

# The Obsolescence of Man, Volume II: On the Destruction of Life in the Epoch of the Third Industrial Revolution – Günther Anders

*It is not enough to change the world. That is all we have ever done.*

*That happens even without us.*

*We also have to interpret this change.*

*And precisely in order to change it.*

*So that the world will not go on changing without us.*

*And so that it is not changed in the end into a world without us.*

## Preface

This second volume of *The Obsolescence of Man* is, like the first volume, a philosophy of technology. More precisely: *a philosophical anthropology in the epoch of technocracy*. By “technocracy” I am not referring to the supremacy of the technocrats (as if they were a group of specialists who dominate contemporary politics), but to the fact that the world in which we live and which surrounds us is a technological world, to such an extent that we are no longer permitted to say that, in our historical situation, technology is just one thing that exists among us like other things, but that instead we must say that now, history unfolds in the situation of the world known as the world of “technology” and therefore technology has actually become the subject of history, alongside of which we are merely “co-historical”.<sup>1</sup>

This book therefore addresses the transformations that men as individuals, as well as humanity as a whole, have undergone and continue to undergo due to this *factum*. These transformations affect our entire life in both its active and passive moments; they affect our free time as well as our working time, our inter-subjective relations and even our (allegedly *a priori*) categories. Today, anyone who still proclaims the “transformability of man” (as Brecht did) is a figure from the past, since we *are* transformed. And this transformation of man is so fundamental that anyone who still speaks today of his “essence” (as Scheler still did) is a figure from the distant past.

If I nonetheless claim that the picture I present of modern man represents not only the man of today, but also the man of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, and therefore it is in a certain sense a *definitive picture*, I do not do so as a result of arrogance—quite the contrary: I am fully aware of the fragmentary character of my work—but only because the stage that I describe, precisely that of technocracy, is definitive and irrevocable; because this stage, insofar as (there are many things that speak in favor of this possibility) it does not lead one of

---

<sup>1</sup> I formulated this “Copernican revolution”, which has not been understood by any politicians up to this date, in my most specific thesis that it is false to claim that the atomic bomb exists in the framework of our political situation; to the contrary, it is clear that politics takes place in the framework of the atomic reality. See the author’s *Endzeit und Zeitenende*, pp. 204 *et seq.*

these days to the end-time, can no longer be followed by another stage, but that it is and will forever remain a final time.<sup>2</sup> And this means that we, the men of today, will remain constant in our (recently acquired) “essence”. I say, “recently acquired”, because this “constancy” is not of course a property of our human “nature”, but an artificial situation, in which we have gotten ourselves, something that we were only capable of because the capacity to transform our world—no: not just our world, but *the* world—and ourselves paradoxically belongs to our “nature”.<sup>3</sup>

I said that this volume is a philosophy of technology. This might sound as if I am referring to a system. But this is not at all the case, if by “system” one understands a framework within which one introduces the empirical facts, which are more or less easily fitted into that framework *a posteriori*. The empirical facts have always been my starting point. For every one of the ideas elaborated in the following text, the same thing is true that I said concerning those in the first volume: they comprise an *occasional philosophy* [*Gelegenheitsphilosophie*]; that is, I have always started from particular experiences: whether from those of assembly line labor, automated labor processes or those associated with sports stadiums. In fact, this character of *plein air* of my theorizing, contrary to all construction, is what characterizes this philosophy; and on this basis I am permitted to hope that it can be something more than just specialized literature.

However, despite the—if I may be permitted to use the expression—impressionistic character of these investigations; despite the fact that at no time have I tried to *invent* anything—I have always been seeking rather to “discover” things—and the fact that none of my particular observations or theses are based on an elaborate systematic construct (that is, a schema of prejudices); despite all of this I will not claim that my investigations are non-systematic. True, their general connection was not planned in advance; it is rather a systematic *après coup*. If, as I said, none of the theses presented here contradict even one of the many others—indeed, they even mutually support one another—it is not because I have set up in advance a “pre-established harmony”, that is, that I have arranged in advance the relations between the theses. To the contrary: I have become aware of this harmony only *a posteriori*, that is, after the necessary revision of the texts for publication, texts that were written in some cases decades apart and in different places. This “systematic” quality was a (not unpleasant) surprise to me; and only thus, discovered *après coup*, does it seem legitimate to me. This is true not only for the theses presented in the two volumes of *Obsolescence*, but for the theses in all of my books, since they are generally only paraphrases of my principal work. It would probably be easy to construct a “system” (in the conventional sense of the word) on the basis of the theses in these books,<sup>4</sup> but I do not think this is my job, since I cannot understand why some truths should be “more true” just because they are presented in the form of a “system”. It is absolutely enough that they do not contradict one another.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Endzeit und Zeitenende*, *op. cit.*, pp. 170 *et seq.*

<sup>3</sup> See my article, “Pathologie de la liberté” (1929) in *Recherches philosophiques*, Boivin, 1936, pp. 40 *et seq.*

<sup>4</sup> This has been carried out excellently by *Grover Foley* in his book, *Denker des Unterganges*.

I will be asked why I published this second volume almost a quarter century after the first volume. This question is all the more justified insofar as many of the essays published in this second volume were written (and many of them were even published) before 1960, and therefore I could have published the continuation of the first volume a long time ago.

What led me to abandon my main theme, the destruction of humanity and the possible physical self-dissolution of humanity, to set aside my innumerable files, and even to forget about their very existence? What more agreeable themes led me to this desertion?

The answer is: I never abandoned the main theme (despite the fact that it was often hard for me to resist the temptation to do so); I never gave preference to another theme; I never deserted my initial project.

If something led me to philosophical silence it was the intuition and the feeling that, faced with the danger of the real downfall of humanity, it was a luxury not only to concern myself with its “mere dehumanization”, but that there was not even any value in concerning myself with the threat of an effective downfall, if this were to be limited to merely a philosophical-theoretical concern. Instead, I considered it unavoidable, insofar as it was within my power, to really take part with thousands of other persons in the struggle against this danger. If I set aside my first volume this was because I was not ready to set aside what the first volume represented.

More than fifty years ago, a philosopher who was as mean-spirited as he was speculatively grandiose and who, in the meantime, has become world famous, with his particular taste for scornfulness, warned me *not to desert by succumbing to praxis*. I have not been able to forget those words; at the time I considered this moralistic warning to be of a most profound honesty. Nonetheless, I did desert and succumb to praxis. And the reason why I did so requires no justification; for, as rumor has it, “morality is its own explanation”.

In any event, during that stage of my life, which was dedicated above all to praxis, writings which were not entirely theoretical also appeared that retained a strict connection with the reflections of the first volume.<sup>5</sup> However, since I hoped that these writings would have an immediate and widespread effect of alarm, it would have made no sense to delay publishing them for several years in order to integrate them, only later, as part of the second volume of *The Obsolescence of Man*. Warnings after the fact are stupid. That is why these writings of alarm have a style that was not designed for professional philosophers, nor would it have been suitable for a purely philosophical book.

However, even after having expressed what I believed should be said about the nuclear threat, my “repatriation” to philosophy was still prevented. For the second time I “went astray” (if it can be said that the call of duty can lead one astray), for in the sixties I confronted another emergency, which had just as much to do with the main concerns of *The Obsolescence of Man*, that is, the urgent need to take part in the struggle against genocide in

---

<sup>5</sup> *Der Mann auf der Brücke*, Munich, 1959; *Off limits für das Gewissen*, Hamburg, 1961; *Endzeit und Zeitenende*, Munich, 1972.

Vietnam, which, insofar as it was being implemented by means of machines, was a horrible illustration of my philosophical theses on machines. It is certainly true that, here as well, one cannot draw a clear line of demarcation between theory and praxis; on the basis of this activity a book also took shape, which represented a fragment of the “critique of technology”: it addressed the language elaborated by the homicidal technocracy of the United States which was used in part to disguise, and in part to justify, its acts of devastation and genocide.<sup>6</sup> And what applies to the “anti-nuclear” texts also applies to my Vietnam book: despite the fact that they were not absolutely non-philosophical (for it is a difficult task indeed to refrain from philosophizing), they were so closely bound to the events and the historical situation they addressed that it would not have been right to leave them on the shelf so as to later present them to an academic circle of readers as part of the second volume.<sup>7</sup>

Now it will be understood why I cannot accept the basis of the question about why I deserted the philosophical reflections of *The Obsolescence of Man* in order to devote myself to praxis and therefore cannot answer it. The correct question would be just the opposite: why have I *deserted towards the rear*, towards philosophical theory, as I have done in this volume. The answer to this question is a trivial one: I am too old for praxis.

Of course, such a *desertion towards the rear* is not a pleasure. When someone like me, who has been a “politically committed” writer for approximately fifty years, faces the imperative of standing with crossed arms or, in the best case, of employing his time writing theories, it is hardly bearable in the face of the old dangers that still remain unresolved—no: they have not even been understood by most people—and in the face of the new dangers which humanity has not even noticed yet. Inactivity is incomparably more difficult than the most arduous activity. Having to abandon tasks is a task that is itself almost too hard. It is incomparably easier to resist the temptation to perform one’s duty than it is to undertake to oppose resistance to temptations that arise *by way of* duties. It is not surprising that now, when I

---

<sup>6</sup> *Visit Beautiful Vietnam*, Cologne, 1968.

<sup>7</sup> I certainly cannot claim that, while I was writing those reflections, I dared to hope for a victorious conclusion to the war. Instead, I considered the struggle and my very modest contribution to it to be one of the duties of the epoch, unavoidable despite its slight chances of success. Even today, I am still mistrustful and incredulous with respect to the victory of North Vietnam and the Viet-Cong, since it contradicts my conviction that the victory of the technocracy had already taken place. Meanwhile, even this victory has now been revealed to be quite dialectical, since the alleged loser, thanks to its technological superiority, has been able to view its defeat with indifference: the victory of the Vietnamese has not affected its supremacy in the least; instead, the victors have *not* been able to take advantage of their victory: even today (1978) they have not recovered from the war and might soon fall into a greater or lesser dependence on their supposedly defeated enemy. It can now be seen that my book about the Vietnamese war also represents, as a critique of technology, a complementary periphrasis of *The Obsolescence of Man*, just like my condemnation of the space program set forth in *Blick vom Mond* (Munich, 1970), which I opposed not because it might fail, but, to the contrary, because its unmitigated success seemed to be the herald of future horrors, an indication that other colossal enterprises, such as, for example, nuclear attacks from space platforms, “might be a resounding success”.

return as a pure theoretician with the second volume of *The Obsolescence of Man* and I have to leave the necessary struggle against nuclear reactors, uranium enrichment plants and neutron bomb production and other such things to the younger generations, the interval that separates me from the first volume does not seem so very long to me, but rather too short. And I do not consider the resumption of my theoretical quest to be too late, but, rather, too early. “Today, already?”, I complain. Not as I did in the first line of the preface to the first volume: “Only today.”

While revising the following texts, which were written many years apart and without any planned connection between them, I noticed a defect, which I was not so clearly aware of when I was writing them: they are generally variations on a single theme, that is, *that of the discrepancy of the capacity of our diverse faculties*. This *a posteriori* discovery of my “monothematic”, however, does not bother me. And not only because I think that my variations, in the sense of Beethoven’s musical variations, are real “transformations”, that is, that every one of them displays the theme in a new light or conceals it under a new shadow, but above all because, as Heidegger once said, this “defect” can be thrown in the face of all the thinkers of the past, including the most important ones, with whom it would never even occur to me to compare myself in my wildest dreams. What matters is whether the multiple modifications render something of the *idée fixe* visible. It is not the author’s job to judge whether this has been achieved.

I would like to conclude with a saying of Max Weber’s: “The most important things are naturally in the footnotes.”

*June 1979*

## **INTRODUCTION: THE THREE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTIONS**

**(1979)**

§ 1

*Give us this day our daily hunger.*

In 1956 I gave the first volume the subtitle, *On the Soul in the Epoch of the Second Industrial Revolution*. At the time this was an understatement, for if instead of locating the criterion of the differentiation of such revolutions in their various energy sources (water, steam, etc.— which is as common as it is superficial), it was to be philosophically defined, the following reckoning would be imposed: you can speak of a real “industrial revolution”, that is, the first industrial revolution, only at the moment when the principle of “machinery” began to be *iterated*; that is, by *producing machines*, or at least parts of machines, *by way of machines*. From that moment, whose date is of no importance, this iteration rapidly built up steam, since from then on the production of machines by way of machines was no longer an exception,

but the rule.<sup>8</sup> The mechanism of our industrial cosmos now consists in the production (obtained by way of products and, concretely, means of production) of products, which in turn, as means of production, have the purpose of producing products, which, in turn ... and so on, until finally a machine “spits out” *final products*, which are no longer means of production, but means of consumption, that is, certain means that *must be consumed by being used*, like *bread* or *hand grenades*. Only at the beginning of these chains of production (as inventors or artisans) and at the end (as users) do men have a place. However, it is not legitimate to claim with regard to these final products that they are exclusively products and not also means of production, since these final products, for their part—the iteration does not undergo any interruption at all—by being used, produce something, that is: situations in which the production—again via machines—of subsequent products is required. In such cases, it is not actually the products themselves that figure as means of production, but our *acts of consumption*: a truly disgraceful situation, since here our role (the role of men) is limited to assuring, by way of the consumption of products (for which, furthermore, we have to pay), that production continues.<sup>9</sup>

A Molussian aphorism says that if we were honest our prayer would not take the form of, “Give us this day our daily bread”, but *Give us this day our daily hunger*, so that the daily manufacture of bread should be assured. Given the fact that those who pray today are really the products themselves, insofar as we even pray at all these days, the prayer should be: *Give us this day our daily eaters*.

In fact, this Molussian aphorism is absolutely valid for 99 percent of all products, since *most of them*—even those that we could hardly call artificial, like the butter that is piled up as high as mountains and is assured of easy digestion—*have a hunger to be consumed*, since they can and must depend only on a corresponding human hunger. So that the accounts can balance, that is, so that production can continue, we have to produce and introduce, between the product and man, a subsequent product called *demand*. Construed from our perspective: *in order to be capable of consuming products we need to have a need for them*. However, since this need does not naturally arise in us (like hunger), we have to *produce it*; and this must be done by way of a particular industry, by way of particular means of production, produced by machines for this purpose, and which are *products of the third degree*. This industry, which must balance the hunger that the commodities have to be consumed and our hunger for these

---

<sup>8</sup> It is even a feature of the current situation that every machine is a co-presupposition and thus a co-producer or co-preserver of the other machines; and that the legion of existing machines tends, ultimately, to grow together towards a single megamachine and thus finally to found the *totalitarianism of the world of things*. (See the essay, “The Obsolescence of Machines”, below.)

<sup>9</sup> This effort to maintain production by way of consumption, at least in capitalism, is the current *concern [Sorge]*. And this has been true for fifty years, since the time when Heidegger, in whose *Being and Time* the economy, as well as hunger and sex, is absent, introduced this category as an existential melancholy.

same products, is called advertising.<sup>10</sup> Thus, means of advertising are produced in order to produce the need for products, which need us; in this way, by liquidating these products, we guarantee the continuation of their production.

§ 2

*What can be made must be made.*

What has to be satisfied by way of the production of human needs is not just the needs of the products (satisfied by the buyers), but also that of the technology of production, since the latter tirelessly demands that everything should be made that, in every one of its stages, is feasible. I say: “demands”, because today—this is the *idée fixe* of the third industrial revolution—the *possible is generally accepted as the compulsory and what can be done as what must be done*. Today’s moral imperatives arise from technology and render the moral postulates of our ancestors ridiculous—not only those of social ethics, but also those of personal ethics. In fact, these imperatives are strictly adhered to, the *abortion* of products is strictly prohibited (those products that, from the technological point of view, are possible, are “in gestation”), which implies that today thousands of things are born, thousands of *odradeks* (as everyone knows, this is what Kafka called those objects that have no reason to exist, a term that he invented), things that correspond to no human need, not only to none of the so-called “natural” needs (which, in any case, only apply to an insignificant fraction of the growing and constantly changing system of human needs), but not even to any of the most artificial demands.<sup>11</sup> Thus, for example, in order to satisfy the needs of technology, that is, to make what can be feasibly made, weapons are produced that make it possible to destroy humanity many times over; that is, a situation after which there will not only be no demand, but all demand is *rendered impossible*, or, more accurately, a situation that rules out any survival of industry (and not only industry). However, not only must everything be made that can feasibly be made, but *everything that has been made must really be used for the purpose for which it was designed*; not only is it the case that no weapon that has been invented, has not also been effectively produced, but every weapon that has been produced has been effectively used.<sup>12</sup> *Not only is it a rule that what can be done, must be done, but also that*

---

<sup>10</sup> This industry is also subject to iteration, in turn, since the advertising agencies advertise their own services just as they design advertisements for the products of their clients. See, below, “The Obsolescence of the Individual”.

<sup>11</sup> Naturally, it does not stop there; a demand for such products is also produced, often *post productionem*; and this is done as a result of the desire for profits on the part of the producers, who, fraudulently present their own interests as a national necessity. Thus, the *lobby* for heavy industry in the United States produced—and not just during the Cold War, which was also one of its products—a need for security and protection in the “free world” by way of the production of false statistics concerning Soviet arms production: and in this manner the most unbridled production of the most monstrous weapons and their purchase by the Armed Forces was justified and implemented.

<sup>12</sup> Poison gas, which has always been referred to in order to refute this claim, is no exception to this statement, since in 1918 it only proved to be unusable because of the danger that it poses to one’s own troops.

*what must be done is inevitable. And this is not just a rule, but a postulate, which takes the following form: You must not refrain from using that which can be used!*

The weapons produced by A are also “used”, insofar as their utilization consists in the threat of their use, and therefore, in extortion, which in turn compels the virtual enemy to improve its weapons, to which A again must react with the production of “even better” weapons. Since 1945 the United States has needed the Soviet Union to implement this “legitimation” and thus to continue its arms buildup. *If the Soviet Union did not exist, the United States would have had to invent it.* In fact, this absurd utilization of products is so obvious that indignation occasionally erupts in the United States because the weapons that the latter produces and sells are actually used by their purchasers. It is no longer *up to date* to effectively destroy products by way of their use: today, products have to be liquidated by way of their replacement by other products. No science fiction author could imagine anything more absurd: arms dealers who sell their weapons on the condition that they are not used as “offensive weapons”.

### § 3

*Variations on the “Promethean Disjunction”.*

A second example of *odradeks*: today, computers are built that in one second can not only process a thousand times more data than a thousand workers could process in a thousand hours, but also a thousand times more data than a thousand men could use in a thousand hours. This “Promethean disjunction”, which served as the topic of the opening discussion in my first volume twenty-five years ago, that is, the disjunction that exists between the maximum that we can produce and the maximum (shamefully small) that we can imagine, has now even become a *disjunction between what we produce and what we can use*. Impatiently we seek *raisons d’être* for these products; desperately we go in search of the questions that might be able to provide *a posteriori* legitimacy to the answers that we already have; and tirelessly we produce new products, in order to fulfill this new task (that of finding new tasks). In fact, we can now provide a third version to our *Promethean disjunction*, since the latter has now arisen between *the maximum that we can produce and the maximum* (shamefully small) *that we can need*. And this third version is, no matter how contradictory it may sound: “*we can need*”, for humanity now finds itself in the situation of the man condemned to death in *The Thousand and One Nights* who is told that he will be given a reprieve from his death sentence if he eats one hundred loaves of bread, which are placed before him. He was not capable, of course, of eating one hundred loaves of bread, and he had to face the consequences. Today, however, it is *we ourselves* who put the one hundred loaves in front of ourselves and who execute the sentence. Dispensing with metaphors: our actual finitude no longer consists in the fact that we are *animalia indigentia*, needy beings, but quite the contrary: it consists in the fact that (as if to spite inconsolable industry) *we can need too little*; in short: *in our lack of poverty*.

### § 4

*The third revolution.*



Now, in this stage in which we have to produce needs, I discern the stage of the third industrial revolution. This change, however, which was already underway in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is by no means the last; it was not even the last stage when I wrote the first volume. In fact, even then I called attention in the book's conclusion to a subsequent revolution, introduced by a new apparatus; it had already begun ten years before and had entailed a transformation of humanity that was so spectacular that, even then, it would have been correct to speak of a revolution *sui generis*, that is, of a *third industrial revolution*.

The spectacular means of production to which I refer is naturally that one that, for the first time ever, put humanity in the position of *producing its own destruction*, that is, the *atomic bomb*. To describe the latter as having “put humanity in the position of” is certainly an *understatement*, even, as they say in America, the *understatement of the century*, for the reasons previously set forth: because it forms part of the essence of our technological existence that we not only cannot or are not permitted to refrain from producing what we can produce, but also because we cannot or we are not permitted to refrain from using it. If this is the case, then we are living—and have been for some thirty years—in an epoch in which we incessantly manage the production of our own destruction (the only thing we do not know is the precise moment of its advent). If this is not a suitable criterion to define a new stage of the industrial revolution, that is, of the third industrial revolution, then I do not know how such a criterion could be defined.

The symbol of the third industrial revolution is nuclear energy, but not because it is a physical *novum*—which it also is—but because its possible or probable effect is of a *metaphysical nature*—which cannot be claimed for any previous effect brought about by humans. I call the effect of nuclear energy “metaphysical” because the term “epochal” still presupposes as obvious the continuation of history and a succession of other epochs; an assumption that is not permitted to us. *The epoch of changing epochs no longer exists after 1945*. Now we live in an era that is no longer one epoch that precedes others, but rather a *reprieve*, during which our existence is endlessly nothing but a “barely-still-existing”. The obsolete quality of Ernst Bloch, who resisted even taking the event of Hiroshima into consideration, consisted in his faith—which almost amounted to indolence—in the idea that we are still living in a “not yet”, that is, in a “pre-history”, one that precedes the authentic one. He could not, even for one minute, be motivated to lose hope. In any event our epoch is, regardless of whether it ends now or continues, the *last*, since the danger to which we have exposed ourselves by way of our spectacular product, which has become the definitive Mark of Cain of our existence, can never disappear, not even with the end itself.

This third revolution is therefore the last. I do not want to say anything else about this topic, for in the last twenty years I have addressed it in copious detail. In this volume it will not appear again.

§ 5

*Internal revolutions. Homo creator and homo materia.*

1. After defining the third stage as definitive and unsurpassable, we have to renounce any further reckoning of stages of revolution. And this is because revolutions, which up until now have convulsed humanity—and there have been many and there will certainly be even more—regardless of how spectacular they might be, take place *within* the third stage. If this third stage had not arisen, we would be permitted, or, more precisely, we would have to classify the transformations, to which I now refer, as undeniable revolutions. I am thinking, above all, of two: of the monstrous fact that man has been transformed into *homo creator*; and in the fact, no less unprecedented, that he has transformed himself into *raw material*, that is, into *homo materia*...

By the term, *homo creator*, I am referring to the fact that we are capable, or, more exactly, we have put ourselves in the position of generating *products* from nature (like the house built from wood) that do not belong to the category of “cultural products”, but to that of *nature*. In fact, we can speak of a second nature, an expression, which up until now has only been used metaphorically, but which today is permitted to be used in a non-metaphorical sense, because now there are processes and parts of nature which did not exist before we created them. These days it is nothing new to our contemporaries when new variants of plants or animals can be designed. Given the fact that the individuals of artificially cultivated species are living creatures, who belong to botanical or zoological classes, it can be asserted that, in these cases, we have now produced φύσις by way of τέχνη; and furthermore, since these living creatures were not “foreseen” by nature, they are spectacular. We use the term, “variant”, however, because in the past such things were always a matter of variations on themes already established by nature. We can, however, and indeed must, speak of a “revolution” from the moment that the stage of mere variations is abandoned. And this is the case today, since what we can now invent and produce by way of technology is an existent that is not a variation of a previously given theme, but represents a *new theme*, to carry on with this figure of speech. I am thinking, for example, of Elements 93 and 94 on the periodic table: Element 94 is Plutonium, which “did not exist” until recently, and which, only thanks to the (truly “Godlike”) intervention of man, that is, by way of the processing of U-238, has emerged into the arena of existence, into the arena of nature. (And it has done so in the form of the most fearsome toxic substance that exists in nature.) It is a product which at the moment of its production belongs to nature as a *novum*; that is, it does not just “belong” to nature, like any other human product, whether an old-fashioned table or a breathtaking oil painting by Rembrandt. However, not only is it the world that has been transformed in a revolutionary way by this possibility of producing “novelties”, but also man, since the latter has thereby ascended from the status of *homo faber* to *homo creator*. If this is not a revolution, I do not know what the word can mean. Nor is it just by chance that this revolution, too, just like the apocalyptic revolution that put us in a position to destroy the world, began in an atomic physics laboratory.

2. The *transformation of man into a raw material*, if we disregard the era of the cannibals, began in Auschwitz. Everyone knows that, from the corpses of the inmates of the concentration camps (which were already products, since what happened in those places was not the killing of men, but the manufacture of corpses), the hair was certainly removed and gold teeth were definitely extracted, but probably also the fat was rendered to use as a raw material. Likewise, everyone knows about the American soldiers who came back from the

Pacific theater with the gold teeth of Japanese soldiers: I have with my own eyes seen bags full of teeth; these soldiers showed them to me (as incredible as this may sound) *innocently*. Innocently, because it was obvious to them to view the world as raw material and they also took it for granted that their Japanese counterparts (who, of course, had previously been demoted to “monkeys” by means of a systematic campaign of defamation) should also be considered to be part of that same world.

3. Thank God, however, this way of using man as a valuable source of raw materials has remained an exceptional phenomenon. More frequent and incomparably more typical are the actions in which men manufacture, from other men, not simply a dead raw material, but something alive. In fact, one could say that in these cases *the homo creator and the homo materia coincide*: of course, *creator* and *materia* never personally coincide, but one acts as the *creator* and the other as the *materia*.

It is clear that first of all we have to admit that there are *legitimate* actions [*rechtmässige*], by means of which men are transformed, that is: educational activities, that, even in the best cases, first transform the man in question into what is called a “man the way he is supposed to be” [*richtig*]. Here we are not referring to this kind of transformation. We must also mention this case, however, for it is hard to clearly establish where education ends and where instruction strictly speaking begins, that is, where men are conditioned in an “inhuman” manner by other men. And even of these it can be said that they are “inhuman” only with reservations, because, as anthropology and ethnology have demonstrated, the more or less violent artificial transformation of men into “conditioned” beings is part of the essence of both the (allegedly) “most primitive” societies as well as the most modern ones; and not only of those societies, for it is possible even in the absence of any society.

In any case, the conditioning to which I am referring is incomparably more radical, since it is not satisfied with changing living beings, but seeks to *create, starting from living beings, other, different beings*. In a certain sense, this is already an routine event, because artificial insemination (with semen taken from “banks”) is being carried out not only in cattle breeding, but also in humans (the latter is even done for a good reason, when for some reason natural insemination is not possible). This manipulation is, however, in comparison with the kind of manipulation with which we are now being threatened, completely innocuous, since the “products” that they are attempting to create by way of this artificial insemination are not, like plutonium, “existents that did not previously exist”, but rather normal human beings; and it is only the path, or rather the detour, that leads to this normal goal, that is artificial. By way of artificial implantation in the maternal womb, growing embryos are transformed into normal human beings.

Today, however, the process does not stop with this kind of artificiality. And with this step we are dealing with a form of production that, in fact, would have to be classified as a *novum* in the typology of the forms of human production and as a subsequent “industrial revolution”, if, as we previously demonstrated, we did not have to renounce any further reckoning in terms of subsequent revolutions.

I am referring to what is called *cloning*, or *genetic manipulation*; that is, to the possibility of producing new, unprecedented and unforeseen genera or species, or even duplicates of existing individuals. I do not know if they have already cloned human beings. But since we know that the ruling incantation recites that “What can be made must be made”, or, “What is feasible is compulsory”, what was until now only possible now looms over present as a portent that makes our hearts skip a beat.

Until now living beings had only been transformed within the range of variations that were possible for each species. This also applies to the attempts (such as that of the National Socialists) to transform the psychological type of man, as they said: to improve the species (the campaign to cultivate *Lebensborn*).<sup>13</sup> Or else what was changed was not the type of living being, but an indirect method of reproduction was introduced, that is, by way of *artificial insemination*. To this we must add that the transformations implemented in men were usually not a transformation of φύσις,<sup>14</sup> but of ψύχῆ, and that the latter, in accordance with its nature, is “plastically” moldable, and therefore is not only *capable*, but also *must be* learned, experienced and trained; and thus not only entails the passive possibility of being transformed, but is *suited to transformation*. Unlike this situation, the modern-day *cloners* are attempting to transform *the psychological type of the living being*. This means: creating combinations of creatures that were not “foreseen” by nature, concerning which it is not possible to determine whether they can even be included among the currently-known species; or else, certain beings that abolish the unique character of the individual, since they would be living replicas of the individualities (in a certain sense, “twins”, not to say duplicates)<sup>15</sup> of other individuals. *Whereas nuclear war means the annihilation of living beings, including men, cloning signifies the annihilation of species qua species. And perhaps the annihilation of the human species by way of the production of new types.* The question philosophical anthropology asked regarding the “essence of man”, with which those of us who are eighty years old or older were raised (Scheler), and which even I accepted, only later to radically repudiate it with the response that, “The essence of man consists in not having an essence”;<sup>16</sup> this question would be rendered completely meaningless on the day that man is used as a raw material *ad libitum*. How naïve it was to think that the theory of evolution is opposed to the biblical idea of man in the image and semblance of God! How ingenuous and human Darwinism was, which situated “inhumanity” only in the pre-history of man, if one compares it with genetic manipulation, which might *produce the inhuman*, precisely by manufacturing beings that would be *images and semblances* or copies of *desirable types, for political, economic or technological reasons!*

And even if the products that might result from such attempts were to be not subhuman beings, but “superhumans” (what the technicians imagine to be “superhuman”, along the lines of Superman), that is, if they were to fabricate, for example, *creative beings* (the

---

<sup>13</sup> *Lebensborn*, literally, “source of life” [Spanish Translator’s Note].

<sup>14</sup> We need not speak of exceptions such as *doping* or sports training or cosmetic surgery.

<sup>15</sup> The author engages in a play on words with the term *Zwillinge* (twins) and, to eliminate the reference to the number 2 (*zwei*), invents the term *Illinge*, which we have translated as “duplicates” [Note of the Spanish Translator].

<sup>16</sup> “*Pathologie de la liberté*” (1929), in *Recherches Philosophiques*, Paris, 1936.

putative ideal in the countries ruled by models), musical geniuses or mathematicians, then the sacrilege against man would not be any less than if they were to attempt to create the ideal of a semi-simian machine-tender.

Let us return to our main theme of the “industrial revolution”, for that is what we are talking about here, because the genetic engineer treats man (whom his predecessors had known only in the following five roles: owner, inventor, worker, seller and consumer) merely as simple (actually, merely as physiological) *raw material*. As raw material for the production of new types of products or means of production.

## § 6

### *Post-civilizational cannibalism.*

The one text that has had, and still has, the greatest impact on the best minds of our generation—the one by Kant that says that one can never use any person “merely as a means”, that is, as an instrument, or, as a slave—is now obsolete.<sup>17</sup> And not because such a *mediation* (in the most rigorous sense of the word)<sup>18</sup> of man, that is, slavery, no longer exists (the existence of hundreds of concentration camps and forced labor camps, from Santiago to

---

<sup>17</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason*, I, 8. It is true that we could never subscribe to Kant’s claim that, as he says elsewhere, “[with irrational animals] one may deal and dispose at one’s discretion” [“Lectures on Anthropology”, 7:11] (a claim that could be invoked by the exterminators of whales and seals). This terrible general license, which makes nothing taboo except man and which assumes that everything has been created for man, that is, that everything is at his disposal, has never existed outside of the monotheistic domain of the Judeo-Christian tradition (Genesis 1, 26-28): neither in the systems of the magi, nor in the various polytheistic systems. This is *the* defect of our “Western” ethic. Only in the framework of the anthropocentric tradition, in which the world was considered to be “subordinated” to man, that is, his servant, object and nourishment; and in which man, although still a *creature*, was not considered to be part of nature, but as the unlimited lord and master of all of creation; only in this framework could natural science arise and along with it, technology and then, finally, industrialism. That man should be the *goal* and the world *a means*, this anthropocentrism was the common denominator (only rarely interrupted by pantheistic *intermezzos*) of the European philosophies and vulgar worldviews, whose innumerable differences hardly matter in comparison with what they have in common. Naturally, the natural sciences and technology, which would never have existed without theological anthropocentrism, are today also rooted in those peoples, such as the Japanese, for example, that did not originally possess the theological presuppositions for them. These presuppositions, however, have long been forgotten in Judeo-Christian cultural circles as well. Now, the technocratic countries are no longer united by a single faith; to the contrary, what unites them is the atheism (only rarely explicit, but always observed) that (despite the occasional proclamations of faith on the part of physicists) underlies the natural sciences.

<sup>18</sup> *Mediation* [*Vermittlung*], in the sense of becoming a means; without tracing the word to its root, as the author would like to emphasize, perhaps it would be more correctly translated as “instrumentalization” [Note of the Spanish Translator].

Vladivostok, testifies to the contrary), but because (and this constitutes the essence, or non-essence, of the stage of the “industrial revolution” to which I am referring here) what has in the meantime erupted is *the utilization of man as raw material*, which overshadows the utilization of man as a means or instrument (prohibited by Kant) and actually makes the latter seem humane. What has taken place over the course of the history of the mechanical natural sciences is that now man, too, is considered to be a machine (*homme machine*), since the exception would have contradicted the principle; and this is repeated today on another plane: given that the world is considered, as a matter of principle, to be raw material, so, too, must that piece of the world known as “man” also be treated as raw material in order to prevent the principle from being contravened. And he must “be treated” as such not only in the theoretical, but also the practical sense (if the practical treatment does not already precede the theoretical). No one will deny that this stage (which could very well be defined as that of *post-civilizational cannibalism*) is so spectacular that one could very well acknowledge it as an “industrial revolution” *sui generis*. If we do not do so it is because of what we said above: because this revolution is taking place within the third revolution, which, in the form of a postponement or reprieve, is the last revolution.

## § 7

### *The world is overmanned.*

The fourth internal revolution, which I shall now subject to extensive investigation, is the inclination (as absurd as it may sound) *to render man superfluous*, that is, to replace his labor with the automatism of machines; to bring about a situation in which, if not doing away with people altogether, *as few workers as possible will be indispensable*. I deliberately refer to an “inclination” rather than a “tendency”, because of course one cannot impute to anyone, not even to an enterprise manager who is fanatically implementing a rationalization program, the pursuit of the goal to transform workingmen into unemployed men. The intention of today’s enterprise managers (and not just in the capitalist world) *is not to deprive the workers of work, but to see to it that their enterprises are not idled*. According to *Der Spiegel* (April 17, 1978) the Japanese consortium Kawasaki now boasts of having its own *unmanned factory*. It is no accident that this expression recalls certain military projects, which always and in every sense (including that of rationalization) anticipate peacetime industrial projects and that, once installed, function without soldiers, that is, without workers, such as, for example, the *unmanned minefields* in Vietnam. Likewise, the fact that a lack of work should effectively lead to unemployment is something that, naturally, is not made more bearable by the distinction that we have proposed.

In fact, now is the time to introduce a *WQ* (=workers quotient), which would reveal the percentage of workers necessary to provide for the life needs of one hundred workers, or, more precisely, these workers themselves would be provided for, since naturally here we cannot define “life” as simple physical survival, but existence in which the whole system of artificially contrived needs, transformed into second and third nature and of which the constant rise in the quality of life and living standards also forms part, that define today’s life. Of course, our thesis says: *The WQ in the highly industrialized countries declines*

(*asymptotically*) and constantly towards zero. In these countries, not to speak of the whole world, every enterprise is, as the American term expresses it, *overmanned*.<sup>19</sup>

One essential characteristic of the stage of the industrial revolution known as “rationalization” is its liquidation of us humans as *homines fabros*; provoking a situation in which labor would be increasingly more rare and unusual with each passing day and, far from considering it to be a curse (here, the Bible is entirely mistaken), it will be demanded as a *right* and, as a *privilege*, it will be reserved for an elite, one that is diminishing in size every day. The lives that most of us experience at home is, then, an *existence without labor*, and by this I am referring to a hellish existence (even assuming that our quality of life is not thereby affected). “Hellish”, because we would be deprived of one of the most powerful, important and highly esteemed pleasures: the *voluptas laborandi* (which often goes unnoticed amidst the fatigue brought on by work). In fact, for some time now an attempt has been underway to replace this *voluptas*, whose libidinal energy must be given some kind of outlet, with other pleasures, which certainly have always been highly esteemed.<sup>20</sup> I doubt, however, that this substitution will be successful.

Expressed in academic language: the classical equation of *free time* and *freedom*, in which my generation still believed fifty years ago and which is no longer valid today, is false in every respect. To the contrary: *free time*, that is, the time of not-working, will be experienced as a *curse*. And instead of the famous curse of the Book of Genesis (3:4) we will have to say: “You will have to sit on your ass on your sofa and watch television with your mouth hanging open the rest of your life!”

If, as I think, the inclination of rationalization is unstoppable, there is nothing more appropriate for our epoch than the tendency (which is already observed here and there) to stop this process or even to reverse its course, that is, to recover activities that can now be carried out (or are already carried out) by machines or robots; in short: *to turn back to replace things with men*, for example, the machines that dispense tickets for cash with old-fashioned ticket agents. The expression, “Be like a thing” precisely delineates this process.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> One American manager, when asked about this development, offended by the question, replied, without suspecting just how much his response, which was formulated as a question, resembled that of Cain: “*Why should I be responsible for the unfortunate fact that there are too many workers in the world? Am I their nurse?*”

<sup>20</sup> The attempt to replace it with the pleasure of pornography, *do-it-yourself* pastimes and sports will be addressed below, in Section 4 of the chapter devoted to labor.

<sup>21</sup> It might be assumed that these ticket agents would be ashamed of their reinsertion into the work process at the level of a machine (or of the fact that they would work less efficiently than the machines, below their level). But I have never encountered this kind of shame, which would be a kind of “Promethean shame”, referred to in the first volume. It is possible that it does not exist, something that would certainly justify a second kind of shame, since it is not very honorable to resign oneself to this “being like a thing”. One might think that twenty-five years ago, when I introduced “Promethean shame”, my speculation was erroneous, that is: that it presented a postulate as a fact and, in this way, crossed the border into a *Philosophy Fiction*. Perhaps, then, this theory of shame has to be revoked. On the other

It is absolutely Kafkaesque for the workers to try to reconquer work processes that consist of the production or fabrication of parts of extremely modern machinery, that is, of products by means of which the workers once again render themselves replaceable.

However, despite the absurdity of the struggle to reconquer functions already conquered by machines, it would be inappropriate to ridicule those engaged in this struggle as reactionaries or even as counterrevolutionaries because of their *Luddite* [*anti-machine*]<sup>22</sup> character. Those who do so only shows that, even today, they have not yet overcome the superstition (common to Marxism and capitalism, that is, it is the most widespread superstition) that identifies technological progress with social progress, and therefore political progress. And those who persist in this scornful anti-*Luddite* attitude due to their inability to overcome this superstition, only prove just how reactionary they are.

One hundred and fifty years ago, our ancestors, the domestic workers and farm laborers, who were transformed by rising industry into unemployed persons who were incapable of competing with machines, were the first Luddites. We have imagined that they and their descendants, after the terrible miseries of the transition and the losses they incurred during the reorganization period, would have ended up entering industry in one way or another and would have been integrated; that the epoch of Luddite sentiments had definitely been left behind. This was an illusion. This crisis has endured through the generations; we, their great-great-grandchildren, find ourselves facing the same dilemma as our ancestors. After a century and a half of latency, the crisis has become virulent. Once again, the machine has become the competitor and enemy. But it was not enough for this crisis to erupt once again: this time it is incomparably more dangerous than it was then. And not only because those who are affected today or tomorrow do not represent a minority, but above all because this time there will be *no refuge*. The question remains unanswered concerning just where, in which spaces of liberty or labor, which do not exist and that can never be reestablished, the masses that are no longer necessary will have to seek refuge. Today, for example, in the typographic industry there are signs of a storm of collective fear; and tomorrow, this fear will understandably continue to grow until it becomes a massive panic of unsuspected intensity. In this situation, it is no use to brandish scornful words like “Luddites”. *If there is anything that deserves scorn it is, to the contrary, today’s scornful use of the term, “Luddite”*, since this scorn (which was recently expressed by Government Chancellor in defense of a nuclear reactor) is currently more obsolete than the allegedly obsolete Luddism.

---

hand, I would not revoke the sense in which, even if one could not prove the existence of a shame of this type, there would still be shame in the sense of the English word, *shame*, that is, humiliation.

[To this note by the author, we should add a few words about the term, *Verdingung*, literally: to transform into a thing, which has been translated as “to put oneself on the labor market” and which Günther Anders is very careful to distinguish from another similar term: *Verdinglichung*, which we translate as “reification”. The possibility of confusion is produced by the root word, *Ding*, which is present in both terms. (Note of the Spanish Translator).]

<sup>22</sup> In the Spanish translation, the word used is “*antimaquinista*”, which is translated in this English translation as “Luddite” [American Translator’s Note].



In Molussia, whose past, as everyone knows, was full of futurological illusions, in a similar situation (shortly before the fall of the Reich), there were repeated instances of *leisure strikes*, which were called *negative strikes*: spontaneous mass revolts, combined with factory occupations, carried out by the proletariat that was not allowed to work, against its *compulsory freedom*. Of course, these attempts to recover its lost labor wreaked havoc in the technological structure and economy, since automated environments were not designed for manual labor, and indeed, the integration of the latter into the factories was technically impossible ... to which was added the fact that the piles of raw materials, introduced into these automated factories, accumulated in front of the docks and warehouses. Naturally, in such cases the Molussian executives always intervened without the least compunction. And it would appear that they used weapons similar to neutron bombs, because in the chronicles there is nothing about destroyed installations, but rather reports concerning *deaths* and, moreover, these reports were conveyed in such a way as to leave no doubt that these deaths were not unwelcome. Even so, the Molussian police forces were incapable of definitively putting an end to these desperate attempts to reconquer the factories; in fact, the society collapsed.

Regardless of whether or not we actually experience outbreaks of Luddism: tomorrow, free time will no longer be considered as “authentic” life, but as empty time, as a mass of time that is outside of one’s control, as an absurd stagnation, and will therefore be hated. Nor will the privileged ones who will still be able to work be spared this fate: not even during their working time, since they, too, will be deprived of the possibility of satisfying their *cupiditatem atque voluptatem laborandi*, for they will have to content themselves with playing the roles of *watchmen of automation*, and their activities will only be distinguishable from doing nothing by virtue of the fact they will be paid for them. We shall subject this stage of labor to an in-depth examination below.

This inexorable development towards an “empty life”, which began barely a half century ago, during the era of the worldwide unemployment crisis, and which found in National Socialism its bloody pseudo-solution, is one of the principal characteristics of the third industrial revolution that is examined in this volume. Given the fact that during the era of electronic media there is no longer any place on earth where you cannot be informed and therefore dis-informed, or, more precisely, where you can escape the obligation to be informed and thus dis-informed, that is, there are no provinces, indeed, no places at all, where one’s ears are not filled with idle chatter about the *loss of meaning* spouted by vulgar philosophers, psychoanalysts, and radio preachers, or *automatic consolation tapes*, which each individual can choose over the telephone. I will engage in a detailed examination of this phenomenon, which has been theoretically verified, in my essay on the *meaninglessness of the concept of meaning*, which I consider to be all the more necessary due to the fact that, among today’s preachers of meaning, there is not a single one who restricts his message to proclaiming the loss of meaning, but instead almost all of them also propose remedies: *the less they understand the cause of the problem, the quicker they are to give advice*. I will subject their terminological heritage to an in-depth investigation. My investigation will reveal the fact that most of their vocabulary consists in philosophical and psychological “chicken-feed” from the period before the first world war. It is true that it took several decades for

these cultural terms [*Bildungsvokabeln*] to be devalued in the language of trivial philosophy and vulgar spiritual edification. In view of the fact that these words (such as “genuine”, “values”, “creative”, “configure”, “personality”, not to speak of a “healthy world”) are only disseminated on a massive scale, that is, they conquer through their devaluation, one cannot speak of “extra stock in the warehouse”. Some people who are completely “avant-garde” are even “now” using (in reality only about fifty years too late) some of the dregs of Heidegger’s “jargon of authenticity”. These con artists of spiritual consolation and edification inevitably come to us via the radio. Given the fact that they treat the alleged “loss of meaning” as an “illness”, that is, they do not want to delve into its roots, nor are they capable of doing so, they are thus pure quacks, with whom I emphatically do not wish to be associated. This book will thus contain just as few instances of the use of the words, “genuine” or “positive” or “meaning”, and just as few references to “values”, as my previous books. The current situation is too serious for insipid chitchat full of beautiful terms and for remedies for the alleged “process towards meaninglessness” of life. Anyone who wants to measure up to the seriousness of the situation by adopting a serious attitude has to renounce such sugarcoating.

Before articulating this repudiation in my essay on the concept of meaning, however, in the first two lengthy chapters in the first part of the book I shall attempt to present in detail the loss of categories that we have induced and continue to cause as creatures of technocracy. Of course, I doubt that we (and I am not referring to myself personally), after the exposure of the disorder, will still have enough time to revolutionize this revolution, that is, to redirect it in such a way that we will avoid the downfall inscribed in the latter, since this essay addresses this downfall rather than the treatment or spiritual edification or hoodwinking of private patients thirsting for “meaning”.

## § 8

### *The metaphysics of the industrial revolution.*

At the beginning of this book we spoke about the *idée fixe* of the third industrial revolution, that is, of the compulsory quality acquired by the feasible; of the fact that the (“moral”) decision about whether a product must be created, if a certain effect must be produced, depends exclusively on whether its production or its implementation is *possible*; of the fact that the non-production of something that can be produced is considered scandalous and that, according to this criterion, the (“moral”) quality of the effects that must be produced (even if they involve the ability to destroy all of humanity many times over) simply does not count in the deliberations; in short: no price is too high.

This *idée fixe* of the third industrial revolution, however, is also expressed in another way: not only is the non-utilization of a possible raw material considered to be scandalous, but so is the mere fact of abstaining from recognizing something that is there, within reach, as a raw material and treating it as such. *The world is viewed as a mine that must be exploited.* Not only are we obliged to exploit everything that is exploitable, but we are also obliged to bring to light anything and everything that is exploitable, which is supposedly concealed in each and every thing (even in man). The mission of modern science no longer consists, then, in attempting to hunt down the secret, that is, secret in the sense of the hidden, the *essence*, or

the *regularity* of the world or of things, but in discovering their *secret treasures that can be appropriated*. The metaphysical assumption (usually also concealed) of modern research is therefore that *there is nothing that cannot be put to use*. “What use is the Moon?” (Molussian saying). At no time does the doubt ever arise that something might not have a possible use.

The question about what is meant by “world”—in this sense, perhaps, the dubious term “worldview” has a meaning—has been answered in very different ways over the course of history: for example, with the term, “cosmos” or “creation”, or “object of knowledge” or “totality of material processes”. If the question were to be posed today, the answer could only be the following: *raw material*. By this I do not mean the world as an “in itself”, but as a world *for us*, which must not be understood in the sense of “idealism” (insofar as the latter, crudely expressed, defines the world as a correlate of consciousness), but in the sense of (if one can put it this way) a *pragmatic idealism: being is the correlate of utilization*. Of course, this idealist allusion is often veiled, since, as we have seen, we do not often use objects of the world in an immediate way *for ourselves*, but *for some thing* (that we use). And we must add that we run after products, despite the fact that we do not have a direct need for them, or, more accurately, despite the fact that we are not even aware of what use they could serve or why we need them; instead, we first have to invent and manufacture them. *World*, then, is not only the totality of *that which can be made into something*, but the totality of *that which we have the obligation to make something of*; here it is tacitly assumed that, since—in fact—there *can be* nothing that is not possible, ultimately there is nothing that one cannot use to make something else. And vice-versa: existence must be denied to that class of things from which nothing can be made, and it is permitted to annihilate that which is nothing but a nuisance. Like the National Socialist “life that is not worth living”, such things fall under the heading of “beings that are not worth existing”. To sum up: *being raw material is the criterium existendi*, it is the fundamental metaphysical thesis of the industrialism that will be discussed in the various chapters of this book.

## Chapter 1

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF APPEARANCE

I would like to open this second volume with some brief reflections that are directly relevant to the main idea of the introductory chapter of the first volume, but which go far beyond it and will serve to familiarize the reader with the radicalization that my philosophical reflections have undergone in the meantime. In the chapter entitled, “Promethean shame”, I exposed our main defect, that is, *the incapacity of our imagination to grasp the enormity of what we can produce and set in motion*; and I emphasized that it is only due to this fatal disjunction that we accept the ominous machines that we produce and use, and the apocalyptic effects that they entail. It would not be correct to say that these spectacular effects are “unforeseen”—an adjective that is too often used in a superficial way—since, to the contrary, we directly aspire to these effects, however incapable we are of imagining them (and I repeat the formula, because the defect that it describes in fact represents the key defect of our current existence in the universe of technology that we have ourselves produced).

Another defect corresponds to another one of our shortcomings—and here I come to the main point—the *defectiveness of the things made by us*; not only with regard to individual things, but also, or, more accurately, even especially with regard to the defectiveness of our entire system of machines, which is interconnected in a grid. If we, insofar as we are incapable of imagination, are blind, then *the machines are mute*.<sup>23</sup> I am referring to the fact that *their appearance does not betray anything about their function*. It is true that this expression, “mute”, is not entirely appropriate, since machines cannot be denied a certain perceptibility. Despite, however, the fact that they are in a way perceptible, they remain unrecognizable. They mimic an appearance that has nothing to do with their essence: *they seem to be less than they really are*. Due to their all-too-modest appearance one cannot immediately see what they are. Some devices, such as, for example, the capsules of Zyklon B used at Auschwitz, which could hardly be distinguished from jars of fruit preserves, at first glance have the semblance of *nothing*. This *negative ostentation*, this *being more than what they seem*, is historically unprecedented. Due to the fact that what is perceptible in them no longer has anything to do with their function, they can be called “mendacious”; or “ideological”, a term that has hitherto been unjustly used exclusively to characterize concepts or theories, but not objects. In any event, these machines are *the most featureless* things that have ever existed; by this, I mean that they lack the capacity or the will to express what they are, that “they are speechless” to an extreme degree, that their appearance does not coincide with their essence. Such a co-incidence is manifested not only in the art of mime, but also in simple devices; in hammers, chairs, shirts, pants or gloves, we can still see what they are there for: *they appear*.<sup>24</sup> This is not at all the case with regard to the outward appearance, for example, of nuclear reactors, which have precisely the same innocuous appearance as any other factory and do not betray anything of either their virtual contributions nor their inherent dangers. “What could go wrong here?”, asked a well known European politician, with smug sarcasm, upon leaving a nuclear power plant (which was not yet operational), having toured it as if it were a shoe factory. This good man, who was not otherwise without intelligence (although he was not intelligent enough to recognize *what it is* that he thinks he must know today), believed, just like any man from the past, that today as well he was permitted or even, more correctly, he had to trust his eyes and an antiquated concept of *empiricism*. Our political progressive had never heard that we are capable—if indeed we are—of adequately understanding and judging our modern machines only with the power of our imagination, “the faculty of our time”—since this effort has to take the place of the Hegelian “effort of the concept”—and, with all certainty, he will also know how to avoid understanding it.

To return to our theme, however: it was not necessary to *verbally* render the ominous power plant innocuous, because *it had already rendered itself innocuous by way of its non-appearance*. Formulated in the language of philosophy: such apparatuses are no longer phenomena, if we define the latter with Heidegger as something that “shows itself”. To the contrary, their contribution consists in the fact that they do not show what they are, that is, in the fact that *they conceal themselves*. Although I am aware of the fact that I am beating this

---

<sup>23</sup> There is no expression (analogous to the acoustic term, “mute”) that describes the “inability to render oneself visible”. The term, “opaque”, is inadequate.

<sup>24</sup> This co-incidence is ideally realized in works of art, since in the latter, essence and phenomenon coincide and not only do not remain mute, but are nothing but speech.

term to death, I do not consider it illegitimate or blasphemous to claim that *the “mystery” of our time resides in its colossal machines and complexes of machines, since they are visible only apparently, but are actually invisible. The attempt to perceive their meaning by means of our senses would be a completely meaningless enterprise.* And this is true not only today, but has been true for more than a century. Even the machines of our great-grandfathers did not betray what they were to perception. That is why it is also meaningless to depict such machines, the kind that do not betray anything of their reality, in realistic pictures, as Soviet and East German painters so often do in their enormous “socialist-realist” paintings. In fact, their paintings are reminiscent of the efforts of the painters ridiculed by Plato in his *Politeia*, whom Plato reproached for “making copies of copies”. If machines themselves, despite the noise they make when they are in operation (which is constantly being reduced: satellites and computers do not roar like the machines of the heavy industry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), are still “mute”, the reproductions of the mute must remain mute, too.<sup>25</sup>

## Chapter 2

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF MATERIALISM

(1978)

We are not living in the era of materialism, as all the trivializers complain, but in the second Platonic era. Only in our times, in the epoch of mass industry, does such a minimum degree of being in fact correspond, as its own “idea”, to the individual object, that is, to its *blueprint*. What value does light bulb number 7846539 of such-and-such a corporation possess, compared to its immaterial model? It is only an imitation of the idea and therefore an  $\mu\eta\ \delta\upsilon\nu$ , a non-existent. In 1945 we did not enter the atomic era because of the fact that three atomic bombs had been produced, but because we had the immaterial plans that would make possible an endless number of such bombs. At that time, the Soviet Union was not threatened by a handful of material objects, but by their “idea”. And if, then, it had committed a robbery, it would not have stolen a certain number of objects, but rather the designs of their models.

---

<sup>25</sup> The work, *Einselwalzwerk*, which Adolph von Menzel painted a hundred years ago, depicted the grandiose scale of the buildings of the heavy industry of the past, but did not yet convey the “invisibility” of the machines. The only painters who did so in an intelligent way were the “mechanical” painters (F. Léger), who let the cat out of the bag, that is, they exposed the fact that the machines or the mechanized men they depicted no longer betrayed anything about themselves, that is, their theme was not the world of machines, but its muteness. Naturally, not a few art critics mistakenly praised these expressions of the fact that the apparatuses say nothing as a glorification of the world of machines. Equally mistaken was the reproach of those who imputed to the artists the dehumanization the latter depicted in their works, as if it was their fault. There is therefore nothing new (e.g., psychoanalysis) about the fact that those who cannot keep their mouths shut should be considered to be responsible for the existence of that about which they cannot remain silent.

Patenting an invention means, as everyone knows, protecting an idea against its imitation and use. It would never even have occurred to Plato that a day would come when there would be ownership of “ideas” and attempts would be made to provide legal guarantees for such property.

Compared with the small number of ideas in the world of Plato, the number of our ideas today is infinite and infinitely increasing: by way of the inflation of *inventions* (which, in Plato, are never presented as “the production of ideas”) the number of ideas daily increases towards “infinity”. If, sooner or later (presumably sooner), we undergo the final fiasco, we shall do so as victims of this second Platonism.

## Chapter 3

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF PRODUCTS

(1958)

§ 1

*Mass produced products were born to die.*

The principle of reproduction in modern industry means not only that the products produced by assembly line technology are ephemeral and perishable; not only that, like the parts of previous generations of products, they will unfortunately fail some day because they will wear out, but also that they suffer from a mortality of a particularly special degree, whose characteristic sounds plainly theological, that is: that they must die, that they are destined to an ephemeral existence. And not only is their temporary functionality planned, but also (at least approximately) their lifespan and, furthermore, a lifespan that is as short as possible. In the words of a Nazi song, whose purpose was not only to inculcate in the youth the fact that they are replaceable, but even to make them embrace their expendability with enthusiasm: mass produced commodities *were born to die*.

Pay close attention to this expression.

A death for which one has been “born” (thus, a death that, instead of merely being the conclusion of an existence, is established in advance as the goal of that existence) is only nominally a “death”. For the young people who were forced to sing this song, the latter did not prepare them for their deaths, but rather prepared them for being killed. And the same thing is true of the “death” of mass produced products: they are born not to die, but to be killed.

And, in fact, they are killed by those fresh young specimens, which (by virtue of the fact that their costs and benefits are identical to the costs and benefits of those already in the ranks) have the same right to enter the fray and that, up to a certain point, as “packaged

potentialities”, they are always prepared, impatient and insistent, to come to the relief of the old.

Or, more precisely, since that image is not entirely appropriate: the old specimens are killed by *production itself*, because the latter deliberately brings the old specimens into the world with hardly any life in them. And since the process of production employs us, the users, as allies, that is, it encourages us and trains us to consume the specimens by using them, to exploit them by using them, we spare the young specimens the act of killing, so that they can always take up their own ephemeral positions with innocence and clean hands.

Let us hear what the Molussians have to say about this:

In one of the most famous Molussian documents<sup>26</sup> we read: “The fact that products die at a most tender age is no argument against our industry. It rather indicates that the latter creates a mortal progeny, even expressly emphasizing their mortality; that it measures out the dose in advance of their average lifespan and gives preference to those that die prematurely over the others; it even *devours its own children*, which had been said of revolutions in other times. But to blame it for this, to accuse it of pursuing an unscrupulous demographic policy or even to admonish it for being a ‘monstrous mother’, would be not only insulting but unintelligent. Industry knows what it is doing and what is good. Stop to think for just one moment about where we would be if we were so foolish as to produce offspring that were *too* good, *too* healthy, *too* long-lived or even *immortal*: may the gods preserve us! Do you not see that in this way they would be deprived of their own fertility and, along with this, they would also ruin us? *The mortality of their children is the guarantee of their mortality and our mortality, too*. And we should praise mortality as one of the guarantees of our happiness!”

“Thus, do not call production a cruel mother! If it executes a horrible demographic policy, it does so exclusively in the interest of its subsequent and continuous fertility. And from its very beginning, it has demonstrated its ingenuity by producing not only mortal offspring, but the mortality of its offspring. That is why we can admit with equanimity that it should not only make its offspring expressly mortal, but that it should cause them to begin to wear out from the first moments of their existence. None of them is allowed to be a definite article, a *the*. Every one of them is allowed to lead its life only as an *a*. And none of them is allowed to enjoy the consolation of being identical with itself. Indeed, it has to be identical, it even *must* be identical, but only with its model: in reality, it performs its functions like any other specimen of its model and therefore does so together with the innumerable specimens that, like itself, have been sold to the world like any other specimens of the same model. That is why anyone who believes he can describe the present situation with the following words, ‘What is created today, will tomorrow be thrown in the trashcan’, falls far short of the truth. The truth is instead that production creates products as tomorrow’s trash, that production is the creation of trash; and of trash whose essence is constituted by the temporary preservation of the *status* of being used.”

## § 2

---

<sup>26</sup> From the *Mollussischen Industriehymnen* (translated by the author).

*On the end of a virtue.*

We, the owners and consumers of products, are not indifferent with respect to the merciless<sup>27</sup> and always victorious struggle waged endlessly by production against its previous generation of products. Rather, we are on its side, that is, *the side of production*; and this means that, in the struggle, we participate as partisans for each new generation. Which in turn means that we become merciless [*Schonungslos*].

We are therefore also in a world whose leading maxim is to carry out as rapidly as possible the relief of the old generation of products by the most recent generation, and it is therefore almost impossible for us to behave respectfully towards the former. If, nonetheless, one of us dares to try to behave respectfully towards the older generation, he cannot make any headway against the current that drags him, too, in its wake. And if his attempt is successful, if he contrives to delay the moment when the new generation relieves the old, he is treated like a saboteur. *Being disrespectful has become a moral command for us.* Of course, this command is never actually proclaimed anywhere. If someone were to brandish tablets of the law with inscriptions such as, “Overcome your respect for things!” or “Don’t take care of your property!” or “Cultivate your lack of respect!”, we would be profoundly shocked and would consider anyone who proclaims such commandments to be insane. Nonetheless, these commandments exist and proliferate all the more in proportion to how secretly and obliquely they are propagated. And these forms of camouflage are not just rare or occasional phenomena, but some of the most glaringly obvious and inevitable realities of our world. This would appear to contradict the expressions, “secretly and obliquely” and “forms of camouflage”. But not today, because what I mean by camouflage is not a transformation into the non-apparent (that is not how camouflage works today), but *transformation into the shocking and the sensational*, exaggerations which silence the voice of the truth. For a quarter-century now we have known that the best refuge against the truth is a clamorous uproar. And in fact, the versions of camouflage that conceal these commandments consist in just such a clamorous uproar. I am referring to advertising.

Why are advertisements versions of camouflage of the commandments?

---

<sup>27</sup> *Schonungslos*: lack of respect and, in this sense, “merciless”, as in inconsiderate treatment; *Schonung*: “respect”, “care”, “consideration”. Should this concept be related with the old *pietas*? The problem consists in the fact that one must maintain the relation between *Schonung* and *schonungslos*, in such a way that the relation is still maintained in Spanish, too; so if we were to translate *schonungslos* as “merciless”, we would then have to be consistent with regard to this reference and translate *Schonung* as “compassion”; but in using this term we almost exclusively refer to the domain of religion and, in any event, to personal relations. *Schonung*, however, also refers, for example, to the care that one lavishes on the cultivation of plants, that is, things. It would be appropriate, then, to translate this word as “care” and “attentiveness” and its opposite as “disregard” and “neglect”. But for this we have the term, *Sorge*. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]



Because every ad, independently of the fact that it is disrespectful (in the sense that it is always interrupting our life, always “interfering” with us), is at the same time always an *appeal to disrespectfulness*. To disrespectfulness, because we always already possess 95% (although perhaps in slightly different proportions) of the products that we are commanded to buy. Thus, for example, while I am writing this text, another propaganda text obstinately advises me, that is, commands me that, instead of using my ballpoint pen, which has been completely adequate, I should acquire another kind of ballpoint pen that “is guaranteed to write under water”; therefore, I should abandon my usual pen in favor of this new kind of pen, despite the fact that I do not feel the slightest need to be an underwater writer. What this text from my files permits is permitted by all advertisements. Every ad implicitly exhorts us to renounce the objects we already possess, and toss them aside as used-up; that is, that we should be disrespectful towards them. *Every advertisement is an appeal for destruction.*

As arduous a task as it would be to evaluate the effectiveness of every advertisement—an entire branch of science is presently responsible for and therefore concerned with perfecting methods of quantitatively calculating the effectiveness of ads—no one will deny that these ads, as a worldwide phenomenon, are fruitful. But then one also must admit (insofar as the distinction between these two results is necessary or has any meaning) the result that must accrue from the appeal for disrespect. In fact, this latter result is so obvious, that one would have to be blind not to recognize its reflections in our gestures and physiognomies. Since we live in a world that consists exclusively of things that are not only replaceable, but must be replaced (in extreme cases, they are even eager to be replaced), it is not only plausible, but simply inevitable that we should adapt ourselves to a type of behavior that is appropriate for these clearly mortal objects that merit death; that we should cultivate a lack of attentiveness and respect in handling things, in our activity, in our habits and our physiognomy. And not only with regard to things. To me it seems unthinkable that certain forms of behavior, which, when applied to products, are no longer considered to be virtues but, to the contrary, are even considered to be vices, will still be capable of preserving their status as virtues in the domain of interpersonal relations. Humanity, which treats the world as *a world to use and then throw in the trash*, also treats its own kind as *humanity to use and then throw in the trash*.

You must keep in mind just what this implies: neither more nor less than the fact all hitherto-existing moralities (regardless of how different they may have been in other aspects) are thus reduced to a *single* epoch, since there never was a morality in which respect for products was not an obvious feature; and that this epoch is now behind us. Respect is now considered, and rightly so, to be an obsolete virtue.

But this does not go far enough, since in the place of this obsolete virtue, its opposite has been introduced: now, the lack of respect is a virtue. And anyone who does not practice this virtue is viewed with suspicion. Even as far back as the forties I heard of the case of a student who was truly normal in every important aspect, but was forced to undergo psychoanalysis, because he consistently resisted his mother’s repeated attempts to buy him new clothes (which he really did not need). He was classified not only as *stubborn*, but as *poorly adapted*. Poorly adapted to what? To the prohibition against having respect, that is, to the dominant world. And he was considered to be not only a *crank* who had to be treated, but as a virtual

enemy, as a *leftist*, “for anyone who does not abide by our will is a saboteur” (from the Molussian song of the products).

§ 3

*The Land of Cockaigne of production.*

If this thesis is correct, there is in fact nothing more shortsighted than to seek to recognize our current lack of respect exclusively in our warlike actions, that is, in our manifestly destructive actions. Moreover, there is nothing more foolish than to see our technology of reproduction as an antidote, that is, as a means with the help of which we will be able to combat our will to destruction. It is very doubtful, after our recent reconstruction of the cities that were destroyed in the Second World War, that a mentality really exists that is opposed to the warlike mentality. The not-at-all dissatisfied Berlin taxi driver who in 1953 noted the landscape of ruins of the Tiergarten district with these words—“Anyway, we have created a lot of space for construction”—is already close to the truth, since he at least referred to the connection between destruction and construction.<sup>28</sup> He did not, however, express the full truth, since he left unexpressed the fact that *the destructive element is immanent to production itself*.

The truth is revealed only when it becomes clear how things stand today with respect to the expression, which is so proud of its positivity: *It is easy to destroy ... but hard to build!*, since *this expression*, which in the past was of only trivial significance, has today become something that is simply *meaningless*. And not only because, in the era of assembly line production, it was possible to only destroy particular individuals instead of the “thing itself” (something that the burning of books by Hitler had already transformed into an ideological act or, more precisely, into a farce); and not only because the quantity that can be produced today in a given period is hardly less than the quantity that could be destroyed in the same period of time, but because (and here we return to our main theme) *destruction and reconstruction are no longer opposed to one another*, but have their origin in one and the same root: in the principle of reproduction; and because this principle as such is destructive, that is, it is interested in the destruction of its products. If one were to try to paint a utopian picture of the situation in which all the dreams of prosperity of today’s technology of reproduction would have come to fruition, that is, one that would represent the situation of the Land of Cockaigne (not of the consumer, but of the producer), he would have to sketch *a world in which use does not exist, but only the most disrespectful consumption*; in which all the products—women’s hosiery, hydrogen bombs, cars or cities, just like the products of the food industry, paper plates and napkins—are destroyed as soon as they are used; in short: a world in which *all industry has been transformed into a single industry producing means of consumption, which includes everything*.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> I do not know of any other example that so clearly displays the dependence, so often claimed, but so seldom demonstrated, of every moral *status* on its corresponding technological *status*.

<sup>29</sup> *Der Blick vom Mond*, p. 156.

If this painting looks utopian, this is above all (speaking from the perspective of industry) due to our neglect of our duty.<sup>30</sup> That is, because *we, the customers, neglected to fight hard enough against the atrophy of our lack of respect* and to attend to the ideal possibilities, which pressure us to realize them, with a properly conformist behavior. This is the situation, in any case, from the perspective of the principle of reproduction. Nor is this perspective so false, since in reality all of us have been rendered obsolete. In opposition to what Benjamin says, we also endow *mass produced products* with that *aura a posteriori*, although at the moment of their acquisition they do not possess this aura, we *aureate them*, we imbue them with our existential atmosphere: our heart is just as attached to the pants that are now mass produced as the ones that are cut to measure; our sentimentalism penetrates just as deeply into our relation with mass produced commodities as with the things made by hand. We also treat manufactured products as *these, ours, irreplaceable*, instead of treating them (as would correspond to the real situation) as *those ownerless and replaceable* products. And if we have to get rid of any products, we are often incapable of feeling that indifference or even that satisfaction that should be demanded in an era in which a lack of respect has become a virtue. Who knows whether there will be psychoanalytic specialists whose *mission is to cure us of our taboo-repressions concerning the world of things* and to prepare us for happily abusing products with a good conscience. To go with the flow you have to have impeccable china and a heavy hammer.

#### § 4

##### *The unwanted owner.*

Products are manufactured in order to be sold as commodities and, as such, to become property.

---

<sup>30</sup> Certainly, industry is not entirely innocent, since it, too, is in part responsible for not yet having achieved its dream of a utopian era, since it is always the case (in part due to neglect, in part because it is forced by the quality of the commodities of the competition to make its products last a little longer) that it makes its products too durable. And “too durable” means: so durable that the gap between the rate of production, which is desired or required, and our rate of consumption, even if the latter is characterized by a complete lack of respect, is too large for it; this gap is unbearable for it. It is true, however, that it possesses the means to narrow this gap. For example, it could bring about a situation where repairing the old products, including the most simple ones, would be more expensive than the production of new ones. Its main method, however, consists of “social pressure”. That is: bringing about a situation in which we set aside and throw away products that we have, even though they function perfectly well, because they are *socially inadequate*, prejudicial to our own prestige. In order to give more impetus to this method an entire separate sector of production has been developed: the *advertisement*, whose task consists in producing, on the basis of “offers” of raw material, the commandments of the manufactured commodity; in transforming offers into commandments; that is, in inculcating in us these commandments in a decisive way, so cleverly disguised and subliminal, that we are rendered incapable (both psychologically as well as morally) of marshalling any resistance to this pressure.

If, however, as we just pointed out, all of today's production tends to cause its products take on the semblance of consumer products, and today many examples of this type are manufactured, these products must become "property" in the same sense as the products of consumption.

Are products of consumption, however, really property?

It is of the essence of every good that claims to be property that *time* forms a part of it, that is, duration, during which it remains identical with itself. And it is of the essence of the owner that he is free to return this good within a certain period of time. One cannot be an owner of goods that do not offer this possibility.

Consumer commodities, however, do not offer this possibility of "being returned". When we have acquired a consumer product, *we have consumed it at the same time that we have used it*, and our hunger for another one arises: we once again find ourselves in the condition of being non-owners, once again *vis-à-vis de rien*, once again we have to go in search of our bread and our milk; and the miserable merry-go-round starts all over again.

Of course, it is miserable only for us, since this going in circles on the merry-go-round is what makes possible the survival of the consumer goods industry. If this industry maintains its rate of production this is only because we, who are always needing something again, once again destroy its products; because *we feed it by feeding ourselves*; because *we satisfy it to satisfy ourselves*. In short, because *we never have time to become owners*.

If we imagine the opposite were to be true, our idea will be more clear. If we were to possess some means (for example, a marvelous kind of bread with a very long shelf life) that, without being consumed, could be used continuously, day after day, the ownership of this product would force the baker to close his shop. *Our "property" would be his ruination*. And suddenly, we will hear from *his* mouth (that of the producer, not that of the proletarian), the old saying: *property is theft*, which thus acquires *an unexpected new meaning*, not that property would itself be something that was itself stolen, but that *every product that is durable property in the hands of the buyer, is a theft from the producer*, that is, it robs him of his opportunity to continue to produce.

The essence of consumer commodities consists in the fact that *they are here in order to not be here*. They are manufactured in order to be consumed as rapidly as possible with their use. If, however, they are consumed with their use, they need that time in which they could constitute themselves as objects that are identical with themselves and therefore in which their owners would be able to "return" to them.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, it is part of the essence of the consumer good to have an ephemeral character. It is produced as "ephemeral". And as such it avoids becoming property. There has never

---

<sup>31</sup> Animals, which *only* consume, and which therefore do not stockpile anything (not counting what they store in their own bodies), know neither *duration* nor *object* nor *property*. These three things form a categorical syndrome.

been a concept that is so antithetically opposed to the concept of eternity than this ideal of non-duration. If, in Plato, the things of our world were considered as ontologically inferior, this was because, unlike the ideas, they were subject to time, and were therefore perishable, while *today, in the eyes of today's producers, normal products are considered to be ontologically inferior, for the basic reason that they take too long to perish*. Instead of the fixed  $\alpha\epsilon\iota$  of the passing moment, the ideal is considered to be *the duration that allows for absolutely no duration*. This is the ontology of the industrial era, which should be denominated a *negative ontology*.

Weapons also belong to this class of ideal objects, of those objects that must be consumed with their (first) use. A napalm bomb cannot be dropped twice, any more than it is possible to eat a loaf of bread twice; in this sense weapons are articles of consumption and, from the point of view of the theory of the object, they are more like loaves of bread than they are like the other products of industry. If a weapon “refuses” to be consumed with its first use and stubbornly retains its usefulness after being discharged or if, for example, due to political oversight, there is an absence of wars, and thus possible buyers, the producer sets to work on other projects: it liquidates the existing weapons by inventing another, so-called *better weapon*, which entails as a consequence the fact that its first weapon is rendered useless and is in this way “liquidated”. The furious rate at which a category of production comes to the relief of the previous category in the capitalist world almost never results from the fact that “the consumer needs something better”. In many cases (and this applies above all to the liquidation of nuclear weapons) there is absolutely no way to “improve” these products, because no greater effects can be obtained than those produced by the older versions of these weapons. If, nonetheless, industry continues to work on their “improvement”, this is done precisely to liquidate the previous versions and because it is too blind—deliberately too blind—to see that the era when it still made any sense to compare such successive versions of these weapons has been left far behind us. Someone who has died cannot be made more dead. Humanity is not capable of a more complete self-extermination if it has already been totally exterminated; and everyone knows that this has been possible for several decades.<sup>32</sup>

## § 5

### *“Hot out of the oven”*

The relation between consumption and ownership is complicated or, if you like, “dialectical”: as owners of consumer goods we are only owners if we do not consume them. If we do not consume them, however, we are not consumers.

This could be understood two ways: we either cease to be owners simply by annihilating the good that we possess (for example, if we eat the whole sausage which could have been stored for a long time); or else (and this is the case that is of interest to us) the factory supplies its products *hot out of the oven*, that is, with the stipulation that they be consumed immediately

---

<sup>32</sup> Note added in 1979: the so-called SALT negotiations are tremendously formal and costly congresses of the blind. From SALT II, which concluded recently here in Vienna with a lot of cheek kissing, not the slightest progress has resulted.

in that condition. The expression, “immediately”, is decisive in this context: it means that the product *must by no means attain* that “duration” that is required as a precondition for it to be a good that is converted into property.

This extreme example, however, is not the only one. Between the two possible extremes—the product as property, in the classical sense, which inherently includes duration, and the product that demands immediate or almost immediate consumption once it is produced—a broad spectrum is opened: that of everyday commodities, the ones we buy today, consume tomorrow and replace with others the day after tomorrow. From the perspective of the producer: those that we buy today *in order* that they may be consumed tomorrow and *by which* they are replaced by other new ones the day after tomorrow.

That is: already, in this normal case, the interval of consumption is so short that the product barely has the necessary time to be transformed into property, and the customer has barely enough time to become an owner.

Certainly, we say only “barely” because all the branches of industry, with the exception of the industry producing means of consumption, must “unfortunately” accept an interval that is inserted between purchase and consumption, and it is just in this interval during which the good is “only” property, “it is only possessed”, “it is only used”. But this time of use, the time when the product is property, is *dead time* for the producers; it is this period that the producers naturally begrudge to the customer; that (despite praising the durability of their products) they prefer to shorten and that (given the fact that insofar as we enter into consideration as buyers, we always possess something, we are always owners) they would prefer to abolish. Every suit, every radio, every refrigerator, every product that, instead of being consumed immediately, lasts a while and survives and as such is confirmed to be an owned product that must be used, is (to return to the expression we used above) a *loaf of bread with a very long shelf life*. And, *as such*, an act of *theft*. The rate at which industry changes its seasonal fashions is a “means of vengeance”, a measure by which it takes revenge for the preservation of its products. It renders the overcoat, which still keeps us warm, *socially unusable*, since it cannot physically ruin it. *Fashion is the measure utilized by industry to make it necessary to replace its products*.

It is not at all surprising that all the sectors of industry cast their gaze, full of envy, on the sole ideal sector: the consumer goods industry, whose products are so admirably unsuited to serve as property and in which they perceive the desired model of all products. In production, we would be the preferred buyers if we were to annihilate their products, not only the ones that are eaten, but as buyers of all products and thus we would ensure the continuing progress of their rate of production. We would thus remain without property.

These conditions, however—“we would be”, and “we would remain”—are now almost superfluous. The truth is that we have already come very close to this ideal, since as far as industry is concerned, insofar as we are considered to be owners, we are also viewed (and, what is more important, we are treated) as owners of *ephemeral goods*. That is, it is expected that we should *expropriate ourselves* of our property as rapidly as possible by means of its consumption, so that we may thus be in a position to obtain another new article of property as

soon as possible and, once again, eliminate this article as soon as possible. *Et sic ad infinitum*. Industry wants us to be and treats us as *intermittent owners*.<sup>33</sup>

By way of the transformation of the owner into the “intermittent owner”, *the concept of property is transformed in the most profound way, if not utterly destroyed*. In any event, it should be noted that this destruction is not the work of any kind of socialism. It is rather *industry itself that has driven us to replace the stability of property by the alternation of having and not having*.

Of course, this does not mean that industry wants us to be left without means. To the contrary; given that it needs us as constant buyers, it wants us to be supplied with as many means as possible. Its dream is a humanity composed of *paupers endowed with means*, of customers who, unlike owners, are in need of everything; and they need everything, because they consume everything by way of its use and never spoil the plans of industry with those saboteur’s words: *I already have one*.

Naturally, industry cannot count on finding such ideal buyers. Indeed, it almost always has to create this clientele itself.

This task is not so difficult for it, however. In fact, it is constantly carrying it out: it transforms, as if by a spell, as if by magic, *every situation of ownership into a situation of need, into a situation of not-having and necessity*; into a situation in which buyers (and this, due to the commodity that they just obtained) have a longing for such and such goods and in which they still have not acquired such and such goods, which they have to acquire by becoming their owners. This not-having is a consequence of having. *Richesse oblige*, production says. “If you buy commodity A, you are obliged or impelled to also acquire commodity B.”

In other words, production creates paupers by producing every one of its goods in such a way that its possession is rendered worthless without the additional possession of other goods. In fact, *the production of a persistent situation of need is one of the principal activities of all production*. If the situation of need, in a certain way as an attribute, forms part of each one of its products, then every commodity bears within itself a hunger, which the buyer must satisfy by way of a new purchase. For example, cars, the hunger for gas, which cars consume as effectively as man consumes milk. I say, “consume”, because *it is clear that the equation “to*

---

<sup>33</sup> The principle of preservation of the means of consumption is no argument against this thesis, since the goods that are preserved are still nevertheless means which must be *consumed* and therefore annihilated. They are not, by means of *canning*, promoted to the ranks of the more durable goods and therefore transformed into the colleagues of pants or hammers. What is at issue here is not so much at what precise moment a product is consumed, but whether or not it is consumed at the very moment of its use, whether its use and its consumption are identical or not. And it is certainly the case that these two categories are also identical in preserved consumer goods. *In a way, the equation—“to use is to consume”—is mutually reinforcing*. And at the very moment that we use the can opener, the equation leaps alive from the can.

*use = to consume*” is also valid for non-consumption goods. Given the fact that each good that is acquired demands a new purchase, each buyer again becomes a consumer. If the owner of a car, after acquiring another car, expects to be able to rest on the laurels of the car he just bought, he will be a very glamorous pauper.

## § 6

### *The liquidation of products*

We have already seen that consumer products are extinguished with their use. They are here in order to cease to exist. Their use and their liquidation coincide. Therefore, they cannot properly become property, or they can only become property to the extent that and only as long as they are *not* used. Given that their use (and therefore the liquidation of their condition as things and their condition as property) renders the production of subsequent consumer products necessary and therefore promotes this production, it is understandable that *industry as a whole tries to assume these methods of promotion, that is, of overcoming both the status of being a thing and that of being property with regard to its products.*

In other words: industry would prefer to operate a continuous conveyor belt of production and sale. It can only achieve this ideal if it can induce us to liquidate its products immediately by way of their use, since it is by means of this liquidation that it is obliged to immediately produce something new and sell it. That is why, whenever it gets the slightest opportunity, it has tried to imitate the method used by the consumer goods industry, that is, *to reduce as much as possible the span of time between the production and the liquidation of the product.* Its task is to consider the objective form (and the characteristic as property) of its products as an unremunerative intermediate form, the product-thing as a something that must be circumvented, as a kind of barrier; it by no means accepts the thing-form, it seeks to avoid it and renounce it.

The radio and television industries demonstrate that they are in fact following this path.<sup>34</sup>

In these industries, in effect, one can no longer really find the intermediate form of “thing”, and there is no longer anything that corresponds, for example, to the object, “book”. And this is the case because the product is produced and comes “hot out of the oven” to the receiver. *The only image* that appropriately summarizes the reality to which we are referring *is that of the nursing mother and her baby*: the industry is the mother; the nursing infants are the listeners or the spectators. But the spectators are “nursing babies” not only because (which, on the other hand, is often the case) we become infantilized by the infantile substance that we receive, but because the method through which we are supplied with these products (whether the product is *People Are Funny* or Bach’s “Mass in E-Flat”) consists in their *administration* [as in the administration of medications]. Just like the mother’s milk as it passes from the breast to the mouth of the baby, the “transmission” from the broadcaster to the receiver, in the interval between production and consumption, does not acquire a properly objective

---

<sup>34</sup> We are referring to the broadcast industry, not the one that produces the household appliances of transmission and reception.



*status* as a separate object, not to speak of a specific *status* as property. Everyday language confirms this. It is not by chance that we use the term “transmission” to define both the *act of transmitting* as well as *what is transmitted*; just as it is only rarely that we clearly express which of the two senses we are using with this term, since, unlike other commodities (such as the books that are mailed to our homes, for example), which, at the moment of their arrival can be called “transmissions” and, immediately thereafter cease to be so in order to become owned products, and as such acquire *consistency*, the transmissions of radio and television only have consistency as long as they are transmissions; otherwise, they have absolutely none at all.

In a certain sense, they surpass even the model of the consumer goods industry, since in their case they even overcome the duality between consumer good and the act of consumption that is characteristic of “food” and “eating”: both converge in and conform to a single process in a way that is as undifferentiated as that of a consumer who engages in “eating” (lets the food pass into him) at the moment that the “food” comes to him, but who also is incapable of grasping the object, since the latter *consists* (insofar as it has any consistency) exclusively at the moment that it is supplied.<sup>35</sup>

It is therefore obvious that they also lose the possibility of becoming property.

Formally and legally, of course, radio and television transmissions can be classified as “our property”, since we pay to receive them and they are supplied to our homes as paid commodities. This classification, however, is “without an object”, because these commodities “are not objects”. In fact, no customer of radio or television transmissions would classify them in this way. No one, while listening to the radio or watching television, would feel that they “own the transmission”. Compare this lack of a sense of ownership to the reader of a book, who feels that he owns the book he bought. Instead, the radio listener or television watcher *consumes the transmission as it takes place*: he has no other way to “possess it” outside of this act of consumption; he lacks the possibility of “returning it”. The object is an object of consumption that, insofar as it is immediately consumed, renders the immediate supply of another, subsequent transmission necessary; *et sic ad infinitum*.

This inability to become property can be formulated in another way: if the supplied product can only be consumed at the moment of the transmission itself, this limits the freedom of appropriation; however, this contradicts the concept of ownership, since it forms part of the essence of the latter to be able to dispose of one’s property and therefore to determine when

---

<sup>35</sup> For the contrary case, imagine (this idea is absolutely possible, despite the fact that it may seem surrealistic and horrible) that in a city that is entirely destroyed, the loudspeakers are still intact and that radio broadcasts are played day and night to streets in ruins. Unlike, for example, the books that would continue to be printed there by an automatic process, without requiring any simultaneous consumption, these transmissions would have a spectral quality, since they would cease to fulfill their mission: to be consumed at the moment of their transmission. And spectral, in a completely new sense, since the dead would not take on the semblance of life, but the living would take on the semblance of the dead.

and for how long one possesses one's property and can use it; and given the fact that we, as radio listeners, can no longer do this, we are no longer really owners.

Thus, the only things that really belong to us as property are the televisions and radios that transmit these commodities, not the commodities themselves. Expressed in the form of a paradox: we are *merely sovereigns of our passivity*, when not even the owners of that to which we are condemned, since it is desired that we should consume the transmitted commodities; we are therefore figures no less comical than those *owners of their own hunger* of Stirner that Marx ridiculed.

“Sovereigns of our passivity”, since *what we possess is only our ability to be supplied*. However, we do not possess the commodities with which we are supplied, since we consume them before we can possess them. Their production, form and selection, we also leave in the hands of the suppliers, that is, the producers. Millions of us, upon coming home from work, blindly turn on our radios and televisions, that is, without knowing in advance what will emerge from the faucets of culture. What matters to us is that something, anything at all, should pour out, so that we can rest our heads on the visual or acoustic “maternal breast”. In most cases, the yearning to possess and the pride of possession are satisfied with the possession of the *apparatus*. From that point on, it is child's play to do without this property *ad libitum* during the interim.

If these reflections only explain the specific domain of radio and television, however, it would not have been justified to introduce them here. What is true of this domain, however, is an example of a much more general state of affairs. I am not saying that what is true of radio and television is also true of industry as a whole. What I am saying is that what takes place in those industries can also be verified everywhere as a dynamic tendency. Indeed, there are sectors in which our description is applicable; newspapers, for example, since they are consumed and lose their value by being used, that is, by being read once. The same thing can be said of those types of magazines that show us the direction in which all of today's reading material is heading: it is not by chance that 99 percent of all the books that are read in the United States should be sold in the same shops or *drugstores* that sell articles of consumption properly speaking: ice cream and soda pop.

Furthermore, our description is also valid for all the paper and cardboard materials, now undergoing rapid development, which are rendering cloth and fabric towels and napkins superfluous. Or, expressed exactly: their purpose is to perish with their sole encounter with the world.

But even if our analysis were only valid for radio and television, this “only” would be misleading. We must not allow ourselves to be deceived by the fact that these products represent only two industries among innumerable others. These two industries have become decisive for the current concept of the world and of objects. What is supplied by both is not a specialty in the sense that the necktie, soap and needle industries are specialty industries. Radio and television instead produce a *second world*: that image of the world in which today's humanity believes it lives. And besides this “second” world, they also produce a third world: that of entertainment, that is, everything. And what is decisive is precisely that this

“everything” no longer takes the form of an object or property, but instead remains fluid; or that it does not “remain” at all, but is “introduced” in that fluid state in which it flows from the factory. In fact, this takes place in such a frictionless way, that one can no longer speak of an act of reception or even of a conscious “apprehending”. And this is by no means an exaggeration, since we know that today there are methods of broadcasting transmissions that are so “subliminal” that they are perceived, but not apprehended. This is what certain companies do with regard to their trademark commodities, for example, in advertisements: they repeatedly introduce the names of their trademark products in films, but only in brief flashes, so that the eye is incapable of directly noticing it.

One cannot take this supply of a pre-objective world lightly, since this is the trait that most extraordinarily characterizes the current condition of the “comfortable freedom” that predominates in today’s conformist world. It represses all possible action; and this means the possibility of laziness as well as that of non-freedom.

If this assertion sounds contradictory to some people, this is only because they have an outdated concept of “non-freedom” and still associate it with externally-imposed pressure or even with the chain that weighs down and lacerates the flesh. It is just those characteristics of non-freedom that cannot be spoken of these days. In this fluid state, those who allow the pre-cooked world to just flow down their throats, those who do not even need to make an effort to suck it down, are so anaesthetized that no sensation of non-freedom could possibly arise in them. *We are deprived precisely of the feeling of being deprived and, in this way, we are apparently free.*

Actually, the situation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is fundamentally different from that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. If one of the most famous sayings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century proclaimed that the majority of humanity of the time had nothing “to lose but its chains”, today we would have to say: *the majority believes that it possesses everything thanks to its (unnoticed) chains.* In view of the fact that it constitutes part of the essence of these chains not to be noticed by their bearers (just as little as any *a priori*), the latter will never experience the fear of losing their chains. Should our contemporaries, however, attempt to bring about a radical change of the world, by way of a sudden seizure of the instruments of production that instill us with the world in a liquid state (especially by seizing the radio and television stations), and thus transport us to a “state without chains”, to a state in which we suddenly see before us the world in the form of objects, of such a consistency that the latter cannot be liquidated by means of immediate consumption, we would not be in any position to really discern our absolute dependence on the manufactured world in which we had lived up until that point, but we would succumb to panic, to a kind of hunger panic: *to the panic of the toothless person who, accustomed to feeding on broth, faces the prospect of starving to death amidst loaves of bread, apples and sausages.*

What lesson can we learn from the above reflections?

That the term, “reification”, which has been used to characterize the tendencies of our epoch for the last century, is no longer sufficient to describe the current situation; that, instead, we find ourselves at the threshold of a new stage, in which, to the contrary, the thing-form is

avoided, and becomes fluid. Or at least that in this stage the dissolution of the thing will be just as characteristic as the reification of the non-thing. To designate this state of affairs, which theory has disregarded up until now, I propose the term, “liquidation”.

*Addendum added in 1979*

This analysis, written more than twenty years ago, would appear to have been invalidated by the invention of “recording technologies” and the *video-recorder*, which enable the consumers to repeatedly consume, wherever and whenever they like, what they had once consumed in a “liquid” form. In fact, it is now the case (this paradox has never been described before) that *for the consumers* (yes, for the consumers!) it is now *possible to reproduce what was temporally unique* and to “reify” the “fluid” (a completely new type of “reification”). This does not, however, contradict my thesis that for production it is essentially of the greatest interest to produce its “products” in a “liquid” form and for immediate, one-time use (*instant consumption*). For these new inventions do not involve (at least not primarily) inventions created in the interest of production, but the reverse: *due to the protests of the consumers against their liquid supply*, who do not want to remain condemned to a single, irrevocable act of consumption without a trace of ownership, and who want to *possess* their transmissions in the same palpable condition as books or paintings. And in fact this protest was successful: one correctly speaks of “preserving” television films and “canned music”; or, rather, incorrectly, because the consumer can only enjoy “preserves” (as in “fruit preserves”) once (this is only permitted at the moment of consumption), while he can play the recorded transmission as often as he likes.

Of course, the consumer was not able to take this step against industry on his own. To do so, he also needed the help of industry. In fact, industry did not need to be asked twice: it immediately set to work and assumed the responsibility for meeting this need (which was actually directed against its interests). When it perceives the possibility of producing a new commodity, it avails itself of the opportunity, even if this new product is actually contrary to its principles. This was already demonstrated by its production of the components necessary for the construction of *do it yourself* goods. And that is what it is doing today: producing devices that the customer only needs because the customer does not want to accept its (industry’s) principle of “liquidation”. Hegel would have been more than a little surprised at these detours that his dialectic has undergone a hundred and fifty years after his death.

## **Chapter 4**

### **THE OBSOLESCENCE OF THE HUMAN WORLD**

**(1958/1961)<sup>36</sup>**

---

<sup>36</sup> This chapter and the following one, “The Obsolescence of Obsolescence”, are based on entries from my Tokyo diary dating from 1958. Written in 1961.

*Desideratum: a psychology of the thing.*

It is incredible how many gaming arcades there are here. I am not referring, for example, to the *speakeasies* or the roulette casinos, but to the entertainment shops, accessible to anyone, located on the first floor, originally built to serve as stores, where you find all lined up, one next to the other, the chrome sirens, the game companion girls of the Japanese population, the *pachinkos*, in short: the *pinball* machines, waiting for a normal man to give him pleasure in exchange for a few coins. It is true that they are not exactly waiting there, since these sirens are seldom unoccupied, never on weekends, and on those hot nights when the very idea of sleep seems impossible, they are the closely-pursued objects of ardent courting. With the exception of the hunters who by chance have grabbed one of these sirens by the wrist, the lobby is crowded with countless ludopaths who nervously walk about looking for one that is free; and suddenly (apparently for incomprehensible reasons, but actually because with a single look at their competitors they can tell whether they are halfway through their games or are almost done) they take their places here and there to grasp the still-warm metal handle; in other words, to immediately assure their place at the machine as soon as it is free. One day, in Yokohama, I could see from a street intersection seven of these arcades at one time and the people who were crowded together in front of every one of them. And in the Tokyo gaming district, which extends from the Shimbashi station to the end of the Ginza, alongside innumerable establishments of a normal type there is even a glass building similar to a bazaar that, floor upon floor, contains nothing but these synthetic game girls; it looks like a transparent anthill.

Here, then, were the hunters of the sirens, with their hands on the handles, responding to the thrusts and capricious movements of their companions. They are entirely oblivious to their surroundings. At first glance you can see that they are not beginners, or men just passing by who decided to try their luck, but all of them react like samurais, with that fantastic speed that is only characteristic of habitual customers or addicts. It is a well known fact that there are numerous addicts among them, people who are physically incapable of going to bed without first having played their daily game or tournament or whatever you want to call the activity to which they are passionately devoted. Yesterday, for example, toward midnight I saw a player (with an artificial leg) at one of these machines, whom I had already seen at seven that same evening playing with determination at the same machine; naturally, I do not know if he was *still* there or if he had returned. In any case, can we assume that he would be able to tell us?

Why did this man return to that place? Or is he still there? Why do the hours pass by so easily for him? What *sex appeal* drags him into the arms of the chrome siren? What magnetic power prevents him from tearing himself away from her?

Of course, the most correct response would be the following: because he is alone; because he, too, like thousands or millions of other residents of the big cities, is dependent on a substitute satisfaction; because the machines also serve as substitutes for girlfriends. This answer, however, does not satisfy the eyewitness, who has had impressed on his mind the

image of these players. The degree of their passion, the depth of their absorption, their inability to interrupt their play, all of this speaks against the hypothesis of substitution. And the first thing that we notice is the fact that the players no longer pay any attention to real flesh and blood girlfriends; they prefer these reified girlfriends rather than the live ones. In fact, the hypothesis of substitution is not only false, but *naïve*, since it not only assumes something that does not correspond to the facts, but even gets the facts all wrong, that is, it takes it for granted that human relations are still primarily relations between persons. Today, the contrary is often the case: *the everyday world with which people have to deal today is first of all a world of things and machines, where there are also other people; it is not a world of persons, where there are also things and machines.*

If psychology were to take note of this inversion, it would have to inquire whether our psychic life, as well as our emotional life (especially the latter), has not more or less accommodated to this inverted situation, or whether it is at least not on the verge of accommodating to it. In other words: whether if today *a large part of our emotional energy is not directed towards our machines. It would therefore be necessary to have a special psychological discipline that would correspond, with equal standing, to social psychology, whose first task would have to consist in investigating our relations with our world of things and, therefore, of machines;* in this discipline the relations of things with us will also be encompassed. By this, of course, we are only referring to the way that we seem to be treated by things.

Secondly, this new discipline must include a relation with social psychology to investigate how the relations between us and things influence our interpersonal relations, which are addressed by social psychology. Of course, this *desideratum* has not up until now been given its own name. If I use the term “psychology of things” here, I am aware that I might be mistaken and that it may only be a provisional term. I would be pleased if someone would find a better one.

One example of a relation that corresponds to the “psychology of things”, is that of the car owner with his car. It is a *sui generis* relation, by no means a substitute relation; to the contrary, it influences the relation of the owner with his own kind, for example, with his wife. The specific character of the relation of the worker with the assembly line is absolutely incontestable; in this case, it would be absurd to ask what interpersonal relation would find its substitution here.

Naturally, our man with an artificial leg is still standing in front of his machine. And no less passionately absorbed in what he is doing than he was before. The “hypothesis of substitution” is too simple because it does not explain the degree of intensity of his passion. But what other explanation should we consider? Let’s ask him.

Actually, he gives us our first clue by way of his physiognomy, with the expression on his face. What his face betrays is that it reflects not only the emotions that are specific to Monte Carlo, with which we are familiar from the facial expressions of all those who play games of chance (and therefore, not just tension and excitement or pleasure caused by tension and excitement), but also *rage* and *vengeance*.

But, *why*? Why is this man enraged? Against whom could he be angry? And why should he be vengeful? Against whom or why would he be seeking revenge?

We shall give, at least heuristically, the answer that the “psychology of things” suggests to us, this new discipline that we have called for: he is enraged against things, against machines. But, against which things, which machines?

§ 2

*The trauma of the industrial era.*

First, negatively: his rage is not directed against the pinball machine. And if he wants revenge, it is not against these machines, which have done nothing to him. You could almost call them “innocent”. Of course, only “almost”; this limitation is important. “Only almost”, because they are accomplices of those who are to blame. They are accomplices, because they have no other *raison d’être* and do not seek to achieve anything but to divert the rage directed against those who are to blame onto themselves; in short: because they represent *reaction neutralization machines*. A Molussian household rule advises: “If you are itching to thrash your family, thrash your servant. If you do not have a servant, then get one so you can beat him.” The pinball machines are these “servants”: they were created for this purpose and they were installed for this end.

In this case, however, who is the “family” that is the initial target of these beatings?

The machines with which, day after day, they have to spend their lives, the machines they have to serve day after day: their hatred is directed against them.

This sounds incredible. It seems to imply that, in every nook and cranny of our world, the sand in the machines should be making them squeal and explode everywhere. Not at all. In fact, the quantity of sand in the machines is minimal; nowhere do we see Luddite outbreaks.

Not directly, of course. But that is not what I said, either. What I insinuated is instead that, for the workers, as they work at their machines, their own rage remains unknown, and is in a certain way displaced, held back until the moment when they leave their workplaces; and that then, or even immediately, their resentment explodes and is vented on other special machines, invented and installed solely for this purpose, that is, on the *pachinkos*.

As we said, this Luddite effect is not understood by those who suffer from its symptoms. That it should remain unknown to them is indispensable, because if those who hate the machines were to become conscious of their rage and would act in accordance with it, it would overturn the foundations of all production, that is, it would represent subversion, outright sabotage. The knowledge of this resentment, then, must be prophylactically suppressed, to prevent sabotage.

Compared with this impediment of the impediment, “sabotage”, in the usual sense of the word (and therefore that of the machines through us), becomes a secondary phenomenon.

This impediment is put into effect by way of “psychotechnology” in the broadest sense of the term, that is, by manipulating our souls. Expressed in technical terms: *by penalizing* the mere idea that such a Luddite attitude would even be possible. Or, more precisely (since even the expression, “penalize”, is too weak), *by transforming it into a taboo*.

In fact, this attitude is taboo among workers as well as among employers. Under the banner of this taboo, both sides are united, and they fall all over themselves on its behalf. And in this aspect, East and West are no less united. So much so that any American employer who faced the alternative of having to hire a Luddite or a communist, would opt for the communist; and the same thing goes for the Russians: any Soviet enterprise, faced with a similar choice, would prefer the capitalist candidate rather than the Luddite. In other words: *the taboo relating to technology is neutral with respect to classes and systems*. It is incomparably stronger than all the other taboos that have arisen on the basis of the diverse forms of political or economic rule or “philosophies” in any part of the world. It is global. It is the taboo of our time. And what is transformed into a taboo is not—we once again stress this point—only the eventual Luddite act. The power of the prohibition fundamentally reaches a greater depth: *what is prohibited is always the mere idea that one could be ill-disposed towards machines in general*. In this way, the actual taboo is also presented as “authentic”, that is, as a taboo that corresponds structurally with the taboos with which we are familiar from previous societies, since in those, as well, there was always an idea that was repressed: for example, the idea that in man (in every man) there could be objectives or variants of the libido, that would threaten to overturn the structure of the family or the clan. Such a thing does not happen because “what cannot be, is not permitted to exist”. Thus, the perfect taboos consist not only of a prohibition (of a crime), but in a negation, in the most radical negation that can be conceived. That is, it consists not only of the refusal of the intellect to recognize reality, *but also of the refusal of the senses to perceive reality*.<sup>37</sup>

And this is, it seems to me, the situation in which we find ourselves today. The taboo of our epoch functions perfectly, that is, there is no one (as we have said, neither in the East nor in the West, neither among workers nor among their employers) whose vision is free and autonomous enough to recognize his resentment against machines.

---

<sup>37</sup> Today this situation of refusal is generalized: it prevails in conformist societies no less than in openly totalitarian societies, despite the fact that it is largely unperceived (but this does not affect its essence). Primarily, it constitutes one aspect of the essence of this confusion—which is produced—that it is not recognized, and in any case it does not have to be recognized *as* confusion. The indignation of the Americans over *brainwashing* is an indignation that is supplied in a form that is suitable for conformist consumers by the production of conformism in the enemy camp. And the indignation of Soviet Russia over the capitalist monopoly of opinion is no less hypocritical. The taboos of others are seen, but the recognition that one lives under analogous taboos always remains unperceived and taboo.



Sometimes, this blindness is disconcerting for those who are convinced of the existence of resentment against machines, since the facts that confirm the existence of this resentment (or that remain unintelligible without the assumption of this resentment) are perceived by everyone, and are accumulating on a daily basis, even on a global scale. There are, for instance, the medium-scale disorders that are breaking out everywhere, even behind the “iron curtain”, which often lead to real uprisings. No one will deny that they have rage and a thirst for vengeance written all over them. The question has also repeatedly been asked concerning what the young people are rebelling against and against whom they want to exact vengeance in their destructive fury. But the plausible answer has never been given: that *the destructive rage is displaced from working time, where it cannot be vented, to leisure time* and that, instead of being aimed at the machines of work, *it is aimed at substitute objects, completely innocent, false and accidental, placed at their disposal by the world of leisure.*<sup>38</sup>

The existence of these medium-scale disorders, however, is just one example among others, although it is one of the most visible, since today we are witnessing—and I am not referring only to war—a powerful surge in the positive thirst for destruction,<sup>39</sup> not to speak of an attitude of indifference with respect to destruction. The latter is, at the present time, an almost universal phenomenon, taking the form, for example, of indifference towards the prospect of total annihilation by way of an eventual nuclear war. Against the background of the growing thirst for vengeance, which is being incubated universally, it is hard to understand this indifference. And those indifferent apocalyptics who say, “Who cares?”, and those who like to dismiss the threat with a “Why not?”, are absolutely incomprehensible. *To the question of against whom this attitude is directed, the answer must be: “Against the entire complex of machines”.* That is, against the machinery of the modern world, in whose functioning they have been introduced by force and which they have lost all hope of ever escaping. They are certainly fascinated by the fact that this machine is not entirely sure of itself and that, in particular circumstances, it might blow sky-high in a universal apocalypse of the machines. In any case, this idea fills them with happiness as they contemplate the shocking misfortune that will one day befall these machines, while for their part they do not experience the fear that they, too, will go down with them.

### § 3

#### ***Effectus transcendit causam.***

---

<sup>38</sup> As a complement to this interpretation, see the author’s “*Faule Arbeit und pausenloser Konsum*”, in *Homo ludens*, January 1959.

<sup>39</sup> During *peacetime* (which is *the continuation of war by other means*, so-called “cold” means) this thirst for destruction is no less effective, but is merely concealed with various measures and circumstances. In the countries of mass production, in the United States, for example, it is concealed by the fact that it serves production, or, even more, by virtue of this fact it becomes something positive. For given that the interest of production to continue on its course has produced, introduced and rendered compulsory new forms of liquidation, the dictates of fashion, imposed again and again each year, are nothing but commandments to throw out certain products as if they were ripe for liquidation, despite the fact that they are still intact and functional.

Why is this? Why should modern man hate the machine?

Answer: because he is cheated by the machine.

This accusation sounds obsolete. In fact, the example of the domestic workers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who, replaced by machines, lost their very modest means of survival, has repeatedly been mentioned. Or that of the “pre-scientific” socialists who, as non-owners of machines, felt cheated of the *fruit of their labor*. Naturally, most of these reproaches have been rendered superfluous today. Now that there are no more domestic workers, at least none who are competing with machine labor, the standard of living of the factory workers has risen astronomically. And, of course, no less obsolete is the reproach that the man condemned to work with machines is misused with regard to his physical health. Compared to the quantity of effort that was at one time invested in and is still required for agricultural labor, in the building trades and road construction, ever since human labor has existed, machine work is light work. Where the machine is limited to requiring actions of direction and control, one can no longer speak of physical exertion. And in the totally automated factory it is reduced to practically zero, so that the problem now is the absence of physical exertion, the similarity of work and doing nothing and leisure.<sup>40</sup>

Now, however, we are thus getting much closer to the domain of the fraud, which is what we are talking about here. Our contemporary worker who works at a machine is not defrauded either with respect to his physical health, which is less threatened than that of his pre-machine-age ancestors, or with respect to his physical survival, which is today threatened by much more massive means, or even with respect to the pay he receives for what he has made, which is higher today than it has ever been. *He is defrauded, however, with respect to his own productive activity*. What does this mean?

It means that what he has to do and to make in order to live, that is, his labor, is no longer any kind of “making”. And this, in turn, if one takes seriously the definition of man as *homo faber*, means that he is defrauded with respect to his essence.

This, too, sounds strange. “To make”, it will be objected, “means exclusively *to produce*”. “And today he *produces* more than ever before, even infinitely more than before”.

Exactly. Economically irrefutable.

But only economically; not in terms of behavior.

---

<sup>40</sup> In fact, the category of the worker in an automated factory is entirely new. Even if he works alone like an old-fashioned cobbler, he never has a product in his hand, not to speak of a product of his own labor, but rather only watches for signs of the process that takes place without him. And even if he sits there without doing anything like someone who is writing a book, he nonetheless never makes any progress towards the status of an intellectual worker, but only towards that of being a policeman of the machine, whose labor consists in hoping that it does not have to stop for anything or anybody.

And this distinction, in turn, means: the fact that machine labor turns out “manufactured objects”, even in unprecedented quantities, is no proof that the activity that brings these products into the world (or to be more precise, without which these products would not come to the world) in accordance with their prototypes, represents a veritable *facere*, a real *process of making*. The truth is rather the contrary, since there is nothing that is as characteristic of the current situation of production than the *inversion of the proportions of the economic and the behavioral*. This inversion is a strict rule: *the more things are made today, the less things are made in the true sense of the word*. As a result: the fewer the number of real activities, which *make* something, in the strict sense of the word, the greater is the output of *things that are made*. In fact, the classical formula, *causa aequat effectum* (the cause conforms to the effect) has never been less true than today. Today it would be correct to say, instead: *effectus transcendit causam*. What does this formula mean?

It means that the effect (the product of labor, that is, of its contribution) supersedes the assumed “cause” (the labor of the worker) and not just with regard to its magnitude, but also with regard to its quality. The “disjunction” between cause and effect is so vast that (now speaking psychologically) the causative agent (that is, the worker) no longer recognizes the effect of his productive activity as his own, that is, he no longer identifies with “his” product.

This first explanation of the assertion, *effectus transcendit causam*, however, is not sufficient, since it still leaves open the possibility that the “causative agent” (that is, the worker) had originally *intended* to engage in such an act of identification but merely failed in his attempt. However, this, too, misses the mark. Not only is he defrauded with respect to this identification, but also with respect to the failure to successfully achieve this identification, since he no longer thinks of attempting to use the effect (that is, the final product) as a model for his activity.

Ultimately, even this second explanation of our thesis, *effectus transcendit causam*, is also insufficient, since it still seems to assume that the worker, if he only wanted to do so, could attempt to engage in this act of identification, but he does not want to. But this also misses the mark. *He is defrauded not only with respect to the pleasure of undertaking this attempt, but with respect to his ability to do so*. The truth is, rather, that he can no longer engage in the attempt to use the effect of his labor as a model; that if, while working, he were to be presented with the opportunity to have before his very eyes the final product as a model, he would no longer know how to combine this image of the model with his own effective activity. And even this third explanation is unsatisfactory, since it seems to take it for granted that the worker would be allowed to perform this act of identification, if he were to be capable of it. But this cannot even be contemplated, either. *He is defrauded not only with respect to pleasure and ability, but also with respect to the right to engage in this act of identification*. The truth is, then, that given the fact that any such attempt at identification, whether or not it would be successful, would complicate the work process, that is, it would lead to sabotage, the worker is not allowed to use the effect of his labor as the model for his labor.

In other words: this *Promethean disjunction*, which in my first introduction to the concept was exemplified above all in the difference between representation and production,<sup>41</sup> *becomes real*, because production no longer has anything to do with what is produced, even *within the process of production itself*. Thus, it seems to me that my thesis is obvious, because unless this fraud is eliminated (that is, if it were to be rendered impossible or prohibited), then naturally one can no longer speak of “making”.

#### § 4

*To make = to fabricate, to fabricate = to make. Service.*<sup>42</sup>

Our thesis will become entirely clear if we take a moment to proceed from the dimension of “fabricating” to that of “acting”, since it is here that the relations completely correspond. That is, the less “fabrication” there is, the less “action”.

For example, the claim that the pilot of the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima “acted” when he pressed his button, sounds incorrect.<sup>43</sup> In view of the fact that his physical effort, which might have attested to his “productive activity”, was entirely insignificant, one might even say that he did not do anything at all. Nor did he see the effect of his “productive activity”, since the mushroom cloud that he saw is not the same as the charred corpses. Nonetheless, with the help of this “not doing anything”, in a kind of *annihilatio ex nihilo*, he caused two hundred thousand people to pass from life to death. Let us assume that this unfortunate man was sitting in front of us. What would we have to ask him? Obviously, not “did *you* do that?”, since he knows as well as we do that it was *him*. Instead, we would have to ask him: “Did you *do* that?”, which means: “What took place with your help—can you still define it as doing something and can it be attributed to you?” And he would deny this with the following words: “No, actually, I did not *do* anything; at most I only *collaborated*.” And his denial would be correct, since the words, “do” or “act” are truly inadequate, since he had not envisioned the effect of his “deed”; and not only was he incapable of imagining it (due to the limitation of his capacity for imagination), but because he was never allowed to conceive of this or even allowed to be capable of conceiving of it. The “moral of the story” therefore consists in the fact that he was prevented from really understanding the effective consequence of the action for which he was used, and thus also from participating in its morality or immorality. He was even excluded from participating in the immorality of the action, and he was even *deprived of the right to have a guilty conscience*, it was not legitimate for him to feel responsible, he could feel that he was without responsibility.

In other words: the fact that cause and effect are separated, the separation between *causa* and *effectus*, which we have demonstrated in today’s manufacturing processes, is also manifested

---

<sup>41</sup> *The Obsolescence of Man*, I, First Part: “On Promethean Shame”. Keep in mind the common root of both verbs: to represent [*vor-stellen*] and to produce [*her-stellen*].

<sup>42</sup> We have translated *Machen* by “fabricate” and *Tun* by “make” [Note of the Spanish Translator].

<sup>43</sup> I am not speaking here of Claude Eatherly, who only gave the *go-ahead* signal.

here. If I maintained in the first volume<sup>44</sup> that today traditional ethics have become obsolete, this is why. That is, because they entail the assumption (and even today this is still the case) of the reality of “actions”, despite the fact that in regard to what is “done” today—at least in the activities that currently have a moral implication—it is no longer a matter of “actions” in the strict sense of the word, nor of “agents” with *the right to take responsibility*.

To manufacture is no longer then, to manufacture; nor is acting any longer really acting. Naturally, it is not by chance that these two words have at the same time come to reflect different contents. No; what we have here is a single event: both forms of activity have fallen victim to the same enemy, that is, to a third form of activity that, indifferent with respect to previous distinctions, has now completely monopolized praxis: *service*.

If we were to take a closer look at this question, it would strike us as odd that we continue to use the word that once defined the jobs of domestic servants to define today’s work: only that today, instead of those lords and ladies for whom services were performed in the past, it is the machines who have become the masters. But we only pay close attention at most now and then, and we have no qualms about using the expression, “tending a machine” [as in “service to the machine”].

Even more strange for most people, however, is the claim that what applies to “work” (and therefore to “manufacturing”), also applies to “acting”, that is, that action has also been replaced by the form of action known as “service”. But we shall discuss this later.

For example: once again, let us take a look at the action of the Hiroshima pilot. Described schematically, it consisted in the following stages of services rendered:

Some workers ( $T^1$ ) serve certain machines ( $M^1$ ) in order, with their help, to produce another machine, the airplane ( $M^2$ ). This machine ( $M^2$ ) is flown by another worker ( $T^2$ ), called a “pilot”, in obedience to an order; the pilot serves this machine in order to thus give another worker ( $T^3$ ), who is also sitting in  $M^2$ , the opportunity to serve another machine (the launching mechanism of the bomb,  $M^3$ ) which was also produced by the workers ( $T^1$ ) in the service of machines ( $M^1$ ), and, by means of this service, to bring about a particular effect (the destruction of Hiroshima). Naturally, the latter was the final effect, towards which *the process as a whole was directed* (from the very first step); and, even if this process was composed of various, and even innumerable, individual stages and steps, it represented a *continuum*; and not only in the temporal sense, but also “formally”, that is, it did not contain a single contribution that was not the contribution of a “service”.

If I said that the process was directed towards (and not “the men were directed towards”), I did so deliberately: in order to emphasize the fact that none of the workers had envisioned the final effect, but rather exclusively undertook—and disinterestedly and blindly with respect to the goal—to perform a service, regardless of whether their task consisted in “manufacturing” something or carrying out an “action”: none of whom, without exception, “manufactured” anything, nor did any of them “perform an action”.

---

<sup>44</sup> *The Obsolescence of Man*, I, Second Part, § 26.

My thesis, then, takes the following form: *the difference between the stages of “manufacturing” and “acting” has been abolished.*

Today, this suppression has become completely clear, since in our *push-button* era even the final effect is produced at the push of a button. And since this button-pushing takes place somewhere far from the scene of action or the theater of war, there is no difference between the bombing of Hiroshima in this respect and any *button pushing* employed in the normal process of production, that is, it has just as little to do with “action” as any other mechanical motion of service. In principle, with regard to all types of activity, there is no longer any difference between punching a hole in a piece of sheet metal and the destruction of a city located on another continent.

In sociological terms, this means that the two types—“he who manufactures” and “he who acts” (or, “worker” and “soldier”)—have merged into a single type, since both activities have converged into one single activity. Strategically, this means that all actions related to war “take place” and are implemented in the rearguard, since the fact of pressing a button, which sets in motion the process leading to the final effect, now takes place in the rearguard, exactly the way that up until now the production of arms took place in the rearguard; of course, as a result (which had already become evident in the last world war), the rearguard ceases to be a rearguard and becomes part of the front. All these differences have been abolished.

Anyone who is irritated (and certainly with reason) by the fact that, the workers in the totalitarian regimes are often subjected to paramilitary or even actual military organizations, should be no less irritated by the fact that in the non-totalitarian states a parallel development is currently underway, that is, that the military has been transformed into a labor army and that this development, although it proceeds in the opposite direction, leads to the same result, that is, the fact that the distinction between the worker and the soldier is also abolished. One need only recall the extermination camps, where the liquidation of men was carried out as a kind of job, in order to understand that the dissolution of this difference is one of the characteristic traits of totalitarianism. It would be naïve to believe that this totalitarianism could be stopped or hindered by “purely political means”, since in the final accounting the root of this totalitarianism consists in a technical reality, that is, in the fact that “manufacturing” and “acting” are being both replaced and abolished by means of “service”; or, more accurately, they *have already been* abolished.

## § 5

### *The decapitated fabricator.*

Someone who makes use of a tool, pliers for example, does not serve the pliers. To the contrary, he dominates them, since he uses them for the purpose of his work, for the *εργον*, which he has before him in his mind. He dominates them in almost the same sense that he rules over his own “instruments”, his organs, since he uses the pliers as his extensions of, or refinements or supports for his organs. I am not saying that he cannot also “make use” of machines in this way. To the contrary: the producer does this, since he uses them as

instruments, with whose help he carries out his ἔργον, the production of his commodities. However (even if he is the owner of a totally automated factory), he cannot make use of machines that operate on their own, but must at the same time make use of workers. And he makes use of them in order to be able to effectively serve his machines. He does not place the machines at the disposal of the workers, but rather *places the workers at the disposal of the machines, so that the machines can make use of them*. Furthermore, it would make no sense to say that these workers make use of the machines; instead, the workers are at the service of the effective operation that the machines perform. The workers serve the machines. What the workers have in view is not the product, but the perfect operation of the machine. For their part, in order to see to it that this process proceeds smoothly, they can “make use” of a tool, but this is another question.

Here we are saying three things:

1. The labor of the worker has no τέλος. Even if the factory in which he works is a productive enterprise, he only has something *to do* there, but nothing *to make*, as it is correctly distinguished in English. This is valid for all those who work in the factory. A rule: when a process of production is divided into a plethora of steps and each and every worker is only employed on one stage of the manufacturing process, the process of production is not divided into partial productive processes, but only into partial activities; none of those who are engaged in the manufacturing process is a person who manufactures anything, but a person who does something; and the τέλος of these activities is not attained when a product is finished and ready to ship, but when the worker has worked and done what he is paid to do for a full day’s work. To the person who works it therefore makes no difference whether there is something finished and ready to ship, that is, a finished product; nor does he care: for the day is done (not for *the* product, but for *some* product).

Of course, this being said, there can be no objection to “doing” (as opposed to “manufacturing”). Anyone who is capable of reading well or who can play the piano (that is, is capable only of “doing”) is by no means inferior to someone who “manufactures” something. In machine labor, however, it is by no means a matter of this kind of authentic “doing”. While reading and playing the piano, expressed in Aristotelian terminology, are ἐντελέχειαι, that is, they contain within themselves their own τέλος and thus their own satisfaction, machine labor is in a certain way ἀν-ἔργεια, since it is excluded from the ἔργον, that is, from interest in itself and its knowledge. *A horse that works in the mines cannot be a carriage horse, because it works blindly in the dark*. In these activities the τέλος of manufacturing is shattered; the manufacturer is after a fashion “decapitated”. Here, *labor becomes “doing” only as a result of this mutilation*.

Anyone who remembers the situation in Germany during the crisis that took place about thirty years ago will vividly recall the image of those “emergency” workers who had to dig holes and, as they were working, were fully aware of the fact that the job of the next shift would be to fill those same holes. It is not at all surprising that these workers often *did their jobs* as if they *were playing a part* and allowed their activity without a τέλος to deteriorate into a game. It will be objected that this was an extreme case. True. Yet today one can consider *all workers* as *co-workers* in this *emergency labor*, since *psychologically* they do the

same thing whenever work is transformed into something without a *τελος*: whether the job is proposed as a mere simulated goal, as in the case of the emergency workers, or whether the workers do not care about it at all, as is the case in normal factory labor. In both cases, the work (even work that is physically undemanding) becomes a kind of forced labor, since the two satisfactions to which man has a right are excluded from it: both the satisfaction that is produced in the worker by the visible taking-form of the product, as well as the satisfaction that is entailed by the authentic *making* that is not referred to an external *τελος*. It is not at all strange that today an attempt is officially being made to make the *inauthentic "making"*, which is inauthentic because of the "decapitation of the manufacturer", more pleasant by means of *musical accompaniment* and similar contrivances, that is, *by transforming it into a kind of dance*, in order to bestow upon it the external appearance of an occupation that is manifestly without a *τελος*, that is, to once again give it the appearance of a game.

2. Labor does not produce fatigue. Of course, at first sight this sounds agreeable. In this way, however, labor is completely deprived of its character, since the pleasure taken in labor is limited not only to pleasure which is experienced by the person who *makes something* with the formation of his product. It rather consists, at least *in addition*, of the investment of fatigue, in which the person who *makes something* completes himself. In the kind of labor (in total automation, for example) in which the quantity of fatigue has been reduced to a minimum, a degeneration of one's life force takes place, since now the latter consists not only in the fact that "manufacturing" has been transformed into mere "doing", but also in the fact that this "doing" is reduced to a kind of "doing nothing"; of course, only a "kind of" doing nothing. In the same way that "decapitated manufacturing" cannot be classified as authentic "making", neither can "decapitated activity", for example, that of the overseer in the automated factory, be classified as "authentic leisure". Their status is rather that of an *apparent leisure*, a mutilated attitude, a mere form of rest, since despite the fact that he does not need to move (moreover, in certain circumstances he is not permitted to move), the worker in an automated factory has to be focused and pay attention to every alert, just as the ordinary machine worker must be energetically active, even though he no longer has to make any particular product. Of course, now this labor consists in *a physically immobilized condition of paying attention*. The person who *makes something* has been transformed into a mere watchman of the machines who, sitting in his chair, always cherishes the hope that he will not have to take any action, when he is not secretly hoping for an incident that will give him the opportunity to take action and feel that he is *doing* something.

Even with this description of the two degrees of the degeneration of labor we have not exhausted the subject. We shall turn from our vanguard worker in the automated factory to the ordinary, even normal worker, the one that at least still has to serve his machine. What does he have to do in order to correctly perform this service?

3. The *imitatio instrumenti*. He must guide his actions in accordance with his machine; indeed, he must become its servant. This expression must not be misinterpreted. Naturally, "to guide one's actions in accordance with something" is what we have to do in any kind of labor, even in the most self-operating machines. Since we want "to manufacture something on the basis of something else", there must be, *a priori*, a whole series of conditions (for example, the material and the limitations of our technical capacities), in accordance with



which we must “guide our actions”. We do not have any problem with this. To manufacture something is human, whether we see the “need to manufacture” as a curse or if we see the “ability to manufacture” as a sign of freedom. Anyone who sees a privation of liberty in the *a priori* conditions of manufacturing—that is, in the fact that, if one begins to manufacture, one must deal with the world, on the basis of which one manufactures—wants to be “free” in an absurd sense, that is, in the sense of being “without a world”; and he is simply a metaphysical con artist. In any case, this service would only be perfect if the one who works maintains the rhythm of his machine; only if he abides by the *imitatio*.<sup>45</sup> The Hegelian model of “master and slave” can undoubtedly be translated into the relation of man-machine.

## § 6

### *The night of vengeance.*

We have thus provided a description of what today passes for “labor” as well as the normal day of the Japanese cripple in the *pachinko* arcade.

1. He did not really produce anything, either.
2. He, too, only served his machine.
3. He, too, had to accommodate himself to the machine’s rhythm.
4. What he was doing did not matter to him, despite the fact that he had accomplished something.

And then we come to the end of the working day.

And that is when he leaves, walking out through the factory gate and, he looks around, and there in the storefront across the street there are machines. He crosses the street and stands in front of one of them. “It is not so different”, he thinks. And what he is referring to is: “It is not so different from the thing that I had to stand next to all day, that I served all day, of which I am sick and tired and which I would like to give a thrashing. Anatomically, this *pachinko* belongs in any case to the same genus as her sisters in the factory, all drenched in oil. Nor are her needs essentially different from those of her sisters. She, too, reaches out with an arm in the form of a handle; she, too, demands her nourishment; she, too, wants to be served; she, too, wants to be turned on. And if I can turn her on simply with a glance from my beautiful eyes, it means nothing; in short: she is one of them, a machine is a machine.”

---

<sup>45</sup> See the introduction to this concept in Volume I of this work. What I mean by *imitatio* or “categorical assimilation” can be understood by analogy with music: anyone who makes music, accepts the structure of that music; cyclical time dominates not only the sonata (which is played under the imperative of *da capo*), but also the interpretation of the sonata. That is, as long as the person who is playing music is “in the music”, the rhythm of the latter is his rhythm and, in a certain sense, the form of existence of the music is also his form of existence. Similarly, the rhythm of the machine becomes the rhythm of the servant of the machine, except that (and this “except” is certainly decisive) here the man has to identify himself with something inhuman in the same way and to the same degree that someone who plays music adapts himself to music (which does not dehumanize him).

This is what he is thinking. But not just that, since there are certain undeniable differences that leave him perplexed: the fact that this glittering chrome person entertains him by displaying herself; that she knows she has something to display; that she has learned how to please a man; and all of this makes her a *sui generis* being.

Nor is that all, since—and now it gets really interesting and the machine is transformed into a siren—she also *supplies something*, a satisfaction of a kind he has never been offered before, a satisfaction that her oil-soaked sisters had never given him (supposing that they were to be capable of such a thing). Thus, what she promises him is to produce something for him, yes, for him personally; furthermore, as a direct result of her collaboration with him, just like bread that comes hot out of the oven as a direct result of baking, and just as the pot comes from the potter's wheel as an immediate result of the efforts of the potter: in the end, you have the thing in your hands, it is just what you imagined it would be and even, at first, it belongs to you. And as I said, this is unprecedented; and this in fact is what transforms this glittering person into a queen compared to her sisters. "What are you waiting for?", she whispers to the amazed worker. "Or are you afraid of me? If you turn me on in the right way; if you serve me faithfully, you, too, will be served faithfully by me; of course, you will receive something, you will get what you deserve and *you* will be the master. With the proviso, however, that if you serve me incompetently, the situation will naturally be different: *you* will have failed and *I* will be the boss." This is what she whispers to him, this is how she incites him to let her show him what she can do. And even though the victorious conclusion of the battle is not absolutely predetermined; to the contrary, despite the fact that victory depends on whether he treats the glittering chrome person competently or not (or precisely *because* this condition provokes his pride), it is impossible to resist this incitement. "A machine is a machine", he repeats, "when all is said and done, you have already learned how to deal with others just like her—or maybe not?"; and he feeds her (since she demands payment in advance) and he says: "Now you will see how I will teach you a lesson!" And what he wants to teach her is not just that he knows how to treat her type, but that she and her kind deserve nothing better than to obey and do what he desires and that now is the time for her to learn, since he is the master. And he attacks her with a frenzied rage to force her to make up for what her oiled sisters in the workshops and factories did to him all day. So he grabs her. And her handle is still warm from the hand of his predecessor, who had tried to quench and relieve his rage through it, but of course in vain: the world is collapsing to his right and to his left, the world has gone under to his right and to his left and the game or the rape or the act of vengeance (or however we might describe what then begins) starts. And that evening, when I passed by the arcade, he was still playing. Or he left, and then came back for another go.

This is more or less how his first encounter with the siren took place. It is quite clear that, to him, she does not represent a *reified partner*, that is, that she is not just a substitute for a human game player. To the contrary, she is a humanized machine, a substitute and representative for the machines, for the entire family of machines. Yet she is precisely a representative who, unlike the other machines, posits human conditions, conditions that one can accept just as you accept those of a real person, by which you can be defeated just as with those of a person and by which you can inflict vengeance on her just as you could do to

a person. Vengeance against a person: why would our cripple want to take vengeance against a real person? Against whom? Against the owner of the factory, perhaps? Not against a person who shares his everyday experiences, but against the machines; it is they who humiliate him, not the owner. His feelings refer to the machines. A game with other people? What a miserable substitute! Only here can a person really let off steam. Only here do you have the possibility of doing so.

If one can still speak of “possibility”, since one’s chances of winning are minimal. And he knows this, too. If one can even speak of a possibility in general, the latter would consist only in the fact that here he has the right to put his vengeance to the test against a real, that is, mechanical, target. *This is the triumph that he is permitted: to be able to try, to fight and be defeated.* And even for this triumph, which is usually a defeat, he has to pay; even for this defeat, since he can avail himself of the possibility of being able to fight as if it were a victory, at least as if it were satisfying. And he opens his wallet and pays again for the umpteenth time.

That is why our man is not, ultimately, a game player, but a football. However well he plays (and we may even assume that he has beaten the siren on several occasions), even as a winner he is always defeated, he was beaten in advance, that is, by those who made the sirens, by those who constructed these special machines for him—for him, a man who was ruined by a life with machines—for the purpose of giving him an opportunity to find a safety valve for his thirst for vengeance. When he puts his money in the siren’s mouth, he pays with the money that he had earned with his hard work or with mortal boredom in the hall of machines across the street. And when new accommodations for sirens are installed in nearby buildings, it is *he*, our cripple, *he*, the victim, who has financed them.

## Chapter 5

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF THE MASSES

(1961)

§ 1

*The return of the soloists.*<sup>46</sup>

In the reflective observer, the *pachinkos* described in the previous chapter will produce an effect that is not only scandalous, but also phantasmal. The main reason for this phantasmal character is that it is not immediately recognizable. And it is not immediately recognizable, because it consists of the fact that something is missing; and what is missing is not immediately apparent. Just yesterday, when I found myself once again in the shadowy interior of one of these pinball arcades for the purpose of making observations—surely for

---

<sup>46</sup> See *The Obsolescence of Man*, I, Second Part, Section 9.

the millionth time—I clearly perceived the reason for this phantasmal character. I was suddenly struck by the impression—which was both absurd and uncomfortable—of being in a very old movie. And when I tried to investigate the reason for this growing association, I realized that as “I listened”, there was hardly anything to listen to; I realized that the image of this establishment swarming with men was almost soundless, that the crowd that was jammed into that room was a wordless crowd. Hence, the impression of being in a silent film.

How can this absence of sound be explained?

“What is so surprising?”, I can hear someone respond. “You already said that mass consumption, at least that pertaining to the commodities of the entertainment industry, is performed in a *solitary* way. So, your players are *soloists*, too.”

It is true that I have already addressed this fact of solitary mass consumption.<sup>47</sup> But this expression is not a patented formula. The sudden subordination of our situation as game-players to today’s consumption of entertainment erases the specific character of the case. Between our player and today’s “normal” consumer of entertainment there is a considerable difference. What is that difference?

If radio listeners and television watchers no longer see or even have contact with one another, that is, if they consume their commodities as soloists, it is because they are in this way adopting an attitude that is appropriate to the situation. That is, because, separated in effect from the world around them, they can remain seated in their houses and continue to consume.

This “because”, however, does not apply to our case. To the contrary: in our case, the corresponding word would not be “because” but rather “despite”, since, if our players are “soloists”, it is not because they are physically separated from each other, but despite the fact that they are not physically separated from each other, despite the fact that they are gathered together, elbow to elbow. And this is a special case that merits consideration as a new stage of mass consumption.

Three stages can be distinguished:

1. In the first stage, the normal stage, which we shall not examine here, the entertainment supplied is consumed collectively or, at least, in groups by *crowds that are really gathered together, physically amassed*. This “stadium-theater” has always existed. And it still exists

---

<sup>47</sup> It has been said of my description of contemporary man that it is one-sided, since it is limited to situations and acts of consumption, particularly to the situation of radio and television consumption. This criticism completely misses the main point of my theory, because my thesis refers to the fact that almost all jobs are now dependent on the consumer goods industry or are heading in that direction. The gum that is chewed during work, or the music on the radio that is heard subliminally at work, transform labor into an appendage or a variation of consumption. Today it is no longer the case that consumption occasionally interrupts our existence as non-consumers, but, to the contrary, that only rarely *do acts of non-consumption arise within our consumerist continuum*.

today. Even the cinema still belongs to this stage, despite the fact that film, as a means of reproduction, approaches threshold of the second stage.

2. In the second stage, that of radio and television, the mass-produced product *is not just for the masses, but assumes a mass form*, that is, it takes the form of countless individual products reproduced by the millions. *There are no longer originals, only copies*. Or, if you prefer, only originals remain. Whatever the case, these originals are distributed to the consumers on such a vast scale that virtually *anyone can consume these commodities within their own four walls*.

One of the characteristics of this second stage (discussed at length in the first volume) is clearly the abyss between the mass character of the products, identical everywhere, and the private character of their reception and thus their *disingenuousness*, in view of the fact that this privacy or isolation of the receiver disguises the mass character of the commodity and the mass character of its transmission. The non-truth that is suggested to the receiver, that is, to millions of receivers, if it were to be formulated (which, of course, never happens) would sound like this: *You are a private consumer of the commodities that are supplied to you. So, where is the "mass-character" in this?* Exactly: you. Each person is interrogated as if he were *the* consumer. It is not by chance that a well-known radio magazine should be named, in the singular, "Listen!". So, where is the "mass-character" in this?

For where is it, really? As something palpable it is not found anywhere. But it is not found anywhere only because it exists (we shall see later in what form) on such a massive scale, that it no longer needs material substance. In other words: given the fact that the mass producer and mass supplier can deliver their mass products at any time to your house, and furthermore, to every house, they can dispense with the production of masses (in the sense of *crowds*). In view of the fact that their commodities are directed individually at millions of people (who are thus rendered completely equal), the formation of a palpable mass is prevented. *The technology of reproduction of the media not only does not have a democratizing effect, but to the contrary, it has a directly anti-democratic and atomizing effect*. And this is completely valid for the East as well as the West. It is a matter of indifference whether the inventors of the *mass-media* foresaw or planned this atomizing effect, since today the media are used in this sense. Despite the fact that today each person exists *in mass-form*<sup>48</sup> (and only exists as a *single person* in the numerical sense), *those who exist in mass-form no longer assume the form of masses*. *The masses, precisely insofar as they have assumed "the form of mass existence", have now been transformed into a quality of millions of individuals, a quality that no longer involves their physical conglomeration*. Nuremberg rallies are now a thing of the past. Such demonstrations are no longer needed, any more than "original theatrical performances" with "real" spectators, that is, spectators who are really present, are needed to transmit a televised spectacle. Television programs only

---

<sup>48</sup> We translate *massenhaft* by "in mass-form" and *massenhaftigkeit* as "form of mass existence", precisely in order to avoid the misinterpretation to which Günther Anders immediately draws attention: the fact that this form of mass existence is not conglomeration, but a form of existence that characterizes today's existence, even in the private sphere. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]

exist in the form of copies and only these copies can be consumed. However, since each consumer, despite the fact that the transmission that has been supplied to him at home is identical to the transmissions supplied to millions of other consumers, receives his transmission in solitude, each consumer (even if he knows it, but only “knows” it) has the feeling that it is supplied to him individually. And this is true even when the nature and the tendency of the transmission are expressly totalitarian. *In fact, each of us is supplied personally not only with our de-individualization and our form of mass existence, but also, at the same time, with the illusion of privacy* (insofar as it is generally a question of a dual conditioning). One experiences pleasure at home when one consumes in the family circle (which has actually been transformed into a mere juxtaposition of individuals) the program that millions of other consumers are consuming at the same time, in an equally “private” way. This, then, is the second stage.

3. The third stage is the effect of the second stage, for it consists of the fact that we, by virtue of the situation of consumption described above, are so definitively affected by this situation that *we behave like its creatures, even when this situation is occasionally (accidentally) interrupted*, even when we find ourselves away from home. We also remain soloists when, now and then, by happenstance, we find ourselves at an orchestral performance. Today we can be liberated of our physical isolation and find ourselves in arbitrary social or apparently social situations, without thus risking once again losing our domestic attitudes or the role of soloist to which we have become accustomed. Cases are known where prisoners—Dieterle has shown us one such prisoner in his film about Dreyfus—are allowed to stay in their prison cells with the doors left wide open, because their warders know that, habituated to their four walls, they will not make any attempt to escape or that, even should they escape, they will still be prisoners, because *their cell follows them, sticking to them as a mentality*, even after they escape.

Today’s hermit-consumers can also be allowed to roam free like these prisoners, since it is known that they will continue to conduct themselves as hermits and will continue to do so even when, as in our case, in the pinball arcade of the *pachinkos*, they find themselves herded together just like sheep in a corral. Although they have been rendered completely equal, that is, although they are mass beings, it is not likely that they will remain conglomerated in a physical mass. The risk of mass revolutionary action has never been less than it is now in the stage of maximum industrialization, in which each person has been converted into a mass being by way of the manipulation of the *mass-media*.

To recapitulate: while the characteristic of the second stage consisted in the fact that, in it, the outside world, transformed into images, was transported to each person’s home in order to be consumed there in a solitary fashion, the criterion of the third stage is rooted in the *reverse transport*, that is, in the fact that the soloists can be released into the outside world, because, conditioned by the second stage, they no longer recognize this outside world as an outside world and there is no longer any risk posed to their character as soloists when they return to their homes. And this reminds us of our cripple, who, even though he is still there, absorbed in his game, he still has not realized that, to his right and to his left, he is surrounded by people that are as much like him as two peas in a pod, his comrades in suffering and passion, who have not noticed his presence, either.

§ 2

*A parallel case. The “staying home” that takes place in the outside world. Our “schizotopia”.*

Another example provides confirmation of this character of the “third stage”. During the early forties, there were *drugstores* in the United States in which every dining booth had a *juke box* installed for the customers’ use, that is, a music machine. These *juke boxes* provided the customer with the opportunity to listen to his favorite songs while he dined. This innovation was a big success. And not only because every new device is destined to enjoy a certain amount of success at first or because today every “supply functions as a command”, that is, because the customers experience the pangs of a guilty conscience when they *do not* utilize an device that is placed at their disposal, but also for this special reason, that is: because by means of this installation the customers are placed *in circumstances that are an extension of what they do at home*—listen to records or the radio—but *in a public place*, that is, because *with the help of these juke boxes they can carry on in public just as they do at home*. This might sound contradictory, because with the expression, “home”, we are actually referring to a space that is separated from the outside world and impermeable to the eruption of the outside world; a space in which we are *chez nous*, while the purpose and contribution of the radio, to the contrary, consists in bringing the outside world or a desired image of the latter into the home. This contradiction, however, is not mine, but rather is embedded in reality itself: in the contradictory, but irrevocable, fact that today *it is precisely that space that we perceive as “home”, that opens up the doors to the outside world* and really puts us into contact with it. *In politically critical moments we are urged to stay home in order to be informed, by way of the media, concerning what is happening “out there”.* The petty bourgeois concept of “staying at home” seems to have been left several millennia behind us. A house lacking a spigot of information through which the outside world flows into the “inside” (or a house in which, by chance, this spigot does not function, since there is no house without this spigot), is no longer a “home” for us, but an inhospitable empty space [not homely], naked, separate from the world. Any prison cell, furnished with the usual devices of communication or, even better, any *sputnik* thus furnished would be habitable and comfortable compared to a habitation without either a radio or a television. This is also further confirmed by the fact that millions of people take their transistor radios to the countryside, so that there, that is, *in the outside world, they can continue to be just as connected with the outside world as they generally are at home, in their kitchen or their living room.*

The customers in the *drugstores* therefore behave *in public as they do in their homes*. And I stress the “in”, because it cannot be claimed that they do this *coram publico*: they do not notice any such public, despite the fact that they are surrounded by it or even crowded elbow to elbow with it. I have never seen a customer using a *juke box* who tried to call the attention of someone sitting in an adjacent booth to “his” music. This is extraordinary because their collective character is part of the essence of musical phenomena, that is, the fact that they can be listened to in a group, that other people can hear them, even—and this is what language consists of—that they *have to* listen to them. Our *juke box* players, however—no, they are

*users*, not *players*, since the latter term implies too much activity—totally ignore this aspect and act as if they were alone in the *drugstore*, as if they were the only proper receivers, since they paid to hear their music. It would never even occur to them that the other customers (*who can't help hearing*) would even imagine protesting against this music they do not want to hear (or against the various musical tunes, since it often happens that various songs are playing at the same time in an authentic polytonality<sup>49</sup> and polyrhythm, that is, one invented by reality). And rightly so, because the other customers would not even imagine making such a request, since they accept the fact that they did not pay for silence the same way that the customer who is using the *juke box* paid for his music and that the commodity has priority over the non-commodity. Once, when I complained to my neighbor in the next booth, the other customers voiced their anger with threatening unanimity against me: *You better mind your own business*. I did not even dare to explain to them that it was just this that I was trying to ensure with my complaint. I made a quick exit from that establishment.

The thesis, which is more bold than the one set forth in the first volume, goes as follows: *In the same way that the outside world is introduced into the home by way of the media, you take the "stay at home" mentality along with you when you leave your home for the outside world*. The oft-repeated observation that for several decades now the difference between "private" and "public" has been erased, is based on this "dual movement".

In this context, the possibility of maintaining our *schizo-topia*, which seems natural to us when we are at home, plays a role that must not be underestimated. What do I mean by this term? The answer: a *spatial dual existence*.

One of the most extraordinary and characteristic features of our current existence is that the space that we receive by way of the media, is never identical or co-extensive with the space in which we actually find ourselves; that we are always at the same time "here" and "far away from here".<sup>50</sup> Examples: even though he has already been put to bed, the baby is at the same time at the baseball stadium, since the cries of the spectators echo in his ears because the radio is playing. Even while she is beating her carpet, the housewife is not only at home between her four walls, but is at the same time under the vast cupola of St. Peter's, since the organ music accompanying the Coronation of the Pope is playing in her house. And even though it is suffused with the odors of food, the dining room is not just a dining room, but at the same time part of the ship that is sinking (the *Andrea Doria*), since the echoes of the cries of the drowning passengers amidst the fog resound here as well. It is therefore part of the essence of *staying at home* to not *be* just one space, but also to *contain* another space. The schizophrenia that corresponds to this *schizo-topic staying at home*, that is, the *spatial dual existence*, is currently for us so usual and so normal that we are uneasy should an occasion arise (for example, when the radio transmission is interrupted) when we have to entertain

---

<sup>49</sup> Ferdinand Kürnberger has described this "authentic polytonality" in the first chapter of his novel, *Der Amerkamüde*.

<sup>50</sup> Research in acoustic technology has already succeeded in driving this sensory paradox to its furthest limits: by way of the stereophonic production of records, recorders and radios. The author had foreseen this technical development in "The Acoustic Stereoscope", in *The Journal for Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 1948.



ourselves in *a single* space, just in our space. It is therefore not surprising that we also feel *at home* in public places, if the latter allow us to experience and guarantee a spatial dual existence. Because the radio can be installed anywhere, at home, in the car, or in any public place, in a way it represents a *common denominator device* which is capable of neutralizing the differences between these places where we spend our time. And since with their help we are always somewhere else, that is, we are never home, we are also always and everywhere *at home* by virtue of their help.

If I have spent so much time examining this “being at home in public” it is because it represents a feature of our current existence that has generally been ignored by theory until now. What the cultural critique has emphasized up until now was always the *de-privatization of the private sphere*. This, however, only describes one-half of our current existence. No less important is its counterpart, that is, the fact that *the public sphere* has also lost its singularity, that this latter sphere (despite the monopoly which it would appear to have won with de-privatization) is often understood *only as an extension of the private sphere* (and therefore no longer as a public sphere). Anyone who fails to include both traits in the picture of our current epoch paints an incomplete portrait of our time. It is part of the socio-psychological makeup of the modern American, for example, not only *to always be somewhere else and never at home* because of the incessant deluge of images and sounds from the outside world and, therefore, the loss of his private sphere, but also *to be everywhere and always at home* (at least as long as he is on American soil) and therefore the loss of his sense of the outside world, that is, the *elephantiasis of his private sphere*. In the same way that (despite being effectively seated *at home*) by means of broadcasts he is always somewhere else, he is also *at home* even though, seated in his car, he is driving around in some foreign country. *If the radio is the embodiment of his de-privatization, the car is the embodiment of his always-being-at-home*. Whoever views the radio and the car as merely two more machines, which by chance have become decisively important, does not understand that they are so strictly inter-related that they are complementary machines. In fact, the illusion of our current existence is only complete when we use both of these apparatuses at the same time; when, despite the fact that we are driving around in some foreign country, we are at home, because we have not left the car, our second home, and because in the car, as at home, we receive a second world through our radio. People today are half-nomadic, because, even when we are at home, we are at every moment somewhere else; and half-sedentary, because, even when we are actually driving around in a foreign country, we can consume the comforts of being at home; and this means, paradoxically, that we also have the possibility of finding ourselves elsewhere, that is, transmitted.

The first paragraph [of this section] showed us that, in order to forestall the formation of a real mass (composed of thousands or millions of persons who associate together), by way of the distribution of copies of images and sentiments to thousands or millions and by way of their isolated consumption, a “form of mass existence” [*Massenhaftigkeit*] is produced: that the substrate “mass” is replaced by the attribute “existence in mass form” [*massenhaft*]. And here we have identified the specific fraudulence of today’s media, if not of our epoch. Furthermore, as we have understood it, the effects of the so-called “second stage of mass consumption” on privacy are so long-lasting that we, thus conditioned, can be released and allowed to go free, even amidst a crowd of millions: those who release us have no need to

fear—even if millions of us, nourished by the media, have been rendered equal to the point of being interchangeable—that we would in this way lose our pseudo-isolation and that we would coagulate in a real mass. The isolation of our *pachinko* player, surrounded on all sides by his neighbors who are just like him, therefore not only does not represent an isolated phenomenon, but it is even a phenomenon that is typical of the epoch. Given the fact that *the mass of individuals* (which was described by Le Bon and which in the Revolution of 1917 was still a real force) has been replaced by the “*form of mass existence*” of individuals, we are permitted to speak of *an obsolescence of the masses*. Kollwitz’s images of the revolution are documents of the past. The replacement of the masses by an induced “form of mass existence” has been the revolutionary event of our century. Or, more precisely: *the counterrevolutionary event of the century, insofar as the definitive triumph of the counterrevolution is also, of course, a “revolutionary” event.*

*Appendix: the fascist masses. The masses as defensive bastion against the masses.*

If one reflects on the enormous role that was played not so long ago by *crowds*, the physically conglomerated masses, in the Nuremberg rallies, for example, one might get the impression that these masses had attained the climax of their career in the eleventh hour of their existence. But such a conclusion would be erroneous. The climax had already been attained when the physical formation of the *crowd* had already been rendered superfluous, when gigantic mass rallies could already be dispensed with. Hitler and Goebbels had already understood that by way of the radio one could assimilate and “effectively transform into masses” incomparably more people than one could in a Nuremberg stadium, no matter how colossal its dimensions might be, since in their efforts to confer the maximum massifying effect on their mass actions they magnified the impact of their monstrous demonstrations by broadcasting them over the radio. At the time, there was no television and Riefenstahl’s movies did not reach everyone; but the *radio* did. *Without the radio the massive successes of Hitler would have been unthinkable. Fascism and radio went hand in hand.* The demonstrations that served as the basis for the “broadcasts” were already obsolete measures, the last attempts (at the moment of the transformation of the masses into the “form of mass existence”, when not even carried out after this had already taken place) to “massify” man, something that was absolutely feasible by way of the radio, even in the old-fashioned style, that is, that of regimentation in the form of a physical conglomeration (even one that is allegedly cultural) of men. It was not yet understood that the power of copies actually renders the creation of the originals superfluous; it would take years for this lesson to sink in. The colossal demonstrations, which, although they could not yet be disregarded, represented *ideological activities*—since there are no exclusively *ideological concepts*—that is, a regression to a “form of social production” that was already superseded. Tanks made by hand or homemade rockets would not have been any less anachronistic than these colossal demonstrations. If they still meant anything, it was nothing but a transformation of the masses, but not their culminating point: *the transformation of the masses as a power into a defensive bastion against the power of the masses.*

It is evident that what fascism organized were not “masses” in the almost mythological sense in which this expression had been used over the course of the previous hundred years, since it is assumed to be an essential feature of the “masses” that, despite being habitually

amorphous and dormant they could occasionally shake the foundations of the established order with a sudden and massive explosive force, that is, they were capable of becoming a *historical subject*. Despite the fact that the National Socialist leaders embraced the myth of the masses (since they praised them and shaped them into something that was half army and half community), naturally nothing was further from their minds than to help the masses achieve the *status* of historical subject. To the contrary, with the “massification of the masses” they intended to transform them into something different from masses or, more precisely, into the opposite of masses, that is, into a *colossal praetorian guard, whose task would consist in protecting them, the leaders, against the masses (that is, against themselves)*. To deprive the masses of power was therefore what the organizers (who thus performed the role of exorcists) of the masses then organized. And what at first, due to the simple fact of its imposing character, might appear as the high point of the power of the masses, was to the contrary its lowest point ever.

This was what I was trying to say when, a little while ago, I cast doubts on whether it made any sense to speak of a “climax of the masses”, since *the* “high point of the masses” (at least quantitatively) coincided with the moment when the masses were deprived of their power. And this high point appeared at that moment *because* they had to be deprived of their power. It is not at all surprising that in the year 1933 the event was invisible to the millions of participants, since “the punch-line of the joke” consisted in the fact that the masses sank under their own weight (in the words of Goebbels: “Let them stew in their own juices”), that is: confronting the masses with such masses that they would get the impression that they were victorious *as masses*. In fact, at that moment they *violated themselves* (the expression is eccentric, but it is close to the truth).<sup>51</sup> Then the masses became a counterrevolutionary instrument. And as we have seen, they remained just that, and that is what they still are today. First, because the *mass-media*, which are based on processes of reproduction, have transformed the massified masses into the manipulable masses; and then because today the masses exist exclusively in the form of the mass existence of individuals. This second reason is the more important one, *since it is obvious that masses that still represent an individual quality are by no means be considered to be an active historical subject*.

And this is the current situation. At least in the highly industrialized countries—the difference between the East and the West is irrelevant here—whose populations have been transformed, by way of the media of reproduction, into millions of mass hermits. And since these mass hermits no longer get together in crowds—at least it is not necessary for them to do so—they are absolutely innocuous, absolutely passive, absolutely non-revolutionary. This means—and, once again, this is valid for both the East and the West—that *the epoch of the reproduction is the fundamentally non-revolutionary epoch*. On the other hand, it is obvious

---

<sup>51</sup> It is not surprising that those who came of age in the socialist movements and conferred credibility on the term “socialism”, including its version in the expression “national-socialism”, did not discern the possible implications, since they thought in terms of their own previous experiences, and thought that the later mass concentrations were the continuation of their previous experiences of mass phenomena. And not just their continuation, but their maximum realization. Faced with the apothecic dimension of what was being offered to them their previous experiences paled by comparison.

that for the authorities that transmit mass opinions, attitudes and emotions to the mass hermits, it will be increasingly easier, at those times when for political reasons such a course should seem advisable, to change, that is, to transform as if by magic, the mere quality of the “form of mass existence” into real physical “masses”. The masses that will be needed, can always be produced, and always overnight.

(Added in June 1979: these analyses have not been refuted, but rather confirmed, by the millions of people who thronged the streets and squares in Poland during the Pope’s visit.)

## Chapter 6

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF LABOR

(1977)

*If demagogues like Hitler or Goebbels were to appear today they would promise their peoples, all at once, rationalization and full employment or, even better, they would advocate rationalization merely as a precondition for full employment.*

*Why the precondition, however?*

*And if their peoples were as easy to fool as the German people were in 1933, they would greet this double promise with jubilation and they would plunge rejoicing into the abyss.*

*Once again, however: why the precondition?*

§ 1

*The privatization of the worker. “Chaplinitis”.*

The question concerning whether today’s worker is still a proletarian or not, cannot be answered with reference to how high or low his *standard of living* is—viewed in this way, hundreds of millions of workers are no longer proletarians—but rather with reference to the condition of his *standard of freedom*. And this latter standard is so low, that the response to the question must be one hundred percent in the affirmative. In fact, he is not free, for example, merely because he is excluded from the ownership of “his” means of production or his products, but because he cannot take in with a single glance the totality of the process of production within which he is integrated; nor does he know the final product or its function (in a manner of speaking, both remain “transcendent”); nor does he know the moral or immoral qualities of “his” product; nor does he know its beneficiaries, its users or its victims. All of these things—and with them also his own labor—take place in a certain way behind his back. This is how it seemed to me and my co-workers on the job I had more than thirty-five years ago in a factory in California.

The only thing that we “saw right before our eyes” was the fragment of the product that passed before us and then disappeared and for whose manufacture we had been gathered there: *nor did we desire anything more than that, neither to know nor to see any more*; we had been manipulated and our curiosity was eliminated; and we had absolutely no interest in what we were doing: why should we have known or seen anything more? What *could we have achieved* with such knowledge? Above all: *we were not supposed to have any interest* in what we were doing; *we were supposed to work without purpose*. If any of us were to have asked one of the engineers or someone from the office about the function of our activities in the factory, in the best case we would have been treated as eccentrics: *That’s none of your damned business*; and a couple of years later, during the era of McCarthyism, we would have been considered to be *security risks*. In fact, to call that “labor” would have been false, not to mention conceding it too much honor. Since we worked blindly with respect to the end purpose, it was instead a kind of *gymnastics* that we had to perform every day for eight hours, consisting of a series of free exercises—or rather, *un-free* exercises—that were always the same; for *what was still “free” about those movements dictated by the assembly line?* A few decades before, Chaplin had already shown us these “un-free exercises” in his film *Modern Times*, which depicted a man who, upon returning home in the evening from his job on the assembly line, *is no longer sufficiently free to free himself of those un-free movements* and anxiously watches his hands dance about like some strange species of animal: *Chaplinitis*. Indeed, you might very well be stricken with dread and anxiety when you realize that now, too, at this very moment, hundreds of millions of workers are busy performing such gymnastics; and that these hundreds of millions can even be grateful because, unlike the millions of less fortunate workers—the unemployed—they are at least *allowed to perform these gymnastics*; and that they should stubbornly proclaim the right to this gymnastics as a fundamental political right: in fact, they must proclaim this, because without such useless gymnastics they would sink into the gutter or be planted in front of the TV screen—whereas this kind of “activity” is only a dissimulated form of doing nothing—and because they have devoted themselves to gulping down the daily gruel of time, which endlessly accumulates before them. And this is even more disturbing if you think that this gymnastics cannot stop or be corrected by any kind of revolution; that our description is just as applicable to labor in the socialist countries as it is to labor in the capitalist countries; that is, that *the consequences of technology will not be transformed with the transformation of property relations*; that the *discourse of the “humanization of labor”* and the “abolition of alienation” is and will always be *nothing but idle chatter* as long as we live in a world in thrall to technology, which is what this world is increasingly becoming.

And with this observation we come to the glib claim, that is so often thoughtlessly repeated these days, that *there are no more proletarians*. Actually, *there are more proletarians today than ever before*, since if those who spend the greater part of their lives waking up to “un-free exercises”—and this category embraces almost all wage workers—and who at the end of their working day only have enough energy<sup>52</sup> to enjoy entertainment products supplied directly to their homes, and if those who are *excluded* even from this *opportunity to engage*

---

<sup>52</sup> During the period when I worked at the factory I was no exception. Of course, I did not have a television then, but only a radio. However, I, too, lived at the time in the company of that radio.

in “*un-free*” labor, that is, the unemployed are taken into account, if all these people are not proletarians, then I do not know what this word could possibly mean.

To this we must add that it is not so certain that assembly line labor is still really “labor” in the classical sense of the word, since what we “do” on the assembly line is not a gestural entity, a complete action in itself, in which we could engage like the carpenter when he makes a table or the violinist when he plays a tune or even the lumberjack when he fells a tree. Our contribution consists, instead, only of fragments of an activity with which we can never identify, but which we have to repeat a thousand times without identifying with it. And then we have to do it again the next day. Since we derive no satisfaction from the unfinished product on the assembly line, nor from the finished product, assembly line labor is worse, not to say much more accursed, than any previous form of labor ever was. This type of labor is the kind that transforms us into proletarians.

## § 2

*Automation. The second type of inactivity.*

But that is not all: although alienated labor is already truly inhuman; although it is impossible to renounce it; although no political system could have an interest in renouncing it; and although no political revolution would be capable of renouncing it, it is still not the worst kind of labor. Of course, I am not referring to the fact that there are jobs that are physically or spiritually more burdensome than the kind I have described. To the contrary: what I want to say is that this other kind of labor that I am talking about, viewed superficially, is *very easy work*; so easy that, in fact, since we ceased to be shepherds, compared to what we have understood by the word “labor” it even seems less strenuous than what the Taylorist system requires. It is the worst kind of labor, rather, because we are completely deprived of freedom. In fact, its introduction is in itself a revolution that, with only a small delay, took place at about the same time in the East and in the West. I am referring to *automation*.

Although it is true that most of today’s workers still do not belong to the category of the servants of automation, the tendency towards automation is nonetheless inexorable: it is predicted that by the year 2000, most workers will work in automated workplaces. Naturally, this does not mean that then everyone “who is looking for work” will work for and in automation, since there is an iron rule of *inverse proportionality*, which says that *the increase in automation will diminish the number of necessary workers*. To put it another way: it is inevitable that, almost as a “byproduct”, automation will produce millions of unemployed persons and, thus, proletarians.<sup>53</sup>

If, however, we disregard this probable ominous outcome and restrict ourselves to those few lucky individuals who will not drown in the soup of their undesired free time, but who will successfully obtain jobs in automated industry, we might think that at least they will have an

---

<sup>53</sup> Marx’s statement that, “The shortening of the working-day is [the] basic prerequisite [for the flourishing of the “true realm of freedom”] (*Capital*, Volume III, Part VII, Chapter 48, Section III) sounds as if it were from another era.

opportunity—as paltry as it might be—to continue to blindly perform their “free exercises”. But no, even this exception is still too optimistic. These “lucky individuals” will also be condemned to inactivity, and, indeed, they already are. This sounds absurd, but it is not, because the inactivity of which I am speaking here is of a totally new type, that is, an inactivity *whose duration will be identical to the hours of work*; or, to speak plainly, *it is identical to work*. I am referring to the fact that those employed in the automated factories—it makes no difference whether they are called workers or “employees”, since here the distinction is no longer valid—will not even be obliged to perform those “gymnastics” during their working hours that we have previously depicted as the epitome of modern inhumanity; no, they will not even have the freedom to do that. Bathed sweetly in radio music, their duty will consist, in a way, in doing nothing; of course, only in a way, because they will be busy *watching*<sup>54</sup> to see if by chance (this is merely an example taken at random) a light that is supposed to be green turns red (something that, if all goes according to plan, should never happen and, in fact, hardly ever occurs), indicating a breakdown. Of course, they must engage in this *watching* with the utmost concentration (and this is psychologically a unique case): they are the Lynceuses<sup>55</sup> of the industrial era. The term, “to watch”, is preferentially used because it has a double meaning: not only *watching for something* or *watching to see if [something happens]*, but in its transitive form, *watching over* something, which suggests the active custodianship over something. This second sense is in fact a challenge to the person who is the watcher. *The watcher must feel like a watchman*.<sup>56</sup> He is actually a “watchman”, however, in only a small percentage of cases. *Shepherd of the object* would be the most accurate description of the worker in an automated factory.<sup>57</sup> That is today’s bucolic idyll. In fact, in the history of human activities since the ancient occupation of shepherd there has been no job that, even if it were truly a curse, has been so fundamentally unlike the “labor that is accursed” (Genesis, 3:19) as the situation of the worker in an automated factory. *He is even denied the sweat of his brow*. I am not entirely sure that he has the right to subsume his *doing nothing* and the *backbreaking toil* of the farmer under the same general concept of “labor”. In fact, compared to the frustration of someone who works in an automated factory, assembly line labor, described above (and which is still the dominant form of labor), is an entertaining job—one is almost tempted to say: worthy of man—despite the blindness with regard to its meaning, since it still keeps the workers in motion. At least, this kind of work *has the semblance* of doing something.

---

<sup>54</sup> We translate *warten* as “*aguardar*” [“to wait”] in order to avoid the ambiguity posed by the Spanish “*esperar*”, which could mean both “to wait” and “to hope”. For the hoped-for expectation, the German term is *Hoffnung* [Note of the Spanish Translator]. The word used in this English translation is the verb, “watch”, which can mean “waiting to see if something happens”, as in “night watchman” [Note of the American Translator.]

<sup>55</sup> Lynceus was one of the Argonauts, whose eyesight was so sharp that he could see through the earth or through a sheet of metal (hence the term, *lynx-eyed*) [Note of the Spanish Translator].

<sup>56</sup> The author is engaging in a play on words here with the terms, *Warter* (one who watches) and *Wärter* (watchman) [Note of the Spanish Translator].

<sup>57</sup> The expression, *shepherd of the object* [*Objekthirte*] is, as we shall see below, not only a borrowing, but also a rectification of the name that Heidegger gave man, whom he referred to as the *shepherd of being* [Note of the Spanish Translator].

To this we must also add, as a second *negativum*, the fact that the “watchman” watches for something that *never* happens. I doubt that man will be able to endure this second negativity. Most likely, the person who anxiously watches to see if the ominous red light blinks, nervously expectant like a policeman, will pace back and forth, frustrated for hours, watching for the appearance of a criminal, since only this eventuality would show that his job is not entirely useless and without purpose.

Finally, the third *negativum*—and we can never emphasize this point enough—consists in the compulsory *unsociability* of the watchman. Whereas the workers on the assembly line still felt that they were working together with their fellow workers, and remained in contact with each other (even if only in the same way that *galley slaves are in contact with each other*), the workers in an automated factory have to *stand watch as soloists* and, furthermore, they must not move about, since they have to perform their duty while seated. *The hermetic character of today’s consumers* (television spectators, for example), which I described in the first volume,<sup>58</sup> encounters its *corresponding phenomenon in the hermetic character of today’s workers (employed in automated factories)*. In fact, the latter do not find any comrade at their side: if they have a thirst for socializing, instead of turning to their neighbor, the most they can do is turn to the enterprise itself, that is, to a *thing*. Who knows if the idea upon which those of us who are seventy or eighty years old were raised, and which for more than a hundred years gave the socialist movements their social power, that is, the idea that the workers had to feel *their power in numbers* and that only if they felt this power, that is, if they felt and acted in accordance with the principles of solidarity, would they be able to affect the course of political events and obtain their freedom; who knows if this idea might turn out to be incomprehensible to the coming generations of workers, because the labor situation is incompatible with the existence of *teams*, not to speak of masses or classes. It was certainly not by chance that the lithographs of Käthe Kollwitz, once justly famous, which represented the revolutionary masses, were no longer seen on the walls of the cities after 1945, and after 1933 were rapidly torn down. The future represented in these images had become the past before they could become the present. These images have lost their “truth”; no one recognizes themselves in them anymore. And who knows: perhaps in the near future many workers will be as hermetically bound to their surrounding world as today’s astronauts are in their space capsules. *And who can tell whether in the more distant future the terms, “class consciousness” and “comrade”, and even the word, “work”, will not also be obsolete, just like the term “worker” is today (replaced by the fraudulent term, “job-seeker”).*<sup>59</sup>

Nevertheless, those who watch or the watchmen who “do nothing” will be the lucky ones tomorrow, since there can be no doubt that the automated enterprises will be almost

---

<sup>58</sup> *The Obsolescence of Man*, I, Second Part, Section 9.

<sup>59</sup> “Job-seeker” (that is, someone who accepts a job in exchange for a wage, and therefore, the wage worker or employee) corresponds to the German term, *Arbeitnehmer*; we use it to highlight the deceptive character of the word that is emphasized by Günther Anders. The correlate of the one who seeks jobs is the one who gives jobs (*Arbeitgeber*) [Note of the Spanish Translator].



autonomous, that is, they will operate with as few workers as possible. There are already *unmanned factories* in Japan. Soon there will also be unmanned factories in other places, as well as *unmanned offices*, since today there are computers that can perform operations almost 1,000,000 times faster than their creators,<sup>60</sup> if they had to do the same tasks, who have now most unfortunately fallen far behind their creations.<sup>61</sup> Countless specialized procedures that twenty years ago, when I was working on the first volume of this work, had to be carried out by people, can today be processed automatically and, furthermore, much more accurately and a thousand times faster. The worker no longer experiences the “Promethean shame” I described in that book, which is the shame the worker felt, when confronted by the machine (which he served), that consisted in the sense that he was less perfect than the machine. In fact, the Lynceus of tomorrow, seated in the cockpit of his machine world, will have neither the opportunity nor the inclination to compare his “own contribution” with that of the machine. The latter does not work instead of the individual, but for the whole shift; and this means: the difference in output has become so vast—some complexes of machines already replace 50,000 workers—that such comparisons are idle. Even so, despite the degrading situation in which *these men condemned to “watch” will find themselves, they will comprise the elite of the workers and employees*, for—there is no need to harbor any illusions—most of the proletarians, however much they want to work, will wait in vain for the opportunity to be employed as “watchers”.

Will humanity not be transformed into one gigantic global lumpenproletariat? And even if—a most unlikely eventuality—the authorities somehow manage to preserve the current welfare state through a total restructuring of the social system, what will millions of people do to *keep busy* from morning to night? It is ridiculous to think that this question can be answered with proposals concerning popular education. Will they not be abandoned, and exposed to the ocean of free time? The question, “What is to be done?”, that the best men of the past century and the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century tried to answer, will be replaced by this question: “What do we and our fellow men have to do to keep ourselves busy?” I doubt very much, and indeed refuse to believe, that millions of people can fill the ocean of empty free time with entertainment, “education”, sports or sex. And not because I am an intransigent and jealous fanatic of the work ethic; nothing could be further from my intentions than to preach that only those who earn their living by working deserve to live. What I think is that man cannot live without labor, to which he was once condemned; that he is incapable of entertaining himself *around the clock*. The recommendations of those who could not bear the miseries of humanity, whether Tolstoy or Lenin, are obsolete now that humanity faces a completely new situation: *it, too, is now obsolete. The question now is not how to share the fruits of labor equitably, but how to make the consequences of not working endurable.* However repugnant the expression, “planning free time” [*Freizeitgestaltung*] might sound—I do not trust the word, “plan”; it is on my blacklist of proscribed words—at least the term, “free time” shows what is at stake today. Naturally, I do not have an answer, either.

---

<sup>60</sup> *Das Argument*, special issue no. 19, p. 92.

<sup>61</sup> The Molussian *theologoumenon*, according to which the world created by God is greater than his power, presumably results from similar experiences.

Those were fortunate times when the “job-seekers” called workers (who of course never had the freedom to just *take* their jobs) were hired and considered as such, since the unemployment that is now in the offing will make the unemployment crisis of fifty years ago look like child’s play. If one reflects upon the fact that the previous unemployment crisis was one of the main causes of National Socialism, you do not have to really go out on a limb to imagine what this unemployment that is looming over us now will cause. It is not absolutely impossible that the gas ovens of Auschwitz (which were economically absurd at the time) would be the models for the “solution” of the fact that, compared with the conditions of labor, *there are too many men*.

But the upheaval that is now affecting labor is not completely encompassed under the rubric of rationalization. Of at least equal importance as the revolution brought about by automation is the revolution that consists in the fact that at the present time *means and ends* have exchanged places. One will immediately see that both are merely aspects of a single upheaval. For today it is certainly the case that each individual considers his job to be a means (for the purchase of means of subsistence, in the broadest sense of the term). But whereas the purpose of labor consists in satisfying needs by creating products, today the goal to be met by satisfying needs is creating jobs; job creation becomes a task: *work itself becomes a product that must be created*; a goal that can only be attained by creating intermediate products. These new products are called “new needs”, and they are created by a kind of labor called “advertising”. Once these needs have been created, the demand for and the possibility of providing a *new job as a final product* are also created at the same time.

Of course, they are not created *ad libitum*. Not only because our “ability to need” is not unlimited (what more could one desire after having bought a “pen that can write underwater”?), but above all because, with the inexorable rise of technology and with the inexorable perfection of rationalization and automation, the number of workers needed for the provision of goods and services is constantly declining. *The postulate of full employment therefore is rendered less likely of realization as the technological status of a society rises*. When certain central European politicians sought to raise the technological level of their countries, because only thus could they guarantee full employment, they were either incapable of thinking or they were demagogues. *You cannot have both a program for maximum rationalization, which diminishes the number of necessary workers, and full employment*. This type of logical error would not be permissible outside of politics. The current dialectic consists in this *contradiction between rationalization and full employment*. No politician would dare to openly admit this.

§ 3

*The WQ.*

Just as there is an IQ, there should also be a WQ (*workers quotient*): this measure would reveal the number of people who have to work in order to provide for the livelihoods of one hundred people. Thus, a WQ of 100 means that one hundred people must work to keep one hundred people alive, something that sounds ideal, since each person would have to have—

that is, would have—a job. In the capitalist system, however, one cannot claim that this “coverage” would be ideal; for three reasons.

First, because, at the current level of production, each job would become, for a certain number of unemployed persons, a *desideratum* and, in this way the working class would be undermined.

Second, because rationalization, and therefore also the reduction in the number of jobs, is required for higher profits.

Third, because it is preferable for 10 percent to be enough to maintain 100 percent, that is, because every enterprise wants to be in the black.

At the same time, however, there is an aspiration to realize the utopia of the Land of Cockaigne where the WQ = 0; that is, the situation in which no one needs to work, because all work is entrusted to machines. Thus, a WQ of 4 means: four people are necessary to feed a hundred people. The higher the technological *status* of a country, the lower is its WQ. Since, however, the quantity of what is defined as indispensable is relative—what is indispensable in Los Angeles is not indispensable in Calcutta—and depends on the technological *status* that has been attained, the data provided by the WQ must always be used with caution. In highly industrialized capitalist society, the following rule applies: *n* persons are never needed to provide for the needs of *n* persons. It is always the case that, *n* minus *x* men are needed to provide for *n* persons. Anyone who seeks to combat *unemployment by retraining those who have been “liberated”* (as they so elegantly say these days) *from a one kind of job* (typography, for example) *for another kind of job is a “minimalist reformer”*,<sup>62</sup> for it never occurs to him that with rationalization not only does the WQ decline in one industrial sector, but in all of industry; that is, the fact that *rationalization absolutely reduces the number of jobs*. If this rule does not apply to the socialist states and the latter boast of the absence of unemployment, they are by implication boasting of the fact that this rule is *not yet* valid for them, that is, they are bragging about their technological backwardness.

Another term related to the WQ is the HQ (H = Hour), which reveals how many hours per day a person has to work in order to live. HQ 24 would mean: in order to live you have to work twenty-four hours without rest; HQ 4: you have to devote four hours to working. WQ and HQ decline in tandem. And this applies not just to industry (in the strict sense), but absolutely, for the independent owner of a business, for example, whose working time (during which he works with electronic devices) has been reduced to the point where he can become a part-time worker, or even curtailed to the point where he is almost “unemployed” (HQ = 0). The latter condition is a totally new kind of *unemployment*, that is, *a kind of*

---

<sup>62</sup> “Minimalist reformer”: an attempt to translate the term *Salamitaktiker* [“salami-tactician”], which refers to cutting a sausage into thin slices and, in politics, to the person who pursues a goal by taking very small steps towards it. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]

*unemployment that you can allow yourself.* In this case unemployment is therefore a *stage of social ascent*.<sup>63</sup>

Diligence, which for millennia and even during my youth was naturally recognized to be a virtue—our report cards even listed it as a separate category on which we were graded—is now *obsolete*. It is now strictly limited to serving as an indication of non-rational labor and as a way to kill time. Anyone who needs two hours to create a good or provide a service that can be made or performed in one hour makes himself look ridiculous or like a dimwit.

#### § 4

*The relocation of the **voluptas laborandi**, the **voluptas concurrenti** and the **voluptas solidaritatis** to leisure: sports, the new division of labor.*

What solution exists today for this situation of working and not working? For today, although automation has not been victorious in every domain, *the worker* has still been *defrauded with respect to the effort of working*; and not only with respect to the effort, but also with respect to the *pleasure entailed in that effort*, to the indispensable *voluptas laborandi*. We are spared the proof of existence that labor previously conferred: *I sweat, therefore I am*. It would certainly be bold to claim that today's workers and employees miss the arduous labor of times past or even that one of the motivating factors of the Luddite radicalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the relative (I emphasize: relative) lightness of machine work. In the future, however, the yearning to expend effort or at least *to do something* will be overwhelming. And even now I can see our great-grandchildren: shepherds of automation and unemployed, who will look back on the good old days of assembly line work, despite the fact that the latter consists exclusively of dehumanizing and Chaplinesque gestures, because it still contained a minimum of *doing something*, and therefore was still something comparatively human, and spared them the effort of having to kill time *on their own*: *Luddite radicals* who, of course, will enjoy just as little success as their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors. The targets of the terrorists of the future (which will be the same as the official targets of countries at war) will be the great industrial complexes, since the acts of violence that are today engaged in by groups of conspirators as a result of desperation in the face of the "absence of meaning" in their lives or from some hope for a proof of their existence—of an *ergo sumus*—these *acts of terror will pass*, I fear, *into the hands of the masses all the more rapidly as the triumph of automation becomes all the more incontestable*.

---

<sup>63</sup> "Only half an hour a day", we read in *Der Spiegel* (November 21, 1977), "is all that a farmer named Groth works", "who raises two thousand pigs for the slaughterhouse every year (total value: 700,000 marks) on a farm that is worth 280,000 marks. The gates have to be opened and closed. Everything else works on its own.... Thus, *in one hour he can stable eighty cows in ten enclosures*, comfortably and without effort.... *Then, Groth goes hunting*." We would like to draw attention to the fact that the time that Mister Groth does not need for preparing his herds for the butcher, he devotes to killing other kinds of animals.

In the meantime, the workers and the unemployed have to be content with other methods to recover their much coveted hard work. In fact, there is a method, but only one, that has proven to be fantastically successful: *sports*.

Its results would be incomprehensible without an analysis of modern labor. “What do you usually do in the evening, after you get home from work?”, I asked (this was twenty years ago) a worker at an automated factory in Marl, who was watching a little green light. His answer (without looking away from the green light): “Naturally, football. And twice a week, naturally, I lift weights”—and this illustrates my previous observation about the fact that today’s workers secretly miss the hard work of their ancestors. The double “naturally” in his answer was indeed completely natural, since these two sporting occupations in his leisure time represented for him the natural compensation for his unnatural, that is, all-too-light activity, which “filled” his “working time”—it is not possible to omit the quotation marks. In fact, *the basis of today’s sports is our contemporary all-too-light labor*. The existence and the further development of sports can only be understood as complementary phenomena. That is: *the less arduous labor is*—and the development in this direction was already underway at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, only to culminate in automated labor—*the more that man must seek to recover*—man, who was constructed to labor “in accordance with his essence”,<sup>64</sup> --*his absolutely indispensable expenditure of effort* and the corresponding *voluptas laborandi, which is equally indispensable*; to do so, he must *transfer it to his free time*. This means, however, that he must develop an equally new *division of labor*. Whereas this expression had up until now indicated that the execution of a kind of labor necessary for the fabrication of a product had to be divided up into diverse operations (naturally, more or less arduous) performed by various men, here the term indicates that *the aspect of “effort” is separated* from the other acts performed in labor. This procedure is exceedingly strange, since it implies a double freedom or, more precisely, the *appearance of a double freedom*: what is apparently free are: (1) the very act of performing the labor, insofar as it is freed of all effort; but this separated effort also appears to be free because (2) it has to take place as an absolutely voluntary game and entertainment.

This is, of course, senseless. As the successive uses of the words “appears” and “appearance” already indicates, we are confronted here with a double fraud, because (1) “free of effort” does not *eo ipso* mean “freedom”; an effortless job (such as, for example, pressing buttons or for that matter any automated job) is anything but free. And (2) leisure is not *eo ipso* a situation of freedom; instead, the type of leisure is determined by the type of labor that is imposed upon us and therefore it, too, is also imposed. *Hobbies*, which have the semblance of freely-chosen leisure time activities, are determined by the objects of the *hobby*, which are sold as commodities, and the latter, in turn, are determined by the nature of contemporary labor, as *counter-types*. It is hard to understand why playing miniature golf (naturally, with prefabricated components) has to be a “free occupation”. When we go on vacation and go *fish spearing* or surfing, we do so because we have been subjected to pressure by the objects offered for sale on the market, that is, by the producers. As vacationing consumers of *fish spearing* or windsurfing we are employees of the manufacturers, who seductively enticed us

---

<sup>64</sup> I reluctantly use this expression of Husserl’s, since it has usually been used (as in Scheler) for conservative purposes. It is unavoidable here, however.

to engage in these activities, which we never would have performed as workers: for example, activities that involve killing or taking “big risks”. To this we must also add that, accustomed to the *soft terrorism* (as I called it twenty years ago) of commodities, we are no longer capable of amusing ourselves. (I am not sure that our ancestors did any better. Most likely, especially during the winter, they vegetated and slept more easily than we, who are immersed in so many impressions.) In any event, today the television screen is the assembly line of leisure. We have to continue to consume at its rhythm. To summarize: leisure, consumption and sports are imposed on us just like work. What we experience at work and in our leisure time is therefore not, as it might appear at first glance, a double freedom; it is rather a *double unfreedom*, which is *the existential lie of the epoch*, since it presents itself disguised as a double freedom.

## § 5

### *Recovery through sports.*

But we have not yet addressed all the aspects of the compensatory function of sports. There are also other defects pertaining to today’s kind of labor that are repaired by way of sports.

Whereas, as assembly line workers, we are defrauded with respect to the possibility of identifying with our activity and of seeing the result of our own labor before our eyes, as sportsmen (runners, swimmers, skiers) not only can we *be as one* with our activity (and in the most satisfying way), but we are even incapable of *not being as one with it*. And that is not all. What today’s work lacks—a defect that has been the object of repair operations again and again, here by piecework, there by “socialist competition” (Stakhanovism)—is the *competitive dimension*, that is, the possibility of competing, the pleasure of competition and the desire to compete and win. What the vulgar philosophers of capitalism, especially in their appeals to the owners of small businesses, throw in the faces of the socialists,<sup>65</sup> that is, that the latter seek to eliminate the possibility of free competition, is precisely what industrialization accomplished a long time ago by way of the introduction of dehumanizing techniques in the labor process (which have been adopted without the slightest modification by the socialist states). In the factories, the possibility of the  $\alpha\gamma\omega\nu$  (not to speak of the pleasure of the  $\alpha\gamma\omega\nu$ ) has been almost completely eliminated. The role of piecework is irrelevant. Once again, what we just said about the expenditure of effort applies here as well: there has been a relocation, for to the extent that possibilities for competition are lacking at

---

<sup>65</sup> Vulgar ideologues (such as, for example, Taus, in Austria), in their fear that the epoch of free competition might be coming to an end, are resorting to the most naïve philosophical formulas that were characteristic of the pretentious journalism of the early twenties, such as, for example, “creativity”, and “self-development and self-realization of the personality”, which they allegedly support, but which are frustrated by the socialists. Nothing is more likely to earn you the accusation of treason than the assumption that you had once conceded to a dependant—a peasant or a bank employee or a soldier, for example—the possibility of becoming a “personality” or “developing” that personality. Such festive words never even provoke derisive laughter, but merely a leaden incomprehension. Those who speak of “self-development” are referring directly to the preservation of the “self-development” of capital.

work and, on the other hand, the yearning for competition and the *voluptas concurrenti* cannot be renounced, the latter is transferred to *leisure time*, once again, to *sports*, which represents *the competition of those who are excluded from real competition*. In sports one can, and even must be victorious both as an individual as well as collectively. *Sports is the safety valve for the competitive urge, it is "competition for the people"*.<sup>66</sup>

We still have not examined all the surrogate functions of sports, since we have to add—this is the third function—that it concedes to the workers (or condemns them to) the possibility of venting steam each weekend and experiencing that sensation (which is by no means desired by the ruling class) of unity and solidarity, which they are supposed to experience in the factory sections, in another, completely innocuous environment (sometimes even at a sports field placed at their disposal by their employer). *Sports is a compensatory substitute—accepted, when not promoted—for the desire for solidarity*. As football players they feel solidarity with their football team, or as cyclists, with their cycling club. And those who do not themselves play or ride, but who, as family members of the sportsmen, gaze open-mouthed or lead cheers or only participate by sitting in front of their televisions, also feel this solidarity: then they express their solidarity *as fans or sympathizers of the Brooklyn Eagles or of the Parisian Vélos de Rougemont*. And this means: *not as proletarians*. *The institution of the false "as" is one aspect of the most effective ideological manipulations in the East and in the West*. The Molussian *dictum*, "Sports are counterrevolutionary", is not entirely unjustified.

We must also mention (although this probably amounts to the same thing) that sports allows the sportsmen to experience the sensation of conflict, which is otherwise denied to them; more exactly: they condemn the sportsmen to *dispel* the repressed energy of political hatred *by transferring it to a false target*. And not only do they replace the target of enmity, but, even more seriously, they sublimate this sensation into the least serious sensation of all: that of mere hostility. It is a bad sign that this is also the case in the East, where there are supposedly no more classes and where as a result there should be no need for a substitute for class hatred; as it is a bad sign that in the East mass enthusiasm and mass hatred are also officially promoted in the sports stadium, and an entire industry is even devoted to competition.

Once these pseudo-effects have been produced, they can then be *retroactively transformed into political pseudo-effects*. Not long ago, an incident at a sports event degenerated into a real war. The roars that interrupted and concluded the speeches of Goebbels (both the roars of hatred against "Bolshevism and world Judaism" as well as the roars of approval for total war) were previously tested on the football pitches. In fact, the roar of the crowd at a sporting event also sounds "murderous". The fact that the most famous mass demonstrations of

---

<sup>66</sup> In the Soviet Union, competition has been artificially reintroduced: shifts of workers who produce a particular *output* in less time than other shifts are honored as "heroes of labor". This is not real competition, however. What is really taking place is that this shift of workers manages, with their tongues hanging out of their mouths, to keep up with the rate of a machine that runs faster at their factory than at other factories: the shift thus competes *with this machine*, not with the other shifts.

National Socialism took place in the Berlin *Sportpalast* has an incomparable symbolic significance: no novelist could have invented a better scenario. All of this is, of course, also applicable to the roar of the crowds at the May Day parades in the East and at the American Party Conventions.

Let us recapitulate what is happening here. The process has three stages:

1. It is assumed that there are authentic political emotions of solidarity and antagonism.
2. New targets are provided for these feelings, and they are transformed into (inauthentic) sports emotions. As such they are incomparably more intense than any “natural” affects or emotions; no one is gripped by a natural fury, regardless of its type, that is as inhuman as the rage that is expressed at a football game.
3. New political (pseudo-) targets are assigned to these augmented inauthentic emotions: the football fan shouts not for his team but for his Reich and for total war; not against the other team but against Bolshevism and world Jewry.

## § 6

*The technological revolution, the only authentic revolution of our time. The planned economy: the system tailored to technology.*

Let us return to our initial question about whether today’s workers are still “proletarians”; and to our answer to the effect that they absolutely are proletarians because of their multiple privations. Of course, these privations are not primarily political, but are instead the effects of the only authentic global revolution that has taken place in our time and which, unlike any other, is still actually taking place as a *permanent revolution*, that of *technology*, which is *neutral with respect to the system*, that is, it has established its dictatorship equally everywhere, and *also remains constant even after sudden political changes*, as if nothing had happened, that is, it continues its feverish pace of development. This is the case when the level reached by technology, which has outgrown the political structure that has prevailed up until now, is often even the driving force of political revolution. Perhaps the well known revolutions of our time, which as political revolutions even advertised themselves as acts of salvation, were only travesties and, in the best cases, they were only misinterpreted as salvation. Actually, these changes obeyed technical imperatives; and it would be no exaggeration to say that *politics is now ideology*, or even more, that perhaps *economic programs are nothing but superstructures constructed to meet **technological requirements***; that the dictatorship of technology has transformed the dictatorships themselves under which millions of people had to live or take up arms or sacrifice their lives.

*What unites Washington and Moscow* is certainly not the “hotline”, but the fact that neither of them could exist without telephone technology (and nuclear reactor technology, and so on), *the fact that both of them are under the dictatorship of technology* and therefore of the technologists. It is not an argument against our thesis when it is submitted that the political programs of most countries, despite the dictatorship of technology that rules everywhere, are still profoundly different (which cannot be denied). These differences proceed instead from the political, social and economic situation in which technology has been establishing its



rule. Once it rule has been consolidated, however, with each passing day what happens in the framework of politics is of less and less importance, since what takes place on the basis of this situation is a real change, that is: the importance of technology is so predominant that, in the final accounting, every political event takes place in its framework. As a result, the different countries, with their different pasts, are becoming more similar as the predominance of technology (which is increasing without a halt) continues. It would be senseless to expect that the non-freedoms (described above) will disappear with the end of capitalism (which may very well come to an end someday), because they are the consequences of technology to a much greater extent than they are the consequences of property relations. One may even have to ask whether the opposite will be the case (something that, naturally, is a shocking, depressing or provocative idea for any socialist believer): whether technology, which operates within a programmatically planned economy and whose planning mechanisms are dictated by its *requirements*, is as incompatible with the satisfaction of human needs (something that was the original goal of the introduction of planning) as the capitalist economy (whose aim is profit); whether perhaps the technology that functions within an economy that is not entirely centralized, but structured pluralistically (which in the eyes of the planners must appear as disorder), would not leave more loopholes and, in this way, a few last possibilities for freedom (of course, not planned by the system, but accepted). To ignore this question—which sounds ultra-reactionary and scandalous to me, too—because the spokesmen of reaction would respond to it in the affirmative (certainly not as a result of their interest in the freedom of the workers) would be to demonstrate not just confusion, but *cowardice*. It does not matter: *the convergence of the systems*, which has been underway for some time (and which is certainly not something that I discovered), *is unstoppable*. This convergence, provoked by technology, is *the revolution that is constantly taking place. And it is proceeding not in the direction of human freedom, but in the direction of the totalitarianism of the machines*. And, as pieces of this world of machines, we humans are, in the best cases, proletarians. But usually something worse than that.

## Chapter 6

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF MACHINES

#### PART ONE

(1960)

##### § 1

*The dream of the machines.*

The triumph of the world of machines consists in the fact that the distinction between technical and social structures has been abolished and the distinction between these two spheres has been deprived of its object. The organizational apparatus of an enterprise that, in order to function, has to coordinate the activities of each squad of workers with that of the

others and which itself contains countless material devices (from the telephone to the Hollerith machine),<sup>67</sup> is an apparatus in just as literal a sense as the other, material-technical kind of apparatus known as the machine, which usually bears that name; or, more accurately, it is even a more advanced kind of apparatus, since the ideal of the apparatus is realized all the more completely the more energy and efforts are united in its structure. In fact, individual machines (in the literal sense) cannot function meaningfully unless they are coordinated in a whole that functions as an “apparatus”; otherwise, they would lack not just raw materials, but also a reason to work and to consume. What is today called “entrepreneurial doctrine”, in accordance with its tendency, is nothing but the attempt to unite both types of apparatus in a single discipline. In any case, the smooth functioning of the macro-apparatuses is the precondition for the smooth functioning of the micro-apparatuses, which, viewed from the perspective of the macro-apparatuses, are reduced to the roles of mere pieces of an apparatus. In exactly the same way, however, each macro-apparatus, insofar as it seeks to continue to function and to be successful, must also coordinate its functioning with other macro-apparatuses, and finally even with all the other macro-apparatuses. Yet, as fantastic as this consequence may sound, this implies that the apparatuses have the basic goal of bringing about an *ideal situation* in which only one continuous apparatus exists, that is, *the apparatus*: this apparatus, which “incorporates and synthesizes”<sup>68</sup> in itself all the apparatuses and in which “everything functions”.

We have thus come to one of the key concepts of our reflections, since in fact the actual world of machines can only be understood *ex futuro*, on the basis of this final idea that is inherent to it. Now we have to attempt to clarify this final situation; or at least the tendency that is leading towards it.

## § 2

*The equation: “apparatus = world”.*

If all the machines were merged into a single apparatus—for this is what such a situation would imply—the assertion that “everything is functional” does not just mean, as has been the case up until now, that no breakdowns take place within this isolated apparatus, but that there is absolutely no “outside” for this apparatus (just as there was no “outside” for philosophical systems) and that it had incorporated everything within it: including within itself all imaginable functions, that all existing things are assigned a function, and that all men born within its domain are integrated as its functionaries; in short, the phrase, “everything is functional” implies the equation, “*machines = world*”. Of course, this is not yet the case today; at the present time, machines are merely proceeding towards the

---

<sup>67</sup> A machine invented by H. Hollerith (1860-1929) that operates on the basis of punch-cards [Note of the Spanish Translator].

<sup>68</sup> “Incorporates and synthesizes” is the translation we propose for the German term, *aufhebt*, utilized in dialectics to refer to the “supersession” that bears the synthesis, after the confrontation between the thesis and the antithesis; the synthesis overcomes the opposition between the two insofar as it incorporates part of both terms of the opposition, rather than by abolishing them [Note of the Spanish Translator].

realization of this equation, but even though they are proceeding towards this conclusion, today they are already considered as “candidates”, as pieces of the “universal machine” that lies in our future.

And not only are they perceived in this manner, but they also perceive each other this way; and not only each other, but every existing thing. If one were to sketch an “ontology of machines”, that is, if one were to ask how machines “enter into contact” with *what exists*, and therefore what is presented to them as *existents*, the first fundamental response would sound like this: each thing “enters into contact” with them as a potential piece of a machine. Or more precisely: *only that which displays its fitness for being a piece of the apparatus is acknowledged and recognized as an existent.*

### § 3

#### *The Ontology of pillage.*

It is not that the machines *treat* raw materials, energy, things and men as “part of themselves”; it just so happens that *they address them as if they have superior rights over them.* Even the most universal formula “things exist” no longer corresponds to anything in their ontology; “being”, *data*: they know nothing of all of this. What does not arise as “something to seize”, as prey, is not classified as an *existent*; the words *existent* and “that which can be seized” are interchangeable from its perspective: *esse = capi.* *Therefore, the “world” is the name for a virtual occupation zone;* energy, things, and men are exclusively materials subject to requisition. Strictly speaking, these materials have a value for them as [being] “there” only from the moment they are subjected and integrated and therefore forced to function with them. It is indifferent whether the machines utilize their prey as raw material, as pieces of the machinery in the narrow sense of the term or as consumers, since raw material and consumer also form part of the process of the machines. In the strict sense, they are also “parts of the machine”.

What certain vulgar mechanistic theories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had assumed as a description of the real situation of the universe, that is, that the latter is a whole that works like a machine, has now become the goal of technology; for the latter the universe *must* become a machine. The moon, which in other times glowed amiably and has now been transformed into a television station and a representation of countless no less conclusive fragments of the world, can serve us as a luminous sign of this universe that is being transformed into a machine.

### § 4

#### *The kingdom of blessedness.*

Similarly, the theory of *l’homme machine* of the French philosopher Lamettrie—that is, his theory that we are like machines—has been transformed into the following postulate: as men we have to make ourselves equal to the machines, we have to become machines, that is, pieces of machines that are part of other larger machines, and finally, pieces of *the* machine. All machines are designed in advance with a view to this final situation in which there will

no longer be individual machines, because all of them will be diluted as parts of machines in the embrace of the one blessed machine. Men have always dreamed, and are still dreaming today, of this eschatological kingdom of mechanical blessedness, for as long as they are living under the curse of having to work individually and in any case without complete coordination and harmony, they will not have achieved their optimal contribution and assimilation.<sup>69</sup> They still exist, then, in the state of *technological sin*. Spinoza's pantheistic formula of *individuatio sive negatio* (to be separated means to be incomplete) is his credo of this misfortune. Or, expressed less metaphysically: given that, by nature, they are expansionist and integrationist and therefore burning with impatience not to be left without anything to do or, more accurately, they are entirely incapable of *not* assuming functions that they could perform, they will not have attained their goal as long as there are still remnants—things or “eccentric” persons—that *still exist outside* machine: treacherous *outsider* energies or potentials that still manage to exist beyond the reach of the planners; blank spaces that continue to put up resistance against absorption; scraps that still refuse to perform their last services as raw material or energy sources. In their view, the most insignificant piece of the world that is not yet occupied is a reason for anxiety and any part of the universe, even if it is beyond the solar system, is a missed opportunity or, more accurately, a task that has not been carried out, a duty that has not been performed and, therefore, a stain of infamy. They will only be participants in blessedness at the moment when they experience the fact that the ἐν χαι πᾶν has become reality, that the *deus sive machina* is resurrected in its glory, that is, that *the machine* has been set in motion and that, then, they, too, the machines, degraded to the level of pistons, bolts or fuel for *the machine*, can be integrated and function in the latter without friction.

## § 5

### *Totalitarian rule.*

The catastrophic threat posed by such a universal machine is indeed appalling. For if the total interdependence of all its parts were to become a reality—which would take place with the degradation of all the machines into parts of a machine—any breakdown that affects one part would also automatically affect and therefore paralyze the entire apparatus. Obviously, it is not in the interest of the “total machine” to become “totally total”, but to maintain a certain amount of independence for its component parts. Its totalitarian maxim directed at its components would sound like this: *I need all of you, but in an emergency I can do without any one of you*. Here we cannot examine this dialectic in more depth, as it pertains to the “sociology of things”.

During the previous generation there was a refrain in a song—the SA [*Sturmabteilung*—storm troopers] sang it on the streets of Germany—that went as follows: “... and tomorrow the whole world”. Of course, it could very well be that today one no longer hears this ringing hymn to total domination; but if it were to be adapted to today's world, we would hear these words exactly as before, that is, emerging from the roar of the machines, even from their

---

<sup>69</sup> *Abgestimmtheit* also has the meaning of “tuning”, “accommodation” or “adaptation” [Note of the Spanish Translator].

activity that is today often silent. In fact, this refrain arises from the workshop of technology; from the technology whose rule is today just as indisputable as it was then, if not more; and it was composed long before the term, “National Socialism” even existed. As horrible as it may sound, the SA was merely repeating the refrain of the steel lips of the machines in order, later, drunk on their venom, to march forward in thunderous clamor, like parts of a machine, towards the great machine of the total State.

## § 6

### *The final monocratic situation.*

If there was a “sociology of things”, its axiom would be: *There is no such thing as an individual machine.* Instead, each machine is a ζῶον πολιτικόν; outside of its society, as a mere *Robinson-thing*, it would be useless. The term, “society”, does not merely designate those things that are similar to it, not only the millions of machines that function at the same time or even the sum of all their operations, but a correlate that morphologically adapts to the machine, a home that provides shelter for it, nourishes it, and cleans it, which is composed of raw materials, producers, consumers, identical machines and channels for waste products; in short: a *surrounding world*. And since the perfect functioning of the individual machine will only be possible if its “surrounding world” functions as impeccably as the machine itself functions, this same “surrounding world” presents itself as a machine. If a material Robinson-machine (which, as we know, is imaginary) is called “apparatus A” and the enterprise that the apparatus feeds on, in which it functions and within which it works, is called “the world”, then “apparatus A”, in order to attain its optimal performance, desires for itself a world that is also an apparatus, that is, a “vast apparatus A”, which “adapts” to it as if it were tailored to its measure or molded according to its needs, that is, that it represents its complement and structural and functional extension. It is, of course, easier to desire such an outcome than to bring it about; no, even this desire on the part of an apparatus that adapts ideally must remain fundamentally unrealizable, since individual machines (from alpha to omega) that could demand a monopoly to configure the world in which they operate, as a mold made in their own image, are just as impossible as individual humans who could cut the world as a whole to their measure. Rather, each apparatus has to adjust to share this world with countless others of its kind (from alpha to omega). That is why the coordination of the small apparatus and the large one can only take place in a really perfect way if all the small machines, in an act of self-denial, were to form a bloc: that of the *popular community of the machines*; that is, if they strive to bring about the triumph of a single great machine, in favor of the predominance of a monocratic situation, in which each machine must humble itself to be a mere piece of the apparatus, acquiring, by way of this humiliation, the perfection of its functioning. Of course, the fight for this “popular community” has not been won yet, but it has been underway for some time (ultimately, since the first machine) and certainly can no longer fail.

## Chapter 7

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF MACHINES

## PART TWO

(1969)

§ 1

*The spread of the machines.*

Only a few years ago [in 1965] something unprecedented took place in the United States, not just in the usual sensationalist and journalistic sense of the word, but also something of extraordinary importance for those who attempt to philosophically understand the problems of technology, especially those of planning and centralization. I am referring to the failure of the electrical power grid in the northeastern United States and southeastern Canada, which resulted in a situation of near-complete paralysis for several hours in a region populated by millions of persons. What we have to learn from this event, we can understand in the light of a few reflections on the essence of technology in general or, more precisely, on the machines and apparatuses in general. I emphasize the term, “in general”, because these reflections are of a fundamental kind, that is, they are independent of the separation of today’s world into two different economic and social systems; its results, therefore, are valid for both or else are not valid for either one. I shall summarize my reflections in ten theses.

*First thesis: The machines are spreading.* The “will to power” is innate to each individual machine (if we may be allowed to use Nietzsche’s expression in a metaphorical sense). No machine is capable of refraining from submitting to this will. Whether it wants to or not, each of them is made to be bigger than itself, since it tends towards a situation in which the indispensable external processes for its operation and maintenance (such as mechanical maintenance, supplies of material, energy supply, shipping its product, creation of demand, rate of consumption, etc.) are also directly developed with mechanical precision; and this means, at the same time, that these external processes together with those processes directly pertinent to the machines must be part of one vast functional whole.

*Second thesis: The expansionist impulse of the machines is insatiable.* Let us suppose that a machine ( $M^1$ ) which has successfully annexed its “surrounding world” (that is, the process that surround it and which are indispensable for its operation) and assimilated it to its own functioning, so that now all these processes together represent a single functional complex of a higher order, that is, a great machine ( $M^2$ ). What happens at the moment of this merger? Answer: a repetition. The expansionist tendency by which machine  $M^1$  has been transformed into machine  $M^2$ , leads again to a higher level, and therefore, to a higher dimension. However,  $M^2$  also tends—and to refrain from succumbing to this tendency is not within its power—to conquer the processes that are the preconditions of its own functioning, so that they function as precisely and in a manner that is as calculable and mechanical as for the single little machine,  $M^1$ ; in short: the machine  $M^2$  also expands and becomes an even larger machine,  $M^3$ . It is superfluous to point out that this expansion also enters a third stage and

then a fourth stage and so on successively; that is, that in principle there is no limit for the “iteration” of this process.

*Third thesis: The number of existing machines is declining.* Of course, this assertion, presented in isolation, is meaningless: every housewife who buys her washing machine, like every *teen* who buys a motorcycle on installments, knows that the number of these objects is growing every day; this increase is so rapid that we are justified in speaking of an *explosion of machines* (analogous to the population explosion). We shall not formulate our thesis as an isolated claim, however, but rather in connection with our theory of expansion. And in this context it is not absurd, because what applies to the individual machine  $M^1$  (that we have introduced as our first model), that is, that it proceeds through stages 2, 3, 4, etc., also applies to any other machine. In other words: each of these machines, in order to function optimally, has to attempt to conquer its “surroundings” and induce them to be assimilated to it and form with it a vast machine, or else it has to insert itself into another, larger machine (which is what happens in 99% of the cases). In this sense, we do not have to start with an individual machine, as we did before in such a non-dialectical way, but from the whole ensemble of the machines, which today already work together (despite the fact that they have not yet been merged into the total machine). If each machine, in preparation for its survival and its improved functioning, has cultivated camaraderie and promiscuously mixed with the other machines (ultimately, with all of them), obviously, from the perspective of an individual machine  $M^1$ , it would make no sense to consider an individual machine  $M^2$  as “just another machine”. Therefore, one can no longer decide where one machine ends and another machine begins. Instead, one can, or, more accurately, one must speak of *one* machine, not of two machines; and precisely this means—*quod erat demonstrandum*—a “decline in the number of machines”.

*Fourth thesis: The machines are “in decline”.* Having noted the decline in the number of machines, we still have not reached the last stage of the dialectical process resulting from the principle of the machines. The numerical dimension does not exhaust the question. Instead, a really qualitative-dialectical transformation enters into play: the machines change by virtue of the fact of their aggregation; it can even be said that they become something different, something inferior.

What do we mean by this? Of course, we do not mean to suggest that they are worth less than the machines of the past or that they are becoming worse from one day to the next; to the contrary, they are progressively improving (as long as they are not subject to planned obsolescence). Nor are we referring to the idea that the social prestige of machines is in decline (or that of their owners), which may happen on occasion (owning a car no longer means anything) but is not generally the case. Instead, we are referring to the fact that the *machines*, merely by virtue of the fact of their aggregation and collaboration, cease to be machines, they undergo an “ontological decline”, that is, they become *pieces of the apparatus*, pieces of larger machines; that is, they become inferior because the dignity of the pieces is inferior to that of the whole of which they form a part. What is valid for us humans, that is, that when we are transformed into mere “cogs in a machine” we lose our personality, is also equally valid, as strange as it may sound, in the realm of things. The reification of man, which is today generally admitted (for perverse reasons of fashion even by those who

collaborate with or promote our reification), is matched by a corresponding *reification of things*. That is, the number of machines, which are still actually machines rather than just “cogs” of a larger machine, is decreasing every day; at least with each passing day the danger of this “decline of autonomy” increases. Compared to our present-day machines, the machines of the last century were still solitary and sovereign individuals, not to say proud “pioneers with a personality”.

*Fifth thesis: The machines are being transformed into a single machine.* This reification does not take place only sporadically or in a single sector. The principle of “iteration”, which we have already encountered, is valid throughout the realm of the machines. What this means is that, when the individual machines “go into decline”, that is, when they have been transformed into pieces of larger machines, the latter also begin to “decline”, that is, they have become pieces of even larger machines, into components of larger complexes, etc. We do not see an end to this repetition, unless a completely different kind of “end” supervenes, that is, the nuclear-apocalyptic end of the world, which absolutely rules out the possibility of repetitions. Should that not happen then someday we will reach the stage in which all the machines will be undergo a blessed “supersession and assumption” as parts of a single machine, one that is identical with the global system of production that will function in conjunction with its parts. If such a situation should prevail, towards which the innumerable machines of our time are tending, naturally this will not mean that there will be less *machine-ism* than there is today. To the contrary: then *nothing will exist that is not machine-like*. This would mean, however, that, except for this totally machine-like thing, of which everything forms a part, there will no longer be a single object that could claim to be exempt from being described as an individual machine. Today there is not a single apparatus that does not dream of this final totalitarian situation,<sup>70</sup> in which each machine will only exist and function as a

---

<sup>70</sup> I use the expression, “totalitarian”, as seldom as possible because I consider it to be merely a term of abuse, and only slightly less suspect than the thing that it is supposed to designate. If I nonetheless use this term here, this is precisely in order to put it in its proper place. Everyone knows that the expression is employed almost exclusively by theoreticians and politicians who are convinced that they are citizens of non-totalitarian or anti-totalitarian states, and this almost always results in self-justification or self-praise. In 99 percent of their reflections, totalitarianism is considered as a primarily political tendency and therefore a primarily political system. And I think that this is not true. As opposed to their position, I advocate the thesis which holds that *the tendency towards totalitarianism is part of the essence of the machine, and originally proceeded from the realm of technology*; that the tendency, inherent to every machine as such, to subjugate the world, to parasitically seize upon the fragments that have not yet been subjugated, to merge with other machines and to operate with them as pieces of a single, total machine: I maintain that this tendency represents the fundamental fact and that political totalitarianism, as horrible as it is, only represents an effect and variant of this fundamental technological fact. While the spokesmen of the technologically advanced world powers have been claiming for decades that they are engaged in resistance against the principle of totalitarianism (in the interest of the “free world”), their claims are fraudulent or, in the best cases, are the effect of a lack of intelligence, for the principle of totalitarianism is a technical principle and, as such, is not fought—nor will it ever be fought—by the “anti-totalitarians”.



part of a part of an apparatus. At least, each machine, if it wants to survive, must be prepared to welcome this situation of total degradation. What we must expect from the future is not then, merely (as we had believed in the stage of the fourth thesis) a diminution in the number of machines, but a straightforward abolition of the plural, “machines”.

## § 2

### *The failure of the grid.*

And now we come to the event that took place in the United States that we referred to at the beginning of this chapter. Something very strange happened there, something that allows us to perceive in a new and unexpected light the tendency that we have just described: the process of expansion, which arises from the very essence of the machine, develops in the direction of the “total machine”, and which must make it possible for any person capable of reflection, that is, every non-doctrinaire person, to rearticulate the problem of the “dialectic of the machine”.

What happened? In a certain part, in one part of a piece of the apparatus of the gigantic and enormously stratified power grid, in which many machines are united, in one small corner of this grid a minor breakdown occurred,<sup>71</sup> since to err is only human. No, it was not minor; for what does “minor” mean if such a minor thing could be the cause of such consequences? Because of this breakdown, thousands of machines proved that they were no longer machines, but only parts of a machine, as we formulated the problem in our third thesis. What became a reality, positively, as the collaboration of countless parts of a machine in the form of a “grid” meant, at the same time, negatively, that each part of the machine depends on every other part, and is therefore also subject to being affected by the defective performance of every other part of the machine. Suddenly, the entire grid broke down because a breakdown had affected a single one of its parts; suddenly, it was revealed that the drive for expansion that is “innate” to machines, and the fusion of the individual machines into complexes of machines, simultaneously entails the consequence of an increase of the threat that is posed to each individual machine or, to be more exact, to every part of the machine.

*Sixth thesis: The bigger the machine, the more seriously endangered are its parts, which had operated individually before their merger into the larger machine.* Due to the breakdown that took place in some secondary corner of the grid—here I am restricting my account to the New York event, although the area affected by the failure was much larger—hundreds of thousands of persons suddenly found themselves immobilized in the catacombs of the New York subway, in the IRT and BMT buses, in Washington, stopped as if they were stones or tables and to whom it had apparently never occurred that up until then they were considered and even proved themselves to be mobile objects. Others among their contemporaries, equally numerous, were suspended, while the abysses of the streets were plunged into darkness beneath their feet, in elevators that had come to a halt between the 100<sup>th</sup> floor and

---

<sup>71</sup> In a similar case, the burning of a prematurely unplugged contact “sabotaged” the launch of the space capsule, *Gemini-6* on December 12, 1965.

the asphalt, as if they were mountain climbers who had to resign themselves to bivouacking between the sky and the earth, on some ledge halfway to the top of the mountain they were climbing. Millions of liters of milk spoiled in so-called refrigerators, whether there were children or not, because the laws of physics have priority. Hospital operating rooms were plunged into darkness, regardless of whether perhaps at that moment the patient's heart had to be sewn up or he only had a cut on his finger. Calculators refused to sum up the day's gross receipts, whether they were the pennies of a corner store owned by foreigners or millions of dollars. Movies went dark on the screens, including the images of dead bodies. One prisoner who had been condemned to death had to remain seated on the electric chair: he was able to sit on the throne for hours—it is not hard to imagine—the victor of the power failure and awful conqueror of that spectral night. In short: suddenly, the enormous electrically interconnected complex of the colossal city took on the appearance of nothing but a gigantic pile of millions of imitation buildings, fake machines and pseudo-installations in the manner of pop-art, completely without any consistency, made only *for the hell of it*. Suddenly, it was revealed, or (because, of course, everyone already knew it) it was made clear to each individual in the most hideous way that there was no such thing as an individual apparatus, no such machine as an individual machine. Gertrude Stein's formula, ridiculed as avant-garde nonsense—*A rose is a rose is a rose*—suddenly acquired a meaning in this situation, since it was revealed that this was no longer true, that refrigerators were no longer refrigerators, subway trains were no longer subway trains, light bulbs were no longer light bulbs. Nothing was itself anymore, because each part had previously become so exclusively an appendage of the central machine that, if the latter fails, each part must also lose its meaning. Or, because—and this formulation is no less appropriate—each “appendage” had become the central machine of the grid, since not only did that appendage depend on the others, but all the others also depended on it. In any case, each person clearly perceived that the dream and hope of the machines that they would some day merge into a single total machine can fill us not only with hope, but could also bring us a deluge of horror.

In other words: when the failure of the electrical grid took place it was revealed that the process of expansion, given that it conceals within itself the danger of a stoppage or an incident, a danger that is constantly increasing, cannot proceed in a constant and steady degree and extent, as if in ceaselessly expanding concentric circles. Proportionally to the growth of the machines in the direction of the great machine and the growth of the latter towards the complex of great machines and of the latter towards an entire network of complexes, so, too, does the danger of a breakdown, and even catastrophe, increase. As long as a machine operates in a relatively isolated manner, the probability that it will be infected by the defects of the other machines (or that it will infect them) is much less than if it is combined with the others. The failure of a solitary machine remains relatively uneventful. If, on the other hand, the operation of a part of machine 1 is essential for the operation of a part of superior machine 2 and the latter is in turn essential for that of another even larger machine 3, etc., the danger that each individual machine harbors within itself grows, insofar as it is possible that it will break down some day. If it is undeniable that the part of machine 1 is entirely dependent on the superior or total machine into which it is integrated, it is equally undeniable that the whole depends on the part of the machine and that the possibility of sabotage, inherent in the smallest component, will be all the greater the larger the machine complex of which it forms a part.

The result of this is the *seventh thesis*: *Despite the integration of the parts into a whole, the part has to protect itself from the whole just as the whole has to protect itself from all the separate parts: the part, from the breakdown of the whole; and the whole, from the breakdown of the parts.*

### § 3

*Emergency reserves.*

The electric trains did not run. Automobiles, however, did. What does this imply?

Evidently, it means that the machines were more secure the more they operated as individuals and the less they depended on a continuous connection with other machines. I said, “on a continuous connection”, because it is clear that not even the cars are independent machines, since they depend on gasoline supplies and therefore their “autonomy” is due to the machinery of the gasoline supply and they are only temporarily “autonomous”, between one trip to the gas station and the next. This certainly does not mean anything, since the collapse of the gasoline delivery systems (due to a strike, for example) would not have as an immediate consequence the collapse of the operations of the individual machines, since the latter could survive, in certain circumstances, a strike by the gasoline refinery workers, as long as it is a brief strike.

In other words: while the trains and the subways were paralyzed and had to await their reintegration as parts of the machine and thus to become operational again, the cars and buses, which had reserves of energy at least for a little while, continued operating as if nothing had happened. As we have already said, this does not mean that there are two fundamentally different types of machines. It is not the case that some work only as parts of an enormous central machine while others, cars, for example, are autarchic entities which depend exclusively on themselves, as if they could face this type of catastrophe such as the collapse of the electrical grid with equanimity. It is not that simple. Without a supply network, which in turn depends on imports, which in turn also depend on oil production, which in turn depends on the constellations of political power, without all of this, naturally, no car in that dark night would have been in any condition to go on functioning “on its own energy” and autarchically, while the electric trains were condemned to remain motionless. In any case, we may draw a conclusion from this difference:

*Eighth thesis: The superior machine, to which the individual machines are annexed in such a way that they only perform as parts of a machine, as long as it functions, must concede to each one of these parts an **emergency reserve** that must serve them when the superior machine breaks down. Or, to put it another way: the central machine must take measures to deal with the possible emergency situation of decentralization, to which it might succumb: it must always function in such a way that, at least temporarily, the central machine can be superfluous.*

Just as there can be no doubt that the interconnection of all the complexes and machines (in which the energy economy has made the most progress) has brought enormous benefits, there can also be no doubt that the magnitude of the danger posed by this development likewise increases with the growing magnitude of the superior machine. The larger the machine complex, the greater is the catastrophe if the complex breaks down. Not only is it true that the enterprises integrated into the greater network can be endangered by these factors, but the reverse is also true, that is, the great enterprises represent a danger, so that slightly smaller enterprises might perhaps be more practical. Beyond a certain maximum size, which will have to be ascertained in each particular case, the complexes of machines might not be economical because they pose too great a risk.

*Ninth thesis: One of the main tasks for all planning (and this means: of the centralization of thousands of activities and machines, of their orientation towards a single goal) will consist in the future in an evaluation of the optimal size of the superior machine complexes. It is quite possible that the best machine not only will not be the smallest, but it will not be the largest, either.*

#### § 4

##### *The dialectic of technology.*

In the preceding pages we have drawn consequences from the dialectic of the machine that might lend themselves to misinterpretation (I will not entertain any illusions in this respect); and not only might it be misinterpreted as a reactionary polemic against the planned economy, but even as a polemic against technology as such, that is, as an appeal to “Luddite radicalism”. In fact, this expression has often been utilized in debates concerning my works, in attacks proceeding from both the capitalist side as well as the communist. With respect to this matter I would like to offer a couple of observations.

1. It is not enough to emphasize that one must use technology for good rather than evil purposes, for constructive rather than destructive tasks. This argument, which one hears endlessly issuing from the mouths of many *hommes de bonne volonté*, is indisputably myopic. The question that must be asked today is whether we actually have such free disposal over technology. We cannot simply assume this capacity for free disposal. In other words: it is appropriate to consider that the danger that threatens us does not reside in the abuse of technology, but is inherent to the essence of technology.

2. Those who are afraid of being called “Luddite radicals”—it is all the same whether they call themselves capitalists or communists—are reactionaries. It is childish to believe that there are domains that are free of internal contradictions and not subject to dialectics and that precisely technology should be one of these domains. We should not be very surprised that the believers in progress, whether pro-Marxists or anti-Marxists, should be so *naïve* as to praise technology in every circumstance. Those Marxists, however, who treat the term, “dialectics”, with more respect than they would a mere official business card, must not allow themselves to do so: they are obliged to recognize, investigate and combat the contradictions inherent to technology as such and therefore its potential dangers. There is nothing more

ridiculous than to view these dangers as derisory and to view the investigation of these dangers as something ridiculously anti-Marxist. From the moment that Marx made the machine and the technology of capitalist society responsible for alienation and announced the self-transformation of the capitalist system into a socialist system—it does not matter whether correctly or incorrectly—he also affirmed the dialectical overthrow precisely with respect to technology.

Of course, with my critique of technology, nothing is further from my intentions (and, of course, nothing would be less within my power) than to try to dissuade the technologically underdeveloped peoples, oppressed by the superiority of the technologically advanced great powers, from embarking on the “adventure of technology”. The attitude towards technology in the underdeveloped countries has to be completely differentiated from the attitude that must be adopted in the countries with advanced technology. The absence of technology in the underdeveloped countries is an incomparably greater danger than its existence. In these countries, an anti-technological attitude, which is valid among us, must sound like madness.

*Tenth thesis: what is characteristic of the current situation of the world is not just the fact that it is divided into capitalist and a communist hemispheres, or even the fact that it is divided into technologically developed and backward zones, but also the fact that the inhabitants of the various highly privileged regions are obliged to adopt a totally different position with regard to technology.* It would be crazy to cast suspicion on technology as such in the presence of a starving Indian, whose country can be saved by the assembly line production of tractors; if we were to do so, this man would have every right to combat us as enemies.

It is certainly difficult to respond to the question concerning where the “yes” to technology must end and the “no” must begin, since technology becomes a threat not only where it has been transformed into the technology of the threat (as is taking place today in the United States). One of the principle tasks of the philosophy of technology will be to discover and determine the dialectical point at which our “yes” to technology has been transformed into skepticism or into a straightforward “no”.

## Chapter 8

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

(1979)

The question, “what is man?” (more pretentiously, and supposedly more existentially: “*who is man?*”), which Heidegger unhesitatingly asked, is meaningless as long as one does not subsequently ask (something that Heidegger did not do) just what one means by this “what” (or even “who”); that is, what kind of answer one expects or thinks one can accept. A mere *differentia specifica*? This response merits an immediate denial, since it would be

philosophically infantile to believe that the difference of other beings, whose existence is completely contingent, determines the “essence” of the essence of man (as long as the latter has an essence). If, however, one is thinking of something that is not a specific difference, the term “essence” can only refer to his *specific mission in the universe* (or to his mission with respect to other men), which God the creator would have assigned to man; a purpose for which God created man; this assigned purpose would be his “essence”. In other words: the question about essence only has any meaning on the basis of deistic assumptions, something that says nothing about its truth, but rather says everything against the possibility of an essential destiny of man. *In fact, the uncorrupted atheist considers the question about “essence” to be meaningless.* If he nonetheless asks such a question, it is because he does not know what he is doing.

As for the question about “who” man is, the person who asks this question necessarily is asking for the proper name, needed for identification, instead of the “indefinite article” that responds to the usual question about “what” man is. Anyone poses the question in this way transforms the investigated human species into an “individual”, the “that” into a “you”; that is: into an essence, to which corresponds the “declaring one’s presence” as such before the call of God. Thus, the question about “who” man is, also assumes a God; and not only a God who by creating man has assigned him a “mission” (or who created man for this mission), but a God who ceaselessly manifests himself to man. The question about “who” man is, therefore, is not a question at all, but an interrogative form that rests on a double prejudice.

The self-complacency of the question about what or who man is, is insuperable. Are other species confronted by these questions? One could ask: *what is a horse*, or, whether there is a “philosophical equine science”. Or, in the manner of Kierkegaard, *who are you, horse?* Would Scheler, who, as everyone knows, wrote the book, *Man’s Place in the Cosmos*, have written another book entitled, *The Horse’s Place in the Cosmos*? He certainly could have enthusiastically noted this question—since, most unusually, in his old age he did not have any prejudices; but, in fact, he did not. In any case, anyone who, like Heidegger, took the questions “What is man?” and “Who is man?”, respectively, seriously, shows that they have responded in the affirmative, from arrogance with respect to the millions of species there are in the world, to that other fundamental question: whether it is justified to confer upon man a special metaphysical or theological position. And this is what Heidegger did, for example, when he proclaimed man to be the shepherd of being, exactly like the “philosophical anthropologists” he criticized as “fashionable philosophers” and with respect to whom he had no right to arrogantly distinguish himself.

It will be understood that “the obsolescence of man” also calls for a corresponding theory on the obsolescence of “philosophical anthropology”; that the complaints about the “end of man” must be based on a particular image of man. In a formal sense this argument is not false. If I am still dubious concerning the expounding of this “positive anthropology” it is not because, like a doctor, I have never found time for a theory of the healthy man or that the question is too disturbing [*Sorge*] for me, but also due to the fact that for the last half century *I have seen in man the being that cannot and does not want to be fundamentally healthy, that is, the being that is not established once and for all, the undefined being concerning which it would be a paradoxical undertaking to attempt to define.* In 1929 I wrote a long essay in the

spirit of such a negative anthropology, which I delivered in the form of a speech at the Frankfurt *Kantgesellschaft* under the title, “*Die Weltfremdheit des Menschen*”, in which I addressed, a few years before Sartre, man’s freedom as a positive affirmation of his non-fixed character. This speech no longer exists in the German original; its French version appeared seven years later, although too soon, under the title, “*Pathologie de la liberté*” in *Recherches Philosophiques* (1936).<sup>72</sup>

## Chapter 9

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

*“The fact that there are separate individual beings is certainly a regrettable defect pertaining to our existence as creatures and presumably we shall never be able to abolish it. This is no reason, however, to lose hope. Individual beings are just as minor gaps in our total system, as the holes in a sieve. Even if they are not formed of the same material as the sieve, they function as parts of the sieve, even as its main parts. And they are incapable of doing anything that is not dictated to them by the size, material and form of the sieve.”*

From the Molussian *Handbook of Conformism*.

*A note from before 1970*

This essay was first written in the winter of 1962-1963 and, except for a few paragraphs, was published under the title, “*Der sanfte Terror*” [Soft Terrorism] in the Spring 1963 issue of *Merkur*. When I first wrote it, I had not planned on this text being an independent work; it instead arose as a supplement to another text: my first reflections (which also appeared in *Merkur*) on space travel, which was then just beginning. The ideas about “conformism” so overshadowed those special topical reflections that, seven years later, it seemed to me to be unreasonable and unjustifiable to present both these texts together, as part of a single longer work. That is why I separated them and combined the first part (the considerations on space travel) with another later text on the same topic; I have therefore decided to present the second part, the present text, separately. Of course, I am quite well aware that this explanation is not sufficient; that the reader has every right in the world to want to read the text as it was originally published in its entirety and why, at least momentarily, I was able to consider them to be parts of a single essay; or, to put it another way, how a theory of conformism could arise from considerations on space travel, or just what common denominator the two themes share.

The answer to this justified question is: *Science Fiction*. I was curious—and I was not the only one—about the surprising similarity of the first space flights with the fictitious events

---

<sup>72</sup> Of all the persons who engaged in the debate concerning this text at the *Kantgesellschaft* (Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Goldstein, Horkheimer, Mannheim, Riezler and Tillich), none are still alive. Concerning the historical impact of this text, see Wolfgang F. Haug, *Jean-Paul Sartre und die Konstruktion des Absurden*, Frankfurt, 1966, pp. 106-107 and 227-228.

and adventures depicted over the years by the authors of *science fiction* and in the *cartoons* that were published daily in all the newspapers in the United States. My surprise at this shocking literary and graphic anticipation of today's reality led me to ask the natural question about the function of these "artists" in the contemporary world; a question whose answer was that these men wrote and sketched as if they were not independent writers or artists, but as if they were *functionaries of the technocracy*, as if their *paid job* was to *educate their contemporaries in advance*, that is, to educate *us as good and obedient*, that is, conformist *fellow citizens of the technological world*. One cannot give a definitive answer as to the degree to which we are speaking here of an "as if", much less whether and how much the authors would be offended by being classified as "hired hands". In any case, while I was writing, the personalities of *science fiction*, the artists of the *cartoons* and the consumers of the products were losing their exemplary significance. What interested me and drew me to write about this topic were the processes of the assimilation and education for assimilation as such; processes with such a fundamental and general significance, that it would not have made sense to continue to present them with examples of the artists who drew the *cartoons* or authors of *science fiction*. In this way, then, just as the original starting point was forgotten, the very reference to this starting point was often intentionally omitted and a general theory of assimilation was outlined.

## § 1

### *Prophets as thieves.*

It is embarrassing to see just how much the space program bears a shocking similarity to the colorful illustrations that the most infantile and vulgar writers of our time, *the authors of science fiction*, have fantasized about for several decades. Is infantilism or vulgarity, however, a refutation? Is it less likely that *supermen* could exist because their models were inferior? Is it not stupid to believe that only highbrow texts should have the right to make predictions that hit the target? Or is it just that certain texts are not true because they are not highbrow enough? This is the most hopeless kind of cultural optimism. Rather, in *inferior times*, *there is no text that is more important or even more prophetic than the inferior text*. Anyone who does not retain remnants of infantile tastes, will not have a nose for the cosmic menu that will presently be prepared in the children's kitchen of tomorrow. Anyone who is not yet without higher culture, will not be able to take pleasure in the disclosure of the lowbrow daydreams of his brothers who desire to reach the moon and the planets. Every epoch has *the prophets* that it deserves: a vulgar epoch, has vulgar prophets. Everyone knows that the Molussian aristocrats considered it to be beneath their dignity to deal with fellow citizens whose judgments had proven to be correct; they even went farther and incorporated the maxim, "let yourself be surprised" into their code of honor. As arrogant as this may seem, it still makes sense. *They recognized accomplices in the prophets; and in the vindication of their prophecies, including the precautionary ones, they recognized the testimony of the fact that the prophets had prostituted themselves*. This is precisely the case today. The authors of *science fiction* are not suspect because they subjected utopia to an in-depth analysis by fantasizing randomly and wildly (only the least gifted ones do this) or because they were sometimes mistaken (they are only rarely mistaken), but, to the contrary, because in general



their accounts of the future are correct, and they thus display the degree to which they have unswervingly abided by realism.

Exactly: by “realism”, since this term indicates first of all not the faithful representation of the real, but a particular position vis-à-vis the real, that is: the position of those who accept and promote the world, without taking into account its moral quality, simply because it is the way it is, that is, because it is *power*. That is, it is the position of opportunists and accomplices, whose maxim is as follows: “Let’s be realistic.” In this hardly honorable sense, the authors of science fiction are realists, even when they disguise themselves as surrealists or when the gap between the super-worlds they depict and the situation of the world of each of them is fantastically wide.

As an isolated claim, this observation concerning the nature of the fantasy of science fiction authors, whether their works take the form of praise or blame, says very little. The question that must be asked—and this is the only question that counts—is whose fantasy they actually depict. And the answer to this question is that they depict the fantasy of their more powerful brothers, the fantasy of those who, in the laboratories and offices, are seated before their drafting tables and fantasize about the exclusively technological world of the future.<sup>73</sup> These authors feed on the spirit of invention of the scientists and engineers, who are today the masters of the world; their fantasy is parasitic; the activity to which they devote themselves consists in an act of theft, that is, in that they copy the *blueprints* sketched by their brothers and, to a certain extent revealing the future, they present them to their contemporaries so that they will consume them as *faits accomplis*, as a *monde accompli*. It is of course undeniable that in this respect they allow themselves to make modifications, to add flourishes, exaggerations and amplifications; but there is no reason to believe that they need more fantasy for these variations or that by these means they display a greater capacity for fantasy than the non-scientific novelists, who in the final accounting are no more capable of restricting themselves to photographically reproducing their world. If many of them can create images of an avant-garde appearance or texts that prophetically hit the nail on the head, it is not because they possess unusual reserves of imagination, but simply because the description of technical matters takes less time, less sweat, fewer risks and less responsibility than their effective formulation in the research offices; because nothing is easier than to imagine as finished and ready to use than what in fact has not proceeded beyond the experimental stage and only exists as a sketch; in short: because, while their brothers are still striving in vain, they already have the freedom to present to us in the form of fiction the easily recognizable final images on the basis of the designs copied as images from reality. Today it is absolutely not unusual or it is even the norm for the copies to take the wind out of the sails of the originals and for the revelatory texts to enter into competition with the fundamental texts. In this sense, the anticipation of science fiction does not represent a special case, but only the confirmation of the rule. “Distrust the original”, we are told by a

---

<sup>73</sup> It is even problematic whether these individuals can be considered to be authentic fantasists. In the last instance they are not, because their daily task consists in the pursuit of the increase of already fantastically high levels of performance, and they have no recourse but to undertake to design something even more fantastic. *We poor guys can't help being geniuses* (maxim of a rocket engineer).

Molussian proverb, “because if you see two competitors, the one who has the advantage is usually the thief and the one who comes in second is usually the victim of the theft.” This saying seems to have been coined prophetically with reference to today’s prophets.

§ 2

*The thieves are heralds.*

Of course, with the difference that these persons, that is, our science fiction authors, do not have to fear that the rightful owners will seize the goods they stole. Actually, quite the opposite is the case: the owners have no objection against the thieves and, if the latter run towards the future with such haste, at least they also do so in the interest of those whom they have robbed. And this is the decisive factor here. The description of the strange relation between thieves and their victims would be insufficient if we were only to claim that the victims only wink at the visit of those who copy them or only turn their backs on the “theft of the patent”.<sup>74</sup> What is certain is, rather—and this truth is even more surprising—that the owners are grateful to the thieves because they act in collusion with them. What does this mean? What do those who have been robbed expect from this joint operation?

The answer: propaganda on their behalf.

And rightly so, because what the thieves are trying to achieve with their *stories* of super-worlds and supermen (based on copied designs) is completely compatible with the goals of those whom they robbed. What are the thieves trying to accomplish?

To familiarize us today, we, the children of the totally technologized era that is now dawning, with the completely technological future as designed on the blueprints;

To prepare us for that world, today;

To reeducate us today so that we will be *conformists with respect to that future world*.

In other words: if the technologists accept the science fiction authors it is because they passionately desire that these authors should run ahead of them as heralds; because they propose that they function as their “fifth column” and that they should obtain victory for them even before the battle takes place. And they even do this for free. “Where we work”, they assure their older brothers, the men of the laboratories and offices, “the resistance is

---

<sup>74</sup> It is obvious that if things that are *ficta* can be taken as *facta* (as usually occurs in science fiction), it is also possible for things that are *facta* to camouflage themselves as *ficta*; thus, truths that someone seeks to reveal or to divulge can be circulated as literary falsehoods. It is hard to explain why this subtle possibility of “treason” has not been used up until now by any political faction. The only person who has explored this inversion is Huxley. Not to mention what a modern-day Swift, an author who was up to date on all the possibilities inherent to this literary genre, could do with science fiction.

already broken, humanity has already accepted your total technologization and the road is open to your invasion.”

It is absolutely understandable that the owners are grateful to their thieves. But how do the thieves achieve their goals?

§ 3

*Entertainment: the tendentious art of power.*<sup>75</sup>

The answer seems to be contradictory, because it sounds as if we are saying that the authors of science fiction disguise the manipulation to which they subject their readers in the form of *entertainment*.

And just why is entertainment successful?

Because *entertainment is terrorism*.

And why is that?

Because it totally *disarms* us. The lack of seriousness of its presentation entails the consequence that we trustingly open our hearts and defenselessly abandon ourselves to it, in a way that is incomparably more unwary and defenseless than when we are faced with terrorism, which attacks us with a uniform roar; we lose the will to resist, even before it can emerge; we assimilate ourselves to what infiltrates us in a premeditated way, even before we have any idea that we have been infiltrated by something; and all this means that we can be defeated by entertainment even *before* the battle begins.

---

<sup>75</sup> The term “tendentious art” [*Tendenzkunst*] will sound strange in this context; but only because, at least in the “free world” (in the totalitarian systems the relation between the services performed by art and entertainment is much more evident), we are accustomed to understanding by “tendentious art” only the art that expresses tendencies of *opposition* or of criticism. There is nothing more tendentious, however, than this limitation of the concept of tendentiousness: the tendency of all ruling powers is to prevent their own tendencies from being presented as “tendencies”; all powers seek to be considered as the zero point, as the “normal reality”, so that only what deviates from this zero point would appear to be “tendentious”. Therefore, it would be contrary to their interests if an art that conformed to their tendencies were to be considered to be “tendentious”. That is why those who speak without contradicting the status quo almost never figure as persons who expressly say “yes”, but rather as “pure artists”; and that is why what is in accordance with the dominant tendencies is not considered as “tendentious”, but rather as “free”. It is only because we submit, whether consciously or unconsciously, to this linguistic rule, that we consider this limitation of the concept to be legitimate.

[At one time, what the author refers to as *Tendenzkunst* was called “committed art” (Supplementary Note of the Spanish Translator).]

Not only is that which is closed off to our demands merciless and, for that very reason, terroristic, but so is that which (and especially today) presents itself as so innocuous and comfortable and presents to us what it has to offer so sweetly that it never even enters our heads to say no, to resist it or to ask for mercy. Dictatorial systems that still cannot dispense with their rubber truncheons or threats of liquidation are now pathetically archaic, and in any case incomparably less terrible than those that can now abandon themselves to entertainment or even only to objects of fashion. *Of all the powers that form and deform us today, there is none whose penetrating force can compete with that of entertainment.* Our current way of laughing, walking, loving, speaking, thinking or not thinking, even our way of being ready for sacrifice: all this we have learned only to an insignificant degree at home from our parents, from schools or churches; instead, we have learned these things almost exclusively from the radio, magazines, movies or television; in short: through “entertainment”. If in other times entertainment was just one of many “forces of socialization” and, certainly, not one of the most significant ones, now it has rapidly ascended to a monopoly position.

Of course, the fault for this ascent must not be attributed only to our own lack of resistance, but, expressed metaphorically, it is also the fault of the *world's* lack of resistance; by this I am referring to the fact that none of the contents that the entertainment industry seeks to manipulate possesses the power to oppose its transformation into entertainment material that is multiplied millions of times.

Finally, we must add that this industry seems like a confused omnivorous beast, an animal that not only has an appetite for everything, but also possesses the gift of being able to devour any content, bones and all, and, after a rapid digestion process, restore it as a sweet excrement. It does not matter whether we are talking about state funerals or smoking chimpanzees, catastrophes at sea or fashion parades, bases constructed or cities destroyed overnight: not only does this beast encounter no resistance, but it does not even find anything that will make it nauseated if it eats it. It never heard of taboos. As long as it can gulp its food without pause, manipulate what it has swallowed, expel it and supply us with what it has expelled, it does not matter to it what is placed before its snout. As everyone knows, it is never too ashamed to return to chew its own waste products and eliminate them a second time: then it broadcasts novels as radio novels or *songs* as *evergreens*.

And *we*, now, are exposed to this incessant supply and irrigation, since what this animal allows to fall into its gullet is destined for us, for our endless consumption. We have seen, however:

1. That we are ingenuously predisposed to claim concerning this creature that it is “nothing but entertainment”; and
2. That there is no longer anything that cannot be supplied to us as “entertainment”.

This entails—and, furthermore, ineluctably—that we, too, are transformed into beings that devour everything and to whom everything is supplied. And as if it were a convenient fluid or in the form of bite-sized nuggets we are no longer even aware of the fact that we are swallowing or the nature of what we are swallowing; that is, since we are now swallowing as

a reflex reaction, we conclude this transformation in an instant. The days when those who had nothing to eat were considered to be “poor swallows” are long gone. Today, to the contrary, those who cannot resist the terror of their fattening, those who also have to swallow a little privation of freedom with every bite, are the ones who are the “poor swallows”.  
*Anyone who consumes without being free consumes non-freedom.*

Instructions for use:

Those who have resolved to subjugate us (in our case, those who are interested in technology, that is, technology as their own interest) seek to render their intended victims as deprived of the power of resistance as possible and as receptive as possible. Given that this *power elite* knows

1. that our resistance is minimal and our receptivity optimal if we are supplied with entertainment, and
2. that there is no content that can defend itself, that is, none that cannot be transformed into material for entertainment and, as such, be served on the table,

this elite disguises as “entertainment” all content that it seeks to cause to be assimilated. Therefore, *entertainment is the tendentious art of power*. It is even the case that its *tendentious art is avant-garde*, since with its help today it has already subjugated the victims foreseen for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, that is, victory has been assured before the battle is even fought. And seen from this perspective, *science fiction is the avant-garde tendentious art of technology*.

Naturally, by this I do not mean to say that entertainment is “avant-garde art” (“modern”, in the sense of art history); nothing would be more absurd. The opposite is the case, as a matter of fact: entertainment almost exclusively makes use of the most obsolete forms and the most time-worn idioms, those that involve no difficulty even for illiterates, or even just for those who are illiterate with regard to matters of taste. This is not a counter-argument, however: the fact that something is outdated in the sense of art history does not rule out its pragmatic avant-garde application; to the contrary: entertainment is so adequate in its role as herald precisely *because* it is obsolete, that is, *by virtue of the fact that* by means of its fluid nature it can guarantee that it will not provoke any opposition. Precisely for this reason, it can therefore be sent forward without any risk as an advanced herald on behalf of power.<sup>76</sup>

§ 4

*The conformist system: too effective to be recognized for what it is.*

---

<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, the tactic of using things from the past for the realization of future projects is common to all groups in power. Thus, for example, in the domain of music history there is nothing more “old fashioned” than the *lieder* that were used for revolutionary purposes; and if the standards of the music conservatories of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are still preserved anywhere, it is only in these *lieder*.

After these last reflections, it would appear that we have to undertake a fundamental revision of the image we sketched at the beginning of our investigation. Did we not describe the authors of science fiction as thieves? Did we not catch them *in flagrante* while they were copying the *blueprints* of the technicians and selling the stolen future like door to door salesmen? What remains of the truth of this first image? Would it not be more appropriate now to present the alleged thieves as the creatures of technology itself, as its children, that technology creates in order to have pioneers whom it can send forward as an advance guard?

“Not so fast”, I hear someone say. “When you get right down to it, the authors of science fiction are *freelancers*, that is, independent writers. And finally, technology is not a business that commissions the production of fantasy novels.”

Of course not. It is equally indisputable, however, that the texts are written *as if* they were commissioned, as if they proceeded from perfectly assimilated authors, not to say from highly complacent functionaries. And this appearance would be mysterious if our interlocutor is correct. So, what is going on here? Is our interlocutor right or not?

No. And what we have here is not simply an “appearance”, either. In fact, such an objection could only be made by someone who does not understand the specific way that *conformist societies* function. What is it that he does not grasp?

The fact that for conformist societies two distinctions now lack validity, distinctions whose legitimacy we have not previously had any reason to doubt. What distinctions are these?

1. The distinction between explicit and implicit coercion.
2. The distinction between assimilating and being assimilated.

Conformist societies, which really operate “like well-oiled machines”, function like *pre-established harmonic systems*. This means that in these societies as they currently exist recognizable actions subject to differentiation have been rendered superfluous. Since individuals adapt to them like standardized bolts in standardized nuts, the system can completely dispense with procedures whose purpose is to enforce express conformity and, also, most of the time individuals can be spared the effort of adapting to the system by way of explicit efforts of adaptation. Do not misunderstand this: of course, what is being questioned here is not the fact that individuals are molded in an appropriate way, nor the fact that they are embedded in the system; to the contrary: both of these things are constantly taking place. What is being questioned here is only the idea that these processes take place as *special* actions of assimilation, that they need to be carried out as such special actions. And we say that this explicit character is superfluous, because the life and the activity of the conformist society as such are carried out *simply* by means of this work of assimilation; moreover, this is achieved in a way that is as unostentatious as it is radical. Naturally, it is not just that our inter-human relations form part of this “life and activity as a whole”; rather, these relations remain on a secondary level, since today what occupies the primary level are the relations between us and our world of things, that is, of machines; in fact, we are assimilated to our world, above all, by way of our adaptation to the products that surround us like sirens, regulating us in accordance with the thousands of directives that, taken as a

whole, mold our “world” and using the mechanisms of assimilation of its technical and administrative instrumentalities, indispensable for us, so that we are served by those instrumentalities. Since no one is free to choose his epoch and thus is not free to choose “his world”, either, from among all possible worlds; since, when you get right down to it, no one can live outside of the epoch in which he was born, *there is no one who is not assimilated, either*. This applies not only to normal, everyday people, but also to the professional critics of our time, for whom I am writing these lines, for today’s programmed lumpen-proletarians, the *beatniks*, since they, too, only need to pick up the telephone or play their records, which fill them with so much enthusiasm, in order to prove that they are embedded in the system, the system that they supposedly keep at arms length with so much “negation”, and with regard to which, if they do not collaborate with it, they have to renounce even their polemic against the system.<sup>77</sup>

We do not need to address this variety of *frustrated nonconformists*, since the essence of today’s world consists precisely in the fact that it does not allow interesting *outsiders* to prosper (in any case, only to a much lesser extent than preceding systems, such as, for example, the *juste milieu* of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) or even in the fact that it promotes or even creates eccentricity, when it needs it as an alibi. Philosophically, *those who are really interesting are only those who are not interesting at all*, that is, those millions who function flexibly in the structure. And concerning these millions we can truly say that in their existence there is not even the most insignificant initiative to resist *outright* assimilation, nor the most insignificant event that does not assimilate them *outright*; that is why no special measures or precautions are required for their assimilation.

That is why, for example, it is only rarely necessary to explicitly appeal to those who listen to the radio that they should listen to broadcasts that are specifically useful for their adaptation. This is only necessary if the system as a whole is undergoing a rapid and drastic shift in a new direction. Instead, the mere fact that without their radios they would no longer belong to their world is itself a guarantee of their assimilation; and vice-versa, the radio listener does not need to be embedded into his system by means of special assimilation exercises, either. Instead, as the master and owner of his device, he has already performed his duty by accustoming himself to being its servant and its property, by allowing the device to fill his free time, that is, to fill him.

Naturally, all of this sounds, even to me, like a logical vicious circle, that is, as if the effective functioning is explained by the effectiveness of the functioning. Of course, this objection is not completely false, but it does not have explanatory force, either. And it does not have such explanatory force because the circular form (actually, it is a spiral) is indicative of the mechanism of the adaptation process itself; by this I am referring to the fact that all

---

<sup>77</sup> By saying this I am not conferring the stamp of naturalness upon conformism; rather, it is necessary for the nonconformist to be clear about his own role in the system, that is, he has to be aware of the point at which collaboration is not possible, and at what point he must collaborate in order to be able to live as a critic and act in opposition to the system. The problem is not new: it is the problem of *collaboration*, and certainly in the broadest sense, not just in the domain of politics.

adaptation is consummated by the mere fact of its existence; all adaptation, which begins to function, functions *more effectively* as a result of its initial effectiveness; that which already functions well functions *even more effectively* due to its effective functioning; everything that is adapted is adapted more effectively than that which has not yet been adapted; every one-way process automatically reinforces itself. It does not matter whether we are talking about a “geometric” increase in the strict sense of the term (in any case it is greater than an arithmetical increase); and certainly there is no human action in which the principle of progress (which has otherwise been so profoundly undermined) is so indisputably in the ascendant as with respect to the process of adaptation.

For example: Once we have begun to assimilate ourselves to the rhythm of a machine, we will then become capable of assimilating ourselves all the more readily to its rhythm, because we have already mastered it to some extent or because it has already mastered us to some extent. And the more profoundly we master it, the more profoundly we are dragged along by it. Until, in the words of Goethe’s “Fischer”, “we are lost”; until we have succumbed to that *profound ideal point, at which our service to the machine and the functioning of the machine constitute a single process*. Ultimately, even at this point we have not reached a definite conclusion, for now *we are adapted to the very process of being adapted*, much more effectively adapted than before (and therefore also much more vulnerable to subsequent machine processes); and it is debatable whether one can speak of a suspension of the constantly increasing effectiveness of this ongoing process.

It is superfluous to point out that what is true of any particular adaptation, is also valid for the system of adaptation known as “conformist society”.

After all this, we shall have a better understanding of why our interlocutor’s objection constituted a misunderstanding: what he did not understand is the fact that life today, as such and in its entirety, is now engaged in as a labor of conformation and, therefore, renders conformation as a special procedure superfluous and renders the existence of conformation invisible. And his ignorance is not an accident; it rather proceeds from the fact that he, *as a conformist, is not allowed to understand the mechanism of conformism*, since it constitutes one of the duties of the conformist that he must never gainsay the illusion of freedom. And he complies with this duty by misinterpreting the ubiquity of assimilation and its lack of explicit expression as its non-existence.

To summarize: the mechanism of assimilation operates as if it were non-existent, because it functions so effectively, so comprehensively and so profoundly, that it does not need assimilation as a special measure. It cannot function dialectically. *It is too effective to be recognized for what it is.*

## § 5

*Everything and nothing.*

In response to the question, “What actually transforms us into slaves in the conformist system?”, we can say, with equal justification, “everything” and “nothing”.



*Everything*, because we no longer need to leave our home—no, all we have to do is wake up—in order to immediately find ourselves courted by the sirens that seduce us and command us, and which today comprise our world: by the millions of machines, ways of speaking, habits, opinions and *behavior patterns*, which exhibit their charms, and call upon us in a deafening chorus, “Take me!”, “Do my will!”, “Play with me!”; and then, before we even know where we are going, we are dragged along in their wake. And *we are* at their command, *we allow ourselves* to be led, *we play* the game without even being surprised by their violent welcome; to the contrary: nothing seems more obvious to us than to entrust ourselves to this hellish racket, nothing seems more natural than to see “our world” in these siren-like creatures and in their orders, and we even get the impression that anyone who resists will come to a bad end; one only needs to listen to the spokesmen of psychology, always present amidst all this noise as judges, who claim that the resister is an incompetent, *poorly integrated*, or even disloyal.

But we can also provide the answer, *nothing*, because as much as we may listen, nowhere is it possible to hear the voice of a central bureau that unconditionally demands of us that we should continue to swim in this current. And if, now and then, when truly desperate, we assure ourselves that we do not want to swim there, that we have no need, that we must not do it, that no god has ordained that we have to allow ourselves to be swept along by this current; and even if it was written that we have to believe and shout and buy with everyone else, we no longer have any right to do so; sometimes it even happens that *we admit that they are right*, the fact that people like us are dragged along without any resistance makes us admit that they are right.

We cannot, of course, allow ourselves to misinterpret or approve of such an attitude, for it is not due to the fact that they, too, feel restless because of the absence of the supreme voice that would tell them what to do, that they do not applaud our resistance, but to the contrary, because they perceive this absence as the justification for their lack of resistance and the legitimization for their good conscience. In other words: *however unscrupulous or disproportionate their anger may be, the victims are furious at us only because they experience the certainty that their fury is spontaneous; and they are so sure of this illusion of theirs because there is no central bureau of command that displays itself anywhere, because the **deus** of their system remains mute and **absconditus** and because they misinterpret this imperceptibility of their god as his non-existence, that is, just as their god wants to be misinterpreted.* In fact and in truth, this god remains *absconditus* and imperceptible because he knows that he is more powerful if he remains hidden in the wings and that the best way to ensure the integrity of his rule is not to allow himself to be perceived.<sup>78</sup>

Therefore:

---

<sup>78</sup> Sometimes it even occurs that these seductive creatures prove that we are right and that, apparently against their own interests, they claim that “no one has to”. “You don’t need it”, proclaims an ad for hats that is aimed at the “self-confident gentleman”, “but can’t you just try me?”; in this way, this siren reveals her enormous interest in nourishing our illusion of freedom and announcing her alleged concern for our liberty.

The more integral a power is, the more mute is its order.

The more mute an order is, the more obvious is our obedience.

The more obvious our obedience is, the more secure is our illusion of freedom.

The more secure our illusion of freedom is, the more integral the power.

This is the circular or spiral process that keeps conformist society on its feet and that, once it starts, proceeds by automatically perfecting itself.

## § 6

*Passivity disguised as activity.*

We have thus implicitly addressed the second “neutralization”, the neutralization of the difference between being assimilated and assimilation, because there is only one answer to the question about what takes place when the conformist system functions: *to go along with* [collaborate] (the expression has already appeared repeatedly).

But what is this? Is it a “with”? Or is it a “making”? Or is it a process *sui generis*?

It is the latter. And what does it mean?

It means that it is no longer possible to draw a line of demarcation between passivity and activity, that is, between being assimilated and assimilating.

This can be misinterpreted in two ways.

The first misunderstanding: this thesis only renders an empirical observation.

False. Since it questions the validity of a pair of categories, it must be understood as a philosophical thesis. Here it is claimed not only—something that might suffice for domestic sociological use—that the two processes, the active and the passive, always occur simultaneously in the conformist system, independently and convergent, because if it is claimed that they are always characterized by independence and convergence, it remains unclear upon what basis and what right entitles us to continue to speak of *two* processes.

The second misunderstanding: the thesis amounts to a claim concerning our current *situation of research*, that is: that we are not yet capable of delineating the frontier (between assimilation and being assimilated).

False. It rather involves a claim concerning our *object of investigation*; that is, concerning the conformist system. That is, it claims that in this system there is no longer a line of delineation

between doing and refraining from doing. And this does not mean that we cannot *yet* delineate this line, but to the contrary: that *we can no longer do so*.

In previous epochs there were also scientists who, trusting their fully accredited conceptual acumen, attempted to continue to impose their categories on objects that no longer submitted to their interpretive framework; that is, they pursued something that did not exist. And this is precisely the claim that we are defending here: that if, in the conformist systems, that is, in the world of “going along with”, we seek the borderline between activity and passivity, between assimilation and being assimilated, we pursue something that does not exist.

This is so true that someone who today consumes something, at the same time succumbs to a food composed of cattle feed; that someone who voluntarily turns on his radio, always does so as a person educated for “slavery” [only for listening]; that someone who expresses his point of view, always propagates an opinion that has been served to him on a platter. And conversely: that someone who is assigned the task of propagating an opinion, always does so as if it were a personal conviction; that someone who is obliged to listen always finds his existence as a listener as “his” entertainment; that someone who obeys the compulsion to consume always has “his own” appetite for what has been placed in his hands. So, too, it is just as certain today (this claim is the basis of other more specific claims) that *someone who assimilates is also someone who has been himself assimilated; and vice-versa: that someone who is assimilated is also someone who assimilates; in sum: what we have to deal with in conformist systems is a single process, a “medial” process;*<sup>79</sup> to attempt to break it down into its component parts of activity and passivity is as meaningless as to divide the circumference of a circle into its convex exterior and its concave interior.

Of course, it would be a crude fraud to try to pass off this “mediality” for something positive, for example, as a testimony of the fact that spontaneity and passivity, or “freedom and dependence” (as we are forced to hear so often at academic conferences) “are reconciled”. The share of passivity (to the extent that it can still be separated) is incomparably greater than that of spontaneity or activity; and it is certainly true that *there is no system that is as asymmetrical and as unbalanced as the conformist system*. The claim that we are “active” is generally still justified only because our activity is utilized and preserved in its apparent existence by that same *power-elite* that wants us to be passive; because it still exists only as a disguise (certainly an indispensable one) within which we are clothed so that, in it, we can pursue our passivity without complaining.

This sounds contradictory only to someone for whom it is not yet clear how, in what form and in what situations his submission progresses. No one who has undertaken a conscientious examination of this issue could claim that he is assimilated only in unequivocal, psychologically vital situations, only when he allows himself to be assimilated (for example,

---

<sup>79</sup> It is a moot point whether the expression “mediality” (*The Obsolescence of Man*, Vol. I, Chapter V, § 18) can be said to be a philosophical category. In any case, it can serve as a warning sign that frees us from having to resort to alternative concepts that are no longer valid; or as an indication of the “place of the *desideratum*”, that is, of the place where the work of the examination of categories must begin.

as the television viewer, who dreams along with everyone else the “dreams dreamed in advance” for him) and succumbs to a mechanical-somnambulistic state. Much more often, we succumb to the powers that assimilate us when, in a lucid manner (certainly, without being aware of the fact that we are obeying an order), *we do* something, for example, “we go along” with the others in what “they” are doing.<sup>80</sup> However much we may have believed that we were busy the day before yesterday when we traveled in our car, which then took us to a place where, the day before yesterday, one had to go in order to count as a zero full of value; or when, yesterday, we went shopping for the new anti-nuclear personal bomb shelter (since the latter, with its portable hi-fi record player, with its built-in air conditioner and its Bible that lights up when you open it—see the instructions for use—was considered a *must*; and because it would have been unbearable not to have *that must, too*); the fact that yesterday we really worked hard and today we still feel deprived of rest, does not prove that the day before yesterday and yesterday we really did anything on our own initiative. Our hustle and bustle was *not our* affair, but the affair of those for whom it was a business transaction. And it was not a proof of activity, but of the fact that we were victims in a seemingly active way. And this is all we meant with our claim that our activity continues to endure only because it can be used as the “consumption of our passivity”. To the contrary, our passivity is now complete; and with it, our servile submission. If, having been transformed into workaholics, we go here and there in the motley vestments of an alleged activity and an alleged freedom, we are *deceived with respect to the freedom to recognize our lack of freedom*; and when, as compulsory consumers, we run after commodities so that they can fill us up to the deepest recesses of our souls, we have already exhausted even that last reserve, inaccessible from the outside, of privacy, freedom and dignity, where our ancestors had still been able to take refuge, from Epictetus to those who only recently preached existential “authenticity”. In the same way that today the wall between “the inner and the outer world” is minimal (since our

---

<sup>80</sup> What was done thirty years ago (1933) horrifies us: the *servile submission* of a population in the form of an *uprising*, was in fact only a completely special example, spectacular and bloody, of the assimilation which takes place in a more discreet way in the conformist world that calls itself “free”. Of course, this similarity with totalitarianism is systematically disappearing or, more correctly, it is even being transformed into a general contradiction. By being assimilated, however, we prove our condition when we allow ourselves to be seduced to collaborate in this disappearance and transformation and when we close our eyes to this similarity. Today, there is no activity that is less free, or more clearly assimilated, than the expression of that vulgar jargon of the “free world”, for however outrageous it may sound, it is incontestable that the *power-elite* of conformism has not been remiss with regard to the decisive matters compared to their alleged enemies, the dictators: it, too, can adapt our activities as pure “processes”, as components of mechanical functions; and what it is capable of doing, it does. Nonetheless, it is also capable of preserving our uninterrupted illusion of autonomy, freedom and activity; and it does that, too. Of course, because it cannot do anything else; this also implies that it, that is, the apparatus of power that it leads, is “medial”, since what it does and does to us, are done on the basis of the demands of its existence and survival so automatically that with regard to this power-elite, as well, the search for the “line of delineation” between activity and passivity is problematic. There is much that seems to speak in favor of the idea that we are the victims of a monster that is itself the victim of its own existence and need for survival.

“inner world” is replete with supplied commodities), so is the wall between “active” and “passive”, between “free” and “unfree”; and the abolition of this difference proceeds from the hegemony of passivity and non-freedom, however much this may seem to contradict the usual rules of arithmetic.

§ 7

*Congruism—nonconformism. The double absence of walls.*<sup>81</sup>

In the first volume I spoke of the fact that, for the radio listener and the television viewer, the domestic world is no longer separated from the outside world by any wall.<sup>82</sup> This disappearance of walls is not, for example, a curiosity that can be explained by the accidental technological peculiarities of the communications media. Rather, these peculiarities owe their success exclusively to the fact that they correspond in the most precise way to one of the characteristic demands of the conformist system, which is nothing but the *absence of walls*,<sup>83</sup> for in the conformist system walls are no longer permitted. Not only have the walls between activity and passivity, and between the private sphere and the public sphere, been torn down, but so, too, has the wall between “soul” and “world”. What does this mean?

That the optimal conformist is not only a conformist, but a *congruist*.

And this, in turn, means that not only does he conform to the contents, which have been designed for him and supplied to him, but that in the end *the contents of his psychic life coincide with these contents*. Specifically:

- he only needs and is only capable of needing what is designed for him;
- he only does and is only capable of doing what has been done for him;
- he only feels and is only capable of feeling as he is ordered.

Formula: *Whereas the conformist system leads supply and demand to congruency;*

- and does so in such a way that *what is supplied is presented as mandatory;*
- and *these commands, in turn, function as prohibitions*, that is, in such a way that they in fact prevent the person who expresses a demand from even imagining that there could be anything different from what is supplied to him;
- *therefore, the wall between the inner and outer worlds has fallen.*

---

<sup>81</sup> In Catholic theology, “congruism” is the doctrine (expounded principally by Francisco Suárez) concerning divine grace, according to which the grace conceded by God to a soul is effective because the soul accepts it; an acceptance, furthermore, already foreseen by God when grace was bestowed. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]

<sup>82</sup> See *The Obsolescence of Man*, I, Second Part, “The Phantom”, § 13.

<sup>83</sup> The intimate connection between conformism and the visual absence of walls is obvious: glass architecture.

It would be absurd to continue to attribute to such a person, who has been transformed into or who has been rendered “without walls”, a “selfhood” or an internal life of his own. Since he is, without the slightest residue, identical with the material that has been instilled into him, only with reference to such a person is the formula that a materialist from the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>84</sup> coined for man in general actually completely valid, that is: *You are what you eat*. Having contributed to the factual realization of this stupid phrase is the merit that conformism can take pride in having achieved. The fact that the material we are talking about here is not material in the physical sense (or only is minimally), by no means ameliorates the situation of the “congruist”.

It is therefore false to claim that man has now become “soulless” as a result of the breaking of the dike between the outside world and the inner world; or that the soul of the “congruist” is now “empty”. And not only is this false, but it is furthermore the absolute inversion of the truth, for what is certain is that *the soul of the congruist*, in view of the fact that it is completely inundated by the endless stream of the world as it flows towards him (the world of commodities, opinions, feelings, attitudes, etc.), is *terribly saturated*, incomparably more full than souls used to be; and that this soul, like foam on the water, has become co-extensive with the world, at least with what has been designed as a “world” for the soul.

What, however, does this have to do with the singular, “*the congruist*”? Either congruists exist *en masse* or there are none at all. The assertion that the wall between supplier and supplied has fallen is correct if we are referring to millions of persons, or else it applies to no one. Obviously, to millions. And, of course, not just to millions of persons in a general sense, but to real persons, that is, the ones that live in the era of mass production and reproduction. This is what is decisive, for it means:

1. that these millions are generally supplied with a *similar* or even a single *identical* material (by means of the radio, for example). This in turn means
2. that for these millions, the “others” are primarily *comrades of supply*, rather than persons like them. This in turn means
3. that all the “comrades of supply” are “congruent” with the selfsame identical material. This in turn means
4. that this material, insofar as it belongs to everyone, is *socialized property*. And, finally this means (and now the reader will understand the title of this section)
5. that not only have the walls between supplier and supplied fallen, but so, too, for that very reason, have the walls *between the supplied themselves*. The scholastic thesis: “If two magnitudes are equal to a third, they are also equal to each other”, acquires the following meaning in this context: “If two comrades of supply are supplied with the same material and are equal to that material, they are also equal to each other.”

It is therefore clear that difficulties in mutual understanding can no longer arise among these persons who are “congruent” in relation to the same thing (that is, to something identical).

---

<sup>84</sup> Feuerbach, the author of the phrase, however often he may have repeated and seriously argued on behalf of the formula, was playing with the *consonance* of the two verbs, “is” [*ist*] and “eats” [*isst*] in the German language. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]

Each one understands the other; the difference between self-knowledge and knowledge of the other is abolished; they are on a first-name basis with each other; each one is *proximus* to the other, although in a new sense; no one feels obliged now to assert his right to privacy; no one sees any reason *not* to share his secrets with his fellows; and this is no longer of any importance to any of them. The congruists no longer possess real secret treasures or a psychic private property; even what they might consider to be their private property is actually part of what has been supplied to them; and they are even supplied with the illusion that what is supplied to them is their private property. In short: they now share their *privata* with the others, *unconditionally*. If, however, it so happens that a “congruent” nonetheless refuses to spill his guts or notes some peculiarity that he does not share with the others—something like a manufacturing defect or a mole—he merely communicates it to the others *a posteriori*, which poses no difficulties, since psychoanalysis—always available for such cases—places the means and methods appropriate for this task right into his hands. Today, *in conformist society, the lack of shame is viewed as candor, that is, virtue; and the latter, as a proof of loyalty*. Of all the current sayings of our contemporaries I know of none that is more representative of our time than the famous confession by Eisenhower concerning his bodily afflictions (naturally announced on a television broadcast to the entire nation): *I have nothing to hide*. The mere aplomb with which he spoke (and was capable of speaking) these words, transformed them into a classic document of conformist society. Let us not fool ourselves: this readiness for exhibition which we have developed under “soft terrorism”, that is, in conformist society, is in our view just as characteristic as the mania for self-incrimination on the part of those who live under the bloody version of terrorism, that is, in the totalitarian dictatorships. There is no good reason why our defect should be less evil or less degrading than that of the other kind of terrorism, which we never tire of denouncing. It is just that it is less widespread propagandistically.

## § 8

### *The collective monologue.*

Therefore, no one has any secrets; everyone is an open book to everyone else. Thus, for an author who wanted to write *Philosophy Fiction*, who had to describe the perfectly conformist society of the future, it would be very tempting to present the generation of our great-grandchildren as *speechless*; moreover, as entirely speechless, not just atrophied with regard to language, as we already are today.

Naturally, this sounds contradictory: mutual openness without anything held back and being speechless seem to be mutually exclusive. They only appear to be mutually exclusive, however, because speechlessness does not emerge only (although this is most often the case) when the abyss between person and person is too wide or too dangerous to be crossed, but also *when it is too narrow for it to still be necessary to build a linguistic bridge*. All speech requires a minimal distance: communication only has meaning if there is a disjunction between he who speaks and he who listens; if A, who has information, allows B, who has no information, to participate in his knowledge. This minimum of difference will no longer exist among the congruists, who will comprise the perfect conformist society of the future: in view of the fact that everyone will be supplied with the same things, everyone will know the same

things, too. And this means that every listener will only be able to hear the same things that he would be able to say; and that he who speaks would only be able to say what anyone else can hear for themselves. In such circumstances, of course, to persist with opening one's mouth or listening would be absurd. A lovely perspective, as from the philosophical point of view this means that triumphant conformism will not only make individual differences disappear (such as the difference between "active" and "passive"), but even our *differentia specifica*, that is, our λόγον ἔχειν.

We have not yet reached that point today, however, although we have made quite a bit of progress along that road. It is not possible to answer the question about whether in our conformist world people will speak less than in the world of the recent or more remote past. It is nonetheless undeniable that there are already ominous manifestations of speechlessness, such as, for example, that of the family that is sitting in front of their television, without uttering a word, while they eat. And to me, what seems even more important than that particular situation, is the new *function* that speech has acquired in conformist society, as long as the term, "function", still has any place in such a society, since our speech—at least at first glance—seems to have been reduced to a completely meaningless activity. What I am referring to is the fact that, when we speak among ourselves, we express the same experience (which has been supplied to us) of the world and we do so with words that come from the same storehouse of words (likewise supplied) and, therefore, we engage in nothing more than a *tautological exchange*. Concerning most of our speech, especially *small talk*, it may be said that the words and vocables that we exchange with our *partners* are like the balls that go back and forth between tennis players; that is, the "balls" that "we serve" by speaking are identical to those that we have received by listening and the ones we receive are identical to those that we had served; in short: that to take and to serve have become interchangeable.<sup>85</sup> If mister A were to sell a roll *a* to mister B (supplied by planner P) and mister B, in order to pay mister A for the roll *a*, were to give him a roll *b* (supplied by the very same enterprise as, and the exact same as roll *a*), the transaction would not be more absurd than the one that now characterizes our everyday speech.

In other words: *the clamor of millions of voices* that is heard today *represents nothing but a single "collective monologue", pronounced with shared roles*; this is what the new function of speech consists of today. Conformist society as a whole speaks with itself. This certainly sounds strange, but strangeness is no counter-argument. To the contrary, it is justified to ask (since this activity cannot be as absurd as it seems at first sight) why conformist society has not yet allowed all of its speech, which is so atrophied, to just be euthanized, and why it still attaches any value to this endless monologue. And the answer is: it goes on with this monologue for reasons of self-interest affecting its very existence. That is, because its

---

<sup>85</sup> Today, this interchangeable character is not only generally accepted, but is even used expressly with an insurmountable ingenuousness: the custom has been introduced in radio broadcasting (which in theory serves to "dramatize" and often has disorienting effects) of a single script being read by several voices in succession, so that it is of no importance whether voice A reads sentence A and voice B reads sentence B or vice-versa; what matters is that there are various voices to support the pretense of life of a declining schema of vivacity, that is, the illusion of an exchange.



machinery never functions perfectly, without an occasional breakdown; because it is continually exposed to the danger of once again losing the form it has acquired, its coefficient of conformity; because it continually needs and is capable of improvement; that is, because it constantly has to introduce means to maintain and correct itself.

We previously emphasized, however, that we comply with our duty to conform by means of countless activities (naturally without perceiving their nature). Furthermore, when all is said and done there is no activity that does not contribute to this. And one of these activities, presumably the most important, is our speech with each other, with thousands of voices, since it is thus, by speaking among ourselves, that we eliminate the differences that still might remain among us; expressed in a positive way: we thus provide a smooth finish to conformity in order to attain perfect concordance. The term, “concordance”, really fits like a glove, since it calls to mind an image that is incomparably better fitted to our speech than our tennis metaphor: the image of the *perfectly tuned [concordant] orchestra*. By speaking among ourselves *we tune* our instruments, we tune ourselves until the *la* of the “quartet” rings true. That is as far as the image is applicable, since the symphony for which we tune ourselves is an odd fragment, that is, a fragment that does not have to play anymore. The symphony for which we are so noisily preparing ourselves must be so perfect that it can remain silent. This is not paradoxical; at least what is paradoxical about it is banal, since in the final analysis there are hundreds of jobs today that are no less paradoxical, since we toil away at them with the sweat of our brow, because we thus hope to make them obsolete in the future. And today this also applies to our speech: *by speaking we proceed straight to the ideal situation of a seamless conformity, towards a situation in which everything attains concordance “on its own”*; this is a situation in which speaking on one’s own behalf becomes superfluous.<sup>86</sup> In the future world of our author of *Philosophy Fiction*, *our speech in the first person will be just as obsolete as it is today to personally go hunting or to personally bake one’s own bread*. And if this reporter of the future were to depict the triumphant advent of the shameful day when total speechlessness will be inaugurated as a result of our current “collective monologue”, he would be fully justified in doing so.

Of course: the image of the conformist that we have sketched is not a realistic portrait, but rather a terrifying idealized image that is presented as an entertaining parody. This by no means implies, however, that the description is so exaggerated that it will not really be so bad for us. We do not have the slightest reason to be proud of the distance that still separates us from this ideal image, since it cannot be said that we still have a very firm grip on some ultimate core of our individuality or some impregnable remnant of our autonomy. The opposite is true: it can be said, rather, that we recognize the model that has been supplied to us; that we measure ourselves by that model and only by that model; and that with all the powers at our disposal we attempt to become like that model. If this total congruency with

---

<sup>86</sup> “On one’s own behalf” corresponds to the German expression, *selbstredend*, which literally means “that one speaks with oneself” or “speaks for oneself” and, thus, what one says is evident and obvious, something that is self-evident. And in a play on words, now the author says, “speaking on one’s own behalf”, which corresponds to the German *Selberredend*, and thus implying that it is a waste of time to speak in the first person, since in fact only common and identical speech exists. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]

the total “congruist” has not yet been realized this is simply because we could not do it on the first attempt, at least not entirely. *We also have to learn to be ruined*, to allow ourselves to be completely inundated and filled to every nook and cranny; this is not such an easy task. Usually we are “supersaturated”, almost in the chemical meaning of the term, that is, incapable of continuing to absorb a fluid world. Or the *quantum* that is proposed for us is too great, or else the speed too fast; in short: *we are incapable of “keeping pace” completely*, just like the worker who is not yet totally accustomed to the assembly line. This is the only reason why we are not yet totally congruent with the ideal congruist. And this is therefore not due to our strength, but rather solely to our weakness.

## § 9

### ***Ergo sum.***

If we try to clarify this situation of ours, three things stand out:

1. that, as “congruists”, we fail because somehow we are still “ourselves”;
2. that, on the other hand, we view this being ourselves as a “failure”, that is, we see only a rudiment in our ego;
3. that we do not know any other confirmation of our being ourselves than the one that is supplied to us by way of our failure.

Naturally, this entire complex is shameful. But the most shameful thing about it is the third point; which becomes clear if we incorporate it into the formula of a “*proof of the ego*”, that is, “*of existence*”. If we do this, we see just how despicable a place our contemporaries occupy in the history of human dignity.

I said, “incorporate”, because it is not possible to claim that such a formula exists, a formula in which a congruist, as the spokesman for his comrades in misfortune, has verbalized his self-confirmation, or that this formula can be read anywhere. Such a formula cannot exist because it would be inconsistent with the essence of the essence-less congruist: to confirm himself as himself. Not only is he incapable of doing this, but he is not even permitted to do it, either; he is not even permitted to be capable of doing it. And, on the other hand, he only feels that he is an “existent” when he “goes along with”, that is, by not being himself.

In any case, if one of them were to summarize his existence in a formula, it would have to sound something like this: *I am still underdeveloped; therefore, I am still myself*. And this means not only that his being himself is a blemish, but also that the blemish of his being himself represents the only proof of being himself. Descartes, cover your head in mourning!

## § 10

### *Assistance for adaptation.*

As provocative as the equation of “failure” and “being oneself” may sound, it cannot be said that it is bizarre or contrived. Rather, it is presupposed in most of today’s vulgar

psychologies. And in today's vulgar American psychoanalysis it even plays the role of a fundamental axiom. Naturally, I do not mean to say that it is recognized as the scandal that it is. To the contrary: it is *propagated*, since in the table of values that this psychology uses (despite its vocabulary concerning the *personality*) as the basis of its work, it appears as the canonical figure of man, who confirms himself by way of the maximum adaptation; and this means: being as fully "congruent" as possible and *as little oneself as possible*. By way of the implantation of this canonical figure it has given its stamp of approval—certainly not explicitly, but unequivocally nonetheless—to the equivalence of "being oneself" and "failure".

And this is not just any stamp of approval, but it is almost official, since the reputation enjoyed by contemporary psychology is enormous; but not because the scientific level that it occupies is objectively so high, but, to the contrary, because it adorns itself with this scientific prestige so that it can fulfill its principal task as authoritatively as possible. And this task consists in functioning as the spokesman for the conformist powers, that is, in disguising with a popular scientific vocabulary the demands for adaptation that these powers impose on us, in supplying them to man in this disguise and, while we are still kicking over the traces, to transform us into beings that are desirous of adaptation or well adapted beings by way of an effective treatment.<sup>87</sup>

There is nothing more characteristic of these objectives of psychology (or of the ones that are assigned to it) than the lines of the diagnostic connections that it likes to trace. Thus, for example, there is the connection between *self-centeredness, poor adaptation and the inferiority complex* to refer to the fact that people are maladapted due to their (pathological) egocentrism and are inferior because of their maladaptation; and that is why they fall victim to the torments of inferiority. Of course, this schema is not directly false, since there is in fact a condition in which this syndrome is valid: conformist society. That is, the fact that the theories of psychology (conformist with conformism) are really correct with respect to people who have to live as conformists in this society. But this is only the case because conformism has already triumphed. In other words: the causal context of the syndrome can be made clear for us only if we reverse the causal relation, which is assumed to be obvious; that is, if we recognize that many of those who are considered to be "ill" (those, for example, who are slandered as *self-centered* recognize their "being themselves" as inferiority and really suffer as a result of this presumed inferiority) were made ill *by* conformism; that it is conformism itself that is therefore the root cause of the illness. *The healthy ones are those who, in order to be capable of living in conformist society, accept as legitimate the false yardstick against which they are measured, and making it their own, are infected by this*

---

<sup>87</sup> Given the fact that it seems normal to us that the sciences should be born as academic theories in order to thus, perhaps, *also* be capable of being utilized and popularized, the claim that the *raison d'être* of psychology consists in fulfilling this mission sounds incredible. Unjustly; for its historical origin and the actual reason for its existence are two different things, so that the question, "Where does phenomenon X come from?" must always be complemented by this other question: "What is the reason for the fact that phenomenon X is still there?" And with our affirmation that today psychology is still there only because it has proven its usefulness for adaptation, we now answer this additional question.

*falsehood and end up really sick as a consequence of their impatient attempts to overcome their presumed illness.*

Our theory of “congruism” cannot be more convincingly confirmed than by means of the assumptions that are entailed by official psychology and the objectives that the latter pursues. Of course, this does not mean that the psychologists are themselves clear about their premises and objectives. That is why we do not find very well-calculated reasons among them; for example, we would search in vain for the thesis or even just a reference to the fact that “congruist man” is composed solely of contents that have been inoculated in him; or for the recognition that the “walls” between the external and the internal worlds, between persons, have already disappeared. And naturally this absence is not accidental; it is rather a consistent policy in the conformist system.<sup>88</sup> I am referring to the fact that the psychologists, to the extent that they are the instruments of conformism, are not allowed to reveal the fact that the system, which calls itself “free” and which they serve, annihilates the self-identity of the personality. Moreover, even this explanation is still insufficient and the discourse of “silence” is still too honorable, since it assumes that “those who remain silent” are aware of what it is that they are silent about; and this assumption is unwarranted. Instead, one of the conformist duties of those who have the mission of blinding us consists in being blind themselves. What they are not *permitted* to reveal, they are also no longer *capable* of revealing; and they are no longer capable of revealing it, because they cannot even *see* it.

Of course, there have never been “windowless beings”, in the Leibnizian sense. We, however, who are “without walls”, are not only not “monads”, but the complete opposite of monads. And our situation is incomparably more dire than the Leibnizian problem, that is: instead of asking what miracle would be necessary to “harmonize” the individual beings that are isolated from each other, today the problem is completely the contrary, that is: *the question concerning the basis upon which we, “the congruists”, could convince ourselves that we are still individuals and still ourselves.*

## § 11

*The world exposed.*

Our claim that the features of our portrait have finally been drawn and stand out clearly might sound incredible, since what has been exposed is precisely the fact that the *differentia specifica* of the conformist consists in *non-clarity*; in his *lack* of distinct outlines; in the fact that, in the conformist’s existence, all the lines of demarcation that seem so obvious to us have totally disappeared: the lines between spontaneity and coercion, between activity and passivity, between needing something and being compelled, between the interior and exterior worlds, between one individual and another.

---

<sup>88</sup> I will not discuss whether or not the psychologists, to the degree that they do acknowledge these facts, lose contact with their proper object, the *psyche*, and in this way become “aimless” [useless].

It is clear, however, that this also represents a result: the positive definition of this obscurity also forms part of its indefiniteness. And now that we know what a conformist is, perhaps we are also prepared to explain the fact which had proven to be such a cause for amazement at first and had originally given rise to our reflections on this topic. We may thus return to our original question, which was as follows: *Why do certain products, which undoubtedly do not proceed from any employees, act as if they were the work of the most skilled employees?*<sup>89</sup>

In order to once again attempt to answer this question we shall use as a starting point an expression that we previously used to characterize the things of our contemporary world: we called them “sirenic”. Why?

*Because they are aspects of advertising.*

Indeed. Naturally, everyone knows that advertising, particularly commercial advertising [as opposed to public relations in general], has attained in our contemporary world a scale that, up until only recently, would have been unimaginable. As correct as this common knowledge may be, however, it is not adequate: we shall not have hit the mark as long as we see advertising as only one more reality among others.

It is not just another reality, because we do not live among things that surround us silently and indifferently. It would be naïve to think that there is, on the one hand, our “world”, and the possibility of setting aside this or that part of the world by advertising, on the other. From the moment when all the objects of all types have been infected by all the objects of the current dominant type, that is, of the commodity type, it is instead correct to say that *our world is, in advance, a universe of advertisements*. It consists in things that offer themselves to us and solicit us. *Advertising is a mode of existence of our world.*<sup>90</sup> In ontological terms: *in the “bellum omnium contra omnes” the only thing that commands respect as an “existent”, the only thing recognized as an “existent”, is the thing that irradiates a power of exhibition and attraction more powerful than everything else*. Formulated in negative terms: what is not advertised, what does not call out to us, what does not display itself, what does not form part of the light of the strategic manipulations of advertising has no power to solicit us, we do not perceive it, we do not hear it, we do not share it, we do not recognize it, we do not use it, we do not consume it; in short: it is “ontologically subliminal”, in the pragmatic sense that *it is not there* [it does not exist]. When Heidegger, regardless of whether or not he was right or wrong to do so, gave new life to the term, “phenomenon” (which had been neutralized), through his interpretation of it as “that which shows itself”, he was by no means thinking of the phenomenal character of advertised commodities; his interpretation, however, did hit the

---

<sup>89</sup> See above, “The obsolescence of the individual”, § 1. The fact that that section discusses science fiction authors is only of secondary importance once we reach the domain of the basics.

<sup>90</sup> The fact that advertising has been transformed by the pressure of the specialization of a particular sector, known as *public relations*, plays an enormous role and, now and then, as if it were only another one of its customers zealous for its advertising services, it advertises itself; but this does not contradict the fact that, in accordance with its essence, it is nothing special at all, but rather a mode of existence of our world.

mark with regard to them. And since the nature of these commodities has been transformed into the model for all other types of objects, his interpretation even possesses universal validity: what wants to be taken “into consideration” has to display itself. Thus, the world has been an “exposition”; and certainly an advertising exposition, which is impossible not to visit, because we always find ourselves in the middle of it. The fact, for example, that today’s statesmen can only achieve political reality if, suffused with *political sex appeal*, they appear before the television cameras, was only very recently proven once again in the American presidential elections.<sup>91</sup> The depravity of this expression is no longer noticed; it is instead used universally to evaluate the powers of seduction of the candidates.

Naturally, the sexual character that permeates today’s world of advertising and which has reached its high point in the countries with Puritanical traditions of taboos, is merely the confirmation of the currently dominant equation: to be = to be advertising-conscious. What is taking place here is an entirely normal process of production: the “quality of sexual seduction”, which is a natural and even free raw material, is transformed into an attractive quality of commodities and is used as such. The tits advertise steel; the legs, whisky. The advertising industry has become the authentic owner of the female body, at least of its seductive image. In a certain sense, *the fact that women have bodies, too, is only accidental* and only of secondary importance (leaving aside the fact that competition with seductive images, especially in voyeuristic countries, is extraordinarily strong). At the moment when the transformation of the raw material, “sexual seduction”, into the seductive quality of commodities appears to be gaining momentum, this seduction loses its character as a taboo: the current absence of prejudices with regard to sexual matters, especially in the United States, is the offspring of the freedom of advertising, *of the collapse of prudery*, a “progressive” development the United States is so proud of, amidst *an exclusively commercial reality*. And that fact that the term, “advertising” [publicity], has an origin that was strictly erotic has completely disappeared from consciousness, since the world as a whole has been eroticized.<sup>92</sup>

On the other hand, the lack of desire for splendor, not to speak of unreality, which continues to draw the attention of those who visit oriental cities, consists to a great extent of the absence of advertising for commodities. This absence is natural, since it is evident that those countries where supply still lags behind demand and where no product needs to devote itself to a “struggle for existence” with other commodities, do not need commodities that call attention to themselves, either. What is lacking there is the military dress uniforms and signaling of the competitors, which transforms the capitalist world into a multicolored and shining world. Since the western visitor is accustomed to identifying “world” and

---

<sup>91</sup> Note added in 1979: referring to the Kennedy-Nixon campaign.

<sup>92</sup> To this corresponds the fact that the being, who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was considered to be so exciting, the prostitute as commodity, has become a boring figure. Nothing is more old-fashioned than theatrical works in which prostitutes are depicted. Since the commodity as prostitute, that is, the universe of commodities as a universe of prostitution, has achieved dominance, the model-figure has lost the splendor of aberration itself. It has fallen victim to the abundance of the objects that have become assimilated to it, that is, to the universalization of its principle.

“advertising world”, the world without advertising conveys the impression to him not only of an acoustic and erotic desert, but even of unreality.<sup>93</sup>

Of course, this is not to say that advertising is by its very nature always intense, that its displays must be manifested in every circumstance in a strident or garish manner. To the contrary: there are many things that lead one to think that the stridency of the last few decades has been nothing more than an infantile disorder of advertising’s tactical deployment. Advertising only seems to have entered its mature stage when it began to take account of the fact that it is by way of a premeditated lack of appearance, apparently invisible and mute, in the form of *hidden and subliminal persuasion*, that it can achieve many of its goals at least as well as—if not even better—than it can by means of spectacular advertising; and therefore only since the time when it began to renounce its own spectacle. There are now advertising agencies that only reluctantly reveal that they are engaged in advertising. It is clear that, although the equation, “to be = to be advertising conscious”, is still strictly observed by these agencies, they embrace the maxim,  $\omega\sigma\ \mu\eta\ \acute{\omicron}\nu$ , that is: *Act as if you do not exist, as if you were not there!* And it even happens that some agencies engage in advertising in favor of their own lack of appearance and praise it with inconspicuous means as a sign of their discretion and good taste. In the dictionary of advertising lies, the term, “discreet”, has the meaning of “attack from behind” and the term, “with good taste” that of “treacherously”. The con game becomes subtle; even with regard to the privation of freedom nothing is more effective than a good education. It would not be absolutely unjustified to describe *all these advertising techniques* as an immense *nonviolent action* or, more precisely, as *nonviolent aggression*. Everyone knows that *nonviolent action* is what you call a movement of opposition whose followers are convinced that they can neutralize the offensive force of the aggressor by not opposing any resistance to it. This movement is the spectacularly inverted image of the *nonviolent aggression* to which we are exposed constantly, since the attack of the advertising world or, more accurately, of the entire conformist system, is carried out so *nonviolently* that it neutralizes our resistance in advance. Both types of action go hand in hand as phenomena of our century; both are characteristics of the contemporary dissolution of the alternative, “active-passive”.

## § 12

### *Employed man.*

That is therefore what our contemporary world is like. And since, to express it academically, ontic transformations on such a revolutionary scale cannot take place without any ontological consequences, this means that “being-in-the-advertising-world” represents an ontological *status* of a particular kind; that we who live as fellow citizens in an advertising world, are “there” in a different sense than our fathers and ancestors were “there”; that our lives are

---

<sup>93</sup> The claim that the communist world is in no sense an “advertising world” would of course also be mistaken. There, however, man is courted not by the products offered to him or by seductive images, but by the goals of economic planning and by the images of those who are considered to be the embodiments of this planning.

played out as an incessant “being courted”. Once again, however, what does this mean? What does it mean for us modern men?

With regard to this question there can be no doubt: as we are already familiar with the image of the “congruist” and we know that, as “congruists”, we have become incapable of distinguishing between spontaneity and coercion, between needing something and being compelled, the response is as follows: “We become the apes of advertising”. And this, in turn, means: *We live as if we were actually recruited for collaboration, as if we were performing a job to which we were assigned.*

Why, however, do we continue to use this timid construction, “as if”? Do we really still need this qualifier? After all, does the answer to the question of whether or not we are recruited really depend on whether or not we perform an assigned job, on whether or not we were expressly enlisted for collaboration? Or does it not depend, instead, on whether or not we have the freedom to *resist advertising*?

It depends exclusively on the latter. Without the freedom to resist, no other criterion can play a role here.

And that is why the answer can take another form; indeed, it must take another form. Since we do not have this freedom to resist, it should be phrased as follows: “*We have been employed*” and “*We have been drafted*”.

Rule: *If beings who have been deprived of the freedom to resist advertising are courted, it is precisely for that reason that they become recruits. Their existence is therefore, to be drafted.*

Let us pause here for a moment, since behind the diverse comings and goings which we have been obliged to engage in to sound out the terrain of conformism, now we have once again reached our starting point: the problem of “being drafted”. The step from “being drafted” to “being employed” is only really a matter of words: instead of “being drafted” we can speak with all confidence of “being employed”. And now nothing stands in the way of the equation that, from the beginning, was our goal. We shall therefore finally express it: *Our being conformist is our being employed.*

### § 13

*False allocation, falsification of activity, and the mechanism of displacement.*

As we have already said, this formula has nothing legal about it: one would search in vain for contracts between “social partners”, rules or certificates of our being employed. The reality of our dependence, however, is not affected by this absence of documentation, but rather to the contrary: it is reinforced, since it is part of the essence of the “master-slave” relation (insofar as one can speak of a scam as “essence”) that it implicitly entails the commitment to perform every action that could possibly be the object of any contractual agreement. And this means that the “master” can be spared the need to commit himself and to be bound by an explicit contract with the “slave”, who is in any event totally bound to him.



Naturally, given that the advertising character of our world is derived from the hegemony of our world of commodities, there is no more unambiguous testimony of the fact that we are employed than the function that we perform as *customers* and *consumers*: when by means of advertising, that is, by the need that has been imposed upon us, we acquire the products upon whose continuous sale and production the producers depend; when we destroy these products by using them and then, after their destruction, we need new products, we are performing an assigned task and therefore a succession of assigned tasks that have been conferred upon us by the producers. *We are employed as liquidators*. In an apocryphal Molussian text we read: “Be grateful to those who eat, to those who sleep and those who do not sleep. They are domestic workers, who do not know that they are performing domestic work and, despite the fact that they do not know it, they are faithful. By eating at their tables they serve those who need the destruction of their products in order to harvest their crops again; by sleeping, they serve the manufacturers of beds, who will want to supply new beds tomorrow to replace the worn-out ones; and by not sleeping, they support the production of sleeping pills. *In fact, the gods have created their hunger only because they consider the mere existence of production to be desirable.*” As exaggerated as this theological *aperçu* might sound, it undeniably contains a kernel of truth. And the fact that this is also valid today is testified to, better than any prolix demonstration, by a single revealing expression that has been used for a half century without any qualms by every American newspaper to characterize those who, without any real desire to do so, are ready to perform as an employee the assigned tasks of buying and consuming what has been assigned to them: the moralistic expression, *lazy customer*.

What is certain is that these assigned tasks are usually presented in such a manner that their character as assignments is dissimulated and that we almost never consider our using and consuming *as* the performance of a duty and doing a job. To allege the fact of this blindness, however, as an objection against the reality of our relation as employees would be absurd, insofar as this relation always owes its solidity and its irrevocable nature precisely to our false consciousness.

To the contrary, it is absolutely sensible or, properly speaking, even indispensable, to inquire as to what particular means are employed to produce our false consciousness. Indispensable, because the mechanism of fraud that operates in the conformist world is different from the mechanisms of fraud with which we are familiar from prior epochs. How, then, is our false consciousness produced?

First, negatively: not because we are inoculated with false theories or “ideologies”. In any case, ideologies are no longer decisive; the term, *the end of ideologies*, which has now become so popular, is fully justified. On the other hand, the satisfaction with which this term is used, as if it indicated the end of the con game, is not justified or is even fraudulent. One can by no means speak of an “end of the con game”. If ideologies are now beginning to die it is precisely for the opposite reason: it is because they have become superfluous, that is, because now it has been permitted to them—and with this development we are already positively determining the mechanism of the con game—to yield to a principle that is

incomparably more deceitful than the “ideological” principle: that of *false allocation*. To what are we referring with this expression?

We are referring to the tactic of today’s elites to falsely classify the assigned tasks, whose fulfillment they expect from us, of allocating them to us in a camouflaged version, with pseudonyms, with labels whose legends not only conceal the real nature of the assignments, but that directly lead to deception by indications of another nature; that is, they suggest to us the most diverse forms of the so-called “planning of free time”, that is, of “non-working time”. In addition to the “falsifications of commodities”, which everyone knows, today there are also corresponding *falsifications of activity* (which are strictly related to the falsifications of commodities), which are all the more deadly precisely because they are unknown as a principle. And just how deadly they are has been proven, for example, by the false label, “Showers”, that adorned the gas chambers in the extermination camps: with this label the labor assignment was transformed into what it really means, that is: the assignment, “Transform yourself into waste!”, into an assignment of free time, that is: in the suggestion, “Freshen up with a shower!”. Everyone knows what came next.

This example will suffice to prevent any misunderstanding of the expression, “false classification”. Anyone who views these classifications (whether or not they are correct) only as *post festum* planning carried out by academics at their desks, mere theoretical operations of the intellect and therefore as theory without consequences, has never reflected on the pragmatic meaning of thought. The clear distinction between “real processes”, on the one hand, and *a posteriori*, and therefore inconsequential, “merely theoretical classifications”, on the other hand, does not correspond to anything in praxis; having said this, of course, it cannot be denied that this distinction is often enormously practical. In any case, classifications are always practical measures; and many of them, even, instead of straggling along behind reality, precede it. And they do so just because it is on the *whether* and *how* we perform these assignments that *the reason* (which means: how they are classified) they are assigned to us depends. And it is not possible to imagine anything that has more consequences and, therefore, more reality, than this “whether and how”.

Thus, we are not defrauded with the help of a separate *superstructure* that supplies us, but with the help of something that now *forms part of the structure* of reality. *Today’s real swindle always finds its “alibi”, that is, its proof of having been somewhere else, that is, it is now always hidden within praxis itself.* And this alibi is the very best stroke of luck that the con game could hope for: since the latter has renounced an individual existence and therefore also renounced any intention of presenting itself to us as an identifiable or refutable axiom of deception or as deliberately disseminated doctrine, it is prepared to act exactly the same way as its classical mentor, Ulysses, when he was reconnoitering Polyphemos in the darkness of the monster’s cave: lying with apparent humility by saying that he was *nobody*.<sup>94</sup> And by

---

<sup>94</sup> The author is referring to Book 9, line 360 of the *Odyssey*. The deception practiced by Ulysses was possible because his name in Greek, Οδυσσεύς [Odysseus] is similar in pronunciation to ουδεις [*udeis*], which means nothing or nobody. Rather than modesty and humility, as Anders claims, it would be more appropriate to speak of a consciously dissimulated deception by the use of a homonym. That is at least how Adorno and

way of this alleged “being nobody” and “not being” it, too, is capable of confusing and defeating its enemies.

This tactic of falsifying the assigned task by transforming it into an occupation of free time becomes entirely clear when we recognize it as part of a greater whole, of a more extensive system of deception. This extensive system is the *mechanism of displacement*. And what am I referring to by this term?

I am referring to a mechanism whose principle and capability consist in systematically regulating this process of deception, that is, in falsely arranging *all* the activities that really belong to class A, presenting them as class B and the activities that belong to class B, which really belong to class B, are presented as belonging to class C, and so on in succession. Given that A is displaced to sector B and B to C, the *mechanism of displacement* is revealed.

In fact, nothing could be more false than to believe that the only thing that is the victim of a false classification is our “job”. This procedure also operates in reverse: it is customary to define *as* “jobs” various activities that really are not “jobs”. We do not need to look very hard to find examples of this inversion: the two classic examples are Auschwitz and Hiroshima. These exterminations, which naturally really were *deeds*—and, of course, criminal deeds—were assigned to those who performed them as *jobs*. Everyone is familiar with the consequences entailed by this false classification; and I am not referring to the ultimate consequence, dust and ashes, but to the penultimate consequence: its effect on their authors. Given that the latter, as creatures of the industrial era, had learned that work *non olet* or, more to the point, that it is not even *capable* of emitting an odor, and that it is a job whose final product basically has nothing to do with us or with our conscience, they performed their assignments of mass murder, which had been assigned to them in the guise of “jobs”, without any contradiction, just like any other job. Without contradiction, because they did so with the best conscience. With the best conscience, because they did it without conscience. Without conscience, because, what they did was done in the performance of an assignment and thus they were absolved by their consciences. *Off limits* for conscience.

B instead of A and C instead of B. The correspondence is perfect. Just as at Auschwitz and Hiroshima the activity was displaced to the category of “job” (and, naturally, in similar cases this displacement is still taking place today), likewise our work is often displaced to the category of “planning for free time”. And just as the bomber pilots or commanding officers of the liquidation facilities did not know *that* they were acting nor did they know *what* they were assuming by acting as they did, nor do we, as conformist customers and consumers—since we think we are freely using our liberty—know *that* we are performing an assigned task nor do we know *what* task it is that we are performing. The intention and the result of both displacements, then, are identical; the correspondence is perfect: in both situations our wholehearted collaboration is assured; in both situations any resistance—in case that it should arise—is nipped in the bud. And many of the things that we would hesitate to do, that we would directly refuse to do if we were to be assigned them as jobs that had to be done, we

---

Horkheimer interpreted it in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [Note of the Spanish Translator].

would carry out if they were falsely classified and then assigned to us, and we would do so without resistance or, maybe even diligently, or, better yet, even with enthusiasm.

For more than a hundred years attempts have been made to prevent the worker from recognizing that he is a worker by supplying him with a “false consciousness”: the tactic of hindering the formation of his class consciousness had no other goal. It would be justifiable to assume that the incredible improvement that the worker’s standard of living has undergone over the last few decades and which, in many countries has even already eliminated the very word, “proletariat” from the lexicon, would also signify the end of that action of hindering the formation of class consciousness. To the contrary, this is not at all the case, because the activity of prevention has become so widespread that now *no one* is a member of the category of victims of deception. The reason for this is obvious: in view of the fact that, on the one hand, consumption has become an assigned task and, on the other, there is no one who is not a consumer and therefore not employed, it is thus *necessary to make it impossible for all of us to understand our status and the nature of the tasks we perform. This means, however, that regardless of the class that we come from, in general we have become the legitimate heirs of the proletarians of the past: dupes.*

Certain advertisers seem to never tire of repeating, with a slight tone of accusation, sometimes even with a little malice, that the standard of living of today’s worker is at least as high as that of the bourgeois class of the past. Of course, this claim is true: it is probably even an understatement. It is true, of course, only if it is perceived as only half of the truth, since it is equally true that the *standard of truth* (and by this I am not referring to the measure of our subjective love of the truth, but, in a way analogous to the “standard of living”, *to the measure of the truth that is divulged to us*) of today’s allegedly classless consumer society as a whole is at least as low as the standard of truth of the proletariat of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, if not even lower. The undeniable similarity of the situations of the contemporary worker and the worker of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is expressed not just in the form of ascendance, that is, from the bottom up, but at the same time in the form of a decline, that is, from the top down.

#### § 14

*Post-contractual slavery. We are secret agents.*

Our contemporaries are filled with pride, and not without reason, when they, as workers, carry in their pockets their labor contract and can present themselves as *partners* who are certified to work. Compared to the situation of our ancestors, slaves or serfs, our situation seems in fact to be identical with freedom. What we overlook, however, is the fact that this “freedom” of ours actually exists only because, instead of the “pre-contractual slavery”, a *post-contractual enslavement* has been established; a slavery that is unconditional, if we *do not* work; and it is unconditional, because we are not yet free enough to be aware of this; and properly, this post-contractual slavery has a tendency to make us terribly sceptical with respect to our pride in our freedom. In fact, the situation to which we have been led is the total inversion of what we had been accustomed to up until now. *Today we do not live under the curse of labor, but under that of leisure.* Whereas up until today it had seemed obvious to consider our hours of labor as the “island of non-freedom” within our existence, now that we

are freer, in comparison, they have become the island of freedom; in any case, only if we work are we provided with identifiable and legally sanctioned rights. The regulated time of work provides us with incomparably greater freedom than does our free time, which in appearance is not subject to any regulation and is therefore open to any kind of secret regulation or contents. *When the factory sirens announce the end of the shift, at the same time they announce the inauguration of the inevitable monopoly of the sirenic world of the **mass-media** and advertising; that we are then subject to that world; that, then, the hours of our being employed without limits or contracts commence: the hours in whose quagmire we have to combat leisure with the sweat of our brows.*<sup>95</sup> It is all the same regardless of what they impose on us: ball point pens that write under water, the pride of those who seek to rule the world or melodramatic songs that assure us that love only flourishes on the Mississippi, or canned food that is guaranteed to remain fresh until the end of the world; no legal clause regulates what is or is not permitted, or what the advertising powers assign to those of us who spend our non-working time as their employees. When the black cotton-picker, having been domesticated by the advertising supplied as entertainment, finally installs the shining new television in his dilapidated shanty; or when my neighbor “spontaneously” began to sing the Mississippi song that had been blasted into his ears a hundred times, and then bought the record at a record store so he could consider it to be something of his own, as his property; both exhibited an obedience that was more unconditional, more free of contradictions and more fully committed than they ever would have exhibited during the hours they naively considered to be their only “working hours”. “Fully committed”, because the enslavement that they participated in by way of this obedience, does not represent only a momentary and particular event. *By way of their acquisitions they became “congruent” with what they acquired, they made themselves just as insipid, imbecilic and vulgar as their property; the non-freedom of their free time contaminates their existence as a whole and, furthermore, does so in a definitive manner.*

What applies to them, applies to more or less all of us. Given that we are *doubly unfree*—since it is this in which our “illusion of freedom”, called “liberty”, consists—that is, *deprived of the freedom of suffering under our non-freedom, we perform our assignments, which we are obliged to perform as courted individuals, without recognizing them as assignments, without complaining.* What appears to us, the customers, in such a way that they make us believe in a most insinuating way that it is “customer service”, is nothing but the system of measures by means of which we are recruited for performing services; and the seller, with the solemn undertaking that “our wish” is “his command”, is thinking of course of just the reverse: that we must transform his command or that of his business into “our wish”. He often even assumes that we should undertake this labor of transformation automatically or that we have already committed to perform it generally for the entire future. We are almost never directly asked to do this or that, but we are almost always told that we should desire this or that. Nothing is more characteristic of the dictates of “post-contractual slavery” than

---

<sup>95</sup> The situation is similar, naturally, with regard to the time of total inactivity: just how true this is has been proven, for example, by the lack of resistance on the part of the unemployed to the National Socialist propaganda of the years 1932-1933. If something similar were to happen as a result of the introduction of automation in the contemporary United States, there would be hardly any reason for surprise.

this *detour by way of desire*, provided that we may speak of a “detour”, since there is no shorter path leading to our obedience. It is the shortest, because it is the smoothest; the smoothest, because one cannot produce resistance to oneself; and one cannot do so, because (for psychological reasons whose examination would lead us too far afield) there is no “not wanting to desire that” analogous to the “not wanting to do that”. It is all the same, however, whether it is the shortest road or a detour, because by way of this procedure two things are simultaneously always assured: both our strict obedience, as well as our total illusion of freedom. No, there is even a third guarantee—and, really, one could not ask for more—since above all, the same people who issue the commands also benefit from this “detour”; and not only (and this is perfectly understood) commercially, but also in the moral domain. If they have produced our desires, it is effectively true (that is, *it has become true*) that they do not offer us anything that does not correspond to our desires. On the basis of this mendaciously induced truth they can, *with the best conscience, view themselves with the best conscience*; that is, they believe that they satisfy us and our demands with the respect that is due to us.

Thus, it is not possible to imagine a more beautiful world, or a more intimate understanding between the two sides: both have the right to wash their hands in innocence and even *mutually*. And if one of our contemporaries were to be endowed with Brechtian irony and the ability to write an operetta of social critique, and if, instead of presenting something real in a magical light, he were to theatrically depict the corrupt enchantment of today’s reality, he could conclude his *libretto* with an apotheotic finale, with a double chorus, in which the advertisers and the employees would impugn, in harmonious indignation, the existence of compulsion and *would praise with one voice the freedom of the rulers as the rule of freedom*.

It will of course be objected that we *enthusiastically* perform the tasks that are assigned to us: that we enjoy it when Coca-Cola sprays all over us; and that if we allow ourselves to be swept away by nostalgia when we hear the previously mentioned Mississippi record, it is only in order to satisfy a yearning. This is true. Unfortunately, it is true. It is just that this does not constitute an objection. Or, more precisely: it is only *the desired objection*, that is, what *we have to do* as dupes and therefore what confirms our theory. For *enthusiasm is no protection against slavery*. Rather, the performance of the assigned tasks fills us with pleasure only because we have obeyed the order to desire what was ordered and because the rule that the fulfillment of desire is united with pleasure is valid without exception, even when this involves the fulfillment of desires that we were ordered to have. In fact, there is nothing that so definitively confirms the character of work and slavery as “our pleasure”. And I put that phrase between quotation marks only because the self-deception begins already with the use of the “possessive adjective”, since between “our” and “our” there is an enormous difference. *The possessive pronoun indicates not only our possession, but also the fact that we are possessed*. The expression, “our pleasure”, is no truer than that of “our ideology”, “our concentration camp”, or “our needs”. When we are inculcated with ideologies we are not their owners, but rather their property, and we are even “possessed” by them in some circumstances. When, as inmates in a concentration camp (not to speak of the numbers tattooed on our arms), we call the camp “our camp”, we do not mean to say that it belongs to us, but to the contrary, that we belong to it. When we go shopping for the “Mozart brand underwear”, we are not obliged to do so by our needs, but by the needs of those who

need our needs and who supply to us the need for this supply so that we should be receptive to this supply of underwear.

And exactly the same goes for our *enjoyment*. When we enjoy the commodities that they supply to us, it is not we who are the beneficiaries of our pleasure, but those who appeal to us to enjoy ourselves. The “detour by way of desire” is always at the same time also the “detour by way of enjoyment”; and *our enjoyment has no other **raison d’être** than that of serving the enjoyment of those who employ us*. It is clear, however, that this enjoyment of ours, which is there only to serve, is not “ours” in the strict sense of the word. If one considers this performance of a service of enjoyment in a broader context, it is evident that the space of our non-freedom is more extensive and the forms of non-freedom are more numerous than we ever would have assumed until now. Just as the Marxist definition is still valid, which says that as non-owners of our means of production we are not free, it is also true, on the other hand, that today this definition does not go far enough. More precisely: it is only valid for one-third of our current non-freedom. To describe it completely, we have to complete it with two additional features: first, we must add that today we are also excluded from the co-determination of the effects of our products, which, in certain circumstances, would also be valid if we were the owners of our means of production;<sup>96</sup> and second, we have to add that the pleasure we obtain from the products, insofar as it performs a service function, in the last instance belongs to those who are served by means of that pleasure and therefore it is not our property, either.

It is well known that the Molussians expressed these kinds of relations with much more straightforwardness than we are usually capable of mustering. In fact, a couple of verses have come down to us in which the scorn that the producers have for the pleasures of their customers is formulated with unsurpassable frankness. In the fragmentary hymn, “Power by way of pleasure”, which the Molussian industrialists sang on solemn occasions, it is said:

*... our power, by way of their pleasures*

and in the following verses:

*... for you have to please us,  
if you like the bait.*

And in the refrain, probably for all the verses:

*Praise and glory to the consumers,  
our secret agents!*

What seems important to me is that last phrase, “secret agents”, since it applies to us, the consumers, more exactly than any other term that we could invent *ad hoc*. It is clear that it is used here in an unusual way. While the term “secret agent” is usually defined as someone

---

<sup>96</sup> See, with regard to this question, the author’s article, “*Siamo tutti come Eichmann?*”, in *Mondo Nuovo*, 6-1-1963.

whose function as an agent is secret and must not be revealed to those among whom he is assigned to act, *in our case a “secret agent” is defined as the consumer because the consumer is not allowed to know the nature of his activity and because when he is sitting at his plate, the question of for whom and for what purpose he performs his activity remains a secret to him.* However, within the parameters of our understanding of this unusual utilization of the expression, we shall be allowed to use it and to state: in their quality as consumers, our contemporaries are basically secret agents.<sup>97</sup>

§ 15

*Excursus on synthetic perverse murderers*<sup>98</sup>

Everyone knows that the “falsification of activity”, that is, the principle of assigning our assigned tasks to us in the form of “enjoyment”, has now spread even to those jobs whose character as work is not so easily camouflaged as that of our assigned consumer. There are now enterprises in which our service to the machines is transformed, by way of the most aggressive musical rhythms from loudspeakers, into a kind of “manual dance” and thus into a pastime. It is entirely comprehensible that those who are caught up in this music experience their work as a form of enjoyment, perhaps even as “captivating”. And, nevertheless, for these satisfied workers, too, it is also true that, from the moral point of view, their enjoyment is not “their own”, but it belongs rather to those who have cast the bait of enjoyment, to those “you have to please, if you like the bait”.

This falsification of activity, of course, is incomparably more deadly than the one to which we fall victim as consumers: whereas, as consumers we are only harming ourselves, as

---

<sup>97</sup> For those of us who are familiar with the “mechanism of displacement” and the “detour by way of enjoyment”, it is naturally laughable that it is precisely this expression, “secret agent”, which completely reveals the truth, has over the course of centuries, and even on the part of the most notable Molussicologists, been viewed with suspicion or with the aplomb of stupidity has been defined outright as “perverse”. It is to be taken for granted, of course, that the possibility of understanding the new meaning of the expression should be denied to the philologists. Most likely, this limitation on their part represented, in turn, *their own* performance of their secret mission, since it has not been revealed to them, either, that, by virtue of the fidelity and the stubbornness with which they uphold their lack of understanding, they perform a service.

<sup>98</sup> “Perverse murderers” is the translation we have preferred for the German word, *Lustmörder*, in which the reference to *pleasure* or *enjoyment* appears (as we have been translating *Lust*), provided that “perverse”, applied to people, to their feelings or instincts and to their actions, means: “capable of doing a great deal of harm to others and of *taking pleasure* in their suffering” (see M. Moliner, *Diccionario de uso del español*). In this entire paragraph, the author is trying to get to the bottom of the meaning, which is unusual as the author himself points out, of the word, *Lust*; that is why, when he defines the essence of today’s perverse murderer he will say that this murderer is *lustig*, which we have translated by “happy”, in the sense of joyful, since he performs his work “enthusiastically” and, to that extent, is happy. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]



producers we harm others; our work, camouflaged as enjoyment, has, like any other contemporary job, unforeseeable consequences that exceed not just the domain of our personal existence but also our imagination. Not long ago I heard this rumor: *there are now manufacturing processes in Chemical Warfare Production that are carried out with musical accompaniment*, that is, sweetened or seasoned with pepper; I have not been able to confirm whether this rumor is true, but I would not be surprised if it was true, since what is happening here is consistent, that is, it is a *double falsification of activity*; by this I am referring to the fact that here the “mechanism of displacement” as a whole is being set in motion. And not only would it not be surprising, for what would be surprising would be if the contrary were the case: that the fullest possible deployment of the principle should be renounced. Let us assume that the rumor is true, since it coincides with the dominant principle. What is it that has taken place here?

Answer: Those who are really agents have been assigned (by way of training in mass murder):

1. their activity as “jobs” and
2. their “jobs” as “pleasure”.

Or, read backwards: *what is presented as “pleasure” is only a disguised form of work; and this, in turn, is only a disguised activity. Given the fact, however, that the goal of this activity is “murder”, the latter is also the goal (invisible, of course) of their work and, with it, also the goal (likewise invisible) of their pleasure. In summary: these workers are “perverse murderers”, although by way of a detour.*

It will be remarked derisively: “The most naïve perverse murderers in the world, since they are unaware of the nature of their pleasure. Therefore, in these circumstances, why should this affair be considered to be scandalous?”

To which we have to respond: it is precisely *because* they are naïve, *because* they are unaware of the nature of their pleasure. In fact, their ingenuousness is artificially produced, they have been condemned to it by those who need naïve people to perpetrate with their help the most malicious [hence the least ingenuous] deeds; and this *function of ingenuousness* is, precisely, the scandal that scandalizes us. It would be a total misunderstanding to believe that our comprehensive admission of their naiveté contradicts their classification as “perverse murderers”. The truth is quite the contrary: the specific difference of these perverse murderers is only clarified by our comprehensive admission, since *the essence of today’s perverse murderer consists precisely in the fact that he is not permitted to know that he is a murderer, but only that he is “happy”*. To put it another way: we can admit with complete tranquility that “the murderous perversity” of the naïve individual, insofar as it is not so much a perverse pleasure *in* murder as a perverse pleasure *in the process leading up to* the murder, can be distinguished from the ordinary perverse pleasure in murder, since, insofar as this difference is not influenced by the objective fact that his perverse pleasure culminates in

murder, the legitimacy of the expressions, “perverse murder” and “perverse murderer” remains intact.<sup>99</sup>

The fact that those who have been rendered ingenuous by way of the performance of their duty might be responsible for the most extreme kind of destruction only represents half the scandal, since to this consequence we must also add that they are themselves destroyed, because their ingenuousness—and I say this in a completely non-metaphorical sense—represents an artificially produced split in their personalities; a split that we shall call *a schizophrenic disorder of labor*. The workers are “splintered”, because the relation between their affection (in this case, the innocent and pleasant happiness caused by the music at the workplace) and the nature of their affection (in this case, the production of means of annihilation, which makes them guilty) has ceased to exist; and because this breach is so definitive that those who are “split” in this way not only do not miss their lost relation, but are no longer even capable of missing it.<sup>100</sup> “One laughs, the other gets the joke”, as they say in Molussia.

I am, however, referring to a “disorder of labor” because it is the consequence of today’s system of labor, that is, of the division of labor. It is almost unbelievable that the rule that prevails here has never been formulated despite its simplicity. This rule is as follows: *The division of labor into various parts always divides the individuals who work in the same way. The **division of labor** transforms the in-dividuals into “dividuals”.*

“Dividuals”, in this sense, are those whose affects are totally divorced from the nature of their affects [their consequences]; those to whom it is not permitted to feel what they are doing and those who, for that very reason, are those upon whom substitutes for the affects

---

<sup>99</sup> “Employees for killing”, as it says in a Molussian manual for generals on the General Staff, “must perform their assignments without inhibitions or scruples. In order for them to do so, it is not allowed to them to sacrifice the illusion of their innocence. Nothing guarantees the preservation of this illusion as much as the camouflage of performing their duty as enjoyment. The enjoyment that is granted them is, then, a necessary form of their dispossession. Those of us whose job is to allow them this enjoyment conceal from them the purpose of their activity.”

<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, the possibility of separating the affect and the nature of the affect is now occasionally utilized as a tactic of the entertainment industry. I cannot forget a scene from an Italian film, the first scene depicting a baby crying next to the corpse of its mother in a most heartrending manner. It was not long before I discovered something about the feeling that I experienced during the movie—the feeling that I had never before known what it means for a baby to have lost its mother—for I soon found out how they had managed to get the baby to cry and scream: they pricked the little fellow with pins. As repugnant as this may be, it cannot be said that it is not typical. No less repugnant is the joyful attitude that is induced in the workers with the help of the music played at their workplace. The two cases are like peas in a pod, since in both it is true that the affect and its nature are split and that the right to synthesis is prohibited to the actors. This synthesis takes place, instead, at a third location: first, in the soul of the emotionally moved movie spectator; then, in the account books, which show the augmentation of production.

and emotions that are completely foreign to the actual activity they perform are foisted (in this case, the pleasure of listening to music). Karl Kraus described some executions that were carried out in the First World War in which various people were hung so incompetently that the rope merely seemed to tickle them, causing them such horrible discomfort and nausea that, as if by some otherworldly grace, they forgot their death and swung from side to side until their nooses tightened, that is, until they died (they were literally killed) of laughter. In the half century that has passed since then, we have proceeded even further along the same road, since the music played in the industry of annihilation means nothing else than that, now, even the executioners “are tickled” so that, as if by some otherworldly grace and blinded with respect to what they are doing, “they laugh while they carry out” their murderous mission.

Regardless of what psychopathology and psychiatry might say about today’s schizophrenia, we shall only understand it on an etiological level if we contemplate it as the consequence of the division of labor, which conceals the contributions that are properly interdependent, that is, if we see it as the normal situation of today’s working man. The horror that we feel with respect to those employees of the extermination camps, who usually worked without emotions until the evening in order to then devote themselves to affects and emotions that were totally divorced from their work (the executioners even read Hölderlin), our horror at the “average men” [*Biedermänner*] of the technological era is only permitted to us if we include ourselves as objects of our horror.

Anyone who has once noticed that among the goals of the way people are treated today there is not a single one that is pursued in such an approximately systematic manner and also in an approximately so successful manner as the production of our schizophrenia; and anyone who has once noticed that today we have already come so far that we can misinterpret our participation in the preparations for mass murder as “naïve” enjoyment, *such a person will no longer consider the idea that some day the redemption of the last judgment will take place “in a pleasantly agreeable manner” to be unrealistic, that is, that it will be beautified with melodramatic songs or (nothing could be better) with classical music.*

## § 16

### *Domestic work and dispersion.*

As consumers we are “secret agents”, as we have concluded in the last paragraph.

Of course, we are not referring to the fact that we have been transformed into “secret agents” because we are consumers, but rather that we have been transformed into consumers because, when we enjoy, we most faithfully perform the “role of secret agents” that has been assigned to us; because in no situation can we be so deceived or are we so susceptible to succumbing to illusions with as little resistance as in the situation of consumption. In this sense, however, enjoyment is *hors de concours*, because it is an ενεργεια (as we would say with Aristotle), that is, an activity that already contains within itself its τελος (the enjoyment), such as, for example, going for a walk, as opposed to running an errand; expressed in negative terms

because for anyone who is enjoying something there are no longer unachieved goals towards which he directs himself or which he still serves.

Naturally, for the *hidden persuaders*, who want us to be well adapted accomplices, there can be nothing better than the existence of *ενεργεια*: it is only because they exist, that they can be disguised as the activities whose goals and functions of service remain unknown to us. As soon as we believe we are enjoying something, despite the fact that we are performing an assigned job, we find ourselves in a situation in which we no longer imagine that it could still make sense to ask a question about a *τελος* and therefore about the fact that we have been dispossessed of the freedom to recognize our activities of service as such.<sup>101</sup> In that case, the relation of non-freedom and enjoyment has totally changed. Today, anyone who continues to describe non-freedom as something “without enjoyment”, turns the truth upside down. What rules in the conformist system is precisely the contrary principle: that non-freedom and enjoyment increase proportionally; therefore the following rule prevails: *the greater the quantum of non-freedom that is assigned to us, the greater, too, the quantum of the enjoyment that is served to us on the table*. Or, more exactly: *the dispossession of freedom is presented as the supply of enjoyment*.

Given that the transformation of our jobs into acts of consumption is the best way to assure the functions of “secret agents” that are assigned to us, the ideal situation of the conformist system will be realized only by way of a *totalitarianism of enjoyment*, that is, only when a situation is created in which *the appearance or the “feeling” of acts of enjoyment is conferred upon all our activities*. It does not matter that this vulgar *paradis artificiel* can be imposed by force or that its ideal must be utopian, what is certain is that a systematic attempt is underway to bring us as close as possible to this goal. Testimony concerning this process is provided, for example, by the countless American advertising appeals that, regardless of what jobs or purchases they are exhorting us to take or make, culminate without exception in the assertion: *It’s fun*. The idea of the “greatest happiness for the greatest number” could not sink lower.

What is taking place in the conformist world is not exhausted, of course, by mentioning organized factory labor and consumption on command. Along with these factors there are innumerable other forms of activity, among those that are carried out by *individuals*. Thus, our activity, too, that of the independent author. And given that we produce our texts privately, as domestic labor, at our own desk and fully conscious of our own creative capacity, it would appear that we are not subject to the pressure and the deceitfulness of conformism.

Relations in the conformist system are neither so simple nor so a-dialectical, however. The fact that labor is carried out in private still does not prove that it is not an assigned task; it did not prove any such thing in the past, either. In the final analysis, even the domestic textile

---

<sup>101</sup> Naturally, it is altogether another matter if someone who performs a service, in the sense of Epictetus, is the same person who assumes this disguise, for example, if he is a slave sent to perform an job that he enjoys as if it were a pastime, since for him it constitutes an act of sovereign freedom.

workers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were workers on assignment: the material, the quality and the quantity of the fabrics they wove in their homes were determined by the factory owners; the products only acquired reality by being accepted, finished and marketed by the factory owners. This kind of work still exists today. *Certain authors, especially authors of movie screenplays and scripts, despite their luxurious standard of living—you only need to replace the word, “textiles” with the word, “texts”—may be considered to be the grandchildren of the domestic labor of the previous century.*

This is not, however, the kind of domestic labor to which I am referring here. The cases of the weavers and the writers for the motion picture industry involve transitional arrangements (between manual labor and mechanized production) that usually are recognized to be compromises<sup>102</sup> that were accepted by the business owners, because they could already foresee that they would someday be superseded.

This is not at all the situation in our case. The domestic labor that we are talking about here does not represent either a transitional arrangement or a compromise. Instead, it proceeds from a *principle*. This is my hypothesis: those whose interests are served by the conformist system explicitly support and encourage domestic labor. And they do so because they concede the maximum value to keeping under wraps the knowledge of the fact that their system is now total (and therefore a system of the total dispossession of freedom). This concealment is carried out by dispersing their labor assignments, that is, by assigning them to *individuals* as domestic workers; of course, these individuals will not even know why they have been employed. In this sense, our hypothesis represents an analogy with our theory of consumption: if in that theory we affirmed that anyone who enjoys something in the conformist system and thus performs an assigned task (camouflaged, that is, “falsely assigned”), now we affirm the same thing about the individual worker, even the one who works alone, that is: that he, too, performs an assigned task. It is just as proper to mistrust the isolation of our labor as it is to mistrust our consumption.

## § 17

### *Dispersed consumption.*

There can be no doubt that isolation, that is, what we just called “dispersion” to characterize our individual labor, is implemented much more clearly in consumption and it is on the basis of the latter that it can be understood most clearly. In what sense is consumption “dispersed”?

The answer may be formulated as a rule; this rule would say: *today’s supply system, whose goal is assimilation and massification, is never presented in such a way that it would seem to feed the masses (or, similarly, serve them), but serves individuals, regardless of their vast numbers, and these individuals receive their food as individuals. Massification is implemented “one individual at a time”.* For example, radio broadcasts are disseminated to

---

<sup>102</sup> An example of the overcoming of this compromise: many of the authors who in the past had still been domestic workers, are today performing their jobs as employees working at the word processors of the businesses.

“soloists”: millions of people are sitting alone in front of their radios and receive the transmission in the privacy of their homes.<sup>103</sup>

Naturally, this promotion of isolation (for supply and reception) does not contradict the goal of assimilation; to the contrary, it is itself an instrument of assimilation. Its goal is not to provide more definite outlines for the individual or to assure his privacy, but quite the contrary: to produce massification; in this way it also represents a case of “false assignment”.

Of course, this disguising of massification as isolation in conformist society is not new. Riesman’s expression, *The Lonely Crowd*, which seems to describe the same phenomenon, has become a fashionable catchphrase. But it is generally used without an understanding of the dialectic that it implicitly expresses, that is, as a simple confirmation of the fact that, despite being a *crowd*, we are also *lonely*, or vice-versa, despite being *lonely*, we are also members of a *crowd*; naturally, this is not sufficient, because the truth is that *the measures that make us lonely have no other objective than to transform us into a crowd and to maintain us as a crowd.*

In other words: the places where massification is produced today are not the “sports palaces” or the Madison Square Gardens, but private homes and apartments. The output that is demanded of us, is demanded of us in the form of *domestic consumption*; and this means: in the form of *domestic labor*, with which we are already familiar since we revealed consumption to be camouflaged labor. That is why we can affirm: *by way of dispersion we have been transformed into millions of domestic workers.*

The system makes use of this new “massification by way of dispersion” not only because it seeks the maximum number of buyers or only because the new technological inventions, such as radio or television, accidentally make this “dispersion” possible, but to the contrary: the triumph of these new technological inventions was only possible because they were fantastically adapted to the desires of those who had an interest in massification, that is, because in the view of the latter *the only good Indian is a dead Indian, and the only good massification is dispersed massification.* And it is the only good kind because the masses that are desired by these interested parties (and they have in fact been produced) must remain *paralyzed*; that is: the possibility of recognizing themselves, of perceiving themselves *as* masses or even to engage in mass action, must not be enjoyed nor must their absence be noted, or, more accurately, the masses must not even be *capable* of noting the absence of these possibilities. And the “dispersed masses” remain paralyzed because, despite being composed of millions of individuals, they are dispossessed of the ability to escape from their ingenuous and powerless condition as long as they are manipulated in their diverse hermitages, separated from each other; on the other hand, a real *crowd*, massed at a single point, even if it only includes a thousand demonstrators, always has the possibility of becoming aware of its own power to escape control and setting itself in motion *as* masses.

---

<sup>103</sup> See *The Obsolescence of Man*, Vol. I, Introduction. The clamorous joy that characterized the praise for television from above and the welcome for television from below, according to which television creates an opportunity for “the rebirth of privacy”, still resounds in everyone’s ears.

One would have to be somewhat imperceptive not to acknowledge the ingenuity of this mechanism of deceit. Even we, who have been transformed into the *lonely*, the victims, cannot deny it. To be proud of this mechanism, however, would indeed be unfortunate. And we are proud of it: in the dispersed form of massification to which we have become accustomed, and that we no longer understand *as* massification, we see a conquest, the only such conquest worthy of a free man or, at least, a free world, while we look with mistrust or scorn (in the best cases, with arrogant condescension) on our contemporaries who occasionally, just like our parents did, still “pour onto the streets” to form masses or to allow themselves to be formed into masses as parts of a real mass. For us, who possess such great esteem for our progressivism, it is just as completely out of the question that we should allow ourselves to be deceived by the methods that were customary or fashionable in the past, as it would be to use a candle to illuminate our passage through a modern city resplendent with electric light. Of the thousands of absurdities of today’s humanity there is none that is as comical as this arrogant attitude of ours. A dupe (let us hope there is not more than one such dupe) who feels he is very much more advanced than another dupe, because the latter allows himself to be deceived in a less modern way than the former, would be a character worthy of a Molière: and this character exists today, millions of them. No theater would be big enough to adequately portray this gigantic ridiculousness; not even we are at the level of this ridiculousness of ours.

As we said, however, this arrogance is no laughing matter; to the contrary, it is first of all cause for despair. Sometimes, it still happens that some massifications arise from *contradictions*, that is, that they are non-conformist demonstrations. If it is true, however, that all mass actions—simply by virtue of the fact that, instead of being “dispersed”, they are composed of real people who really gather together—are still considered to be things of the past or even reactionary, then this is also naturally true of protest demonstrations. And this, in turn, means that every one of these demonstrations has now been defeated *ante festum*, that is, even before it begins or before it is even attacked. Conformism could not hope for a more complete victory.

“Massification by way of dispersion” always has the objective, at the same time, of a double deprivation of power: not only are *individuals* deprived of power by way of the supply of mass commodities, which transforms them into mass beings, but also, at the same time, the *masses* are deprived of power by way of the “dispersion” of those commodities. The question concerning whether the existence of real individuals or the existence of real masses is less desired today, is misplaced. It does not matter whether we circulate here or there as “massified individuals” or as “masses fragmented into individuals”; the only thing that matters is: *Ni homme, ni femme, c’est un capucin.*

## § 18

### *The free hand.*

The questions concerning what right we have to consider “dispersion”, which has been demonstrated to be a principle of our consumption, also as the principle of our “spontaneous

activities”; to affirm that we are also the victims of the same illusion to which we fell victim as supplied consumers when we are playing the roles of creators or even as suppliers of commodities; and that, when we act as individuals, we are only performing assigned tasks “that have been given to us *in a dispersed form*”; these questions (which are identical to the ones we formulated at the beginning of this chapter) have already been adequately answered by means of the depiction of the seamless conformist system that we have outlined. Just how adequately we have answered them, is something that must be further clarified.

1. *Mediality*. As you will recall, in one of our analyses we touched upon a fact that could be assessed to be the basis of the conformist system: that of the “absence of walls”. This expression means that certain categorically antagonistic walls, whose general philosophical-anthropological validity we never doubted before, can no longer be discovered in the existence of conformist man. The distinction between activity and passivity also must be counted among such “disappeared differences”. What has become evident is the fact that enjoyment (considered generally as merely “passive”), when it appears in the conformist system, always represents at the same time an assignment performed for that same system; as such it occupies a position between activity and passivity; it is therefore “medial”. And what has also become evident is the fact that our activities, when they take place in the “sirenic world”, which constantly surrounds us with advertising, are always at the same time acts of “collaboration”; as such they are just as akin to passive endurance as to active engagement; therefore they, too, are “medial”. To summarize: it has become evident that “mediality” is suffused throughout our entire conformist existence.

This fact, moreover, compels us to adopt a methodical point of view, one that is decisive in this context. That is, the point of view that it does not matter whether a category proceeds from this or that sector of the conformist “trunk”, whether from activity or passivity; that, rather, it is legitimate to use the activity found in one sector in another one as well; and this is so because here it is not a matter of “utilization” (in the strict sense of the term), for to speak exclusively of “utilization” would be indispensable if we were really dealing with two sectors A and B. Here, however, this is not the case, since A is composed partly of B and B partly of A, activity is in part passivity and passivity is in part activity. In other words: given that both A as well as B are “medial”, every category, regardless of where it is found, to the extent that it possesses any general validity, pertains to the medial sector of our *entire* existence. And the same thing also applies to the category, “dispersion”.

2. *Products of grandchildren*. The works that we produce while sitting in front of our blank sheet of paper are *products of beings produced by means of products* (given that we have ourselves been produced by means of the products that are constantly supplied to us), therefore “products of grandchildren” of the system. However much we think we are impassioned by the fever of creation, this in no respect affects the “grandchildren” character of our products, since this possessive enthusiasm is also a product that has been distributed to us as a commodity tailor made for the purpose of causing us to misinterpret the assigned character of our creative acts, that is, for the purpose of causing us not to recognize that our contributions only represent intermediate phases in the process of production and distribution as a whole; only intermediate processes that have arisen from the conformist system and are destined to rejoin it. *Our creative acts are only events of transmission between one supply*



*and another*, between one reception and another. In fact, our products, having barely come off the assembly line, return to be ground up in the mill of the system, since only if they are considered worthy of dispersion by the system are they admitted and put into circulation, it is only thus that they acquire “existence”, in that pragmatic sense that we have defined; only then can they “appear”. In other words: the system, by way of the “dispersion” of its influences, has transformed us into beings that, by creating, *eo ipso* create products which are then adapted for its mechanism of dispersion.

3. (Variation on number 2 above) *Pre-supply*. Nothing could be further from our intentions than to claim that we are constantly saturated with “assignments”, in the ordinary sense of the term; that every one of our products represents the performance of a special assignment; that our freedom is curtailed in every case; that we are not permitted to fantasize. We do not by any means need to say this, since even before we begin we are beings of assignment; we already have our wings clipped before we have left the nest; in advance, *the function of our fantasy is reduced to that of “cadences”* (this comparison is the one that makes our *status* most clear). As everyone knows, cadences appear already established within musical scores and at the particular times when they are called for; the tonalities with which they begin and end are always “pre-supplied” to us, and without this being a “limitation” for us.

This is exactly what takes place with our inventions and fantasies within the conformist system. The “musical score” of the system is always “pre-supplied” to us; even before we begin it is always *ours*, of course not in the sense that we are owners of what is supplied, but in the inverted sense of the possessive pronoun that we defined above: rather, we are its property. In any case, this “pre-supply” is the key fact. By way of the general assignment that those who are responsible for assignments have introduced into our past and by means of which we have been transformed into faithful parts of the system, they dispense with the effort of distributing to us their day-to-day special assignments. Given that our “front doors” are wide open; that there are no longer any “walls” between us and the system; that we live in “congruence” with its contents even before we take up the pen, it is obvious to us what we are permitted to have access to and what not, what vocal registry we are allowed to choose and which ones we are not, and even how far we are allowed to surpass the limits of the system in order to ensure the illusion of freedom for both us and everyone else, or not. And we are for the most part obedient even if we are not aware of the rules that are imposed on us, since they are camouflaged precisely because we have been rendered incapable of even desiring anything other than what we are supposed to desire. No, the conformist system does not need to dictate every one of its movements, fix every phrase, control every word. *Given that it has already defined us **avant la lettre**, it can always allow itself to be generous, it can always be liberal.*

However, it is liberal not despite, but rather because of the fact that it is an integral system.

And it is terrorist not despite, but rather because of the fact that it is gentle.

And we are its victims not despite, but rather because of the fact that we are not aware of our slavery.

If we are left a free hand for our own labors, it is because our hands do its work.

## Chapter 10

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF IDEOLOGIES

(1978)

Today one no longer needs to begin a work on ethics with the postulate of “good will”, as they used to do a hundred and seventy-five years ago. That postulate takes for granted that *we have* a will, *each his own*. This assumption is formulated even by the person who took as a starting point the difficulty of being moral, that is, he admits that “good will” usually faces too much opposition from “needs and inclinations” (Kant) to be *good* will. What is opposed or even destroyed is always only the *good* will and the factor that opposes it is always only the twin duo “needs and inclinations”. Fortunate times those were indeed, when nothing was threatened except *good* will, for today what is at stake is *the will as such*.

And what poses this threat to the will as such is not exclusively limited to our “needs and inclinations”.<sup>104</sup> The assumption that every one of us has his own will is presently, both under soft terrorism and under the hard form of terrorism, that is, in the era of mass influence, just as unjustified as the assumption that every one of us “has” his own opinion.

This assumption concerning a “will of one’s own” was even made, for example, in the classical documents of democracy, since the legitimate pretensions with respect to “opinion” that are proclaimed in these documents presuppose the freedom to “have” an opinion and refer to a second freedom: that of *freely expressing* one’s opinion, which one is assumed to “have”. Today, this assumption has been completely undermined. It is true that not even the most inveterate sceptic could deny that every one of us has opinions of some kind. However, especially since the deadly attack directed by Marx at Stirner’s concept of property, we have become extremely mistrustful towards the meaning of “having”. After all, *one can also “have” hunger or a number tattooed on your arm*. It is hard to decide whether *habere* is today really a *habere* rather than a *haberi*, a being had (reversing the saying of Aristippus). Moreover, it is certainly true that our having an opinion represents a variety of this being had; and therefore that our opinions and thoughts about the world are *coined*; that *we are supplied* with them; in short: that “my *opinion*” is not “my opinion”, and that “our opinion” is

---

<sup>104</sup> And this is even less the case, insofar as they are not “ours”, either. Rather, like everything natural, they are at the mercy of manufacturing processes; for some time now they, too, have been products. My thirst for Coca-Cola is by no means “my” thirst, but something produced in me by the producer of Coca-Cola, and is no less of a manufactured finished product than is the beverage itself. And it is certainly an apparatus, whose purpose and contribution consists in satisfying the thirst for surplus value from production. The thirstiness, therefore, by way of my thirst or, actually, by quenching it, quenches the thirst of the enterprise; I perform an assigned task.

not *ours*. Today this is not only acknowledged to be true, but to be indisputably true; here I am referring to the fact that *the producers of our opinions do not have to fear that the fact that they are the producers of our opinions will be revealed*; and even that they have a right not to fear this exposure, since the victims realize this fact up to a certain point only fleetingly, but without any consequences.

This perspective became a cliché (for example, in its obvious existence in Anglo-Saxon Social Science) only recently, that is, at the historical moment when this perspective began to become ideological and the concept of ideology itself began to become obsolete, *for today ideology has been transformed into the term, ideological*. And this is so, because the contemporary interest groups, which seek to keep us in a state of “false consciousness”, can spare themselves the effort of supplying us with false theories or with artificially produced world views. And they can refrain from having to do so because the artificially produced world itself, especially the world of machines that surrounds us, presents itself as *the world*, that is, it so dazzles us and so effectively influences our consciousness that the production of special world views for the shaping of opinions is rendered superfluous. Given that these interest groups have the power to surround us with colorful walls, they can limit or even eliminate the function of the bureaus that previously produced the rose-tinted lenses of ideology. For someone who has consciously lived during the last few decades (not to speak of the times of the pompous National Socialist ideology), nothing is as surprising as the precarious persistence of ideology in today’s western world, especially in the Federal Republic of Germany; which by no means implies, however (this is, as we have said, the point upon which all else depends), that the western world or, rather, the Federal Republic, are non-lying or non-hypocritical, but quite the contrary: that, in order to achieve their goals, ideologies are no longer as necessary as they were in previous eras. *Given that the ideological has been introduced into the world of the products themselves* (and especially into that of the machines), *we now find ourselves in a post-ideological era*. This situation can be portrayed as the negative parody of the situation that Marx referred to, when he predicted that philosophy would be “superseded” by the reality of the future situation of humanity, that is, it would be rendered superfluous. In a completely analogous way, now *the lie is “superseded” by the massive non-truth of the current situation of humanity, that is, it has been rendered superfluous*. Its non-existence is its no-longer-being-necessary. *It is no longer even necessary to lie*. It is often legitimate to express complete truths, since within the framework of the massively falsified world they are inoffensive, pure “cultural values”, and they have an entirely unreal effect. And even truths can undergo a change of function and be used as decorations, something that, for example, took place with the cultural critique of the person who is writing these lines.

What is valid for opinions, that is, that despite their being “mine” or “yours” they represent products that, manufactured by producers, have been inculcated into me or you, is also of course valid above all for the *will*.

Ideological opinions are not just false theories in every respect. And all the less so insofar as even true claims can be utilized ideologically. They are false, rather, because, despite their actually being instruments, they present themselves falsely or in a falsified form as theories. The unmasking that Marx undertook with respect to philosophies as ideologies and his

demand for the “unity of theory and praxis” are not two separate parts of his doctrinal construction, but two aspects of a single idea. Ideologies are false not so much because of what they express (although this is certainly also true), as because they adorn themselves as *affirmations* or systems of affirmations. Although their immediate goal consists in producing “false consciousness”, the latter is in the final analysis only an instrument, which in turn must produce *false will*. And the latter, too, is ultimately only an apparatus, the last one: the apparatus for the production of *false action*. In other words: the goal of ideologies, which we have defined as instruments, consists in coordinating the doing and refraining from doing of those to whom they are supplied: “*false consciousness*” without “*false desire*” would have *absolutely no value*.<sup>105</sup> *The truth of ideology* (that is: true compliance with the interest that lies at the basis of its production) is *false praxis*. A theory that is incapable of channeling or preserving false praxis is not a “true ideology”, but only a true or false theory; in any event, whether it is true or false, it is certainly false from the perspective of the producer of ideology. What cannot be used is non-true. This phrase belongs not only to the axiomatic arsenal of Anglo-Saxon pragmatism, but also to the praxis of the totalitarian regime of the economy. With regard to this point, entente between the two worlds is superfluous, since their mutual conformity already exists in advance. With regard to this point, it really was not necessary to attempt to settle any cold war with weapons.

Ideology, insofar as the first thing it is interested in is the doing and refraining from doing of those to whom it is supplied, is primarily a moral problem. There have never been any ideologies that had any other goal than to channel a false action and to make its victims believe that they have to do something, want something or even to want what is contrary to their own interests. The ultimate goal consists in preparing and “readying” the subjects in such a way that they can no longer act in any way but falsely and, *thanks to their having-acted-in-this-way, in also convincing them that they had wanted to do what they have done*, so that, if we were to make them aware of their own interests, of what they “properly” should want or should have wanted, they would protest angrily or come to blows with us.<sup>106</sup> If they were to be capable of expressing the secret maxim that they live by (but the fact that they are incapable of expressing it, of course forms part of the desired situation), they would have to reverse the order of wanting and doing and speaking: *I do something, therefore I wanted to do it*. This is their maxim not only when, as a result of totalitarian pressure, they are transformed into the henchmen or accomplices of a totalitarian state, but also when, as victims of *hidden persuaders*, they buy a brand of bread that does not so much satisfy their

---

<sup>105</sup> Where it is possible to produce—which is the case today—“false will” without “false consciousness”, or even “false praxis” without “false will”, it is the result of surplus production of “false consciousness” or, even better, of “false will”. The person who pushes the nuclear button, for example, no longer needs any theory or world view to want to act or to act against his own interest; by pointing this out, naturally, I do not mean to say that he has a “true consciousness”, but only that he is as much “beyond the true and the false” as he is “beyond good and evil”, that is: in the total absence of thought.

<sup>106</sup> In our nuclear situation we have directly managed to bring about the following situation: the indignation that is provoked when one makes people aware of their real desires (that is, of what they properly should have to want) and that, if “they consent to want” nuclear weapons, they want their own destruction, is verily worthy of a better cause.

hunger as it does the hunger for surplus value from production, for today the differences between the methods of contemporary propagandists for bread and those of Goebbels are not very great. Both are authentically contemporaries. Both pursue the same goal: to dispossess us so completely of freedom, that not even the last remnant remains to us, that of the freedom to be aware of our non-freedom.

The ultimate goal consists in the deliberate production of a liquidation of the will, of an *abulia* of such a kind that, unlike its pathological forms such as syncope or catatonia, *it lacks the consciousness of not being free*. The destruction of the will shall only be considered to have been achieved when it is united with the illusion of self-consciousness and power in the dispossessed person; when the person who has been deprived of his will, is at the same time convinced that he is a good person. *Impotence and jackboots are twin gifts, as anyone who was in the SA can confirm*. The boots transform the abulia, desired from above, into pseudo-abulia. When the powerful bestow the power to engage in violence upon someone who has become impotent, the latter participates in this display with the feeling that he is acting in accordance with his own will and at his own initiative. With the help of this abulia transformed into pseudo-abulia, the victims who are presented as “guilty” desire and engage in actions that properly speaking they are not permitted to be capable of even desiring.

## Chapter 11

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF CONFORMISM

(1958)

§ 1

*The conformist does not conform.*

Of all the fashionable terms that are popular today none has more meanings than *conformist*, which is used by cultural journalists of every stripe. The figure that this expression is supposed to indicate, the man who, for reasons of convenience or freedom decides to assimilate his actions, opinions and feelings—in short, his entire lifestyle—this character without character is not characteristic of our current situation. By “current situation”, I mean the present stage of our development (which advances through various phases) towards non-freedom; that is, the stage which followed the previous one that was characterized by the openly dictatorial and terrorist dispossession of freedom. As contradictory as this thesis may sound, however, the figure of the conformist does not play a decisive role in conformism. Not *anymore*. The image of the conformist world, at least that of the “process of conformation”, is not encompassed by the expression, “conformist”. What does this mean?

It means that today, it only rarely appears (only rarely does it need to appear) that individuals are transformed into “conformists” by way of their own decisions and actions. Such a

“making oneself become a conformist”, however, is usually what those who speak of “conformists” tacitly presuppose.

A quarter century ago it was customary to use the expression, “assimilate”, as a reflexive verb, that is, as in: *to assimilate something*. Then, there was a good reason for the question to remain open. In any case, our thesis is that today there is no longer anything that corresponds to the action defined by this reflexive verb; that now—and in this way we render our formulation positive—we have reached *a new, more perfect stage of coercion*: a stage in which the place that had previously been occupied by reflexivity (at least among other things), is occupied exclusively by *passivity*; that assimilation, in ninety-nine percent of all cases, takes place in the form of *being assimilated*, and *being conformist* takes the form of *being made into a conformist*.

The claim that the coercion and the deprivation of freedom which accompanied the decade of National Socialism must not be considered to be the most perfect forms of coercion and deprivation of freedom, of course sounds shocking and even outrageous in view of the monstrous events that took place then. At that time, too, it was impossible to imagine that the degradation could be increased or to admit that the finishing touch, the last functional refinement of conformism, had yet to be applied. Only today are we beginning to understand this. Our reasoning is quite simple:

As long as a dictatorial power is still exhorting or inciting those whom it must pressure to contribute a little to their own dispossession of freedom and powerlessness, a minimum of personality is still conceded to its victims. This concession is only made reluctantly, of course. This is also true when this power does not demand of those whom it is inciting anything more than to become executive officers in charge of their own elimination, therefore, to use all the energy that they can bring to bear exclusively for this self-elimination. National Socialism still did this, at least during its first few years. Its appeal was capable of sounding like this at that time: *Be enough of a man to not to have to be a person any longer!* What it demanded was the *sacrificium*, the suicide of the person.

Today this demand has no place. Life is more comfortable. But not because the integrity of the person is more guaranteed now (or guaranteed “again”), but to the contrary: because now, in our “more perfect stage”, the personality is annulled; because servitude or, more accurately, *the non-existence of the person is now assumed as a fait accompli*. In these circumstances, explicit obedience (which is achieved in slavery) has been rendered superfluous. That is why commands and prohibitions are also superfluous. That is why they no longer need to be promulgated and complied with *as* commands and *as* prohibitions. In fact, in view of the fact that the person no longer exists, the appeal to moral suicide no longer has a target. You do not shoot at corpses.

Naturally, when commandments are no longer necessary as commandments and prohibitions are no longer necessary as prohibitions, the impression arises that there are no (longer) commandments or prohibitions, that is, the *illusion of freedom*. This illusion is a major opportunity for those who are interested in the production of the perfect non-freedom. And it cannot be claimed that they do not take advantage of this opportunity. In fact, *the*

*dispossession of freedom of the person goes hand in hand with the ideology of the freedom of the person; and the abolition of freedom is carried out, most of the time, in the name of freedom.*

This first sketch already shows us a very complicated situation that requires a precise explanation. It is not such a simple matter, however, to explain it. The attempt fails from the very start. And it fails for a particular reason:

As clear as the image we are presenting may seem to be, it always seems to be the *clear image of a blurry object*. Neither of the two figures in which we are interested, neither that of the ruler nor that of the ruled, seems to really have acquired definite outlines. The classic “master and slave” relation, so well articulated, remains murky, even before it is obscured in its well known dialectical form. In fact, we only make any progress when we also decide to identify this *murkiness* with a *fragment of recognized reality*. This fragment of contemporary reality, which is actually not entirely unknown, but is never explicitly defined or even labeled, we may call *social agnosticism*. This expression must indicate that the bearers of the roles of society do not recognize each other by virtue of their roles. Or even (as is increasingly becoming the case today) they do not recognize their own roles, that is, they do not recognize themselves. This fact has been partially recognized by Marxism: when Marx attacked the lack of class consciousness, he combated the fact that the bearer of the role, “proletariat”, did not recognize his own role. This agnosticism, however, is only one-fourth of the whole “social agnosticism”, since the complete construct displays four varieties of blindness:

*First blindness:* The ruler (that is, the one who is imposing the pressure) does not recognize with respect to the ruled (that is, the target of the pressure) the fact that he rules the latter (that is, imposes pressure).

*Second blindness:* The ruler does not recognize himself as the ruler.

*Third blindness:* The ruled does not recognize the ruler as the one who rules.

*Fourth blindness:* The ruled does not recognize himself as the ruled.

Those who supply the products, especially the “phantom-products”<sup>107</sup> transmitted by the media, do not recognize the fact that, by way of their supply, they render us without experience and incapable of experience; that they deprive us of the freedom to form judgments; that they brand us and dominate us. Instead, they believe that they only supply us. And we, too, the consumers, are blind, since we do not recognize the fact that our suppliers render us without experience and incapable of experience; that we are deprived of the freedom to form judgments; that we are branded and dominated. Instead, we, too, believe that they only supply us.

---

<sup>107</sup> See *The Obsolescence of Man*, Vol. I, Second Part, Chapter 2, especially § 15.

This first example refers to the roots of the quadruple blindness. If the master-slave relationship assumes this form, without being articulated, it is by means of the *supply*. It is the latter that renders the imposition of commands and prohibitions superfluous *as* commands and prohibitions; it is the supply that, as a form of camouflage, makes it possible to cause the commands and prohibitions to become invisible. Camouflage in this context means: the world, that is, the universe of products, especially of the machines that are imposed on us. This supply already bears within itself all the “duty” that is needed today. *The offer [“Gabe”] already contains all the assignments.* The wall between the two Kantian worlds has been eliminated. *What has been offered and supplied is presented eo ipso as binding.* And to seek a “duty” beyond this monist world that is neutral with regard to “being” and “duty” is considered fanatic or subversive.

This universe of products that are supplied to us, however, is binding because it determines what we do and refrain from doing, what we have to do or must not do, what we can do and what we cannot do; in sum, our entire way of life, so absolutely that not only do we lose the freedom (something that requires constant growth) of evading this determination, but we are also directly rendered incapable of noticing and recognizing our determination more generally.

Thus, today’s commands and prohibitions are generally secret commands and prohibitions: commands and prohibitions that are promulgated without their recipients noticing it. They are, of course, a very particular type of secret commands and prohibitions, since they are automatically complied with by their subjects despite the fact that the latter do not recognize them *as* commands or *as* prohibitions. This ignorance is desired, since not only does it not entail negligence, but quite the contrary: it is the precondition for their compliance. Hence, the principle, “ignorance of the law is no excuse”, is unnecessary; or to put it another way: *given that these laws are now contained in their products, they are complied with in the same way that sick people swallow sugar-coated pills.* At the very moment when the products are consumed—and we are not free to consume them, since we are not capable of living outside our world—the commands are swallowed at the same time. The expression, “*The world is supplied to us*”, has an ominous double meaning: *it is offered to us not only in the sense of the participle of supplying, but also in that of commanding.*<sup>108</sup>

The one who “swallows” these commands, however, without noticing the fact that he is swallowing or what he is swallowing, is also swallowed by the one who commands/supplies, without noticing that he is swallowed. This does not involve a second fact, but the same one, only seen from the opposite perspective. In other words:

The ideal of the current era consists not only in the fact that we consume in such a way that we do not perceive the act of consuming or the food that we consume, that is, without effort,

---

<sup>108</sup> The double sense to which the author is referring is due to the fact that the terms “offered” and “commanded” are expressed by the same German word: *geboten*. It is possible to speculate that, from the perspective of Jewish tradition (Moses), in their origin the commandments were considered to be “gifts” or offers (which is manifested in the German terms, *Gabe*/gift and *Aufgabe*/task). [Note of the Spanish Translator.]



without leftovers, in a way that is as frictionless and narcotizing as possible. With this observation, our situation is only half described, since this ideal exists only thanks to a second ideal and only by way of this second ideal does it acquire “meaning”, that is: *we must be consumed in such a way that our being consumed must be imperceptible to us* (and this likewise forms part of the situation of the current era), that is, without effort, without leftovers, in a way that is as frictionless and narcotizing as possible. In the optimal case, not even those who are swallowing us perceive that they are swallowing us. This is the opportunity [presented by the illusion of freedom] referred to in the first two forms of the “four kinds of blindness”.

We said that it is extremely difficult to act contrary to the commands contained in products. This is because we are not merely confronted by a number of products that, like buoys on the ocean, float in a productless medium; rather, the products as a whole comprise a cohesive, seamless system, without gaps or windows, a system that is so *complete*, that we have the right to call this whole a *world* or a *universe*. These expressions, which we have already used, are not used metaphorically. The subjective criterion of this “complete character” of the world of products consists in the fact that we, those who live in it, are prevented from even imagining that this world could be “any different” or that there might be “other worlds”.<sup>109</sup> This impediment is established by the supplied world in a playful manner, that is: by showering us with a profusion of products or, to use another image, by plugging in advance all the cracks in the wall, through which we could, in certain circumstances, get a glimpse of other variants of existence and of the world.<sup>110</sup> This profusion is the mother of the lack of imagination. Wherever we extend our hand, we always find something to grasp and something that, as a ready-to-use commodity that is already supplied, mutely but unyieldingly validates its pretensions, that is, it excludes the representation of anything else, since it already conceals within itself its “commands/supplies”. This is the current version of the myth of Midas.

This “complete character” of the world of products is fully plausible under the aegis of *time*: this world is not offered and supplied only now and then, but ceaselessly, that is, also during our so-called “free time”, as our neighbors’ radios mercilessly prove. Outside of sleep,<sup>111</sup> there are no longer any temporal gaps during which we would be able to imagine or even to lead another possible life that is not supplied in the double sense. And thus non-freedom

---

<sup>109</sup> This is the basis of the lack of understanding displayed by Americans with regard to past historical eras and non-American countries and mentalities.

<sup>110</sup> This is not at all refuted by the countless utopias that, precisely in the United States, were published and seemingly demonstrated some imagination. All of them are only “extended versions” of the paths that had already been trodden [in a unique way] in the complete world.

<sup>111</sup> Even our freedom to sleep is now jeopardized. As everyone knows, the technologists of the subliminal now plan to intrude upon sleep by way of subliminal acoustic transmissions to supply man with offers, that is, “commands”, while he sleeps.

would be defined, since it is nothing but the elimination of the subjunctive potential and of free “free time”.<sup>112</sup>

To recapitulate: as “what is supplied”, the “complete world” establishes the actions, opinions and feelings that are required of us—in a word, our entire lifestyle—so completely that our obedience is assured, without the need for us to perceive an order as an order. *Just as what is supplied is the order that we receive, the consumption of what is supplied is our obedience.*

And it is to this situation that I referred when at the beginning of this chapter I claimed that, in comparison with the contemporary version of the deprivation of freedom, the variety practiced in the openly dictatorial nations was still imperfect.

The climax of perfection was only attained when the apparatus of oppression rendered the oppressed not just ingenuous, but also transformed them into *usurpers of the practice of oppression* itself, as we have already noted previously; when they do not even know or *no longer know what they are doing*, that is: by being supplied, they are oppressed. And that is the situation that prevails today. Indeed, at present there is no one who cannot, with the best conscience in the world, correctly claim that *there has never been an era when rule has been exercised with such a good conscience as in ours.*<sup>113</sup>

## § 2

*What is “experienced” is not experienced.*

What all customs consider to be preeminent with respect to all legal codes, that is: that it is valid in such a way that (as the language says) one *cannot* do this or that (while the legal code exclusively establishes what one is not *permitted* to do), is also considered to be preeminent by contemporary power, which, by means of the world of products and machines, goes beyond the old-style dictatorship, which needed particular acts of oppression. And just as those who live under a set of customs do not perceive them (in any case they do not perceive them as restrictions on what they do or refrain from doing or, at most, perceive them as channels for their activity), the contemporary conformed person does not perceive the set of apparatuses that establish actions, feelings, opinions, etc., as an impediment or deprivation of his freedom.

In other words: we are conformed by means of a process whose effectiveness is imperceptible and that we do not notice. And we do not notice this process because it is more than a particular procedure or even a procedure that we have understood as a particular measure of coercion. Instead, the process is effective without interruption and, in the last analysis, it is nothing but the *modus* of our treatment, which we constantly “experience” (that

---

<sup>112</sup> This identity is likewise confirmed in psychopathology. Kurt Goldstein’s studies of brain injuries show, for example, that those who have become non-free are also incapable of understanding conditional propositions.

<sup>113</sup> Nor is the hypocrisy of the United States, so often censured and ridiculed, a vice in the traditional sense, but an objective consequence of the mechanism of supply.

is: that affects us constantly). And this is precisely why we do not “experience” it (now, in the sense that we do not perceive it), because what is constantly experienced (in the sense of “being affected”) is not experienced (in the sense of “perceived”). The conditions of experience are not the objects of experience. The water pressure that the fish of the deep oceans “experience” constantly (that is, which affects them uninterruptedly), is not “experienced” by them (in the sense that they do not perceive it); instead, this pressure is internally adapted to in advance by their mechanism of mobility, in the entire structure of their bodies. *The “paradigm of coercion” has become the **conditio sine quo non** of their lives, so that they burst when they are hoisted onboard by the deep sea fishermen.* Similarly: a person who is walking does not “experience” the fact of gravity and he certainly does not experience it as a special measure of coercion that has anything to do with him. Rather, the fact of gravity is already internally adapted to in advance in his action of walking, in the structure of his body, in such a manner that if there were no gravity he would not be able to stay on his feet.

The same thing is true with regard to artificial conditions, that is, conditions created by man. In our *dasein*<sup>114</sup> the *modus* of the way we are treated, to which we are constantly exposed, is internally calculated; that is why we do not “experience” this *modus*; at most, when it temporarily breaks down, for *only absence makes everyday presence visible*. That is when it is presented to us as the indispensable *so-sein* of life itself: that is how it would be presented to us, if some kind of catastrophe were to one day remove from us the pressure of the matrix, which molds us every day by way of the radio, television, advertising, etc.; or if—and this would be a completely new kind of strike, which we may glimpse as a possibility on the horizon—the powers that supply us with images to keep the consumers in line (that is, the entire population) were to suddenly one day interrupt their supply. There can be no doubt that a *strike* of this kind, “from above”, would have the same effect as if the sun were to stand still: the population would be seized by panic and a sense of suffocation and would finally beg for mercy.

In any event, nothing is further from the mind of the consumer, seated for his twenty hours a week in front of his radio or television, than to classify his being so supplied as suffering or coercion, despite the fact that it is pure passivity, and therefore pure endurance. Rather, this time of consumption is his life, even his *dolce vita*.

If one were to inquire as to the diverse functions performed by people in conformist society, the answer would be: besides those who have an interest in producing the conformed society, that is, in conforming their fellow men, society is constituted of “conformers” and “conformed”. That is: partly by people who are destined to be conformed; partly by those whose manipulation is already complete. Of course, this is not to say that contemporary humanity is divided into two such very distinct and separate groups: the already-conformed

---

<sup>114</sup> *Da-sein* and *So-sein* are expressions that were once fashionable, largely because of their use by Heidegger. *Da-sein* is the phenomenological term to refer to what was traditionally understood by the word, *existence*, but avoids the opposition existence-essence. *So-sein*, on the other hand, refers to the determined way of being; it literally means “to be thus”, or being in a historically-socially concrete way.

commodity and the raw material of the not-yet-formed, because non-conformed, individuals. Rather, each person is simultaneously part of both groups, since within the conformed society there is not a single person who is not in some way conformed and, on the other hand, there is no a single person in this society who is so perfectly conformed that he does not need to be subjected to continuing influence by way of an uninterrupted conformation or a *conformatio continua* and to be adapted to new situations.

If, instead of “conformers” and “conformed”, we were to speak of “conformists”, the latter term is not only inexact, but falsified, since, as we noted at the beginning of this chapter, such usage would amount to assuming that the individual has the choice of allowing himself to be subject to conformation or to allow himself to continue to be subject to that process; it is thus assumed, consciously or unconsciously, that he has the freedom which it is the proper task of conformism to liquidate, and which in fact *has* already largely been liquidated. Thus, in a certain sense—as we observed at the beginning of this chapter—the concept “conformist” represents a negation of the reality of conformism. This negation or falsification is certainly the work of conformism itself; that is, anyone who speaks in this way is already conforming, since one of the preferred occupations, one of the essential con games of conformism consists precisely in slandering *individuals* as conformists, in making them pass up to a certain point for voluntary conformists so that, in this way, the fact that conformism is trying to make *everyone* conform can be concealed. In fact, conformism is most flourishing where it encumbers those who have become unfree with the illusion of freedom or simply inoculates them with this illusion; where it successfully leads the individual to engage in a machine-like repetition of the vocabulary of individualism, which is self-contradictory by virtue of this repetition. The powers that carry out the process of conformation become the victims of their own activity of conformation: that is how irresistible their capacity is. They fuse with the homogeneous mass that they produce; they believe their own lies; and when they speak, they speak to themselves in a machine-like way.

Of course, nothing is less consistent with the intentions of the spirit of our time (which is advancing towards total non-freedom) than a situation in which those who are assimilated were to really be individuals, since the goal imposed by the spirit of our time, for the realization of which no means have been spared, consists rather in a situation in which spontaneity is stifled in every domain, self-consciousness is extinguished, and there is an absolute absence of consciousness. This implies, however (disregarding the possibility that the spirit of our time should attempt to blind itself), that it does not allow any individual to know what he is doing. And it is capable of bringing such a situation about, because it can prevent the individual who is *doing* something, in the true sense of the word, from doing it. In fact, this situation *has already been* brought about, for the spirit of our time has replaced people who do things (or even people who “act”) with people who only “go along with” [collaborate]; *it has eliminated the dividing line between activity and passivity* and, in the place of those two differentiated provinces, it has imposed the domain of a *single* neutral province, that of *mediality*.<sup>115</sup> *Even the discourse of his “freedom” is expounded by the individual only “by going along with”. When he boasts of his individuality, he does nothing but repeat what he has heard about individuality on the radio.* Even when he speaks of

---

<sup>115</sup> See *The Obsolescence of Man*, Vol. I, Chapter entitled “On the Bomb...”, § 18.

“freedom”, it is not really he who is speaking: rather, what he is doing is merely retransmitting the words that he has received and consumed.

What is valid with respect to the final goal that conformism has set itself is naturally also valid for the road that leads to that goal. The road that leads to non-autonomy must not be travelled in an autonomous way, either. To continue to distinguish in general between road and goal in this context, however, does not make sense, since each person already finds himself in a conformist situation, which in turn serves as a step towards another “higher step”. In any case, the road to conformity is travelled not because we as individuals set ourselves this task by way of a conscious act, by way of an express *sacrificium individuationis*, of our own *intellectus*, which we then assimilate to ourselves: as we have said, such a way of sacrifice would be in contradiction with the ultimate goal, since it would presuppose that we are autonomous, spontaneous subjects who are ready for sacrifice, and even that we are persons with personalities (even if bad personalities).<sup>116</sup> Rather, we continue to be subject to the process of conformation in an imperceptible way, since we are half-*medial* and half *conformed*. And the more completely we are conformed, the less we suspect anything about our situation, since our memory of non-conformist man will also continue to atrophy in step with the growing conformism. In fact, it would never occur to any conformist, not even in his dreams, to label anyone else a conformist.<sup>117</sup>

One of the essential tasks of the machinery of conformism consists in making itself invisible both to those who are in the process of being conformed as well as those already conformed; and to bring about a situation in which its description, or in any event its critical description, does not reach the ears of the conformists. The task and the effect of the machinery of conformation is not exclusively limited, as most people believe, to allowing all those whom it is trying to victimize to react immediately and in the same way. No less essential is its absolute interdiction against those who are undergoing conformation, that is, everyone, from understanding certain facts; that is, preventing them from “knowing the real facts”. And in this sense, this very situation must remain as “not given”, especially in the situation of conformism. “Night is a good time not to see the night” (Molussian saying).

When the voices of non-conformists or anti-conformists do manage to make themselves heard with a shocking thesis, a general defensive reaction ensues, with which we have been familiar since the early days of psychoanalysis: a defense, whose motivation and vehemence

---

<sup>116</sup> Another aspect of the image of the conformist world is the fact that, in it, individuals do not sacrifice themselves, but rather are only *sacrificed*; but also the fact that *they can* be sacrificed, because their resistance has already been broken. Any person who is consciously prepared to sacrifice himself for a goal that has not been demanded of him, that is, one that is not part of the process of conformation, renders himself suspicious. With this extinction of the concept of sacrifice, this conformist world reveals its regression towards not just a pre-heroic stage, but even a sub-human one.

<sup>117</sup> Note added in 1971: In the meantime, among conformists it has become fashionable for them to boast of their non-conformism. This non-conformism, however, is a mass phenomenon, separation from which calls for a degree of non-conformism of which few are capable.

can only be explained with the help of the theory against which this reaction is directed and which, for that reason, confirms the thesis. A chorus of various voices, which proclaims in unison, “We are not conformists”, confirms what it rejects by the way it rejects it.<sup>118</sup>

It is true that, once in a while, this combat assumes more subtle forms: the reality of conformism is not denied, of course; rather, what is denied is that anyone has the right to consider the reality of conformism to be important or novel. And it is said: “What are you really claiming? As if compromise has not always existed, yes, *always!* And precisely under the name of *customs!* As long as it has existed under this well-respected name—except when it was a matter of superstitious customs—it never bothered you philosophers. You often even considered it to be the guarantee of order and civility. So, why does it bother you so much today?”

At the beginning of this chapter we claimed that today’s conformism, unlike that of the time of the dictatorships that we have left behind us, no longer arises from a kind of active, much less conscious, assimilation. Assimilation in that reflexive sense has become superfluous; it has been replaced with being assimilated. We must now add that even the personal *führer*, upon whom the dictatorships still depended, is today superfluous, since what makes us conform is *not a “person”, but a “thing”*: the universe of machines, composed of identical fragments of sirens; and by “machines” we must not understand only productive machines in the strict sense of the word, but also all the instruments of supply, such as the radio, and even *all of today’s products* in their combined action: these are *today’s dictators*. For every apparatus bears a particular instruction and a particular intention. And due to its inalterable intentions regarding its treatment and use it prevents us from relating to it in our own way. In other words: we have been deprived of the possibility of reacting to machines in an individual way or subjecting them to an individual use, such as, for example, treating them as we would a piano. And to attempt something of that kind would be pure folly. A hand-carved, hand-painted radio I once saw in a worker’s house in Styria was the most absurd object—from the point of view of the philosophy of history—that I have ever seen. What applies to individual machines (which, in the strict sense, do not exist),<sup>119</sup> also naturally and precisely applies to the world of machines that, as a whole, surrounds us. Since this world enthralles us in the most determined way and does this to all of us in an almost identical manner, we have been deprived of the ability to address it in this or that way; in short: *the world of machines assimilates us in a more dictatorial, irresistible and irreversible way than terrorism* or the world view subject to the terrorism of a dictator would ever be *capable of*

---

<sup>118</sup> This would appear to be contradicted by the fact that in the current public discussion, in the supplements of cultural criticism, for example, a conformist jargon is now being employed concerning, and even against, conformism; and moreover by the fact that certain journals that are themselves conformist are on the verge of transforming the debate about conformism into their favorite theme. The contradiction, however, is only apparent: given that it is in the interest of conformism to suppress discussion of all themes that would pose a threat to it, it must itself become a theme and itself lead the discussion of its own problematic. In cultural politics, the occupation of enemy positions is just as important as their “destruction”.

<sup>119</sup> See *The Obsolescence of Man*, Vol. I, Introduction.

achieving or has ever achieved. *Today, Hitlers and Stalins are no longer necessary.* And if someone were to add: “unfortunately”, this expression would not of course mean anything but that conformist society now functions, unfortunately, so smoothly and automatically that it can allow itself not to regret the absence of the voice of command or the terrorist control of a dictator.

Perhaps this description of the new stage of our non-freedom is “exaggerated”. Nonetheless, it is certainly no more exaggerated than my other descriptions of our current situation. What is today called the “future”, will tomorrow be called “the present”; and what seems like an exaggeration today, may seem like a rather prosaic description tomorrow.

### *Excursus on exceptions.*

In one of the most reliable Molussian chronicles, we read:

“It is certainly the case that today, at the high point of conformism, there are no longer, properly speaking, any conformists, it is no longer necessary that there should be any; that is, no person who, for reasons of opportunism, security or convenience, assimilates. Only ‘those in the process of being conformed’ and ‘those already conformed’ remain, that is, persons who *must be* conformed and those who, without even knowing that this has happened to them, *are already* conformed. There are exceptions, however, which must not be overlooked. I am thinking, above all, of a variety of cultural journalists, who explicitly approve of the attitude of assimilation and personally assume responsibility (supposedly an unpopular responsibility) for the outright defense of the status quo. Here we can leave unexamined the question of whether they do so *because of* or *in spite of* the fact that they are too sensible to simply yield to the pressure of the imposed lifestyle. In any case they are highly suspicious types, for, despite their assimilation, they prove by their style and their choice of words how eager they are to form part of the elite of Molussia (that is, of the non-conformists). This internal contradiction of their activity (more precisely, the attitude of bad faith that is inevitable in such a contradictory kind of activity) leads them to engage in histrionics, that is, it causes their arguments to reflect a degree of self-assurance that is never credible. Ignoring for now the advantages that accrue to them from such behavior, which assimilation as such always confers, there are, above all, two objectives that they pursue with their engagement on behalf of something that does not need any intercession on their part (since it is predominant without it):

“First of all, they hope to convince the conforming reader that they are taking a completely unpopular stance, that is, that they are displaying an unusual civic courage; and

“Secondly, they desire to flatter the conforming reader, that is, to convey to him the feeling of pride that, as a conformist, he is a man of integrity and that this is a result of his own conformism (that is, of his not-being-himself). In other words: one cannot deny a certain kind of refinement to these advocates of assimilation. ‘Today’, as they begin their pseudo-audacious witticisms, ‘today, given that everyone mistrusts conformism and that it has become a thankless, or even sometimes a daring, task to fight on behalf of conformism...’, in order to completely muddle the situation, this is the tone with which they insinuate that the

overwhelming majority of their contemporaries are non-conformists and that the conformists represent the rare and bold exceptions.

“The preferential targets of these journalists are, as we have said, the ‘philosophers of culture’, whom these journalists almost always scornfully insult as ‘professional critics of culture’, as ‘scribblers’, who ‘are always paid for their work’. Evidently, with this observation they expect to make their conforming readers laugh (who, nonetheless, have nothing at all against making money). In any case, what is most decisive is the fact that they present the ‘professional critics of culture’ as immature and timid, that is, they accuse them of lacking the courage to face reality like men and accept it the way it is and happily collaborate with it. Actually, the inversion of reality is unsurpassed. While they present their own assimilation as a risky and spiritually bold conversion to reality, they impute to anti-conformism the appearance of vice or immaturity.”<sup>120</sup>

## Chapter 12

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF BORDERS

(1979)

When, about twenty years ago, I explained at the World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs, held in Tokyo, that the concept of the *border* (and along with it, that of the solely national arena of responsibility) would soon be obsolete, because rainfall contaminated with radioactivity did not give a damn about whether the territory it fell on was “here” or “there”, I did not make any impact, since the Congress was only attended by people with technical, political, or spiritual, but not philosophical, interests. Some of the hosts of the Congress, who were very patriotic, were deeply shocked when I explained that the concept of *sovereignty* had become a relative one, because the effects of what happened “at home” would be felt in other countries.

The effects of the nuclear test explosions are not, of course, the only causes of the extinction of the validity of the concept of “borders”. Thus, today, for the government of the German Democratic Republic, it is impossible to keep its citizens “under its tutelage”, since they spend their leisure time, in a way, in the Federal Republic: they sit down in front of the television, which allows them to participate in the life of the neighboring country—including its political life—and its tastes and idioms. Radio waves do not bother about political borders any more than radioactive rainfall does. It has come to the point where the *teenagers* of the Democratic Republic wear the same clothes as those of the Federal Republic: a photo in a Scandinavian magazine shows some youths from the Democratic Republic who are not only

---

<sup>120</sup> See “Plädoyer gegen Cassandra” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, January 18, 1958), whose author, Horst Krüger, has unfortunately forgotten that Cassandra, whose name he offers as a standard for comparison in order to cast ridicule on her contemporary descendants, was correct in all her warnings about the approaching disaster; that is, she was an authentic prophetess.



wearing *blue jeans*; in the view of the Democratic Republic, this would not be too dangerous, despite the fact that this unkempt fashion contradicts the ruling imperative of socialist tidiness; one of the youths in the photo was even wearing an IOWA UNIVERSITY sweatshirt. It does not matter whether this American sweatshirt made its way across the border as contraband or whether it arrived as a gift or if the youth had made it himself according to the model he saw on television. What matters is the fact that, in the era of electronics, there is almost nothing that corresponds to the concept of “border”. The Berlin Wall was, even when it was first built, the most obsolete edifice of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The fashion of poetry written in regional dialects, which became a worldwide phenomenon about ten years ago, is absurd. When this new fashion trend’s representatives from Franconia, the Basque Country, Brazil or Burma arrived at their destination in New Delhi, their very mode of transportation (which so comfortably crosses all borders) contradicted the purpose of their journey, which consisted in the discussion and the glorification of limited spaces. Provincials of all countries, unite! In New Delhi, however, they could only understand each other with the help of translators or because they all chattered away in the same English language, which is understood across all borders and negates spatial limitations. It was not possible for them to read each other’s provincial texts, since no one understood anyone else’s dialects, and even the official language, hostile to dialects, of each of them was also incomprehensible to the others. This is the third example of the dialectic of the border, as it exists today.

## Chapter 13

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF PRIVACY<sup>121</sup>

(1958)

§ 1

*Not only is it true that “The world is delivered to your home”, but also: “Your home is delivered to the world”.*

In the first volume<sup>122</sup> I described how the events and objects of the world are “delivered to your home” by way of radio and television; they are supplied just like gas or water; how the outside world, having overcome the greatest distances and penetrating the most solid walls, clutters up our houses, and loses both its outside character as well as its reality; that is, how it is no longer presented to us as “world”. Of course, it is not just an “image” of the world, either. Rather, it is presented as a *tertium*, as something *sui generis*, as a *phantom of the world*; and this phantom acts in turn as a *matrix* that not only molds us, the effective

---

<sup>121</sup> Transcript of a speech delivered at the Lessing-Gesellschaft in Hannover, in October 1958, under the title, “*Akustische Nacktheit*” (“Acoustic Nakedness”).

<sup>122</sup> *The Obsolescence of Man*, Vol. I, “The World Delivered To Your Home”.

consumers, but also influences the organization of events; in this way it surpasses in terms of pragmatic reality many fragments of the so-called “world”.

In view of the fact that this supply of man with phantoms of the world does not represent any kind of unique event, but rather a process that has transformed the man-world relation *in toto*, it acquires a *philosophical* significance. By this I do not mean to say that our current existence exclusively represents a system of processes of supply, nor even an enormous single supply, since there is a complementary process that is no less decisive in molding our existence than the “supply”, that is: *the delivery of man to the world*.

It is often the case, of course, that not only are both processes complementary, they are also aspects of a single process of transference, which contains man or the human group A as a supplied consumer good and, at the same time, human group B as supplied consumers. It would be idle to attempt to investigate such cases of transference as if they were a question of “supply” or “delivery”. The “*candid camera*”-type television broadcasts, which are so popular, illustrate what we are talking about here:

Everyone knows that in the United States there are television *shows* (such as, for example, “*Person to Person*” or “*Strike It Rich*”), in which the real domestic life of real people or families is broadcast to millions of spectators. Thus, for example, we are sitting in front of our television in New York; on the screen the door of an apartment or a house of anonymous family X or the famous actor Y opens: and following him, we walk through his home;<sup>123</sup> the members of the household present themselves to us or are presented: *Fido* jumps up and down in front of us, as if we were old friends; problems relating to school, sex and even—what a surprise!—finances are confidentially exposed to our attention.

This kind of self-assurance is certainly not yet ideal, because the persons with whom we are supplied deliver themselves, that is, they are our voluntary victims. The *optimum* with regard to delivery and supply is only attained when those who are delivered are just as unaware as the other commodities are of the fact that they are delivered and that they can do nothing to prevent it; that is (as frequently occurs on shows like “*This Is Your Life*”), when, tricked on one pretext or another, they are brought to a place where they find themselves, without suspecting anything, under the gaze of a camera, because an enormously exciting event was arranged there just for *them* (or, more accurately, not for them, but for the television viewers), an event that is transmitted to the viewers live, complete with spontaneous screams, tears or fainting fits. Thus, for example, situations have been arranged—veritable reunions in the sense of Aristotle’s *Poetics*—in which, all of a sudden, people meet family members from whom they have been separated for decades, who had been living in the most distant corners of the world, and who would never have dared to hope that they would ever see each other again. Whereas in the past, in more ingenuous times, *stories* were attractively embellished in the assurance that they were *true to life*, now (there must be progress) *true life is really produced*: the unrehearsed cry of surprise, the authentic tears, the actual fainting fit,

---

<sup>123</sup> Or, rather, his home comes to meet us, since the “delivery of the world to man” is also confirmed by the fact that the image of the world itself is constantly coming to meet us and spares us from having to move ourselves and “go to meet it”, since it is already in our home.

*in such a manner that this arranged reality becomes a story* and, as such (that is, in the condition of a phantom), it is supplied and consumed.<sup>124</sup> Summarizing: the spectator has been transformed into a cannibal of phantoms, who now eats the images of his fellow men who have fallen into the trap of the camera, and he becomes agitated, and even feels that he has been cheated, if for some reason it occasionally happens that his usual feeding time is postponed or even cancelled.

To put it another way: these days, the social situations of “get-togethers” or “visiting” have been transformed into processes of consumption in which the *first* man figures as the product that is delivered and the other as the recipient of the delivery; one as a means of consumption, the other as consumer.<sup>125</sup> Our fellow men therefore comprise a part, and even the primary part, too, of the goods that we are supplied: all of us are now virtually the dinner guests and the food of others. It is in this sense that the situation partakes of *cannibalism*. If you do not see that these two cannibalistic processes are underway at the same time, that is, the eating and the being eaten, you are incapable of obtaining a complete image of our current existence.

## § 2

*Today's thief robs without stealing, since he is "only" a thief of images.*

We are not always aware of the fact *that* we are delivered and consumed, however. We are delivered, without knowing it, especially *acoustically*. I am referring to the fact that today, with the help of so-called [wire-] *tapping*, it is possible—and this is quite frequently practiced—to intercept our conversations and our whispers, even our most intimate ones.

---

<sup>124</sup> In the television series, “*People Are Funny*”, its creator ‘Art Linkletter’ has permitted himself the enormous audacity of demolishing during their absence the house of a married couple who had been dispatched on a vacation under the cover of some kind of ruse, *in such a manner that*, upon their return home, instead of parking in front of their house they parked *vis-à-vis de rien*; they were understandably disconcerted and, panic-stricken, began to look for the μὴ ὄν. This phrase, “*in such a manner that*”, however, is false, since the famous television personality had conceived of this nice little trick only *in order to* provoke their panic and their tormented search and *in order to* be able to serve it to his viewers as a sweet snack. The process corresponds to that of the artificial production of pearls: a wound is inflicted on the living being *in order to* transform its injury into an object of pleasure.

<sup>125</sup> The situation of visiting in these transmissions can be clarified with these two reflections: 1. The situation is not clear: on the one hand, the spectators remain at home; *we*, insofar as we are actually sitting in our houses, are evidently the recipients, those who are visited. On the other hand, however, the “visitors” are displayed in their own homes; that is, *they* appear to be the hosts, those who are visited and therefore we appear to be the guests, the visitors. 2. The situation is phantom-like: despite the fact that everyone seems to be at home, obviously no one is going to anyone’s house. Rather, the “traffic” takes place without reciprocal awareness: while the persons who are “delivered” remain blind with respect to us, the spectators, *we*, the spectators who are being supplied find it impossible to enter into any kind of contact except that of *voyeurism* with those who are delivered.

“No!”, I hear someone object. “It is erroneous to speak of actual delivery. Just as the world transmitted by radio and television does not lose its existence by entering our homes, any more than it ceases to exist after it is reproduced, *we* do not cease to be ourselves, either, when someone intercepts our voice in order to transmit it to another place or to many other places at the same time. And just as the world that is transferred to our homes by means of radio or television is not the real world, but is a phantom double, *we*, when we are intercepted, are not really transported, either, that is, delivered in the material sense.”

This is the objection.

These analogies are, however, mistaken; the objection is not to the point. And it is not to the point for these two reasons:

1. It is not true that the originals of the objects and events supplied to our homes remain intact “after they are reproduced”; that they continue to be what they *are*; that in the universe of consumption there are “things in themselves”.

The truth is, rather, that they are affected by the fact of having been reproduced, by their availability for reproduction; they are transformed in favor of their reproductions.

Thus, for example, a parliamentary session or a courtroom trial broadcast to millions of spectators on television takes place in a different way than it would have if it was not televised. It is not, then, by any means a question of “true reality”.

2. It is not true that those who listen or who preserve our expressions in the form of a durable object (that is, they “record” us) are only aware of “reproductions” or have only “reproductions” of us in their hands. Of course, the voice they hear or possess may very well be “only” a reproduction, but this “only” means absolutely nothing from the pragmatic point of view: now they have disposal, effectively, over what we transmitted by voice and therefore they effectively have disposal over us, too.

It is therefore the case that we, real persons, from the moment when there are reproductions of us at the disposal of others, have really fallen into the discretionary power of these others and that, in fact, *we are delivered* (for example, we can be subjected to pressure on the part of private individuals, our employers or political officials). The results of the enterprise devoted to phantoms are new realities. The data that confirms this will be provided below.

It is therefore false to assume that we shall remain intact and continue to be ourselves, in spite of having been robbed, defrauded, violated or rendered susceptible to violation. It is important to emphasize this, because an attempt is being made to convince us of our invulnerability in order to make us indolent and because this indolence comprises one of the essential existential lies of our time. The function of these lies consists in making the radically transformed situation into which we have fallen seem innocuous, or even rendering it invisible. Our situation has been transformed by the following facts:

1. Because there is an entirely new kind of thief: the thief of images; therefore, there is a particular and new kind of crime against property: the theft of images;
2. Because we are exposed to a completely new danger: that of being dispossessed of our appearance and our expressions.

This is, in fact, the characteristic perspective of the thief in the era of reproduction: given that he can restrict himself to appropriating the images of people and things, instead of the people or the things themselves, in every incident of theft he has the possibility of claiming (and even doing so convincingly) that he did not steal anything or, in any case, that he did not really steal anything.

The possibilities created by this situation are endless. In all of history there have probably been few opportunities for hypocrisy with such a capacity for seduction; and few that have been used so generally and so profoundly; in fact, on the basis of the perspective of stealing images with a good conscience, a regular *iconokleptomania* has developed; that is: the custom and the mania for stealing from the things of the world (especially the ones that one does not own) their appearance and considering this appearance (that is, the appearance of the images) as one's property.<sup>126</sup> And it is not just individuals, not only certain criminals, but all of us, who succumb to this *iconokleptomania*. For every one of us is accustomed to browse in the supermarket of the world, to note the pieces that catch our attention and to capture—in the form of an image, of course—our famous contemporaries whom one would want to “have” or to sell. And not a single one of us suspects that we are thus committing a crime against property. Rather, each of us retains the illusion of leaving the originals *in statu quo* and where we found them before the crime.<sup>127</sup>

The fate of the photographer or the person who intercepts a conversation, when he restricts himself to using our reproductions or conversations, is *not to steal while committing a theft*. The question is this *not*: it is this *not* to which everyone can appeal and which confers upon our hypocritical epoch its good conscience and its sanctimonious appearance. The businessman whose telephone calls are intercepted by a *snooper* did not have his wallet stolen. No. The young girl, photographed in a *cheesecake* pose from a hidden vantage point, did not have her virginity stolen. No. Thus, apart from the fact that the *stock* of recorded tapes has grown by several meters and that there are two more reels of tape or film in the world, it does not appear that anything of any interest at all has taken place.

---

<sup>126</sup> Whereas in the world of magical existence, in which every image was considered to be part of what things themselves appeared to be or even identical with what they appeared to be, the theft of images, most often in the form of the theft of the gods, comprised an everyday local crime, in our post-magical world the theft of images no longer plays a decisive role. The fact that this kind of crime is reappearing in our existence seems to demonstrate that a dialectical development has brought us back to a condition whose supersession had helped to produce the pride of the European rationalist.

<sup>127</sup> Perhaps, this illusion has become more pronounced among us because we, as photographers, produce the images. The idea that something produced by us could be something stolen is indeed quite strange.

No, nothing at all of interest, since we are not the only ones who suspect nothing. Not only does it appear that we, the victims, go on living the same way as before after the crime against property, that is, without noticing that anything is missing. Furthermore, *the thieves* and bandits do not suspect anything, either, because, although they have enriched themselves with a little loot, they have nothing in their hands that their victims lack. Just as it seems to *us* that nothing has happened to us, so also it seems to *them* that they have done nothing, that they have done nothing to us. While our classical ancestors, the honorable highwaymen and pickpockets, committed unmistakable crimes, that is, their actions led to situations in which the victims no longer possessed the stolen objects, their current descendants bring about a completely ambiguous situation, in which those who have been robbed (that is, us, and we do not notice the theft of images at all) *do not seem to have been deprived of anything* and therefore *lack the sense of lacking* (as paradoxical as it may sound).

While our ancestors knew precisely what they were doing when they robbed gold chains or pocket-watches, their descendants, who, by photographing or [wire-] *tapping* only produce reproductions of their victims, are still so terribly unsuspecting and ingenuous that they can continue to ply their trades with the best conscience in the world. When someone asks them for an explanation, they can always wash their hands in innocence and have recourse to an alibi. And certainly, they can always (this is an additional peculiarity of this business) have recourse to their victims as an alibi, that is, to *our alibi*, because they always have the opportunity to turn the question back on us, in order to provide *negative* proof, that is, to demonstrate that we are *not* in their hands, but that we constitute an *alibi*, that is, that we are somewhere else: exactly where we *really* are; and that we go on living unchanged, intact, without any more verifiable losses than those that we suffered prior to the crime against property. To summarize: it seems that one cannot speak of a guilty party, of a crime, of a transgression, of a sin, of any reasons for shame or repentance.

There is nothing that is more difficult to analyze than the connection between the historical situation of technology at any given moment and that of morality. We have yet to understand this connection. That is why our claim that the processes of reproduction, which have become commonplaces in our epoch, are on the verge of atrophying our moral conscience and our consciousness of culpability, seems so strange. We have to try to understand this.

### § 3

*Surveillance devices are totalitarian.*

The expression, “delivery of man to the world” only seems like another formula in favor of political totalitarianism, that is, in favor of the system in which it is stipulated not just what the individual must do, but also how much he does and what happens to him, what must be delivered to the eye of power and therefore controlled by the latter. In fact, it is not by chance that totalitarian governments of all kinds have eagerly seized upon the instruments that we shall discuss below (at least those devices that, before they attained full perfection, promised to confer a maximum degree of control).

The truth is just the opposite, however: the fact that every society that makes use of these devices, acquires—and even must acquire—the habit of considering the person as totally deliverable, as someone whose delivery is permitted; thus succumbing to the danger of sliding towards a totalitarianism that is *also* political.<sup>128</sup> This danger is so serious because (as we have seen) *technological inventions are never just technological inventions*. There is nothing more deceitful than the “philosophy of technology” (rarely formulated in such an explicit manner, of course, but rather presupposed as obvious by both the right and the left) which claims that machines are in principle *morally neutral* and therefore freely available for any kind of use; all that matters is *how* we use them; what use we make of them *a posteriori*: moral or immoral, human or inhuman, democratic or anti-democratic.

This widely disseminated thesis must be combated. It must be combated precisely because, *eo ipso*, it gives *priority* to every machine and defines the philosopher as someone who only arrives on the scene later. Because it assumes that the formulation of the moral problem only has to be introduced *a posteriori*.

This approach, however, amounts to a declaration of the capitulation of morality, because the moralist is thus supposed to be content with the miserable task of conceding his *placet* to the *fait accompli* of machines (it does not matter which machines) or, in the best cases, with the mission of explaining to his contemporaries how and for what purposes they are allowed to use their machines, and in what ways and for what purposes they may not use them.

Or, formulated differently: we must combat the thesis of the “moral neutrality” of machines, because it is an illusion. *Homo technicus* abandons himself to this illusion only because he needs to maintain a good conscience before his stockpile of machines, which are accumulating daily and overwhelming him. The belief that we can preserve our freedom against the machines we have built, and choose or determine the ways they will be used, however, is simply false.

Rather, it is true that every machine, once it exists, already *constitutes* a way of its utilization by the mere fact of its functioning; that every machine already always performs a previously established role (social, moral and political) by virtue of its special contribution. And it is true, finally, that we are always molded by every apparatus, regardless of the purpose for which we think of using it or imagine it being used for, regardless of what political-economic system we use it in, since it always presupposes or “establishes” a determined relation between us and our kind, between us and things, and between things and us.

Therefore: every machine is already its utilization.

---

<sup>128</sup> Note added in 1979: It is not the person who is observed and *recorded* mechanically who is suspicious; instead, it is the person who tries to avoid being observed who is considered suspicious. For the person who is considered to be suspicious—not to say guilty—is the person who is *recorded*, regardless of how ridiculous the bureaucratic reasons for it may be.

I attempted to document this disagreeable thesis in the first volume (in the chapter devoted to “the world delivered to your home”); based on the example of television, we arrived at the following conclusions:

It does not matter what is delivered to the person: whether a nuclear explosion, the coronation of a queen or a beauty pageant; nor does it matter who is sitting in front of the television screen: whether a Siberian farmer on a Kolkhoz, a London tailor or the owner of a gas station in Colorado: the fact that events arrive in the condition of phantoms, deprived of reality, and the fact that the consumption of phantoms replaces real experience in the world, are everywhere the same: what is decisive is only this reality, because it is this reality that molds and perverts the person and prejudices his relation with the world and the world’s relation to him.

This was the thesis of my essay on the effects of the delivery of phantoms to the person. There is no reason to believe that this thesis should only be valid for the kinds of machines addressed in that essay, that is, for the “apparatuses of supply”. If its validity is assumed to be universal, then this also applies to the “apparatuses of delivery”:

If people are fundamentally controllable and can be delivered to their fellow men or to a power center and therefore are considered and treated as beings that one is allowed to deliver; and if now *they already live* as controllables or deliverables or even in effect are controlled or delivered, then a particular mode of *being-in-the-world* is established or, more precisely, of being-*unfree*-in-the-world, regardless of who, for what purpose or within what political system one is delivered; a mode that is so radically different from the previous modes that the idea that one can preserve, with the help of these devices, those previous modes or principles of being-in-the-world, including the principles of democracy or human freedom, makes no sense; it would make just as little sense, for example, as the idea that, with the help of nuclear energy, one can modernize the extraction process of coal or oil and thus prevent nuclear energy from overtaking these old methods of energy production; or the idea that, with the help of camping accessories available on the market, one can revive the old American pioneer spirit. These ideas are *naïf* from the point of view of the philosophy of history, since *what triumphs in such cases is always the capacity of the means to impose its own orientation as means, so that, in order to compete with it, the power of the allegedly pursued goal never suffices.*

We began our discussion in this section with the claim that surveillance devices are totalitarian merely by virtue of the fact that they are used. Why is that?

Because they erase or at least correct a metaphysical fact that stands in the way of the pretensions of totalitarianism. The metaphysical fact in question is that of *individuation*, that is, the fact that the person, like any other being, insofar as he *exists*, is fundamentally a *discretum*, something isolated or at least something that is also isolated.

This ontological fact of being unique means that each person, whether he wants to or not, represents an isolated reserve, like an island surrounded by walls, and in this way obstructs the pretension to ubiquity and omnipotence of the totalitarian state.



Or, expressed less formally: although the totalitarian state includes within itself the individual beings, they remain outside, there are still gaps in its *continuum*, white spaces on its map: these are still inaccessible to and unreachable for it.

I call this unattainable character of the parts with respect to the whole, “internal transcendence”.<sup>129</sup> In the view of the whole, that is, the totalitarian state, this “internal transcendence” represents a defect, its own defect as well as a defect of its parts, that is, of the individual beings. The whole can only be considered to have been ideally achieved if its map does not show any blank spots, if it displays solidity, continuity and monolithism: if it exists as a being in the Eleatic manner, “forestalling” any individuation, or (which amounts to the same thing) if it can become equal to its individuals, or else if the latter were so “amenable” as to exist *coram*, that is, without walls and transparently.<sup>130</sup> To summarize: the totalitarian state will only be perfect if there is absolutely no “discretion” (in the sense of the philosophy of nature), not to speak of being-oneself, of “privacy” or “intimacy” in the psychological sense.

For totalitarian power, however, theoretical clarifications are of course of little account, since the only thing that it is interested in is imposing and ensuring the power of its postulates. That is why it perceives not only a defect in the reality of singularity, which is a metaphysical fact, but also a scandal: and not so much a scandalous *fatum* as a scandalous *factum*.<sup>131</sup> If it were capable of expressing in words its moral-metaphysical principles, it would characterize *individuation* as a *sin against its monolithic pretension*; and it would blame the individual for his *self-appropriation*; that is, it would reproach him for the fact that he appropriates from the totality that which he owes to the totalitarian power, that is, that he appropriates himself totally, that he shirks his duty, that he establishes himself as a reserve, that he takes control of himself and therefore is unreachable and uncontrollable by the totalitarian power.

Since, however, there is nonetheless no remedy for the reality of individuation, in view of the fact that the “sin” of the individual proceeds from the fact of existence itself, in the eyes of totalitarian power it is an *original sin*, that is, a condition that must be combated by every

---

<sup>129</sup> This “internal transcendence” can be verified in systems of the most varied kinds. All the processes that are currently classified as “unconscious” are of this type. Most corporeal processes, even though they take place “within us”, are non-given and inaccessible to us and therefore they are “internally transcendent”. Someone who is travelling on an airplane, however, is also “internally transcendent”, that is, our contemporary who is accustomed to leaping from one part to another of the regions he flies over; or for the musician, the intermediate tones that exist between diatonic passages. That this type of transcendence has never been addressed in philosophy is to be explained, of course, by the theological origin of the concept.

<sup>130</sup> It is entirely possible that the triumph of transparent architecture, that is, the *Glas-Architektur* [its technical term], that we have witnessed in the last quarter century, is connected with the ongoing process of the destruction of privacy.

<sup>131</sup> It is characteristic of totalitarianism to transform every *fatum* into a *factum*, into something that is made (for example, being Jewish can be made into something evil).

means. This condition, however, can only be combated if both *partners*—both the totalitarian power (against which *the sinner sins*) as well as the *sinner* himself—simultaneously participate in the battle. And with this observation we arrive at our theme.

For this means, on the one hand, that the totalitarian power has to attempt to be *impertinent* and *indiscrete*,<sup>132</sup> that is, it must invade the “discrete” province of the individual or at least monitor it; that it “assumes responsibility” for sinking roots, by way of controls, questionnaires, provocations, intimidation, etc., in the gap from which it was excluded by the scandal of individuation and also to establish there a total presence and jurisdiction.

On the other hand, the individual has the duty to renounce his discreteness and his “sense of shame”, to “admit” his sin that is *a priori* inherent to him. The term, “admit”, means, literally, that the individual must remove all impediments to and deliver over to the totalitarian power the “internal space” that he had taken and reserved for himself as an isolated and “discrete” being. This “internal expansionism” of the totalitarian state is a process that corresponds with imperialist expansion. Wherever totalitarianism exists, the individual is the first “occupied territory”. *Expansionism begins at home.*

“Integral impertinence” and “integral shamelessness” are therefore the correctives required by the state, which aspires to the totality, in order to implement its ideal of completed integrality.

And with this observation we have returned to our theme, since there is no measure or apparatus that is capable of providing a “rudeness” and a “shamelessness” of such perfection as the *surveillance devices*. Because they are the best self-correctives that could fall into the hands of totalitarianism, we called them *totalitarian devices* at the beginning of this section.

And these devices are not only characteristics of totalitarianism, they are also totalizing. This inversion has no fewer consequences than the thesis itself. That is: *As surveillance devices are used routinely, the main premise of totalitarianism is already created and, with it, totalitarianism itself.*

That is, it does not matter that State A uses these devices, because it is totalitarian, or that State B is totalitarian, because it uses these devices: the final result is the same, since tomorrow states A and B, insofar as they will unscrupulously use these devices, will become as similar to each other as twins, until no one will be interested in the question of which one was πρότερον and which was ὕστερον. A French proverb says: “To his children it is all the same whether a drunk is ill because he drinks, or drinks because he is ill.”

The same goes for us.

§ 4

*Examples.*

---

<sup>132</sup> These expressions are to be understood in their technical sense.

All the examples that I shall now provide come without exception from the United States.<sup>133</sup> We limit our review to these examples, because it is there—something that would not be possible in the explicitly totalitarian states—that the data pertaining to these devices is published and the problems and dangers entailed by their use are publicly discussed, both officially (in the State Judiciary Committees) as well as in newspapers, etc. That is, because the American data are more publicly available than the data from other countries.

I will begin with three examples, chosen at random.

1. Between 1940 and 1956, surveillance devices were installed in more than a thousand buildings in the City of Los Angeles, according to information provided in expert reports prepared by the State Judiciary Committee.

2. In 1952 (that is, six years after the end of the war), U.S. courts issued warrants to the police to engage in the surveillance of 58,000 persons, businesses and groups. This is not an unsubstantiated exaggeration, but a figure provided by Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.

3. The police forces are not the only agencies that engage in surveillance. Actually, they are responsible for the smallest share. In any case, it is officially estimated that “legal” surveillance (as long as this term is “legally” applicable) accounts for only one-fifth of all surveillance actually undertaken. Thus, in 1952, we encounter the impressive figure of 290,000 persons, businesses and groups that were *acoustically stripped naked*, that is, when they spoke, they were listened to or what they said was recorded. I said, “persons, businesses and groups”, because it is not just, for example, political or criminal suspects or those thousands of people among whom one would expect to be able to find perhaps a few political “culprits” or suspects of some other kind who are spied on and recorded, but also members of a political party who are spied on by other members of the same party, government officials spied on by other government officials, research institutes spied on by the military, businesses spied on by competing businesses, customers spied on by businessmen, businessmen spied on by customers, wives by husbands, husbands by wives and, finally, thousands of private persons and public officials by the so-called *snoopers* (that is, by blackmailers, who make a living by selling secrets or threatening to sell them).

And this figure of 290,000 suffices to prove that we are not just talking about political measures implemented here or there, or of a handful of curious scandals, but of the control of a broad sector of the population, of an *assault on privacy as such*. And this is all the more true insofar as this figure is far too low, since no one knows for sure nor can anyone really know whether *he, too* is a target of surveillance.

This not knowing is a factor of the greatest importance. From the times of the dictatorship we know that, from the moment when one *considers that it is possible or even only not*

---

<sup>133</sup> Note added in 1978: The number of such devices that exist in the world has multiplied since 1958; and their quality has improved enormously.

*impossible that one is under surveillance, one feels and behaves differently than one did before, that is, in a more conformist way, when not in an absolutely conformist way. The unverifiable possibility of being under surveillance has a decisive capacity for molding: it molds the entire population.*

The technology of surveillance is no less fabulous than its effects. A couple of reflections and some data will immediately confirm this.

1. Let's make it clear first of all just *what* is being recorded by way of telephone surveillance, by so-called [*wire-*] *tapping* or, at least, what can be recorded. We are not just talking about, for example (like a compromising clandestine photograph), a particular situation or conversation. Instead, once a surveillance device has been installed it can spy on *any conversation*; and not only any conversation that takes place explicitly over the telephone, but effectively any conversation that takes place in the room where the telephone is located, since maintaining a "live" line even when the phone is apparently hung up is a simple trick that children use thousands of times.

2. *The distance between the spy and the object of surveillance* has become irrelevant, and is effectively nullified as a factor. Today, a businessman in Seattle only needs to pick up the phone to listen to what they are saying in his New York branch office. That is, the *lines of communication*—more or less equivalent to the distance from Lisbon to Moscow—are *nothing* to him, since he can make one place appear anywhere else.

The "contraction of distance" is on everybody's lips today, but its philosophical meaning, the *ubiquity of man*, has yet to penetrate the consciousness of our epoch and, naturally, it has not penetrated the consciousness of philosophy, either, which is always behind the times. For some time now the spatial situation has been the *principium individuationis* and it has thus played a pragmatic role, that is: whereas previously one was not effectively where one was *not* and "being" had always meant "being in a certain place", now one can be in various places and virtually everywhere at once.

It will be objected: given that one is not shut up in the prison of one's limited spatial location, this "being everywhere" is proof of a new freedom, the freedom from distance; and, in a certain sense, this objection is not incorrect. Incomparably more important, however, is the counterargument that being everywhere entails as a consequence non-freedom with respect to what can be reached and what cannot be reached. *As long as the others are, like me, in a situation of being present in the spatial location where I find myself and, furthermore, they can do so without being observed, I have ceased to be the monopolist of my spatial location and thus I have lost the last and most formal minimum of my freedom. The others—and we must understand this expression as a technical term that refers to the currently prevailing person-to-person or state-to-person relation—have become unavoidable.*

At least as important as the tapped telephone are the *bugs*. This is what they call those tiny microphones that are secretly installed in houses in order to observe and record what takes place in them; or, more precisely, *they used to be installed* in houses, since over the last few

years the *breeding of bugs* has entered a new, truly triumphant stage.<sup>134</sup> For the disciplined little fellows it has even become unnecessary to infest houses, since now they have been taught to perceive and absorb a distant whisper from hundreds of meters away in order to record or retransmit it. That is, now the *bugs* can be installed *outside of* houses or, being invisible, even smuggled into them (the choices are endless), hidden on the bodies of the residents. If this type of bug, capable of spying from long distances, is so valued, it is because it seems to be capable of salvaging the morality of the epoch, as odd as that may sound. For it is evident that someone who wants to violate the domestic acoustic peace no longer needs to take the kinds of risks that were associated with traditional ways of violating the domestic peace; therefore, that *when he does something he no longer needs to do anything*, or at least nothing illegal.

Examples: on November 27, 1956, the president of Stephens Tru-Sonic, Inc., Bart Berland, testified before the State Judiciary Committee concerning a device that records conversations from a distance of five hundred meters. And another business owner declared to the same Committee that he had supplied the police with devices that were so small that he refused to discuss them in public session. Tape recorders, moreover, do not need to be any larger than a wallet. The *minifone pocket recorder*, produced in the Federal Republic of Germany, is even smaller; and in Chicago you can buy microphones disguised as pocket-watches.

Thus we arrive at an even more outrageous point, the topic of *availability*.

I say “outrageous” because the telephone surveillance devices, at least, can be obtained dirt cheap. The two pieces of equipment with which one can assemble a *complete wire tap kit* cost about nine and a half German marks (according to *Life* magazine, 1955), which is understandable, since all you need is an induction coil and an ordinary amplifier. It is incredible just how much progress has been made with respect to the *freedom of stealing freedom*. In the now bygone epoch when it was still unavoidable to have to break into houses that one wanted to put under surveillance in order to install *bugs*, *the tools needed for breaking into houses were sold alongside all the other kinds of tools*, and were even *standard accessories* in the cars produced in 1957. In a certain way, this seems “normal”, since without these preparatory tools the surveillance devices would have been useless, like a hook without a line. If we were to formulate this principle, the maxim that would be inscribed on the covers of these catalogs would sound like this: *If a commodity A, concerning which nothing can be said morally, is not usable without another commodity B, the latter’s sale and use is equally justified; for that reason, its use cannot be immoral.*

The dangers that accompany this spying, however, have not been fully enumerated with these examples, since it is not just the person who is spied upon who is in danger, but also the spy, who has become accustomed to indiscretion and who has acquired the taste for indiscretion.<sup>135</sup> I am not referring here, however, to a handful of police agents or detectives, whose job is to obtain access to the private lives of people under surveillance (which, all told, is usually unbearably boring, since to spy on someone without having the freedom to choose

---

<sup>134</sup> This was written in 1957. Since then, naturally, bugs have continued to evolve.

<sup>135</sup> See the next section, below, for a more detailed discussion of “shamelessness”.

the target of the espionage is not an enviable job), but to the *general public*, since today, in the era of reproduction, spying is a public affair, since any recorded conversation or discussion can be used as a matrix and reproduced in countless copies. Thus, for example, in California there is a flourishing black market in audio recordings, which, in an analogy with pornography, can be called “pornophony”: they are recordings of the words, sounds and murmurs that accompany the most intimate situations of human life; in a way they have transformed *the experience of being a Peeping Tom into a marketable object*. When the victims spied upon by the Peeping Tom are “public figures”, the price of this acoustic “nudity” naturally rises (since the mere *identification* of such nudity entails taking pleasure in another’s misfortune); and if these recordings contain intimacies that are considered to be prohibited (adultery, for example), the object is really considered to be a *rarissimum*, since it offers in addition *the pleasure of an opportunity for extortion*. We need not stress the fact that the opportunity to engage in extortion does not have to be taken advantage of in order to be enjoyed.

The fact that people, and even young people, are surrounded by this kind of commodity; that they can purchase the most extreme indiscretion; that they can learn to *take pleasure in the pleasure of others*; that *they enjoy sexuality indirectly by way of things and the defenselessness of those who are spied upon*: all of these things are so repugnant that, in comparison, the most vulgar satisfactions are simply the quintessence of probity and purity.

These few facts must suffice for now. Now we shall inquire about the reaction they have provoked.

It would be *unfair* to say that nothing is being done to stop this development. The irritation of some segments of public opinion is considerable. Legislators in various states are making serious attempts to discover just how widespread the acoustic violation of domestic peace is and to consider measures for dealing with this new situation; the press (of the parties) is debating the problem. A Supreme Court Justice like Oliver W. Holmes has openly expressed the view that (and these are his own words), “it would be better to let a couple of criminals go free rather than for the government to engage in such despicable methods”. The question is whether or not the oppositional forces *can be* successful. And it is fitting to ask this not only because the powers that have an interest in controlling the population (both political as well as economic powers) are enormously powerful; and not only because the population, to the extent that it does not directly support the destruction of its right to privacy, only puts up the most minimal resistance to this development; nor only because of the fact that because the devices are available already always implies that they will be used; but above all because the business of surveillance itself is almost completely beyond control; that is, because the use of its means can only rarely be proven; because anyone can abuse them. And, naturally, the state, every state, thinks that it cannot allow itself to renounce the use of these technical means, that private persons can use at will; and much less the police.

*One* solution, of course, has been proposed: the so-called Cahan Act. This Act seeks to legislate regulations concerning the following two things:

First, that it is not permitted to use information obtained by such methods as evidence in a court of law;

And, second, that the secret planting of *bugs*, that is, microphones, in other people's houses represents an act of breaking and entering a residence.

This solution certainly sounds more impressive than it really is, since the use of such information in court represents only one of the many ways such information can be used: in order to discredit a person, to ruin him socially, to ruin his career or to ruin him politically, to deprive him of his privacy, all of these things do not require, when all is said and done, any use of such information in a trial or courtroom.

And as for *bugs*: they are not prohibited by any legal code. What is prohibited, and is subject to punishment, is only their installation in other people's houses. As we know, however, such internal installations are no longer necessary. The solution, then, would operate in a vacuum, and would counteract a situation that is now a thing of the past, and in the meantime would leave unresolved at the legislative level the main question, which consists in unambiguously expressing the fact that the conventional concept and even the sufficient proof of "violating the domestic peace", which until now has been understood to mean the physical breaking and entering into someone else's house, is today insufficient. We shall therefore formulate the problem as follows: *Not only do the preparatory steps undertaken, that is, the installations themselves, represent a violation of the domestic peace, but so do the acts of surveillance themselves*, regardless of the alleged distance from which the acts of surveillance are performed, because anyone who listens from "outside" the house also penetrates *into* the domain of the other person, *into* his privacy and therefore *into* his home. But I said, "alleged distance", because these devices have no other purpose than to cancel out distances and to render this cancellation real, that is, to abolish the border between "outside" and "inside".

In view of the fact that our privacy has been destroyed by means of *bugs*, as if we were living in glass houses, in which we could be victimized by anyone (despite the fact that we would not be surprised by anyone), it is indispensable to introduce the concepts of the *acoustic violation of the domestic peace* and of *acoustic theft* as legal concepts.

We still have not adequately assessed the main deficiency of the Cahan Act, since this deficiency consists of a principle: it only considers use to be a "crime" and therefore it understands the concept of "use" too strictly. What does this mean?

A comparison:

If only "use" were to be punishable, no one would have a right to object if we were to take photographs of people when they are naked and who do not suspect that they are being used as our models. We would only be punishable at the moment when we sold the photos or were to use them in some other way. The decisive idea that the very act of secretly observing and photographing someone already represents a "use", that is: it goes unnoticed that the abuse of the privacy of another person constitutes a theft of his freedom. It is undeniable that this all-

too-strict interpretation of the concept of “use” is unsophisticated and vulgar. And this unsophisticated view can also be attributed to the Cahan Act.

We must furthermore add that the *object* of shame is characteristically lacking: the person who is ashamed is ashamed not because, or in any case not only because, his secret vices or transgressions are revealed, but because *he* is revealed. Whereas for him what is private is *off-limits*, because it is private, the vulgar unsophisticate, that is, the contemporary conformist, takes it for granted that *privacy is nothing but a pretext for the surveillance of prohibited activities*. The expression that one so often hears from the mouths of totally naïve Americans (for example, when they are told that they left their doors open)—*But I have nothing to hide*, proves that *shame* (in the sense of “having the need for shame”) *is now identified with immorality*, and *shamelessness* (in the sense of “not having the need for shame”) *is identified with morality*.

§ 5

*Naïve arguments.*

It would be wrong, however, to think that the only arguments are those made by people who oppose the use of surveillance devices. Those who have an interest in these devices by no means restrict their activities to selling or installing them. Sometimes, they even take specific measures to support them, at least when they feel threatened or provoked. It is undeniable, of course, that their reports in defense of surveillance devices are generally primitive, and often evince an astonishing degree of stupidity; we must not allow ourselves to be disarmed by this appearance, however. To the contrary, the dangerousness of an argument is proportional to its stupidity.

Let us begin with two of the most stupid arguments:

In the hearing held by the California State Judiciary Committee that we mentioned above, a business owner declared that surveillance with the proper instruments is, from a business point of view, of enormous importance, because thanks to the conversations that are recorded he knows just how much he needs to put on the market, thus enabling him to make rapid business decisions; *the prohibition of these devices would therefore represent an interference with business*. Since this statement does not seem cynical, it really arises from ingenuousness.

Another businessman—the owner of a company that sells surveillance devices—bitterly complained that his business would go from bad to worse if the Cahan Act were to be passed.<sup>136</sup> Any poisoner who was prevented from plying his trade would sympathize with this argument.

---

<sup>136</sup> If he were capable of *pathos*, he would have shouted: “Freedom is in danger! Oh, no, not just my freedom, but the freedom of the market! And so is the freedom of the person who buys what he wants with his honorably acquired money! Are we not all buyers and sellers?”



As we pointed out above, however, these are the most stupid arguments. Most often, it is admitted that a certain amount of danger exists in order to thus be able to minimize the real threat or for the purpose of continuing discussion of the issue with apparent remedies. The argument of this kind that is most often employed and which, in fact, always crops up, is: *The danger is averted when the devices are, without exception, in **authorized hands**, that is, in the hands of the police and the state.*

What can we say about this argument?

We shall, for the moment, ignore the fact that the implementation and maintenance of a state monopoly on such devices is hardly possible, since anyone can manufacture many such instruments and even technically illiterate people are capable of installing them.

Let us therefore assume the possibility of a state monopoly on surveillance devices. What would happen then?

Precisely *because the state will spy **ad libitum** on private persons, it will become an **unauthorized and illegal practice***, since it will be guilty precisely of the destruction of the freedom of the citizens, which it is the state's constitutional obligation to guarantee. Ultimately, this argument opens the door to any dictatorship, since it identifies state power and morality. It is easy to see just how much someone like McCarthy would have welcomed such a monopoly if he were to be able to become the dictator of the United States. Would the means he used perhaps have been *authorized* in such a case?

The degree to which the identification of "legal" and "moral" is taken for granted is exemplified in a special way by the police agencies, when they are ordered to account for their surveillance activities: "But everything was done according to the law!" they assured us again and again, since they really did not understand what "irregularity" could refer to, "Everything was done according to the law, since we have never worked without the authorization of the state!"

This argument is *totalitarian*, because the essence of the totalitarian state consists in the fact that it eliminates *the duality of "legal" and "moral"*. "You must not serve two masters."

The third argument, which is especially favored by private detectives, refers to the sacred character of private property. I shall quote the following example from an article written by people who work for the surveillance industry for the express purpose of presenting the business as innocent.<sup>137</sup> "But, please," this self-defense begins, "we only intercept the telephone conversations of a woman when we have been assured by every means that the telephone really belongs to the man who hired us to spy on her." This means, indirectly, that

---

Therefore, the freedom of all of us is in danger!" And he would have felt that he was issuing an exhortation to the whole nation.

<sup>137</sup> See H. E. M. Bernhard and H. M. Kean, "The Truth about Wiretapping", in *Pageant*, August 1955.

*they consider that every word spoken over this fragment of property called the “telephone” is the property of the owner of the telephone, it is a fragment of property that the owner can dispose of freely and of the ownership of which he can make other people participants at his discretion. If we were to replace acoustic disposal with optical disposal in this argument, it would sound like this: “But, please, I only saw and photographed the woman’s body when her husband hired me to do it and only when she was in bed, when I was positively certain that she also really belonged to him.” That is: the questions of shame and discretion are measured exclusively with the yardstick of “property”.*

Very closely connected to this argument is our fourth argument: this one refers to the method of confronting the accused with conversations that were secretly recorded that prove their guilt. “What progress!”, this argument proclaims. “Now, the malefactors *accuse themselves and prove their own guilt*, since the expressions that incriminate them are fixed in the form of objects and therefore are *objective realities*, and instead of being accused by others, everyone accuses himself!”

I would like to leave aside the fact that in the processing of magnetic audio recording tapes there is no limit to cutting and editing and therefore, to falsification; that only by eliminating the little word, “not”, one can put into the mouth of any suspect sentences that he never spoke or would ever speak. At this time I do not wish to consider this abuse, but rather the abuse represented by its use as such. This is terrible, because the accused, by way of the *thing* transformed into a confession, is cheated out of the possibility of an authentic confession and repentance, since these have been rendered superfluous.

Now, the possibility that someone would inculcate himself not by his own decision, but because of torture or coercion, is not properly in accordance with human dignity. Such a degradation of humanity, however, is always much less evil, that is, less hypocritical, than the method involving the thing transformed into self-incrimination.

As everyone knows, Saint Augustine portrayed the memory that reproduces the past as the vehicle for the discovery of sins, of conscience and of repentance. Today, this reproduction is unnecessary; in its place a device of reproduction has been installed that transforms the past into something reproducible and present at every moment, into something that properly does not belong to the past. *From the peccavi of the conscience, we have proceeded to the pecco of the audio tape, that is played back.*

The fifth argument is the argument based on intimidation and terror, with which we are sufficiently familiar due to our experience with the dictatorships: “Believe me, gentlemen: if someone feels uneasy because he thinks he might be under surveillance, essentially he is unlikely to do anything immoral.” In other words: *something immoral, spying, is transformed into a guarantee of morality.*

Even this argument, however, does not yet represent the high point, which is attained only when resistance against being spied on is considered to be a reason for suspicion, as a kind of self-incrimination against one’s own will. Here is the argument offered by an agent responsible for *wiretapping*: “Every now and then, a businessman would ask me: ‘Do you

think that *my* line is tapped, too?’ To which I would respond: ‘It is very interesting that you ask me that question. Do you feel guilty? If so, are you afraid that you have committed a crime?’”<sup>138</sup>

What this vulgar retort takes for granted is the notion that privacy consists exclusively in concealing what is prohibited; that *the fact that something is secret and private proves eo ipso that it is bad, since what is bad takes place in secret*. And with this observation we have come to our last and most decisive point:

The destruction of privacy is only fully depicted in our sketch when we include a *partner* for “shamelessness”: the *lack of shame*.

Let us assume that a population is composed of persons who are extremely discreet. Totalitarian espionage would be unbearable for such a society; “total shamelessness” can only function in such a society with the help of terrorist measures, since “total shamelessness” can only be achieved—or at least be realized without serious difficulties—if one is dealing with individuals who have undergone a certain amount of preparation, that is: preparation involving their not resisting being spied on and “not seeing anything particularly wrong with being spied on”.

Even this, however, is only a minimum condition, since what is ultimately sought is an individual who is tailored specifically for shamelessness, *whose hands are always on his zipper*, ready for pat-downs and searches. And only that person who has been won over to collaborate in this activity of depriving him of his own privacy and who does so “cheerfully”, is considered to be entirely perfect. *Integral shamelessness can only be successfully achieved when it is accompanied by an equivalent lack of shame that is equally total*.

This is easy to say, since we cannot be ordered to “succumb to a total lack of shame”, overnight, as it were, and without any preparation. Mastery in a trade does not fall from the sky; neither does a lack of shame. This is not achieved without hard work; I am referring to the fact that those who are interested in just such a transformation first have to strive *to make us lacking in shame*; their mission is to make us masters of the lack of shame. And, for their part, those who are interested in bringing this about can only fulfill this educational task *by changing the value* of the lack of shame. That is:

- a) if they make us realize that the lack of shame is a virtue;
- b) if they transform us so radically that we are incapable of living without this alleged virtue.

As bizarre as these conditions might sound, their realization is already underway in much of the world; in the United States the process of *the elimination of shame* is already almost complete. There is an abundance of examples that show that the American environment is shameless and, indeed, insolently shameless, that is, totally, for in its existence there is almost no situation that does not provide proof of this. *If there is anything that John is*

---

<sup>138</sup> See William L. Roper, “Wired for Sound”, in *Frontier*, 57.

*ashamed of it is that remnant of shame, which he thinks he has not yet definitively overcome.* Given that every issue of *Reader's Digest* or any copy of the *Digest of Digests* has inculcated in him the idea that to feel shame is a symptom of *introversion* (and therefore of “self-withdrawal”, in the sense of being “closed off”); and that this introversion is the sign of *inhibition*, of “repression”; and that all inhibitions lead eventually to *frustrated social adaptation*, that is, to defective conformation, his shame consists at most of a “potential shame”, that is: *the feeling of shame for still being capable of feeling shame*.<sup>139</sup>

This “potential shame”, however, is the last kind of shame, or *was* the last kind, since today no occasion ever arises for the display of such shame. It is hardly possible anymore to find remnants of shame, or of those who experience shame. Today *one no longer has any scruples* about demonstrating one's lack of scruples, that is, about disclosing everything to everyone. *Without even noticing it, the saying, “to each my own” and therefore, “everyone for me”, has replaced the old form, “to each his own”.* And if the contemporary American leaves his doors wide open—America is the country of open doors—he does so not in order to allow the meadow breezes to waft into his house or to give the neighbors an opportunity to trespass, but—for the love of God!—to avoid being imperceptible to his neighbors; and everyone does it. *Please have a look, for I have nothing to hide.* In other words: he feels that he is *universal property*, he behaves as if he belonged to everyone. And because he knows that if he does not behave that way, if he were to explicitly refuse to behave that way and even did so with a certain passion or, in any case, deliberately and often, he would be considered “rude” and suspicious. A couple of examples from America:<sup>140</sup>

1. Our *lives have become universal property*. It is considered normal to allow oneself to be asked about the most intimate things; and it is considered incomprehensible why one would not ask or allow oneself to be asked such questions.

2. Our *bodies have become universal property*. And, of course, especially its taboo zones; something that is naturally true, above all, of the female body. Any woman, as long as she does not want to be considered *funny*, submits to what in other times would only have been engaged in by prostitutes, if by anyone, that is: to allow her breasts and her ass to be measured in public and to allow these figures to be published with photographs.

3. *Sexual relations have become universal property*. Countless articles are published, even in popular magazines, about the joys and disappointments of the bedroom, in part written in a confidential tone as if offering friendly advice, as if they were addressed not to millions of people, but to me, and in part, in the style of *how to do it*.

---

<sup>139</sup> The reader will observe how naturally conformism and health are identified with each other in this case. This identification is structurally similar to that of National Socialism: the latter also identified political assimilation with belonging to the healthy race.

<sup>140</sup> I gathered most of the following examples from the domain that has always been the homeland of taboos and therefore of shame: sexuality. It is plausible that shame, if it were to disappear in America, would not be ashamed of disappearing anywhere else.

4. *Digestion has become universal property.* For example, when an ailing president was asked during a televised interview about how much he is bothered by diarrhea, not only was he not shocked, but he patiently responded to the question. And among the millions of witnesses who saw or heard this interview, there was not one to whom it occurred that, apart from the president's digestion, something else might not have been entirely in order.

As we said, along with these examples of massive, and due to their mass character, almost disarming deficits of shame, there is also a whole series of more indirect activities, "more cultured" and hypocritical, that could easily be analyzed as variants, in a way, as "shameful instances of a lack of shame".

5. Take *self expression*, for example. If a typical American is more scrupulous than the other average Americans; if he thinks that, for his social prestige, he has to find more individual and less conformist ways than those of his neighbors in order to renounce his individuality and to attain conformism, he resorts to one of the procedures (which the culture market places at his disposal) that teach him to "express" his personality and in this way to manifest himself and to make himself visible to others. In view of the fact that this field features an extraordinary abundance of methods that are available to achieve this end, which include everything from writing symphonies to cabinet-making, any average American can find his adequate *self expression*. In fact, thousands of people avail themselves of this abundant supply of procedures and one can actually speak of a *self expression racket*, and even one that is ingenious. This *racket*, however, is ingenious not only because it supplies every adept with "his" *self expression*, but above all because it gives each individual the unusual gift of a chance to be a hypocrite. For all *self expression* simultaneously satisfies two desires, desires that are even opposed:

First of all, it produces the satisfaction of *standing out from the crowd*, since this average American, as he "expresses himself", now belongs to the brotherhood of the *creative ones* like Michelangelo, Beethoven and Van Gogh;

Secondly, it acts as a *purgative*, it wards off spiritual ennui, prevents the buildup of any debris from one's private interior life and, in this way, keeps it from being vented in society. It is evident that each individual would be visible to every other individual and would fulfill the ideal of a lack of shame and the elimination of privacy if everyone would submit to this expurgation. That is why it is recommended that everyone should use it: not only artists, who might be able to transmit something really remarkable, but also little children, housewives, Grandma Moses or real estate agents, who might not have anything to do on Sunday and hence are exposed to the risk of becoming an original and therefore a non-conformist.

Finally, the average American can naturally always resort to *psychoanalysis*, or at least to its popular subspecies, since these are supplied to him as techniques of confession and social-hygienic self-abandonment, that is, as methods that "extrovert" him and thus enable him to socially adapt and conform.

What is true of *self expression*, that is, that it plays a double role, is also equally applicable to psychiatry. Its double role consists of:

a) procuring for every average American the satisfaction of participating in a *modern* movement, of being *up to date* and thus of causing his self-consciousness to increase;

and b) bringing about his *adaptation* and thus guaranteeing his conformism.

This contradiction is nothing new. Every fashion trend thrives on assuring a certain kind of appearance to a person, and at the same time, his conformity.

If the widespread popularity of psychoanalysis in America is considered from our perspective—that is, in the framework of “rudeness” and the “lack of shame”—the surprise that this popularity is possible “despite” its unsavory object and “despite” the country’s Puritanical past, is immediately rendered pointless (expressed again and again by the most diverse elements).

To the contrary: this widespread popularity is normal. In view of the fact that the advocates of conformism are the same ones that are fighting to reveal every secret and make everyone transparent to everyone else, to eliminate any sense of discretion as if it were an impediment and to condemn all privacy as treason; to allow no one to live behind shuttered windows and to leave nothing inaccessible to surveillance and, instead, to praise and reward all voluntary self expression as if it were an act of loyalty and health and even the source of happiness; that is, given the fact that it is these very people who organize the propagation and cultivation of the lack of shame, they would commit the most foolish sort of self-sabotage if they were to concede to the psychoanalysts fewer opportunities than private detectives, secret police and any other surveillance agency, whom they allow to work on behalf of the same goal. In other words: they happily assign to the psychoanalyst the job of collaborating to “make man shame-free”. Not only is it true that *It pays to be frank*; not only does *it pay to make others frank*, which can be confirmed by the fees of the psychoanalysts; but also: *It pays to have others made frank*.

If, over the last few years, it has been demonstrated<sup>141</sup> that, in the United States, psychoanalysis has been shamelessly assimilated into the American *way of life* and, certainly, into the conformist model of the last ten years and, in this way, betrayed its principles; having pointed this out, we still have not revealed the whole truth, since the truth will only be complete by adding that America uses psychoanalysis *for* the establishment of conformism.

Today’s “lack of shame” only acquires “meaning” when it is understood as the counterpart of “rudeness”. Given the fact that there is nothing that more effectively facilitates a robbery than the self-immolation of the targeted victim, the thief suggests to the latter that he should lay himself open to attack. Finally, his immolation is therefore an act of help provided to the theft, a method that is used by the thief to effortlessly transform himself into the master of his victim. *Every one of us has been assigned the domestic task of transforming ourselves, by way of the lack of shame, into collaborators in the destruction of our own privacy.*

---

<sup>141</sup> Most persuasively by Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*, The Beacon Press, Boston, 1955, pp. 238 *et seq.*

Naturally, this is not to say that we are generally aware of this fraud. To the contrary: if someone suggested to us that we should strip ourselves of the cover of our privacy or that we should take off our clothes, we would still be convinced that we stripped ourselves of these coverings ourselves. At most, it is only seldom that, by performing this assigned task, we have any idea that is what it is, an assigned task. We are often proud of our innocence and lack of concern, despite the fact that it is precisely by virtue of these attitudes that we are enabled to perform the task that we have been assigned. Soft totalitarianism likes nothing better than allowing its victims to have the illusion of autonomy or even instilling them with this illusion.<sup>142</sup>

Having said this, it is clear that anyone who perceives “rudeness” and the “lack of shame” as two separate processes deprives himself of the possibility of analyzing the universal function of the situation in which we live.

Just as these two processes cannot be separated, their subjects cannot be separated, either: *the spy and the exhibitionist*.<sup>143</sup> Rather, both types merge as *partners* in a single field of play, and even as interchangeable *partners*, for it does not matter who is at any particular moment in one part of the playing field. In fact, it happens every day that the players change their roles. No one would be scandalized or shocked if a television reporter, who yesterday caught one of his fellow reporters *in flagrante* during a convulsive fit and served him to his public as an object of amusement (that is, he unmistakably did so as an unmitigated act of “rudeness”), should today let himself go and make a fool of himself on the television screen (that is, he would now be found in the camp of the “shameless”). This exchange of roles of “spy” and “exhibitionist” is as natural as the exchange that takes place in a conversation between one who listens and one who talks. And I am serious about this comparison, because the “entertainment media” of mass society are really methods that help the members of this society to “entertain” themselves (in the sense of “conversation”). Therefore, just as we

---

<sup>142</sup> Furthermore, this is valid not only for soft totalitarianism, for the relation between “lack of shame” and “rudeness”, which we assert, is nothing new from the structural point of view. It corresponds to a relation that is familiar to us from the totalitarian dictatorships, that is: the relation between *terror and voluptis contritionis*. Everyone knows that in the political trials in Soviet Russia, there were always accused persons (among others, persons who were absolutely “innocent”) against whom it was unnecessary to exert pressure, because the accused themselves did all the work and incriminated themselves, and even did so with zeal and pleasure. To claim that there was anything mysterious about these “confessions” would be as foolish as a medical explanation of this behavior. It is rather explained by the fact that the accused had always been deprived of any private life, and therefore even *before the trial*, simply by virtue of the fact of their existence as Party officials for many years or even their entire lives; and this was so much the case that, despite the fact that now they were going to fall victim to the system of terror, they continued to function as positive parts of the system, that is, they automatically supported it. Their behavior only seems “mysterious” if one starts from the false assumption that the accused had inculpated themselves as individuals. But this is precisely not the case; rather, they continued to act as parts of the terror itself.

<sup>143</sup> I am using these terms in a broader sense than they are normally used.

- a. are beings who listen and speak; and
- b. we are *at the same time* beings who speak and listen; and  
we speak only *to the extent that* we also virtually listen (and vice-versa)  
we are also
  - a. “shameless” *and* “rude”; and
  - b. both of the above *at the same time*; and
  - c. shameless only *to the extent that* we are also virtually “rude” (and vice-versa)

The two figures, *spy and exhibitionist*, are therefore only modes or facets of the same figure, of the figure of contemporary man. That is why it is not strange, either, that the “shameless” at any given moment are never considered by the “rude” as “shameless” and that the “rude” at any given moment are never considered to be “rude” by the “shameless”; that both instead consider themselves reciprocally as normal, as *partners* in the game, as equal; and that their coexistence, from their perspective, leaves nothing to be desired.

Previously, in our enumeration of evidence for the lack of shame, we used the expression, *universal property*; for example, we called the life of the individual “universal property”.

This expression, insofar as it smacks of socialism, probably confused the reader. In reality, however, what should really shock us would be the claim that a country that combats all kinds of socialism practices a socialism *sui generis*. And it would be understandable if this expression were to be taken as a metaphor.

Nothing is farther from my intentions, however, than that this claim should be understood metaphorically. What I think is, in fact, that the situation to which conformism is tending represents a kind of universal property; it can even be said that *the development towards this universal property is led precisely by those who lead the struggle against socialism*. What do I mean by this?

In order to answer this question, we have to clearly distinguish between the variant of socialism to which we are referring and what is generally called socialism:

What the average American has to pay for this new kind of expropriation is not what is usually considered his *property*. Neither the sacrosanct character of his car nor that of the means of production, which could be at his disposal, must be touched. The “only” thing that must be taken from him is his *particularity*, his *personality*, his individuality and his privacy: *only himself*. Unlike the ordinary kind of socialization, which involves what the person *has*, here we are *only* dealing with a socialization of what the person *is*.



Up to this point, the idea does not involve any difficulty. It is, rather, the next step that sounds more difficult and even contradictory: the claim that this new type of socialization can only be justified by those who define the person with reference to the fact that he owns property, as *animal habens*; that at the basis of this socialization there is a secret *habeo ergo sum*. This step is also plausible, however, for only those who, in advance, have transferred the *being* of the person to his *having*, can be convinced that, if in the act of the destruction of the person he leaves his *having* untouched, he has also left his *being* intact. Only this conviction can preserve his good conscience.

We already know that his conviction and his good conscience are illusory. Naturally, what remains after this expropriation no longer represents a real person, a real individual. What remains is, rather, a being who is only “a self” and “one” in a numerical sense; a being, whose self-identity and whose non-interchangeable character are completely encompassed with reference to his possession of the things A and B and C, etc., while his neighbors possess the things A<sup>1</sup>, B<sup>1</sup>, C<sup>1</sup> or A<sup>2</sup>, B<sup>2</sup>, or C<sup>2</sup>, etc. (I am ignoring the fact that these things, in most cases, are equal, specimens of assembly line production).

This situation is anti-moral, for while the moralist properly claims that the right of man to be a property owner is derived from the fact that he is the owner of himself, that is, his own master, here on the contrary there is no longer any right except that of being an owner.

This situation, however, is normal for those who have been deprived of their rights. And even if the *have-nots* call *Mr. Smith, the \$275,000 man*, or *Mrs. Astor, the \$200 million woman*—something that is completely normal—this shows that even they, those who “are only little guys”, because they “only have a little”, have accepted the definition of man on the basis of capability of possessing.

I have to refuse to answer the question about how the situation described above can be resolved; and I must refuse for the simple reason that I am only noting symptoms and because it would be foolish to make proposals to cure these symptoms. There are no grounds for hoping for a patented solution against conformism as a whole, that is, against our entire current political-social situation.

What can be addressed, however, is *the question concerning what is the most shocking feature* of this variant of totalitarianism that we call “conformism”. The answer is as follows: the fact that it *is produced without the use of terrorism*.

And I am not being cynical. I just think that the absence of terrorism shows that today’s powers can allow themselves to renounce terrorism. And they can do so because their raw material, man, is today *already* processed; because we, the victims, *have already performed* our sacrifice—and not only the *sacrificium intellectus*, but that of our privacy and our autonomy—without recognizing it as a sacrifice. In short: because we, those who are spied on, are always accomplices of the spies, even before we are exposed to any actual espionage.

Today, where the authorities can renounce the resort to terrorism, their machinery functions without interruptions. And, finally, it even functions so perfectly smoothly and silently that

they can explain that their renunciation of terrorism—the symptom of fully realized non-freedom—is freedom and humanity, and proclaim that it is freedom and humanity.

“Coined money does not need to be coined”, as a Molussian proverb says.

§ 6

*Appendix: the “acoustic cord”.*

In the examination set forth above concerning the “acoustic theft of freedom” we restricted our efforts to proving that, insofar as we are under surveillance, we are no longer the masters of ourselves, but that we have become public property. This, however, only describes half the “acoustic theft of freedom”, for what has been stolen from us is not just our freedom to live *without being heard*, but also that of living *without hearing others*. What are we referring to?

Not just to the trivial fact that we are forced to live in an increasingly noisier world. Not just to the fact that we have to hear its noise, but also to the fact—and this is worse and incomparably more shameful—that this practical necessity is considered to be, at the same time, a *duty*; that we are required to hear this noise. Formulated differently: to the fact that the noise is not only a scandal, but that it fulfills a *function*, a mission: that of allocating to each his own in the process of the destruction of our right to privacy; that noise represents *one of the main instruments of conformism*.

This sounds strange, but we merely need to recall the role played by the practice of collectively listening to a certain kind of official speech in the years of the dictatorship, as it was considered to be a sign of loyalty to tune in to a speech by Hitler or Goebbels; and not just a sign of loyalty, but to reinforce that loyalty; and not only to reinforce it, but to make it effective. At the time, it really was a matter of duty to expose oneself to and to submit to listening to these speeches. On the other hand, this noise also had the function of subjugating and assimilating us and destroying our right to privacy.

What is true of that kind of noise is also true *mutatis mutandis* for almost any other kind. With this claim we are not assuming that there is a *mauvais genie*, an ingenious totalitarian psychotechnician, who has deliberately planned and organized the noise of the current world in order to subjugate us acoustically. Such an assumption might serve as an element in a Swiftian satire. The only thing that I am referring to here is the fact that, since it is there, the noise is introduced and utilized; and it is utilized as an *apparatus of hindrance*, as an instrument whose function consists in obstructing free movement and preventing us from pursuing our own paths, for example, as part of the campaign to discredit “introversion”. *Noise performs the role of a means to frustrate any possible real solitude.*

As we know, all monolithic societies (and not just the violent totalitarian societies, but also the soft conformist ones) must hold in an iron grip, *without any possibility of escape*, the individuals who comprise them; to force them into a condition of coexistence, that ties them with such an unbreakable power that it would never even occur to them to break free of this bond.

And society also produces this condition with the help of “acoustic submission”. From the moment when an individual is condemned to live in a world where *he has to hear* because no silent place remains, he has no recourse but to stay in this world, obey it or even become its slave. If man is denied the possibility of escaping from his acoustic accessibility and availability, he will soon also be deprived, that is, soon he will no longer be capable, of the possibility of escaping from accessibility and availability in general: accessibility and availability then become second nature to him. And finally, he will even participate in cultivating his own enslavement, so that he would feel lost if by some chance he were not accessible.

The fact that the acoustic environment should operate so smoothly; that it should stand out so clearly as an apparatus of submission is not surprising to anyone who has clearly understood the real philosophical basics concerning the faculty of hearing, *because the dimension of the acoustic is the dimension of non-freedom*. Insofar as we are listening we are unfree. To refrain from hearing is harder than to refrain from looking. And this fundamental difficulty is based on the fact that we have not been endowed with “ear-lids” [*Ohrlider*] or, to express it phenomenologically, on the fact that that, unlike the visible world, the auditory world can introduce itself into us without our permission, indiscreetly, rudely, without any need for our express consent and, whether we want it or not, it obliges us to participate. No one who listens to something is only where he or she is. Given the fact that the sound is somewhere else, where it is generated, and, at the same time, it is also where it is heard, it forces the person who hears it to be simultaneously in two places at once: despite being “here”, he is always also “there” and, in this way, he becomes a dependant and is bound.

Therefore, given the fact that to refrain from hearing something requires freedom, the capability to isolate oneself from one’s environment, a power of “negative concentration”, and given the fact that only few people possess this power, most of us are subjected to all the noise and, by reason of its continuous din and racket, we are prevented from ever being able to become ourselves. And with this, the ideal of the destruction of privacy in conformism is complete.

*To hear is to hear with*. Anyone, whether he wants to or not, who is found in the circuit of a particular acoustic world and hears it, since it is impossible not to hear it, finds himself trapped in the net of sound, he belongs to that world. There is a well-known radio magazine that, instead of the more direct invitation of “Listen!”, has chosen as its title the imperative of conformism, “Listen With Us!”. The invention of this title was anything but a mere accident. Rather, the creator of this title, whether he was aware of this or not, was only divulging a secret, that of conformism, since one of its tasks is precisely *to make us listen, since listening transforms us into conformists*.

Like little children we are tied to a cord, the *acoustic cord*. And we also behave like well-trained children. That is: we obtain our satisfaction within the confines of a horizon whose radius does not extend beyond that of the “acoustic cord”. And most of the time, we even enjoy being trained.

For, having become accustomed to this cord—and most of us are—what we experience on this restricted horizon is not just pleasure, but happiness. Those who walk about with their transistor radios show that they voluntarily bear this cord with them. The following example proves that they are seized by panic if the cord is ever broken.

About ten years ago I climbed Mount Washington with two American friends. From the loudspeaker of the hotel a melodramatic song rose up from the valley. I cannot forget that it asserted that only in Honolulu does love exist. Most crucially, it was impossible to escape from this music for hours. My companions did not understand why this made me nervous, since they found this circumstance not only not disagreeable but actually quite pleasant. Clearly, as they were listening to the music and found themselves “within” it, they felt an enjoyable sense of security: the feeling of still being “there”, that is, down below. They were like aviators who want to maintain reliable contact with their base. They had not yet gone out of range. The acoustic cord, which connected them to the valley, was not yet broken.

However, as I said, whereas this situation of walking up the slope while serenaded by this music was an unspeakable martyrdom for me, for my friends the irritation only began when the music stopped. *Sort of weird*, said my friend on my left, when we crossed the acoustic frontier and he had to listen very attentively in order to register the tenuous remnants of the song about Honolulu coming from the valley. *Why weird?*, I asked him, “Aren’t we finally in the open air?” “The open air?”, he repeated, shrugging his shoulders. *I would rather say*, my friend on the right said, *in a sort of social stratosphere*. And then, suddenly, he said: *Let’s get it over with as fast as possible*, which I did not understand, just as I did not understand the sudden vigor that both of them applied to our climb.

Shortly afterwards, the meaning of their words became clear, as well as the reason for their sudden burst of speed in climbing: suddenly we heard a new music; no, not just music, but the same bold monopolist assertion that love is only to be found in Honolulu. The voice, in an impudent higher scale, ascended above our heads towards Mount Washington to make its propaganda for Honolulu from the airy heights. In any case we had become enmeshed in the sound of the radio loudspeaker installed on the peak, which bathed the mountain in the radiance of an acoustic lighthouse. And the acoustic darkness, the nothingness, was left behind us.

Thus, we had by no means really been “outside”, really “in the open air”, or really “free”. Rather, we had only crossed the subtle acoustic line of the no-man’s land that existed between the two radio loudspeakers.

Once again, my two friends halted. *Wasn’t it like crossing a river?*, said the one on the left, turning as pale as the knight on the Bodensee. And the one on the right, with his face transfigured with relief: *Isn’t it nice to be **there** again?*

*Awfully nice*, I admitted, but only to get a little peace, since at that very moment I was exclusively occupied in submerging myself in the silence of that *there*, of that extraordinary *there*. Then I understood that my two friends were really only “there” at the moment when they were *there*, and that they were both “there” and “here”; and I understood that with that

*there* they had revealed the secret credo of conformism; the argument: “I am *here*; therefore I am *there*; therefore *I exist*.” And I experienced a vision.

As in an abstract painting I saw before me numerous circles, large and small, whose surfaces intersected and overlapped so that most of the points of the picture belonged to various circular surfaces at the same time; and there were only a few points that remained outside of the arc of any circle. It is unnecessary to explain this picture, for in accordance with the preceding account it is clear that the circular surfaces represent the domains covered by the loudspeakers; the intermediate spaces, the rare no-mans’ lands, one of which we had just seen; and that the whole was *the map, never before drawn, of the acoustic territory of unfreedom*.

It would be foolish to believe that such experiences can only take place in the United States and that only Americans are irritated by the “breaking of the acoustic cord”. Not long ago, in Upper Bavaria, something very similar happened to me. There, too, I had to walk quite a long distance to reach the region of silence. And there, too, among the few hikers I encountered, there were some who, even if unconsciously, avoided separating themselves from the acoustic cord that anchored them to the valley. The phenomena that I have addressed here are now global. They are the phenomena of the slavery of our times.

## Chapter 14

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF DEATH

(1979)

In the era of manufacturing there can be no events that are not manufactured, at least none that are not utilizable or, at the very least, that are not integrated into an event of production. The fact that there are still events that are just there  $\varphi\upsilon\sigma\epsilon\iota$  and do not serve as a material or source of energy (solar heat, for example, which radiates “uselessly” on everything) is today, for us, the most scandalous waste of all. In Molussia, shortly before the destruction of the city, a research group labored to discover whether the ongoing useless deaths of the citizens could not be transformed somehow into a source of energy.

Although we have not yet come to that point, it is not an exaggeration to say that fewer and fewer of us simply die from old age or exhaustion of our vital powers. Simple cases of dying are rarities from another era. Most of the time, *death is produced*. *One is killed* [dies passively]. Our contemporaries are not mortal; rather, above all, we are murderable. When we are not killed by napalm, radioactivity or gas—in fact, those who were gassed were no longer the squandered dead, their corpses were not “useless”—we are concentrated in chrome death factories. We are not killed in these places, of course (to the contrary, our death is delayed by way of an astonishing apparatus of manipulation); during this postponement, however, we are so strictly inserted into the apparatus that we become part of it, our death becomes part of the functioning of the apparatus and our death becomes a momentary event

within the apparatus. In the intensive care unit of the Molussian city of Vaslegas these apparatuses are connected to *sound tapes* that—we need not complain about the lack of spirit or culture of our era—automatically, at the moment someone dies, begin to play the first five movements of Chopin’s funeral march.

## Chapter 15

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF REALITY

(1960)

*Theses for a symposium on the mass-media*<sup>144</sup>

#### I

My proposed theme is the other side of the theme of “tendentious art”, since the object of my inquiry here is not how we have to or how we can create art to influence the masses, but to the contrary: how can we create art at all, now that we are confronted by the effective mass influence that is currently attributable to radio and television, for example, or by the influence of the “effect of mass phenomena”? To what extent do we create art in a different way than we did in the past?

The question cannot be answered directly, because first we have to ask: how does mass influence, or influence by way of the masses, operate? Do we go directly to the masses? Is it not rather our messengers, that is, our products, that go directly to the masses, while we, on the other hand, are only confronted by the enormous apparatus of reproduction? And is it not the case that the masses themselves are presented to us also in the form of products, that is, in the form of radio broadcasts, films, television shows, magazines, etc.? And are these same products not in turn means of production, since they co-produce the specifically mass character of today’s society? None of these questions has to be answered here, but I have posed them to counteract the illusion that we can immediately devote ourselves to the theme of “The artist and society” and that this theme can be directly discussed. These relations are even more mediated, however, since our production is co-determined and, therefore, co-produced by those mass products (which, for their part, have co-produced the mass character of the masses); and given that we form part of those who by way of their products have co-produced these masses and their real or alleged mass demand, as producers we are also the *products of our own products*.

#### II

---

<sup>144</sup> Presented at the Berliner Komödie, November 20, 1960, under the title, “Mechanical Infantilization”.

The fundamental problem is called reproduction, not the masses. *Anyone*, as is the case here, *who speaks against so-called mass taste always exposes himself to the risk of being labeled anti-democratic*. This is true precisely in the domains of “soft terrorism”, under which conformist society lives. Nothing pleases the anti-democratic producers of opinion more than to condemn the critique of the *mass-media* as elitism. My critique of culture has also been subject to this accusation. The massive supply of goods of reproduction has its effective *raison d'être* not, for example, as those who would like us to believe in order to justify themselves, in the “equal rights of all to culture”, but rather in the possibility of the producers to sell a single cultural product a thousand times; or, expressed cynically: in the *product's right to be bought*. Today's so-called “cultural pluralism”, which is so smugly assumed to be based on social-ethical foundations, is instead based primarily on something else, that is, on the right of all commodities to have the same chance of being sold. Van Gogh's sunflowers are disseminated in the same way as *Williams Soap Flakes*: they have filled the plains of America and have even spread to the bathrooms and porches of houses in the provinces. It is not impossible that one of the seeds of these sunflowers might germinate, although it is not likely, since the soil of the garden dedicated to culture does not consist in unique products; not even one particular sector is culture; rather it is an entire lifestyle; a style that only in a secondary way also affects the products. Those who express their concern for the *cultural sector* (as is demonstrated in the names of certain radio and television programs) identify themselves as barbarians because they are concerned about the cultural *sector* and because, by thus isolating this sector, they reveal that they assume that human life is primarily pre-cultural.

### III

The main category, the principal destiny of our current existence, is called the *image*. By *image*, I mean any representation of the world and fragments of the world, whether photographs, billboards, televised images or films. *The image is the principal category, because today images are no longer also present in our world as exceptions, but we are instead surrounded by them* and exposed to a constant torrent of them. Previously, there were *images in the world*; today, what we have is *the world in the form of an image* or, more precisely, the world *as image*, as a wall of images that endlessly assaults and captivates our gaze and covers the world. It is clear that, if the number of images (that are not only presented to us, but imposed on us) is increasing so excessively, this quantity is transformed into a quality. This does not necessarily mean that the images are or can be worse than they were before, but that each image, even if it were only one among millions of others, acquires a different function than it previously performed. When Tommy asked his mother, when she turned off the television, how they made darkness and silence in the old days—before the invention of the radio and the television, and therefore before they had any other, old-fashioned way of producing darkness and silence—he revealed the essence of our era, since he showed that the reproductions that are delivered to our homes (whether they are “works”, alleged reproductions of the world, “direct images” of actual events, or models supplied for conformation) are no longer islands in the environment of everyday life or silence, but rather the contrary: silence and the absence of images have become gaps and holes in the *continuum* of the world of the image. Expressed in terms of *Gestalt* psychology: figure and ground have

exchanged places, that is, the figures have degenerated into mere ground (*background music*).

The reality of the current production and consumption of images—since they constitute the main portion of our consumption—is so extensive that its discussion cannot be carried out in the limited framework of the theory of art. Previously, we could understand the image as the preserve of art; today, however, we cannot understand it that way, since everything, including the real, is presented first as an image, up to the point that *the world without its reproductions would seem like an empty world*. The world has become so large, unintelligible and opaque, that it renders models necessary and causes its images to prevail over its own reality, since the faculty of our eyesight is not equal to the scope of the world; even with respect to knowledge and understanding we need the assistance of the media of appearances. The fact that even understanding presently demands the media of appearance, the establishment of a world of images, has now created an enormous opportunity for deception. Today, as artists, we have to ask: how does art (which had previously enjoyed an almost exclusive monopoly on the production of images) take place in a world that other powers have largely transformed into a universal world of images? Thus, for example, the “absence of art objects” [abstraction] is, among other things, also a reaction against the conversion of the world into images that has been carried out by these other powers.

#### IV

What effects can be attributed to the fact that the *image* has become the principal category of our lives?

1. *We are deprived of experience and the ability to form an opinion.* Given that we cannot know by way of direct sensory apperception, but only by way of images, the vast horizon of the world, “our world”, real and actually present (for it is the “real” that concerns us and upon which we depend), *what is important comes to us precisely in the form of appearance and phantoms*, that is, in anedulcorated version, when not even an unreal one: not as “world” (one can only appropriate the world by means of travel and experience), but as an *object of consumption* that is delivered to our homes. Anyone who has ever consumed a freshly served nuclear explosion as an image delivered to his home, that is, in the form of a moving picture postcard, will, whenever he hears anyone talk about the nuclear issue, associate it with this event that he saw at home on a miniature scale and, in this way, he will be deprived of the ability to understand the question and to take an adequate position with regard to it. What was supplied to him—and certainly in a liquid state, that is, in such a way that he can immediately swallow it—renders a confrontation impossible, because such a confrontation would be superfluous. Most of the time, the desired position is even amicably supplied at the same time as the image; few things are more characteristic of today’s broadcasts than the liberal domestic supply of applause. At bottom, there is no longer any external world, since the latter *is no longer anything but an occasion for a possible domestic representation*.

2. *We are deprived of the capability of distinguishing between reality and appearance.* When the appearance is presented in a realistic way, as so often happens in both radio and television broadcasts, reality acquires to the contrary the aspect of appearance, of a mere



*exhibition*; if the theater (which in theory signifies the world) is presented as the world itself, the latter is also transformed into theater, that is, into a mere *spectaculum*, that does not have to be taken so seriously. In this sense, all *conversion of our lives into images is a technique of illusionism*, since it gives us and must give us the illusion that we are viewing reality. The impression of spectacle, which reality produces when it is televised, has a *rebound effect*, since it contaminates reality itself: the fact that only recently Kennedy and Nixon wore makeup for their televised debates proves not only that the public expected both of them to put on a *show*, but also that both of them considered themselves to be actors, who were competing with the television stars, and that their effective political chances depended on their talent in putting on a *show*. Thus, not only is the appreciation of reality on the part of the public hardly serious; reality itself is not so serious, either, since it must take images into account. The world becomes a “representation”, but in a sense that Schopenhauer certainly would never even have imagined. Strictly related to this:

3. *We configure our world according to the images of the world: inverted imitation.* Given that there is no image that, at least potentially, does not act as a model, we actually mold the world in the image of its images: today, any Johnny kisses like Clark Gable. Thus, reality becomes the *image of its images* (not the image of the ideas, as in Plato, for example).

4. *We become “passive”.* Because of continuous supply we are transformed into continuous consumers. Whereas, for example, when we are reading we are still autonomous, that is, we can return to previous pages and determine for ourselves the rate at which we assimilate the contents of the book, now, as a public that listens and watches without pause, it is as if we were on a moving walkway; by consuming, we must also consume the rate of supply at the same time. This was, of course, always valid for the public of the theater and concerts, but today it has become a destiny, because spectacles are displayed without pause and, due to this lack of a pause, they channel our lack of autonomy.

To put it another way: *man’s relation* [with the world] *is becoming unilateral.* Since we are accustomed to see images, but not to be seen by them; to hear people, but not to be heard by them, we are becoming accustomed to an existence in which we are deprived of half of our existence as persons. Anyone who only listens, but does not speak and, basically, is not capable of replying, not only becomes “passive”, but also a “slave” [insofar as he only listens] and unfree.

5. This loss of freedom is produced in such a natural way that now, unlike the slaves of the fortunate past, *we are even dispossessed of the freedom to be aware of our lack of freedom.* For “slavery” is shipped to us at home and served to us as a commodity of entertainment and comfort. And one would need an absolutely uncommon kind of sovereignty not to understand this comfort as freedom.

6. *We are ideologized,* because today’s images constitute our present-day ideologies: the representations of images must transmit to us an image of the world or, more precisely, *the sea of individual images must in every respect prevent us from forming an image of the world and from becoming aware of the absence of an image of the world.* The current method, with the help of which understanding is systematically hindered, does not consist in supplying

very little, but too much. The supply of images (advertising), in part free and in part even unavoidable, rules out the possibility that we might ourselves conceive an image: we are flooded with an abundance of trees to prevent us from seeing the forest. Today's ignorance is produced by way of the multiplication of what appears to be the stuff of knowledge. The less we have to become involved with decisions that are really of some importance to us, the more massively are we "implicated" in things that do not really affect us at all, for example, in the woes of Iranian empresses. The thousands of images conceal the context of the world, all the more so by virtue of the fact that every image—including every scene of our weekly reality that only lasts a minute—is fragmented, that is, we are *blinded with respect to causality*. Given that the images do not show contexts, but only "this thing and that thing", we are transformed into purely sensory beings; and this triumph of the "senses" is incomparably more sinister than the below-the-waist, Lolita-type sensuality.

7. *We are mechanically infantilized.* In the same way that nursing babies cling to the maternal breast, we are attached to the inexhaustible breasts of the machines, since every consumer need as well as everything that is imposed on us as a consumer need—the world (as well as the so-called "world of art")—are served to us in a *liquid state*. That is: we are not actually served, but are supplied so directly that the product can be simultaneously *used* and *consumed*; and since the product is a liquid, it disappears as soon as it is consumed, that is, it is *liquefied*. The "fragments" (a misnomer) that are supplied are as unlikely to coagulate into objects as mother's milk is to coagulate into cheese or butter between the act of supply and absorption; we have already internalized them even before we have a chance of examining them or even understanding them. Today, the model of sensory reception is not, as in the Greek tradition, sight, or even, as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, hearing, but *eating*. We have been plunged into an *industrial oral phase*, in which the cultural pap slides smoothly down our throats. In this phase, what is supplied does not even have to be perceived, but only absorbed. What the *background music* demands of us (ninety-nine percent of the music played on the radio and television is, or is in the process of becoming, *background music*, for *c'est la situation qui fait la musique*) is no longer that we should listen to it, but only that it should be there, because without it there would be an unbearable vacuum. The supplied commodity is, for the listener, "air"; and this in a double sense: 1) it is something he takes for granted; but 2) without it he cannot breathe. This kind of destruction, the self-liquidation of the object, is not a special feature limited to radio and television, but is characteristic of all current production as such. In the United States, they are now talking about the principle of *planned obsolescence*, that is, of the principle of producing products in such a way that they do *not* endure as objects. And this is quite understandable, since it is in the interest of production to dispatch a product B as rapidly as possible after product A, which can only be done if product A is made in such a way that it is consumed as soon as it is used, that is, that it is liquidated as soon as it is supplied. This principle has encountered its most perfect realization (up until now) in radio and television.

8. *What is supplied is edulcorated* [it is deprived of its bite]. Since the commodity must be consumed by the greatest possible number of consumers, it must have *mass appeal*. It is clear that this is valid above all for the motion picture industry and television. It will be objected, however, that this does not apply to radio, since we have the freedom to adjust the cultural spigot, of changing it to hot, cold or even avant-garde; that is, we can choose who or what

must fill our living space with their song. It is true that in radio and sometimes even in television, avant-garde, that is, actually esoteric, productions sometimes play a certain role; but we must ask ourselves just what function is performed by such avant-garde broadcasts, insofar as they always come to us as supplied commodities and no longer have anything about them that smacks of risk or conspiracy. The answer: these cultural productions are *edulcorated* (and this applies even to the fragments that kindle great hopes and are presented in their entirety). For by the very fact that they are supplied, they are inserted into the category of the familiar, even before we, the public, get to know them; before we can take a position with respect to them. Today, conformism even gives non-conformism a chance: given that the latter is dispatched to the right wing and the left wing, in a way, in the same package as any respectable commodity or any entertainment or the everyday predigested world, we absorb the non-conformist presentation not with a confrontational attitude, but as consumers who are swallowing what is supplied to them, regardless of whether its taste is perhaps somewhat bitter or unidentifiable. I use the term, “edulcorated”, because it is part of the essence of art to be in opposition, that is, to present a different “world”. Even academic art minimally partakes of the character of opposition, upon which such art confers a beautiful appearance, since this appearance is also an isolated fragment that interrupts or denies what is real, amidst the real; and, on the other hand, even naturalism, since it depicts the world in a different way than the image of the world—which we are accustomed to or which is imposed on us—affirms what is real. Since the avant-garde can sell all its contradictory assertions about the world to this same world and is not infrequently imitated by the latter, it often runs the risk that its works, even when they are intended to portray the truth and are presented in such a way as to be faithful depictions of the truth, are drained of their vitality by the time they reach their audience. It is just as if the anarchists were asked to sell their bombs, and then these bombs were to be used to set some staged fires for mass consumption, as entertainment for the population. And because that is the way things are, *today the real avant-garde artist has to conceal himself in the non-appearance of everyday language*. In Brecht we read: “From new antennas the old stupidities came/Wisdom was passed mouth to mouth.” And even new things that are sensible can become old stupidities by being disseminated like old stupidities through new antennas.

Or, expressed in sociological terminology: everything can be massified, even the esoteric and the productions of the avant-garde. *Why don't you join our intimate candlelight chamber music club? Millions joined it!*, one heard in 1947 on American radio. Thus, the difference between exoteric and esoteric has been absorbed in the exoteric itself. Or, in economic terms: those interested in the production of consumer goods have successfully absorbed, that is, “consumed”, the anti-consumerist difference between non-consumption and consumption. We have now reached the point where consumer goods, for the purpose of being sold, are praised as non-consumer goods.

## V

One of the tricks that are mobilized in an attempt to counteract the appearance of the political or economic dispossession of freedom, or to actually make it invisible, consists in destroying all taboos in the “sectors” that are politically and economically indifferent. This is just as applicable to the news programs (which, proud of their freedom from prejudices, provide

information concerning the president's digestion or the menstrual cycle of the wife of the *president elect*) that shamelessly transgress all the bounds of discretion, as it is to the programming that is labeled as works of art. This is all the more easily accomplished given that 1) one of the foundations for the maintenance of taboos is a class that sets standards, a class that does not exist today; 2) over the course of the last few decades, in dictatorships and wars, all taboos have been violated and, furthermore, they have been violated so systematically that these violations are no longer considered to be violations; and 3) except in the few remaining religious groups, no absolute is any longer recognized that could figure as a sanction for the status of any taboos. To summarize: as a compensatory substitute for the taboos imposed by political conformism, which do not tolerate any contradiction, delightful replacement zones are now open to public use, for those with a taste for scandal, where one can, or even must, superimpose the forms of B. B. [Brigitte Bardot] or Lolita. *In this domain, prohibitions are prohibited: taboos are taboo.* With respect to every freedom of this type we should ask ourselves: what other freedom, one that is not conceded to us, has to be suppressed by way of this permission to violate taboos?

This decomposition of taboos has a direct impact on everything related to today's theatrical productions, which also naturally include the film industry and radio and television broadcasts. *Today's theater lacks tension*—a lack that is universally lamented—*because there are no more taboos.* For the original tension of the spectator and the reader was always the tension felt by the prospect of the violation of an acknowledged taboo that was recognized as absolute; as if, for example, the play or the book might show Oedipus really sleeping with his mother. When this lurking fear relating to the possible violation of a taboo no longer exists, there is no longer any tension, not even the kind that just keeps you on the edge of your seat as you wait to see what comes next, which is the pleasant variety of this tension; and then a leaden boredom descends upon the spectator. From the historical point of view, the transformation of contemporary theater into epic theater has something to do with this end of taboos, since this epic theater consciously accepts the consequences of this development and renounces tension.

This could certainly happen at any moment, if we were to have the courage to violate those taboos for the preservation of which the others are being destroyed, that is, if we were to have the courage to violate the political taboos. I cannot recall ever seeing the Gessler scene<sup>145</sup> performed in a contemporary play, in which an actor would have dared to refuse to salute a political leader for having participated in the crimes of the Nazis. With this final observation I am certainly violating a taboo, but we are convinced that, with such a scene, tension would once again return to the theater.

## Chapter 16

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF FREEDOM

---

<sup>145</sup> Gessler is the tyrant in Schiller's *William Tell* (1804): it was Tell's refusal to salute Gessler in the square at Altdorf that led to the test to which William Tell was forced to submit.

§ 1

*Neutralization of the difference between interpretation and factum.*

It cannot be denied that, in today's mass societies, most people are molded by the mass supply of products and by the pressure of the *mass-media*. This fact is not only affirmed, but above all practiced (by unpopular cultural critics): and especially by the suppliers themselves, who, in order to meet the challenge of taking advantage of man's capacity for being deceived and manipulated, that is, to meet the challenge of transforming a "bad customer" into a good customer, donate vast sums to research institutes for the systematic study of this capacity for being deceived.

It would be childish to believe that the process of production would find its purpose in what is generally understood to be its purpose, that is, the production of material products. Instead, the process has three phases.

Given that every finished product, in order to be utilized and in order to continue to be utilized, requires certain needs, particular forms of behavior, a particular lifestyle (not to speak of particular acts of manipulation), is at the very moment it leaves the factory obliged to make a "leap", that is, to *transform itself immediately into a means of production*, despite its quality as a product. That is, it must transform itself into an apparatus whose mission consists in creating, in turn, the need required for its use and the lifestyle required for its continued utilization. At the same time, however, it creates this kind of need in order to produce something that produces, that is, to provoke or to render necessary the need (now called "demand") to produce again, every day, the same or increased level of production.

Considering that, having said this, the entire scheme of production is laid bare, it is easy to determine the locus of our investigations: the latter refer exclusively to the second phase, that is, to *the production of man by way of products*, to his configuration as a being that is in accord with the products.

Because most products are commodities that are mass-produced, they transform those who use them in the same way they are produced, and thus homogenize them, and therefore turn them into masses. *The mass commodity produces standardized mass style*. This thesis is valid despite the fact that most of the millions of consumers are "hermits",<sup>146</sup> solitaries who (sitting in front of their radios or their television screens, for example) have few reasons or occasions for gathering together as masses. And this thesis is valid despite the fact that actual physical massification, which in other times had briefly assimilated men, occurs today much less often than it did in the epoch of totalitarianism, when people were crowded together in masses (at the Nuremberg rallies, for example) in order to frighten them with the experience of their

---

<sup>146</sup> See *The Obsolescence of Man*, Vol. I, Chapter entitled, "The World as Phantom and Matrix", § 8.

own existence.<sup>147</sup> And it is valid despite the fact that today this massification is not even desired by and is even superfluous for those who lead the masses. The thesis, “the mass commodity produces masses” is valid, then, for the millions who, separated as solitary individuals, have to be deprived of power, but must be, as assimilated persons, entirely controllable.

Thus, what molds men are products, things. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that today *customs are determined and imposed almost exclusively by things*.

Of course, this might sound strange, because we are accustomed to using the word *customs* to designate the system of the *forms of behavior* (considered and expected to be habitual and adapted) *affecting relations between man and man, not between man and thing or between thing and man*. But this system is no longer in force. The determinant factor is, rather, the fact that *the products have taken the place of our fellow men*; therefore, also the fact that they mold the way man behaves with man. The fact that the motorbike or the television set or the world of phantoms that is shown every day on the screen has an impact on our behavior vis-à-vis these products is only one characteristic aspect of our current situation; another aspect is the fact that these products (or their possession) also collaborate in the molding of the forms of behavior with our own kind, whether our mother, the teacher or the *girlfriend*. To the extent that we have a code of conduct today, it is dictated by things. And social life, which takes place within the world of products, is a life molded by that world of products. As proud as Social Psychology may be of its “discovery” that the “individual” does not exist, it is an inadequate knowledge, since “social man” does not exist, either, but *social man only exists within the world of production and of products. That is why a representation of the human soul must be manufactured within the world of products*; the description of the transformation of the soul by way of products; the representation of the “forms of behavior”, which are configured between man and product (or, more precisely: between product and man). Only within this framework can there be a Social Psychology, although properly speaking it would only be an adjunct to this new discipline, for what is your neighbor compared to your refrigerator? And what friend from the club would you choose and care for with the same attentiveness that you devote to your car?

Among the *finished commodities* that, supplied *en masse*, transform us into mass-beings, opinions or judgments also form a part, of course, and are called “prejudices” in their ready-to-consume form as finished commodities. These are delivered to us the same way as the other commodities; indeed, they are cheaper. And since we are accustomed to content ourselves with ready-to-consume commodities, we consume them, too, and therefore we transform ourselves into *consumers of opinion*. Anyone who, seeking to bring this thesis

---

<sup>147</sup> Note added in June 1979: If television-viewing humanity reacted ambiguously (in part horrified, in part enthusiastic) when faced with the effective physical massification of real masses during the Pope’s visit to Poland, this is because it had become accustomed to the fact that the mass-character was merely its own quality (of the mass hermits). In fact, this shock provoked by seeing the masses as a quantity of persons (instead of a mere quality of persons) was not experienced by real masses, but by millions of consumers sitting alone or in pairs in front of their television screens.

down to earth, objects that it has always been like that and that, when all is said and done, there have always been “ideologies”, is oversimplifying the issue. To call the opinions and judgments that are supplied today, “ideologies”, is to confer too much honor on them. Apart from their fraudulent purpose, ideologies were always theoretical constructs, and even systems, that were claimed to interpret (in this respect, just like philosophy) the *totality* (of the world, of society) and that sometimes (when attempts were made to adapt the system to new facts that were not foreseen by the founders of the ideology) even required a certain degree of mental autonomy. Of this kind of ideology, there is no sign today. The *images coming from all over the world* that are ceaselessly transmitted to us have nothing to do with what were still called, only fifty years ago, *images of the world*. Now they are always only single trees, not the forest; they do not attempt to offer an image of the world nor do they require any understanding; to the contrary: their goal is to squelch any possible understanding of the world by means of their meaningless abundance. We only have to *consume them* and allow ourselves to be molded by way of their consumption; and to do so in such a way that we will be hungry for more of the same.

Everyone knows that opinions are supplied today the same way as any other finished commodity. What is not so well known is that this is how contemporary democracy is being deprived of its basis; and that this is how the underdeveloped democracies (Germany, for example) are deprived of the possibility of further development. Furthermore—and this is not very widely known, either—it is true that anyone who admits that opinion is configured in this way (that is, admits that the freedom to configure and have one’s own opinion in general is suppressed by this configuration) also admits the non-existence of the freedom to *express one’s opinion*; he therefore concedes that, as a result, this second freedom becomes vain, that is, a purely verbal ideal. In a secret Molussian report it says: “It does not matter whether someone who is expressing himself thinks that his expression is his own *bona fide* expression, or even if he asks himself ‘is this my opinion or not?’, or even if he does not even understand the question; in any case, what is not permitted is that what he expresses should be *his own opinion*; it must always be a *supplied opinion*. Even when it seems to be advisable to allow variations, they must be predictable variations on the pre-established theme.” This means: in such cases both the “*authorized angle of divergence*” and the scope of the variation that must be taken into consideration must be supplied conjointly.<sup>148</sup> Or at least it is justified to say that the tendency is proceeding in that direction. The faith that, with regard to decisive problems, the points of view *of the people* must be expressed is naïve, despite the fact that, naturally, no other faith is so widely shared; and it is propagated precisely by those powers and groups that effectively produce and supply us with our “expression” and that in fact have something to do with our decisions, since their operational principle consists in selling to the population the decisions that concern it, with the help of the *mass-media* they have at their disposal, and doing so in the same way that any business sells its commodities to its

---

<sup>148</sup> The fact that the greatest variety exists in culture does not constitute an argument against this thesis, for it is part of the essence of soft dictatorship to leave spaces (pressure valves) for non-conformists; of course, it is also part of the essence of the soft dictatorship to decide which spaces can remain free to perform the role of such “pressure valves”. In poetry one is permitted to say more than in ordinary prose works, especially because the number of readers of poetry is minuscule.

customers, as if what was supplied was always the satisfaction of something desired, *as if the orders to buy were supplies made in response to a demand*. That is: in order to dictate you have to make it understood that you are compromising or, even better, that you have absolutely no other desires than those of the customers (who, naturally, have for some time now *been deprived of their right to desire*).

In fact, one aspect of the image and of the code of conduct of the contemporary power elite is *to refrain from the conspicuous display of wealth*; that is, to deprecate its power position, to make it seem as if, instead of *the power elite*, the customer is the master, and that all the power elite does is serve the customer. Those who engage in propaganda are increasingly more prone to use a vocabulary of banalization, that is, one that pretends to be humble as if it were your next-door neighbor talking; it is concerned with making its whole way of presenting itself (instead of the truth: “My desires must be yours!”) say “I do not know any other desires than yours!” In the secret Molussian report cited above it says: “If you want to stay on top, humble yourself! Make it clear that you are nothing special, but just one of them. No better than them in any way (nor any worse, either). And be sure to make them see that you smoke the same brand of cigarette as they do. Then they will trust you. And you can go right over their heads and make decisions without their interference.”

Two neutralizations are characteristic of this situation:

Above all, it is plausible that if decisions have to be supplied as “desired decisions”, the interpretations of these decisions also have to be supplied in a finished form just like the decisions themselves; therefore, it is plausible that an integral component of the decision is *how* it must be interpreted; and furthermore, that the interpretation is also prepared in advance and supplied immediately together with the decision. However—and with this we formulate an essential neutralization of the conformist situation—this means:

*“There can be no difference between ‘facts’ and their ‘interpretation’.* This difference must be annulled or concealed.”

This principle is strictly applied. Interpretations are never presented *as* interpretations, never *as* points of view, but always *as* facts. The model is the newspaper, *Bildzeitung*.

This neutralization is of decisive importance, for it reveals the totalitarian nature of this mechanism. It is “totalitarian” because when decisions or events (called “facts”) are furnished in advance with a particular slant, the same interpretation is assured of being disseminated everywhere; for in this way no one could ever entertain the idea that this was a mere interpretation or that there might be other interpretations or, even better, that “interpretations” even exist at all.

Once when I was having a conversation with an American, I innocently used the term *interpretation* three times, and my interlocutor lost all patience with me. And he interrupted me with a *What the hell do you mean with your damned interpretation?!* If only he had understood just how much his horror of interpretation begs for interpretation, indeed, it begs to be interpreted as an abomination against the freedom of thought, he probably would have



regretted his outburst. He had already been deprived of the possibility of understanding this, however, since his conformity was total. His demand was limited exclusively to what was transmitted to him as *fact*. Or, more accurately: that is what his demand *had been* limited to. In any case, *fact* was his favorite word, he believed in *facts*, he believed that he was accustomed to *facts*. And despite the fact that he did not possess even the slightest freedom of judging any fact for himself, he was imbued with his conviction of being constantly inundated with *facts*, with a maximum of self-awareness or, more precisely, with a proud sense of freedom. “What society ever had access to such an abundance of information?”

Certainly, the term, *fact*, has been the favorite word of the last two or three generations: both the father and the grandfather of my interlocutor were always using the word. This is undeniable, but it does not give us the right to conclude that the word does not have anything to do with conformism. If his father and his grandfather were “believers in the facts”, it was because they were raised to have respect for the *sciences*, for what is known, as opposed to what is believed.<sup>149</sup> If my interlocutor believes in the facts, this is because he is constantly subjected to the manipulations carried out by those who have an interest in *supplying him with a pre-interpreted world* and in ensuring that this world should be interpreted as *the world*, that is, as *fact*; that is, just because he has to *believe*. *He is transformed into a glutton for facts, so that he does not discover that he simply believes what he believes he knows . . .*<sup>150</sup> *in brief, because he is deceived*. Indeed, today the use of the word *fact* is not only the distinctive sign of the deceiver, but also of the deceived. And the increasing degree of conformism and the greater frequency of the use of the word go hand in hand.

In itself, this neutralization of the difference between interpretation and fact is not at all surprising in our epoch. If one reflects on this fact in the framework of the world in which we live today, that is, in the framework of the world of finished commodities, it is entirely normal. We are now entirely accustomed to being supplied with finished commodities; *do it yourself*, making something on one’s own—we engage in such things at most as a *hobby*, as an occupation of our free time. It is therefore understandable that *we expect and claim to receive opinions in the same condition as the other finished commodities*. Nor should we be surprised that we should receive them in that condition and that we should renounce making them ourselves (in this case: to judge on our own and to form our own opinions).

It is totally normal that we should accept these manufactured opinions as “valid” in the same way that we accept manufactured commodities, whose existence and possibility of acquisition appear to form part of the *a priori* of life. In fact, the world that surrounds us, of which opinions together with the other objects also form a part, is a force that so profoundly guides our habits that it deprives us of the freedom to stray from its channel; that is, even the freedom to *imagine* that another world is possible, a world composed of other objects. “How could people live in a world like that?”, an American *college girl* asked me, half horrified,

---

<sup>149</sup> As everyone knows, this trend has reached the point where attempts are being made to legitimate and confer credibility on the Christian faith by transforming it into a *Christian Science*.

<sup>150</sup> If this formulation sounds paradoxical, this is because the situation is itself paradoxical, that is, because the faith that must not know that it is only faith is designated as knowledge.

have amused, but altogether perplexed, after we concluded our tour of the house where Beethoven was born. But her amusement was not just individual stupidity: what she missed was not anything in particular, such as record players, for example, which she had become accustomed to associate with Beethoven. What she missed was something more than that: it was her own finished and ready to use world as a whole. And she laughed because she was incapable of believing that life in a world that lacked, according to her, the *a priori* supplies, was really a “life” at all.

*The identification of fact with interpretation is nothing but the principle of the finished commodity applied to the supply of what is “intellectual”, of opinions or judgments.* With this glance at the context, of course, the reality as such is no better; to the contrary: the context shows that here it is not just a question of a particular reality, that arises in one political system or another (in the totalitarian political system, for example) and that can disappear along with that system; rather, it is profoundly rooted in our system of mass production and mass supply. And this renders the whole business more nefarious, for it means that the principle cannot be liquidated by political means, nor can it disappear from the world with the liquidation of political systems. To the contrary: everything confirms that these political systems when all is said and done are nothing but reactions (and, of course, appropriate ones) to this current situation of technological production, to the situation of production that, apart from other decisive differences, is the same in the West as it is in the East and that—if this is even possible—can only be restructured with incomparably greater difficulties than would be required to restructure the political forms of the state.

## § 2

*Neutralization of the object-character of the supplied commodities.*

This neutralization (of the difference between fact and interpretation) can only be successfully achieved because of the existence of a procedure that, as I see it, acquires a decisive significance in today’s world of mass production and conformism. I am referring to the tendency to *liquefaction*.

*What I mean by liquefaction<sup>151</sup> is the fact that many supplied commodities no longer have the solid consistency of objects, but must be received—and in fact are so received—by the customer in a liquid state, in the fact that they come to him (from the spigots of the radio and television, for example) without any time lapse, without chewing, and in a way even without the act of swallowing.* Given that the flow between transmission and reception does not undergo any interruption or stoppage and that what is supplied is introduced into our sense organs instantly and at the same pressure that it came out of the spigot, it is no longer appropriate to speak of “consuming”. *Nor does the goose, that just gulps down his food, consume.* That is, *we are even deprived* of what might be imagined to be the last activity of reception, *our very act of swallowing.* *We are the best informed people,* I was assured by an American, *we just can’t help being informed.* If he had said *conformed* I would have agreed with him. In other words: *insofar as opinion is supplied as **fact** it is transformed into the*

---

<sup>151</sup> See § 2 of the chapter devoted to the obsolescence of conformism.

*opinion of the consumer, it is immediately assimilated, it is his forever.* And, once again, it is no exaggeration to say that what he has been inoculated with is something that “comes to him from his soul”, since the latter, his soul, is no longer anything but the depository for the *facts* supplied to him up until now, where any incoming supply is integrated in an extraordinarily natural way.

The claim that those who are thus “conformed” *have* an opinion is a meaningless assertion, since there is no answer to the question concerning what the word, “have”, means in this context. Or, the only answer would sound like this: *these people have their opinion in the same sense that the inmates of the concentration camps had their numbers (tattooed on their arms).* And they have it in the sense of being “had” by it, rather than “having it”. They *couldn't help having*. Certainly, since then the history of the degradation of man has taken a step forward, since, unlike the victims of the concentration camps, the “conformed” now misunderstand their “being had” in effect as a kind of “having”.

### § 3

*Neutralization of the difference between speaking and listening.*

This description makes it clear that the difference between “thing” and “interpretation”, addressed at the beginning, is not the only contrast to undergo neutralization. There is another neutralization, no less characteristic of conformism. If the supplied opinion is assimilated *eo ipso*, and it is accepted *eo ipso* as one's own opinion, naturally there is no other opinion that one can express: the difference between *listening and speaking* has therefore been nullified. This nullification is, in fact, the *principal nullification*, to which the first nullification tends. What must be achieved is *speech that obeys what is heard*: and here I am not referring only to the fact that one who obeys says what he has heard, but to something more basic, that is, to the fact that *his speech is nothing but a variety or concomitant phenomenon of his listening*. Originally, speech (as is indicated by the expression, “to have something to say”) is a proof of power and freedom. Listening, on the other hand, is a proof of non-freedom (as is suggested by the words *gehören* and *gehörchen*).<sup>152</sup> The definition of man as ζῷον λόγον is now undermined, since *man is now a being who speaks only because he is a being who listens*. In fact, for most conformists speech has become a mere co-speaking of what is endlessly heard; they speak the same way that those who attend concerts sing, who mouth the words of the songs they hear more or less silently.

### § 4

*Neutralization of the difference between violence and docility.*

---

<sup>152</sup> Both the words, *gehören*—which means, “to belong to”—and *gehörchen*—which means, “to obey”—have the same root word, *hören*, “to hear”. That is why we translated, a few lines above, the phrase, *höriges Reden*, as *speech that obeys what is heard*, which might have been translated as *obedient speech*. The Latin root of obedience, *audire*, indicates something similar, insofar as he who obeys (that is, the slave) does so because he hears and acts in accordance with what he has heard. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]

Whereas throughout all of history up until now it was normal to implement oppression by way of commands, and especially prohibitions, today's *secret dictators* do so by way of *offers*, especially ones that are extremely hard to refuse. Or to put it another way: they do not exercise, at least not at first, their dictatorship by way of the coercion of labor, but by way of the coercion of consumption, something that renders the coercive character unrecognizable to those who are coerced. In the Molussian text, "Splendor and Misery of the Land of Cockaigne", we read: "Panting under the burden of their daily gifts they forgot, finally, how to raise their heads. The more voluminous was the baggage, the more they were like pack animals. And they ended up as cattle for the butcher."

This situation, of course, compared to the crude terror that gripped Europe between 1933 and 1945, seems rather tame. The methods are not bloody; the difference between the open terrorism accompanied by the clash of arms of National Socialism, and the terrorism of the commodity, which is shy and does not want to disclose its true nature either to those who carry it out or to its victims, is undeniable. "Shy", however, is certainly an equivocal term. What is true, rather, is that those who have an interest in "soft terrorism"—in creating a situation in which nothing but the echo of what they shouted into it returns to them from the forest—can allow themselves to describe their coercive system as a system of freedom and, with this false label, fully implement it. In fact, they are not at all ashamed (before whom would they be ashamed?) of proclaiming that their principle is the "freedom to form and to express an opinion", that is, they verbally advocate the opposite of what they are in fact doing.<sup>153</sup>

As for those who are supplied or molded in this way, however, they do not realize that they are supplied or molded, or they no longer realize anything at all about their supplied and molded *existence*. They undoubtedly consider the points of view that have molded them to be their own points of view.<sup>154</sup> And given that what is molded by way of this soft terrorism are

---

<sup>153</sup> It is no less true, however, that this system of occult terrorism, when it deems this to be necessary, will shed its civilian garb overnight, and openly display the armor that it wears underneath.

<sup>154</sup> There are new experiments with the so-called "subliminal" manipulation of man: there is disagreement about whether or not they will be successful, but the decisive thing is the principle itself. That is: one is influenced by *petites perceptions*—to borrow a phrase from Leibniz—and with subliminal stimuli, which are hoped to be effective, but which are not perceived. For example, with exhortations to buy things that, introduced among the images of a movie, are presented to the eye of the spectator so briefly that they are not noticed (later, however, so it is hoped, the spectator will buy the commodity in question as a result of post-hypnotic suggestion). There can be no doubt that this method or similar ones, in order to yield good results, must be adopted in politics. From the perspective of the "history of the mind", this barbarism is particularly interesting: the subliminal, which—as we said, it was Leibniz's idea, conceived in connection with that of the "differential"—was inherited by Freud as a concept of the "unconscious"; Freud became common property in America (for reasons that are not pertinent here). Later, in the hunt for the *locos minoris resistentiae* of the buyer they came up against his unconscious and set to work on the project. This is the course

not just their *points of view*, but that rather it is their souls that are thoroughly subjugated, in fact they feel free (and most often, unfortunately, even happy). It is not surprising that they—and here the falsehood of the situation reaches its culmination—consider those few people who really are free, and who manage to marshal the power to resist being molded, to be *bona fide* saboteurs of freedom and treat them as such. There has never before been a historical movement in which the principle of the counterrevolution, that is, the principle of getting the people to mobilize against themselves, has celebrated a triumph that even approaches the scale of the victory won by conformism under the flag of the freedom of those who have become un-free.

The gentleness of the type of totalitarianism known as “conformism” is anything but a sign of humanity. If we are treated gently, this is a sign of our defeat. “After breakfast even Polyphemus smiles”. Conformism is not exclusively bloody because it has already enveloped us; because it does not have to face the appearance of those opposition movements, for the liquidation of which the totalitarianism of the past needed or thought that it needed its terrorism. It is gentle because it can allow itself to reject threats and bloodshed.

It does not matter whether this thesis is correct or not: certainly, in one aspect, conformism is *not bloodless*, because what matters is not just whether the process of our assimilation, whether our being assimilated, is carried out in a bloody or bloodless fashion, but *whether the established goals*, the threats and risks that, once assimilated, we have to defend and that we effectively defend as *our goals, our threats and our risks, are bloody or bloodless*. We already know the answer to this question today, in the era of nuclear bombs and the Korean War; it is as follows: however secretive and gentle the manipulation of our souls might be, *by the mere fact of being manipulated and assimilated we express our conformity by becoming murderers* (and in certain circumstances, also by becoming those who are murdered). It is clear that we must assume that there is a certain kind of relation between the terrorism of the goal and the terrorism of assimilation, that is: there is an inverse relation between them. That is: *the methods of seduction will be all the more bloodless and humane, the more bloody and horrible are the goals and the risks that we assimilate*. In any case it is indisputable that the question about whether we suffer our assimilation by way of a bloody and clearly totalitarian fist or by an elegant hand in a velvet glove, has today become, as incredible as it may sound, a secondary question. What counts is only the fact that the situation that is sought is one in which we can be counted on not to have anything to say about this question. And in both variants this is the case.

## Chapter 17

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF HISTORY

#### I

---

of the history of the mind. The Leibnizian legacy has therefore attained the honor of being a psychotechnical con game to take advantage of the masses. Indeed, no philosopher can ever predict what kind of future master he will serve in order to finally achieve immortality.

(1978)

## TECHNOLOGY AS HISTORICAL SUBJECT

**Politics is our destiny (1815)**

**The economy is our destiny (1845)**

**Technology is our destiny (1945)**

§ 1

*First introduction of the concept of “ahistoricity”. History has not always existed, nor are all those who coexist in space and time historical.*

I do not dispute the claim that today’s worker lives and works in an incomparably more comfortable way than his ancestors. It is not realistic, however, to expect that he should be conscious of this past, which he did not experience, and of his own ascent, that is, of the difference. He lives without memory, that is, *ahistorically*.<sup>155</sup> I would like to meet the worker who would ever even think of comparing the standard of living and subsistence of his ancestors with his own; or one who would consider his life to be “worthy of that of a human being”, or “non-proletarian”, because it is better than that of his ancestors.

Furthermore, this also applies to the petty bourgeoisie who, surprisingly, live ahistorically, despite the enormous size of the conservative parties to which they often belong. In general, if any one of them were ever to feel an urge to compare them—I use this vague term intentionally, because comparison is always carried out in an absolutely imprecise way—he would not evaluate the present as being better than the past (not represented concretely), but to the contrary: he would consider “the good old days” to be superior to the present. And he would do so even when his past consists of bloodbaths. What Aristotle said about existence as such—that it is ἡδύ τι, something sweet—also applies to the sense of yearning that generally accompanies memory; and in fact memory also confers sweetness on its content. In a Viennese courtroom where war criminals were being tried, I witnessed a former concentration camp inmate cry during his deposition on the horrors of the camp; and as his words demonstrated, his tears were not tears of sadness or indignation, but of nostalgia.

“*But man*”, as I was assured by an American *college* professor (despite the fact that most of his fellow citizens know even less about their *roots*, which originated in the soil of Europe, than my European contemporaries), “*but man is* [we have known this at least since Dilthey] *an historical being!* He lives on his past and his distant past!”

---

<sup>155</sup> The concept comes from Marx and Engels. Both distinguish between “ahistorical” and “historical” peoples. They consider the agricultural peoples in particular to be “ahistorical”, whose life in the country Marx once characterized as “idiotic”. Poland, which has been repeatedly victimized by the “historic powers”, was not recognized as having its own history.

It could be that modern man is still more or less marked by his immediate or remote past, that is, by his ancestors, by customs. Certainly more or less, since he is molded above all by the present (to the exclusion of even the recent past that he experienced himself). Even assuming that he is deeply affected by his grandparents, this *causal* relation is by no means a *relation of memory*. This means that it is inappropriate to say that someone who is thus affected bears with him the images of what has affected him or that he compares or is even *capable* of comparing his current existence with these images.

My hypothesis is that *not all men* (that is, not all “those who are living at the same time” in the space of our history, whom it would be more appropriate to call *co-spatial* than *contemporaries*) are *historical*. And what is true of the present is also true with regard to the past: neither the consciousness of historical existence nor the concept of history has always existed. Even the object of the concept of “history” *has not always existed, either*, that is, *the very process of history itself*.<sup>156</sup> As absurd as it may sound, the emergence of this process, too, has always depended on certain presuppositions (which can be described as “historical” only with reservations). Once (or to be more precise: every time that) *history has arisen*, after millions of years, from a historically neutral mass of time (in which all living beings are condemned to remain except for man) or from a cycle of time (evident for the ancients and of course today, as well, for some peasants). If I said “every time”, however, it is because *up until now history has been histories* (just as language has been languages) and because only today, by way of the communication between peoples and the ongoing contraction of the world, is it becoming *universal history*, which up until recently had only existed as a phrase and only now is becoming a reality; it is becoming the global history of the world, which is only now dawning on the horizon before us, if we do not perish in a global cataclysm first. The fact that *our time is characterized as much by the beginning of world history as it is by the end of historical existence* is a reality whose contradictory character we shall explain in the following section of this text. The genre of histories pertaining to individual nation states, which has only existed for a very short time in the *history of histories*, is about to be extinguished.<sup>157</sup>

In fact, histories restricted to single nations have always been merely “historical phenomena”, that is, *intermezzi*: either their subjects are again submerged in the *nunc stans* of the absence of history, from which they had arisen, or else they join—which has become the general rule—the broader historical currents of the greater historical subjects who conquered them.

## § 2

*History is the history of the ruling class. The ruled are only co-historical.*

---

<sup>156</sup> As strange as this assertion may sound, it is still utterly insignificant compared to the spectacular thesis of Plotinus: not even *time* has always existed (*Enneads* 45, 98 *et seq.*).

<sup>157</sup> The peoples who are only today trying to re-live the 19<sup>th</sup> century by attempting to fight for their national identity cannot compete with this tendency of world history. The Arab and Zionist national movements, for example, are absurd anachronisms from the point of view of world history.

The society that is constantly undergoing transformation and that, despite its transformation, is still capable of reviewing its preceding stages and comparing its present condition with images from its past, is a recent development. And just as this historicity is not always evident, there is no reason why there has to be history in the future, either. In fact, I think that it is still possible for today's society to lose its historicity, that is, to become ahistorical, to the extent that it has ever been historical taken as a whole (which is very debatable).

“To the extent that it has ever been historical taken as a whole”: I have expressed this reservation because it would be incorrect to think that we (even those of us who live in the Euro-American historical space, so replete with history) are “historical” in general and to the same degree, because *history is a history of classes*. By this I am not referring, for example, to the idea that each class has had its own history or that “contemporary” class histories have proceeded or still proceed in parallel with each other: that has never been the case. Rather, I am referring to the fact that the ruled classes, the slaves, for example, have never had their own history; that they, over the course of their destinies, have at most obtained their own history occasionally in insurrections, or in rebellions that, like the Spartacus uprising, for example, subsequently disappeared without a trace. Certainly, when rebellions develop into revolutions and, as in China or Vietnam, they are successful, a new historical era does in fact make its appearance: from victims of history or merely co-historical populations, the rebels or their classes transform themselves into *subjects of history*.

As we can see, here history is in turn understood *not only as the narrative reconstruction of what has occurred (narratio rerum gestarum)*, nor is it understood as only the memory of what has occurred (*memoria rerum gestarum*), but above all as what has itself occurred (*res gestae*). To clarify: the ruled class is ahistorical not only because it is not mentioned,<sup>158</sup> because there is no written account (neither one written by one of its members nor one by a member of another class) of its “history”; nor is this the case only because it has no consciousness of the past—the uprooted urban worker is completely cut off, as if by the blow of an axe, from the peasant way of life of his ancestors; nor because it does not preserve a living memory of its past by way of its own customs; but rather because *it is not a subject of history* whose destinies are stages of its own development, a development whose explanation is immanent to the class, a fact that Marx had observed in a most penetrating way, although with another vocabulary, when, in order to convert the proletariat into a, or *the*, subject of history, he proclaimed the formation of class consciousness as its primordial task. If you were to want to write a history of the proletariat, you could only do so by presenting *responses*, the chain of reactions that comprise its responses and reactions, that is, its reactions and responses on an everyday basis, to the historical actions and situations created

---

<sup>158</sup> Brecht, with his question about who built the pyramids, was referring to this absence of attention to the ruled classes and therefore to the ahistoricity of the slaves; and with this reference he was attempting to restore to them, for the first time in six thousand years, the light of history to which they are entitled and to thus, to quote Rilke, “save them”; an act that, of course, has not helped them in the least.



by the ruling class,<sup>159</sup> as long as the terms “react” and “respond” are not understood to denote too much spontaneity. Up until today the proletariat, even though it now belongs to history, has only been *co-historical*. Thus, with respect to the millions of proletarians who, in the First World War, for example, paid their tribute in blood, one cannot claim that, by marching to war and falling on the battlefield, “they reacted” or “responded” to the historical actions of the ruling classes; rather, they simply obeyed, they had to obey, they were victims. Strictly speaking, then, these wars were not *their wars*; and if one were to write a history of the proletariat, one could not devote an *independent chapter* to war, *since it would not be a chapter about independence*. This is true despite the fact that the ruling classes of the belligerent powers of the First World War managed to convince the proletarians that what they had to do was also in their own interests,<sup>160</sup> that “there were no longer any parties, but only Germans”, as Wilhelm put it on August 2, 1914; immediately thereafter, the German Social Democracy, through its parliamentary representatives, co-approved the war credits, that is, it acted in the most pitifully co-historical way out of a sense of shame at the prospect of not participating in the manipulated enthusiasm. Hitler and Goering went even further than Wilhelm, for they not only decreed the proletariat’s obedience, but also demanded that it seal its co-historicity in the form of explicit assimilation. And these first demagogues of the era of [mechanical] reproduction—in a certain sense, the winner in 1933 was radio—in fact succeeded in seducing the proletariat to enthusiastically undertake the decreed assimilation and to do so in such a way that it seemed to be acting on its own initiative. The fraud was entirely new, since it consisted not only in the mediation of a false participation, but also in the production of a *false sentiment* (the correlate of the “false consciousness” of Marx) and thus, in turn, in the production of a *false activity*. In other words: *the proletariat, along with everyone else, acclaimed this compulsory being-co-historical as its own history*; and the number of proletarians who voluntarily joined the lethal party rose into the hundreds of thousands. The class, whose parties had been destroyed, was not only not permitted to know *who* it was, but also was forbidden to know *what* was properly in its own interests. “Do you want total war?” “Yes!”

Furthermore, this ahistoricity or co-historicity is manifested in the teaching of history, to which the children of the proletariat are subject like everyone else, for they are fed almost exclusively with an alien history, not the *history of suffering*, that is, the series of humiliations suffered by their ancestors.

And that is not all, because even those who are “only co-historical” are co-historical only *in the best cases*. I am not, of course, denying that the proletarians have uninterruptedly and unavoidably been part of the unfolding of the real events of every passing moment: *the horses, too, in cavalry battles, take part in world history*. What I am saying is, rather, that the children of the proletarians hardly understand<sup>161</sup> the contents transmitted to them in the

---

<sup>159</sup> This is probably also true for the proletariat *after* its “seizure of power”, that is, in the Soviet Union, since, in reality, it is not the ruling class there, either.

<sup>160</sup> In the Second World War the situation was different: the war against Hitler was a war (at least this, too) in the interest of the proletariat.

<sup>161</sup> It can certainly be doubted that, in this respect, the children of the bourgeoisie do much better.

history books: I said “in the best cases” because of the rarity of this understanding. Generally, these contents simply go in one ear of the proletarian child and out the other, which is understandable, and almost justified, because they do not have even the least connection with his own world, at least not the way he sees it; and because someone who does not have any living reference point—this discrimination is a positive capacity of intelligence—cannot perceive or understand, not to speak of being capable of remembering,<sup>162</sup> what at most can be hammered into his head by force of repetition;<sup>163</sup> and what has been hammered into someone’s head only by force is quickly forgotten. That is why I have spoken here about proletarian *children* in particular, not just of proletarians, for once a person leaves school he is no longer subjected to any more history in the sense of the *narratio rerum gestarum*; the historicity of the “made-for-TV historical dramas”—the only histories to which ninety-nine percent of the population is exposed—goes no further than the costumes: one cannot attribute to such *features* any promotion of the understanding of history.

### § 3

*The future as history. Co-historical existence with the history of technology. In recent history, the history of technology has become history itself.*

It is true that the proletariat is, or at least *was*, absolutely historical in another sense. I said, “was”, because it is very doubtful whether the assertion concerning its current historicity still applies to the proletariat. What I am saying is that it was historical not with respect to a retrospective reference to a past and due to the preservation of that past, but from the perspective of a hoped-for *future*; that is, because its existence up until now, in which it was

---

<sup>162</sup> Of course, the scientist’s zeal for knowledge, directed at contents which, in and of themselves, are of absolutely no interest to him personally, is an exception that must not be underestimated; it even has a philosophical-anthropological importance. In fact, man is the only animal who “is interested” in objects that “do not really serve his interests in the least”; the only animal that is not “limited”, the only one that likes to “move towards what is alien to it”, not to speak of “transcendence”. Kant, in his *Critique of Judgment*, referred to this tendency with the concept of the “absence of interest”.

<sup>163</sup> This is why all those memory-enhancing tests containing meaningless syllables, series of numbers and things like that were and are completely meaningless: they say absolutely nothing about the memory of the persons who are tested (and they certainly say much more about the lack of intelligence of the psychologists who design and carry out the tests). Only disturbed children memorize what has no meaning (railroad schedules, for example). The generic and undifferentiated *zeal to know something new* [*Neu-gierde*, curiosity] only rarely takes the form of a *zeal to know what is old* [*Alt-gierde*], that is, curiosity about what has been. The “archaeological trend”, which is dominant today in the topical literature of educational science, does not contradict this thesis, for the objects of this interest are substitutional, the interest arises almost exclusively from the fear of the domination of the recent past; it is replaced with an alien antiquarianism of the past. *The images of the murderers of Auschwitz are eliminated; in the gap thus produced the images of the Etruscans or the Hittites are inserted.*

not yet allowed to live in a human way, degraded it to the category of *pre-history*, to the pre-history of a, or rather, of *the* future era of humanity or of the classless society. Anyone who is familiar, even superficially, with the *history of history* knows that the chiliasm of early Christianity was the first to found the concept of “history”; and, of course, the concept of progress (even today, in the United States and the Soviet Union, there are millions of people who consider it to be naturally valid) was equally *futurological*. In the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, between 1800 and 1848, this futurology was replaced by a historical mentality oriented towards the past, and not only in the domains of the German states. This mentality, in turn, was replaced by a *re-chiliasm*. In fact, after the end of the First World War, an absolutely messianic historical hope prevailed, whose charms even I, at the age of sixteen, was unable to resist.<sup>164</sup> We were not proud of “how far we had come”; to the contrary, we hoped and we struggled to “go as far as we could”, immediately and in the future.

Of course, it remains to be established whether or not we have to attribute this change of direction of the consciousness of history to the “history of the proletariat”, or whether we have to consider it as a fragment of co-historicity, in view of the fact that this new concept of history was not conceived by the proletariat itself, but rather *was given to it* by the founders of socialism, who were not proletarians. In all likelihood this is a historical event that belongs to both “histories”, to that of the bourgeoisie and to that of the proletariat, an *overlapping* that represents a historical oddity.

#### § 4

*There is no future.*

Naturally, in underdeveloped countries, the chiliastic orientation towards the future still plays a decisive role today. Or one could say that it plays such a role for the first time. Meanwhile, “among us”, in Europe, in America and also in the Soviet Union (if one ignores the compulsory optimism of the official proclamations and the speeches at Party Congresses), a life that looks forward towards an ideal future now seems to be a thing of the past. If we are not to utterly deceive ourselves, *there is no future*. Or to be more precise: our historical attitude has attained, in the last few decades, a subsequent stage or, more accurately, even a second, or a third and a fourth stage. As a third stage I am referring to the conception of history of the extremely rare preachers in the desert of time who, here and there, fear that humanity is no longer in the situation of the *not yet*, but in that of the *already*,<sup>165</sup> and raise

---

<sup>164</sup> Its last representative was the professional hope-monger Ernst Bloch, who did not allow himself to be intimidated or fooled by anything like Auschwitz or Hiroshima.

<sup>165</sup> I found the following verses carved into a desk at a German university:

PRINZIP VERZWEIFLUNG ODER EINMAL ETWAS ANDERS

ernst bloch spricht:

“wir sind noch nicht”.

ernster als bloch

ware: “gerad’ noch”.

their voices against the technologically possible apocalypse in order to prevent its very likely advent. (“Very likely”, because today—and this defines our epoch—technological possibilities are considered to be entirely binding, since *facibile faciendum est*, that is, what we can do, supposedly we also must do and thus we effectively do it.) But I am not thinking only of these Jeremiahs who foresee the future: they, too, still understand the present as pre-history, although they do not understand it as a “future kingdom”, but as the end, that is, as the last *reprieve*.<sup>166</sup>

## § 5

### *Technology, the subject of history.*

This third conception of history, today the most realistic one, is not of course shared by most people today. Today a fourth conception, closely connected to the third one, is more widespread. I am referring to the fact that we—and by “we” I mean most of our contemporaries, including statesmen, who live in industrialized countries—*have renounced* (or have allowed ourselves to be influenced by this renunciation) *considering ourselves* (as nations, classes, or as humanity) *as the subjects of history*; we have abdicated (or we have allowed ourselves to be deposed) and *we have replaced ourselves with other subjects of history or, more accurately, with a single subject: technology*, whose history is not, like that of art or music, just one among other “histories”, but *the history*, or at least it has become *the history* over the course of recent history, which has been confirmed in the most terrible way by the fact that the existence or non-existence of humanity hinges on its development and use. Naturally, most of our contemporaries are only vaguely aware of the epochal significance of this transformation: in fact, all of them live almost exclusively *in, with and for* their machines (or those of others) and without them they could not “live for even a single minute”.<sup>167</sup> If, however, one were to ask them to define technology—to the extent that they would understand this philosophical question—they would define it as *something that exists in our historical situation, not as the subject of history*. We must also add that the eruption of

---

anders wär:  
“nicht mehr”.

### [PRINCIPLE OF DESPERATION OR FOR ONCE SOMETHING DIFFERENT

ernst bloch says:

“We are not there yet”.

more serious than bloch

would be: “just yet”.

another way would be:

“no longer”.]

<sup>166</sup> See the author’s *Endzeit und Zeitenende*, pp. 170 *et seq.*

<sup>167</sup> The *Do-it-yourself* movement, vegetarianism, nudist culture and whatever manifestations of Luddism and the Rousseauianism of the little man may be found, are only escapist trends that prove the rule. Furthermore, they cannot themselves exist without the help of machines: nudists fly in airplanes to their nudist beaches and raw vegetables are turned into juice with electric juicers.

this new situation (despite the fact that, from the perspective of universal history, it has been extremely rapid) has taken place (measured against the standard of the individual lifespan) too gradually for the individual to notice what is revolutionary about it; and finally, that (as an example will soon make clear to us) the understanding of this abdication of man and the enthronement of technology is obfuscated in the most artful way.

Certainly, some of our contemporaries are very much aware of this “inversion”, since they have transformed the new situation into the basic underpinning, that is, the object of their *business transactions*. I am referring to the authors of science fiction, and the comic strip artists, who represent interstellar events, and of the producers of futurological movies; in other words: to the vulgar prophets of our end-times, who have stolen a march on us philosophers by several decades. If, by some chance, they should hear anything about us, they would not only not understand our reflections, they would actually be bored by them and would sweep our belated “discoveries” off their desks, since they had long ago recognized this change of subject as a *fait accompli* and transformed its presentation into words and images as a profitable commodity, at a time when we were still raving about the “essence of man” or “the instrument in man’s hands”, for it was obvious decades ago that, *in order to approach closer to the instrument, we had to strive ceaselessly*; and that, expressed in the Heideggerian manner, if there is any *who of history*, that *who* is not us, but precisely *technology*. And this thesis, which has been valid for years now, is of course eternally valid, or, more exactly: it is valid for the time that still remains to us, since we will not be conceded an eternity.

## § 6

*The shepherds of products. Technology is not only the subject of history, but also its goal. Production requires destruction.*

Very closely connected with these observations is the fact that statesmen, from Truman to Kissinger and Carter (and the American *mass-media* in general), when they speak of the danger of (nuclear) destruction, never call it the *end of mankind*, but generally refer to it as the *end of civilization*; that is, what in their view must not under any circumstances be annihilated, but must be preserved at all costs, is not humanity with its past and its future, but the world of products and means of production: the cars, factories, refrigerators, deep-sea oil drilling platforms, audiocassette players, intercontinental ballistic missiles, nuclear power plants ... which, should *that* happen, would have existed in vain and for nothing: a possibility that strikes panic into the hearts of these advocates of civilization, because they interpret this “end of things” as the most colossal waste and therefore as immoral.<sup>168</sup> As absurd as it may sound, they are actually convinced that humanity, just like them, is so strictly *dependent* on its products and means of production that it would be more difficult for it to come to terms with the loss of these products and the end of production than with its own destruction. And the term, “dependent”, designates not only a “hanging from” or being dependent, but also the status of *being only an appendage*; and this, in turn, means to be ontologically less important than that upon which one depends. If, nonetheless, these “technocrats” (an insufficient title)

---

<sup>168</sup> See the author’s fable, “*Das Ende*”, in *Der Blick vom Mond*, Munich, 1968.

consider *the existence of humanity also worth preserving*, it is only because, in their view, there have to be *owners who prevent the products and the means of production from subsisting*<sup>169</sup> *without master or meaning, that is, in a way that would engender pity*, an idea that fills them not only with panic, but also compassion. “Shepherds of being”, as Heidegger situated us, in an even Biblical way, that is, anthropocentrically, thus vastly overestimating “man’s place in the cosmos” (a cosmos that is not affected in the least by whether we still exist or have disappeared); no, we are certainly not “shepherds of being”. We consider ourselves instead to be *shepherds of our world of products and machines*, which, however much more imposing than us they may be, need us as servants (as consumers or owners, for example). Of course, we, the guardians of the machines, generally refrain from expressing or even giving expression in thought to this idea of ours, *the key idea of our epoch, that our products are ontologically and axiologically superior to us humans*. This idea is never even thought, for it is not just sexuality that is repressed. And this is so because we vaguely sense that our *alter ego* would receive a shock and would be scandalized. Indirectly, however, we clearly verify the triumph of this never-thought idea, of this *lie of survival*. The most unequivocal proof of this triumph is the production of the *neutron bomb* (invented some fifteen years ago), which treats our technological facilities as *taboo* but treats us as *expendable*; expressed in theological terms: it treats *what we have made*, the *opera creata*, as worthy of survival, as *ontologically more important than us, its makers, the creatores*. In any event, by way of this invention and the unabashed readiness to put it to use, the term “inhuman” has acquired a meaning that it did not even have during the classical years of annihilation, between 1941 and 1945. If one crucial testimonial in favor of “the obsolescence of man” were needed, this would be it.<sup>170</sup>

## § 7

*The non-modern neutron bomb. Its inversion. The ahistoricity of products. “Aborted objects.”*

Overall, while we have maintained the ideal of saving and conservation inherited from our parents, we, the people of today, are still blind with respect the application of this concept to ourselves. I am convinced that even the term *conservation* (which, in fact, I have still not heard in the mouth of any person younger than fifty years old), within a hundred years, *will sound as archaic* as the term *maidservant* sounds today, since our current guiding principle is to produce *disposable objects*, to confer upon our products a short lifespan in order to create new opportunities and new buyers once they are no longer serviceable. Thus, the annihilation of people is not actually the primary objective of contemporary production—something that I do not say, naturally, to make excuses for the latter—because *genocides*, such as those of Vietnam or Cambodia, *are unhesitatingly accepted as collateral damage*. In any case, the

---

<sup>169</sup> See the author’s fable, “Die Kanne”, *ibid*.

<sup>170</sup> Auschwitz, where hundreds of thousands of persons were classified as mere bearers of hair and gold teeth and annihilated in order to obtain those materials, could be viewed as a testing ground for this “pure human annihilation” (in fact, the neutron bomb is recommended as the “cleanest weapon”).

objective is the world of products (that is even conserved by the neutron bomb): that is today's *Cartago delenda*.

Today's ideal product is therefore the consumer good that, like the little rolls of Vienna, *is consumed when it is used*. All of today's products have a tendency towards, and (despite the now-obsolete, but persistent, advertising about "durability" and "solidity") attempt to adapt to, this ideal of obsolescence, that is, to have a lifespan that is as short as possible.<sup>171</sup> When, however, nothing ever comes from the past, nothing that endures or that must endure, then history is abolished. It has been some time since the consumer has adapted to this ideal of the ephemeral life, an adaptation that is manifested, for example, when someone buys paper towels that do not have to be washed. The *objects* of our world are therefore also ahistorical: they neither come from the past nor are they destined for the future; like newborn babies, they live only in the present; and many are never even used, for prior to even seeing the outside of a warehouse they are replaced by newer models, and are in a way *aborted* before they are born. About thirty-five years ago, I witnessed this type of *abortion of products* when I lived in Los Angeles. While we were engaged in the production of hand-loomed for *hobbyists*, the owner of the workshop received the news that better *hand weaving looms* were being sold in New York at a lower price; his reaction was to order that all the specimens that were finished and ready to ship should be thrown in the trash.

Let us leave the metaphors behind, however. In the highly industrialized countries it is cheaper to buy new objects than to repair the old ones; and it is often impossible (or a luxury) to repair the old ones, because there are hardly any craftsmen who can repair them, except for expensive items like cars, televisions and refrigerators. Thus, the switch from durable commodities to throwaway commodities has profited not just industry, but also the customers. This transformation, of course, has not taken place without some peculiar upheavals.

§ 8

*The "used" look as a product. **Blue jeans.***

About forty years ago, a movement that attempted to forestall the predominance of ahistorical objects was initiated. I am not only referring to the flourishing traffic in authentic objects and the enormous production of fake documentation testifying to the age of such objects (almost always rural handicrafts)—which are not applicable to most purchases—such as, for example, cast iron signs, oil lamps and suchlike things; I am referring to a phenomenon that is even more dialectical: given that things that are repaired have a value as rarities, *products are [made to look] "repaired" in advance* (even by the same industries that

---

<sup>171</sup> The stunning expansion of the conservation industry, which appears to plan and to produce not obsolescence, but eternal life, or at least durability, does not contradict our thesis. We also use canned foods only once, and consume them by using them. It is not proper to speak, then, of the idea that we "conserve" *canned peaches* or *foie gras*. What we gain from this is the possibility to determine almost at will the moment when we consume them.

produce throwaway products) and thus, *products are made that have a “historical” appearance*; products that are all the more dialectical insofar as they incorporate “obsolescence”, even though they must have the feel of the past. We must not get ahead of ourselves, however.

The most noteworthy incarnations of this new kind of product are the so-called “Levis”, the *blue jeans*, whose *quality consists in their artificially produced low quality*, in that they have to appear to have been patched or mended, faded and frayed, that is, they have to simulate a past or at least give the impression that they were made in the past, in order to be sold and worn. *Otherwise they are not up to date* (the expression of a sixteen-year-old American girl, who was not, of course, aware of the dialectic of her words). The first buyers and wearers of these pants, which are so very interesting from the point of view of the philosophy of history, really felt like rebels, saboteurs of the ahistorically manufactured pants, detractors of *glossy* mass manufacturing, protestors against slacks with creases. *Blue jeans wearers of the world, unite!* In fact, this new fashion in clothing that feigns the appearance of being old has something about it that smacks of a *conservative revolution*. At the same time, however, insofar as this fashion is adopted by rebel youth in a way that is “neutral” with respect to classes and gender, it seems to proclaim an affirmation of *Equality*, a feeling that *We are the people*. *It seems* to do so, for almost overnight the despicable mass manufacturing industry has taken advantage of the rebel *outsider* in order to make the new type of clothing a collective fashion, the dictates of which a young person can no longer evade even momentarily if he does not want to risk being thought of as belonging to the *establishment*. And for some years now, not even the children of the manufacturers can allow themselves *not* to wear these anti-conformist pants, as they are subject to the coercion of conformism, since by not wearing them *they would call attention* to the fact that they are *not up to date* from the ideological or political point of view, that they do not belong to the *people* or, in short, *that they are not out of the ordinary*.

## § 9

*Weapons are consumer goods. The obsolescence of hostilities. War and fashion, twins.*

Let us return to disposable products, however, since their most prominent embodiment is by no means fashion, but the military industry, since the latter, by way of the constant modernization of its models, renders the previous specimens unserviceable, that is, it destroys by way of production: a process that would even accelerate with the arms race of the great powers. Of course, this arms race is not equally welcome to both competitors: the Soviet Union and the other countries of the East Bloc, for decades now, due to the pressure “to keep pace in the arms sector”, are forced to neglect the development of other industries, some of which are still underdeveloped.<sup>172</sup> For the United States, on the other hand, the production of a new model in the Soviet Union is welcomed, because it cancels out the

---

<sup>172</sup> This has the unexpected consequence that it is precisely in the socialist states where the *conservation* of everyday objects, which, as we pointed out above, have disappeared among us, has not yet become old-fashioned, that is, that it is precisely in these countries, as any surprised visitor can attest, that the attitudes of our grandparents are still preserved.



competitive capacity of its own existing model and requires the production of a new one—last year’s weapons are sold at rock bottom prices to Asian countries—and industry cannot desire anything better. In this sense, the “cold war”, despite its supposedly very hot [prospective] endpoint, was a most advantageous situation for capitalist industry. Industry only accrues the greatest advantages, of course, from “hot” war, because then the weapons, or at least the projectiles, the bombs and the chemical weapons form part of the category of *consumer goods*, as strange as that may sound, because they can only be used once. It would, *of course*, be false to perceive war as a caesura in the life of capitalist industry; it represents instead merely *a continuation of the peaceful destruction of products by other means*, to paraphrase Clausewitz’s famous definition.

The primary tendency of industry is therefore not (as the production of the neutron bomb might lead us to believe) towards the liquidation of the world of persons and materiel of the enemy (this is the tendency towards which its weapons are directed), but rather towards the liquidation of its own products. The strategy of the lightning fast victory, of the immediate total destruction of the enemy, which has been considered to be possible and feasible for thirty-five years, has today become completely obsolete: from a business angle it would be bad business. What industry actually prefers is the war worthy of the name, the war with solid prospects of lasting for years, that is, the war of the Vietnam type, which can even end in a military defeat (as was indeed the case with the Vietnam War), since regardless of whether or not its home country is defeated militarily or not, in any case such a war represents an overwhelming victory of the power of the military industry, due to a maximum consumption of disposable goods. Viewed from this perspective, that Vietnam was an enemy of the United States was only a superficial appearance; *in reality*, it was, willy-nilly, *its best customer for commodities and thus its closest ally*. What other customer, other than such an “enemy”, had ever offered American industry the opportunity to produce and consume three times the number of bombs that were used in the entire Second World War?<sup>173</sup> The need for such an “enemy”, customer or ally, and of such a mentality, known as “patriotism”, to facilitate this relation: these needs are produced no less artificially than the needs for stereo record albums or color televisions. The factories where these needs are produced are the *mass-media*.<sup>174</sup>

---

<sup>173</sup> And vice-versa: the Vietnamese used the enormous quantities of metal, which rained down on their country in the form of bombs, as raw material for their own small-scale industry, that is, they used the enemy at the same time as a supplier of free material.

<sup>174</sup> It is true, of course, that the attempt to produce these needs can also go astray. A few years ago we saw how millions of television viewers, who by way of the broadcasts depicting the war in Vietnam were supposed to be won over to the television networks, unleashed a reaction against the programming: and of course not only with indifference, but with horror and indignation. In fact, the movement against the war in Vietnam would never have acquired the political impact that it effectively had without the daily televised depiction of the war. This experience contradicts my characterization of television in the first volume. Evidently, the horrors of Vietnam seen on television reached the spectators not only as “phantoms”; my previous analysis must be revised.

To recapitulate: the modernization of products and war are twin phenomena, which reinforce each other. Both serve, each in its own way, the destruction of products, which in turn guarantees the continuity and expansion of production. This expansion is the only thing that is desired consistently and invariantly. The products, on the other hand, must always disappear. And so, too, must the means of production, since their permanent usefulness would reveal the fact that production is not expanding, aside from the fact that, in the view of those who produce them, the means of production are also products and, naturally, as such they are subject to the law that decrees that they must be used up as rapidly as possible and must be replaced as soon as possible by other such products. The name of the process described here is still *progress*,<sup>175</sup> a concept that in fact, both in the East and the West, has most disgracefully survived all the crises and catastrophes of the century and is the only stable landmark amidst the disorderly stampede of phenomena.

§ 10

*The good guy, Superman, as saboteur of the truth.*

Let us return to our main theme, however. Before I discussed the goal of production—the destruction of production—I touched upon the decisive novelty of our time: the fact that, today, technology has become the subject of history; that we are only *co-historical* with that history; and finally, that the understanding of this transformation of technology into the subject of history has usually been obscured.

In fact, this process of obscuration is constantly underway, both by way of the choice of words by the media as well as by statesmen, who, with a vulgar or edifying philosophical language seek to make us believe (perhaps they even really believe it, since it is more comfortable to believe in a crucial lie than to constantly live with it) that *we* are, as always, the subjects of history and that it only depends on our good will (which we have, of course) how we shall utilize technology in any given historical situation, for example, whether we use *atoms for peace* or *for war*, to express it in the banal words of Eisenhower. The fact that the mere production, the mere possession, the mere *factum technicum* or, more correctly, *the mere possibility of production represents a form of utilization*; that today, *habere* and *adhibere*, *esse* and *adhiberi*, are identical;<sup>176</sup> or, formulated in the terms of the philosophy of history: the fact that in our epoch, the claim that there is also technology, would be mistaken, and it would only be correct to say that *our epoch is constituted* (and probably, also

---

<sup>175</sup> After this exposure of destruction as the goal of production our evaluation of the neutron bomb must be revised. Evidently, this weapon, which protects the world of products, is not as typical of our current situation as it is generally considered to be: perhaps it is even a deviation, which, naturally, does not at all make its invention and eventual use any more palatable. I would not be at all surprised, however, if sometime in the near future a *negative neutron bomb* were to be discovered, whose principle of discrimination would be the opposite of the current neutron bomb, that is, it would destroy exclusively products—which would better serve the interests of industry—and would not have any particular effectiveness in liquidating people. I can already hear the “humanist” justifications for this invention.

<sup>176</sup> See *Endzeit und Zeitenende*, p. 183.

concluded) *by technology*: to understand this fact transcends the horizon of its promoters, manufacturers, owners and users. For the latter, man is still, as always, the *master* of technology and, as is natural, in their view he will also survive as such.

There is now an incarnation of this lie of the master and survival, according to which the decision concerning our destiny is still in our hands and not in the hands of technology: a person who for several decades—in the meantime he has been joined by many others—has been ubiquitous in all the *mass-media* and whose popularity cannot be overestimated, since he plays the leading role in their infantile and vulgar Olympian scenarios (as a glance at any American newspaper will confirm): I am referring to the figure of Superman. For this man, whose characteristic is to have the ability to fly without an airplane and to cut through space like a guided missile, possesses an *omnipotence* in the universe of the comics, in which his creator has placed him. And this means that omnipotence (thanks to what miracle, is not made clear), which is actually inherent to technology, seems to have returned to man (as long as the term, “return”, is correctly understood, because man himself, as paradoxical as it may sound, never possessed the omnipotence that he bestowed upon technology). Anyway, for decades now any illiterate (whether pre-literate or post-literate) can console himself with the idea that omnipotence is now in the hands of an anthropoid, of a being like himself; and anyone can almost identify himself with the image of this hero or demigod.<sup>177</sup>

Even though he is a divinely omnipotent being in the world of the comic strips, he has been brought to our real world as a servant; and precisely as the *servant of the technocrats, who have entrusted him with the mission of obscuring the abdication of man [as subject of history]*, the transformation of technology into the subject of history, and their immense interest in both undertakings. Superman was created at the instigation of these interested parties; he is their creature, even if he owes his reputation to an artist:<sup>178</sup> the latter was their *court painter*. And given that those who have assigned him his mission also desire that Superman should be confirmed as *technology become man* (or, perhaps, “permanently”) by the millions of people who live as slaves of the *mundus technicus* and that the latter should identify with him, they deprived him from the very start of that negative trait, not at all sympathetic and even sinister, which is today inseparable from the inherent essence of the

---

<sup>177</sup> For we can indeed call him a “demigod”; and not only for formal reasons, since he has both a human form and superhuman power at the same time, but for more particular reasons, since he is the modern counterpart of the most important demigod of Antiquity, *Prometheus*; for, like a modern-day Prometheus, he has (supposedly) returned fire to us, which had fallen from our hands. This classification is also appropriate because, like any god or hero worth his salt, he arrived in the world *as an adult* and since then he has not aged. Insofar as anyone can be eternal today, Superman is; that is, he will accompany us as long as our technological era, and along with it, humanity and the world, last.

<sup>178</sup> Unlike all the other images produced since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Superman also shares with all the mythical personages of the distant past the fact that his creator is anonymous. Even if one were to discover his name (which should be possible, since he has protected the god he created with a *copyright* number, an honor that has never previously been granted to any god): for the millions of his admirers and followers, the name of his creator is irrelevant, since they think that this person has existed since his earliest infancy or, even better, forever.

science of nature and technological inventions: *the Janus face*;<sup>179</sup> that is, the property of being employed not just for good, but also for evil purposes. Superman escapes from this stigma; from his very “birth” he is presented as *an exclusively moral being*. With his fantastic powers (that is, realistic powers, since technology has become the stuff of fantasy) he always strives only for the victory of good over evil, without losing sight of the fact that his conceptions of “good” and “evil” correspond to the most conventional and petty bourgeois ideals of the *middle class*. In a way, he is not only a second Prometheus, but also a second Archangel Michael.

Although this combination of hero and petty bourgeois could only happen in the United States, the bastard has followers all over the world, wherever technology exists or attempts are being made to acquire it; that is, everywhere.<sup>180</sup> During my stay in Hiroshima, about twenty years ago, no scene horrified me as much as that of two little girls of seven or eight years of age, who, sitting on a bench in front of the famous building above which the bomb exploded, were enthusiastically chattering away over a Superman comic book they were reading, and thus destroyed—there of all places—the very idea of the destruction that took place there.

## § 11

### *Today's categorical imperative.*

Let us return, however, to the question we left unanswered in our last *excursus*, concerning in what sense we are still historical. We provided a preliminary, brief response: we are only *co-historical*. Originally, we introduced this category in response to our question about whether or not the proletariat has a historical existence. In the meantime, however, the proletariat has forfeited its monopoly on this second-rate, merely *co-historical* existence, since now we are all *co-historical*, regardless of the class to which we belong; and we are no longer co-historical with the history of another class, but rather with another class of history, that is: *with the history of the current subject of history, with technology*. In fact, our historical role with respect to the history of technology is the same role that was played by the proletariat with respect to the ruling class. Or, to employ a comparison that might come closer to the truth: our relation with respect to technology is merely that of the individual worker with respect to *his* machine: just as he acknowledges the preeminence, the authority, the rhythm, etc., of the latter (disregarding the fact that those who invented it were his fellow men and that he may have designed it himself or, at least, he may have participated in its construction) and just as he feels obliged to *follow*<sup>181</sup> the machine, because the latter *goes ahead of him*, so,

---

<sup>179</sup> See *Endzeit und Zeitenende*, p. 155.

<sup>180</sup> Except, of course, in the communist world: it is clear that the American god was always politically unacceptable to the communist world, as he was always a very strong supporter of the capitalist system and, during the cold war, the communists have gagged him, or rather, they have turned off his loudspeaker. I do not know whether, in Soviet and Polish science fiction, which was so productive and to some extent also so rich, there is a figure similar to Superman, that is, a figure of technology become man.

<sup>181</sup> Not just in the temporal sense.

too, does present-day humanity, or at least the citizens of the highly industrialized countries, feel obliged to *follow* the level attained by technology at any particular moment, because the latter *goes ahead of it*. If there were to be a categorical imperative today, it would not refer to our relation with our fellow men or the community or society, but to our relation with the present or future *status* of technology. And it would sound like this:

*Act as if the guiding principle of your action could be that of the machine, a part of which you are or will be;*

or, expressed negatively:

*Never act in such a way that the guiding principle of your action would contradict the guiding principles of the machines, part of which you are or will be.*

These imperatives are currently in effect, they are accepted almost everywhere, although, naturally, they are expressed nowhere, since technology is fundamentally discreet.<sup>182</sup>

## § 12

*Upside-down Luddism. The retro-translation.*

It is true that, now and then, there are exceptions, situations in which the compulsory nature of the machine does not appear to be fully consolidated. I call these situations “ideological”, because, between the machine, which is modern and up to date, and morality, which is old-fashioned and obsolete, there is a disparity that corresponds to the well known disparity between the “base” (which is modern) and the “superstructure” (which is still old fashioned). We shall soon see that man will not be capable of maintaining this disparity for very much longer and that he will “correct” it. But let us not get ahead of ourselves.

What I am referring to are the *double standards* that can often be observed today. A classic example of this is provided by the *war in Vietnam*. Despite the fact that the preeminence of the machinery of destruction, in which the GIs were inserted as components, was beyond any doubt, it was nonetheless expected and required of them that they were still supposed to be somewhat faithful to previous, “pre-technical” standards, that is, that in their *actual activity* they were still supposed to behave in a different way than the machines; in a different way than they would have been capable of acting or, more accurately, differently than they would have acted if they were *indirectly* engaged in the war, that is, if they served on the operational squads of the machines that stood between those squads and their victims. Thus, for example, the GIs are not permitted to do directly and with their own hands what helicopter crews are allowed, or more precisely, ordered to do with the help of bombs and

---

<sup>182</sup> Even the annihilation of the Jews by National Socialism was implemented, as far as possible, discreetly. *The fact that* it could have been implemented at all and that normal people, people like my neighbors, could have deliberately killed millions of their fellow men, would be absolutely incomprehensible, however, if they had not abided by our categorical imperative.

napalm, that is: to completely exterminate the inhabitants of villages.<sup>183</sup> No one can maintain such an enormous discrepancy, such a *disjunction between the morality of the machine and human morality*. This does not mean, however, that, for example, these men will demand that what is prohibited to them, should also be prohibited to the machines. If the GIs—and I am thinking above all of the epochal case of My Lai: the massacre was immediately characterized as an “incident”—were irritated, their irritation was not in response to the fact that the machines were allowed greater latitude than they were, but to the contrary: because they, the GIs, were allowed to do less than the machines. They wanted to be *even*; that is why they perpetrated a bloodbath, which it would be entirely false to characterize as “unparalleled”, since it was very similar to the bloodbaths that their machines caused on a daily basis, a massacre that they carried out only because they wanted to be equal to their machines. The imperative they obeyed was not:

*Prevent your machines from operating according to guiding principles that cannot be the same principles that guide your conduct,*

but, to the contrary:<sup>184</sup>

*Perform with equanimity what does not contradict the guiding principles of the machinery in which you are inserted; and demand the right to be able act in this way.*

I call the massacre of My Lai, which we can use as a key to decipher today’s situation, epochal, because in this massacre the man-machine relation attains a qualitatively new stage. What the pilot at Hiroshima perpetrated was an act of “indirect mass murder”; and the murderous actions of the helicopter crews in the Vietnam War were just as indirect. What took place at My Lai, however, marked a *third stage*, one that is fundamentally new, since in that case *indirect action was retro-translated in “terms of direct action”*. “Retro-translation” is, in fact, the key concept without which what occurred at My Lai would be inexplicable.

This stage, which the man-machine relation has attained at My Lai, can be completely clarified if we compare it with what the Luddism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century represented. Whereas the Luddites revolted against the world of machines as an invasive world that was competing with them, the mass murderers of My Lai accepted it as legitimate or, more accurately, as the natural standard for measurement, just as all of us accept it as natural simply due to its power and its ineluctable character. We are no longer capable of desiring or even only imagining a world without machines, which the Luddites of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were still capable of doing.

---

<sup>183</sup> Of course, the “epochal event” of My Lai, only three years after the peak of the global publicity devoted to it, now seems to be forgotten, that is, it has been more profoundly dislodged or even buried than the events at Auschwitz, which took place twenty-five years earlier. Furthermore, it is clear that even before My Lai, there had been countless other such events and it can very well be assumed that there were many others like that took place after that famous incident. The fact that so much publicity was devoted to My Lai was purely accidental.

<sup>184</sup> We are not talking about a real imperative here, of course, but of a *license*, a *notification of a right*.

Anyone who would want to fight against machines (only verbally, of course, since to do so in a practical manner has long since become impossible) would enter into contradiction with his own everyday existence and would fight against himself. No: what the GIs of My Lai reacted against was the fact that they, who definitely formed part of the machinery, were not conceded the rights that were conceded to the latter. *Their goal was not the destruction of the machines, but to become "sicut machinae"*, to also be allowed to do what the machines were allowed to do. And if they were morally outraged by something, it was only the fact that human taboos were still imposed upon them or acknowledged to be applicable to them. They did not desire to survive as men after a sought-after death of the machines, but instead desired to survive as parts of the machine after the sought-after or, actually, the demanded, death of humanity. If my motto of "the obsolescence of man" has any meaning anywhere, it is precisely here: as the expression of a negative attitude of man to his human existence.

Five groups were involved in the case of My Lai: the unit that carried out the massacre; those who gave the orders; the people who were charged or testified at the subsequent trial; the press that published millions of words about the massacre; and, finally, the alleged mastermind, Lieutenant Calley,<sup>185</sup> who attempted to depict his conduct not only in his testimony at the trial, but also in an autobiography (*ghostwritten*, of course). Among all these people, however, there was not even one who understood or expressed the fundamental feature of the event, which we have called "retro-translation". And this is very understandable; not only because humanity, dominated by technology, finds it extremely difficult to understand its (technological) mode of existence—these inhibitions are incomparably greater and more widespread than all the inhibitions identified and treated by psychoanalysis—but also because—and this taboo is the real reason for these inhibitions—no one must, and no one is permitted to, understand or express this mode of existence; and this, in turn, because all understanding, not to speak of formulations, would amount to a fundamental critique of technology and, of course, this critique must be prohibited.

In any case, during the weeks of the trial not even once did anyone express the suspicion that those who participated in the massacre had desired, just like many millions of their contemporaries, to be *sicut machinae*. Only by way of our concept of "retro-translation" does the case of My Lai acquire a fundamental historical significance; only this concept enables us to perceive that *Lieutenant Calley represents the current relation between technology and morality just as faithfully as Eichmann and Eatherly represented the situation of thirty-three years ago*.

To recapitulate the case: the Calleys had all witnessed, on a daily basis, how the components of the war machine, especially the helicopters, by dropping napalm, had transformed whole villages, together with their inhabitants, into blazing infernos. These components of the war machine were allowed or, actually, ordered, to carry out the liquidation of civilians. In the

---

<sup>185</sup> As was to be expected, an attempt was made to attribute the responsibility for the massacre to a *little fish*, this Lieutenant Calley. But even if the prosecution had been decent enough to examine and attribute the responsibility for the massacre to higher levels of the command structure as well, the real nature of the case, "technology", would not thereby have been clarified.

view of the GIs, who when all is said and done had a right to consider that they, too, were components of the war machine, it had to be not only incomprehensible, but also offensive and unjust, that they were not allowed and required to do what the other components of the war machine were allowed, or rather, required, to do; i.e., that the latter were allowed and ordered to engage in indirect liquidation, yet the GIs were forbidden to engage in direct liquidation. They did not tolerate this double standard between the indirect and the direct; it was unjust. So they engaged in direct action and opened fire, just like their models, the war machines, *indiscriminately*. That was the official term for it, as if it were permissible to murder *discriminately*; so they opened fire *indiscriminately* on women, children and old people; and probably, in this savage massacre, they even enjoyed the satisfaction of finally feeling “satiated” for once, whereas up until then they had felt as if they were under the rule of a wicked stepmother. Of course, they did not quite measure up to their models, since unlike the murderous machines, their massacre was such an exhausting effort for them that, *post festum*, they felt the pressing need to lie down on the job, that is, among the mangled corpses of their victims, in order to restore their energy with the help of the *lunch* rations that they had brought with them.

### § 13

#### *Taylorism as a political principle.*

This discrepancy between man and machine, however, an example of which we have provided in the case of My Lai, is an exception. Generally, the postulate that we assimilate ourselves to the level of technology, whose history has become *history itself*, is considered to be absolute. This is especially clear precisely today, when the debate about whether or not to build nuclear power plants has reached its peak. People like Robert Jungk and myself, who have not allowed ourselves to be intimidated by the “imperative” supposedly implied by the technological level at any given moment, and who refuse—for even this is naturally demanded everywhere—to recognize today the level, that has not yet been attained (and probably will never be attained), of the technology of the future, are condemned by the nuclear industry and the politicians, who are looking after their business interests, as “rebels” or are caricatured as “out of touch” just as a worker is condemned or caricatured or even fired for being a “rebel”, if—which, of course, never happens—he refuses to or declares that he cannot obey “Taylor”, that is, keep up with the pace of *his* assembly line. I am referring here above all to the problem that is still unresolved—if indeed it can ever be resolved—of the *stockpiles of nuclear waste*, a problem we shall only be capable of overcoming if we were to be capable of exercising the gift of prophecy regarding geological changes over the next several thousand years; and to the fact that the nuclear industry and statesmen, who are concerned about the bottom line, and, standing tall in the saddle (not for themselves, but for the sciences), describe in the most stupid way—and I am quoting the words of a currently serving Chancellor—these problems as “*naturally solved in the future*”, for “*in the history of humanity not even one technical problem has arisen that has not found its solution at the right time*”. This is how they base and justify—most often with a view to short term political and electoral success—their unscrupulous measures with expectations of solutions to be provided by future inventors or solutions that will probably never be found. We must be clear about just what this kind of attitude implies: nothing less than *the assimilation to a future*



*which in all likelihood will never arrive.* “We have to be prepared”, was the conclusion of the speech of this statesman.

And in fact, this is the first time that this has ever happened, since the assimilations that we previously experienced as victims or as spectators were always of the kind that involved present conditions or, at most, conditions that were planned for the near future; and they were often the kind of assimilations, demanded or imposed by an authority, into which *we had yielded* as subjects or customers. Neither type characterizes this situation. Those who argue in this manner, like our famous statesman, assimilate themselves to a *future* (an imaginary future, anyway); and given that they themselves assimilate to this future, it cannot be said that they have yielded to a request to assimilate, unless it is claimed that they are compelled by technology to align themselves with a future or imaginary situation.

This situation also hearkens back to the comparison with the labor process, since in a certain way, to become enraged against the epoch we have just depicted is similar to the rage expressed by the worker against his assembly line. Today’s statesmen work diligently to keep pace with the assembly line of the history of technology. And it is by no means an exaggeration to say that *Taylorism*, which was at first only a special and particularly profitable form of industrial labor, *has now become the principle of history*. Statesmen consider the rhythm of the “assembly line of history” of any particular moment as obligatory, in the same way as those who work on real assembly lines. If they display fear, it is not due to the unforeseeable consequences of their actions (as a result, for example, of the construction of nuclear power plants) or due to the possible elimination of the human species (by nuclear wars or pollution of the environment); given that their imaginations are incapable of embracing the current reality, that is, they are incapable of thinking about the latter in a realistic way, they consider these fears to be *overinflated exaggerations*, an expression a well-known critic used in an attempt to discredit my discussion of the next world war, and to discredit me as well. No, if they are capable of feeling fear, what they are afraid of is *being historically backward*, when not even excluded from the world’s affairs and from among those who count, that is, those who can compete. In fact, numerous contemporary politicians—just recently, Chancellor Kreisky—have resorted to this argument to force the construction of nuclear power plants. The idea of not keeping pace, that is, of being left behind, horrifies these politicians and therefore the economy that stands behind them and rewards them (in response to a silent, but inevitable, assignment from the economy, some socialist politicians also speak up, who do not want to or are incapable of knowing that they are its mouthpieces); I said that the idea of being left behind provokes in politicians such a profound horror that they denounce it as “immoral” and, depending on the political faction, as “asocial” or “anti-national”. Expressed in positive terms: they accept as compulsory, as even as comforting, the rhythms and effects of technological development, despite the fact that, for some time now, these rhythms have been unsustainable and the possible effects, unimaginable. And, of course, all of us have become like them, the ruled as well as the rulers: we have become sympathizers or followers of today’s technology (sometimes even cheerleaders of an anticipated technological development). We run after it with our tongues hanging out, and it continues to advance, and we participate in this race even when we intuit that not only has it become our destiny, but that it will be the end of us. We try to placate this intuition, however, with an even more zealous devotion to the race. Due to our fear of being

left behind the others, we will end up being the last and nothing will really “be left” of any of us.

§ 14

*We are all proletarians.*

I concluded the previous section with a play on words, which I just formulated, but I do not take it lightly. The question still demands one last idea, however: that all of us, regardless of whether we are employers or workers, who are going to die in the East or the West, during the span of time that still remains to us, will lead, or, more accurately, now lead, a *heteronymous life*; and for that reason—I am aware of the profound transformation of the meaning of the concept that this new use entails—we *will all be* or, more accurately, *we have all become proletarians*. Compared with the new opposition, technology-humanity, which up until now (except in the still inadequate proposals of the environmentalist movement and the anti-nuclear groups) has not led to any battles and much less to a “class struggle” (in a new sense), *the class struggle in the traditional sense has become irrelevant*. It is totally unlikely that we, the neo-proletarians, will unite some day to tame the common enemy. And it is so unlikely because, regardless of whether we live in “shacks” or “palaces”, we are already united, since we run shoulder to shoulder and blindly to our assigned places in the shared peace of the cemeteries.

§ 15

*By means of technology we are transformed into ahistorical beings. Benjamin's image.*

Let us return, however, to our theme of the transformation of man by technology. By way of this transformation, as we have said, humanity is entering not only another period of history, but above all a situation that can only be described as an *up to date ahistoricity*. Given the fact that with each passing year, or with each passing day, a “new world” confronts us, that every day humanity is plunging forward without even a glance (furious or nostalgic) backward or, more precisely, *it continues to plunge without stopping*; it does so in a way that is unlike that of Klee's angel, which Benjamin introduced as a symbolic figure and which turns his face backwards (despite the fact that, trapped by his wings, he is swept forward by the hurricane of history). Contemporary humanity looks neither forward nor back; rather, during its tempestuous flight its eyes remain closed, or, in the best cases, are fixated on each present moment.

Even in view of the fact that we are at the mercy of technology, the assertion that we live ahistorically is inadequate. The full truth is, rather, that *our history has been transformed into a continuous history of the forgetting of each passing moment*, that is, a history that is never conscious of itself and cannot step outside of itself and, for that reason, is not properly speaking “history” at all, but a mere *unnoticed sequence of moments*. This means, however—and here I return to the idea that was introduced at the beginning of this chapter—that it makes no sense to demand that today's man, not to speak of today's proletariat, “for whom things are going so well”, that in order to discover that he is no longer a proletarian, must

compare his standard of living with that of his grandfathers. Despite the current abundance of history books (that are only read by the bourgeoisie), he does not, indeed *he cannot* make this comparison. If you were to go directly to the workers and demand that they make this comparison, you would come up against deaf ears and a complete lack of understanding. Left to their own devices, they do not look back. And except for a few churches or bridges (and not every city is as old as Prague; even the mere sight of Prague can convey a sense of the way life was lived in the past), nothing reminds them any longer of “their” past world or that of their grandfathers. Their past is by no means theirs anymore. Stunned by the massive quantity, the rapid pace and the clamor of historical changes, they have lost not only their desire, but also their ability to remember. The so-called “wave of nostalgia”, that is, the mass production of artificial memories, only shows that memory no longer functions “on its own”. The problem of what is called the “unresolved past” is much more comprehensive than our usual assessment of it. The exception is that there are contents that must be eliminated. Anyone who speaks of “elimination” always assumes that lived experience is trying to emerge from the cellar of the unconscious and climb up to the first floor. But one cannot speak in these terms: in view of the fact that there are no more cellars, but only surfaces of the present moment, which excludes both depth and higher levels, it is no longer necessary to store anything away in the cellar.

To summarize: we have once again become what we always were up until the *intermezzo*, which only lasted for a couple of lumpen-millennia: *ahistorical beings*.

## Chapter 18

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF HISTORY

#### II

(1978)

#### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF MODERNITY

##### § 1

*The obsolescence of the category of “modernity”. Today we are all modern.*

Anyone who, coming from the dazzling world of exhibitionism and advertising, walks the streets (even including the shopping districts) of a socialist state—the walk from the zoo to Friedrichstrasse in Berlin is a good example—thinks that he has not only landed in a different continent, but even a different era. No, not in the future, but in the *past*. This impression arises from finding oneself transported to a world that, like the world of the past of our ancestors—which was in comparison not so disturbing—is not composed of stimulating images, but still contains objects, which, in the most sincere manner, “appear for what they

are”.<sup>186</sup> This feeling of going back in time seems all the more contradictory insofar as the self-understanding, proclaimed in a thousand ways, of the socialist states is in part formed by the conviction that they are much more advanced and “progressive” than the non-socialist states. However, *being progressive is not the same thing as being modern*. In fact, it has now been a half century since the East threw the category of “modernity” overboard after an eruption of modernity in the early twenties. This had various causes.<sup>187</sup> First, it is in part due to the fact that the category, “modern”, could only arise in the capitalist world and only in the latter could it possess validity. This becomes clear if we consider this category in connection with that of *fashion* (which is always modern). Given that it is in the interest of production that fashion should pave the way for the greatest possible number of products, it also has to create other, *new* and previously unknown products as often as possible. The product P, at first, was seductive by virtue of its nature, that is, “modern” thanks to its novelty in the front ranks of fashion; then (in the West everyone has *their own* style of clothing), it is acquired only by an elite, who can allow themselves superfluous luxuries and in this way desire to display themselves (and in fact do display themselves) as an elite; thus, this product P is converted—this is the first dialectical change—by way of advertising into a *must*, since no one wants to refrain, or is capable (due to social pressure) of refraining, from belonging to the elite; that is, *the product becomes something that no one can resist possessing; it becomes everyone’s fashion*. When this moment arrives, in which each person (each woman) has the product, that is, the moment of satisfaction, the second dialectical change takes place: these products create not only need, but also—and this is not so well known—*boredom*. Not only is there an advertising industry, but also an industry devoted to *customer dissatisfaction*. The customer is instilled with dissatisfaction: “You cannot wear those clothes (*old stuff*) anymore”.<sup>188</sup> And given that the first buyers of fashion are dispossessed of their prerogative

---

<sup>186</sup> The colossal skyscrapers of the sugar coated style that were built in the capitals of the East Bloc about thirty years ago will still have to continue to stand (since architecture is destiny); there, too, they are considered to be testimonials (especially of the imposed Soviet power), of which no one wants to be reminded anymore; that is, there, as well, they try to form part of the past; however, they are not for the most part conceived as objects of publicity. Their visual purpose was not so much that of seduction, as of *intimidation*. Even the miserable ornaments with which these gigantic scoops of ice cream are decorated in the *kitsch* style do not serve the purpose of attraction, but only the ostentatious display of power. They are similar to the medals which Stalin (who had awarded them to himself) wore when he was photographed or, in the interests of “culture”, when he posed for portraits.

<sup>187</sup> On the other hand, even among us the category of “modern”, which seemed to have been well entrenched in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (even Nietzsche sounded modern), is beginning to lose its modern character, and only retained its “modern” quality for a few decades. The title, *Temps Modernes*, which Sartre used at the end of the war for his magazine, was even then just as un-modern as the title of Chaplin’s film, *Modern Times*. Instead of the term, “modern”, which has become un-modern, we now have the less pretentious term, “new”. Socialism does not promise a “more modern” man, but a “new” man. The concept, “modern”, began to lose its modern character about half a century ago; examples: “*Neue Sachlichkeit*”, “*nouvelle vague*”, “*new look*”.

<sup>188</sup> Concerning the reaction of the young people to *blue jeans* and their principle—“Only what is used or, even better, what is worn out, is *up to date*”—see the previous chapter, § 7.

to call attention to themselves by way of product P, they also really believe that they “need” something new or, indeed, they really do need it. At this moment, the producer, in order to assure the continuation of the process of production, continues working methodically while P is still fashionable and he continues to produce and to sell it: the phases of P<sub>1</sub> and P<sub>2</sub> “overlap”. While P<sub>1</sub> is still advertised, P<sub>2</sub>, which must replace P<sub>1</sub>, is developed. And when P<sub>2</sub> is ready, it undergoes the same fate as its predecessor: it will become a “must” and will be imposed on everyone, so that later, when the moment of satisfaction is attained, it will fall victim to the boredom produced by its producer and will yield its place to a third generation of products. What applies to clothing also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to all products: stereo equipment, cars, machine guns, tanks and napalm bombs. They, too, subsequently become non-modern and are replaced by models from new generations. And *this never-interrupted depreciation of the matrix of models is contemporary history*, of which a *prestissimo* that has never before existed forms a part (as is often noted, but not from the perspective of the philosophy of history). Furthermore (and with this I return to the difference between the physiognomies of the capitalist and the non-capitalist worlds mentioned above): these reflections of the philosophy of history refer exclusively to the capitalist world. It is a commonplace that in pre-capitalist times, “time passed more slowly” than it does today, that is, that change occurred less often. But even in a highly industrialized but non-capitalist country like the Soviet Union, the rhythm of history is slower than it is among us, despite its notorious claim to have increased the pace of industrialization and planning. The feverish activity that is specific to capitalism, caused by the fact that, with each passing day, not only must more products be produced competitively, but also new types of products, does not exist in the socialist countries, because in the latter it is not required, unless these countries should be afraid of losing in their competition with the capitalist countries, especially in the armaments sector. The category of the *rhythm of history* cannot be sufficiently emphasized. The philosophies of history and of time remain empty as long as we are not offered any information about the economic system, whose “time” they investigate, and as long as they do not reveal anything to us about the rhythm of the time that is investigated. *Historical time* is not a fixed existential datum, any more than a “form of intuition” is. Rather, *it is a form of production, of the transformation of production and consumption*.

The second reason why the category of “modernity” is disappearing in the socialist states (or, if it did not exist previously, it will not appear) consists in the fact that “modern” (at least in the mouths of modern men) is a *connotative term*: being modern was the affair of an elite (often, of a marginal *bohème* that felt that it was an elite), which was hated and persecuted by the “non-moderns” with a resentment that even led to the incitement of pogroms.<sup>189</sup> The term, “modern”, entered the popular linguistic heritage especially in order to define clothing styles, cars and refrigerators; but not to define historical existence as such or as a name for the epoch (“modernity”). It is clear that the elitist and therefore non-egalitarian moment (it makes no difference whether it pertained the aristocracy, the *bohème* or the *intelligentsia*), which relied on the concept of “modernity”, was equally unacceptable as an ideal of life for

---

<sup>189</sup> With regard to this kind of resentment, National Socialism was equivocal; where the Nazis subjected “modernity” to popular rage, it was comparatively insignificant, that is, in art (not in technology).

both socialism and National Socialism.<sup>190</sup> For the Western mass societies that are neither fascist nor socialist, however, this “ideal” is just as unacceptable and useless, except as a part of the affirmation that in today’s mass society *no one is non-modern*. An American advertising slogan states: *You can’t help being up to date*. In fact, to be non-modern today requires an unusual degree of capacity for resistance. This is because these days everyone, by virtue of the fact that they are compulsory consumers, automatically participates in the “newest acquisitions” and because, having been trained in *planned obsolescence*, they *turn up their noses at outdated commodities supplied to them* (note the two-sided aspect, both active and passive, of this phrase). It cannot be said that participating in modernity is still a prerogative or a sign of distinction; or that there are still “special offers”. I am not referring only to *blue jeans*, or to the *latest hits* of the music/entertainment industry or of the recording devices, which flood us at home with the most trivial “retro” by means of the most refined and “up to date” technology, but also to the “cultural values” (as it is expressed so barbarously), to the products that, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the concept of “modernity” was still modern, were accounted to be more “modern” than all others: to *works of art*. Today, there is no longer anyone who is not familiar with the contemporary avant-garde of modern art, whose works are reproduced and therefore consumed in millions of copies. They are *in*. To the contrary, these days anyone who *does not* participate in the newest trend is considered to be non-conformist and *spleenig* [a crank]. Today, anyone who does not possess the newest *musts* calls attention to himself and becomes suspect in the same way that, in the past, in a phenomenon anticipating modernity, people used to attract attention to themselves as *dandies* and became suspect for that reason. For years now I have been accused of being arrogant and of displaying a “lack of democratic understanding” because I do not have a television, because I do not have time for it.

I should also add that nowadays, as paradoxical as it may sound, everyone has to be *up to date with respect to the masterpieces of the past*. No one brushes his teeth without the *Unfinished Symphony*, or vacuums his carpet without the *Liebestod*. It is possible that now and then a seed falls on fertile soil. We hope so. This is not part of the plan, however, neither for the producers nor for the consumers. As for the consumers: they—this is what they have discovered for a half century—love the “cultural values of the past” so passionately because they can enjoy them for free. They do not have to pay any royalties to Telemann or to Vivaldi, the cultural past is cheap, a gold mine *à discretion*. And with respect to the housekeepers: the only thing that matters to them is that *something* comes out of the acoustic spigot, not *what* comes out. For these reasons, the past also becomes “modern”.

## § 2

*The most modern thing about our time: past productions are rendered modern.*

---

<sup>190</sup> National Socialism transformed the whole people into an elite, but only to deceive it, of course; to do this it needed a pretext for a non-elite, for “vermin”. This pretext was served by means of the extermination of millions of Slavs and Jews. Concerning this question, see the author’s *Besuch im Hades*, Munich, 1979, p. 212.

Even this examination, however, does not exhaust the dialectic of today's situation. As paradoxical as it may sound, at the present time, especially in the United States, a person is considered to be modern if he (unlike the *man in the street*, who lives exclusively in the present) can exhibit or simulate a relation with the past, a kind of family tree: the pseudo-aristocrat who surrounds himself with rustic objects (which suggest an association with the "provincial nobility") or *continental* objects (which is a sign of culture). "Fragments of the corpse of history", Brecht once called them—most unjustly—since not only do they not decompose, but, to the contrary, they acquire a sweeter scent as they age and become more valuable possessions with the passage of the years, which in other times only occurred with violins or wine, and are all the more precious when everyone knows that not only did they cost a lot of money, but that should they be sold they must fetch a higher price than was paid for them or, more precisely, they *would*, since it is considered to be a sign of special prestige when someone, despite the constant increase in the value of his object, *does not* put it up for sale, and does not *need* to sell it. In fact, those who traffic in these objects, the antique dealers (unlike their ancestors, the vendors of used clothing who used to go about peddling their wares), have managed to convince their contemporaries, especially those who live in countries that are "history-poor" like America, that everything that survives in some manner from the old days is ennobled by its age and is thus a work of art; that the value of these used objects is greater than that of recently produced objects (which, of course, work better), because it is value conferred by prestige. Of course, it is often the case that the function of these old used objects changes and they are integrated into present day life, because not all their owners, especially in countries with utilitarian traditions, have learned yet to see a virtue in the lack of functionality of an object, nor have they learned to see the Kantian "disinterested pleasure" as a distinguished attitude that also confers distinction. Thus, once when I was in Hollywood, I saw a piece of furniture from a church that was not simply transformed into a work of art—the owner would have been ashamed of an object that was so purposeless—but rather into a wet-bar lit up by electricity. In any case, these esthetic objects are never simply "contemplated"; rather, the "artistic taste" of the owners almost always consists in the fact that it is this taste itself that the owners *exhibit*. To possess old objects, whose very look bespeaks of *roots*, as if they were inherited rather than purchased, is considered to be a hallmark of the elite and their ownership as "modern", yet not because their owners are *avant-gardistes*, but because they can behave as if they were *après-gardistes*.

Certainly, even with this exposition we have not reached the last stage of the dialectical development, for in view of the fact that everyone wants to be part of the elite—we have already described the transformation of elite fashion into mass fashion—and thus, for years now, the demand for "authentic" objects can no longer be satisfied, an industry producing antiquities has emerged that fills the void in the market with objects that have a more antique and more authentic appearance than the ones that are really authentic antiques. In fact, with regard to these inauthentic objects we are justified in saying that they are the authentic representatives of our epoch. Given that new objects are better than old ones, so, too, are the new antique objects better than the old antique objects. And no one invited to a *party* expects the purposeless spinning wheel in the hostess's *living room* to be really authentic. To the contrary: more than thirty years ago, at one of these *parties* in California I saw that the

hostess, as a result of her insistence that her old spinning wheel was really “an old antique”, was considered to be a tasteless boor.

I would not want to conclude this section without relating a similar incident, which also took place in California. Thirty-five years ago, in Westwood, I saw, in the air-conditioned *art room* of a couple of *would-be-Hollywood-stars*, suspended from the ceiling, a spinning wheel (I do not know if it was authentic or not) from a stage set in Arizona (whose *sentimental value* derived from the roles these actors performed in so-called *westerns*); a spinning wheel whose owner, as he modestly explained to me, had acquired it at an auction where the bidding for it was based on its prestige value, and furthermore this increased its real monetary value, too, since, as I have already said, old unusable junk fetches incomparably higher prices than the best modern domestic convenience, because of its rarity (real or imputed), by its ability to satisfy the need for nostalgia, and because only the rich can permit themselves the luxury of owning something that cannot be used. There it was, then, this spinning wheel, hanging there without knowing where its thousands of sisters (if it was the fruit of mass production) had ended up and perplexed with respect to what it had to do, for it did not feel like going on spinning around, against its nature, like its counterpart, the *mobile*, which was at that time a relatively unknown phenomenon, only understood as “modern” and incomprehensible to it; and it was mortally bored. To summarize: modernism and conservatism (at least, the ostentatious public display of the past) are not only not mutually exclusive, but are even complementary; and this is in fact an extremely peculiar mode of “historicity”.

### § 3

*Once again: the non-modernity of the category, “modern”*

But let us return to our main thesis, which is the assertion that the concept of “modernity” is no longer modern. The main reason why it has become non-modern is that technology has become the only subject of history;<sup>191</sup> technology, which—and this seems to be paradoxical—can only be *new* in the most tedious way, but not properly *modern*. Again, this applies above all to the socialist states of the East: their ideological watchdogs always deprecate whatever is called “modern” in the West at any particular time, stigmatizing it as pretentiously exaggerated in terms of taste, of “formalism”, of being “bourgeois”, of “degeneracy” and therefore already left behind *in statu nascendi* and, finally, of being non-progressive or anti-progressive. And they only accept key works of modern art—the works of Schönberg and Kafka are representative of many others—after several decades have passed, that is, only when they are no longer “modern”, but merely works from the past, *faits accomplis*, that, in view of the fact that they allegedly no longer represent any virulent threat (since in the meantime something else has appeared that is “more modern than the modern”), do not need to be fought, nor can they even be fought effectively. But the proletarians and the socialist states no longer use the category, “modern”, for understanding their own historical present and its verbal articulation. And even this expression, “no longer”, is equivocal, for it still seems to imply that they used the category at one time—a category that pertained

---

<sup>191</sup> See the previous chapter, § 3.



exclusively to the bourgeoisie and the *lumpenbourgeoisie*, the *bohême*—and that they still had a living memory of having used the word. At most, they co-used it. That is why, as nice as it may sound, it is also inaccurate to speak of a *conversion of the category*, “modernity”, *into the non-modern*, since this formulation would not exclude the possibility that there might be something else that was still modern and that only *it*, the category itself, is no longer modern. However, while a fashion, a work of art or an author—and only in the framework of the history of the fashions that continually replace each other—can become non-modern, the category of “modernity” itself cannot. Thus, what we are addressing here is a disappearance that is hard to characterize from the point of view of the philosophy of history and which represents a fundamental event in the *history of the categories of history*, or, if you like, in the “*history of history*”.

#### § 4

#### *Modernity and progress.*

But let us return to the difference between the East and the West from the point of view of the philosophy of history. We may summarize our argument in the following way: whereas the East, without being aware of having taken this step, has allowed the category of “modernity” to die and rejects many Western artists and works of art as “non-progressive”, the West, on the other hand, denounces (this denunciation is, at least, mandated by the “progressive” or avant-garde intellectuals, who are in charge of the apparatus of categories used by society) as “non-modern” those contemporary artists who, even today, whether in the Soviet Union or the United States, recognize as valid and continue to use the category of “progress” without any mistrust of the word and who are still producing their sculptures and paintings of little merit, based on naturalist or heroic themes, for parks and party headquarters. In a park in a city in Upper Silesia, in 1965, I was brought, not without a show of pride and solemnity, to a bronze statue of an eighteen-year old girl who, with a vigorous gesture, was brandishing a sickle, naturally covered in clothing from head to foot and, although I had no particular curiosity to get to know this girl, they explained that she was the *allegory of progress*. And that was what was written on the pedestal of the statue, probably for those who did not immediately see this. The fair young maiden was showing her age for three reasons: *first*, because she might have been modeled by Begas and had not yet attained the modernity of her predecessors, the statues of Meunier; *second*, because she was condemned to be an allegory of something; *third*, because, besides the fact that she was given a very obsolete tool that was not at all characteristic of a mining district, she had to embody an antiquated concept. My guide, who did not have the faintest idea of all of this, lacked even a shred of intellectual integrity; I am absolutely sure that he did not understand my exclamation of compassion: “The poor girl!”

## Chapter 19

## THE OBSOLESCENCE OF HISTORY

### III

(1978)

## THE WORLD AS SIREN

### § 1

#### *The obsolescence of taboos.*

By claiming that by way of *planned obsolescence* and the possibility of indirect destruction, the *protection* of old objects has disappeared, I have announced the obsolescence of a relation with the world. In fact, with each passing day, not only are our machines wearing out; so are our attitudes. Thus, for example, by way of the technological possibility of indirect mass murder (Auschwitz and Hiroshima) and by way of the scenes of torture and murder delivered *en masse* to our homes by the *mass-media*, the horror-taboo attached to violence has been eliminated. The same thing is true—and all the ethnologists concur on this—of the sexual taboo, the most ancient one, which has been reformulated again and again, most recently by Christianity. The latter has been superseded not only by the production of the birth control pill, but also by the manufacture and public sale of pornographic images, films and *gadgets*, not to speak of public displays of sexual acts, common everywhere for the last ten years; in short: the producers of these commodities have changed the function of the sexual impulse by transforming it into a demand for commodities and, thus, *eo ipso*, into something that must be accepted (since it would be an unpardonable waste not to use as a commodity something that can be used as a commodity). This development began in the United States and reached its climax (from which it has never since receded) during the Vietnam War; and this is understandable, since it is clear that those men who were permitted or, more accurately, were ordered on a daily basis to engage in the obscenity of murder, and the families *back home*, to whom the obscene visual record of murder was delivered right into their living rooms without the least compunction ... it is understandable, as I was saying, that these millions of people would not be forbidden to engage in or capitalize on that other obscenity, sexual obscenity, which is in comparison with murder completely innocent. Certainly, no one is unaware of the fact that the sexual taboo, after thousands of years of rule, has entirely disappeared in two or three decades. But aside from a couple of puritanical women's groups, no one can fail to recognize what this disappearance really means: it is one of the revolutions that constitute epochal milestones in the cultural history of humanity.<sup>192</sup>

It is almost superfluous to explain that the ruling class, too, has a profound interest in liberation from, that is, in the demolition of, this taboo, because it thus buys the untouchability of what is, in the last instance, of most interest to it: the taboo of property, as long as one can speak of “buying” here, for if the demolition of the sexual taboo is implemented in the form of the sale of commodities, the customers buy, to the extent that

---

<sup>192</sup> The reference to Freud as an authority represents a colossal error, because he reaffirmed the recognition and the observance of taboos as a premise of civilization.

they are willing to obey the offer, while for the producers and marketers of the objects liberation from the taboo is simultaneously *profitable*, and by this means they “buy” non-liberation from the taboo of property. In any event, by way of the systematic liberalization and production of sexual excitation, capitalism reduces the possibility of political excitation and the emergence of political and moral consciousness. *Just as in other times hard work was recommended as a preventive against sexuality, today sexuality is recommended as an anti-moral and anti-political preventive.* I cannot forget that strip joint in New York, a week after the destruction of Hiroshima, which tried to attract passersby with these words: *Sensational An-atomic Bombs! Step Inside!* With these five words, after the elimination of a city, so, too, was the very fact of its elimination also eliminated. *The supersession of taboos*, which at one time—*lang ists her*—was a revolutionary act, has at the very least *now become a counterrevolutionary measure, too.*

## § 2

### *The sirenic world.*

This sexualization, however, is not an isolated phenomenon in our world. Rather, it has become its fundamental quality, since our world is a world that *publicizes it* and operates in accordance with its purpose the more it is advertised. And given that nothing is more effective in getting our attention than sexual excitation, the world is no longer presented as “the world itself”, but as *sirenic*. Anyone who takes a walk through the *city centers* of the world’s major cities, no longer walks amidst facades, but among lips, tits and legs of various sizes, used as advertising for every type of commodity, even, or rather almost always, commodities that do not have the least connection with sex, such as, for example, snow tires, as I saw recently in Paris. These commodities display their qualities “with bared breast” or, more precisely, they define themselves with the help of breasts. Our world, as paradoxical as it may sound, *is clothed in nudity*; this “nudity” so completely covers the real world that the latter has been *degraded to an adjunct of advertising*. With regard to the capitalist world, we can say, or more properly, we must say, that *it no longer appears as it is*, and that its authentic aspect (if such a thing really exists) is *obsolete*. Whereas, in the section devoted to the obsolescence of appearance I showed how machines attempt *to appear to be less than they are*, when they do not even *simulate nothing*, here I show instead how the world of commodities, by way of the increase of its visibility, attempts to *appear for more than it is*, and even to attain a spectacular visibility as an *anticipatory appearance* in images of the world that must be consumed. In both cases there is a discrepancy between the thing and its appearance. The things of the world around us are not visible, then, in the same sense. They are, rather, divided into three groups: that of things, which certainly “appear for what they are”; the group of those that “appear to be less than they are”; and finally, the group of those that “appear to be more than they are”. The expression, *anticipatory appearance*, coined by Bloch to designate the anticipation of utopian happiness by way of art, here indicates the lure that precedes the commodity as an entrancing messenger.

Gaps are not tolerated. As if by magic, during the night the advertising billboards, which surround construction sites, are emblazoned with new lures. And even in a city that is as un-modern as Vienna, the trolleys serve as mobile advertising platforms for appliances and

mineral water; the fact that one can still travel in such trolleys is, in a way, a residue of the past. Most unexpectedly, the term “publicize” recovers its original sexual meaning.<sup>193</sup> Only now *we* are not the *subjects* of publicity, but the commodities are (or more precisely, the producers of the commodities), who zealously hunt for customers, that is, they must display themselves as exciting objects. *They are there, rank upon rank, to conquer us in our capacity as buyers.* Or else they present themselves, day and night, as a gigantic striptease act. Or, finally—this third metaphor is also fitting—as an enormous slave market, which in numerous *cities* occupies many square kilometers. Not seeing these striptease acts or this slave market is not only impossible because of the fact that in the Broadway-like confusion of the metropolis it is impossible “to walk in a relaxed manner as if in a forest”, but above all because an inversion of passivity has been produced—this forms part of the *Theory of Knowledge of the Industrial Era*, which has not yet been written; by this I am referring to the fact that it is not we who are looking at the world, but rather we are looked at by the exposed commodities and advertising images; and this takes place all the more inexorably, and even in the most penetrating and shameless way, the more artificial is the need that must be stimulated. Images of bread, which are advertised and consumed directly and without a lot of hoopla, do not participate in the ballet or, in any case, only do so rarely; instead, there are always images of “artificial commodities”, without which one cannot live. And we, as citizens of the capitalist world, that is, as customers, cannot avoid the parade in these markets (since wherever we go is a market), represent only *a mass of millions of coerced voyeurs.* This is what the producers, the owners of the big stores and the *publicity people* have done to us: they have turned us into *voyeurs* who, surrounded by and subject to the fixed gaze of the inevitable images, are not capable of looking beyond this show, we are not capable of such a thing, we do not want to look beyond it; of course, this is a situation that the producers only desire as a provisional measure, for they naturally expect, or more accurately, have the exclusive goal of causing us to consider our purely visual relation only as a means towards the goal of replacing it, as soon and as quickly as possible, with the more real relation of advertising and consumption.<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>193</sup> Etymology of “Publicize”: from “public”; “... from Old French *public* (ca. 1300) and directly from Latin *publicus* ‘of the people; of the state; done for the state,’ also ‘common, general, public; ordinary, vulgar,’ and as a noun, ‘a commonwealth; public property,’ altered (probably by influence of Latin *pubes* ‘adult population, adult’) from Old Latin *poplicus* ‘pertaining to the people,’ from *populus* ‘people.’” “... Latin *pubes* (genitive *pubis*) ‘genital area, groin,’ related to *pubes* (adj.) ‘full-grown.’” [From the “Online Etymology Dictionary”—American translator’s note].

<sup>194</sup> Some advertising images promise the professional *voyeurs*, who for financial or sexual-pathological reasons cannot take the step to real consumption, that is, who remain eternally fixed in the provisional status of merely looking, images that will satisfy them somehow. I am thinking, for instance, of the (so-called *stills*) photos posted as lures at the porno theaters, which in a way are images of the “real images”, of the *pictures* or in the marquees of the theaters (which, in turn, are mixed with *commercial spots*, that is, with exciting images of or for other commodities). In the eyes of both the producers and the customers, the mere contemplation of these *pictures* is considered as their real consumption. Therefore, the *stills*, which are also *images*, *advertise images*. It is surprising that today the “iteration of reproduction” that Plato had already formulated (with other intentions, of course: the painted

We cannot conclude this description without pointing out that this transformation of the world into a sirenic world would never have been possible without the invention of *electric light*. Without the latter, that is, without the light of day, commodities and advertising would almost always only be “visible”, and therefore would only “appear for what they are”; they would not stand out, as they do at night, from the darkness (or from among the commodities of the competition, less powerfully illuminated), even if they are not inevitable. Just like their two-legged models, commodities and advertising have a nocturnal life; and if God had not created the night, the advertising industry would have had to invent and produce it.

Of course, this nocturnal life is not an unalloyed success, since the competitive struggle that commodities engage in among themselves can only be prosecuted, if the commodities are in lights or take the form of illuminated lures, as they attempt to dazzle each other, and they paradoxically create a diffuse and general blaze of light, amidst which no particular piece can stand out. *That is, through their illumination, they cancel each other out: an exact reproduction of the capitalist world.* In any case, the role of electricity, especially in the form of the avalanche of light, goes so far as to transform not just the commodities, *sensu stricto*, into pieces at an exposition, but also into pieces of reality, which it thus transforms into commodities: buildings or, even better, whole neighborhoods are transformed for the tourists into commodities to look at, which in turn serve as publicity for the travel agencies and the hotel industry. These illuminated plazas correspond to the headlines of the newspapers, which invite you to read the small print. The illuminated Church of Saint Mark, which radiates a magnificence that its architects would never even have dreamed of, becomes an advertisement for itself. The Chiesa della Salute stands out from the obscure background of the lagoon like a jewel against its setting. Even this, however, is a dubious success, since like the posters that seduced the customers to allow the travel agency to plan their visit to “the real Venice”, which they had seen at home, bathed in bright light, these real churches present themselves to those who go there as mere three dimensional copies of the exciting images, as copies before which they react with boredom and annoyance, which they naturally refuse to acknowledge. The medication that they use against this *tristitia post* consists in photographing the “obligatory churches”, that is, in making them become images again. By “producing” these images (which, of course, can no longer be called “production”, since the same device does everything that is necessary) the circle is closed that had opened with the advertising image at the travel agency.

### § 3

#### *The non-sirenic world of the East.*

---

images of the world are εἰδωλα of εἰδωλα) is repeated. In this connection, read the philosophical summary: “The Obsolescence of Materialism”. I recently saw, at an exposition entitled, “History of the Poster”, advertising images of the twenties that no longer had any purpose (since the products that they advertised have since disappeared) and had thus become works of art. Many images with a religious content are like these posters [...] [This footnote is incomplete in the first edition of the Spanish translation of the book—American Translator’s Note.]

But let us again return from the brightly illuminated West to East Berlin. It is not surprising that here we are not surrounded by shining luminous lures, for *when the customers are the ones who hunt the commodities, the latter do not pursue the customers*, and where there are no competitors, compelled to overshadow or to blind other commodities or images of commodities with their own, *advertising is superfluous*. That is why the socialist East has such a horribly colorless appearance. And with this observation, we return to the topic of the dissolution of the sexual taboo. Given that the universalization of sexual excitation, which in the West is used to advertise everything, is not necessary in the East, in the East the elimination of the sexual taboo as such has obviously not taken place, either. And this is also valid for the German Democratic Republic, which I stress because its television-watching public cannot be prevented from becoming aware of this development and being infected by it. As strange as this claim may sound—if someone were to have made this prediction fifty years ago he would have been considered a madman<sup>195</sup>—there can be no doubt that the socialist states, despite their atheism and their repression of religion, have preserved the sexual morality of the monotheistic religions, the rule of monogamy and even the concept of sin (or at least, the guilty conscience) incomparably more effectively than the capitalist states, which guarantee freedom of religion. Responsibility for this *official prudery*, which dominates one-third of the globe, is of course also to be attributed to the fact that every revolutionary orthodoxy has a tendency to asceticism or, more accurately, prescribes and imposes such asceticism, since they mistrust pleasure, not to speak of “libertinage”, as an unpredictable natural force that poses a danger to *Law and Order*, a revolution within the revolution, that is, because it is anarchistic. In China, supposedly, this tendency has even gone so far—and I only say this advisedly, because it sounds entirely incredible—as to so profoundly impose modesty that most people under thirty years of age are celibate. It is assumed that one can only “court” after that age. And then, naturally, *not from something, but for something*: the partner.

I previously mentioned that the streets in the East Bloc have an antique look to us and seem to be full of nostalgia, because, as in the times of our grandfathers, they have the “sincerity” of “appearing for what they are”, and do not lend themselves to serve as a mere backdrop for advertising. This “sincerity”, which we really do not understand to be a virtue, but rather a consequence of *force majeure*, we explain by saying that where there is no capitalist competition or any preponderance of supply over demand, advertising is superfluous.

This assertion, however, cannot be categorically maintained in this form. Publicity, equally pompous, also has its place in the East. On May Day, houses are buried under images and posters. This case, however, does *not* involve:

1. competition against *competitors*, who no longer exist (unless one considers the entire capitalist world as *the* competitor of the socialist world);

---

<sup>195</sup> I can even recall that, during the first years of the Bolshevik Revolution, in reactionary newspapers in the United States and Europe, the revolution was identified with “women in common”. Elsewhere, “group sex” had become customary.

2. or advertising for *commodities*. What is publicized is rather the construction of socialism or what is called by that name: its power, its government, its “classics”, the fulfillment of the plan;
3. or advertising with the help of means of seduction. Not with the help of tits and legs does it hunt for souls, but with the display of *instruments of intimidation* like anti-ballistic missiles (which do not “appear to be more” than they are, but “less”);<sup>196</sup> or by way of the parade of images of Marx and Lenin (transformed into colossal icons in the most ridiculous way); or with the absurd display of texts (perhaps, even, texts full of meaning, but transformed into outrageous pre-literate amulets). It is certainly undeniable that these public relations tactics, which regularly reach their peak on May Day, also transform the appearance of the socialist cities. Unlike the seductive images of the West, however, which must be changed daily so that they will always keep us on the edge of our seats and curious, the colossal images of May Day are the same ones that were used the year before (even if one cult portrait is always indistinguishable from another): that is why they lack that force of attraction that stimulates curiosity, which, whether you like it or not, cannot be denied to the seductive images of the West. Nor do the images of the East display that previously discussed reversal of visual focus, in which people, instead of observing images, *are observed by them*. Instead, both images and persons are bored and visually unfocused.<sup>197</sup> And if on these festive occasions there is something that grips the masses, it is at most the imposing scene of the masses themselves.

## Chapter 20

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF FANTASY<sup>198</sup>

(1955)

§ 1

*The fantastic as realism.*

---

<sup>196</sup> See “The Obsolescence of Appearance”.

<sup>197</sup> The fact that the National Socialists were more successful in organizing propagandistic demonstrations than the Russian dictators can be explained by the fact that the former could resort to the propaganda techniques and exhibitionist tendencies of capitalism and that they were impostors not because of the degeneration of their principles, but from the beginning, *ab ovo*. It was really only a very small step from the impressive mass demonstrations in the film, *Metropolis*, produced by the UFA, to the Nuremberg Rallies in the style of Riefenstahl, something that was admitted by Fritz Lang, the director of the UFA’s pompous film, who noted the surprising similarity in 1940.

<sup>198</sup> First published in *Die Sammlung*, March 1955.

There are certain experiences that can be called “historical short-circuits”: moments when spiritual or artistic phenomena suddenly become apparent, whose connection was previously invisible.

Not long ago I witnessed one of these short-circuits. And because the following reflections on the philosophy of art, regarding *fantasy in the era of a reality that has become fantastic*, owe their existence to this short-circuit, I would like to relate an account of the experience in question.

I recently visited an exposition of *surrealist painting* with an octogenarian lady, of extraordinary intelligence, who in her youth had been as outspoken as she was expert in matters relating to art. For her, this was her first encounter with surrealism, despite the fact that naturally it was anything but a contemporary movement; in fact, it had begun in Paris during the twenties. In any event, this elderly lady’s taste was always largely dominated by 19<sup>th</sup> century French painting, especially by the great impressionists, which, along with “modernity”, had conquered Germany at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What came afterwards she had discounted (insofar as she noticed it at all) as evidence of *re-barbarization*. So I was not very confident about having convinced this old woman, who was still as outspoken as ever, to undertake this “excursion to the future”, and I observed, not without a certain amount of anxiety, how she pounded her cane on the floor as she passed from one painting to another and wrinkled her brow more and more with each picture she looked at.

But what really made me anxious was not only her personal impression; what tormented me was something more profound, something that was directly philosophical-historical, that is: how would the taste of yesteryear, a taste formed by Manet, Monet and Renoir, react to works of art that, although issuing from the past, were still “futuristic”, that is, what would be the outcome of this encounter between the two eras? “And?”, I asked her at the end in order to provoke her, since she had remained silent despite the fact that we had walked, without a word, through two rooms full of pictures without stopping before a single one.

Of course, I had foreseen that she would be indignant. And indeed she was. The curt observation that she pronounced, however, caught me entirely off-guard. What she found offensive about the works was not that they were *too futuristic*, but rather that they were *too old-fashioned*. When she exclaimed with animation, “All Böcklin!”, it resounded like a death sentence.

We stopped in front of a work in which, from an empty countryside, populated solely by very well-executed torsos of plaster figures, almost in an academic style, some kind of gigantic typewriter emerged, which plunged some roots that looked like magnetic tapes into the ground, while from its mechanism, in the form of its entrails, bright red peonies and lacquered fingernails sprouted. “All Böcklin?”, I asked her, taken aback.

“What else, if not Böcklin, kid?”, she replied. “All in vain! These gentlemen cling to the figurative [*Gegenständliches*]. Only to their fantastic objects! Just like that ...”, she said, reflecting for a moment in search of a lethal epithet for the man who for her represented



everything that was pseudo-art, "... that *champion of the days gone by* of my youth: instead of his centaurs, today they paint these typewriters that sprout growths. But the quality of the painting—of the *painting*, mind you, not of the *theme*—is of no concern to them at all!"

I responded: "It seems to me that one cannot deny that these paintings exhibit a certain artistic perfection."

"Of course not", she admitted sarcastically. "I would not even deny that the maudlin works of Böcklin exhibit a certain artistic perfection. They look like they are *varnished*. As if the melancholy was finished with a coat of wax." She raised her cane in a threatening gesture towards the germinating typewriter; I was a little scared. "Nor would I want to deny that this thing also has that inferior kind of perfection. It looks like it was buttered. Varnished. Exactly the way typewriters finished in lacquer would have to look. But the varnished appearance belongs to the perfection of the object that they depict, not to the perfection of the *painting*. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*"

I agreed with her, if only to prevent her from waving her cane so angrily. But my *sacrificium* was futile, for she was already out of the gate. "And naturally", she continued, "here, you cannot speak of fantasy. Where fantasy is necessary it is for the purpose of constructing real typewriters or real airplanes. Today, the real fantasy is that of the *inventor*: *he* is the person who really reconfigures reality. On the other hand, to deform these objects, which are in themselves fantastic, like this ... that you would need fantasy for this ... don't try to fool me, kid!"

The way she waved her cane around instilled me with respect. "Of course not", I said.

"That, not to speak of the stitches, of course," she continued.

"What?"

Then she began to wave her cane around in a really threatening manner. "Here, here and here: don't you see all these stitches between the keys and the fingernails, between the organic and the inorganic, between the separate painted fragments that are painted with such pedantic realism? And how are all these stitches undone? And how do all its contents burst out everywhere?"

I was on the verge of objecting, by appealing to the intentional effect of contrast, to the fact that in today's world the most bizarre things are conjoined or, in her words, *stitched together*: the animate and the inanimate; to the fact that, often, it is precisely *the living* that is assigned the function of a *thing*, while *things*—in the form of enormous machines or institutions—constitute the *life* of our epoch; to the fact that mere juxtaposition, the apparently organic, the visibility of "stitches that come apart" ... all these things are not the product of the fantasy of the surrealists, but rather, by accentuating these traits, they make the reality of our contemporary world fully visible for the first time. But the old lady was already beside herself with rage, she was uttering curses like a housewife who rejected a miserable piece of needlework; in short: her explosion was a natural event, which it would have been

completely useless to try to interrupt. “And you bring me to see these things!”, she shouted hoarsely; and the other patrons at the exposition were watching us with surprise. “This kind of crap? Have you never seen, you brat, a painting by Monet?”

“Of course”, I said, bewildered.

“And? Did you find any stitches there? Not even a blemish in the texture! All one piece! And not even the least bit of pretentiousness! But *this*, what is this? Here, everything is undone! The only thing that holds it together is the frame! Yes, this is ...” “Pure additive fantasy”, I finished her sentence for her against my better judgment, but with the hope of leading her torrential outpouring of words towards a more tranquil and academic language, because her voice had become quite loud and the crowd at the exposition was already beginning to surround us.

“That’s it!”, she cackled triumphantly. “Pure addition! Here, the mere addition of machine and plant, of the inorganic and the organic, just as in our famous Böcklin there was nothing more than the pure addition of the body of a horse and a human head!”

“Exactly!”, I lied (for the other people were now laughing at us); I took her firmly by the arm, and cleared a way through the crowd and led her to the next hall, where I set her down on an armchair. “Anyway,” I said, vainly seeking to placate her, “even before that the connection between the body of a horse and the head of a man had to exist, too, in Greek mythology, for example. And now, just take a breather.”

“What breather?”, she replied, offended. She suspected that I was getting enjoyment from agitating her. “Is that why you brought me here?”

I denied it.

“Good. But as for your Greeks, kid, I don’t know much about them, but I assume that they, too, had really *imagined* beings that were part animal and part man; and they depicted what was to them only *a unity* and what *they believed*; that is, that they did not first produce this combination with their brush, like our famous Böcklin, who only affirmed the centauric. Fantasy is only authentic when one is not at all aware of the fact that one is fantasizing. And that is why the ancient centaurs do not show any stitching.”

I could really agree with that. “But that you of all people should lack faith”, I said, “surprises me a little, for aren’t the paintings by Manet and Monet perhaps documents of faith?”

“It is all the same to me whether you call it that or not. Maybe they are so convincing precisely because they do not claim to depict *anything* that they do *not* believe in. Furthermore, I am quite convinced that Monet or Picasso believed in the shimmering heat of the gardens of summer more profoundly than Böcklin believed in his islands of the dead or in his centaurs, not to speak of the fact that, as I have said, he completely lacked fantasy.”

Here we go again.... “Madame, I think you are really exaggerating,” I said.

She was so sure of herself, however, that she did not even protest. “Never,” she said. “But don’t tell me that Böcklin had original or even fantastic perception. What he fantasized about was fantastic only with regard to its content. However, the way he presented it was not fantastic at all. In fact, he presented his subjects as something perceptible, as if *he had painted the fantastic according to nature*; or as if *he believed* he could perceive things, without having passed through the school of cleanliness of impressionism. Many things he painted even appear to have been *photographed*. Didn’t it ever strike you that his discredited *Playing in the Waves* looked like a color photograph, that he had anticipated by a decade; almost like a photograph on high quality paper of a mythical bathing scene at the islands of Helgoland? That type with the beer belly, which for that matter is not otherwise represented without a certain humor, looks like my father-in-law: the commercial agent type.”

“Now you see”, I said, satisfied, thinking that I had overcome her excitement with her own humor. “I will not deny that in the era of photography one cannot play the fantasist with impunity. Perhaps his untrammelled fantasizing was even a response to the supremacy of photography: Böcklin was polemically dependent on the spirit of his time.”

“I see. Like any reactionary.”

I admitted it. “But if you reproach Böcklin for his lack of fantasy, *do you believe that the impressionists possessed more fantasy?*”

She looked at me as if I had uttered a capital piece of foolishness. “But, please! To free oneself from the habitual way of seeing that had prevailed for centuries, as the impressionists did, doesn’t that require more fantasy than freeing oneself from the objects that we perceive?”

There was some truth to that. “Maybe”, I said.

“They had the most original way of seeing, even if they exclusively painted real things, Monet no less than Manet or Sisley. Each of them saw differently; their fantasy was already in their perception and has had such a profound influence on our way of perceiving, that today we are still seeing things with their eyes.”

“And what about them, the surrealists?”

“It is just in this aspect that they are also like Böcklin. They compete with color photographs. This typewriter looks like a photograph from a retail catalogue mounted in the desert. And what is fantastic about it is merely the fact that it sprouts flowers. And that does not interest me.”

With those words she stood up vigorously. And without taking my arm, she crossed the hall towards the exit. When we were outside, she pointed with her cane at the roses that had just begun to bloom. “This is what seems fantastic to me”, she said laughing contentedly, “even though they do not have keys.” She hailed a cab and was gone.

§ 2

*Realism as something fantastic.*

His paintings looked like third rate imitations of Trübner's landscapes. But one day he explained to me, with a truly disarming ignorance—since the fashion trends and discussions of art had never reached his city in Styria—that now art had to get in step with the times; that is why he was thinking of painting the atomic bomb; and he asked me what I thought about that.

“Not much”, I responded.

“Why?”

*“Because the atomic bomb is too insignificant.”*

He thought he had not heard me correctly.

“Yes, too insignificant, compared to its fantastic reality, that is, compared to the danger that is concealed within it. Try to take what I am saying in a philosophical sense, that is, in the sense that *the bomb is not considered for what it is*. And that, basically, there cannot be any depiction that would really be in accordance with this reality.”

He wrinkled his brow.

*“I consider something meaningful insofar as it is recognized for what it is”*, I explained.

“For example?”

“Your face. Or mine. In mine you recognize *me*. In yours I see *you*. It is more or less like that with everything, since everything has its face. Even animals. Even machines. Even a house. Even a summer's day. That is why, if you want to characterize these things it is also legitimate to paint their faces or their appearances.”

“These things? But you just said that *everything* has a face.”

*“Had. Everything had one. But today there are things that have the appearance of anything; their aspect is so inadequate for their reality, that they end up being mere appearance and falsehood.”*

“Bah!”, he said, vaguely recalling some epistemological commonplace, “every aspect ends up being appearance and falsehood.”

“So, then, in our case we have a *double falsehood*, a *double appearance*.”

He did not understand this.

“*The fact that* these things have an aspect is already a falsehood; and it is also an illusion, when things whose effect is immeasurable have the aspect of predictable and visible objects. In a way, what we are dealing with here is *false modesty*, since the *suprasensory* conforms with the innocuous and non-apparent aspect of things that can be measured and are susceptible to sensory perception.”

“Suprasensory?” he repeated with wrinkled brow.

“Yes. Only you must not understand the term in a religious sense, but in a sense that fully justifies the expression, that is, in the sense that our sensory perception is fundamentally too limited when it is a matter of perceiving these things and that someone who copies them fails in the same way, since the [outward] aspect of these things does not reveal their truth. Therefore, the *atomic bomb* belongs to this class of objects, since it appears to be just another object, that is, *innocuous*, despite the fact that it could very well be the end of all objects in general. *Thus, its aspect disguises its being. If you were to want to paint it, you would have to paint this disguise at the same time, whether you like it or not. For that reason, every image of the atomic bomb, no matter how realistic it may be, will end up being an ingenuous whitewash, it will end up being fantastically unrealistic and automatically a genre painting.*”

“That’s a good one,” he exclaimed. “A realistic painting automatically transformed into a genre painting!” And he laughed foolishly.

I just nodded my head.

“Do you have more contradictions like that in the pipeline?”

“Me? It is reality that has them.” I hoped that this would shut him up.

But keeping quiet for more than a couple minutes was too much for him. “And even if you are right,” he resumed, even more impertinently than before, “why are we artists? So that we should exercise caution? If our perception is not enough, we call upon our fantasy to help it.”

“True.”

He was confused.

“So, you call upon your fantasy for help. Do you think that this will help you represent the *real* object? The object, whose aspect is too insignificant? To represent it adequately or inadequately?”

“Then, naturally,” he responded with great determination, perhaps without thinking of anything definite.

“*Naturally*, it certainly is not. Instead, it is something entirely new.”

“Calling upon the help of fantasy?”

“Not that, but the *purpose for which* you call upon it. Previous artists did so in order to *surpass* reality. You, on the other hand, do it to *conform to* reality, so that you can be more capable of approximating it, that is, so that you can still be *realistic*. Does this not seem to you to be something very new?”

Ideas that he did not immediately grasp, he considered to be deception. “What things you put in one’s mouth”, he reproached me. And then, not without pride: “Anyway, novelty does not shock me so much.”

“Nor does your boldness impress me very much. Audacity with respect to novelty on the battlefield of the sketch pad or the canvas is not a very impressive kind of heroism.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Anyway,” I continued, “it is too easy to say that one ‘calls upon fantasy to help’. Just try to do it with the atomic bomb.”

“What do you mean?”

“*It is so fantastic, that not only our perception but even our fantasy fails to measure up to it.*”

“*Ah! And the fact that we were capable of inventing it? Doesn’t that prove something?*”

“And what is it supposed to prove?”

“That our fantasy does indeed measure up to it.”

I shook my head.

“*So, can we discover things that cannot be discovered?*”, he said, gazing at me triumphantly.

“Exactly. Very well formulated. Only that here one must understand the prefix, *aus-*, as in the terms, *aus-pressen* or *aus-trinken*; that is, *aus-denken* [*discover* or *invent*], in the sense that one thinks something through to its final consequences.<sup>199</sup> And we cannot do this with the atomic bomb. *We are smaller than ourselves; we are by no means capable of measuring up to what we invent and are capable of making; and even our fantasy cannot measure up to*

---

<sup>199</sup> The logic of this argument rests on the corresponding German words: discover = invent = *aus-denken*; squeeze = *aus-pressen*; drain to the last drop = *aus-trinken*. In all these German words the prefix, *aus-*, is used, which we have attempted to translate with our *dis*(cover), *squeeze*, and *drain* [Note of the Spanish Translator]. [In the Spanish translation, *des*(cubrir), *ex*(primir) and *a*(purar); the original German words have been used in the main body of the text of this English translation—Supplementary Note of the American Translator.]

*our fantasy or the products of our fantasy; therefore, it cannot measure up to their consequences, either.*”

Discouraged by this assertion, which was the cardinal point of the argument, he nevertheless responded with an ingenious: “I cannot measure up to that.”

“And I cannot measure up to your lack of seriousness!”, I replied. “Is your problem important to you or not?”

He gave me a surprised look.

“Because if it’s not important to you, I’ll take off.”

He admitted it was important to him by nodding his head, confused, but not without a certain admiration. “You really know how to confuse a person.”

“Then learn something!”, I exclaimed. “That it is not I who confuse you, but reality! That is what confuses you, because it is itself confusing. And *that* is what has undermined our respectable distinction between perception and fantasy.”

He turned his head and sighed. “So, again with something new.”

“Quite the contrary: always the same, but with a new twist. There was a time when we believed that the goal of perception was something real and fantasy, on the other hand, aimed at something unreal. Is that not true?”

“I think so,” he replied reluctantly.

“And rightly so. But now both of them refer to the same thing: to the real. Yes, fantasy, too, because this time it interests you because you want to call upon its help, not because you want *to go beyond* the real, but to adequately depict the ‘fantastic’ effects of the *real*. But it cannot succeed. Your fantasy remains, just like perception, in the *unreal*, because instead of *grasping* or even going beyond, it can only *remain beneath* [without entirely grasping it]. Thus, since both fantasy and perception are equally too limited and are similar to one another with respect to their failure, I have the right to say that the difference between the two of them has dissolved.”

This shut him up. It was obvious that now he was so disoriented that he did not feel like continuing to listen to my hyper-subtle observations. But I could not resist taking advantage of the opportunity. That is why I continued: “But don’t think that these reflections refer only to our relation with the atomic bomb or with other devices like that. It involves something much more fundamental: our *limitation*.”

“So I am to understand this term, too, in the philosophical sense?”

“Yes, this one, too,” I said, hopefully. “Compare the horizon of our sense perception (that of our eyes, for example, which in fact forms the basis for our ability to see the horizon) with the scope of that upon which we depend in general. Let’s say, then, without any qualms: with the horizon of our real world as it exists.”

He pointed to one of his landscape paintings. “Are you referring to a horizon like *this one* here?”

“Yes, that one: the horizon of our sense perception. Compare it with the real one: is it not ridiculously limited? And isn’t it so ridiculously limited because we, as beings that rely on sense perception, are ourselves ridiculously limited? Isn’t it the horizon of some country bumpkin? I admit that your painting, in the sense of our limitation, is absolutely realistic. But our limitation is not realistic. As realistic as your painting might be, with its country bumpkin horizon it conceals the reality of our real world. That is why it has an effect—and certainly not just on me—that is insignificant, that says nothing. Its effect might even be that of falsification.”

He bit his lip.

“I know that what I am going to say will sound paradoxical to you. But you are a fantasist, because you are still a ‘realist’. Now, don’t get upset, for what I am referring to is the fact that you, as a realist, have sequestered yourself in the narrow realm of our sensory horizon; that is, that to the extent that this limited horizon is not the real horizon of our real world, it is unreal and fantastic. *As a realist you are an escapist.*”

“That is really the last straw! Realism as escapism...”, was his reaction.

“I already told you that it would sound contradictory to you. I admit that. Especially when you think about its function, which consists in dismantling the hideout of escapism.”

“Precisely,” he said, as if he had this very argument on the tip of his tongue.

“Even both hideouts: that of romanticism and that of classicism.”

“That, too”, he repeated.

“Even despite that fact, for today the situation has taken a 180 degree turn: today, anyone who reproduces a fragment of the world as it is presented to perception, that is, ‘realistically’, takes refuge in an ivory tower, since the image provided by perception no longer has anything to do with the imageless image of our contemporary world without a horizon, even when this tower is camouflaged under the rubric of ‘reality’, in order to fool yourself and everyone else.”

He looked offended.



I pacified him. “But, please, you are in good company: you are just one of hundreds of thousands! For, what are our movies today—99 percent of them—but escapism from reality—con games, anyway—insofar as the realistic medium of cinematography is used for this purpose?”

He made a gesture of denial.

“And what else are all these people doing who go around taking photographs, that legion of amateurs who go from one place to another competing with you?”

He looked even more disdainful as he waved this off.

“These amateurs, with their images, which are in appearance realistic, are trying to disguise the character, which is fantastically without a horizon, of the world and to convince themselves that the world has a totally normal aspect and, therefore, that it really *is* normal. Even the photos of the ‘faraway places’, which in a certain sense might ‘extend the horizon’ and might create a certain global consciousness, actually restrict it, since each *individual* photo offers a mere ‘*here*’, despite the fact that today’s world, without a horizon, has become a world *without a here*. In short: *the optical detail as such*, which simulates a world that is too constrained, *is not real*, insofar as today every point on the earth can be reached and threatened—and is in fact in danger—from any other point. And this applies to the photo and the painted image: the peaceful character of your landscape, which is simply there *by itself*, painted in the impressionist manner, results in pure falsification.”

“But that is exactly why,” he exclaimed, almost in tears, “I propose to introduce something here that is as real and as modern as the atomic bomb.”

I pointed at the painting. “In *this* landscape?”

“Not necessarily this one.”

“In which one, then?”

He shook his head.

“The atomic bomb with its immense range of impact in a landscape with such a country bumpkin horizon?”

He had nothing to say.

“Can you not imagine what such a thing would imply? Exactly the contrary of what you propose. You would make the atomic bomb entirely unrecognizable; you would directly obscure it, since every object is affected categorically by the world to which it is transported.”

“What did I do?”, he asked, almost stunned.

“Excuse me. But the question is very simple: at the moment when, for example, you transport a Saint Anthony to a countryside of impressionistic colors, he will lose his sanctity; he would be immediately affected by the world that surrounds him and by its form and he would become a splotch of color. What applies to Saint Anthony, also applies to the atomic bomb.”

He understood this. “But what will become of *it*?”, he exclaimed in desperation.

“Of what?”

“Of the horizon!”

“But why should you worry about it? Nothing at all will happen to it. There have already been horizons that have been destroyed.”

“When? By whom?”

“By Copernicus, for example. Or by Columbus.”

He was flummoxed.

“When modern painting, about five hundred years ago, broke through the surface”, I explained, “in order to penetrate into the depths of our world and proceed to the horizon that was perceptively credible, it really took an epochal step forward. Our generation has to dare to take a similar step of epochal significance: to break through the horizon it reached at that time.”

“And how?”, he asked, looking up. It seemed as if he hoped that he would be introduced to some inside information on the secrets of the avant-garde of the future.

“My friend,” I cut him off before he could say anything else, “don’t get it into your head, for God’s sake, that I am giving you a magic formula or that you can make progress overnight by abandoning a particular element of your painting: the horizon. The only ones who can abandon it are those painters who in any case paint in a different way than you do, to the point where in their paintings one no longer even notices the lack of a horizon.”

He looked taken aback, half surprised and half disappointed. “It is not noticed at all in their paintings?”

“It must not be: just as one does not notice the lack of a horizon in a Byzantine mosaic.” As it turned out, he had not taken even one step forward.

“And what can we do?”, he asked after a pause.

“Are you referring to a way out of the non-truth of your way of painting?”

He nodded his head. "Is there no way?"

"There might be," I said.

"What?"

"Take aerial photos, for example."

"Photos!", he repeated, shrugging his shoulders.

"But why should you be so vain? Cartographic aerial photos are not as 'limited' as your landscapes. And they are incomparably more real. And you would get so much closer to the truth with a film taken from an airplane, since these films endlessly displace the horizon and, in this way, they dialectically go beyond it and make everything that is shown here disappear immediately from the air; in short: they transform the fact that today our world has become *without a here* into a sensory event."

"Of course," he admitted, convinced, "my landscapes certainly could not compete with that."

"So, then, give it all up! All the more insofar as these films would reveal that you painted your landscapes not only from the point of view of the surface of the earth, but also from the *point of view of the tree*."

"I never heard of such a thing."

"Neither have I. But what this expression means is clear enough: every one of your paintings assumes a fixed, immutable position ... and thus, whether you like it or not, the experience of the world of a man rooted like a tree, stationary, sedentary, something that is not at all in accordance with our real existence or with our experience of the world, which is today gained by 'traveling'; and this is something that produces an *unreal* effect."

While I was saying this, he was staring angrily at the painting to which he wanted to add the atomic bomb.

"You've done it," he finally said, very upset.

"What?"

"You have made me dissatisfied with my painting. Little by little. Suddenly, even to me it seems too confined, as if you had enclosed it in a magic circle; and too rigid, as if you had cast a spell on it."

Naturally, after my detailed arguments, I could not say that I was sorry to hear this. I remained silent.

“But then, what can I do now?”, he continued, disconsolate. “When all is said and done, I am not an aerial camera. Isn’t there some other recourse for the painter?”

“Yes,” I said, “maybe even for him. There is surrealism. And although numerous theoreticians did not understand it clearly, it was the countermeasure against the difficulties that we have touched upon in our conversation.”

He was listening to me attentively.

“So, what does ‘surrealism’ mean?”, I asked him. “Or *sur-réalité*?”

“Over-reality”, he translated, shrugging his shoulders.

“That’s right. And now recall what I said at the beginning of our conversation. We called certain objects, ‘supra-sensory’—I admit this is forcing language a little; we used this term to refer to the fact that, in reality, they were much more than their sensory aspect presented, deceptively modest; and to the fact that they surpassed their own aspect; ‘supra’ = *sur* in *sur-réalisme*. And we also saw that this did not involve just a special class of objects (such as, for example, the atomic bomb), but embraces our whole world, which has become too large, that is, without a horizon and incommensurable; furthermore, by ‘too large’, we meant not just too large in a spatial sense, but incommensurable in its consequences; and, finally, we demonstrated that not only our perception, but also our fantasy was not equal to this incommensurable world, despite the fact that it is our product or our conquered territory, just as the Romans were unequal to their own great empire.”

He admitted all this. “The only thing I don’t understand is what all this has to do with surrealism.”

“The fact that the world itself surpasses its own capacity for understanding?”

“Yes. I have not seen many of their paintings, but I have always heard that they have something to do with Freud, with the unconscious and all that.”

“Yes, that, too. But that does not contradict what I was saying. To the contrary. Isn’t the unconscious also something that escapes immediate perception? It is not by chance that in our time the external and interior worlds are both becoming equally *sur-réalités*. In any case, the surrealists started from the difficulties that we just discussed, that is, from the fact that the real eludes both perception and fantasy; that today the fantastic is real and the real is so fantastic that to invent the actually fantastic would be like bringing owls to Athens. Hasn’t it ever occurred to you that in surrealist paintings, dead things, machines, for example, often have the aspect of organic, even exuberant life, while men are scattered about like robots or papier-mâché puppets or even as fragments of such puppets?”

“Yes. Disgusting,” he said.

“And it is all the more disgusting insofar as many contemporary surrealists depict the exuberant life of the machines in a neat and orderly fashion, while they present the fragmented, reified or robotized (seemingly as objects of pleasure) organic life with cynical joy.”

“Precisely.”

“But this was not at all the case in the original surrealism. What the original surrealists were seeking to accomplish with their fantastic inversion of the living and the dead was to provide it with an aspect, that is, to reveal a truth that, if it was not that way, would have no aspect at all. That is, the fact that today *things* and machines (in the form of real machines or institutions that have become machines) constitute the life of our world, while *we men* have often been transformed into gears in this machinery, *into things* or debris. *This inversion is not, then, an invention of surrealism, but a factum.* But a *factum* that can never be made visible by way of a mere portrait of things and people. Now you see: what we have been demonstrating throughout our entire conversation is confirmed: the fantastic and the real are mixed together. There is really no lack of evidence for this. For example, what do you consider to be more fantastic as an image: a surrealist depiction of a lunar landscape that is shown by a photograph taken through a microscope of your own skin, or the skin of the alleged fantasy creatures in a Böcklin painting?”

“Sincerely: the image from the microscope.”

“Therefore, what is perceived. The instrument, which we interpose between the world and the eye, converts the image of the real into something fantastic; other instruments even convert the real into something implausible; so fantastic and unbelievable that it would be utterly superfluous to invent fantasy creatures the way Böcklin did. Look: Böcklin is today just as obsolete as your Trübner, the fantasist is just as *passé* as the realist: we are now *beyond the alternative. And the surrealist attempts to conquer this position of the beyond.*”

“And how does he do that?”

“By means of *transformation*,” I responded. “And by way of a *shock effect*.”

This meant nothing to him. He awaited my explanation.

“Right away both terms will say something to you: a little while ago we mentioned an important case of ‘transformation’: that of life and death, of man and thing. And so it would seem, this transformation had an impact on you, because you called it disgusting ... which shows that it had a direct impact on your usual way of thinking and seeing and forced you to come face to face with a reality with which you were actually familiar but which had not yet been made visible in a sensory way. But this transformation is only one case among many others. It is based on a principle of transformation, on a *fundamental case*: precisely *the transformation of the empirical and the fantastic*. That is: in order to show that the real is the fantastic, the surrealist represents both the objects with which we are familiar in a fantastic context or in a fantastic distortion, while on the other hand he represents everything that is

fantastic so meticulously and with such exaggerated scrupulousness that the representation produces the impression that it was painted from a real model, even academically, *au naturel*. Sometimes, the painters go so far as to create the impression, when one is looking at their paintings, that one is looking at color medical photos, atrociously exact. *When, however, phantoms behave 'empirically' and the empirical has a 'fantastic' aspect, the aut-aut of perception and fantasy is 'really surpassed'*; we no longer recognize our world; and it is precisely this that the surrealist seeks to achieve, since he correctly sees that the usual aspect of the world is a *fraud*.”

“And this fortunately brings us back to the beginning of our conversation,” he said. He seemed to be extremely uncomfortable with the drift of the conversation, which he only clearly perceived now.

“Yes, it has”, I admitted without enthusiasm.

“To my problem. That is, that you think that I cannot paint the atomic bomb; but the *surrealist* can.”

“Yes and no,” I responded. “Because the real surrealist does not need to actually paint it. And he does not need to do so because what it represents is already, without further additions, the fantastic, incommensurable and ‘transformed’ world of which the atomic bomb also forms a part. The shock that such a painting provokes is in fact an authentic contemporary of the shock that is entailed by merely thinking of the atomic bomb.” With this I thought that I had brought the problem to its conclusion. And I said goodbye to him.

As I have learned in the meantime, he stubbornly introduced his atomic bomb into his impressionist landscape, anyway. Perhaps in this way he gave his painting an involuntary touch of surrealism. Regardless of his intentions, I prefer this stubbornness rather than to have seen him cover his canvas that very same evening to produce a surrealist painting by the numbers.

## Chapter 21

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF THE “RIGHT HANDS”

(1979)

According to the *Herald Tribune*, Carter declared that nuclear installations might fall into “the wrong hands”, into those of “criminals”. What ingenuousness! As if there were “the right hands”, or non-criminal owners of those monstrosities! Is not every hand that “maintains” these installations transformed into “the wrong hand”, *just by the very fact of maintaining them*? The hand of Truman, and his use of the two bombs in 1945—was it perhaps any less “the wrong hand”, because it unfortunately belonged to the President of the United States? Rather the contrary: was his presidency not morally wrong because it

possessed two atomic bombs? Yes, it possessed them. For that was enough. “To have” was already “to use”. *Habere* is already *adhibere*. The amorality consisted not only in the fact that they were used, but in their possession, for if Hiroshima and Nagasaki had not been destroyed, the bomb would still automatically be a genocidal threat.

What applies to bombs, also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to nuclear power plants, from which it is today possible not only for any *wrong hand*, but for any tinkerer, to produce atomic weapons.

## Chapter 22

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF SPACE AND TIME<sup>200</sup>

(1959)

§ 1

*The Land of Cockaigne*

If we were to have the (probably dubious) luck to live in the Land of Cockaigne, our needs would be satisfied immediately. No, even more than that: every one of our desires, whether we want to eat some barbecued ribs or attend a performance of *Parsifal*, would have something about it of an *intuitus originarius*; it would be an *appetitus originarius*, that is, an *appetitus* that would make what was desired immediately present, it would be the sufficient cause of its own immediate realization. Expressed in negative terms: no “distance” would cause us any difficulties; there would be no roast squabs that would not immediately fly into our mouths; no refrigerators that would not immediately appear in our kitchens; no “I feel like ...” that would not be immediately transformed into “the enjoyment of ...”. To summarize: there would be no *desideratum* that, in order to be satisfied, would still require that we make some effort or even wait patiently for a minute.

Given that we would not have to do anything and everything would be “here”, there would be no distance; that is, we would be *a-spatial*.

Given that it would be our fate to not have to do anything, to act or even to wait, and everything would take place “instantly”, there would be no delay; that is, we would be *a-temporal*.

Existence in the Land of Cockaigne is unlike that of the *aetus aurea* for the following reason: whereas in the *aetus aurea* there is no longer any need, that is, need is radically overcome, in the Land of Cockaigne need persists, since its inhabitant does not want to renounce the pleasure of overcoming it, that is, of consumption. Or, to compare it with our existence:

---

<sup>200</sup> First published in *Scheidewege* 3 (1972).

whereas in our existence (to the extent that it is not yet like existence in the Land of Cockaigne), food products only exist because they satisfy hunger, there, to the contrary, hunger exists only because, without a preexistent hunger, consumption would be superfluous and pleasure impossible. Certainly, anyone who lives in the Land of Cockaigne does not deprive himself of anything; but just as he does not want to deprive himself of pleasure, he does not want to deprive himself of deprivation, either.

## § 2

### *The return to immediacy.*

However—whether for good or for ill—we do not live in the Land of Cockaigne. We are instead fated to mediation and condemned to “make our own way in the world”, to go forth in pursuit of the satisfaction or re-elaboration of our needs by the sweat of our brow, or to wait patiently for them to be satisfied.

This “way” that we must traverse, however, involves spatial movement. And it requires time. As creatures that have needs, then, we are spatial and temporal beings.

This *status* would seem to be definitive. Is it also accepted as such, however? Is it even accepted today?

I am not so sure. Rather the contrary, I think: it seems to me that there are many things that demonstrate that we have the hope of overcoming this *status* of “being fated to mediation”; and even that the principal ambition of the technology created and developed by our epoch has the objective of making this hoped-for goal a reality.

This will sound surprising. Not only because this goal is utopian, but because the function of every technological apparatus consists precisely in being a *mediation*. This includes the function of technology as a whole. When we invent machines we do so for the purpose of inserting them between a need and its satisfaction, between the mouth and the morsel, so that here, that is, in the “means”, “it would mediate” for the purpose of satisfying the need or producing the product. Naturally, this mediating character of technology is undeniable.

But it is likewise undeniable that we invent and utilize machines so that, by their means, we can abbreviate or eliminate that distance, reduce or set aside the impediments that are interposed between need and its fulfillment, between desire and its realization, and that, by their being-in-the-middle, they postpone or impede satisfaction. *The mediation of technology attempts to make mediation superfluous.*

This goal is known by the name of *comfort*. This term, however, conceals the real ultimate goal, for in the last instance we are dreaming of a return to the immediacy that we lost with our expulsion from the Garden of Eden; that is, of a return to paradise.

As mediated and as complicated as technology may be—however much it can transform today’s world into a jungle of machines and however much success it can have in the



meantime by offering partial compensatory goals—its ultimate goal is precisely to eliminate this mediation and complication: the return to the situation of the Land of Cockaigne, that is, the situation in which nothing is lacking, and in which everything is “here”. And a recovery: that of the *desiderium originarium*, that is, of the desire whose inherent property is the power to achieve by magic its satisfaction through its mere existence; the return to comfort, that is, to that existence that no longer has any needs (because it has everything) or in which needs are created only because it is known that the possibility of pleasure can only be assured by means of the satisfaction of needs.

“Our technology leaves nothing to be desired”, says an advertisement for a passenger cruise ship, “everything is here for you”. In this manner, they are only announcing the “return of immediacy”.

### § 3

#### *Basic forms of impediment.*

There is no flight between point A and point B, let us say, between New York and Paris, that is not considered to be basically too long. Does it still take six hours to traverse that distance? Too slow. And it would be a matter for derision if, to travel that distance next year, we have to spend more than five hours, and in the year after that, if we could not do it in four.

Everything that takes time, lasts too long. What requires time, requires too much time. The *factum* that some actions take time is today considered a waste. It does not matter how little time they might require: it is always too much. The mere fact that they take any time at all transforms them into delays. *Time = slowness*. What an insane equation!

As crazy as this may sound, philosophy cannot allow itself to simply let this pass by and move on to the next point on the agenda, since its purpose must consist in revealing the secret maxims of the epoch, that is, the presuppositions that are denied but nonetheless underlie all thought, feeling and conduct. As contradictory or as senseless as it might sound, these denied presuppositions constitute the “agenda”. It would be utterly inadequate to study only what our contemporaries approve of with respect to time and space. Instead, in view of the fact that all conduct contains a secret theory, what must be clarified is *behavior*, that is, how today’s impatient and bored workers, travelers and consumers of free time conduct themselves with respect to the realities of space and time. And the outcome of these observations will, in the most paradoxical manner, confirm the equation, that will sound so contradictory and a-scientific, *time = slowness*, because time and space will present themselves (if we may be permitted to coin an expression that corresponds to the Kantian “forms of intuition”) as *forms of impediment*, directly as the two basic forms of impediment. This also sounds odd, of course, because (one would think) only tangible things can impede; and naturally, to define space and time as things would be ontologically absurd. Do we know what they are, however? How could we characterize them in a way that would be ontologically adequate? This is why we shall leave this ontological objection unanswered for a moment and, instead, we shall explain what we are referring to when we use the expression, “impediment”.

Space and time appear as impediments when they are measured by the norms of Cockaigne. Given that they occupy the location between desire and its satisfaction, between departure and arrival, between demand and fulfillment, and make it necessary for us proceed along a road to our goal, they interpose themselves on that road (that is, they obstruct our Cockaigne pretension to immediately obtain the *desiderata*). They are not *principia individuationis*, but *principia divisionis*, because they stand in the way of the fulfillment of intentions.

§ 4

*A modern-day Job.*

“*What a shame!*”, I heard a salesman from New York complain, a modern-day Job, while we were flying over the Arctic Circle, “all of it, between Scotland and Canada! And it’s nothing! Nothing and more nothing! But it must be so vast! There should be something in the middle of this! Only air and water! But what good is it?”

I was speechless.

“And all this time! That isn’t any better! Also nothing! But it has to go on! Between takeoff and landing! Long enough to wait and take a nap! What good is it?”

I could not provide him with any information about that, either.

“*Alright*”, he tried to gather himself together. “*Alright*, I know that the Lord has created everything. Therefore, he also had to create space and time. Why he did that, I have no idea. *Anyhow*, he probably had some idea and knew what he was doing.”

“Probably.”

His attempt to pull himself together had failed. “Probably,” he repeated furiously. “What does that mean—probably? *What a mess!* Is this any way to do business? To handle shipping? Here you receive merchandise that is delivered to your house, miles and hours, whether you ordered them or not. You have to accept them. And then, here we are stuck with all of that. With space and time!”

Never in all my life had I heard such an unusual description of the *a priori*.

“Or did He reveal to you what He had in mind with this? Why space? And what good is time?”

I was unaccustomed to metaphysics being expressed in the jargon of business. “Do you know what?”, I said, stammering, for it was not easy for me to speak so rapidly in this kind of language. “Maybe the Lord accidentally produced too much; more things and events than he had at first planned. So then he had no other recourse than to store the surplus in various

locations. In various locations of space. And in various locations of time.” I was quite proud of my improvised interpretation.

He vehemently rejected this, however, not because it was too cynical for him, but because he could not imagine such commercial incompetence. “So, he created too much space and too much time,” he objected. “And what a miserable way to store things! With too much empty space between them! With too much nothing between them! Absolutely uneconomical!” And he pointed out the window. “Look at it again! All that unused space! When he could very well have put Scotland right next to Canada! Coast to coast! That unused space!”

“Did you pay for it?”, I asked him.

“Of course,” he exclaimed. “Who else? You don’t think that He paid for my ticket?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“So ... all that space, nothing but a waste! And all this time, nothing but a waste of time!”

“Time as wasted time?”

“It sounds funny,” he admitted in a low voice. But that is what he thought: “Nevertheless, it’s true!” And in the end he even dared to use the expression, “commercial sabotage”.

“Are you blaming Him for commercial sabotage?”

Defenseless, he raised his hand, only to lower it again, even more defenseless. “Who else?”, he retorted. And then he sighed: “I wish it could be abolished!”

“What? Space? Time?”

“So it would seem”, he responded, resigned. And he concluded: “In any case I did not order them. But I can’t get rid of them, either.”

Naturally, he was not the first person whose faith in a God who had let him down faltered; and there were Jobs in every historical epoch. But the reason why this salesman from New York had become irate like a Job with his God, the reason for his complaint that he provided—“pointless installation of space and time”—was a real first. For him, both space and time were in any case nothing but obstructionist realities, forces of sabotage, which got in his way, regardless of where and when he was undertaking something, because they required room, that is, they rendered his ideal of the immediacy of Cockaigne unattainable. If he were capable of doing so, he would have gotten rid of them, he would have eliminated them. He hated them as things that should not exist, as scandals.

It will be objected that this man was an *unicum*. And it is of course true that it does not often happen that someone should be so annoyed with space and time, that he should express his complaints about them in such a crude manner and so clearly display a desire for their

elimination. It is only *the fact that* he expressed his annoyance, however, that is unusual. *What he expressed*, however, he could very well have proclaimed on behalf of all of us (if we were to authorize him to use the jargon of the times, something that, naturally, we rarely do), since in that way he disclosed something that is part of all of us, one of the maxims of our current existence: that of our *struggle against space and time*.

The following pages deal with this struggle, that is, with the attempt to eliminate space and time (especially time).

## § 5

### *Time and need.*

Of course, here I am referring only to the tendency, to the ideal of the epoch. As I said: what should be abolished, not what can be abolished. It is clear that there has yet to be such a significant reduction of the duration of time that we cannot imagine that it can be reduced even more; that we, however tirelessly we strive to reduce the intermediate spaces between desires and goals, will always have in our hands a remnant of time; that in our attempts to achieve the atemporality of actions, we are condemned once and for all to the asymptotic, that is, to failure; that time will continue to separate us over and over again from the era of atemporality. But this fruitlessness does not affect the reality of the *tendency*. In spite of the utter impossibility of achieving it, the ultimate and supreme ideal of today's *homo faber* consists in being capable of rendering his means capable of achieving all the goals of his actions as if by magic, that is, immediately, without any loss of time, without time. *The dream of our time is the elimination of time. The timeless society (rather than the classless society) is the hope of tomorrow.* And in our time there is hardly a moment that is not dedicated—because “time doesn't count”—to the effort to abolish time, to transform time into something obsolete, into a memory of the past.

As we have said, this determination to render time obsolete, the desire to abolish time, is completely plausible, because the ideal of our time is called the Land of Cockaigne. And as in that so horribly fortunate country, it was customary for the roast squabs to fly directly into one's mouth, the time between desire and satisfaction, between yearning and pleasure, did not exist; to return to this golden “time” is the dream of our epoch.

In order to verify this claim it will be necessary to determine with the greatest clarity the relation between need and goal; that is, to deduce time from need.

Before engaging in this process of deduction, a couple of preliminary methodological observations are in order. The arguments about time—and this will cause a scandal—already contain definitions of time. This is inevitable, since anyone who attempts to go to the root from which time arises cannot escape the fate of his own temporality and suddenly employ a terminology that is entirely purged of time-related words.

Most likely, however, it is above all the expressions “forward” and “back” that will provoke a scandal. In fact, they presuppose space and the objection that space is no less interpretable than time is understandable, that is, that it cannot be accepted as an assumption.

The objection is not justified, however, precisely because the directions that the expressions, “forward” and “back” entail in this case do not indicate specific spatial characteristics (nor do they refer to specific temporal characteristics), but to *pre-specific* characteristics of nature, which arise from the essence of life as such. That is, given that it is part of the existence of living beings to threaten and be threatened, to need and to be needed, to hunt and to be hunted, to eat and to be eaten, to intimidate and to be frightened, to attack and to flee, everything that is alive lives *in the framework of approaching and moving away from something*. And based on the fact of these two vital directions, what we call “forward” and “back”, “in front of” and “behind”, arise. Only because these ontological characteristics are given, can our space and our time emerge, as well. But only, “as well”.

The same is therefore true of the expression “present”, which likewise cannot be understood as originating as a temporal determination. The present is, rather, that which, in the case of approaching something, does not need the abolition of a distance, which is required in the case of moving away from something. Thus, the present is primarily, if I may be permitted to use the expression, of an onto-sociological character, that is, that of *being with*. (Thus, the expression, “I could not bear his presence” can only mean “I could not bear being with him”. This “being with” is, in turn, something pre-specific; hence the fact that the expression, “someone’s presence”, has a spatial sense and, at the same time, a temporal one.)

What does the expression, “to deduce time from need”, mean?

It means that time, as duration, empty and intermediate space, emerges only and exclusively when goals have not yet been attained; only as long as they are still absent, as *desiderata*, that (or whose presence) we seek, because without this we cannot live. *Time is the road that leads to having*. There is time only because we are needy beings; because we do not have (and, moreover, endlessly) what we properly must have; because we need (and, moreover, endlessly) to procure for ourselves what is necessary. Time is as empty as we are, as empty as an empty stomach; and time is only “filled” whenever the stomach is full. In other words: it is existence in the mode of not having, that is, in the mode of the act of procuring the *desideratum* (it does not matter whether this act of procuring consists of hunting or producing).<sup>201</sup>

---

<sup>201</sup> It is with regard to this aspect that the relative truth of the Heideggerian coordination of time and *care* consists [the German word *Sorge* refers to our original *care*, which also appears in the term, pro-cure, along with the usual “care of souls” to refer to the priest]. It is true that Heidegger has obscured the real need of man and has transformed it into the extremely opaque *care*, that is, that instead of the coordination, need-time, he established the coordination, *care*-time; and he did so not only because of the fact that if he had represented man as something ontic, as one more part of the world that in order to exist needs the incorporation or presence of others, he would have contradicted his own ontological proposition, which guarantees to man a special position, but above all because this

Thus, time is not a “form of intuition”, nor is it even a “form of representation”, but a *form of obstinate pursuit*. It is the form of our life that persists as long as the prey, which we pursue, remains distant from us and eludes us or even escapes from us, until, finally, we catch it and make it present and have been satiated by it. Just as anyone who is not satiated has hunger (because he does not have the food that he properly needs to have in order to exist), only he who is not satiated has time. On the other hand, he who is happy, he who finds himself in the presence of what is necessary for him, he who is satiated, does not experience the passage of time. He is atemporal.

In any case, he is atemporal only temporarily, since the very dissolution of time is itself temporally limited. Given that we, constitutionally deficient, are referred to another being, there is no consumption that will satiate us once and for all. However much we are satiated, it is not enough. This fundamental incomplete character of satisfaction has as a consequence the extraordinary fact that time, despite the fact that it undoubtedly continues to pass, at the same time runs backward. Satisfaction by way of the present fails; what was present, the chunk of meat, is annihilated, precisely because it has been incorporated as that present; in this way, the present is also annihilated: once again hunger erupts. But satiety is not deficient because it is fleeting; it is fleeting because it is fundamentally deficient.

We say that time passes. We say that because we, driven by need, flee forward, towards our goal; because we do what is necessary to attain or to realize what lies before us and to leave separation behind us. It will be objected that what actually happens is the opposite, since the passage of time is not so noticeable, or time is all the more definitely annihilated, the more intensely it is occupied with the pursuit of the goal. But this is only true in occupations that are engaged in with interest, which are something present (in fact, “interest” means nothing else), which are entertaining, which become ἐνέργεια. In the happiness of work and the hunt, time flies, “instantly”, that is, it is de-temporalized, despite the fact that it objectively passes according to the clock. On the other hand, time can also be annihilated when it is filled with an occupation so monotonous that the approach towards the goal (due to the fact that every step along the road towards it is always equal) is no longer perceptible. Then, boredom is transformed into the complete dissolution of time (anyone who has worked in the service of a machine has had this experience). For this reason, the work whose εἶδος is shattered—and this is today the case in almost all machine work—is incomparably less agonizing than is generally imagined.<sup>202</sup> Indeed, the fact that it causes less distress is a scandal, rather than a consolation.

Only someone who is hounded by necessity “has” time (not in the sense of “having a lot of time”, but in that of “living temporally”). But being hounded also has an incomparably more concrete sense: we are hounded not only by our needs, that is, by our hunger, but also by the

---

concession would have led him to a dangerous proximity to materialism. (In this connection, see our “On the Pseudo-Concreteness of Heidegger’s Philosophy”, in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, III, pp. 337, *et seq.*)

<sup>202</sup> With respect to this question, see *The Obsolescence of Man*, Vol. I, “On the Bomb and Its Origins”, § 18.

other who is hungry and who is stalking us, because we are not only eaters, but also possible food. Not only do we “stalk”, but we also flee from those who stalk us. And it is likewise by virtue of this basic danger of our existence that we are “temporal”. The pursuer, who stalks us, does not “have us yet”, he “still does not”: in flight time arises. But the latter, in turn, also disappears as soon as we are safe. The ideal existence would be one in which no one steps on anyone else’s toes, that is, in which no one is hounded by the threat that the distance between his hunter and himself will ever be diminished. This situation—which is also characteristic of the Land of Cockaigne—would be just as atemporal as the situation that prevails after eating. Safety, too, displaces time, whose technological production tends towards the same goal as the technology of the satisfaction of needs. And this situation is in effect realized in dreams, during which we try to isolate ourselves from any danger and in which time also stops, as long as no fear is introduced into them.

I said that the utopian ideal of our existence is the Land of Cockaigne, that is, an existence in which satiety magically treads on the heels of desire without the need to overcome or traverse any distance. Our technology does not aspire to anything else but the approach towards this Cockaigne goal. As undeniable as it may be that it, too, might represent a mediation, that is, something “between the desire and its satisfaction” or even a jungle of mediations, its ultimate aspiration is precisely to reduce to the minimum those mediations that do exist, that is, the intermediate time between desire and its satisfaction and, as a result, between fear and the warding off of what is feared. Or even better: annihilating it. The latter is the ideal of our time. The expression of impatience, *Let’s get it over with*, is the slogan of our modern life.

But our current situation is even more complicated or, more precisely, directly dialectical. For the following reasons:

What we today recognize as *worthwhile* (that is, something that is “worth waiting for”) is most often what has value for some purpose: therefore, exclusively the means. On the other hand, that for which the means has value, the goal, puts us in a tight spot: we even perceive it as worthless (however much it may, for its part, have some value for a subsequent purpose, for health, for example), because as a goal it is not a means. In other words: given that we live in the era of the bad conscience of ἐνέργεια and enjoyment, we find ourselves in a disturbingly paradoxical situation. On the one hand, we are impatient because the means and the way they must be employed “endure”, that is, they take time. On the other hand, however, we cannot really bear reaching the goal, the ἐνέργεια, because with this destination it seems that the time that could be employed in using means to reach a goal is wasted. Everyone knows that today our lives often proceed down two roads at once. Thus, for example, while we travel the road of our main occupation, we listen to music on the parallel road. And do not believe that we only like this double road of existence merely because we want to balance the need to work with the sweetness of the ἐνέργεια (the enjoyment of the music). To the contrary, we often look for something to do while we listen to music in order to offset the unbearable character of the enjoyment that does not serve any other purpose than its own existence. *I just can’t enjoy Beethoven without doing my knitting*, is not the expression of an eccentric woman, but an article of faith of the epoch. And those poor men who become depressed while on vacation or after their retirement, are not special cases,

either, but rather typical figures, whom a Molière of our time, were one to exist, would depict on the stage as an archetypal personality. These men reach the end of their time, because for them time only exists as long as they are pursuing a goal. When they have reached their goal, they no longer exist (in an absolutely non-metaphorical sense), that is, they die.

§ 6

***Let's get it over with.***

I said that the asymptotic goal of our current efforts was the abolition of time. As incredible as it may sound, this impossible goal has already in fact been attained here and there. That is: in radio and television, since there the reception of what is transmitted takes place (at least psychologically) at the same time as its transmission; and this represents a kind of conveyance that up until now had only taken place in the form of speech (and in its telephonic variant). It is not by chance that I am employing examples from the domain of radio and television for a second time. Already, in a previous work,<sup>203</sup> it was revealed that for anyone who wanted to take the pulse of our time, at least that of the “future that is now beginning”, there are no phenomena that are more revealing (or more typical) than radio and television. In fact, examples taken from these media also display, in this context (not addressed in that previous work), that is, in the context of the philosophy of time, the situation of contemporary man with greater clarity and distinction than examples from any other sphere. I am referring to the following facts:

Under the aegis of the “abolition of time”, man falls short of himself, or at falls short of the images of himself. For while he can send (or allow someone to send) from one point to another (even, at the same time, at his discretion, to many other points) his picture by way of television and his voice by way of radio, without these processes taking any time, he himself has not yet become “wireless” [*funkbar*]. We are antiquated beings, not equal to the level of our technology; that is, just as we always were, in the times of our grandfathers, destined to pay a price in time to reach another point in space. What our images can do, we are not yet capable of doing. But this fact is already archaic. Our children or grandchildren, who have become accustomed to seeing conversations on television between two, three and four speakers who are far removed from each other in terms of spatial location, already find it to be somewhat archaic and quaint that, even today, statesmen still meet with each other *in the flesh* for negotiations.

Despite the fact that we have now managed to overcome distances in the form of images without any lapse of time, we are still incapable of transporting ourselves in this de-temporalized way. And even if the time required for our transport were to be reduced to an infinitesimal residuum, the circumstance that this residuum would be immune to our efforts to overcome it, that is, it would always remain, figures as the stigma of our humanity in the unwritten moral code of the industrial era. The mere fact of time is equivalent to slowness; and our slowness is equivalent to something shameful.

---

<sup>203</sup> See *The Obsolescence of Man*, Vol. I, “The World as Phantom and as Matrix”.



The journey from one point in space to another, however, is of course just one example, since it is not the only example that represents an overcoming of distances. Every activity must overcome intermediate spaces, at least any activity whose goal is something that is still distant; for example, one can only reach one's goal by mediation, by going down a road; in short: that which is not ἐνέργεια. The shame, then, does not arise primarily from our spatial movement, but rather from our movement in any sense insofar as it is a movement that has a goal. In other words: given the fact that, as we previously noted, we no longer understand, or desire, or enjoy ἐνέργεια, but that we transform them into εργα, our stigma results from our life as such. The desire: *Let's get it over with as fast as possible*—that is, let us put it behind us as rapidly as possible, because everything that endures, lasts too long and for that reason is something that robs our time and is therefore something negative—refers to all activities without exception. It might even occur that this slogan, which I heard in the airplane from the mouth of the passenger who detested space and time, would be spoken on other occasions, in bed, for instance, and not only to refer to getting the sleeping part of one's time in bed over with as fast as possible. However, if the sarcastic exhortation, which ridicules the labor competitiveness of the Stakhanovist worker—"Sleep faster, comrade!"—has become so famous in the West, it is not because competition or competitiveness is so characteristic of the Soviet Union, but rather because the joke hits home with all our contemporaries in general.

The traveler who flies as quickly as possible from New York to Paris (so as not to waste time), for the same reason will also conclude the transaction that constituted the reason for his trip as quickly as possible. To save time he will try to reduce to the minimum the time taken in all aspects of his trip. Finally, he will attempt to do everything as if he were in the Land of Cockaigne, that is, immediately, without having to spend time between the desire and its satisfaction and without the sum of his activities still entailing duration. What actually comes from all this is certainly the opposite of what he intended. From our discussion of the problems of free time we are familiar with the result of this abbreviation of action: what is produced is a growth of time in the manner of the Hydra, that is, a time that seems to last incomparably longer than any time filled with activity; incomparably longer because it is "free", that is, it is free of an itinerary, and thus does not move. It is precisely due to this abbreviation of action that we save such massive amounts of time that we do not know what to do with it: so much time that, horrified by the *horror vacui*, we are impelled to split up this vacuum into as many activities as possible, which dilute time, that is, fill it up with all these activities. Since our flight from time, however, still has the defects from which we seek to escape, these same activities must be concluded as rapidly as possible: the very occupations that we provide ourselves with as pastimes (theater, music), are presented to us in abbreviated versions, in a pre-digested state; in sum: a pointillism of existence arises, from which all continuity is banished, because it is composed at each passing moment of newborn offers that do not last longer than an instant.

Such is the current "temporality" of man. It is clear that it is also a curse; and no less a curse than the one that up until quite recently used to be considered to be the curse of time. Many of the phenomena that form part of the "pathology of our temporality"—not least of all the famous "youth revolt"—are incomprehensible unless they are understood, at the very least, as *actions of vengeance against the inextinguishable condition of time*. The background

against which the temporality of man is interpreted as a defect or as a scandal is not in any case, as it still was in the past, “eternity”, but the punctuality of time (which is just as unattainable as eternity itself).

§ 7

*On the difference between space and time.*

If we were to ask a rational person just what is the real difference between space and time and why we need to have “such things” at all, there can be no doubt that he would in return give us a quizzical look. And rightly so, since a reasonable, non-philosophical person would consider such definitions necessary, and therefore justified, only if there is a danger that A and B might be confused, when the boundary between A and B has dissolved (which he would notice for some practical reason). To devote himself to formulating such a definition would appear foolish to him outside of this kind of situation. The difference between space and time would not be more worthy of definition than the difference between number and music or between your ass and a hole in the ground. “I never confused them,” he would respond, “and I don’t know how anyone could possibly confuse them.” So, “why define them?” This is what he would say and he would leave our question unanswered.

Nonetheless, our question was not unreasonable.

We started from the *status* of our indigence and dependence; from the fact that, to exist, we have to obtain things that are not at our immediate disposal and therefore, things from which we are separated (*desiderata*). Hence we find ourselves condemned to having to overcome this separation, that is, this distance, in order to make what is absent present, which constitutes our world; and, on the other hand, threatened by the possible presence of enemies, we are impelled to make them absent by way of fight or flight.

This is, then, our point of departure. It is plausible that, even without knowing anything about space and time, this situation would give us the right to define the world as a *medium of distances* or, more precisely, as a schema or a compendium of all those things or situations whose presence we have to seek or from which we must flee; in other words: as a *schema of possible distant desiderata and possible distant dangers*.

The fundamental concept is therefore what is distant. But this fundamental concept is still completely *un-specific* or *pre-specific*: the food is far away, it is *not here now*; the prey that is destined to be our food is far away, that is, *it is not here*. Evidently, the category, “distant”, arises in time as well as space.

It is obvious that there is a world (as a compendium of the “other” that is distant from me), because we, being indigent, depend on something else, on something distant, something that is absent.<sup>204</sup> What is not so obvious, however, is that this *medium* of distances, in which we

---

<sup>204</sup> It is unnecessary to point out that the “other” *is not posed* as “not-me”, in the manner of Fichte. Rather, it is already always *presupposed* by the fact of need, since hunger knows the

move like creatures that are hunted but also like creatures that are hunting, has a double face; because it is bifurcated into two completely different sectors; because absence has to be concretized in two forms, “spatial” and “temporal” absence. This structure cannot be deduced by deducing it from the world on the basis of need. In any case, not until now. Our questions: “Why are there two forms of absence?”, and “Why precisely these two forms?”, and “How can we differentiate between them?”, which sound stupid to a normal healthy human mind, are fully justified in our context. Maybe this bifurcation can also be deduced.

This deduction would have to fulfill two conditions. It would have to

1. deduce the dual form (space and time);
2. develop on the basis of this foundation the specific traits that differentiate space and time.

Let us assume, for a moment, that there is a blessedly autarchic being, an *animal stoicum*, whose ontological nature is fundamentally unlike ours because it knows neither hunger nor any kind of threat. And let us suppose that it were to ask us for an explanation of what we mean by space and time. That is, we would not ask it, but it would ask us.

Responding to its question would be very difficult for us, since as spatial-temporal beings we cannot do without words that denote spatial and temporal concepts. Let us admit, for the moment, that we would nonetheless try to answer its question. Naturally, we would have to begin our explanation by describing our indigence. “As non-autarchic beings”, we would begin, “we always and everywhere depend on something outside of ourselves. Or we have to repel something, that is, something that threatens us.” Our interlocutor would not understand either statement. “Always,” we would continue, “what matters in our existence is to have something that is other, and that something that is other should not have us.” In response to its question concerning what we mean by “other”, we would have to say: “That whose presence or absence we do not have; for example, the presence of food or the absence of the pursuer, which, therefore, must *be rendered* present or absent.”

Let us assume, furthermore, that the inquirer (the autarchic being) has accepted these ontological explanations (which will have to sound not just unusual to him, but completely incredible) and has understood the function of the distance that must be overcome. Then it will find itself at the point where we found ourselves, since it will pose—and rightly so—the question that we proposed to ask the man of healthy mind, which he rejected as stupid. “But what is space?”, it would ask, and “What is time?” Or: “This *medium* of the absent—is it what you define as ‘space’, or is it what you define as ‘time’?”

“Both,” we would have to answer.

“And why both at the same time?”, it would then ask, “why is it necessary for both to exist?”

---

possibility of its satisfaction, that is, the existence of the other; the lung, of the air; hunger, of the mother’s breast. The idea that the nursing baby, put into the world by its mother, *postulates* its mother as not-me would be absurd.

“Necessary? But that is just the way it is.”

“That is odd. And can you distinguish between them?”

“Of course. It never occurred to me to confuse them.”

“Amazing. And how are they differentiated?”

Would this blessedly autarchic being not have the right to pose this question?

So, why are there two “forms of intuition”, that is, of “impediments”, or whatever we shall call space and time? And why precisely these two? Both have something to do with absence. Is their connection with absence different in each case? How are the roles of both shared out in a typical situation of absence?

Let us take the basic situation of hunger. A living being—it does not matter whether it is a fish, a fox or a man—is hungry.<sup>205</sup> So he goes in search of his *desideratum*, his food. Is this food absent in a spatial or a temporal sense?

In both. It is absent here and now; in a certain way we still find ourselves faced with the separation between space and time.

Or perhaps we are no longer faced with this separation? The “food”, in the sense of an object to be eaten (the prey)—is it absent from here or from the present moment?

Evidently, only from here, since the prey exists. And the hungry creature imagines that it exists.

And the “food”, in the sense of the act of eating?

Evidently it is only absent from the present moment.

The distinction between object and act seems to us to be a step forward. To recapitulate: *the existence of the object is understood to be spatially absent*. Of course, the object (the hunted animal, for example) exists somewhere else, and it also exists right now; but it is not here, that is, it is not “together with me” (this is the original meaning of “here”); and I am not together with it.

---

<sup>205</sup> It is likely that our analyses are only valid for beings that engage in, that is, that need, spatial movement. To put it crudely, only for animals, not for plants, which in a certain sense lead a Land of Cockaigne-style life with all its advantages and disadvantages, since the things they need, their *desiderata*, insofar as they are available to them, they find where they are, that is, they are present to them; certainly, if they do not have them where they are, they perish. Or for those that (for example, for their reproduction) depend on some other thing: the wind or insects.

The *act* is *temporally absent*: it is not somewhere else, “it is” even here, since the appetite is, in a certain way, eating in the absence of the food; and in dreams the *appetitus* even creates the *imago* of its object, so that the act takes place in effect, despite the fact that the object of the act is only imagined to be “here” (as in the sexual dream, for example).

Space and time are therefore not parallel forms, but directly distinct “modes of absence”. *The desideratum* is *spatially absent*, to the extent that it exists, despite the fact that I do not have it (or it does not have me). *The attainment of what is desired* is *temporally absent* and therefore in a certain way it is non-existent, because I do not have it. And the past?

The coordination of “time” and “not being”—the past no longer is, the future is not yet and the present is only an ephemeral point—that reappears again and again in the history of philosophy, is no more fortuitous than the fact that spatiality has repeatedly been assigned to the world as a kind of being or that, when its being has been accentuated to the extreme, time was negated, that is, it was attributed with eternity. No metaphysics, however, has ever conceived the (seemingly analogous) idea of defining the world as *a-spatial* in order to maximize its being.

Of course, there is a situation in which the difference between space and time is annulled: the situation in which one *has* the prey, that of satisfaction. This *hic et nunc* becomes the present, in which the object is no longer absent, since it is had, that is, it is present. Actually, it is not at all by chance that we grant a spatially and temporally neutral meaning to the word, “present” (and not only in German). To the contrary: it would otherwise be incomprehensible.

## Chapter 23

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF SERIOUSNESS

On “happenings”<sup>206</sup>

(1968)

The occasion that gave rise to the following reflections was a news report that recently caught my attention in an American weekly magazine. The article discussed a conference of philologists, who took themselves very seriously, at which countless *papers* on the most specialized themes were being read. Suddenly, a naked girl emerged from the audience and began walking about in the lecture hall shouting, “Chocolates, Lemonade, Ice Cream”, merchandise that she brought with her in a box attached to a belt around her waist. If this was not a happening, I do not know what the term means. And this happening is the one that led me to arrive at a couple of observations on what a happening is, and what it is not.

---

<sup>206</sup> This essay first appeared in *Merkur*, April 1969.

The first thing that shocked and, most likely, aroused the indignation of the philologists was: “This naked girl is behaving as if our lecture hall, in which we, real philologists, are holding a scientific conference, were nothing but a stage and, worse yet, a vaudeville stage or a theater of the absurd; and as if we, as actors, only existed according to the *as if* mode. Why is she doing this? In any case, this scene is so implausible that it *cannot* be real.”

This was probably their first reaction; and it does contain a kernel of truth, since the organizers of happenings really do organize them as if these events were not entirely real or completely authentic. They produce this lack of authenticity with the same means they use to render their happenings so shocking, that is, by performing them without any apparent motive and making them break out like completely isolated *intermezzi* in the context of the real event.

This reaction is certainly mistaken, for happenings are without motive, without meaning, and improbable only from the perspective of those for whom *they are staged*. Those who organize happenings, on the other hand, know why they are doing something that seems to be meaningless. What they are always seeking to accomplish is to transform the situation in which they perform their happenings into something equally improbable and meaningless. For example, the usher, who removed the naked girl, also naturally became—regardless of how he behaved—a comical figure simply by virtue of his participation. And the philologists, who were perhaps listening to a reading of a *paper* on “Kafka and the Little Word *And*”, could not of course avoid a similar fate, either, because, whether they sneaked a peak at the naked girl or indignantly looked the other way, were equally, one as much as the other, ridiculous figures. And this was, naturally, the girl’s purpose, that is how she interpreted her seemingly pointless cabaret scene. I think that we can begin with the following definition: *Happenings are scenes whose meaning consists in rendering meaningless, by way of their lack of meaning, the reality into which they are introduced; or, more precisely: in exposing and denouncing that reality as meaningless and ridiculous.*

The organizers therefore know what they are doing. In the selection of their victims they only choose situations or institutions that seem ridiculous to them and that they seek to transform, abolish or destroy. “But,” one will ask, “why destroy something that seems obsolete and worthy of destruction by using such eccentric methods?”

With this question we come to the second fundamental point. The answer is as follows: only those who are *powerless* work with happenings; only those who do not have the possibility of really transforming or abolishing the institutions that must be fought. Happenings are generally ad-hoc or substitute protests, and sometimes even directly acts of desperation, with which the powerless proclaim their intentions. And this means, at the same time, that the powerful (however much their actions, especially their demonstrations of seriousness and power, might often seem stupid and similar to happenings) never think it is necessary to organize happenings. In fact, they cannot even organize happenings, either, for quite often the mere fact of possessing power renders its owners so crudely serious, that they are incapable of understanding jokes. And above all, incapable of understanding the joke of happenings, since the latter are not presented verbally like jokes, but are presented disguised as actions.

Viewed from a political perspective: happenings break out only at historical moments when the possibilities for real resistance—not to speak of possibilities for revolution—are nil; at historical moments when the total renunciation of resistance, uprising or revolution renders the opposition increasingly more anxious; and this is so unbearable that, finally, their anxiety cannot be placated with merely literary or artistic mockery, with pamphlets or caricatures, since the latter only provide them with a phantom existence on two dimensional paper instead of a mass existence in the three dimensional space of reality. In this situation (given that the reality is too vast, that is, unreachable; and the phantom is insufficient, that is, unsatisfactory) an intermediate solution is necessary, a hybrid action, which certainly is not a real political action, but not just literature or art, either. And this condition is fulfilled precisely by means of the happening. While the readers of a satire of institutions which they hate or despise, or those who see a caricature, have to restrict themselves only to consuming the joke or the scornfulness as a work of literature or art, those who participate in a happening enjoy the advantage of real and personal participation in the joke or the denunciation and thus are really satisfied and feel like they have vented their anger.

Here is a second definition of the happening: *a happening is a farce that will not only be written and read, that will not only appear in the pages of a book, whose "realization" takes place not merely on the stage, but in reality itself, in a public place, in a university, in a courtroom or in the street.* Only the powerless, as we have seen, take up the weapon of the happening, which is a substitute weapon, often utilized against *substitute targets*, since one cannot really reach the institution that one really seeks to disturb or to destroy. It is clear, however, that not every target can serve as a substitute target; that disturbing or destroying only promises to have an impact if the target is considered to be highly esteemed or extremely sacred. This is why happenings so often attack *taboos*; why sexual exhibitionism or even anal spectacles are so often found at the heart of such performances.

The violation of taboos, especially the most powerful ones, might provide a certain satisfaction to the organizers of the happening; they even might think that by shattering deeply rooted taboos they are inflicting a real injury on the *establishment*. They are often mistaken in this belief, however, insofar as their actions are politically inoffensive, and are often not such major inconveniences to the *establishment* that the latter should be troubled by the violation of the taboo. And it is often the case that they are not only inoffensive, but even profitable, since it is to the advantage of the *establishment* that its opponents should devote themselves to non-political actions. We should recall that the *establishment* itself, in order to keep the ruled population at arms-length from political opposition and at the same time to offer it the pleasure and the thrill of keeping abreast of the times, uninterruptedly and methodically violates, with the help of millions of naked bodies, tits, asses and sexual acts, various taboos that were still considered to be inviolable only twenty years ago, at least for the majority of the population. In this sense, it might be quite agreeable to the *establishment* that the opposition plagiarizes it in this regard and performs this maneuver of distraction on its own account, something that does not prevent it in the least from reciting the contrary refrain, that is, the refrain that is directed at the philistines, who prefer any properly dressed criminal to these demonstrators who behave so indecently, in order to denigrate the latter as obscene. The harm done by many happenings, which is later exploited by the *establishment*,

is so great that now and then one can hardly resist the suspicion that those who violate the taboos are paid *agents provocateurs*, which might be true, at most, in a completely indirect way.

Let us return to the achievements of happenings, however, for it would be false to claim that they have achieved nothing, as we have seen, since the deliberate lack of meaning of happenings can unmask the meaninglessness of the real institutions in which they take place. In fact, this has enjoyed such good results that, suddenly, real events themselves emit the sensation of happenings, in a certain way, of happenings in the rational course of the world. The organizers of happenings were not so absurd: the students of Munich, for example, who, satirically dancing, led the procession of gown-clad professors; in this case, it was rather the procession of these gown-wearing professors that was absurd, who even looked like the organizers of the happening. And in certain judicial proceedings, it is not just the “diabolical” defendants who seem to be actors, who, by their shameless or impertinent conduct force their antagonists, the honorable personnel of the ritual of justice, to also take on the semblance of actors; the latter also behave as if they understood their functions only as *roles* in a farce, whose purpose is to make them look ridiculous.

Another advantage of happenings is the fact that, due to their ambivalence, they always offer *opportunities for an alibi*. Given that it is not always clear to what extent happenings are only jokes or something serious, their organizers, if they are accused of some serious crime, can avail themselves of the opportunity to pound their chests with their fists—with which they create another happening—and proclaim in the most heart-rending way that they are innocent lambs, that they had only permitted themselves to indulge in a little joke; and that they are very disturbed and indignant at having to seriously justify something that they themselves had not thought of as anything serious at all; and that what looked like blood on the pavement was really—please, gentlemen, you may confirm this for yourselves!—merely red paint from plastic bags that they brought with them; and that they might as well also file charges of homicide and murder against the actors after the curtain falls on a performance of *Hamlet*.

Sometimes, such arguments succeed. Sometimes, the ambivalence of the happenings triggers exactly the opposite effect: dialectically, the joke is often transformed into something serious precisely *because* it is only a joke, because the joke is an incitement to “bloodshed”. Nothing is more offensive to managerial personnel—who are not accustomed to monkeying around and are not specialists in ambivalence—than being held up to ridicule; and any policeman would prefer a hundred times more to have to confront someone who is really trying to stab him with a knife—since here he is on familiar territory—rather than protesters who never have any intention of really spilling any blood, but only splash themselves with red paint and thus transform themselves into seeming victims of his actions as a policeman. It is quite likely that now and then the police are especially harsh and aggressive, just because they do not like the mere semblance of blood, as if they were part of the happening. *Then, “appearance” becomes reality.*<sup>207</sup>

---

<sup>207</sup> This claim is no longer 100 percent valid now, in March 1969, three months after I wrote this essay, thanks to the further unfolding of the dialectic of the situation. For on February



It could happen, then, that some students protesting against the Vietnam War might fall seriously wounded on the street, because, instead of fighting, they were only playing a joke on the police. It is certainly the case that at times the organizers of happenings have this dialectical transformation of “appearance” into “reality” in mind as a goal, the transformation of red paint into real blood, since it is understandable that the protesters have a major interest in *not themselves being* the first to use violence.

Even with these considerations, however, we have not fully explored the dialectic that is inherent to happenings. For two reasons:

1. No one would say that the disturbances of May in Paris were mere happenings. The harsh measures used by the government to repress the movement prove that those against whom the movement had arisen also took it seriously. We must keep in mind the fact, however—as it is inherent to the interests of the victors—that the student insurrections that were taken so seriously, and their attempts, which were also taken seriously, to incorporate the working class in the movement, would be presented *a posteriori* as mere happenings, and thus made to look ridiculous. Worse yet: it might even be the case that the rebels would favor this misinterpretation. One example of this is the surprising fact that sympathizers of the combatants, while the battles were still raging in the streets, organized an exposition of photographs of the events, which naturally degraded these struggles to the pretext for a *vernissage*.

Another example of the subsequent transformation of the most serious events into happenings is the way the second self-immolation by fire in Prague was treated. It would be superfluous to point out that these self-immolations were not themselves happenings, for when real victims are produced and death begins, that is where the kingdom of the game ends. On the other hand, it is true that the self-immolation of Jan Zajic was transformed *a posteriori* into a spectacle that is not supposed to be taken seriously, that is, into a happening, thanks to the contempt with which the Czechoslovakian journalists were ordered or otherwise compelled to treat the incident in their articles.

---

27, 1969, the *establishment* made its first attempt to give the protesters a taste of their own medicine, that is, to work with happenings, the day Nixon arrived in Rome. The Roman police hosed down the students, who were protesting the visit of the American president, with water dyed red, so that they seemed to be bleeding and, not knowing whether they were really bleeding or not, the protesters lost their resolve and dispersed. It is understandable that students, out of desperation, should use the “game” as a method of protest, since they do not have any weapons (in the current stage of arms production, the obsolete cobblestone cannot be classified as a weapon). But it is morally distressing that the police should make use of the game: while the students play, because they do not have nor can they have—at least for now—any serious weapons, the police play because they can allow themselves the luxury of doing so, for they know very well that should the need arise they can always avail themselves of real weapons.

2. We must also bear in mind the fact that, in historical situations in which opposition groups are completely lacking any opportunity to mount a real opposition, a minimal continuity of opposition can only be assured and maintained with a continuity of happenings. In previous epochs of history it has sometimes been the case that this continuity could only be guaranteed by poets and philosophers. Who knows if the authors of happenings are performing a similar role? In any event, it would be better for this continuity, rather than that it should be utterly lost, that ideas that cannot be realized should at least be subjected to “interpretation”.<sup>208</sup> *The more serious the situation, the more serious the function of the non-serious can be.*

## Chapter 24

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF “MEANING”

(1972)

#### I. THE TWO ROOTS OF THE ABSENCE OF MEANING

§ *The absence of εἶδος in labor.*

Of course, it would not be unfounded for us to speak of the *absence of meaning of modern life*. By this we are referring, above all, or more precisely, to the fact that what lies at the basis of this very justified feeling of ours, is something that could be academically denominated as the *intentionally negative structure of modern labor*. I am referring not only to the fact that we are not owners of the means of production, with whose help we work; this famous defect is only one of the direct consequences of the only “world revolution” that has really taken place in the last century, a technological revolution that has triumphed everywhere. Like those of the first volume, my analyses are therefore *neutral with respect to the [type of political] system*.

With this very complicated expression, “the intentionally negative structure of modern labor”, which is the kind of terminology I have tried to avoid as much as possible over the course of my investigations, I define the fact that we (unlike the artisan, the shoemaker for example, who knows and sees what he is making and who, throughout his entire labor process, works with a view to seeing to it that his final product is beautiful), *do not see the final products before us while we are working* (to be more precise: we participate in the fabrication of parts and parts of these parts), but that in this process we remain *without εἶδος*<sup>209</sup> and the products are transcendent.<sup>210</sup> This is because:

---

<sup>208</sup> It must be pointed out that, in German, “to interpret” a performance (a theatrical performance, for example) is expressed by the word, *spielen*, that is, “to play”, for it is customary to consider that what takes place in the theater is not *the reality*, but a *game* (although it could very well be asked whether this opinion is only an *appearance*). [Note of the Spanish Translator.]

<sup>209</sup> See the author’s book, *Endzeit und Zeitenende*, pp. 158 *et seq.*

1. the path that leads from our first gesture (on the assembly line) to its final product is infinitely mediated;
2. in “our” product countless contributions from others intervene and our own individual contribution is not visible through the tangled web of other contributions. In fact, any attempt to think about the final product while working on an assembly line would be stupid. The reference would be purely external, merely “something that everyone knows”, since in the image of the final product we can no longer distinguish our own contribution;
3. *we must concentrate on this part of the part* that we are in contact with at each moment while working and on the precise moment for each task; and *we also have to work this way* in order to work effectively; and, ultimately, we even have to *want to work this way*;
4. we must not think about judging or criticizing or even sabotaging “our” product (regardless of its purpose): such things are not only *forbidden*, but *we want* to refrain from them. And we want to refrain from such actions because by doing such things we would be sabotaging ourselves, especially during times of unemployment.<sup>211</sup>

Obviously, this *lack of εἶδος* and the phenomenon of *transcendence*, although this is not generally known, have already existed for more than a hundred years, for they are neither more nor less than merely accidental qualities of labor and production, which are empirically verifiable. Moreover, as they arose from the irrevocable industrial revolution, they are *essential characteristics of our modern labor* for which there is no remedy. That is why the discourse that is so popular everywhere concerning the long-awaited “humanization of work” is fraudulent blather, a *contradictio in adjecto*. Such a humanization is just as unlikely as a humanization of war, for that which is supposed to be humanized already bears in advance, and this goes for both, the principle of inhumanity.

But the question is not fully encompassed by this *lack of εἶδος* and the phenomenon of the *transcendence of the product*. Its negativity affects many more domains. Not only are we excluded from the *image* of our products, but we are thus also excluded from the *freedom to share the use of our products*. And this in turn implies that we are also excluded from the *possibility of judging and assuming responsibility for the effects* (which sometimes go as far

---

<sup>210</sup> I avoid using the term *alienation*, which has been eviscerated of all meaning. This is because, in the ears of those who still have a minimum of linguistic sense, it indicates exactly the opposite of what it is generally thought to mean: analogously to the words, *ex-culpatate* or *ex-sanguinate*, it seems to express the fact that something is stripped of its particularity. It is incomprehensible that this word could have lasted so long or, actually, that it is so popular. Or, unfortunately, this is understandable.

<sup>211</sup> As paradoxical as it may sound, we feel completely meaningless when we are unemployed, that is, we are excluded from the meaningless world of work, for then we no longer know what we must do, and not only what we are doing, as in the good old days when we had a job. In fact, from the perspective of the unemployed person, labor time, the time of being able to work (a thing that is always meaningless) appears to be full of meaning. But here we are getting ahead of ourselves.

as genocide) *of our products* (therefore, of our production, that is, of *our* effects). And as I said, not only are we *incapable* of doing so, but *we are forbidden* from doing any of these things, too. And not only are we forbidden from doing these things; *we are also forbidden from even wanting to be capable of doing them*; to summarize: we do not do them. The product of our labor does not matter to us.

This “transcendence of the products”, of their uses and their effects, this infinitely wide abyss between our activity and what our activity gives rise to when and where our lives in fact become *meaningless* (and so we come to the topic of this chapter), is imposed on us but also accepted by us as obvious and innocuous. If any kind of discourse is still generally appropriate with regard to the “meaning of work”, it would consist in getting a paycheck; and I say this in all seriousness. Given the fact that most of our contemporaries who live in the highly industrialized countries are only familiar with and are only capable of being familiar with this meaning, we must say that this majority leads a meaningless life. And with respect to this observation we certainly have to admit that “meaningless work” might be meaningless, or more accurately, not so full of meaning, but it is more endurable than the meaningless stagnation of the *unemployed, who are not even conceded a meaningless job*. There is nothing more heartrending than the nostalgic longing of the unemployed for the good old days, when they could still work meaninglessly.

## § 2

### *The universe of means.*

The second reason for our feeling that the world lacks meaning consists in the fact that we are condemned to live in a *universe of means*. By this I am referring to the artificial world created by the second industrial revolution in which there is no longer any act or object that is not a means or that does not have to be a means and whose purpose does not consist in guaranteeing the production or maintenance of other means, which in turn have the purpose of producing or rendering necessary other means, etc. In these conditions, an act or a product produces *value* only if *it is good for something*, that is, *it is not* any kind of meaning itself, but only *has a meaning*. But my use of the word “only” here is inadmissible, because to be a means for something is the *summum* or the only value that justifies a thing’s existence. Thus, *final goals*, were they to actually arise (which never happens) in the universe of means, would have no meaning: *they would be meaningless* (it is in this that the dialectic of the absence of meaning consists). At most, their meaning would consist in being the “meaning of the means”, since their purpose is the quest for realization (of their goals). Thus, given that in this universe everything is only a means and absolutely not a goal, this universe as a whole is meaningless, just as the need to have to live in such a meaningless universe is also meaningless.

## II. THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE VACUUM OF MEANING

Now we shall devote our attention, after having uncovered the two roots of the absence of meaning, to the means with which an attempt is made to find a remedy against this situation; there are two: external aid and self-help.

### § 3

#### *External aid.*

For someone who has only glanced at the literature on this question it would have to be discouraging (which is not the case) that only now and then—or we may even say never—does anyone speak of the lack of effective meaning of our lives, but always only of the feeling that there is an absence of meaning, as if this feeling were the real misfortune and all we needed to do was to eliminate it; as if the pain in our molar was the infection itself. In no author do we find the unequivocal assertion: “Yes, our life effectively lacks meaning.” None of them asks the question whether, in general, the longing for meaning has any meaning.

Of course, this is not entirely unfounded, since it is clear that anyone who admits the lack of meaning as a fact separates himself from *technology* (which, as we have seen, is the root of this lack of meaning); and, furthermore, that any *establishment*, regardless of its location, would be condemned to death precisely by such a separation from technology. This is why *the lack of meaning is almost immediately displaced*. And not just by the *establishments* that provide us with work, but also by the millions of workers who, if they were really to come face to face with the lack of meaning of their work and their lives, would have to totally abandon their jobs. In fact, the number of honest people, that is, those who admit their own lack of meaning—and we shall speak of them in a moment—is incomparably smaller than the number of people who *displace* their lack of meaning. The latter—and here I am talking about hundreds of millions of people—quite understandably emphasize (all the more so, those who are threatened by unemployment and those who are already unemployed) that work as such is a sacred *fundamental right*, a right to which they lay claim. And since in their view it would be absurd to define work, which they proclaim to be a sacred right, as *something that is meaningless*, they effectively avoid recognizing the meaninglessness of their jobs. If one were to remind them of the Biblical verity that labor, even labor that is replete with meaning, that is, the kind of labor that satisfies immediate needs, was originally considered, and up until quite recently was still considered, to be a *curse*, they would not be capable of admitting this despite the fact that *their jobs are more accursed* than all previous kinds of human labor. And not just because they are incapable of simultaneously experiencing the same thing as “positive”, that is, sacred, and as “negative”, that is, meaningless and accursed.

### **III. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE PERCEPTION, INSTEAD OF AGAINST THE SOURCE, OF THE PROBLEM**

### § 4

#### *Racketeers of meaning.*

That is the argument that would be used by millions of people (if one can call it an “argument”, since this argument is never explicitly formulated). But not all of those millions

of people suffer—as we saw above, with ample justification—from the lack of meaning. Let us examine them in more detail.

And we have to begin immediately with the explanation that this suffering, despite the fact that it is now fashionable to talk about the lack of meaning, is not actually taken seriously. What is revealed here, as I previously mentioned, is the fact that what is treated is *only the feeling of the lack of meaning instead of the actual lack of meaning itself*. And when I say “treated”, I am not referring only to theoretical treatment, but also to therapeutic treatment.

This distinction is not generally made: the philosophical exposition of the problem often remains completely unarticulated. Yet it may very well be the rule that what matters is not the thing itself, the *lack of meaning* as a condition that must be cured, but rather the *feeling of the lack of meaning*. Especially in the United States, there are legions of therapists—we shall call them *racketeers of meaning*—who see the existence of this feeling as the meaning of their lives, that is, they live from its existence; and not only do they claim to cure this feeling, but they even shamelessly announce that they can *give meaning* to people’s lives. And I do not even have to go all the way to the United States to look for these thousands of therapists, because they have even spread to Europe. Every day, at a certain time, the nonsense directed against this feeling flows from the radio from the mouths of vulgar psychologists, clergymen and philosophers of all denominations, who, when they expound their nonsense about “meaning” and about the “loss of meaning”, are as like one another as peas in a pod. Generally, all of them are proud, as modern men, of finding themselves in the current of the *third psychoanalytic school*, which has promoted the feeling of the lack of meaning to the first rank among modern illnesses, replacing the Oedipus Complex and the Inferiority Complex. And not only do they present themselves as the apostles of this *third school*; they even have the shocking audacity to put into the mouths of God and Jesus the vocabulary that could have come only from the writings of the founder of this school, Viktor E. Frankl,<sup>212</sup> for the Bible does not contain our concept of “meaning”; this is a falsification that they can indulge in with impunity because of the clearly minimal knowledge of the radio-listening public. These preachers of meaning, of course, do not all have the same interests, since they use expressions that are flagrantly mutually contradictory: the main thing is that the word “meaning” must appear; thus, sometimes it is said that God or Jesus *is* meaning (or, which is a different matter, that the “meaning” of our existence is to follow God or Jesus). Yet a minute later they are exhorting us to apply the *will to meaning* (this is also an expression of Frankl’s), which plainly and simply leads straight to a contradiction, since this formula unambiguously maintains that we should or must seek and find, or even better, invent meaning (according to the expression, “to give meaning”) *by ourselves* (a meaning that is meaninglessly concealed—by only God knows what *genie malin*). In fact, not long ago the formula of the *self-made man* issued from the radio (which is no less indulgent than paper): *each man is the forger of his own meaning*. And it is not enough for these radio preachers from the third school of Vienna to assure us, giving us a pat on the back, that merely by marshalling an *adequate will to meaning* we have already achieved half of our goal (“Where

---

<sup>212</sup> I also admire the fortitude and the courage with which Frankl resisted the horror of the years he spent in concentration camps. But this cannot mean that we should or even must treat the theoretical consequences he derived from those experiences as taboo.

there is will, there is meaning”: the same source); they also dare to try to pass off this senseless-optimistic expression, which is naturally applauded with enthusiasm in the United States, as an exhortation from God or Jesus: recently, one of these sages of Radioland even confidently proclaimed that God “properly” thought of this “*marshalling of our will to meaning*” when he created us; “properly”—it is clear that the *magister* knows better than God what the latter had in mind; unfortunately God has not yet been able to express it as accurately as a *Franklist*. The unbeliever hides his face in shame.

Those who spur us on to fight the feeling of the lack of meaning—and there are actually thousands of these people—are no better than politicians would be, if they advised the starving people of the Sahel to fight against their *feeling of the lack of bread*: a cynicism that no statesman has yet permitted himself. And when the psychotherapists dare to deceive, with their “*marshalling the will to meaning*”, the millions of people who really spend their existences without meaning in offices or factories or as unemployed workers in front of the television, they are no better than statesmen who would recommend to the starving that they “*marshal their will to be satiated*” and inform them that this will is already half of the bread with which they can immediately satiate themselves if they really wanted to.

With solemn discourses of this kind, thousands of psychotherapists deceive the patients who consult them because they feel a chronic “vacuum of meaning”. Instead of honestly conceding to their patients: “You are correct, your feeling is legitimate. In fact, for you, the life you lead (as a worker in a needle factory or as a career *face-lifter* or as a lottery vendor) has no meaning, however much your activity might be of use for this or that person or even if it is ‘humanized’. But do not think that the expression, ‘meaning of life’, that you use, has any meaning or that you once possessed it before you so painfully told me you lost it; what you had before was not meaning, but a situation in which you had no hunger for meaning. Or even, maybe they could prepare for you a *prosthetic of meaning* for a supposedly lost meaning. Why do you assume that a life, besides just being there, also must or could ‘have’ something more, something that you call ‘meaning’? Don’t let them make you think that you can *find* your meaning of life (since it is not hiding anywhere; moreover, it does not exist); or even that someone else, I for example, the alleged therapist, can find it for you and then implant it like false teeth. No, the only thing that you have not lost, because you never possessed it, *cannot be found* by anyone with the best will in the world.<sup>213</sup> And even assuming that your life ‘has’ a ‘meaning’: how paltry and contradictory, not to say immoral, a meaning it would have to be if it conceals itself so well (despite the fact that, in theory, it has the ‘meaning’ of serving as a guide and justification of your life) that it is

---

<sup>213</sup> We only notice bread and meaning when they are not present. This is not the place to investigate this *primacy of the negative*, which is so important for consciousness. Meaning “has meaning” and can be experienced only in its negation. He who is satiated is not as aware of not being hungry as the starving person is of his hunger. Being satiated does not provoke unrest. Analogously: the happy man is not as aware of his “meaning” as the unhappy man is of his lack of meaning. Our grandmothers, who had swarms of children hanging onto their skirts, not only did not have time for the quest for the meaning of their lives, but it never even would have occurred to them that they *should* have a meaning; they feared hunger and sickness, but not the lack of meaning: the latter is a luxury.

indistinguishable and cannot be located, that is, if it totally fails with respect to its function. The usual trivial philosophical language prefers to use the expression, deep meaning, and assumes that life or the world must have such a meaning; but the discourse of ‘depth’ only arises from the fact that the search for meaning, as a senseless undertaking, is still assumed; that is why they always dig ‘deeper’: the less they find, the deeper it must be. The worse, the better.” Here I must remind the reader that these are not my words, but rather the fictitious words of an honest psychotherapist.

No, the *feeling of the lack of meaning* of life is not a symptom that requires treatment, but a feeling that is entirely justified in view of the reality of the lack of meaning, a sign that one is still accessible to the truth, or, not to put it too bluntly: *a symptom of health*. Of course this accessibility to the truth, as paradoxical as it may sound, requires that we stop looking for “meaning”. In any case: the really sick people—and there are hundreds of millions of them—are those who have never noticed that they in fact lead meaningless lives, that is, those who quickly learn to successfully live amidst the lack of meaning and do not expect anything else.

And as for the thousands of therapists, they are like the *barkeepers* of the towns in the Wild West, where the gold prospectors swarmed in droves: these proprietors of the taverns did not dig in search of any alleged gold, but found it thanks to those who came to their towns to search for it and who, ninety-nine percent of the time, failed and went bankrupt. Or another image: they are like those doctors who, instead of prescribing food and rest for the starving, administered an injection that would counteract the feeling of hunger. In exchange for a fee, of course.

## § 5

*Meaning as means. Coffee for the people.*

Let us return to Frankl, however. The latter correctly observes—and his observation is based on his experience—that in Auschwitz and Dachau those who were oriented by a “meaning”—and by this he is referring to believers of every stripe: Christians as well as Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, communists or patriots—were the most well-prepared to *survive* the horror. One could have spoken of *means of survival*, analogous to “means of subsistence”. The consequence that Frankl deduced from this situation, although he did not formulate it *expressis verbis*, would sound like this: in order to be able to live and survive we had to affirm and encourage any *orientation towards a meaning*, any *faith in a meaning*. This sounds pluralist and tolerant and therefore inoffensive and even commendable; however, for philosophers this position is unacceptable in every respect. This is because it proclaims a complete indifference with regard to the question concerning the truth or the non-truth of what is believed. Lessing, who had taught in his Parable of the Three Rings<sup>214</sup> that the three rings were “authentic”, had laid the groundwork for the misfortune of the neutralization of

---

<sup>214</sup> The parable can be found in his work *Nathan the Wise*, which besides being an exposition of his concept of the “Religions of the Book”, is also an homage to his friend, the Jew Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), who advocated the coexistence of religions on the basis of the reason that is common to all men. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]



the truth (which only matters to unbelievers); he had already substituted the subjective sincerity of the believer for the truth of what is believed. Of course, compared to today's neutralization of the truth, his was still innocuous, since it not only defined the three religions as equally true because they are *faiths*, but above all because *they agree* with respect to the *main belief*, monotheism. Today's pluralism, however, and today's psychotherapy, no longer even require this common denominator as a precondition. For our contemporary pluralism and psychotherapy, everything is already in order merely by virtue of the existence of belief in general, whether this belief pertains to the dogmas called the "trinity" or "the classless society". This means that *they affirm the faith in faith*, instead of the faith in particular contents of faiths. That is, they affirm *the faith in the ability to further their survival*.

Of course, it is not merely by chance that Frankl, with this postulate, has provoked such a fascinating echo in the Anglo-Saxon countries. For some time now, the assumption of tolerance in these countries has consisted in the fact that the person who is tolerated *believes, it does not matter in what*. This was already a victory of faith as an emotional activity over faith as a belief with contents. It is naively assumed that all religions are variants of "belief" of the same degree, something that is not true, since "belief", in the current sense of the word, only appeared with Christianity. In any case: *no particular faith is required, but rather that one believes with determination*. England in the 19<sup>th</sup> century still expected that Jewish immigrants should be *orthodox Jews*; naturally, the orthodox happily complied with this condition. Only on this condition (therefore, oddly enough, with the assumption that they would not be assimilated) were they to benefit from equal rights. And even during the 1930s, the candidate for a university position in the United States who failed to fill in the line on the job application, *Religious affiliation?*, would not be hired.

In fact, Frankl speaks as if he comes from this tradition. Certainly, he does not base his verdict in favor of belief (of *belief*, not *faith*) on religious considerations, but exclusively according to purely pragmatic criteria (with which the American pragmatists are quite familiar). He advocates belief not because he considers, as Lessing did, all religions as variants of a single truth, but because, as he asserts not without justification, all religions confer strength in the same way and because all of them display the same inherent fortifying and therapeutic value. This is, in his view, their common *meaning*. For him, religions are not the "opium of the people", but *coffee for the people*. Some rascal is laughing in the peanut gallery: the great man who more than a hundred years ago claimed that "truth" is only a disguise for "that which is favorable for life": the man who impugned every "meaning" and kept his distance from any kind of faith, the father of nihilism, Nietzsche. The abyss between the two is unbridgeable, for whereas Nietzsche considered the concept of the truth to be unsustainable, because, as he thought, it ultimately led to merely biological utility, Frankl, much more "positive", concedes "truth" or "meaning" to everything that is "favorable for life", precisely because of that quality. The man who dared to question the concept of the truth was much more bold than the man who considered everything that "is favorable for life" to be "full of meaning" and for whom "every truth is good". But it gets worse, because Frankl proclaims in the most unequivocal way that (literally) *there is no situation that does not have a meaning* (something that is more or less incomprehensible after his stay in Auschwitz) and that *not only do we have to find meaning, but we can find it*. This is, certainly, the most cheerful message one can offer to someone who is starved of meaning. It

is not very surprising that this message has had and continues to have an extraordinary advertising impact and power of attraction, especially in the country of *public relations*. In fact, this message proclaims: as miserable as you may feel, not only is it possible to help you to escape your situation of a vacuum of meaning which is only seemingly hopeless, even better: *you have always had this help at your disposal*, since this situation, even if in an obscure way, is “full of meaning”. (This is not a quotation.) And this is, certainly, a doctrine for which the expression “the opium of the people” would be an unwarranted compliment.

§ 6

“Artificial meaning.”

It is true that Frankl repeatedly emphasizes the fact that “meaning” cannot be *invented*, but always only *found* (and this assumes that “meaning” *is there* in some way, an assumption that is a hard nut to crack for philosophers). In spite of this metaphysical affirmation, whose ontological implications do not get us very far, Frankl endlessly advocates something that in the best cases can be defined as *artificial meaning*. By this I am not of course referring to a meaning for art, but to an *artificially produced meaning*, analogous to “artificial fabrics”, since the meaning that he recommends to his patients, especially to his retired patients, who are unhappy because they can no longer work at their jobs (which in ninety-nine percent of the cases had no meaning) and who, only after the interruption of their previous work, feel entirely meaningless, consists most often in an *invented occupation*, whether he prescribes do-it-yourself projects or collecting stamps. The generally accepted term for this activity, which produces the feeling and happiness of meaning, is *hobby*.<sup>215</sup> It is hard to decide whether, with regard to these invented *hobbies*, we have to say that *they have* meaning or if *they are* meaning. Both are true, because on the one hand *they have* the meaning of making those who are starving for meaning feel that, by doing something—which, furthermore, has visible results—we are also doing something that is full of meaning. On the other hand, being occupied *is* the meaning of such an occupation and thus the meaning of a life, thanks to which the patient who suffers from the lack of meaning goes on living happily: “If I didn’t have my stamp collection!” Certainly, the occupation is at the same time not only a *means* for the production of the products of the *hobby* (in the circular movement of the economy they are superfluous and therefore “meaningless”), but for the production of the tranquility or the happiness of the person who is thus occupied. *The product is therefore a means for the production of a semblance of labor, rather than labor being the means for the production of products*, as is so often the case. Now it can be seen that here we are confronted with a complex and unusual phenomenon. In any case, it is clear that the relation between occupation and meaning has been turned on its head: while an aspect of the “normal” occupation (carpentry or hunting, for example) is to attain a goal (its “meaning”), here the occupation, that is, *satisfaction obtained by way of the occupation*, is imposed *as the goal*.

---

<sup>215</sup> All these *hobbies* are basically—this is their *raison d’être*—primitive with respect to the technological situation of the usual forms of contemporary labor, and are in a certain way intentionally rustic, since in the exercise of *hobbies* we have to be able to enjoy—this is their meaning—what was so desirable about real “serious” work, that is, to see before us and to make real the εἶδος of our activity of creation.

Whereas someone who pursues a goal (this is the real meaning of his activity) has the objective of attaining or realizing this goal, occupational therapy has the objective of artificially producing or simulating a goal *so that the patient will rid himself of the torture of the vacuum of meaning by way of the semblance of pursuing this goal*. It is not the patient who lives for his goal; rather, *the artificial goal (or the “meaning”) serves as a means for his life*. Evidently, the relation between means and end, as expressed in the popular saying, “The end does not justify the means”, is thus superseded. Today these simplistic formulas are without meaning, insofar as ends have become means and means have become ends; and insofar as not only is it now the goal of every activity to produce means, but goals are also invented to be implanted as means; and finally, insofar as occupations are being invented in order to simultaneously serve as means and ends. By the way: today the postulate, “The end does not justify the means” is no longer valid, rather the contrary: “The means does not justify the end.” The fact that a means known as the “atomic bomb” exists does not justify its goal: its use.

#### IV. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE LACK OF MEANING

##### § 7

*A quick look at three types.*

1. Most of those who lead meaningless lives are not even conscious of their misfortune. *By way of the life that is imposed upon them they are prevented from perceiving its lack of meaning*. That is why they cannot do anything to counteract this lack of meaning, either. Or, more precisely: even what they do to counteract it is something that is done to them, that is, something that is supplied to them. What I am referring to is the fact that, insofar as they are dispossessed of their autonomy, that is, of the possibility of becoming autonomous, they are likewise not autonomous during their alleged “free time”. They enjoy themselves like slaves, just as they work like slaves. For what purpose do they sit in front of the television, what will become of them with their daily consumption of television?—since it is naturally by way of television that they are configured, that is, transformed into products<sup>216</sup> and, furthermore, into extremely trivial ones: not only are they not at all interested in any of these questions, but they would be just as unfamiliar to them as the function of the products of their labor. Nothing is more horrible than this collective expression: *We don't care what will become of us*. From one lack of meaning, the lack of the meaning of work, they proceed to a second lack of meaning, that of leisure, which certainly still has a meaning: that of offering a palliative for the first lack of meaning. This palliative has even become indispensable for them: they can no longer live without their daily consumption of television for hour after hour (according to the statistics, more than 75 percent of our contemporaries watch television every day), since they do not know what they are supposed “to do with themselves”. It would not be an exaggeration to speak of

---

<sup>216</sup> See the chapter devoted to television in *The Obsolescence of Man*, Vol. I.

*forced leisure*, analogous to forced labor.<sup>217</sup> And not only do they happily accept this imposition; they even raise a directly moral demand for the commodities of leisure that are delivered to their homes. *The counterpart of their allegedly sacred right to a job is their allegedly sacred right to a seat in front of the television.*

2. A tiny minority (regardless of how numerous it might be in absolute terms), as we have seen, allows itself to be convinced that its very justified feeling of a vacuum of meaning is an illness. And this minority is sent to the “racketeers of meaning”, to the therapists, to be cured.
3. A third group, which is certainly small compared to the first group, but is more noticeable because of its noisy *outsider* aspect: that of those who come to terms with<sup>218</sup> the misery of their lack of meaning or, more precisely, they escape from their misery; those who escalate their escapism (which is now organized with the leisure industry, but which is still not integrated into public life) to the point where *they drop out of society*. I am referring to the thousands of people who consume hashish or heroine or who, as hippies or flippies, hitchhike towards the East or join the various sects in droves: the “TM” groups (Transcendental Meditation), Ananda Marga, Earth Play, the Moon sect (anticommunists financed by the CIA), Children of God, *Jesuskindern*, The Church of Scientology, and whatever other names are attached to the salvationist doctrines, practices and groups which, not by chance, all originated without exception in the United States. The credibility of the affirmation of these millions of people is undeniable, in the sense that they take refuge in the needle or join these sects because they can no longer bear the lack of meaning of their lives. After the failure of the attempts, over the entire course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to make life humanly dignified, or at least more dignified, by way of political revolutions; especially after learning from experience that *alienation* (given the fact that ninety percent of the latter proceeds from technological development rather than from property relations) does not display the least tendency to disappear or even decline, not even in the socialist countries, it is not at all surprising that they should immerse themselves in a pure state of intoxication that is not only apolitical, but is not even utopian. What is surprising, on the other hand, is the fact that the number of these escapists has been, up until now, still relatively low and that this trend has not dragged hundreds of millions of people down with it. But this fact is based—and I am aware of the fact that I am repeating myself—on the same thing, that is, on the fact that *most of them, due to their misery, are excluded from the knowledge of their misery* and on the fact that *they are too sick to react to this situation with precisely an “illness”, like the drug addicts.*

§ 8

---

<sup>217</sup> See the chapter devoted to the individual in this volume. First published in *Merkur*, March 1963.

<sup>218</sup> Of course, if they, too, only conceived of these practices spontaneously, without mafia-type organizations to provide them with means and manipulate them, this third group would not even exist.

*A comparison with so-called “universal pain”.*

It has often happened that when I am talking to people and I have taken the frustration of contemporary youth seriously and have considered it to be important, people have attempted to console me or dismiss my concerns with the meaningless words (since an evil is no less an evil merely by virtue of the fact that it is an old evil) that this phenomenon is not really anything so serious or exceptional, because *universal pain* has existed long before contemporary youth unrest, and has even always existed.<sup>219</sup> Is this objection justified? Is what we are experiencing today *universal pain*?

No, because the pain, the melancholy, the disappointment and the indignation of those who, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, suffered from that universal pain did not refer, as our contemporary affliction does, to the “lack of meaning” of life and the world, but to its *poverty*, above all, to the *preponderance of physical suffering with respect to any physical pleasure*, as it was expressed with such pathos by Schopenhauer. Today’s poverty, on the other hand, as we saw above, is the consequence of something completely different: on the one hand, it results from the fact that we have to spend our lives employed doing work that does not matter to us and, on the other hand, it is the consequence of the fact that we are ineluctably inserted into a “universe of means”. *For those who are afflicted with universal pain, life and the world are meaningless because they are impoverished. For us and our contemporaries, on the other hand, the world and life are impoverished because they are meaningless.*

And nevertheless, the two types do converge in one aspect: both are *apolitical, frustrated revolutionaries*. Given that the illness of universal pain did not take into consideration (most often, it was not allowed to do so and therefore was incapable of doing so) the situation that it suffered under: to denounce the political-social situation or to intervene violently in the latter would amount to replacing this “real target” of its critique with another, more general, and thus, paradoxically, a much more innocuous one, that is, with the *world: this would have rendered social misery “worldly”*. Thus, it was not the reactionary government or the physical poverty of the population that was unbearable, but the universe. And *it sublimated its denunciation in lamentation*: its indignation was turned into a “cultural value”, which was of course never unwelcome to the rulers. In fact, no censor, no matter how severe, ever expressed any objections against a literary, philosophical or musical documentation of universal pain.<sup>220</sup>

---

<sup>219</sup> This feeling, which would have been an important chapter in *The History of Feelings* (which I vainly announced as a *desideratum* twenty-five years ago), has been suffered not only by small-time, lachrymose romantics, but also by men as great and as unlike one another as Byron and Heine (not to speak of Schopenhauer). This effect undoubtedly represented the first manifestation of feeling against the euphoria of progress that began to take root in philosophy, the natural sciences and the technology of their time.

<sup>220</sup> It was the Dresden revolutionary, Wagner, who later became the composer of *Tristan*, who had transformed his political indignation into a form of nostalgia—which was, furthermore basically unattainable—that (precisely because it could not be attained) underwent such a shocking expansion that it seemed to represent the nostalgia of the entire world. And from this strange and unattainable nostalgia (to the extent that it was only a

In fact, even today a similar mechanism of substitution prevails: those who suffer from the *lack of meaning* of their jobs, which was brought about by technology, and from the fact that *they are nothing more than just another means in a universe of means*, falsify their misery, and replace the target of their unrest in the same way, because instead of recognizing or combating the state of the “technological” world as the cause, they restrict themselves to complaining about or even neutralizing their own emotional state, which was brought about by the state of the world, that is, *they distance themselves from the vacuum of meaning*. They, too, are frustrated revolutionaries, however much this expression might even grant them too much merit, because, aside from a few thousands of American young people, among whom political militancy is “superimposed” on drug addiction, and a few thousand others who, from the seedbed of the social environment formed during the movement against the Vietnam War, have trespassed beyond the boundaries of social norms and have transformed that social environment into a drug scene, only a minority originated (for political reasons, of course) as a political opposition. Instead, most of them, leaving leftism to the politicians, plunged straight into the drug scene or that of the sects.<sup>221</sup>

And concerning the trajectory of these elements, it is also true that it is not entirely without advantage for the *establishment*, which is in turn plausible because a serious investigation of the roots of suffering would come into conflict with technology and, naturally, no *establishment*, neither in the West nor in the East, can allow a massive assault against technology. In both East and West, as if the role of technology has not changed in a hundred and fifty years, even the most modest positions of the critique of technology are ridiculed as if they were expressions of the most antiquated *Luddism*. The same cause lies behind the fact that in America the spread of psychoanalysis has met such a positive reception, insofar as it treats the lack of meaning as a psychologically curable condition, whether the treatment consists of individual or *group therapy*, instead of considering it to be an effect of technology; and that, at the same time, in the Soviet Union, psychoanalysis, which had been proscribed for a half century, is no longer judged with such disdain as before. In fact, it would hardly be surprising if the governments of the highly industrialized countries, both those in the West as well as those in the East, were to allow or even sponsor, under certain circumstances, the [recreational/illicit] drug industry, just as they have financed the entertainment industry, which is not so different from the drug industry, since in their view (both in the East and the West) *the consumer of drugs is less dangerous than the active dissident* and drug consumption might forestall the outbreak of political unrest. But we must reserve this topic for later treatment.<sup>222</sup>

---

*pleasure of* and therefore infinite, instead of being a *pleasure in*, that is, temporally limited) he extracted such an infinite sweetness that even we, four generations later, who are completely disillusioned and who long ago discerned the mechanism of falsification, are not immune to it.

<sup>221</sup> They also expressed their anxieties in a musical form, for in rock music (and even earlier in jazz) they imitate the raucous noise and the syncopated reified rhythm of the machines, which clash with human rhythms, so as to orgiastically identify with the machines.

<sup>222</sup> Already in 1959 I dissuaded the Hiroshima pilot, Claude Eatherly, from taking the chemical products that they were trying to force him to take in a veterans hospital in order to

For we must return to our examination of the difference between the two miseries: that of universal pain and that of suffering from the lack of meaning. This difference confers upon the latter a very precise profile.

When those who suffered from “universal pain” asked any questions about anything—actually, rather than asking questions, they usually just complained—they did so in conformance with an established tradition of theodicy: why do the misery and pain of creatures, their illnesses and their mortal condition, exist? That is, they asked about the *meaning of the negative*. Those who currently are asking about meaning (if that is what they are doing) do not formulate their question that way, because *they are not asking about the meaning of suffering, but rather—and this is a considerable difference—about that of existence itself, which is not rendered meaningless to them because of the torment of suffering, but to the contrary: it is rendered insufferable because it is without meaning*. I say, “it is”, not “they consider it to be”, because *a priori*—I have already demonstrated why at the beginning of this chapter—their starting point is the lack of meaning that is for them indisputable.<sup>223</sup>

But these people can be distinguished from those who suffer from universal pain in just as fundamental a way as they can be distinguished from those others, who are not assimilated—the revolutionaries—since it no longer even enters their minds to construct a world that could have a meaning for them or a world in which they would be able to have meaning. Instead of realizing a new *life, they take refuge in mere experience, in the experience of situations, in which their question about meaning no longer obtains a negative response*: or in the fact that they no longer suffer from the lack of meaning, because in them a lack of meaning is no longer predominant, which does not in fact mean that now they positively recognize or enjoy any particular meaning, but only that, during their drug-induced states, they maintain themselves in a *neutral dimension with regard to meaning*. To define these states (which they call *being high*) as *intoxication* would be to neglect the real question, for this term has too many connotations associated with the Dionysian state. What they are looking for and most likely find is not, once again, an *artificial paradise*, but rather pure *nirvana*. And this is true not only of the states produced by drugs, but above all of all their activities (if one can call these acts, that have *auto-passivity* as their objective, activities): and this is just as applicable

---

overcome his political and moral scruples. What is prescribed for the sick person is allowed for the healthy person. In the era of “soft terrorism”, however, such permission is always a form of recommendation. In connection with this question, see my *Off limits für das Gewissen*, 1960, *passim*.

<sup>223</sup> Another reason why they start from *existence as suffering*, rather than from *the existence of suffering*, is the fact that most of them come from the bourgeoisie, for whom physical suffering does not play a relevant role and who do not experience either physical or sexual hunger. Among them, when physical suffering does make an appearance, it is instead always a *consequence of the illness of the lack of meaning*: fleeing from the question of why this is, they yield to drugs, with which they corrupt or kill themselves. Today’s lumpenproletarians, as can be seen in the subway stations of New York or Berlin, do not come, any more than the terrorists do, from the proletariat. We need to introduce the term, *lumpenbourgeoisie*.

to their deafening music, through which they can “forget themselves”, as it is to their sexuality.<sup>224</sup> Given the fact that they are engaged in a quest for nothingness, one cannot deny a certain justification to their inclination towards Buddhism, which is now an everyday phenomenon especially in the United States, despite the unsurpassable lack of culture in the history of the “apostolic” religions.

## § 9

*Opium, the religion of the people.*

The time is long past when one was justified in defining religion as *the opium of the people*. Today, to the contrary, *opium* (here I use the word to represent all types of drugs) has instead become *the religion of the people*. What they seek and experience in their ecstasies is not (despite the fact that they leave behind, at least momentarily, the misfortune of the lack of meaning) “meaning”: *no one, upon their return from a “trip”, has ever communicated that they experienced the absence of the lack of meaning, or, expressed positively, a “meaning”, whether that of the world or that of existence itself.* Instead, all of them report “only” the *beauty* that they experienced. And this is evidently absolute, that is, it has nothing to do with either meaning or the lack of meaning. There can be no doubt: the condition that is the opposite of the unendurable nature of the vacuum of meaning is not called “possession of meaning”, but *happiness* or, to be more precise, *artificial happiness*. For about fifteen years now we have lived—the G.I. drug addicts in Vietnam and the flower children were our ominous precursors—in a *eudaimonian*, or more correctly, a *hedonist era*. This fact, insofar as the possibility of a universal catastrophe increases with each passing day and in consideration of the fact that everyone is aware of this possibility, is not just odd, but scandalous. But if, confronted with this fatal eventuality, one kills time euphorically rather than in a state of shock, it is not because the danger is not understood or despite the fact that it is understood, but rather *because* it is understood.

The happiness that our fathers and grandfathers, as well as we ourselves, had still promised as a result of the transformation of our inhuman society into one that was humanly dignified, is now procured with *pills and injections of transcendence*. And I assume that *not only can they avail themselves of this transcendence, but they are often allowed to do so, when they are not actually compelled to do so*, because these de-politicized and de-moralized *beautiful people* are not viewed with disdain by the political *establishment*. In any event, they are viewed with less distaste than political opponents were. Opium has become the religion of the people, when it is not even introduced and promoted positively for just such a purpose. The Hiroshima pilot was stuffed with tranquilizers, in order to prevent him from thinking (allegedly in “a sick way”) of the moral and political implications of the bombings in which he participated. That is, in order to de-moralize and de-politicize him. It is hard to believe the

---

<sup>224</sup> Furthermore, despite their total *elimination of taboos* (for the first time in universal history), their sexuality remains exceptionally impersonal and far removed from love. *Partners* are as interchangeable as pills, which is admitted with remarkable sincerity in personal ads in the newspapers. But given that no orgasm can last as long as a *trip* on drugs, there is no *partner* that can compete with the drug trip.



claim of the U.S. High Command in Vietnam that it struggled in vain to put an end to the drug use to which a considerable part of the G.I.s in Vietnam had become accustomed. The High Command solved the most difficult problems in Vietnam. Of course, I am not saying that the High Command itself secretly organized, as was the case in Molussia, the traffic and consumption of drugs; but I am saying that it closed its eyes to the black market, because it could rest assured that the drug addicts would not become rebels, but that they would participate in everything, even in the most bloody “missions”, without exercising their brains concerning their meaning or lack of meaning or about their morality or immorality. In any case, it is certain that these *means mobilized against the lack of meaning* have been used and are accredited *as means mobilized against dissent* and *as means mobilized for the construction of an unconditional loyalty*, that is, as *means of assimilation*. Furthermore, the difference between the tactics employed in the West and those employed in the East is very interesting: while in the West, spiritual upheaval is allowed to spread in order to forestall political upheaval and to prevent the rise of dissent, in the East they imprison political dissidents and opponents as allegedly mentally ill. It is a matter of taste to decide which of the two practices is more encouraging.

But it is not just opium that has become the religion of the people; to the contrary, it is clearly the case—and with this observation we return to the original version of this formula—that the countless *religious sects* that have emerged particularly in America (but which are already invading the entire Western world) are not accomplishing anything very different or any better than these drugs, that is, they work *like* opium. Of course, I am not referring—this was the original meaning of the formula—to the fact that the ruling class feeds those who cannot afford the more expensive drugs, in order to keep them as docile as sheep, with the less expensive substitute of “religion”; rather, I am referring to the fact that the new sects (which, indeed, do not emerge from the “people”, but from the middle class) have become structurally similar to drugs, that is, that the only thing that the followers of the sects attain, without being conscious of this fact, is the psychological *state* to which their drugs and rituals transport them; to the fact that, compared to the latter, dogmas have become insignificant and are disposed of without much loss. In the best case, dogmas and rituals play the same role that drugs play, and today, to the extent that they can be obtained as commodities, they are usually replacements for the most obsolete and coarse drugs. It is true that there are *still* hundreds of sects that propagate certain seemingly novel “trivial dogmas”, but which are most often rehashed versions of older dogmas,<sup>225</sup> and I say *still*, because their number is increasing with each passing day and the multiplication (proceeding from the history of Protestantism) of religious grouplets only seems to have reached its culmination today. But the multiplicity of sects is deceptive. I am convinced that the hundreds of thousands of people who believe they need a particular faith, an “authentic ring”, as a vehicle to transport themselves to their longed-for state of nirvana and that only *their ring will do the trick*, only try to believe this, because their dogmas have become interchangeable. It is purely a matter of chance whether a sectarian Mr. Smith will be infected by the dogma of sect A and Mr. Miller by the dogma of sect B; it is just as much a matter of chance as whether Mr. Smith

---

<sup>225</sup> Yes: trivial, because the founders of sects are generally not very well educated; the mystic has been degraded to a phenomenon of the middle class and the followers of the sects are illiterates, not in spite of but because of the fact that they read the literature of the sect.

will encounter and believe in *veronal* and Mr. Miller in *geronax*. One dogma has the same effect as any other; ninety-nine percent are nothing but pure *placebos*: a claim that Smith and Miller, although they are declared enemies, will naturally reject with the same fervor and indignation that make them so similar. In any case, *the contents of faith are degraded to means of intoxication and nirvana*, which, expressed philosophically, are ἄνευ λόγου and are at the same level as the means of nourishment and sleep.

## V. THE MEANING OF THE CONCEPT OF MEANING<sup>226</sup>

That it is hoped or even demanded from life itself or from creatures or from states or from the course of history or even from the universe as a whole that they should not just exist, but that they should also have a meaning, is anything but an obvious duality. For those who are capable of liberating themselves from the prejudices that the popular language of everyday life has imposed upon them, and for those who are capable of thinking, for example, like a Martian who is making his first visit to Earth, this duality is most surprising. How did the concept of “meaning” arise? What meaning do we associate with it?

### § 10

#### *The monopoly of meaning.*

In order to orient ourselves, we shall first ask the question: what kinds of things are *never* subjected to questions about their meaning? Overall, we can answer right from the start, enigmatically, of course: *one never asks about the meaning of “positive” things*. Never, or almost never, do we ask the question, for what purpose does the world as a whole exist, what is its “meaning” (however much the philosophers were profoundly agitated by its existence or its contingency). Or, for what purpose does life exist? Or, why does this or that people exist?<sup>227</sup> Or, why do oak trees or flies or jellyfish exist? Or even, why does *this* fly or *this* jellyfish exist? Or even, what meaning does *this* or *that* incident in the life of *this* or *that*

---

<sup>226</sup> Before embarking on my own reflections, I propose something basic about the meaning of the term, “meaning”. It is generally not clearly perceived that the term is used in two different senses, which, however, cannot be distinguished, so that they are together submerged in an inextricable meaninglessness. The clarification of the concept has a significance that goes far beyond the merely linguistic aspect. 1. It says that some thing (a), for example, a part, *has* meaning for another thing (A), for example, which is a whole. And 2. that some thing (A), for example, a whole, *is* the meaning of some other thing (a), for example, a part. Evidently, the two uses of the same term are different. More precisely: they have a reciprocal relation. By this I mean that, when some thing (a) *has* a meaning for some other thing (A), this (A) *is* the meaning of (a). An example: a key *has* a meaning for the piano (and without it the piano would be a meaningless object, a Kafkaesque *odradek*). The piano *is* its meaning. The part *has* meaning for the whole; the latter *is* its meaning.

<sup>227</sup> Only Hegel, by establishing the contingent *a priori*, asked the rash question about the meaning of Egyptian or Roman civilization, that is, about the role that these highly praised civilizations played in human history in the development of the world spirit. He even believed that he answered these questions.

jellyfish have? Anyone who would ask questions like these, would certainly be considered to be crazy; but, why? In fact, there is something positive whose meaning has been questioned and concerning whose meaning it has not been considered crazy to inquire: *man*. Evidently, the meaning of meaning was *anthropologically circumscribed*, since it was the role of man in the cosmos and not that of the fly that was questioned. From the point of view of the history of the spirit, this anthropomorphism is easily explainable, that is, by means of the reference to the anthropology of the Old Testament, which is still influential today, which not only elevated man to the status of the master of all, but also to that of the master of existence itself, so that all the other creatures have been created for him and therefore this is *their* “meaning”. If one views this monopoly of meaning through the eyes of the natural scientist, of a Darwinist, for example, instead of through the eyes of the scientist of the spirit, this is really just stupid. No one can seriously believe that something as fundamental as “meaning” can be judged in some way to be an attribute of precisely and exclusively the one species among so many millions to which one by chance belongs; that *humanity, as if it were “the chosen people” amidst all beings*, as the sole *γενοϋς*, should belong to the “metaphysically good shelf”, while the other millions of species and living creatures, from the amoebas to the whales, not to speak of the plants, have to be content with being crowded onto the “metaphysically bad shelf”, the one that holds those who are not bearers of meaning.<sup>228</sup>

## § 11

*Meaning = what one has in one’s mind. The death of meaning.*<sup>229</sup>

In that sense, however, we were utilizing a concept of “meaning” that is still entirely unintelligible. We shall only understand the concept when we clearly grasp the fact that “meaning” was not originally something abstract, but rather something “psychological”, if we can speak in this way. With this I am referring to the fact that the first question was not, “What meaning does this or that thing *have*?”, but rather, “What did God have in mind when he created or dispatched or even tested this or that thing?” Without the assumption of one “who has something in mind”, the original utilization of the word, “meaning”, would be meaningless; and this is also still true for millions of people. Even for us atheists, it is hard to conceive of “meaning” without this hypostasis, which nonetheless certainly does not mean

---

<sup>228</sup> Heidegger, the last person who asked about the meaning of man, was still an heir of Old Testament anthropomorphism, for he had judged the romantically arrogant role from the ontological point of view of the *shepherd of Being*. His thesis, a century after the appearance of *The Origin of Species*, represents the epitome of anti-naturalism in modern-day non-religious philosophy. Evidently, man, if he is an ontological *shepherd*, does not belong to the flock of beings, that is, he does not belong to nature. Of course, this is just inoffensive and metaphysically comical. What is dangerous and fearsome, however, is the *metaphysics of industrialism*, which likewise is based on Genesis, which conferred upon man the “meaning” of being *the exploiter of existence* and sees the *meaning of existence in being raw material for man*.

<sup>229</sup> “To have in mind” is our translation of the German expression, *im Sinne haben*, which includes the word “meaning” (*Sinne*). The reader must keep this in mind in order to discern the play on words in which the author is engaging here. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]

that for “meaning”, that is, for belief in a “meaning”, we would have to become religious, but to the contrary, that we are only permitted to utilize the category “meaning” (if it is necessary to do so) with the greatest circumspection, since one can hardly provide an answer to the question of what the meaning of “meaning” consists in, if one does not simultaneously conceive of a God who would have something “in mind”. In fact, our concept of meaning is only deducible historically, but it is not explainable philosophically. Even the believers in meaning are not so sure of the sense in which they speak of “meaning”, since again and again they assure us (oddly, with a certain pathetic fatuousness) that, *in general, meaning is “hidden” and thus unknowable, a fact whose meaning would naturally have to be questioned*. So where is it written that it is part of the meaning of meaning that it should be “secret”? What did God have in mind when he created meaning, but then concealed it? These questions cannot be put to rest with the puerile contrivance of “deep meaning”. The reason why, usually, meaning is considered to be secret, is itself a mystery of the same order, upon which light can be shed only by questioning the meaning of the category, “meaning”.

The courage to admit and proclaim, along with the “death of God”, the death of meaning; the courage that Nietzsche had already proposed a hundred years ago as the proof of the maturity of modern man, that is, to admit that we, as “non-imagined”, are adrift on the ocean of being; a courage that, with the exception of the natural scientists (who are often hardly aware of just how inadvertently daring their work really is and who almost never speak *expressis verbis* about the atheist implications of their activities), only very few of us have attained. And as it has often been observed, in general even the natural scientists, since they immediately fill the vacuum produced by the loss of divine intentionality with the omnipotent *causality*, with which they establish a universal machine, which functions in a quiet and orderly fashion, instead of the wilderness of the universal ocean; not even they have perceived that the existence of this machine might be equally meaningless, as they are dazzled by the beauty of necessity.<sup>230</sup> In any case, we, who are not natural scientists, have maintained the concept of “intentionality” under the camouflaged label of “meaning”; but as we have said, we transform it into a form of intentionality without anyone to imagine it, that is, we *de-deify* it.

## § 12

*Meaning = secularized justification.*

Only now, after having clarified the original meaning of “meaning” as what God had “in mind”, our initial affirmation is now clear as well, which sounded so enigmatic: almost never is the meaning of the *positive* questioned. Here I am referring to the fact that the question about meaning has almost exclusively attacked the existence of the negative, of evil and the horrible, whose existence, *at first sight* (but also upon *last sight*), cannot be reconciled with having something in mind, that is, with the will of God, and demands justification.<sup>231</sup>

---

<sup>230</sup> Here we can only refer to the unsure reaction, which often takes the form of an improvised variety of theological dilettantism, on the part of many natural scientists to the “crisis of causality” provoked by quantum theory.

<sup>231</sup> The fact that today we should radically question both what is most universal and inquire concerning its meaning (with Schelling and Heidegger: “Why does existence exist rather than

The concept of “meaning” never would have been possible if only the positive were to exist in the world. Job’s healthy brothers would never have had any reason to ask what God had in mind with respect to their prosperity. Only Job, scratching his sores, *needed* the question about meaning and only he *was capable* of posing this question. As long as Lisbon was still intact, it would never have occurred to Voltaire even in his wildest dreams to ask how the existence of that prosperous city could be justified, that is, to investigate the “meaning” of the city of Lisbon. After the destruction of the city, however, he directed inquiries to God and urged him to justify the catastrophe. When this idea of justification disappeared, nothing was left in its place, but only the idea of “meaning”, so that we can say: *The question concerning meaning is the secularized version of the question of theodicy. Or the disguised question of the justification of atheism.*

§ 13

*Excursus on the word, “for”.*

Of course, speaking about “meaning” is itself completely meaningful. Aside from the fact that one is fully justified in speaking of the “meaning” of a text—keeping in mind that this “meaning” is an entirely different matter—it is completely meaningful to speak of the meaning of *machines*. Certainly, machines possess this meaning only because there was someone (see above) who had something “in mind” when he created them, and because there are users who have it “in mind” to make something with them.

In this sense, however, men (or their existences) do not have any meaning. Almost no one would dare to claim that God (or our ancestors) when he (or they) created us, had something particular “in mind” in the same sense that the locksmith produces keys for a particular use (which is precisely their “meaning”); that we were brought into the world only so that we, as machines, *should realize particular objectives, which are external to us* and which are called “meanings”. In fact, today we cannot utter the words, *The destiny of man*, without qualms, words that Fichte was still capable of writing without any second thoughts. If someone were to do this today, he would display an *anthropological megalomania*, for (aside from the fact that we no longer recognize anyone who would craft a destiny for us) the expression would presuppose something that is extremely unlikely and can never be proven, that is: that we,

---

nothing?”) as well as what is most particular (“Why am I here?”) makes it clear that we perceive both things and therefore everything as *contingent*, and thus negative: as facts that need justification, just as natural catastrophes needed to be justified in the view of Leibniz or Voltaire. The classical responses (provided by Plotinus) as well as the modern ones (Leibniz) have led to the solemn claim, which never sounds entirely honest, that no world exists that does not also contain some evil; that evil is the yeast without which nothing will rise; that evil often, to quote Goethe’s *Faust*, “leads to good”; that the world that contains evil is the best of all possible worlds; and finally, that the freedom to do evil is the price of the (positive) freedom of man. Without this tradition of responses, Hegel’s optimism, when he unites in a most peculiar way “meaning” and “negativity”, would never have been possible: his philosophy was the crowning achievement of a tradition of bad faith.

tiny insects on the surface of a third-rate planet that revolves around a third-rate star, should mean something, something decisive of course, for the extra-human universe. It is absolutely meaningless to speak of a “destiny” not only “of man”, but of the individual, as if each and every one of us were to have been assigned a particular function from birth, that is, a particular “meaning”. Such divine births no longer occur (if indeed they ever did). Today we need particular jobs and professional qualifications, which (often with the help of computers) “determine” which available job (if there is one) we must take because of the global and local economic situation. To claim that the job that was assigned to us by means of a machine, should be our “meaning”, would exhibit a stupendous degree of cynicism despite all the senseless chatter about the “sacred right to a job”.

If I maintained above that we are not born with any “meaning” that is “external to us”, this was because, if we define something as “meaningful” we are always thinking that it must have meaning *for something*. Without such a *for*, the discourse of “meaning” is meaningless: there is no “free-floating meaning” that somehow does not refer to anything in particular. Our hands have their meaning *for* the organism (that is, the latter *is* their meaning). The slaves had their meaning *for* the plantation owners. It is possible that if one were to tell these plantation owners themselves that they *have a meaning*, and if they could understand this expression (which is unlikely), they would have violently disagreed. And this is because *to have meaning for...* always means *to be heteronymous*, to be a means for an end, to be unfree. Can we be so sure that having a meaning is an honorific predicate and that not to have a meaning is a diminution? *In the final analysis, does our search for meaning not perhaps culminate in the search for a job*, however much we define this “meaning” as “deep” (because we cannot find it) and however much we adorn ourselves with this epithet, because we are going around in circles searching in vain?

#### IV. THE ITERATION

If we admit that “to have meaning” is always “to have meaning for ...”, we inevitably arrive at a frustrating circumstance that threatens to render meaningless any attribution of meaning. I call this circumstance the *iteration of meaning*. I am referring to the fact that, to the extent that we do not want to contradict ourselves, we cannot avoid transposing the question about meaning from one stage to the next, and from that one to the next, and so on *ad infinitum*. If the meaning of A consists in serving B, we have to assume, in order to recognize this meaning of A, that some meaning also corresponds to B, since it would be senseless to have meaning for something that in itself is without meaning, etc. Certainly, apart from us wacky philosophers, there is no one who, by being logically compelled, also feels obliged on a moral plane to reexamine this iteration and draw the consequences from this reflection. In general, non-philosophers are content with having meaning for something concerning whose meaning they do not inquire. It is in this that the *moral limitation* of modern man consists, which I have exposed *ad nauseum* in *Endzeit und Zeitenende* as well as in other chapters in this volume. On the other hand, however, it seems as if the idea of the *iteration ad infinitum*, the idea of not knowing what the ultimate consequence of the consequences of the consequences of the consequences of my action will be, that is, what “meaning” my actions have in the last instance and for what I am responsible in the final analysis; it would appear

that, as I was saying, this idea is also *demoralizing*, because anyone who yields and surrenders to it is dispossessed of the ability to continue acting in general.

Thus, we seem to be condemned to choosing between the too-narrow horizon and the too-broad horizon, between the present moment of life and the infinite perspective, *between moral limitation and moral excess*. This is, of course, a terrible alternative, an aporia that cannot be resolved, but only cut like the Gordian knot. I am referring to the fact that, as moral beings, we are not permitted to act either *sub specie* of the *nunc* or *sub specie infiniti*; to the fact that we are involved with the span of time “between now and eternity”. Just as it is clear that we have to live and act in a span of time that goes beyond the present moment (that is, we have to ask: what are the effects of the effects of my actions, that is, what is their “meaning?”), it is also clear that we are not permitted (totally disregarding the fact that we are not capable of it anyway) to reexamine this iteration of our responsibility *ad infinitum*. Expressed in pragmatic terms: *it is most likely that the category of “meaning” only has meaning if we blind ourselves to the endless iteration*, if we use it on a limited horizon and if we grant it a merely pragmatic meaning.<sup>232</sup> It falls under the rubric of normality that the mother who sees the meaning of her life in raising her children, does not waste any time asking herself what meaning her children have, and then the same question about the children of her children, etc. And, probably, not only is she not obliged to pursue this absurd chain of ideas; to the contrary, if (for some incomprehensible reason) she were to be tempted to inquire into this iteration, she would have to resist this temptation.

No, we are not faced with the choice between the present moment and infinity. This does not mean, however, that we withdraw our postulate concerning iteration. While we are not obliged to live and work *sub specie infiniti*, we nonetheless have to leave the present moment and put our shoulders to the wheel in a very broad, often imperceptible, and only imaginable, and often not even imaginable, but only conceivable (and by “we” I am referring here to all of us, to every one of us who works in production, from the “uneducated” person to the Minister of Public Works) *domain of foresight and responsibility*. We have to foresee even what we do not see with our eyes. Today’s imperative sounds like this: *Anticipate!* Only now has Prometheus, with whose name I began the first volume (for the name means: he who thinks ahead), become our symbolic moral figure. The question of the “meaning” of our actions, especially of our labor, culminates in the anticipatory question: what is the effect of

---

<sup>232</sup> If we do not do this, the idea would be as follows: if there were some last thing, in which some penultimate thing would see its “meaning”, one could no longer claim with regard to the latter that it “has” a meaning, since it would only “be meaning”, regardless of whatever the profound rhetorical phrase “be meaning” might signify. In fact, no one, besides Hegel, has inquired concerning the “meaning of the totality” or has had the metaphysical audacity or ingenuousness Hegel displayed by providing a theoretical answer to this question. Naturally, however, his answer, “the self-realization of Spirit”, is not immune to the question of the iteration, either. The question concerning what meaning this self-realization must have and for what purpose it exists is just as unjustifiable as it is impossible to answer. No one has ever asked God the question about what “meaning” he has. And this is because there is nothing higher *for which* he could have a meaning. (This has not prevented the publication of countless *drugstore* books featuring the shameless title, *The Meaning of God*.)

the effect of the effect of the use of the part of the product that I co-produce and whose production seems (since it keeps me busy) to give “meaning” to my life? The real meaning of my action, as particular and instantaneous as it may be, is the *last* effect, the effect that comes after a chain of iterations. Once again I shall cite my previous example: the meaning of my labor in the part of the machine of a machine, whose meaning consists in producing another part of a machine and, furthermore, for a machine that is necessary for a weapon of annihilation, whose meaning in turn consists in the liquidation of millions of persons; I say, the ultimate meaning of a job that seems so innocuous insofar as its product is some tiny piece consists in the final effect of the final product, despite the fact that the latter is far removed from me, spatially and temporally, and despite the fact that, during my labor, I concentrated solely on the flawless production of that first little piece. *The ultimate meaning of a modest manual gesture can be called “genocide”.*

As we see, we do not need to proceed all the way to the end of the iteration. The meaning of my labor does not reside in the infinite, but only in what is very distant. The moral truth resides somewhere between the present moment and infinity. Just as we must think beyond the present moment, it is also superfluous to continue to pursue the question of meaning *ad infinitum*. If we recognize as the ultimate meaning of a product, in whose production we collaborate, the annihilation of humanity, we already know what we have to do and therefore, what we must refrain from doing. *The subsequent question*, for example, that of *what meaning the existence or the non-existence of humanity must have*, possesses full meaning at most in the realm of theoretical reason (despite the fact that it is not possible to answer it), but *no interest at all for “practical reason”*. It is a question of no interest to the moralist. The latter is content with the next to last question. And it can be said “luckily so”, if he manages to organize something for the next to last stage.

Of course, I shall not delude myself. Close to one hundred percent of all workers—and among the latter I also include scientists, engineers and statesmen—would consider such a notion of iteration, such a question about the remote meaning of their actions (should any such notion ever even occur to them), to be ridiculous. What they call a “notion”, however, is the exigency of the moment and of all the moments that may perhaps still be left to men. Given that since 1945 it is a question of *to be or not to be* for humanity, it is certainly not paying too high a price to expose oneself to ridicule by way of this “notion”. “If the day were to come”, we read in the Molussian philosopher Mo, “when I would no longer be an object of ridicule, I would be horrified by the suspicion that I had said something false or that I had failed to say something that was true”.

## **Chapter 25**

### **THE OBSOLESCENCE OF UTILIZATION**

**(1979)**

Two reversals are in order:



## I

Certainly, the maxim, “*The end does not justify the means*” (which contradicts the principle, presumed to be that of the Jesuits, “the end justifies the means”), is still valid, as always. No less important, if not even more important, is its reversal: “*The means does not justify the end*”.

An example: the fact that the means of annihilation and blackmail known as the “atomic bomb” exists does not represent any justification that it should be used for the ends that are inherent to it.

It is indisputable—this was one of the reasons Truman adduced, when in 1945 he decided to use the two “available” means for the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki—it is indisputable that one must recommend or execute the realization of an end because the non-utilization of the means that are available for achieving it, in which “so much has been invested” (that is, by the tax-paying population), would be a *waste*.

The same concept applies to so-called “nuclear reactors”, nuclear time bombs set to detonate at some unknown future date. Someone who, in order to avoid such wastefulness, advocates the operation of nuclear reactors that have not yet “gone online”—which the chancellors of the central European countries have done again and again—does not have a moral level any higher than Truman. But that is not sufficient. Those who assume a position in favor of the systematic and “*optimal construction of nuclear reactors*”—this cynical expression is not my invention—do so also because they are frightened by the idea that the energy that *could* be produced would be prevented from enjoying its possible existence by a renunciation of such construction projects. Not only the non-utilization of already-available plants, but the non-production of *possible* plants seems to them to be an unacceptable waste.

## II

The problem that we will soon confront will no longer be that of the scarcity of energy, but that of *its excess*. We will not have at our disposal, as we still do today, reserves of organic materials like coal or oil, but inexhaustible natural forces like solar energy. With respect to this question, Robert Jungk and I are in complete agreement. The question of the future will be as follows: “*Will industry need all the energy that can be produced* (or more precisely: all the energy that can be harvested, or even more precisely, that can be gathered as it rains down from the sky)? *Can it possibly need all that energy?*”

It will not be the materials and energy supplies that satisfy our needs that will be limited, but, to the contrary, our needs themselves will be the limiting factor, since the latter cannot be expanded *ad infinitum*, as is still considered to be natural today. Even now the *reserves of needs*—*sit venia verbo*—are so depleted that, properly speaking, they have to be produced; this production of needs has even become one of the most important sectors of production, for without its existence the products that satisfy these needs would not have any use. But

even if it were possible to infinitely expand our needs, it would make absolutely no sense, except for the economy, which needs them.

The competition for which we have to prepare ourselves today will take place between (limited) needs and (unlimited) sources of energy. An attempt will have to be made to cause needs to *rise to the level* of the energy sources (the metaphor is disagreeable, but indispensable). We will not explore for *untapped sources*—which will flow for free or almost for free—but for *untapped needs*. We will not pray for our daily bread, but for *our daily hunger*. Energy will not be necessary to guarantee production, but the reverse: production will be carried out to prevent the wasteful non-use of available energy, which flows from the faucets of energy, which cannot be closed. Our task will not be to procure or to create energy, but to create tasks whose purpose is to prevent the *quantum* of potential energy from lying fallow. Soon, the complaint of the sorcerer's apprentice—"Spirits that I've cited/My commands ignore"—will no longer refer only to the machines of catastrophe, but also to the available energy as such, for its colossal nature alone will be catastrophic.

Naturally, these formulations of mine, which are generally variations on a single theme, like most of my formulations, are untimely in that they are expressed too soon. They will also be ridiculed, not as predictions, but as erroneous diagnoses. But they can wait patiently. Anyone who still ridicules them today by putting up posters featuring the demon of the energy crisis, is already superannuated.

A new virtue and a new wisdom will be necessary, that is: to endure the situation in which one can (allegedly, one must) receive more than what one can produce. *Moderation: not in the face of scarcity, but in the face of over-abundance*. Certainly, I doubt that we will manage to educate ourselves for a culture of moderation. Before giving what we have to our guest, we will have to tighten our belts.<sup>233</sup>

## Chapter 26

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF INABILITY

(1975)

The more years that have passed since my first formulation of what I called the *promethean disjunction* (that is, the disproportion between our capacity for imagination and production; the fact that we can imagine less than what we are capable of producing), the more it becomes clear to me that with this term I had exposed only a special subordinate case within a group of characteristic disproportionalities of modern humanity. The formula I used then—

---

<sup>233</sup> The expression makes sense if we take into consideration the fact that its usual form is just the reverse, that is: it is preferable to tighten one's belt in order to be able to give something to your guest, that is, that even if you go hungry, you have to offer something to your guest. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]

*Man is less than himself*—is verified not only in the discrepancy that I addressed at that time. No less important, for example, is *the disjunction between the capacity for destruction and the capacity for construction*; here I am not referring to the notion, disseminated by the banal devotees of the “positive”, for example, that unfortunately we can destroy more than we can build, but quite the contrary: that, unfortunately, in certain extremely important domains of our existence, *we can construct much more than we are capable of destroying*; that *it is easy to build but very difficult to destroy* (to turn a trite expression on its head). Naturally, this inversion must sound provocative, all the more so insofar as the man who is expressing it is a man who is considered to be the victim of an *idée fixe*, because he has for thirty years been tirelessly discussing the possibility of an atomic suicide of humanity. If, despite this uninterrupted series of warnings, I say that man can construct more than he can destroy, I do not mean to imply that this is a simple revision or even a reversal of my principal apocalyptic thesis. Rather, what I think is that, despite the indescribable obstacles that we had to overcome before the first atomic test explosion could take place, we now face incomparably greater obstacles, or more precisely, we are basically *incapable of destroying, of annihilating what was created in the meantime*. Incapable, because our *know how* will remain indestructible, even if (an almost meaningless hypothesis) we did not possess any nuclear warheads. The idea remains, Plato wins.

Thus, here, too, the rule is valid: *man is less than himself*; but in this case he proves to be less because he cannot recompose the situation of the lost nuclear innocence; and he can no longer do so (as it was originally defined) because he can “imagine less than he can produce”. To summarize: we are incapable of not being able to do what was done at the time. *Therefore, it is not ability that we lack, but in-ability.*

## Chapter 27

### THE OBSOLESCENCE OF EVIL

(1966)

§ 1

*The sorcerer’s apprentice metamorphosed.*

The topic concerning which I was invited to speak was originally: *On religion in the era of technology*. I had not even reached the second page of my presentation, when I decided to give it the subtitle: *The sorcerer’s apprentice metamorphosed*. Thirteen years later, upon revising the text, I have replaced the original primary title with the following title: *The obsolescence of evil*.

It is clear that I could have easily addressed the topic, “Religion in the era of technology”; that is, I could have empirically described, perhaps even statistically, how the universal religions and the smaller religious communities have prospered in this world that has become

hyper-technological, or rather how they have prospered *despite* its hyper-technologization; what place they still occupy in this world, whether, and if so how, they take a position with respect to the “technological” phenomenon, whether there are—and if there are, what are they—religious or ecumenical theories of technology; and whether, finally, they have successfully made use of technology or not, such as television, for example.

Concerning these problems and facts there are many persons, especially those active in religious institutions, who are much better informed than I am. I neither made inquiries of the existing churches, nor did I investigate what they think of technology; my treatment of the topic is, despite my notorious irreligiosity, incomparably more direct. What I claim is that the two transformations that must be confirmed today are:

1. the transformation that has been undertaken by man as producer, as part and as victim of this technological world of his; and
2. the transformation that the world has undergone with its technologization;

and they are of such a fundamental nature, that the concepts with the help of which I have addressed this issue, can be, and perhaps must be, defined as theological.

Before addressing this problem of religion, I would like to speak about our relation to the modern technologized world.

It is not necessary to recall what Goethe described in his famous ballad, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*: a *famulus* had discovered the magical formula of his master which metamorphosed a broomstick into a servant that worked autonomously. Without worrying about the consequences of his action—for what interested him were only the desire for power and the immediate usefulness of his metamorphosed broomstick, not the formula of retro-metamorphosis—the *famulus* pronounced the magic spell and ordered the machine, which he had at his command as a robot, to get water to fill the bathtub. And sure enough, the metamorphosed broomstick obeyed: it began to work autonomously or, more correctly, obeyed *too well*; indeed, it obeyed *terribly well*, since however autonomously it might perform its job, *it is not autonomous enough to renounce its autonomy*; in short: it was just as ignorant of the *road back* as its master, the apprentice, who had set it in motion. Automatically and blindly and without the least interest in the effects of its activity, the broomstick went to the fountain to fill its bucket, returned to empty it, up and down, without stopping. It was indifferent to the fact that its torrents of water continued to increase until they became a flood, which threatened to inundate the house and the street: it did not *see* this even for a moment; unlike its alleged master, the sorcerer's apprentice, who began to discern what he had set in motion, that is: he had conjured a spirit, without knowing *how* to or, more accurately, *if* he could get rid of it. This belated intuition of his and the panic in which he had become engulfed, however, were of no use to him, and even worse, for when he pounced on his servant, which was so terribly industrious, in order to stop his activity before it was too late and to try to neutralize it, cutting it in half, he only managed to obtain the opposite of the result he sought: instead of putting an end to the emergency, he doubled it; for *each* half of the servant immediately metamorphosed into a *complete* servant and, instead of one, there

were two, which busied themselves with augmenting the flood. Almost drowned and in the last throes of desperation, the apprentice cried out to his master. The fact that the latter, at the last possible moment, really came to his aid and, by pronouncing the spell of retro-metamorphosis, *seids gewesen* [back to the way you were before], he stopped the catastrophe at the last minute, constitutes a *happy ending*, which the apprentice never would have dared to hope for and which we, and our contemporaries, cannot allow ourselves to count on; but here I am getting ahead of myself.

Thus, when about a half century ago, in high school, we memorized the text of *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, of course we never imagined that the text would become more true than it was the day it was written; that Goethe's ballad would now be much more realistic than it was in his time; and that, after a century and a half, all of humanity has metamorphosed into an army of thousands of "sorcerer's apprentices" and the world itself has metamorphosed into an army of thousands of "spirits". It would of course be illusory to believe that now we are finally aware of this. To the contrary: *today, we, the sorcerer's apprentices, are not only unaware of the fact that we do not know the spell of disenchantment or even whether such a spell exists, but we do not even know that we are sorcerer's apprentices.* And we do not know this because the principle of today's *negative information*—the latter is incomparably more widespread than positive information and is endlessly produced by way of the supply of seemingly positive information—is to not reveal to us that we are actually apprentices and that the machines we operate are actually "spirits", to the extent that—and this is a new step—this distinction still has any meaning, since because we have not ourselves given the order for our crazy activity *we are not even "apprentices", but "spirits"*. Nor is it revealed to us that now both apprentices and spirits have failed and that only a minor detail, a "master", is lacking, who can put a stop to what is happening.

## § 2

### *Irrationalism as morality.*

There will be those who will be scandalized by my use of the Goethian metaphor of the "spirits" and who would reproach me for being naïve and for not recognizing that we have left the times of "irrationalism" behind us and that we live in the era of rationalist science and technology. But this metaphor will scandalize only these very same "spirits" that I am talking about, that is, those whose essence-less essence consists in having been dispossessed of their *ratio*. In fact, today irrationalism only triumphs and prevails precisely due to the form of our labor. *We do not even know that we do not know what we are doing as workers.* If this is not irrationalism (and not only as a triumphant theory, but *as a condition of humanity*), then I do not know what the term means. Evidently, this irrationalism is not a remnant of an irrationalist past. Rather, *it owes its existence*—something that is happening for the first time in history—to *irrationalism itself*, that is, to the sciences, technology and the organization of labor. Given the fact that it is due to these factors that we work in a disconnected way and without any fore-sight; given that we always think only (and we want, we must and we can only think) about what is related to the momentary exigency of our special task that is assigned to us by the division of labor, and never about what lies "outside" that task—both in

the spatial sense as well as with regard to the temporal outcome; and given that we are not conscious of this fact and, as we have already said, we do not know that we are not conscious of it, our irrationalism has attained a “degree” of irrationalism that no previous irrationalism has ever before exhibited.

Or maybe we are behaving rationally when we contribute to the production of product A, but we do not reflect upon it, and we even want to remain in the dark about the possible further ramifications of this product (simply due to the fact that it exists)?

And if we do not reflect about what this product might have to do with us and our way of life or with that of our children?

And how the existence of this product might change the world as a whole?

And what other products might be necessary because of its existence?

And if the survival of humanity were to be threatened by its existence?

And if this extreme risk that is perhaps accepted is ignored, because the economic system and, along with it, the system of domination, might be damaged by the interruption of the production of this product?

So I ask: are we behaving rationally, when we—and in this “we” I include ninety-nine percent of modern employed humanity—do our “duty”, without posing these questions? Who is asking themselves these questions? Scientists, perhaps? Those who supply the basic foundations of technology and production and insist on emphasizing that they are only engaged in *pure science*, that is, that they do not want to *dirty their hands*—God forbid!—with the thought of what use or abuse their discoveries might be subject to, and passionately defend this programmatic lack of interest? There are exceptions, of course: a couple of thousand great scientists wrack their brains over this problem of conscience, but they are not representative of our world today. Or maybe it is the workers who pose these questions? The workers, who are only employed for specific gestures and often never see their final products, concerning whom it is truly understandable that they take no interest in the nature of the products, their effects and the effects of those effects, and who cannot be blamed for this indolence, for they know that if they were to refuse to collaborate, there are always others ready to replace them and allow themselves to be paid for their labor and their lack of interest in it?

No, if we live in a world of total irrationality—and thus as sorcerer’s apprentices; if, imprudent and without foresight, we assign to our “broomsticks” the most outrageous “psychic” functions; if we are not fully aware of the fact that these “spirits”, once evoked, will never take us into account: then *we are behaving irrationally not despite* the fact that we live in a system with the most highly developed division of labor and extreme rationalization, *but because we live in such a rational system.*

Thus, today's irrationalism is incomparably worse than any previous kind. Whereas the type of irrationalism that was a fashionable theory around the turn of the century (defended by certain pretentious, fanatical and ignorant philosophers like Klages) proposed that we will never be able to penetrate into the "inner essence" (something that serious thinkers never claimed to set out to do) by using *ratio*, today this dogma is accepted as a principle by *all* of our contemporaries, or at least all those (and who does not form a part of this category?) who have something to do with *production*: and here you find the tycoons of the *trusts* no less than the physicists and the latter no less than the entire working class of the world. And what this new irrationalism affirms is not our inability to grasp the "inner essence" by thinking of this or that, that is, it does not affirm the insufficiency of our *ratio*, but (to the extent that this representation can be qualified as an "affirmation") the *inappropriateness of thinking*. It consists, therefore, of the postulate: *You must not make any use of your ratio!* Or, to be more precise: *You must not think of the consequences of your actions, regardless of the fact that they are accessible to your thought or, better yet, precisely for that reason and because they might be accessible to your ratio!* Thus, today's irrationalism is not just another (anti-theory) theoretical doctrine. It is rather a *prohibition*; and precisely a prohibition that (in the East as well as in the West) is methodically created and inoculated in the population. It is not that we cannot know this or that, today's irrationalism proclaims; it is rather that *we must not* know it. *Irrationalism as morality.*

### § 3

#### *The enviable sorcerer's apprentice.*

Let us not fool ourselves. What Goethe treated poetically as an exceptional and bizarre event, horrifying and worthy of epic treatment, happens to us constantly, if we can still speak in general terms of something "happening", since it only makes sense to say that something "happens" when *that which happens* stands out as an exception from the background of an innocuous and normal everyday life. And that is indeed the case. What is making our lives weird is just the opposite: the fact that the absurd, instead of being shocking, is just the normal condition; the fact that the "broomsticks", invested with autonomy, and therefore the machines (both in the administrative as well as in the material-technical sense), that is, the nuclear power plants, the nuclear missiles, the aerospace vehicles and installations, and the great industrial enterprises required for their production, jointly constitute our *everyday* world. There are millions of persons alive today for whom the production of these machines has been transformed into autonomy; the economies of entire continents would collapse if the production of these objects were to be suddenly halted. All these facts are neither exceptional nor sensational events that can be retold in the epic style like the sensational event that Goethe recounted.

And it is just as much a part of our normal condition, of the quotidian, that we do not think of rebelling against what our "spirits" are requiring of us and making us. *To the contrary, the effective autonomy, that is, the automatism of our products, which was still viewed by Goethe as something horrible, we see as something normal, or, more accurately, encouraging; that is, the guarantee that our own existence will also function without difficulties and that the*

burden of our own responsibility is removed from our shoulders, a responsibility that we now perceive as something archaic, like an outmoded fashion.

And, finally, to this we must add that these “spirits” possess the inherent property of growing and multiplying; that is, not only are they as independent of us as they were immediately after their “birth”, but they are becoming increasingly more independent; and, vice-versa, we are becoming increasingly more dependent on their accumulative power and independence. Goethe, by making his robot, when it was split in half, continue to work as two robots, had already glimpsed this type of accumulation. And we already know that machines generally operate by way of a tendency to function like cogs in a single machine and to unite in *networks* (as they say in electronics technology).<sup>234</sup> And this is also true of the networks themselves, that is, they, too, without taking into account what might happen as a result, are interconnected in networks at a higher level. To summarize: while in Goethe, a single and solitary broomstick appeared, extraordinarily autonomous (and then two broomsticks), we now live in a *dense (and always becoming more dense) forest of broomsticks. And since there is no way to cut this forest down or to escape from it, it is our world.*

Fortunate were the times, then, when one could present, as Goethe did, the incident involving the robot as a horrifying exceptional case, instead of as the everyday *modus operandi* of the world; and when one could still address this problem poetically, which would be problematic today, even perhaps inappropriate (in the sense of the saying about poetry after Auschwitz); fortunate times when, without the risk of being ridiculed as naïve and unrealistic, one could allow oneself to introduce the figure of a *master*, that is, of a man who knows the magical counter-spell and who only needs to open his mouth to once again make possible *a happy ending*. Fortunate times, indeed! Compared to our time, even the *sorcerer’s apprentice* himself, despite the bad jam he got himself into and the bitter desperation with which he called for help, *is also an enviable figure*. What does it mean in this context when I say, “despite”? To the contrary, he is enviable because, unlike contemporary humanity, he still perceived with his own eyes the danger that he had summoned; because he still understood that there was a reason for desperation; and because, as a result, he still made the attempt to stop what he had set in motion or what he was on the verge of causing. Compared to our situation, that of the sorcerer’s apprentice of Goethe was a simple disaster, a thrilling incident.

#### § 4

##### *The theology of the nuclear situation.*

And now you will ask: What does all of this have to do with religion? My answer to this question, as I announced at the beginning of this chapter, will probably be different from what you expect. Even if it were to be important to clarify the attitude that the existing religions adopt<sup>235</sup> towards our *status* as sorcerer’s apprentices and the metamorphosis of our

---

<sup>234</sup> See the chapter devoted to the obsolescence of machines, in this volume.

<sup>235</sup> Furthermore, I do not know of any positions taken by the religious organization that go beyond solemn trivialities. Just like the social problem, *they will also discover* the problem of



world into a robotic world, to me it seems incomparably more important to say that *the very situation in which we have gotten ourselves is a "religiosum"*. This will certainly sound odd coming from the mouth of a notoriously anti-religious man. What I mean is that the metamorphosis with which we are faced is so profound that only theological categories, at least those provided by theology, are sufficient for characterizing it. What am I referring to, specifically?

First of all, to the fact that with the help of the machines we have ourselves created (and not just the nuclear ones) we have made ourselves the equals of the gods, and even *equal to God*. Certainly, "equal to God" only in the negative sense, since of course one cannot speak of a *creatio ex nihilo*,<sup>236</sup> but rather of the fact that we are capable of a *reductio ad nihil* and, as destroyers, we have really become *omnipotent*, for we really are entitled to define "omnipotence" with reference to the fact that we (or, more precisely, our "broomsticks", the machines that we have summoned) can eliminate all of humanity; that we can annihilate all that we have been since Adam, our past; and that we are capable of abolishing even the terrible *future perfect* of Salomon (we will have been) with the futureless future (we will not have been). In fact, everything that for more than a century has been considered to be an alleged *nihilism* has been pure cultural hot air compared to this possibility of *annihilation*. Nietzsche and also the crudely serious Heidegger are not so serious when contrasted against the background of this possibility. It does not matter *what* we believe or do not believe, or *whether* we believe in something or we do not believe in anything: both our *status* in the world as well as the *status* the world has acquired by virtue of the *factum* of technology have changed so radically that no concepts except religious ones are sufficient for their definition.

Secondly, our omnipotence, which is of a completely new type, finds its counterpart in an *impotence*, also of a completely new type.

"What does that mean?", I can hear someone object. "Of course we are impotent as mortals; we always have been". Of course. But this reference to our good old tried and true impotence and mortality generally comes from those who consider it to their advantage to divert attention from the monstrosity of the new situation. The response to this objection is: not all impotencies are equal; not all mortalities are of the same type and same dignity. It is by no means all the same whether we are impotent or mortal as creatures of a God or of nature, or if we are impotent and mortal by reason of our own activity. I am referring to the fact that today we are not primarily "mortal", but "murderable" beings. What occurred at Auschwitz and Hiroshima can be erased from our memories (to the extent that such events even penetrated our memories): and this is what has in fact taken place. One cannot, however, erase the *possibility of the repetition of such events*. Since what happened then—that is, some twenty years ago—a so-called death by natural causes has become an old fashioned special dispensation and the possibility of the violent self-extermination of humanity is becoming constantly more palpable. And since then we have been constantly defined by that constant possibility. Defined in the most terrible way, since *the possibility of our final annihilation is*,

---

technology a century too late, in order to then nevertheless preach *ex cathedra*. The problem of survival is too serious to leave in the hands of the specialists in eternal life.

<sup>236</sup> On the creation by man of what is new, see the Introduction.

*even if it never happens, the final annihilation of our possibilities.*<sup>237</sup> The last messengers of a dignified death were those prisoners of the concentration camps who stole a march on the gas chambers by committing suicide in order not to allow themselves to be exterminated collectively.<sup>238</sup>

Thirdly, it is part of the new “religious” (or hellish) character of our current situation that we, if we are murdered, unlike our ancestors, will not be murdered directly by our fellow men, we will not fall victim to “criminals” (even this term is now an unmerited honor) who would be aware of the fact that they are committing murders (or, even better, who would only acknowledge it *in actu*; or even who have us in their sights; or who would even be aware of our existence). “If I must die, let it be at men's hands!”<sup>239</sup> We are not even conceded this minimal consolation, since we shall either perish as a result of actions that the perpetrators carry out as their normal job somewhere, thousands of kilometers away, or else by machines without either brains or eyes, which have for some time now been emancipated from the hands and intentions of their creators and users and which accept the work of annihilation in a fully autonomous way. The alleged emancipation of man (to the extent that it has taken place somewhere, at some time) is now followed by the incontestable *emancipation of objects*: of the “broomsticks”. To fall victim to them—and I am not being cynical—is not tragic, but *stupid*, which is more terrible. What is tragic is, at most, this lack of tragedy, that is, the stupidity of the death that awaits us. I shall also define this “stupidity” as a *factum religioso*, since the total irrelevance of our existence that this term indicates can only be understood as the extreme negation of the character expressed by the words, “in the image and likeness of God”.

And fourth, it is part of our new “religious” (or hellish, although hell is also a theological concept) *conditio humana* that we *are no longer mortal or murderable only as individuals*, but that we can perish *all together, although only “together”, rather than “in community”*. In fact, ever since a situation of nuclear overkill has been attained, the possibility has always existed (more precisely: the probability) that all of us will be eliminated (if indirectly) precisely by our own hands. And in this “all of us” I include not just all those who are living today, but also our grandparents, since they will die a second and final time because they will not be remembered by anybody; and finally also our children and their children (who have not yet been born), who will have to suffer their death before they even live.

Rilke, a half century ago, solemnly and tearfully begged for the gift of his “own death”; and Heidegger shared this desire, although not in a pleading way, but arrogantly. This desire now belongs to a past era. We, to the extent that we have to beg for anything, must beg for something that is very different from our own death: not to suffer a common death by virtue of our own activity. Furthermore, in Rilke’s day, in a world in which the right to one’s own life was only conceded to a disappearing minority, it was in bad taste to beg for the gift of one’s own death. Besides the fact that nothing can be as little “one’s own” as the death that deprives the individual of his uniqueness.

---

<sup>237</sup> See the author’s *Endzeit und Zeitenende*, epigraph.

<sup>238</sup> See the author’s *Schrift an der Wand*, p. 272.

<sup>239</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, III, 604.

It is undeniable that these reflections can only be defined as “theological”, despite the fact that no God plays a role in them. How else can the monstrous be classified? And here I am actually talking about the topic that I had originally proposed to address: *religion in the technological era*. The fact that I acknowledge this, even though I am notoriously a-religious, does not mean of course that clergymen, theologians or simply *homines religiosi* can feel vindicated by my concession, since what I recognize here as *religiosum* is not something positive, but only the terrible character of human action (not prevented by any God), which transcends all human decency. The saying of Scheler that he (unlike the liberal Christians of his generation, who really believed in the existence of God, but not in that of the devil) believed in the existence of the devil also fits into this context. Undoubtedly, the terrible character that I recognize, is not the same thing, either, as the classic religious negative, that is, *original sin*. And even less so, insofar as the horrifying character of the current situation, although it is our work, is not our fault. Not only are we not culpable, but we are not even permitted to be culpable anymore. Rather, it is the effect of our human history, which passes right over our heads without giving us the slightest thought.

## § 5

### *The really serious thing.*

Of course, this situation, which is “religious” in four senses, is unprecedented. Our end time is fundamentally unlike the one imagined by Christianity,<sup>240</sup> which did not see the last of days as being *brought about by man*, despite the fact that it *was brought about by his sinfulness*. I must also add—and this will naturally sound like sacrilege—that today, faced with the real danger of its occurrence, this discourse of the end of the world is only presented to us as a metaphorical discourse. And this is all the more the case insofar as primitive Christianity was made to look ridiculous by reality (forgive me, but these matters are too serious for us to allow ourselves to be frightened by taboos) with its waiting for the “last day”: the universe did not pay any attention to the threats that were repeatedly made against it, or rather foretold; universal history has continued on its way right up until today. Christianity has still not completely recovered from its shock at the fact that the end of the world, or the Parousia, which they anxiously awaited, did not take place, not even in the year 1000. Again and again, in order to avoid a backlash against its unrenounceable expectation of the end as a mere erroneous prediction, it devoted its efforts to providing concepts such as “end”, “kingdom”, and “judgment”, with *symbolic* meanings (and which are supposed to have been understood in this way since the beginning) in order to preserve their symbolic validity.

The current end time, however, is of a “more massive” type: it does not need any symbolism. Of its possibility (that is, of its inevitability, when technology is involved), historical examples exist: the facts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the evidence, which is a secret to no one, concerning the *overkill* capacity of the currently existing nuclear arsenals. In our situation, the fact that the end has not yet taken place is not a refutation of the reality of the

---

<sup>240</sup> *Endzeit und Zeitenende*, pp. 210 *et seq.*

danger nor is it a counter-proof challenging the fact that our epoch is an end time, or more accurately, the end time.

In other words: the current apocalyptic threat, despite the fact that it is not presented dressed up with the solemnity of religious language, is incomparably more serious than the previous threats of apocalypse. It is more serious because for two decades now the means to bring it about have been available and are growing in number every day (to the extent that it still makes sense in this context to speak of “growth”).

Naturally, with the two affirmations, (a) the present danger is more serious than any previous one and (b) the decision whether the world and our future should exist or not exist is in our human hands, we are not saying that humanity, all of humanity, *desires* or is planning to bring about this end; nor am I implying that there are *cosmo-herostratic groups or individuals*: despite the fact that, naturally, they could emerge at any moment and, certainly, the temptation to commit such a “crime” (the term is inadequate) as a prank might prove to be irresistible given the current predominance of the taste, accentuated by boredom, for aggression and destruction. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the danger, if it were to come only from such satanic individuals or groups, would not compare in scale with the threat of disaster that already really exists now. Not because these criminals do not really know what they are doing (which is doubtful); not because they are individual subjective actors and not merely beings who blindly abandoned themselves to the automatic proliferation of their machines (and this is just as doubtful)—if this were the case, it would be slight consolation for us; not, then, as a result of any of these things, but because maybe it would still be possible to identify and arrest specific individuals or groups. The *factum* of big technology, however, which lies behind the danger that threatens us, is unidentifiable and can neither be fought nor arrested.

Fortunate times, when evil was still embodied in evil-doers or wicked men and when one could still hope that one could contribute to the fight against evil. Our *status religioso*—and now our circle closes—is also defined by the circumstance that we can no longer hope for such a thing. Today, we are threats to the survival of the world not because we are sinners by nature or as a result of a “fall”, but

- because we are sorcerer’s apprentices, that is: because with the best conscience we do not know what we are doing when we produce our products;
- because we are not ourselves aware of what they demand once they have left our hands;
- because we do not imagine that these products, insofar as they function (and they do so by virtue of their mere existence), desire to continue to function or, more accurately, *they must* continue to function; and they automatically converge to achieve a maximum of power precisely over us, their creators; and, like any other product or commodity, they are anxious to be used and consumed in order not to impede the production of new products; in short: they set themselves in motion, whether anyone among us expressly desires that they should be set in motion or advocates this as a political objective.

Being a sorcerer’s apprentice means:

- not knowing what you are doing;
- not knowing that to produce is to act;
- and not imagining or not fearing or not being able to regret, *a posteriori*, what results might ensue from what you are producing or have produced.

With these formulas—which also define our *status religioso*—a fracture in our existence (and for the first time, our current existence) has been described, a disjunction, which surpasses in importance or, more precisely, makes the fracture that once existed between flesh and spirit, or between duty and inclination, or however such differences that were once considered to be so decisive might be denominated, not appear to be so serious. What is our “capacity” for robbery or adultery or blasphemy or murder compared with our “capacity” to commit genocide or, even worse (I have to introduce this term), *globicide*? Or what is our inability to reject those temptations compared to our inability to resist this latter temptation or, more precisely, this latter coercion (for it is likely that such a temptation only rarely plays a role)?

The devil has moved to a new home. And even if we should be incapable of driving him away with sulfur in the night—in case we should want to do so—at least we have to know where he is hiding and where we can find him, so we will not try to fight him in some little hideaway where he has not been holed up for some time, and so that he will not make fun of us from the house next door.

## Chapter 28

### METHODOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS

(1979)

§ 1

*On the systematic.*

It is merely a result of chance that this second volume concludes with a chapter on “the obsolescence of evil”. It is often the case that the sequence of chapters in philosophical books displays a certain degree of arbitrariness, since, like the surfaces of a sphere, they lack a beginning and an end and all their affirmations are intended, correctly, to be “equally close to the truth” (to paraphrase a famous saying of Ranke) and therefore to be at the same time presuppositions and consequences. The sequence of the chapters forms a part, then, exclusively of the presentation of the book’s theme, and not of the theme itself. In our case, the role of chance is greater because we are not dealing with a system, but with separate essays that arose from occasional observations and which were susceptible to being followed by other observations. In any case, this arbitrariness does not prevent the chapters—and I say this not without satisfaction, *a posteriori*—from revealing the fact that they proceed from the

same workshop. Thus, at the end of this volume, I shall once more return to speak of the problem of the “systematic”, which I had briefly discussed in the Introduction.

If I point out that I do not propose to offer any kind of philosophical system, I know that I am in good company. *The system as a type of philosophy is dying or has already died.* In fact, the great philosophers after the death of Hegel (Feuerbach, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard) were not systematizers; since then, only second-rate thinkers like Comte, Rickert or Driesch have attempted to construct systems. And even these thinkers, Rickert for example, have to some extent accommodated themselves to “open systems”, whatever that *contradictio in adjecto* might mean. In this death of the systematic I do not see, as I have said, any cause for regret; at most, an esthetic deficiency, although, where is it written that the truth has to be “beautiful” like a temple (a metaphor that Hegel even actually used for the philosophy of the future) or even a constructed edifice or a “whole”? Is it not just a prejudice to see “the true in the totality”, a unique case that now calls for an explanation; one would be more justified instead in thinking that the truth is not a “totality” and even—this is the peak of heresy—the singular expression “the world” already represents an ontological prejudice that might be false.<sup>241</sup> Given that our world—and now I am referring exclusively to the human world, and my analyses refer only to that world, that is, to our current world of machines—is historical, and history, *per definitionem*, keeps going forward, *the “totality of history” will never be reached* and therefore *one cannot speak of a “system of history”* (because systems reflect the totality). Of course, it was not by chance that Spengler (with whom, by the way, I do not exactly feel any kinship) should present his “morphology of history” not as a system, but as a plurality of systems, of histories (comparable to organisms). Hegel’s great attempt to reconcile history and system was doomed to fail from the beginning. We shall not yield to the temptation to create a closed system, even though we are the great-great-grandchildren of Hegel. *Principiis obsta.* The temporal, at least the historically temporal, does not lend itself to being “fixed” in a system. Only the spatial can be “fixed”. In fact, “system” is a spatial characteristic. Insofar as time is transformed into the characteristic that guides a philosophy—and this is the case in Hegelian philosophy, even when it is not thematically presented as a philosophy of history—the “system” becomes a contradiction (not in the sense that Hegel expected, but as a contradiction of the principle of the system). Judged from the point of view of universal history, his attempt to reconcile time and system for the realization of universal history by way of the denomination of a particular historical stage (specifically, the Prussian State) is simply comical.<sup>242</sup> But the attempt made by Marx did not succeed, either, since his thesis that, up to the present, history, as “class history”, is only the “pre-

---

<sup>241</sup> This is also valid from the point of view of natural philosophy, but we cannot explore this question here. In fact, it is impossible to think of the world (as we do, unlike the Greeks) as infinite, yet *one*, as a system. It is equally impossible to understand the world (as we have done since Hegel) as a *process* and, however, as a totality and even as a well ordered totality, that is, as κόσμος, without considering that this process—this is not possible to say—might be a process of decomposition, which would mean that we can no longer attribute to “the totality” the same “degree of existence” as the *particularia* into which the “totality” may be decomposing, and that the individual sciences would thus be more true than philosophy.

<sup>242</sup> Compared to this *messianization* of Prussia, Heidegger’s messianization of the National Socialist regime was an act of ephemeral opportunism.

history” of a messianic post-historical realm of freedom, was naturally an attempt to unite history and system, at least history and harmony, an attempt that he did not understand as a “system of history”; instead, the latter formed part of the system only because it was to culminate in a triumphant system, in which the history of classes would be superseded (and thus, paradoxically, also history in general). This philosophy of hope, to the extent that one would want to call a messianism a “philosophy”, was still (despite the fact that the Parousia that Marx hoped for did not arrive and that, for fifty years a history has unfolded before the eyes of all, in the Soviet Union, that followed a not entirely messianic course) upheld by Bloch, concerning whom one cannot say, as one could for Marx, that he was dazzled by the hope that he had falsely prognosticated, but it must rather be said that he had dazzled himself in his confrontation with reality, despite his hatred of the German Democratic Republic.

What I took as a small, in a certain way “negative”, legacy from the ideal of the philosophical systematic is that none of my theses can contradict the others; although I ask myself if even this minimal methodological requirement does not represent a prejudice; if by adhering to such a requirement I would not be presupposing as normal that the world itself should be free of contradictions. And with this question I come to my principal doubt about the “system” as a type of philosophy; that is: the systematic is not just a form of literary representation, but an aprioristic metaphysical affirmation: the very object, the “world”, which the system assumes the task of representing, is already a system, something that has to be really and seriously proven, since one would think that the world “as a whole” is undergoing disintegration, which is most likely valid for our human world; in this sense, it could be said that *the degree of existence of the context is less than that of the individual existences* and that, against Aristotle, “*the whole is less than the sum of its parts*”. It seems to me that an *a priori* of philosophical thought does not represent the model of “systemic” thought (which we do not find in non-European cultures, which are not, however, non-philosophical).<sup>243</sup> In any case, it is clear that the “system” type of philosophy has always

---

<sup>243</sup> If we were to examine the genealogy of the system, we would come across a *political origin*. (I) The first system was, probably, the city-state, self-enclosed, ordered according to a hierarchy and functioning in accordance with the law. It was in the framework of this institution that the category of “system” was founded. (II) But the concept did not pass directly from politics to philosophy, for the latter, as an activity, not to speak of its *sui generis* “material”, only emerged later and of course not everywhere. Rather the image of the state served at first as a paradigm of the *planetary system*; in this finite system—I repeat: “finite”, because a system of the infinite is a *contradictio in adjecto*—the totality, law and harmony were fixed. It is not by accident that we still speak of “laws of nature”, as if there was something that rules in nature, as well as a relation between order and obedience. In any case, doctrinal systems were only created because it was understood, or, rather believed, that it recognized its object, that is: the heavens with their center, the “sun”, as a “system”. Then, (III) astronomy (or astrology) transmitted the concept to philosophy, to the extent that one can speak of “transmission”, since it is impossible to trace a solid line between astronomy and philosophical cosmology. In any event, cosmology founded the model of the finite *cosmos*, ordered and in agreement with itself or harmonious. The image of this model is the one that we still call a “philosophical system” today. Oddly enough, this form of

implied a prejudice with regard to its contents, always an affirmation in advance of each particular claim about the world; we hesitate to say “about the world as a whole” because, as we shall see, the concept of the “totality” might also represent a prejudice. Heidegger himself was even a victim of this prejudice: again and again he spoke of “being as a whole” or “existence as a whole”; again and again he defined this question as the original question of Western philosophy, without suspecting that, despite its apparent formality, this question already might contain an affirmation, which bears a prejudice. In any case, the presentations of the world that appear in the form of a system can only be successful because what did not fit the schema was concealed or demoted to βεβηκος or simply written off as “non-existent”. And I am not prepared to do anything like that.

## § 2

*Not only no system, but no philosophy, either. All men are Afghans.*

As I have said, my reflections are always based on very concrete particular phenomena of our everyday lives. Given that I cannot assume that these objects, taken occasionally, all together form a system, I cannot claim that my investigations of these objects are systematic, either.

---

philosophy—and here we move to the next step (IV)—has also been preserved when the political and astronomical origin of philosophy proved to be ineffective. And it is also odd, when the universe is understood explicitly as no longer finite, but as infinite, that is, no longer as a “cosmos” but as a “universe”. If the “system” model, however, despite the most extreme transformations in philosophical contents, has been preserved in the West, it is because (V) the “world” was understood, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, not only as harmonious and finite, but as a deliberate creation, and history not as a cycle, not to speak of a thing that was unfolding and that transforms itself. Thus, world and history were “systems” because they were planned by God and even—which was quite consistent with the concept—as a *temporally limited* event. And if philosophies continued to be “systematic”, this was because the philosophers “re-thought” the designs of God (as everyone knows, this play on words is found in Hegel). Of course, it was still a matter of doubt whether the system consisted in designing and realizing the world (therefore, a “spiritual” task) or in the designed and realized world, since no designer was recognized to exist, that is, God. Until (VI) the concept of God was reduced to a mere “principle”, concerning which, as has been said, one did not know whether it represented a principle of existence or a principle (or principles) of spirit; this ambiguity, inherited from theology, was again expressly rehashed by Hegel by way of the identification of the Spirit with reality. The idea of the system, however, was still maintained even when the Hegelian concept of the Spirit was overthrown. For (VII) then the world was transformed into the colossal image of the systems that were designed, constructed and controlled by men, systems that were closed in the most optimal way, in which each part of the system conditions the others and is in turn conditioned by them; the world *of machines*. It is very odd that the world, despite its infinitude, should be considered to be a closed system of causality. Until (VIII) the pretense of the universal validity of causality entered into crisis. It is beyond my competence to judge whether, after this crisis, as well, the idea of the system can still be preserved or whether it has reached the end of its road as a result.



On the other hand, I renounce much more than that, since it never even occurred to me that my analyses should be classified as *philosophical*, or anything like that. When all is said and done, philosophy is a historical phenomenon that has not always existed and that probably will not exist forever, either (the philosophical discourse on the “end of philosophy” comes from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century). Maybe one can also speak here of the “end of an illusion”. In any case it would be absurd to characterize man as an *animal philosophans*, because this definition (unlike ζῷον λόγῳ ἔχον or *homo faber*) only applies to a vanishing minority and because, even if it were to apply to everyone, it would only say something about man, but not about the legitimacy of philosophy’s claim to truth. To assume that there are affirmations, which as philosophical affirmations are “fundamentally” different from other kinds of affirmations—what does “fundamental” mean in this context and what foundations are we talking about and why should they be obligatory?—is also probably a prejudice and a convention, which an alleged “philosopher” should not accept without first verifying them. If I thus leave it an open question whether the reflections that I set forth here are “philosophical”, I do so for reasons of “philosophical scrupulousness”. Maybe these reflections are simply psychological-social or *psychological-technological* (the term and the thing itself are collapsing).<sup>244</sup> For someone like me who has devoted half a century to an activity that has been called “philosophizing”, the time has come to ask himself what he really has accomplished or *how is philosophy in general possible* or, given that this question is grounded on the undoubted *factum* that philosophy “exists” and from this *factum* concludes that it is also possible (therefore, astrology would also have to be possible), to ask himself an even more radical question: *Is philosophy possible? And what does this thing whose possibility I am questioning consist of?*

However, it would be ridiculous to attempt—I cannot renounce this term, either—to give an exhaustive response to this extremely “fundamental” question here, in the epilogue of a collection of essays on “man and technology”. I would like to try to outline a couple of suggestions, however.

Those who, on the basis of the *factum* of philosophy conclude that it is legitimate and possible, or, more correctly, those who have never yielded the temptation to doubt its legitimacy, may always resort to the reference that philosophy is exclusively concerned with the essence, rather than the contingent-empirical. As primitive or even as false as this affirmation may be it is basically, in a non-explicit way, not only applicable to all philosophy (even the use of this term is already a metaphysical prejudice), since it presupposes that it is legitimate to split the world into beings of two types, or more precisely, to affirm that the world is thus split. But it is also a metaphysical affirmation: *it forms part of the world to also contain something non-essential*. Given that this contradictory formulation might sound ridiculous, I would like to provide an example. No one would claim that there is or could be a philosophy whose object would be the *Afghans*. That the latter exist is considered to be a

---

<sup>244</sup> What a deep abyss separates our generation from the previous one! My father had even coined the unfortunate term, “psychotechnical”, even though he did not boast like his colleagues did of having discovered that the soul can be technologically configured. Our generation, on the other hand, when we speak of “technological psychology”, are referring to research and criticism of the influence that the existing technology exercises on man.

contingent *factum*, that is, a *factum* that also might *not* exist and that might only be addressed by empiricists, for example, by ethnologists or historians. On the other hand, however, as we have said, we shall not dispute that it forms part of the essence of the world that there should be something “non-essential” in it. And not only that. Unlike Afghans, “man” is considered to be the legitimate object of philosophy, that is: this is considered to be the case, because in fact there exists a *philosophical anthropology*. The unexpressed assumption of this philosophy is evidently that the existence of men, unlike that of Afghans (or of sparrows or nettles), is *not* contingent: a *purely theological assumption*, since it is only valid if one assumes a providential God who “has in mind” something for man, to whom—and only to whom—he assigned, by creating him, a particular role (or even, as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, he assigned the world as a particular role for him). Anyone who does not share this assumption, however, that is, anyone who, as is the case here, considers the existence of men to be contingent (as well as that of the world, even of the laws of nature, which some people who think in an imprecise way consider to be the opposite of chance); in sum: anyone who sees in his appearance an empirical fact, that is, anyone who *in a certain way sees all men as “Afghans”*, can or must no longer partake in the view that perceives a difference between knowledge of the essence and the facts. And unlike Hegel, who saw the real as something rational, because it really existed, such a person would see in all knowledge, insofar as it has as an object something contingent, an empirical experience and therefore he would renounce any honorific title of “philosopher”. This is what I have done: my reflections were not philosophical, which also of course applies not only to *my* reflections.<sup>245</sup>

I said: a “philosophical anthropology” certainly exists, but not a “philosophical Afghanology”. Nevertheless, attempts are still being made to create something along those lines. Thus, for example, all the German words that end with the syllable, *-tum* (*Afghanentum*) (most of which belong to the vocabulary of nationalism) represent attempts to provide to what is singular, to the *aposteriori*, to the contingent, the dignity of essence. It is precisely the *Tümelnden* (a word coined by Brecht)<sup>246</sup> who like to act like philosophers, even like “deep philosophers” (it does not matter what this means). For us so-called “philosophers”, it is more suitable to strip alleged “essences” of their dignity, that is, to have *the courage to de-essentialize*.

---

<sup>245</sup> This also applies to the two sciences which are theoretically completely abstract: logic and mathematics. Formal logic not only assumes that something like thought exists, but also that something concerning which something can be affirmed exists. In an “acosmic space”—*sit venia verbo*—it would not only be impossible, but also meaningless to pronounce any judgments. As for mathematics, the latter assumes a pluralist world, of whose essence it forms a part to be split up into multiples, that is, to be countable. This logic contains an unexpressed ontology. In an Eleatic sphere of being there would be no mathematics. To claim that the *noemata* of mathematics “would exist” without a *noesis* to conceive of them and that their theorems “would be valid”, even if they could never be conceived, is a *nonsens*, which the early Husserl came very close to committing.

<sup>246</sup> *Tümelnden*, that is, those who use words that end in *-tum*. [Note of the Spanish Translator.]

It would therefore seem that one would not want to philosophize, or be capable of philosophizing, about nothing. If this extremely strange activity, however (it is hard to answer the question of what it would consist of) would be permitted—*difficile est non philosophari*—it is certain that *the philosopher would have to be capable of philosophizing about everything*. Even about the most trivial everyday events, since there would no longer be a criterion that would allow us to distinguish between what is and what is not worthy of philosophy, between what is and what is not amenable to philosophical treatment, if—as is the case here—all existence, even one’s own existence, is considered contingent. To realize such a distinction would not be philosophical. Georg Simmel, most unjustly forgotten, already before the first world war provided us with such an occasional philosophy (with his reflections on “ruins”, for example). What is so extremely rare in philosophy was certainly not prevalent, but it was less rare, in poetry and the visual arts. What Van Gogh, for example, accomplished—transforming an old pair of shoes into the object or the central point of a “message”—is what we also must be able to do to the extent that we attempt to “philosophize”. And we must even go further and affirm that those who are incapable of bringing themselves to philosophize about some old shoes or, even better, are capable of *not* bringing themselves to philosophize about some old shoes, cannot be defined as philosophers. If there was a test that could be administered to philosophers by some supreme institution, those who are incapable of seeing the allegedly most obvious things as contingent, that is, incapable of facing the fact that “there is existence rather than nothing” and the challenge to the right of philosophers to exist in the face of the contingency of the world, would get failing marks; and they have never even thought of renouncing the elitist title of “philosopher” in order to content themselves with the more common “empiricist”. In any event, I am not interested in the question of whether my reflections set forth in this book on the role of man in the world of technology, that is, on the role of technology in the human world, should be called “philosophical” or “empirical”.

Twenty-five years ago I defined my theoretical efforts as “occasional philosophy” and I posed the question of whether the label of “philosophy” is appropriate for these reflections; whether the fields from which I reap my harvest should be attributed the dignity of philosophical domains. I posed this question not due to modesty—no one has ever accused me of being modest—but the contrary, due to pride, since I do not concede the least value to whether or not the professional philosophers (who, because they indubitably belong to the philosophy department, also consider the existence of philosophy to be beyond all doubt and who, instead of philosophizing about the waters rising up to our necks, philosophize about philosophy) consider me to be one of them, or how they would classify my work. Maybe they would be prepared to recognize me as a “social psychologist”, but then the social psychologists would join me in denying this, since I do not use the vocabulary they employ as a distinctive badge of their profession; to summarize: there would be an endless back and forth. And I use the future tense, because this would happen only if my work were to be accepted in their domain, as defined by the universities.<sup>247</sup> If the first volume of this work—it would be a display of negative arrogance on my part if I were to say that it did not have an impact—was not reviewed by any professional philosopher or by any social psychologist,

---

<sup>247</sup> The sole meritorious exception was the position that was offered to me by the Free University of Berlin in 1959, which I declined.

this is due solely to the fact that, in general, these academics never heard of the book. There is hardly anything more limiting than the exclusive concern with the philosophy of one's colleagues (whose greatest representatives have been worshipped since Kant). Even in the *Handbook of the History of Philosophy* (1892) by W. Windelband, when I was still in my philosophical diapers, I did not find the names of Marx, Kierkegaard or Feuerbach, not to speak of Nietzsche. Nothing is further from my mind than occupying such a negative position, other than, of course, considering such a position to be an honor. The way a modern "Windelband" would classify my writings, were he to accidentally come across them, is of as little interest to me as the question of what "conclusions" he would draw from them. And if such a thing were to take place, it will not be with the measuring rod of the specialists.

### § 3

#### *The significance of interpretation.*

Naturally, however, I cannot deny that my investigations, despite the fact that their objects are empirical, are in a sense different from the ones that are usually called empirical, for as I attempted to *interpret* the empirical veins I went beyond them, whether I was talking about "the auto-accumulation of machines" or "the obsolescence of history" or "the lack of meaning of the concept of meaning".

If I consider this term [interpretation] as a watchword it is because it shows that *despite everything* philosophy exists: there are interpretive disciplines, such as physiognomy or graphology, whose methods consist in interpretation, without therefore claiming to call themselves "philosophies". Instead, it is the subsequent reflection on these special activities that is philosophical, which we call "interpretation", on the interpretable nature of the world: not only does this involve asking the question about what interpretation consists of, but above all the question concerning why interpretation is *necessary* and how is it possible and what does the need to and the ability to interpret imply for the world and for our place in it. I emphasize *necessary*; it is not just *possible*. With this double question I separate myself from the classical question of transcendental philosophy, since the latter, on the basis of experience that was not subject to doubt in the natural sciences, was only concerned with the "conditions of its possibility".

1. The necessity and the possibility of interpretation say two things: something about what must be interpreted, that is, about the *object*, as well as something about the one who interprets, that is, about the *subject*. This division requires a sub-division: interpretation is necessary both for the subject and for the object; and, on the other hand, "possible" means both that the object is *interpretable* as well as that we are *capable of interpreting*.
2. Before we devote ourselves to considering the "dialectic of interpretation", we shall trace this axiom in bold letters: *only the living being can be interpreted and make itself understandable [explain itself]*. And this is because only the living being *expresses itself*. Only expressions can be interpreted. The moon, no. Elshimer's "Clair de Lune", yes. Many of them even *want* to be interpreted, that is what they are there for. The living being expresses itself only because it is not autarchic; rather, it

can only exist in conjunction with other living beings: A cannot exist without B, nor can B exist without A.

3. If something demands interpretation, this fact “signifies” that this something is not obvious. If a being were to be capable of expressing itself without holding anything back, it would be directly obvious and interpreting it would be superfluous. Of course, this notion of total, exhaustive self-expression is paradoxical, for if a living being *were to totally express itself, it would totally “alienate” itself*; in a way, it would be turned inside-out, that is, it would only consist of its externality.

If interpretation is necessary, this also *implicitly* says something about what must be interpreted, being; that is, that which *does not reveal everything that it is, that which is partially concealed*. This sounds like Heidegger and it is true that recalling him here is in fact obligatory, for it is his thesis that being “conceals itself”<sup>248</sup> and that “truth”—that is how he, correctly, of course, translates the Greek word ἀλήθεια—signifies “not being concealed”. Oddly, Heidegger did not ask the question about what this says about the fact that it is part of the nature of being to be concealed, despite the fact that this would have fit right in with his ontological philosophizing. Naturally, the question must be asked, *for it is not enough to reveal what was concealed. Philosophically, it is just as necessary to “reveal” the very fact of the concealment*. It is true that Leibniz demonstrated that he was aware of this problem by allowing his monads to exist basically “without windows”. With a view to explaining the complexity considered here, perhaps there has been a small step forward by way of the reflection (previously expounded) that every individual being has to conceal itself because, if it did not, it would totally “alienate” itself. *To be concealed is in all likelihood the **conditio sine qua non** of the individual being. The question concerning the thing-in-itself is a question concerning the individual-in-itself. The truth is obstructed by being-individual*. If we were to be able to penetrate into (individuated) being, *we would de-individualize it*, that is, we would annihilate it. The very fashionable “irrationalist” discourse about the idea that “knowledge” or the “intellect” *kills life* therefore contains a kernel, although a vague one, of truth. Not even Heidegger interprets the fact, which is extremely odd for the unprejudiced philosophical gaze, that *we are, at least partially, capable of “uncovering” being*. Ability is the answer to necessity: what I mean is that no life that is lived can be lived “not even for one instant” in a world that is completely dark.

All understanding of a product made by man goes back to the origin. If we understand a product, then we understand what the producer or inscriber had in mind at the time he made it, at least how it came to exist. If we interpret it—“interpretation” is any method that leads to understanding—we deduce from the product the significance that the subject (the artist, society, the epoch) originally bestowed upon it. Neither in immediate understanding nor in interpretation are we dealing with syllogistic operations. Instead, it is *in the **expressio** that we see the **exprimens***, whether directly (that is, by understanding), or indirectly (that is, by way of interpretation). It cannot be said, for example, that it is based on the expression on the face of someone who stands before us that *we deduce* his anger; rather, *we perceive* that he is angry *immediately*; or, more accurately, when he is angry, we cannot perceive it any other

---

<sup>248</sup> In Molussia there was a similar thesis that held “that being hides itself”, and also “is ashamed”.

way. It is absurd to believe that such a corporeal expression will only be seen, in what is assumed to be an “objective way”, as an imitative datum that says nothing and that only later do we apply to this perceived datum a significance (“anger”). To the contrary, it is extraordinarily difficult *not* to understand body language like that. The attempt to see the imitation of an angry person as an image of perception, which says nothing, requires a completely anti-natural act of abstraction, which not even the most skilled experimental psychologist is capable of achieving. Nor can we deduce the vanity of a writer from his slapdash signature; instead we immediately see his vanity in his arrogant loops. And interpretation (which we engage in when the quality is not directly recognizable) also consists in a conclusion.

That we, as we understand and interpret, *understand and interpret retroactively* is also valid when we understand (or interpret) “in advance”, that is, when we understand (or interpret) the *function* of a product. Then we also see in the product what significance has been reserved and assigned to it by its author. The world of products—not just, for example, the world of works of art, but the world of all things that are made—is *expression* both for he who immediately understands as well as for he who arrives at understanding through interpretation. It is often the case that the expression is not entirely transparent: if it were, interpretation would be superfluous; but it is not entirely opaque, either: if it were, interpretation would be impossible.

#### § 4

##### *Re-coining and predictive interpretation.*

It is true that the word “expression” (especially as in the term, *self-expression*) is one of the most commonly used words of our epoch. But we must not allow ourselves to be fooled by this. Those who most frequently and enthusiastically use this word today are those who, having been degraded into pure beings of consumption and sensation, no longer have the time for self-expression, and those who, even if they have the time, are no longer capable of expressing themselves, because they no longer have any *self* that can be expressed. In fact, *the epoch of expression is a thing of the past*. And what is true of us humans, is also true of our products. *Most of the characteristic products of our epoch*, above all our machines and devices—and most of our products belong to this category—are *without expression*, they *no longer have an aspect*, they do not show anything of us; at most, they show the fact that we no longer want to display ourselves in them, that is, we do not want to show that we are “object-men”.<sup>249</sup> An attempt was even made, about half a century ago, to turn this defect into something positive, by way of the label, “the new objectivity” [*Neue Sachlichkeit*], or with

---

<sup>249</sup> It is indeed completely understandable that there should be a vigorous protest against this lack of expression, which is evidently perceived as a frustrating shortcoming. Even before the turn of the century, as I demonstrated in an in-depth study in 1951, the *Jugendstil* represented such a protest against the world’s lack of expression and it desperately sought to transform expressionless objects into pure bearers of expression. The rebirth of this style, which is so often incomprehensibly called “incomprehensible”, which began around 1950, arose from the same frustration.

the identification of functionality with beauty. It cannot be doubted, however, that our products, instead of expressing something about us, express something about themselves. *There is almost not one single product concerning which it is known why it is here, that is, that not only silences its origin, but also its function.*<sup>250</sup> And there is almost not one single machine concerning which it is known how to define its effect (in this connection, I cannot forget a tour of CERN [the European Organization for Nuclear Research], because it expressed absolutely nothing). The function is invisible to us because the technology is so complicated that our sensibility is either not equal to it (in fact, *today, technology is "suprasensible"*) or else because the machines do not provide us with an aspect that could be contemplated, but are built in such a way as to be most appropriate for their functions, that is, in a certain way, *they only have a collateral and accidental aspect*. Thus, for example, *nuclear power plants* (insofar as they are not intentionally located far away from the gaze of the surrounding world) *do not seem to be "anything"*, they look like mosques with chimneys, and do not display even the most minor aspect of what goes on there or what they could cause (this is also part of their nature), what an enormous capacity and what an enormous danger they conceal. Indeed, it is not by accident that those who have an interest in the promotion of nuclear power always accompany their propaganda with idyllic photos of these installations in order to "show" how innocuous they are. The innocuous aspect is constructed not only (as I thought when I coined this expression a quarter century ago) by way of a false vocabulary, but also "with means of truth", since the photos are not false in the vulgar sense, insofar as they have not been tampered with. The jars of Zyklon-B, with the contents of which millions were killed, look like jars of marmalade (I saw them for the first time during my visit to Auschwitz) and, even if one were to have wanted to do such a thing (an inadmissible "if"), it would have been impossible to provide them with an aspect that was more appropriate for their nature. Products are either produced without an aspect, by making them really invisible, that is, by removing them from the sight of the public and concealing them, as, for example, in the case of the thousands of nuclear warheads disseminated throughout Europe: I do not know of a single anti-nuclear activist anywhere who has seen with his own eyes such a product; in short: our world of machines, composed of monsters, either does not express anything at all, or it is invisible or it is deliberately withdrawn from our sight. Anyone who, instead of using his eyes, which are today useless, has an imagination in his head, perceives precisely this absence of appearance or invisibility of these monsters as today's monstrosity, since it is by way of this invisibility that we are transformed into beings that, by trusting our eyes in the most old fashioned way, blindly spend our lives alongside these machines until the day comes when it will be too late to verify that today one can no longer trust one's own eyes.

---

<sup>250</sup> Artists have also rendered a "positive" version of this fact and have transformed it into an object of their production. Since 1960 there have been artists who *expound not only the abstract, but who even produce objects without a function*, and especially machines without a function, which, since no one knows exactly what they are there for, seem just like real machines; but not only do they look like real machines, but they in fact function without any functionality. These crazy machines (as works of art, or more accurately, displayed in galleries as works of art) *symbolize the unknowable character of the real machines*. And in this way they in fact express something essential about our contemporary world. Something similar has been taking place in music over the last quarter century.

And just as they express nothing about us, or about their power and their function, nor do they disclose anything—and here I touch upon the general topic of the second volume—about *what they are doing to us*,<sup>251</sup> since there is no apparatus that does not totally change us (regardless of whether we serve it or consume it). *The coiner and the coined are interchangeable. If today there is someone who coins, it is not we who coin the machines, but to the contrary: it is the machines that coin us. We are transforming ourselves into their “imprints”, their “expression” (if we may be allowed to use such a paradoxical term). “Reverse coining.”*

## § 5

### *Predictive hermeneutics.*

The “Taylorist” revolution is therefore complete (it is fitting to refer to it that way, by analogy with the “Copernican” revolution). Anyone who has ever worked at a machine will have observed that he only considered it to be “his” machine when his gestures were carried out in time with the rhythm of the machine and took place automatically, that is, when *he* was part of *it*. Only by adapting ourselves to machines (no: even this formulation still assumes too much spontaneity), only when the machines adapt us to them, does this *adaequatio producti et hominis* take place, which subsequently allows us to believe that our world is “ours” and that it is an expression of us, the men of today. Of course, in a dialectical sense, it is, since men, who are *coined* by the machines, are never men “in their natural state”, but have always been conditioned by previous machines and are thus already prepared for the later ones. In any case, if the “vestments of the world” fit us so well and seem to be tailor made for us, it is because *it had previously cut us to its measure*. It would be useless to point out that the contemporary formula of adaptation does not define the truth, as the previous *adaequatio rei et intellectus* did, but rather our *non-real relation* to the world, that is, our opportune relation to the existing *non-real world*.

If this was an academic text, I would introduce the term, “predictive understanding” and I would call the theory of this understanding, *predictive hermeneutics*. But these conceited *termini technici* are superfluous, since there is no representative of this discipline, but instead most philosophers, always straggling after the times, when they “understand” or “interpret”, are still trying to discover only what the authors of these products (not only literary products) were thinking when they made them, not what the products *will do to us*. Not even among the futurologists are there any exceptions. In fact, we encounter depictions of men *coined* by machines almost exclusively in authors of fiction like Huxley, Orwell or Lem. These authors, who never had the ambition to be considered to be philosophers (and that is just what they are), leave the professional philosophers of their time far behind. When scientists make predictions, however—and their predictions have been multiplying over the last few

---

<sup>251</sup> There are some exceptions. Thus, anyone who has even a little imagination, sees that cars are transforming their drivers (compared with the passengers on a bus) into unscrupulous and zealously competitive beings, into beings that will be deaf to the appeal of solidarity. *There is nothing that has inflicted such irreversible harm on the workers movement as the automobile.*



decades—they almost exclusively refer to the future situation of the world of machines or, to the extent that they take men into consideration, to overpopulation or world hunger, research topics whose importance, naturally, I would by no means attempt to denigrate. The situations they present, however, are, almost all of them, mere “extensions” of the current technological *status* of the world of machines, which could also be produced by the machines themselves, by computers, for example. We men, on the other hand, the “nature of man”, we are presupposed in the most naïve way, although not explicitly or programmatically, as unchanging.<sup>252</sup> For example, the idea—since not only our soul (as was expressed in the subtitle of the first volume: “On the *soul* in the epoch of the second industrial revolution”) changes with the industrial revolution, but so does (despite the fact that I can only adopt this simplifying and inappropriate distinction for the time being) our spirit—the idea that *our categories are susceptible to change* or that our spatial and temporal existence and therefore even the *forms of intuition are susceptible to change, is now on the verge of becoming superannuated*,<sup>253</sup> this idea has never appeared in the predictions of the experts, in those of the Club of Rome, for instance, no matter how breathless their reports may leave us. In this sense, the predictions of the scientists are hardly ever disputed in the popular *space cartoons* (reproduced by the millions with a view towards the transformation of man) or in the space movies like *The War of the Worlds*. The only difference resides in the fact that the scientists do not make such monstrous transformations of the world, as the *cartoon makers* do, objects of pleasure for those who must be transformed. But in both realms, man, even if he is dressed up like a Martian, is still definitely the “old Adam”, always a cross between Middle-West-Middle-Class and SS-man (or else, *burlesque girls*), an asynchrony, which is actually not entirely false, since the rate of the transformation of the users of the machines is always incomparably slower than that of the machines themselves. Despite the fact that, for these modern *cartoon* Icaruses, it is an everyday affair to travel across galactic systems and therefore to be cosmic, as the word is used in a horrible vulgarization and literally false employment of the term, they have nonetheless not left behind their regionalism, their *southern drawl* of Memphis or Charleston; even the beings who visit us in UFOs display for us their predilection for using New York style *slogans* (even among themselves). And what applies to these creatures in *cartoons* and movies, also applies to the real astronauts and Moon-walkers, since they are *reproductions of images*.<sup>254</sup> Anyone who recalls their banal declarations, especially the contrived *ghostwritten* texts, written on Earth for the moment of their arrival on the Moon, will certainly admit that these visitors to the Moon, as underdeveloped petty bourgeoisie, have in the most ridiculous manner fallen far behind the cutting edge of their society’s technological achievements,<sup>255</sup> on behalf of which they are just so many employees (not to say victims). In fact, it is true that our spiritual situation at any given time only reflects the technical state of the past. The response to the ironic question, “Do you think that I am from the past, too?”, must be in the affirmative. Today, every one of us is “from the past”. It is this *gap* that comprises the ideological situation of our epoch, the disjunction which I called “Promethean” in the first volume. And it is our doom.

---

<sup>252</sup> The sole exception is the concern with genetic manipulation, which has even penetrated the world of the *cartoons*.

<sup>253</sup> See the chapter on seriousness.

<sup>254</sup> See Vol. I, the chapter devoted to the matrix.

<sup>255</sup> See the author’s *Der Blick vom Mond*, pp. 82 *et seq.*

§ 6

*The re-coining.*

The affirmation that we serve our machines is therefore inaccurate and too euphemistic, since we, who have been “thrown” into the world of machines and, after this “being thrown”, we accept it as the only world and as something obvious, cannot oppose being taken into the service of this world: no citizen of the industrialized world can decide if he should or should not use gas, electric light or running water in his everyday life. We must do so and, furthermore, we do it with enthusiasm. If these examples were the only ones, it would be fitting to say, or more accurately, we would have to add: nothing worse can happen to us. But these objects which, thank God, have to be used are not the only ones under whose coercion we find ourselves. There is no object under whose coercion we do not find ourselves. The *terrorism of consumption*,<sup>256</sup> whose image I sketched about twenty years ago, is only one part of another much more widespread kind of terrorism: the *terrorism of use*. By way of our universe of machines we have been transformed into beings that are forced to use them. Of course, I am not claiming that the producers and sellers of machines necessarily exercise this coercion due to their malevolence or that they deliberately intend to transform us by way of their products: most of them do not think that much. And it can be tranquilly affirmed that, in the final analysis, even the big advertising agencies do not really understand what they are doing—the innocence of today’s life is unequalled—since they, too, find themselves under this coercion. Not only are they incapable of preventing their products (by which they, too, are *coined*) from *coining* us in one way or another; they do not even have the freedom to *not* advertise the products that *coin* us. I am not thinking of the objectives that determine their course of action, but of *the effects that the machines inevitably exercise on those who are subject to the coercion of use*.

It would be superfluous to emphasize that it is not enough to just verify the existence of these facts, especially those related to “reversed *coining*”. Rather, given that our future destiny and the future aspect of man depend on whether and to what degree we are capable of recognizing in the machines of today the humanity coined by them, we have to develop this capacity of ours. Now, interpretation is not a special activity of “humanist scientists”; rather, it has become the moral task of all of us. That such a “predictive interpretation” is possible has been demonstrated by many extraordinary utopian novelists, who *do not draw conclusions* from the present for the future, but rather *see* the future in the present. The significance of Jules Verne, who was considered to be an inoffensive author of children’s books, is enormous: *he was the prophet of the technological revolution, just as Marx was the prophet of the social revolution*. In any case, we have to learn to do what the *seers* of antiquity did (or were convinced that they did): predict the future. The viscera that we have to learn how to read as predictive signs are not those of sacrificial animals, but those of machines. The latter reveal to us the world of the future and what our grandchildren will be like, should they exist. And if they will not do this themselves, we have to force them to do it. In Molussia there was a saying, which went as follows: *Torture things until you make them*

---

<sup>256</sup> See, in this volume, the chapter on soft terrorism.

*confess*. If we do not accomplish this, we will not be capable of interrupting the course towards the doom that threatens us. Indeed, I do not consider the chances of accomplishing this to be very great. But as long as its impossibility has not been proven, it is morally impossible to renounce the attempt.

How can such a “predictive understanding” and “interpretation” be brought about? I can only answer: “I also want to know”. And likewise it is only a small consolation not only not to know how to bring about a predictive understanding, but not to know how to bring about understanding in general. Although no one has ever accused me of a lack of depth, precision or method, and although I do not have to blame myself for having resorted to “intuition” or a “feeling for the evidence”—never before have I written those two humiliating terms: I have Husserl driven into my very bones—I respond: regardless, *they must* be brought about. Naturally, scientifically scrupulous individuals will not be able to decide to offer discoveries if they are not fully informed about the road that led them to them. I am not so scrupulous; it is not permitted for me to be so scrupulous. And not because there is a scrupulousness concerning which scientific individuals have no knowledge. The dangers that the futurologists predict are immense, that is, too enormous to allow ourselves to remain silent because we cannot contribute any satisfactory information about the method utilized for their discovery. The constraints of scrupulousness are really foreign to the sciences: to take their seriousness seriously as the ultimate seriousness would demonstrate a profound lack of seriousness, which we have to save for less serious times, that is, for times that will never come.

But maybe I can help with a hypothesis, which goes as follows: concerning predictive knowledge, the same thing is true as is true of the “understanding of expression”, since the former also takes place without the help of indirect routes or syllogisms, that is, it takes place directly. Probably, the interpreters (the futurological novelists cited above, for example) *directly* see in the machines what they have *in the offing* and what kind of beings they will transform us into if we do not break out of their mechanical embrace. They probably see it just as plainly as we see, in a fist raised to strike, the effect that the blow will produce. Here, too, some future event is directly experienced. This example is important, because the understanding of body language is *simultaneously the understanding of the expression and of the effect*. Most likely, those futurological novelists we cited, who see in the machines the *blueprints* of the humanity of the future, do something similar. In any case, for those who have even a shred of fantasy—and I have already said again and again that this is “the faculty of our time”—it is not harder to look towards the future than it is to look towards the past, and often it is less difficult. About 180 years ago, Friedrich Schlegel called historians “prophets turned towards the past”. Do we not have the right, today, to define those who engage in predictions as *historians turned towards the future*?

Günther Anders

Translated in June-December 2014 from the Spanish translation: Günther Anders, *La Obsolescencia del Hombre (Vol. II) Sobre la destrucción de la vida en la época de la tercera revolución industrial*, tr. Josep Monter Pérez, Pre-Textos, Valencia, 2011.

Originally published under the title: *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen II*