

The 'Neo' - or Anachronistic Resurrection

As Marx said of Napoleon III, sometimes in history the same events occur twice: the first time with real historical import; the second merely as caricatural evocation of the event, as a grotesque avatar of it - sustained by a *legendary reference*. Cultural consumption may thus be defined as the time and place of the caricatural resurrection, the parodic evocation of what already no longer exists - of what is not so much 'consumed' as 'consummated' (completed, past and gone). The tourists who journey by coach to the far north to re-enact the Gold Rush, hiring Eskimo tunics and clubs to provide some local colour, are people who are consuming; they are consuming in ritual form something which was a historical event, and has been forcibly reactualized as legend. In history, this process is called restoration: it is a process of the denial of history and the anti-evolutionist resurrection of earlier models. Consumption, too, is thoroughly imbued with this anachronistic substance. In its service stations in winter, Esso offers you its log fire and barbecue kit. This is a characteristic example: it is the masters of petrol, the 'historical liquidators' of log fires and their entire symbolic value, who serve these back up to you as the Esso neo-log-fire. What is consumed here is the simultaneous, combined, collusive enjoyment of the automobile and the defunct prestige of everything whose death-knell the automobile sounded - these latter now resuscitated by the automobile! We ought not to see this as mere nostalgia: it is the historical and structural definition of consumption that, by way of this 'lived' level, it *exalts signs on the basis of a denial of things and the real*.

We have already seen how, through mass communications, the pathetic hypocrisy of the minor news item heightens with all the signs of catastrophe (deaths, murders, rapes, revolution) the tranquility of daily life. But this same pathetic redundancy of signs is visible everywhere: the glorification of the very young and the very old, the front-page treatment for blue-blood weddings, the mass-media hymning of the body and sexuality - everywhere we see the historical disintegration of certain structures celebrating, as it were, under the sign of consumption, both their real disappearance and their caricatural resurrection. The family is dissolving? It is glorified. Children aren't children any more? Childhood is turned into something sacred. The old are alone, sidelined? A collective show of sympathy for the aged. And, even more clearly, the body is glorified precisely as its real possibilities are atrophying and it is increasingly harassed by the system of urban, professional and bureaucratic control and constraints.

Cultural Recycling

It is now one of the characteristic dimensions of our society, in so far as one's professional expertise, individual career path and social position are concerned, to engage in retraining – in what is known, in French, as *le recyclage*. It is now the case that everyone who does not wish to fall behind, be left on the shelf or lose their professional standing must 'update' their knowledge, their expertise – in short, their practical range of skills – on the labour market. This is a notion heard particularly in connection with technical staff and also, more recently, with teachers. It claims, therefore, to be scientific and based on the continual advance of knowledge (in the exact sciences, sales techniques, teaching methods, etc.), to which all individuals should normally adapt if they are to remain 'up to speed'. In fact, the term 'recycling' prompts a number of thoughts: it inevitably brings to mind the 'cycle' of fashion: in that field, too, everyone must be 'with-it' and must 'recycle themselves' – their clothes, their belongings, their cars – on a yearly, monthly or seasonal basis. If they do not, they are not true citizens of the consumer society. Now, it is clear that there is no continual progress in these fields: fashion is arbitrary, transient, cyclical, and adds nothing to the intrinsic qualities of the individual. It does, however, impose thorough-going constraints, and the sanction it wields is that of social success or banishment. We may ask ourselves whether the 'recycling of knowledge', under its scientific cover, does not conceal this same kind of accelerated, obligatory, arbitrary change as fashion, and does not bring into play at the level of knowledge and persons the same 'built-in obsolescence' as the cycle of production and fashion foists on material objects. In that case, we should have here not a rational process of the accumulation of scientific knowledge, but a non-rational social process of consumption, indissociable from all the others.

Medical recycling: the check-up. Bodily, muscular, physiological recycling: Le Président! for men; diets and beauty care for women; holidays for everyone. But we can (and *must*) extend this notion to much broader phenomena: the very 'rediscovery' of the body is a corporeal recycling; the 'rediscovery' of Nature, in the form of a countryside trimmed down to the dimensions of a mere sample, surrounded on all sides by the vast fabric of the city, carefully policed, and served up 'at room temperature' as parkland, nature reserve or background scenery for second homes, is, in fact, a recycling of Nature. That is to say, it is no longer an original, specific presence at all, standing in symbolic opposition to culture, but a *simulation*, a 'consommé' of the signs of nature set back in circulation – in short, nature recycled. If we have not yet reached this point everywhere, it is nonetheless the current trend. Whether we speak of countryside planning, conservation or environment, it is, in every case, a question of recycling a nature which is itself doomed. Like events, like knowledge, Nature is governed in this system by the *principle of being up-to-the-minute*. It has to change functionally, like fashion. It provides an *ambience* and is therefore subject to a

replacement cycle. This is the same principle as is today invading the occupational field, where the values of science, technique, skill and competence are giving way to 'recycling' – that is to say, to the irresistible pressures of mobility, status and the career *profile*.²

This principle of organization governs all 'mass' culture today. What all the acculturated receive is not culture, but *cultural recycling*. (Ultimately, not even the truly 'cultured' escape this, or at least they will not.) They get to be 'in the know', to 'know what's going on'; they get to update their cultural rig-out on a monthly or yearly basis. They get to submit to that low-intensity constraint which is perpetually shifting like fashion and is the *absolute opposite* of culture conceived as:

- 1 an inherited legacy of works, thought and tradition;
- 2 a continuous dimension of theoretical and critical reflection – critical transcendence and symbolic function.

Both these dimensions are also denied by the cyclical subculture, made up of obsolescent cultural ingredients and signs, by the *up-to-the-minute* cultural scene, which runs from kinetic art to weekly encyclopaedias – recycled culture.

We can see that the problem of the consumption of culture is not, properly speaking, linked to cultural contents. Nor is it connected with the 'audience for culture' (the eternal false problem of the 'vulgarization' of art and culture to which both the practitioners of 'aristocratic' culture and the champions of 'mass' culture fall prey). The decisive factor is not whether millions or only a few thousand partake of a particular work, but that that work, like the car of the year, or nature in parklands, is condemned to be merely an ephemeral sign because it is produced, deliberately or otherwise, in what is today the universal dimension of production: the dimension of the cycle and recycling. Culture is no longer made to last. It keeps up its claim to universality, of course, and to being an ideal reference, doing so all the more strongly for the fact that it is losing its semantic substance (just as Nature was never glorified quite so much before it was everywhere laid waste). However, in its reality, and by its mode of production, it is subject to the same pressure to be 'up-to-the-minute' as material goods. And we must stress once again that this does not have to do with the *industrial dissemination* of culture. The fact that Van Gogh is exhibited in department stores or that Kierkegaard sells 200,000 copies is of no matter here. What affects the *meaning* of the works is the fact that *all significations have become cyclical*. In other words that, through the very system of communication, a particular mode of succession and alternation has been imposed upon them, a combinatorial modulation which is precisely that of hemlines and television programmes (cf. below, 'Medium is Message'). And also the fact that, given this situation, culture, like the pseudo-event in 'public information', like the pseudo-object in advertising, can be produced (and virtually is produced) *out of the medium itself*, out of the code of reference. Here we find that same logical procedure we come upon in simulation models:³ or see at work in gadgets, which are *merely a play on forms and technology*.

Ultimately, there is no longer any difference between 'cultural creativity' (in kinetic art, etc.) and this ludic/technical play of combinations. And no difference between 'avant-garde creations' and 'mass culture' either. The latter tends to combine stereotyped themes and (ideological, folk-lore, sentimental, moral, historical) contents, while the former combines forms and modes of expression. But both play primarily on a code, and on a calculation of market share and amortization. Moreover, it is curious to see how the system of literary prizes, currently despised in the world of letters for its academic decrepitude (from a universal standpoint, it is, in fact, stupid to award a prize to *one book a year*), has gained a remarkable new lease of life from its adaptation to the functional cycle of modern culture. The regularity of these prizes, which in other ages was absurd, is now compatible with the present vogue for recycling, with the focus of cultural fashion on the present. In the past, these prizes marked out a book for posterity, and it was faintly ridiculous. Today, they mark out a book for topical interest, and it works. They have found their second wind.

The *Tirlipot* and the Quiz Machine, or the Lowest Common Culture (LCC)

The mechanics of the *tirlipot* game consist, in theory, in seeking out the definition of a verb by question-and-answer methods (*tirlipot* [to 'whatsit'] is the equivalent of the 'thingamajig', a floating signifier for which, by selective restitution, the specific signifier is to be substituted).⁴ It is, then, in theory, an intellectual learning process. It is evident, however, that, with a few rare exceptions, the contestants are incapable of asking real questions: they find questioning, probing or analysing a nuisance. They start out from the answer (a particular verb which they have in mind) and deduce the question from it. This is, in fact, the interrogative form of the dictionary definition (e.g. 'is to *tirlipot* to put an end to something?'). If the compère says 'Yes, in a way' or even, simply, 'Perhaps ... what do you have in mind?', then the automatic reply comes back 'to finish' or 'complete'. What we have here is precisely the approach of the handyman trying one screw after another to see if they fit, a rudimentary exploratory method based on trial-and-error, with no rational investigation involved.

With *the quiz machine* we find the same principle. There is no learning. A minicomputer asks you questions, offering a range of five replies to each. You choose the right answer. Time counts. If you respond instantaneously, you get maximum points and are a 'champion'. This is not, therefore, thinking time, but reaction time. The machine does not bring intellectual processes into play, but merely immediate reaction mechanisms. You must not weigh up the proposed answers or deliberate: you have to see the right answer, register it like a stimulus on the same optomotor lines as the photo-electric cell. To know is to see (cf. the Riesmannian 'radar' which allows you to move about among other people, maintaining

or cutting off the contact, immediately selecting positive and negative relationships). Most of all, there must be no analytical thinking: this is penalized by a lower points total due to the time wasted.

If these games do not have a learning function (as is always argued by the programme-makers and the mass-media ideologues), what in fact is their function? In *tirlipot*, it is clearly participation: the content is of no importance. For the contestant, it is the pleasure of occupying the airwaves for 20 seconds, long enough to have one's voice heard, to mingle that voice with the compère's, to hold his attention by striking up a brief dialogue with him and, through him, to strike up magical contact with that warm and anonymous multitude, the public. It is clear that most people are not at all disappointed when they get the answer wrong. They have had what they wanted: *commun-ion* – or, rather, that modern, technical, aseptic form of communion that is *communication*, 'contact'. What marks out the consumer society is not, in fact, the much deplored absence of ceremonies – the radio game is a ceremony just as much as the mass or primitive sacrifice – but the fact that ceremonial communion is no longer achieved by way of bread and wine, which can be seen as flesh and blood, but through the mass media (which are not just the messages, but the whole broadcasting set-up, the network, the station, the receivers and, of course, the programme-makers and public). In other words, *commun-ion* is no longer achieved through a *symbolic medium*, but through a *technical one*: this is what makes it communication.

What is shared, then, is no longer a 'culture', the living body, the actual presence of the group (everything which made up the symbolic and meta-bolic function of the ceremony and the feast), nor is it even knowledge in the proper sense of the term, but that strange corpus of signs and references, of recollections from schooldays and intellectual fashion signals known as 'mass culture', which we might term lowest common culture (LCC), the way one speaks of a lowest common denominator in mathematics. This is also akin to the 'standard package' which lays down the lowest common panoply of objects the average consumer must possess in order to accede to the title of citizen of this consumer society. The LCC lays down the lowest common panoply of 'right answers' the average individual is supposed to possess if he is to win his spurs as cultural citizen.

Mass communication excludes culture and knowledge. There is no question of real symbolic or didactic processes coming into play, since that would be to compromise the collective participation which is the meaning of the ceremony, a participation which can only be enacted through a *liturgy*, a formal code of signs meticulously voided of all meaning content.

We can see that the term 'culture' is potentially very misleading. This cultural 'consomme', this 'digest'/repertoire of coded questions/answers, this LCC, is to culture what life insurance is to life: it is there to ward off its dangers, and, on the basis of the denial of a living culture, to glorify the ritualized signs of *culturalization*.

However, this LCC, which draws its sustenance from an automatized question-and-answer mechanism, has many affinities with the 'culture' of

the schoolroom. Indeed, all these games have the archetype of the *examination* as their mainspring. And this is no accident. The examination is the pre-eminent form of social advancement. Everyone wants to take exams, even in bastardized, radiophonic form, because there is today something prestigious about being examined. The endless proliferation of these games contains within it, then, a powerful process of social integration: we can, ultimately, imagine a whole society integrated into these mass-media contests, the whole of social organization dependent on their sanction. There has already been one society in history which had a total system of selection and organization by examination: China under the Mandarins. But that system only affected an educated fringe. In this case, we should have entire masses mobilized in an endless game of double-or-quits, in which everyone would be securing or endangering his social destiny. In this way, we would be spared the archaic machinery of social control, the best system of integration having always been that of ritualized competition. We have not reached that point yet. For the moment, let us note the very great aspiration to be a part of the exam situation – a dual aspiration, this, since everyone may be examined, but anyone can also slot into that situation as examiner, as judge (as a tiny fragment of that collective authority called the public). This is an onerous duplication, phantasmic in the strictest sense: being both the one person and the other. But it is also a tactical operation of integration by delegation of power. What defines *mass* communication is, therefore, the combination of technical medium and LCC (*not the massive numbers of people* taking part). The quiz machine is also a mass medium, even if the game seems to be an individual one. In playing this machine, where intellectual dexterity registers as beeps and flashing lights – an admirable synthesis of knowledge and the household appliance – you are still being programmed by a collective agency. The computerized medium is merely a technical materialization of the collective medium, of that system of 'lowest common culture' signals which governs the participation of all in each and each in the same system.

Let us say, once again, that it is pointless and absurd to compare High Culture and Mass-Media Culture and to contrast their value. The one has a complex syntax, the other is a combinatory of elements which can always be broken down into stimulus-response and question-and-answer patterns. The latter is most vividly illustrated in the radio game. But, far beyond this ritual spectacle, this pattern governs the behaviour of the consumer in each of his acts, in his general conduct, which is organized as a series of responses to different stimuli. Tastes, preferences, needs, decisions: where both objects and relationships are concerned, the consumer is perpetually appealed to, 'questioned' and required to respond. Making a purchase is, in this context, akin to a radio quiz. It is today not so much an original act on the part of the individual aimed at concretely satisfying a need, as, primarily, *the response to a question* – a response which engages the individual in the collective ritual of consumption. It is a game to the extent that every object is always one among a range of variants, between which the individual is

required to choose – the act of purchasing is a choosing, the determinant of a preference – precisely as he or she must choose between the answer offered by the quiz game. It is in this sense that the purchaser *plays*, replying to a question which is never the direct one regarding the utility of the object but the indirect one regarding the 'play' among the variants of the object. That 'play' and the choice which marks its successful conclusion characterize the purchaser/consumer as opposed to the traditional user.

Lowest Common Multiples (LCMs)

The lowest common culture (LCC) of the radio waves or the mass-circulation magazines today has an artistic subsidiary. This is the multiplication of artworks, for which the Bible – itself now multiplied and delivered to the masses in weekly instalments – provided the miraculous prototype in the celebrated multiplication of loaves and fishes beside the Sea of Galilee.

A great democratic wind has blown through the heavenly Jerusalem of culture and art. 'Contemporary art', from Rauschenberg to Picasso, from Vasarely to Chagall and on to younger artists, is holding its 'private view' at the Printemps department store (though, admittedly, it is doing so at the top of the building and not compromising the second-floor 'interior decoration' department with its harbour views and setting suns). The work of art is breaking out of the solitude in which it has for centuries been confined as unique object and privileged moment. Once upon a time, as everyone knows, galleries were sanctuaries. But the masses have now taken over from the solitary owner or the enlightened art-lover. And there is not simply industrial reproduction to delight the masses, but a work of art that is both unique and collective: the Multiple.

In a happy initiative, under the aegis of the Prisunic department stores, Jacques Putman has just published a collection of original prints at a very affordable price (100 F). No one finds it odd any longer to acquire a lithograph or an etching *at the same time as a pair of stockings or a garden chair*. The second 'Prisunic Suite' has just gone on show at L'Oeil gallery. It is now on sale in the shops. This is not a promotion, nor yet a revolution[!]. The multiplication of images is a response to a multiplying public, which inevitably[!] leads to the creation of places to view those images. Experimental research no longer ends in enslavement to power and money: the art-loving benefactor is giving way to the *participating client* ... Each numbered and signed print is made in an edition of 300 copies ... A victory for the consumer society? Perhaps. But what matter, since quality is preserved? Those who will not understand contemporary art today are those who do not want to.

Art speculation, which was based on rarity value, is over. With the 'Unlimited Multiple', art moves into the industrial era (as it so happens, these Multiples, produced in limited editions, immediately give rise to a black market and 'alternative' speculation: the false ingenuousness of the producers and designers). The work of art in the pork butchers, the

abstract in the factory ... Don't say, 'What is Art?' any more; don't say, 'Art is too dear'; don't say, 'Art isn't for me': read *Les Muses*.

It would be too easy to say that a Picasso painting in a factory will never abolish the division of labour and that the multiplication of multiples, were that to be achieved, will never abolish social division and the transcendence of Culture. The illusion of the ideologues of the Multiple (let us not speak here of the conscious or subconscious speculators among both artists and dealers, though they are by far the largest group involved) and of cultural dissemination or promotion more generally is, nonetheless, an instructive one. Their noble effort to democratize culture or, where the designers are concerned, 'to create beautiful objects for the greatest number', visibly meets with failure – or with such commercial success that it becomes suspect as a result, which amounts to the same thing. But this contradiction is merely apparent: it exists because these fine souls stubbornly insist on regarding Culture as a universal, while seeking, at the same time, to disseminate it in the form of finite objects (whether unique or produced in their thousands). In so doing, they are merely delivering up to the logic of consumption (i.e. to the manipulation of signs) certain contents or symbolic activities which were not previously subject to that logic. Producing multiple works does not in itself imply any 'vulgarization' or 'loss of quality': what happens is that, as 'mass-produced' objects, works so produced become effectively objects of the same kind 'as the pair of stockings and the garden chair', and acquire their meaning in relation to those things. They no longer stand opposed, as *works* and as semantic substance – as *open* significations – to other finite objects. They have become finite objects themselves and are part of the package, the constellation of accessories by which the 'socio-cultural' standing of the average citizen is determined. This, at least, is what would happen in the best of cases, where everyone really did have access to them. For the moment, although they are not artworks any longer, these pseudo-works are nonetheless rare objects, economically or 'psychologically' inaccessible to most people and sustaining, as distinctive objects, a slightly expanded parallel Culture market.

It is perhaps more interesting – though the problem is the same – to look at what is consumed in the weekly instalment encyclopaedias, such as *La Bible*, *Les Muses*, *Alpha*, *Le Million* and in the mass-circulation musical and artistic publications, such as *Grands peintres* and *Grands musiciens*. We know that the audience for these publications is potentially very large, embracing all those in the middle classes who are educated to secondary or technical level (or whose children are so educated): white-collar workers, lower and middle managers.

To these recent large-scale publications we should also add those which, from *Science et vie* to *Historia* and the like, have long fed the demand for culture of the 'potentially upwardly mobile'. What do they want from this freighting of science, history, music and encyclopaedic knowledge – that is to say, of established, legitimate disciplines, the contents of which – unlike what is broadcast by the mass media – have a specific value? Are

they looking to learn something, to acquire a real grounding in culture, or do they want a mark of social advancement? Are they looking to culture as a practice or as a possession to be acquired; are they seeking knowledge or status? Is what we have here a 'package effect' once again, that effect which, as we have seen, marks out – as one sign among others – the object of consumption?

In the case of *Science et vie* (we draw in what follows on a readership survey of this magazine analysed by the Centre de sociologie européenne), the readers' demands are ambiguous: there is here a disguised, clandestine aspiration to acquire 'high-brow' culture by way of accession to technical culture. Reading *Science et vie* is the product of a compromise: an aspiration to elite culture is present, but so too is a defensive counter-motivation in the form of a rejection of elitism (in other words, there is both an aspiration to join the higher class and a reaffirmation of class position). More precisely, such reading functions as a mark of membership. But membership of what? The abstract community, the virtual collective of all those driven by the same ambiguous exigency, of all those who also read *Science et vie* (or *Les Muses*, etc.). This is an act of allegiance of a mythological order: the reader imagines a group whose presence he consumes in abstracto through his reading: an unreal, mass relationship, which is, quite precisely, the mass communication effect. An undifferentiated complicity which nonetheless constitutes the deeply experienced substance of that reading – embodying a value of recognition, of membership, of mythic participation (one can detect just this same process at work among the readers of the *Nouvel Observateur*: to read that magazine is to affiliate oneself to the readers of that magazine; it is to use a 'cultural' activity as a class emblem).

Naturally, most readers (we should perhaps say, most 'devotees') of these mass-circulation publications, which are the vehicles of a 'middlebrow' culture, will claim in good faith that they are concerned with their content and that their aim is knowledge. But this cultural 'use-value', this objective goal, is largely overdetermined by the sociological 'exchange-value'. It is that demand, indexed to increasingly intense status competition, which is met by the vast 'culturalized' material of periodicals, encyclopaedias and paperback editions. All this cultural substance may be said to be 'consumed', in so far as its content does not sustain an autonomous practice, but a rhetoric of social mobility, and in so far as it meets a demand which has something other than culture as its object or, rather, seeks culture only as a coded element of social status. There is here an inversion, and the strictly cultural content appears only as connotation, as a secondary function. We can say, then, that it is consumed in the same way as a washing machine becomes a consumer good at the point where it is no longer an implement but a luxury, prestige element. We know that, at that point, it no longer has any specific presence and many other objects could be substituted for it – culture being, precisely, one of them. Culture becomes an object of consumption in so far as, sliding towards another discourse, it becomes interchangeable and homogeneous with other objects (even if it remains

hierarchically superior to them). And this is true not only of *Science et vie*, but also of 'high' culture, 'great' painting, and classical music, etc. All these things can be sold together at the drugstore or the newsagents. But it is not, strictly speaking, a question of the sales outlet, the size of the production run or the 'cultural level' of the audience. If all these things are sold and consumed together, that is because culture is subject to the same competitive demand for signs as any other category of objects and that it is *produced to meet that demand*.

It is then subject to the same mode of appropriation as other messages, objects and images which make up the 'ambiance' of our daily life: the mode of '*curiosité*'. This is not necessarily something frivolous or casual; there may be passionate curiosity, particularly among those categories of people in process of acculturation. But it presupposes succession, cycles, the pressure for changes of fashion. Thus, for the exclusive practice of culture as a symbolic system of meaning it substitutes a ludic and combinatorial practice of culture as a system of signs. 'Beethoven is fabulous!'

Ultimately, what individuals get from this 'culture' – which excludes both the autodidact, the marginal hero of traditional culture, and the cultured person, that embalmed humanistic flower on the verge of extinction – is cultural 'recycling', an aesthetic recycling which is one of the elements of the generalized 'personalization' of the individual, of cultural 'show' [*faire-valoir*] in competitive society and which is the equivalent, all other things being equal, of the setting-off or showing-off [*faire-valoir*] of the object by packaging. Industrial aesthetics – design – has no aim other than to restore to industrial objects – deeply affected by the division of labour and bearing the stamp of their functions – this 'aesthetic' homogeneity, this formal unity or playful dimension which might be said to connect them all in a kind of secondary 'environment' or 'ambiance' function.

This is the work of those 'cultural designers' one now finds everywhere: in a society where individuals are severely affected by the division of labour and the fragmentary nature of their work, they seek to 'redesign' them through 'culture', to integrate them into a single formal shell, to facilitate interaction in the name of the promotion of culture, to promote an ambience for people, as design does for objects. Moreover, we should not lose sight of the fact that this packaging, this cultural recycling is, like the 'beauty' industrial aesthetics bestows upon objects, 'undeniably a selling point', to quote Jacques Michel. 'It is an acknowledged fact today that a pleasant environment, created by harmony of shapes and colours and, of course, the quality of materials[!], has a beneficial effect on productivity.'⁵ And it is true: acculturated people, like designed objects, are better integrated socially and professionally; they 'fit in' better and are more 'compatible'. One of the happiest hunting grounds of the functionalism of human relations is the promotion of culture: there 'human design' meets 'human engineering'.

We need a term which would be to culture what 'Aesthetics' (in the sense of industrial aesthetics, the functional rationalization of forms, the

play of signs) is to beauty as a symbolic system. We have no word for this functionalized substance of messages, texts, images, classic masterpieces or cartoon strips, this coded 'creativity' and 'receptiveness', which have replaced inspiration and sensibility, this collective *managed* work on significations and communication, this 'industrial culturality', haunted pell-mell by the cultures of all ages, which we continue, for want of a better word, to call 'culture', though we do so at an enormous cost in misunderstandings, nurturing a constant dream – in the hyperfunctionalism of consumed culture – of the universal, of myths capable of deciphering our age without themselves being mythological 'spectaculars', of an art which could decipher modernity without being abolished in it.

Kitsch

Alongside gadgetry, one of the other major categories of modern object is kitsch. The kitsch object is commonly understood as one of that great army of 'trashy' objects, made of plaster of Paris [*stuc*] or some such imitation material: that gallery of cheap junk – accessories, folksy knick-knacks, 'souvenirs', lampshades or fake African masks – which proliferates everywhere, with a preference for holiday resorts and places of leisure. Kitsch is the equivalent of the 'cliché' in speech. And this should tell us that, as in the case of the gadget, we are dealing with a *category* which is difficult to define, but which should not be confused with any particular *real* objects. Kitsch can be anywhere: in the detail of an object or in the plan of a new residential area, in an artificial flower or in a photo-novel. It can best be defined as a *pseudo-object* or, in other words, as a simulation, a copy, an imitation, a stereotype, as a dearth of real signification and a superabundance of signs, of allegorical references, disparate connotations, as a glorification of the detail and a saturation by details. There is, moreover, a close affinity between its internal organization (unconnected superabundance of signs) and its appearance on the market (proliferation of disparate objects, a mass-produced accumulation). Kitsch is a *cultural category*.

This proliferation of kitsch, which is produced by industrial reproduction and the vulgarization at the level of objects of distinctive signs taken from all registers (the bygone, the 'neo', the exotic, the folksy, the futuristic) and from a disordered excess of 'ready-made' signs, has its basis, like 'mass culture', in the *sociological* reality of the consumer society. This is a mobile society: broad swathes of the population are moving up the social ladder, reaching a higher status and, at the same time, acceding to cultural demand, which is simply the need to manifest that status in signs. At all levels of society, the generations of parvenus want their package. There is no point, then, blaming the 'vulgarity' of the public or the 'cynical' tactics of the industrialists who wish to shift their wares. Though this aspect is important, it cannot *explain* the cancerous excretion of the mass of 'pseudo-objects'. There has to be a demand, and that demand is a function of social mobility. There is no kitsch

in a society without social mobility. In such a society, a limited range of luxury objects suffices as distinctive material for the privileged caste. Even the copy of a work of art still has 'authentic' value in the classical age. By contrast, it is the great periods of social mobility which see the object flourish in other guises: it is with the rising bourgeoisie of the Renaissance and the seventeenth century that preciousity and the baroque emerge. Though these are not the direct ancestors of kitsch, they already bear witness to the growth and fragmentation of distinctive material at a time of social pressure and relative hybridity of the upper classes. It is, however, mainly since the time of Louis-Philippe in France, the *Gründerjahre* in Germany (1870-90) and the end of the nineteenth century and the age of the department stores in all Western societies, that the universal knick-knack form has become one of the major manifestations of the object and one of the most fruitful branches of commerce. That era is unending, since our societies are now potentially in a phase of continual mobility.

Kitsch obviously reaffirms the value of the rare, precious, unique object (production of which can also become industrial). Kitsch and the 'authentic' object thus between them organize the world of consumption according to the logic of a distinctive material which is, today, always shifting and expanding. Kitsch has a weak distinctive value, but that weak value is linked to maximum statistical profitability: entire classes seize on it. This can be contrasted with the maximal distinctive quality of rare objects, which is connected with their limited supply. We are talking here not of beauty, but of distinctiveness, and this is a *sociological* function. In this sense, all objects can be classified hierarchically as values, depending on their statistical availability, on their more or less limited supply. This function defines at every moment, for a particular state of the social structure, the scope afforded to a particular social category to distinguish itself and mark its status through a particular category of objects or signs. When broader strata accede to a particular category of signs, the upper classes are obliged to distance themselves by other markers which are limited in number (either by their origin, such as paintings or authentic antiques, or systematically, such as luxury editions or custom-built cars). In this logic of distinction, kitsch is never innovative: it is defined by its derived and weak value. This weak valency is, in its turn, one of the reasons for its unlimited multiplication. It *multiplies in ever greater quantities*, whereas, at the top of the social ladder, 'classy' objects become *fewer in number by increasing in quality* and are revived by becoming rare.

This derivative function is once again linked to its 'aesthetic' or anti-aesthetic function. To the aesthetics of beauty and originality, kitsch opposes its *aesthetics of simulation*: it everywhere reproduces objects smaller or larger than life; it imitates materials (in plaster, plastic, etc.); it apes forms or combines them discordantly; it *repeats fashion* without having been part of the experience of fashion. In all this, it is all of a piece with the 'gimmicky' gadget in the technical world. That gadget is, similarly, a technological parody, an excrescence of useless functions, a

continual *simulation* of function without any real, practical referent. This aesthetics of simulation is profoundly linked to kitsch's socially assigned function of translating social class aspirations and anticipations, of expressing the magical affiliation with a culture, with the forms, manners and markers of the upper class - an aesthetics of acculturation resulting in a subculture of objects.⁶

The Gadget and the Ludic

The machine was the emblem of industrial society. The gadget is the emblem of post-industrial society. No rigorous definition of the gadget exists. If, however, we agree to define the object of consumption by the relative disappearance of its objective function (as an implement) and a corresponding increase in its sign function, and if we accept that the object of consumption is characterized by a kind of *functional uselessness* (what is consumed is precisely something other than the 'useful'), then *the gadget is indeed the truth of the object in consumer society*. Hence, *anything can become a gadget* and everything potentially is one. The gadget might be said, then, to be defined by its potential uselessness and its ludic combinatorial value.⁷ So both sew-on badges, which have had their hour of glory, and the 'Venusik', a perfectly 'pure' and useless cylinder of polished metal (its only possible use being as a paperweight, the function reserved for all absolutely useless objects!), are gadgets. 'Lovers of formal beauty and potential uselessness, the fabulous "Venusik" has arrived!'

But the typewriter which can write in 13 different character sets, 'depending on whether you are writing to your bank manager or your lawyer, a very important client or an old friend', is also a gadget - for where is 'objective uselessness to begin? As are the inexpensive homemade trinkets and also the IBM dictation machine: 'Imagine a little machine (12cm x 15cm) you can have with you everywhere - in the office, at weekends and on your travels. You hold it in one hand and, with a flick of the thumb, whisper your decisions, dictate your directives, hail your victories. Everything you say is committed to its memory ... Whether you are in Rome, Tokyo or New York, your secretary will not miss a single one of your syllables.' What could be more useful? What could be more useless? When technology is consigned to mental practices of a magical type or to modish social practices, then the technical object itself becomes a mere gadget again.

In a car, are the chrome, the two-speed windshield wipers and the electric windows gadgets? Yes and no: they do have some utility in terms of social prestige. The contemptuous connotation of the term comes quite simply from a *moral* perspective on the instrumental usefulness of objects: some are said to have a use, others not. By what criteria? There is no object, even the most marginal and decorative, that does not have some use, if only because, in having no use, it becomes once again a mark of distinction.⁸ Conversely, there is no object which does not, in a sense, serve no precise

purpose (or which cannot, in other words, serve a purpose other than its intended one). There is no way out of this, except to define a gadget as something which is explicitly intended for secondary functions. Thus, not only the chrome, but also the 'cockpit' and the whole car are gadgets if they are part of a logic of fashion and prestige or part of a fetishistic logic. And the systematics of objects means that this is the dominant tendency for all objects today.

The world of the pseudo-environment and the pseudo-object is one in which all 'functional' 'creators' revel. Take André Faye, 'technician of the art of living', who creates Louis XVI furniture, the stylish doors of which open to reveal the smooth, brilliant surface of a turntable or hi-fi speakers:

His objects move, like Calder's mobiles: both everyday objects and real works of art can be designed on this basis. And when set in motion and coordinated with chromophonic projections, they come ever closer to the *total spectacle* to which he aspires ... Cybernetic furniture, desks with variable geometry and orientation, a calligraphic Teletype machine ... At long last a telephone fully built into the human body to enable you to call 'New York or answer Honolulu from the grounds of a mansion or beside a swimming pool.

All this, for Faye, represents 'a subjugation of technology to the art of living'. And it all irresistibly calls to mind the Concours Lépine.⁹ What difference is there between the videophone desk and the cold-water-based heating system devised by some illustrious inventor? Yet, there is a difference. It is that the good old artisanal brainwave was a curious exorcism, the mildly unhinged poetry of a heroic technology. The gadget, by contrast, is part of a systematic logic which lays hold of the whole of daily life in the spectacular mode, and, as a consequence, casts a suspicion of artificiality, fakery and uselessness over the whole environment of objects, and, by extension, over the whole environment of human and social relations. In its broadest sense, the gadget attempts to move beyond the generalized crisis of *purpose* [*finalité*] and 'usefulness in the ludic mode'. But it does not – and cannot – attain the symbolic freedom the toy has for the child. It is impoverished, a fashion effect, a kind of artificial accelerator of other objects; it is caught in a circuit where the useful and the symbolic resolve into a kind of combinatorial uselessness, as in those 'total' light shows, where the entertainment itself is a gimmick or, in other words, a social pseudo-event – a game without players. The pejorative resonance the terms 'gadgetry' and 'gimmickry' have acquired today ('a mere gadget', 'just gimmickry') no doubt reflects both a moral judgement and the anxiety generated by the generalized disappearance of use-value and the symbolic function.

But the reverse is also true. That is to say, the combinatorial 'new look' of the gadget can be opposed by – and this is the case for any object, even one which is itself a gadget – the *exaltedness of the new*. The period of newness is, in a sense, the sublime period of the object and may, in certain cases, attain the intensity, if not the quality, of the emotion of love. This phase is one of a symbolic discourse, in which fashion and reference to others have no part. It is in this mode of intense relation that the child experiences his

objects and toys. And it is not the least of the charms, later, of a new car, book, gadget or item of clothing that they plunge us back into absolute childhood. This is the opposite logic to that of consumption.

The gadget is defined in fact by the way we act with it, which is not utilitarian or symbolic in character, but ludic. It is the ludic which increasingly governs our relations to objects, persons, culture, leisure and, at times, work, and also politics. It is the ludic which is becoming the dominant tone of our daily habits, to the extent indeed that everything – objects, goods, relationships, services – is becoming gadgetry or gimmickry. The ludic represents a very particular type of investment: it is not economic (useless objects) and not symbolic (the gadget/object has no soul), but consists in a play with combinations, a combinatorial modulation: a play on the technical variants or potentialities of the object – in innovation *à playing with the rules of play*, in destruction a playing with life and death as the ultimate combination. Here, our domestic gadgets link up once again with slot machines, *tirlipots* and the other cultural radio games, the quiz machine in the drugstore, the car dashboard and the whole range of 'serious' technical apparatus which makes up the modern 'ambiance' of work from the telephone to the computer – all those things we *play* with more or less consciously, fascinated as we are by the operation of machines, by childlike discovery and manipulation, by vague or passionate curiosity for the 'play' of mechanisms, the play of colours, the play of variants: this is the very soul of passionate play [*le jeu-passion*], but diffuse and generalized and hence less cogent, emptied of its pathos and become mere *curiosity* – something between indifference and fascination, which might be defined by its opposition to *passion*. Passion may be understood as a concrete relation to a *total person* or to some object taken as a person. It implies total investment and assumes an intense symbolic value. Whereas ludic curiosity is merely interest – albeit violent interest – in the *play of elements*.

Take the pinball machine. The player becomes absorbed in the machine's noise, jolts and flashing lights. He is playing with electricity. As he presses the controls, he has a sense of unleashing impulses and currents through a world of multi-coloured wires as complex as a nervous system. There is in his play an effect of magical participation in science. To grasp this, one has only to observe the crowd which gathers around the repair man in a café when he opens up the machine. No one understands the connections and circuits, but everyone accepts this strange world as an incontrovertible datum. There is nothing here of the relation of rider to horse, worker to tools or art-lover to work of art. The relation of man to object is strictly magical, which is to say that it is bewitched and manipulatory.

This ludic activity may give the appearance of being a passion. But it never is. It is consumption – in this case, abstract manipulation of lights, 'flippers' and electrical reaction times, in other cases, the abstract manipulation of marks of prestige in the variants of fashion. Consumption is combinatorial investment: it is exclusive of passion.

Pop: an Art of Consumption?

The logic of consumption, as we have seen, can be defined as a manipulation of signs. The symbolic values of creation and the symbolic relation of inwardness are absent from it: it is all in externals. The object loses its objective finality and its function; it becomes a term in a much greater combinatory, in sets of objects in which it has a merely relational value. Moreover, it loses its symbolic meaning, its millennial anthropomorphic status, and tends to peter out into a discourse of connotations which are also simply relative to one another within the framework of a totalitarian cultural system (that is to say, a system which is able to integrate all significations whatever their provenance).

We have based our argument here on the analysis of *everyday* objects. There is, however, another discourse on the object – the discourse of art. A history of the changing status of objects and their representation in art and literature would itself be revealing. After operating in the whole of traditional art as symbolic, decorative props, objects have ceased in the twentieth century to be indexed to moral and psychological values; they have ceased to live by proxy in the shadow of man and have begun to take on extraordinary importance as autonomous elements in an analysis of space (Cubism, etc.). They have as a result been fragmented, even to the point of abstraction. Having celebrated their parodic resurrection in Dada and Surrealism, which were then deconstructed and volatilized by the abstract, they are apparently now reconciled again with their image in neo-figuration and pop art. It is here that the question of their contemporary status arises: indeed it is forced upon us by their sudden elevation to the zenith of artistic figuration.

In short, is pop the form of art contemporaneous with the logic of signs and consumption we are speaking of, or is it merely an effect of fashion, and hence itself a pure object of consumption? There is no contradiction between the two. We may accept that pop art transposes an object-world, while at the same time simply issuing (by its own logic) in objects pure and simple. Advertising shares this same ambiguity.

Let us formulate the matter another way: the logic of consumption eliminates the traditional sublime status of artistic representation. There is, strictly, no longer any privileging of the essence or signification of the object over the image. The one is no longer the truth of the other: they coexist in the same physical and logical space, where they also 'operate' as signs (in their differential, reversible, combinatorial relation).¹⁰ Whereas all art up to pop was based on a 'depth' vision of the world,¹¹ pop regards itself as homogeneous with this *immanent order of signs*: homogeneous with their industrial, mass production and hence with the artificial, manufactured character of the whole environment, homogeneous with the spatial saturation and simultaneous culturalized abstraction of this new order of things.

Does it succeed in 'rendering' this systematic secularization of objects, in 'rendering' this new sign-based [*signalétique*] environment, which is

wholly in externals, so that nothing remains of the 'inner light' which gave all earlier painting its prestige? Is it an *art of the non-sacred*? That is to say, an art of pure manipulation? Is it itself a non-sacred art or, in other words, an art productive of objects, but not creative?

Some will say (including the pop artists themselves) that things are much simpler: they do what they do because they want to; basically, they enjoy doing it; they look around them and paint what they see; it is spontaneous realism, etc. This is mistaken. Pop signifies the end of perspective, the end of evocation, the end of testimony, the end of the creative act and, last but not least, the end of the subversion of the world and the curse of art. Its aim is not merely the immanence of the 'civilized' world, but its total integration into that world. There is in this a crazy ambition, the ambition of abolishing the splendours (and foundations) of a whole culture, the culture of transcendence. And there is in it perhaps quite simply also an ideology. Let us first remove two objections. First, that it is 'an American art' – in the objects it depicts (including the obsession with the Stars and Stripes), in its pragmatic, optimistic empirical practice, in the undeniably chauvinistic infatuation of certain of its backers and collectors who have 'identified' with it etc. Though the objection is a tendentious one, let us reply to it objectively. If all these things are *Americanism*, the pop artists, following their own logic, cannot but sign up to them. If manufactured objects 'speak American', that is because they have no other truth than that mythology which swamps them – and the only rigorous approach is to integrate this mythological discourse and integrate oneself into it. If the consumer society is trapped in its own mythology, if it has no critical perspective on itself, and if *that is precisely its definition*,¹² there can be no contemporary art which is not, in its very existence and practice, compromised by and complicit with that opaquely self-evident state of affairs. This is indeed why the pop artists paint objects in terms of their real appearance, since it is *in that way, as ready-made signs, 'fresh from the assembly line', that they function mythologically*. This is why they prefer to paint the brand names, slogans and acronyms these objects bear and, in the extreme case, may paint only those things (Robert Indiana). This is neither play nor 'realism': it is recognizing the obvious truth of the consumer society which is that the truth of objects and products is their *brand name*. If that is 'Americanism', then Americanism is the very logic of contemporary culture and one cannot fault the pop artists for pointing this up.

No more, indeed, can one criticize them for their commercial success and for accepting it unashamedly. The worst thing would be for them to claim some 'accursed' status and thus reinvest themselves with a sacred function. It is logical for an art which does not contradict the world of objects, but explores its system, to make itself part of that system. It is even the end of a hypocrisy and of a radical illogicality. As opposed to earlier painting (since the end of the nineteenth century), whose genius and transcendence did not prevent it from being a *signed* object and an object marketed in terms of its signature (the abstract expressionists pushed this

conquering genius and shameful opportunism to its extreme), the pop artists reconcile the object of painting and the painting as object. Coherence or paradox? In its predilection for objects, its endless figuration of 'branded' objects and food products – and also in its commercial success – pop is the first art to explore its own status as 'signed' and 'consumed' art object.

Yet this logical enterprise, which one cannot but approve even in its extreme consequences (even where these contravene our traditional aesthetic *morality*), is accompanied by an ideology into which it is in some danger of sinking: an ideology of Nature, of 'Waking-Up' and authenticity reminiscent of the best moments of bourgeois spontaneity.

This 'radical empiricism', 'uncompromising positivism', and 'anti-teleologism' sometimes assumes a dangerously *initiatory* air.¹³ Oldenburg writes:

I drove around the city one day with Jimmy Dine. By chance we drove along Orchard Street, which is crowded with small stores on both sides. As we drove I remember having a vision of *The Store*. In my mind's eye, I saw a complete environment based on this theme. It seemed to me that I had discovered a new world. Everywhere I went I began wandering through the different stores as if *they were museums*. I saw the objects displayed in windows as precious works of art.

And Rosenquist:

Then suddenly the ideas seemed to flow towards me through the window. All I had to do was seize them on the wing and start painting. Everything spontaneously fell into place – the idea, the composition, the images, the colors, everything started to work on its own.

As is clear from this, the pop artists are not to be outdone by previous generations so far as 'Inspiration' is concerned. Since Werther, this theme has underpinned the ideality of a *Nature* to which one only has to be faithful to achieve truth. One simply has to awaken or reveal that Nature. In John Cage, the musician who inspired Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, we read: 'art should be an affirmation of life – not an attempt to bring order ... but simply a way of *waking up* to the very life we are living, which is so excellent, once one gets one's mind, one's desires out of the way and lets it act of its own accord.' This assent to a revealed order – the universe of images and manufactured objects showing through ultimately as a *nature* – leads to mystico-realist professions of faith: 'A flag was just a flag, a number was simply a number' (Jasper Johns) or (Cage again): 'We must set about discovering a means to let sounds be themselves', which supposes an essence of the object, a level of absolute reality that is never that of the everyday environment and which, in relation to that environment, constitutes nothing short of a surreality. Wesselmann speaks in this way of the 'super-realism' of an ordinary kitchen.

In short, there is total confusion here and what we have is a kind of behaviourism composed of a juxtaposition of things seen (something like a consumer society impressionism), accompanied by a vague Zen or Buddhist mysticism of the stripping away of the ego or *superego* to rediscover the 'id'

of the surrounding world. There is also something distinctly American about this curious mixture!

But there is above all a serious ambiguity and incoherence here. For, by presenting the surrounding world not as what it is (first and foremost an artificial field of manipulable signs, a total cultural artifact, in which neither sensation nor vision are in play, but differential perception and the tactical play of significations), but as revealed nature, as essence, pop gives itself a dual connotation: on the one hand, it poses as the ideology of an integrated society (current society = nature = ideal society, though we have seen that this collusion forms part of its logic); on the other, it reinstates the whole *sacred process of art*, which destroys its own basic objective.

Pop lays claim to be the art of the banal (it is on these grounds that it calls itself 'pop(ular)' art), but what is the banal but a metaphysical category, a modern version of the category of the sublime? The object is banal only in its use, in the moment of its use (the 'working' radio in Wesselmann's installations). The object ceases to be banal as soon as it signifies. Now, we have seen that the 'truth' of the contemporary object is no longer to be used for something, but to signify, no longer to be manipulated as an instrument, but as a sign. And it is the success of pop, at its best, to show it to us as such.

Andy Warhol, who is the most radical in his approach, is also the artist who best sums up the theoretical contradiction in this art practice and the difficulties it has in envisaging its real object. He says: 'The canvas is an absolutely everyday object, like this chair or that poster' (as ever this desire to absorb art, to rehabilitate it, in which there is both American pragmatism – terroristic insistence on the useful, integrationist blackmail – and something like an echo of the mystique of sacrifice). He adds: 'Reality needs no intermediary, all you have to do is isolate it from the environment and put it on a canvas.' Now, this is the whole question: the everydayness of this chair (or a particular hamburger, tail-fin or pin-up) is precisely its context and, specifically, the mass-produced context of all similar or almost similar chairs, etc. Everydayness is *difference in repetition*. By isolating the chair on the canvas, I remove all everydayness from it and, at the same time, deprive the canvas of its character of everyday object (in which respect, according to Warhol, it should absolutely resemble the chair). This is a familiar dead-end: art can neither be absorbed into everyday life (the canvas = the chair), nor can it grasp the everyday as such (the chair isolated on the canvas = the real chair). Immanence and transcendence are equally impossible: they are the two aspects of a single dream.

There is, in short, no essence of the everyday, of the banal, and thus no art of the everyday: this is a mystical aporia. If Warhol (and others) believe that there is, that is because they delude themselves about the very status of art and the artistic act – something far from uncommon among artists. Indeed, we find the same mystical nostalgia at the level of the productive act: 'I would like to be a machine,' says Andy Warhol, who does in fact paint with stencils, silk screens, etc. Now, there can be no worse arrogance for art than to pose as machine-like, no greater affectation on the part of

the person who enjoys the status of creator, whether he wishes it or not, than to devote himself to serial automatism. Yet, one cannot accuse Warhol or the pop artists of bad faith: their logical demand runs up against a sociological and cultural status of art which they are powerless to change. It is this powerlessness that is expressed in their ideology. When they try to desacralize their practice, society simply sacralizes them the more. And we arrive at the situation where their attempt – the most radical yet – to secularize art, both in its themes and in its practice, leads to a glorification and unprecedented manifestation of the sacred in art. Quite simply, the pop artists forget that, for a painting to cease to be a sacred super-sign (a unique object, a signature, the object of a noble, magical commerce), it is not sufficient to change the content of the picture or the artist's intentions: it is the structures of the production of culture which decide the matter. Ultimately, only the rationalization of the art market, on the same basis as any other industrial market, could desacralize artworks and restore them to the status of everyday objects.¹⁴ This is perhaps neither conceivable, nor possible, nor even desirable. Who knows? At any event, it is the limit state: once one has reached it, one either stops painting or continues at the cost of sliding back into the traditional mythology of artistic creation. It is along this fault line that classical pictorial values are rehabilitated: of an 'expressionist' kind in Oldenburg, fauvist and Matisian in Wesselmann, 'art nouveau' and akin to Japanese calligraphy in Lichtenstein, etc. But what do these 'legendary' resonances matter to us here? Of what consequence are these effects, which make it possible to say that 'this is still painting all the same'? The logic of pop lies elsewhere – not in an aesthetic computation or a metaphysics of the object.

One could define pop as a *game with* – and a manipulation of – the different levels of mental perception, a kind of mental Cubism that would seek to diffract objects not in terms of a spatial analytics, but in terms of the modalities of perception elaborated over the centuries by a whole culture on the basis of its intellectual and technical machinery: objective reality, image-as-reflection, drawn figuration, technical figuration (photography), abstract schematization, discursive utterance, etc. On the other hand, the use of the phonetic alphabet and industrial techniques have imposed patterns of division, splitting, abstraction and repetition (ethnographers report the bewilderment of primitive peoples when they discover several *absolutely* identical books: their whole vision of the world is overturned). We may see in these various modes the thousand figures of a *rhetoric of designation*, of recognition. And this is where pop art comes in: it works on the differences between these different levels or modes, and on the perception of those differences. For example, the screen print of a lynching is not an evocation of an event: it presupposes that the lynching has already been transformed into a news item, a journalistic sign, by way of mass communications – a sign taken up again at one further remove by the screen print. The same photograph repeated presupposes the single photograph and, beyond that, the real being whose reflection it is. And that

real being might indeed figure in the work without exploding it: that would merely be one more combination.

Just as there is no order of reality in pop art, only levels of signification, so too there is no real space. The only space is that of the canvas, of the juxtaposition of the different sign-elements and the relationship between them. There is no real time either, the only time being that of the reading, the differential perception of the object and its image, of a particular image and the same image repeated, etc. This is the time necessary for *mental adjustment*, for *accommodation* to the image, to the artifact in its relation to the real object (we are speaking here not of a reminiscence, but of the perception of a *local, logical* difference). That reading will not be the search for connections and coherence either, but an onward movement, a registering of succession.

It is evident that the activity which pop imposes (taking it, once again, in its strictest ambition) is far removed from our 'aesthetic sense'. Pop is a 'cool' art: it demands not aesthetic ecstasy or affective or symbolic participation ('deep involvement'), but a kind of 'abstract involvement', a sort of *instrumental curiosity*. And this retains something of a child-like curiosity, a naïve enchantment of discovery. And why not? One can also see pop as *images d'Épinal* or a book of hours of consumption, but one which particularly brings into play the intellectual reflexes of decoding and deciphering discussed above.

All in all, pop art is not a popular art. For the popular cultural ethos (if such a thing exists) is based precisely on an unambiguous realism, on linear narration (and not on the repetition or diffraction of levels), on allegory and the decorative (and this is not pop art, since these two categories refer to 'something other' which is essential), and on emotional participation linked to the varying fortunes of good and evil forces.¹⁵ It is at a truly rudimentary level that pop art can be mistaken for a 'figurative' art: a colourful range of images, a naïve chronicle of the consumer society, etc. It is true that Pop artists have been happy to claim that it is such. Their candour is immense, and their ambiguity too. As for their humour, or the humour ascribed to them, we are again on shifting ground. It might be instructive here to note the reactions of the public. In many, the works provoke a moral and obscene laugh (or hint of a laugh) – the canvases being indeed obscene to the classical gaze – followed by a derisive smile, which might be a judgement on either the objects painted or the painting itself. It is a smile which willingly enters into the game: 'This isn't very serious, but we aren't going to be scandalized by it. And, deep down, perhaps ...' But these reactions are rather strained, amid some shameful dejection at not knowing quite what to make of it all. Even so, pop is both full of humour and humourless. Quite logically, it has nothing to do with subversive, aggressive humour, with the telescoping of surrealist objects. It is no longer a question of short-circuiting objects in their function, but one of juxtaposing them to analyse the relations between them. This approach is not terroristic.¹⁶ At most it involves something akin to cultural alienation effects. In fact, something quite different is going on here.

To return to the system we have been describing above, let us not forget that a *certain smile* is one of the *obligatory signs* of consumption: it no longer represents a humour, a critical distance, but is merely a reminder of that transcendent critical value which today is given material embodiment in the knowing wink. This false distance is present everywhere: in spy films, in Godard, in modern advertising, which uses it continually as a cultural allusion. It is not really clear in the end whether this 'cool' smile is the smile of humour or that of commercial complicity. This is also the case with pop, and its smile ultimately encapsulates all its ambiguity: it is not the smile of critical distance, but the smile of *collusion*.

The Orchestration of Messages

In TV, radio, press and advertising, we find a discontinuum of signs and messages in which all orders are equivalent. A radio sequence taken at random includes:

- an advert for Remington razors;
- a summary of the last fortnight's social unrest;
- an advert for Dunlop SP-Sport tyres;
- a debate on capital punishment;
- an advert for Lip watches;
- a report on the war in Biafra;
- an advert for Crio 'sunflower' washing powder.

In this litany, in which the drama of world history alternates with objects playing walk-on parts (the whole forming a kind of Prévert poem with alternating black and rose-tinted pages – the latter the advertising ones, of course), the periods of intensity are apparently the news reports. But these are also, paradoxically, the periods of neutrality and impersonality: the discourse about the world does not seek to generate concern. This tonal 'blankness' contrasts with the highly charged nature of the discourse on objects, with its cheery, elated note, its vibrato. All the pathos of reality, of unforeseen events, of persuasion is transferred to the object and its discourse. This careful balance between the discourse of 'news' [*information*] and the discourse of 'consumption', to the exclusive emotional advantage of the latter, tends to assign advertising a background function, to allot it the role of providing a repetitious, and therefore reassuring, backdrop of signs against which the vicissitudes of the world are registered through an intermediary. Those vicissitudes, neutralized by the editing, are then ripe, themselves, for simultaneous consumption. The radio news is not the hotch-potch it seems: its systematic alternation imposes a single pattern of reception, which is a pattern of consumption.

And this is not so much because the value accorded to the advertising message by its tone suggests that, at bottom, world history is immaterial and the only things worth getting excited about are consumer objects.

That is secondary. The real effect is more subtle: it is the imposition upon us, by the systematic succession of messages, of the *equivalence* of history and the minor news item, of the event and the spectacle, of information and advertising *at the level of the sign*. It is not in the direct discourse of advertising, but there that the real consumption effect is to be found. It is in the segmenting – thanks to the technical media of TV and radio – of the event and the world into discontinuous, successive, non-contradictory messages – signs which can be juxtaposed and combined with other signs within the abstract dimension of the programme. What we consume, then, is not a particular spectacle or image in itself, but the potential succession of all possible spectacles – and the certainty that the law of succession and the segmenting of the schedules will mean that there is no danger of anything emerging within them that is not one spectacle or one sign among others.

Medium is Message

Here, and in this sense at least, we have to accept as a fundamental feature of the analysis of consumption McLuhan's formula that 'the medium is the message'. This means that the true message the media of TV and radio deliver, the one which is decoded and 'consumed' deep down and unconsciously, is not the manifest content of sounds and images, but the constraining pattern – linked to the very technical essence of those media – of the disarticulation of the real into successive and equivalent signs: it is the *normal*, programmed, miraculous transition from Vietnam to variety, on the basis of a total abstraction of both.

And there is something like a law of technological inertia which means that the closer one gets to true documentary, to 'live coverage', and the more closely the real is pursued with colour, depth and one technical improvement after another, the greater does the real absence from the world grow. And the more the 'truth' of TV or radio has to be recognized: that the primary function of each message is to refer to another message. So Vietnam refers on to advertising, advertising to the TV news, etc., the systematic juxtaposition of these things being the discursive mode of the medium, its message, its meaning. But we have to recognize that, while speaking to and of itself in this way, the medium is imposing a whole system of segmentation and interpretation of the world upon us.

This technological process of mass communications delivers a certain kind of very imperative message: a *message-consumption message*, a message of segmentation and spectacularization, of misrecognition of the world and foregrounding of information as a commodity, of glorification of content as sign. In short, it performs a conditioning function (in the advertising sense of the term: in this sense, advertising is the 'mass' medium *par excellence*, and its schemata leave their stamp on all the other media) and a function of misrecognition.

This is true of all the media, even of the book medium, of 'literacy', which McLuhan makes one of the central linkages in his theory. He takes the view that the emergence of the printed book was a key turning-point in our civilization, not so much for the contents (ideological, informational, scientific, etc.) it passes down from one generation to another, as for the *basic constraint of systematization it exerts by virtue of its technical essence*. He takes the view that the book is, first and foremost, a *technical model*, and that the order of communication prevailing within it (visualized segmentation, letters, words, pages, etc.) is a more influential, more determining model in the long term than any particular symbol, idea or fantasy that makes up its manifest content: 'The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.'¹⁷

Self-evidently, most of the time, the content conceals from us the real function of the medium. It presents itself as a message, whereas the real message, with regard to which the manifest discourse is perhaps mere connotation, is the deep structural change (of scale, of model, of habitus) wrought in human relations. Crudely put, the 'message' of the railways is not the coal or the passengers it carries, but a vision of the world, the new status of urban areas, etc. The 'message' of TV is not the images it transmits, but the new modes of relating and perceiving it imposes, the alterations to traditional family and group structures. And we may go even further and say that, in the case of TV and the modern mass media, what is received, assimilated and 'consumed' is not so much a particular spectacle as the potentiality of all spectacles.

This, then, is the truth of the mass media: it is their function to neutralize the lived, unique, eventual character of the world and substitute for it a multiple universe of media which, as such, are homogeneous one with another, signifying each other reciprocally and referring back and forth to each other. In the extreme case, they each become the content of the others – and that is the *totalitarian 'message' of a consumer society*.

What the TV medium conveys by its technical organization is the idea (the ideology) of a world endlessly visualizable, endlessly segmentable and readable in images. It conveys the ideology of the *omnipotence of a system of reading over a world become a system of signs*. TV images present themselves as the metalanguage of an absent world. Just as the smallest technical object, the tiniest gadget, is a promise of a universal technical Assumption, so images/signs are a presumption of an exhaustive imagining of the world, of a total assumption of the mode of reality into the image, which might be regarded as its memory, its universal decoding unit. Behind the 'consumption of images' looms the imperialism of a system of reading: increasingly, only what can be read (what *must* be read: the 'legendary') will tend to exist. And there will no longer be any question then of the truth of the world, or its history, but only of the internal coherence of the system of reading. Thus, on a confused, conflictual, contradictory world, each medium imposes its own more abstract, more coherent logic; it imposes itself – a

medium – as message, to use McLuhan's expression. And it is the substance of the fragmented, filtered world, the world reinterpreted in terms of this simultaneously technical and 'legendary' code, that we 'consume' – the entire material of the world, the whole of culture industrially processed into finished products, into sign material, from which all eventual, cultural or political value has vanished.

If we regard the sign as the articulation of a signifier and a signified, we may specify two types of confusion. For the child, or the 'primitive', the signifier may fade in favour of the signified (as when the child mistakes its own image for a living being, or African TV viewers ask where the man who has just disappeared from the screen has gone). Conversely, in the self-centred image or the code-centred message, the signifier becomes its own signified, a circular confusion between the two arises to the signifier's advantage, and we see the abolition of the signified and the *tautology of the signifier*. This is what defines consumption, the systematic *consumption effect* at the level of the mass media. Instead of going out to the world via the mediation of the image, it is the image which circles back on itself via the world (it is the signifier which designates itself under cover of the signified).

We move from the message centred on the signified – a transitive message – to the message centred on the signifier. For example (in the case of TV), from events signified by the image to the consumption of the image as such – i.e. precisely as something different from those events, as spectacular – Brecht would say 'culinary' – substance, exhausting itself in the very time-span of its absorption, and never referring on beyond. Different too in the sense that it does not offer events to be either seen or understood in their (historical, social or cultural) specificity, but delivers them up, all without distinction reinterpreted in terms of the same code which is at once an *ideological structure* and a *technical structure* – i.e. in the case of TV, the ideological code of mass culture (a system of moral, social and political values) and the mode of segmentation, of articulation of the medium itself, which imposes a certain type of discursivity that neutralizes the multiple and shifting content of messages and substitutes its own imperative constraints of meaning. Unlike the manifest discourse of the images, this deep-level discursivity of the medium is decoded *unconsciously* by the viewer.

The Advertising Medium

In this sense, advertising is perhaps the most remarkable mass medium of our age. Just as, when it speaks of a particular object, it potentially glorifies all of them, and in referring to a particular object and brand it speaks in fact of the totality of objects and a world made up in its totality of objects and brands, so, in targeting each consumer, it is targeting them all, and in addressing each individual, it is addressing them all, thus simulating a *consumer totality*, retribalizing consumers in the McLuhanesque sense of the

term, i.e. through a complicity, an immanent, immediate collusion at the level of the message, but above all at the level of the medium itself and the code. Every image, every advertisement imposes a consensus – that between all the individuals potentially called upon to decipher it, that is to say, called on, by decoding the message, to subscribe automatically to the code in which it has been couched.

It is not, then, its contents, its modes of distribution or its manifest (economic and psychological) objectives which give advertising its mass communication function; it is not its volume, or its real audience (though all these things are important and have a support function), but its very logic as an autonomized medium, i.e. as an object referring not to real objects, not to a real world or a referential dimension, but from *one sign to the other*, from *one object to the other*, from *one consumer to the other*. In the same way, books become means of mass communication if they link the person who reads them with all those who read them (reading a book is not, in that case, a matter of meaning content, but a pure and simple sign of cultural complicity), or if the book/object links up with others in the same collection, etc. One might analyse how language itself, a symbolic system, reverts to being a mass medium at the level of the brand name and the language of advertising. Mass communication is everywhere defined by this systematization at the level of the technical medium and the code, by the systematic production of messages not from the world, but from the medium itself.¹⁸

Pseudo-Event and Neo-Reality

We enter here the world of the pseudo-event, of pseudo-history and pseudo-culture which is discussed by Boorstin in *The Image*. By this he means a world of events, history, culture and ideas not produced from shifting, contradictory, real experience, but *produced as artifacts from elements of the code and the technical manipulation of the medium*. It is this, and nothing else, which defines all signification whatsoever as *consumable*. It is this generalization of the *substitution of the code for the referential dimension* which defines mass-media consumption.

The raw event is exchange: it is not material for exchange. It only becomes 'consumable' when filtered, fragmented and reworked by a whole industrial chain of production – the mass media – into a finished product, a material of combined, finite signs, analogous to the finished products of industrial production. This is the same operation make-up performs on the face: for real but discordant features, the systematic substitution of a network of abstract but coherent messages made up from technical elements and a code of imposed significations (the code of 'beauty').

We have to beware of interpreting this gigantic enterprise of production of the artificial and the cosmetic, of pseudo-objects and pseudo-events, which is invading our daily existence, as a denaturing or falsifying of an

'authentic' content. We can see from all that has just been said that the abduction of meaning, the depoliticization of politics, the deculturing of culture and the desexualization of the body in mass-media consumption occurs in a region far beyond the mere 'tendentious' reinterpretation of content. It is in the *form* that everything has changed: a neo-reality has everywhere been substituted for reality, a neo-reality entirely produced by combining elements of the code. Over the whole span of daily life, a vast *process of simulation* is taking place, similar in style to the 'simulation models' through which the operational and cybernetic sciences work. A model is 'built' by combining features or elements of reality, and an event, a structure or a future situation is 'played out on' those elements, and tactical conclusions are drawn from this with which to operate on reality. In a controlled scientific procedure, this can serve as an instrument of analysis. In mass communications, it assumes *force of reality*: reality itself is abolished, obliterated, in favour of this *neo-reality of the model*, which is given material force by the medium itself.

However, let us once again beware of language, which speaks automatically of the 'false', the 'pseudo' or the 'artificial'. And let us turn again, with Boorstin, to the subject of advertising in order to try to grasp this new logic, which is also a new practice and a new 'mentality'.

Beyond the True and the False

Advertising has a strategic position in this process. It is the reign of the pseudo-event *par excellence*. It turns the object into an event. In fact, it constructs it as such by eliminating its objective characteristics. It constructs it as a *model*, as a spectacular news item. Modern advertising began when the advertisement was no longer a spontaneous announcement and had become "made news"¹⁹ (it is in this way that advertising becomes homogeneous with 'news', which is itself subjected to the same labour of 'myth-making': advertising and 'news' thus constitute a single visual, written, phonic and mythic substance; they succeed each other and alternate in all the media in a way which seems *natural* to us – they give rise to the same curiosity and the same spectacular/ludic absorption).²⁰

Journalists and advertisers are *mythic operators*: they present the object or the event as drama, as fiction. They 'offer it up reinterpreted' and might even, at a pinch, construct it deliberately. If we wish to judge objectively, then, we must apply the categories of myth to them: this latter is neither true nor false and the question is not whether one believes in it or not. That indeed gave rise to two false problems which are endlessly debated:

- 1 Do advertising executives believe in what they do? (If they did, they could be partly forgiven.)
- 2 Don't consumers ultimately believe in advertising? (If they did, they would be partly saved.)

So, Boorstin argues that advertisers should not be blamed, since the source of the persuasion and mystification was not so much their unscrupulousness as our pleasure at being deceived: it was not so much their desire to seduce, as our desire to be seduced. And he takes the example of Barnum, whose 'great discovery was not how easy it was to deceive the public, but rather, how much the public enjoyed being deceived'.²¹ This is a seductive hypothesis, but a false one. This whole state of affairs is not based on some sort of reciprocal perversity, some cynical manipulation or collective masochism revolving around the true and the false. The truth is that advertising (like the other mass media) does not deceive us: it is *beyond the true and the false*, just as fashion is beyond ugliness and beauty and the modern object, in its sign function, is beyond usefulness and uselessness.

The problem of the 'veracity' of advertising should be posed as follows: if advertising men really 'lied', they would be easy to unmask. But they do not. And if they do not, this is not because they are too intelligent, but because 'the advertiser's art ... consists largely of the art of making persuasive statements which are neither true nor false'.²² For the good reason that there is no longer either any original or any real referential dimension and, like all myths and magic formulas, advertising is based on a different kind of *verification*, that of the self-fulfilling prophecy. 'The successful advertiser is the master of a new art: the art of making things true by saying they are so. He is a devotee of the technique of the self-fulfilling prophecy.'²³

Advertising is prophetic language, in so far as it promotes not learning or understanding, but hope. What it says presupposes no anterior truth (that of the object's use-value), but an ulterior confirmation by the reality of the prophetic sign it sends out. This is how it achieves its end. It turns the object into a pseudo-event, which will become the real event of daily life through the consumer's endorsing its discourse. We can see that the true and the false are indiscernible here, just as they are in political opinion polls where we no longer know whether the real vote is simply ratifying the polls (and it is, then, no longer a real event, but merely a substitute for the polls which, from having been simulations that are *statistical indicators*, have become *determining agents of reality*) or whether the polls are reflecting public opinion. This is an inextricable tangle. Just as nature imitates art, so daily life ends up being the replica of the model.

The mode of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' is the tautological mode. Reality is no longer anything but the model speaking itself. So it is with magical formulas, so it is with simulations and so also with advertising which, among other styles of discourse, plays – for preference – on the tautological. Everything in that discourse is a 'metaphor' for one and the same thing: the brand. The expressions 'a better beer' (than what?), 'Lucky Strike, a toasted cigarette' (of course it's toasted; they all are!) merely refer back to a spiral of self-evidence. When Hertz ('the world no. 1 for car hire') says, at the end of a long advertisement, 'Be logical. If you did not find that little something more with us, we would not have reached the position we have today ... And someone else perhaps would be placing this advertisement', what is

this but pure tautology and circular argument? Everywhere, repetition itself functions as efficient causality in this way. Just as molecules are artificially synthesized in certain laboratories, so truth is 'artificially synthesized' here from efficient speech. 'Persil washes whitest' is not a sentence; it is Persil-speak. This and other advertising syntagms do not explain, do not offer any meaning, and are therefore neither true nor false, but they eliminate precisely both meaning and proof. They substitute an unadorned indicative, which is a repetitive imperative. And that tautology of discourse seeks, as in the magic formula, to induce tautological repetition *by the event*. The consumer, by his purchase, will merely ratify *the coming to pass of the myth*.

We might pursue the analysis of advertising discourse further in this direction, and we might also extend it to the various modern media. If we did so, we should see that everywhere, in a radical inversion of the traditional logic of signification and interpretation based on truth and falsehood, it is here the myth (or the model) which finds its event – by means of a production of speech which is now industrialized on the same basis as the production of material goods.