are so to speak welded to them. A cameraman is nothing without a camera, and a camera nothing without its operator. They are reversible factors of a relation, both are variables and none is constant. Operators are not artisans or artists in the sense that they master their tools, nor are they proletarians in the sense that they are mastered by them; they are a new type of man. And the apparatus is both more than human; it contains more than men, and less than human: it contains tools which are subhuman simulations of men.

It is this kind of both superhuman and subhuman complex which devours concepts and vomits TV programs. No wonder that the receiver does not want to think about this monster while watching TV. But if one takes a cybernetical attitude toward those monsters, if one disregards their inner complexities and considers them to be "black boxes", that is if one only considers the input and output of TV emitters, the problem becomes easier to handle. One can then see that what goes into the "black recorder" is information concerning events, and what comes out is a program. The basic difference between the two codes is this: conceptual information, like the events it relates, is composed of unique, irrevocable and irrepetitable instances, while TV programs may be repeated over and over. Conceptual information concerning the Zaire war is, like the event it reports, unique and may be dated, whilst you may watch the program about it three times a day, or, if you have a video-cassette, any time you want to. Now this is of course the difference between conception and imagination, between one-dimensional and two-dimensional coding. The first one means the universe of historical events, and the second one means the universe of eternal repetition. Thus what TV emitters do is to re-code history into myth, unique acts into reversible rituals, and TV images and sounds do not mean the universe of historical events, but a mythical universe meant to cover up the first one.

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It should be obvious even from this sketchy and unsatisfactory description, however, that the mythical universe meant by TV programs cannot be of the same type as was the mythical universe of the Ancients, that the Prime minister cannot be a mythical figure like Hercules and the Zaire war a mythical ritual like the war of the Titans. This should be obvious because, however the mythical world of the Ancients "came about", it certainly had not been produced by an apparatus which uses history as the code from which it derives mythical programs. In other words; the mythical universe meant by TV programs is of a different order from "original" myths, it is a post-historical universe, whilst the "original" myths were pre-historic. It is therefore wrong to compare Miss Bardet to Aphrodité or Mr. Nixon to Hermes; Aphrodité and Hermes are "models of experience", (Gods), while Miss Bardet and Mr. Nixon are products of some highly abstract, elaborate and ideological concepts codified into image and sound within an apparatus. Or, to put it another way: Aphrodité lived "once upon a time", the historical Miss Bardet lives in the 20th century, and the Miss Bardet of TV programs lives "on and on".

The eternal repetibility which characterizes TV codes, (and which is very similar, though not quite identical with what Nietzsche had in mind when speaking of the Superman's will to power), means the end of history not only because it bends the straight line of historical time into a circle, but also because it creates a new sort of memory, a kind of immortality of the second order. The images and sounds of TV ^{are} registered on video tapes practically for ever, the apparatus does not forget them. And what goes for TV goes equally for all apparatus: the codes used within the Police department and the Office of Internal Review, in International Banks and in the Educational Systems are just as immortally registered on tapes as they are in TV emitters. Now this explains the lack of memory of what is called the "public opinion": if all of us are immortal within the memory of the Police department and the Office of Internal Review, why should any one try and remember anything at all, especially if you can switch on the TV box which can remind you of anything you have forgotten? Post-historical existence is loss of memory just as much as passive consumption of programs, and the images and sounds of TV mean that you can permit yourself the luxury not to remember.

In this talk the TV code was given only as one among many possible examples of codes with "new meanings". Other examples are the traffic code, the codes of computers, or the codes of supermarkets. This is why I said that the term "audiovisual media" is wrong and misleading; it is not because some of the new codes consist of symbols which can be seen and heard that they carry a new sort of meaning, but because they are produced within apparatus in order to program us for a passive and immemor-

able post-historical existence. The new meanings of these codes are post-historical situations, myths of the second order. They mean a world within which there can be no action, only contemplation, no responsibility, only enjoyment, no dialogue, only an amorphous communion. In short: they mean Paradise on Earth, the Fullness of Time, the Second Coming, theirs is an apocalyptic, chiliastical meaning. Every time you switch on your TV box, look at a poster or watch a red traffic light go off and on, you can see that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, and it is precisely this abandon of historical consciousness and this expectation of immediate fulfillment that is called "mass culture".

I said that I do not believe Marxist analysis to be a convenient tool for the understanding of this situation. It does not permit us to learn how to decipher the meaning of the new codes, because it takes it for granted that they serve the interests of the "owners of apparatus". It takes for granted that the new codes program us for post-historical existence because the programmers are interested in having us live that way, and that to decipher the new codes is to unmask this hidden intention. But such an analysis misses the point altogether, which is precisely that there are no human owners to the superhuman and subhuman apparatus, and that decisions are not taken somewhere "behind" the apparatus, but within it. But there is another, even deeper reason why such an analysis fails to grasp what all this is about: it recommends action against the apparatus to prevent them from establishing a post-historical totalitarian society around them, while every action tends to strengthen the apparatus instead of endangering them; revolutions do not threaten TV emitters, they supply them with raw material for TV programs.

Actions are typically historical forms of existence. History is a series of acts, a "drama", and historical man is an actor, "dramatis personae". Before the coming about of apparatus, action was the attempt to change the world for it to be as it ought to be, (it was the attempt to "make a value real"). But new action is a pretext of a program: no longer are we actors on the stage of history, but movie actors within a colossal superproduction of a film to be watched on a cinema screen. Whether we burn ourselves alive like Vietnamese monks, whether we step on the surface of the Moon, whether we discover a new infra-nuclear particle or whether we create a new work of art; all these acts of ours will be recorded within an apparatus into a program and thus become immortal. In fact: this is the ultimate purpose of each and every action at present: to be consumed over and over again by receivers. Actions are at present nothing but raw material for myths of the second order, and Ché Guevara is a movie actor in a film "about" revolution. He is what the apparatus against which he is committed feed on.

To say that we are being programmed by impersonal apparatus through codes manipulated on the basis of impersonal, almost automatic decisions, and that these codes mean a universe of myths which serve no human purpose although they are obviously artificial, sounds suspiciously like surrender. It sounds suspiciously like saying that there is no use in trying to learn how to decipher the meanings of the new codes, since nothing can be done about them. The very opposite is, of course, the purpose of the present reflection. The thesis I want to defend is this: if it is true that the apparatus serve no human purpose, that even those who believe that they are in control are in reality merely operators, and if it is true that the apparatus program us with information the meaning of which is not obvious and that their deciphering must be learned, it follows that if only one could master the key to the new codes and thus look somehow through the immense complexity of the apparatus, one might take possession of them and submit them to human purpose.

Such a thesis is less utopic than it sounds at first hearing. It maintains, in fact, that it is a better strategy to try and understand the new monsters which inundate us with misleading information from morning till evening and thus induce us to alienate ourselves from events than to try and strike blindly against them. It maintains that it is wiser to institute schools for communication studies than to rebel against mass communication, and that it is a better idea to study cybernetics than to "think small". The reason why it maintains this is that the history of Western civilisation, (and possibly history "tout court"), has produced the present situation for better or for worse, and that it is wiser to try to use it for the better rather than try to do away with it.

Now what I propose will not give rise to general enthusiasm. It is not very glamorous to recommend tedious studies instead of "direct action", especially if it is so seducing to let everything be as it is and enjoy the programs. It is not very glamorous to recommend the study of communications theory instead of joining a protest march or watching an "X"-rated movie. But I firmly believe that either shall we, (first some of us, later the majority of us), learn what the new meaning of the symbol about us is, (and this is a tedious apprenticeship), or Kingdom of Heaven will indeed be established on Earth, and nothing will ever happen.

Of course: this involves a choice, (possibly the last choice within our civilisation). Does one prefer a life of freedom, or one of enjoyment? I am quite unable to state the reasons why I prefer the first alternative, and this incapacity of mine is not only mine: it is a symptom of the crisis we are in. Those who say that present TV programs are fine as they are now are just as "right" as I am. This talk proposes an alternative to the present fine TV programs.