

Symbolic function, technology and society

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Man creates a symbolic universe intermediate between himself, nature and society, which is the source of his control over nature and over his social destiny. However, technology, in its modern mass society orientation, generates an artificial symbolic universe of its own that pre-empt the functions of its natural human counterpart and deprives modern man of the human symbolic resources upon which his ability to control his own destiny rest.

Introduction

The creation of symbols is the capacity of man to transform his natural, objective reality into a special universe that he constitutes from within himself. I take this to be not only the specific characteristic of *Homo sapiens* but also the key to his success. This faculty exhibits several successive degrees: the capacity to discern signs, the capacity to read the real as signs, the ability to elaborate a system of signs: and beyond this to produce mutations from recognized signs and make them enter into a coherent explanatory ensemble (even if only fictively explanatory) of which man stands as master (Todorov, 1977). Symbolization expresses the imaginary, but not illusory, escape from reality (Castoriadis, 1975) which is expressed in language. This is not merely symbolism. Assuredly it does not necessarily challenge the whole level of sign making, but language cannot exist unless it is also symbolic; if there were not a symbolic function, there could be no expression in language. Man can transform the real into symbols which are neither gratuitous and arbitrary, nor a dream-time escapism. They are fictively (in the etymological sense) a sort of reproduction of a reality which is no longer completely entire. It is not like a photographic reproduction, which would serve no function: the painter makes choices of which characteristics of reality to retain, highlighting some and making them carriers of meaning, while others he marks for obliteration, pushing them into the shadows or making them disappear altogether. A portrait of Rembrandt or Velasquez is not a mere reproduction of the subject, but an explicitation: one can comprehend the person in the depths of his being and the sum of his past life, even though this is not visible at first sight. At the same time, the painter places the subject in a certain framework; an environment which he chooses. He symbolizes it through the relation between the colors and the other objects, none of which are necessarily those which exist in reality. There is a transformation into a new universe, which renders explicit and in terms of relationship, that which is implicit and without apparent relationship.

This comparison with art, which does not purport to be a complete explanation of the symbolic function, permits one to say simply the relationship that exists between the real and the symbolic. Contrary to what is often thought, symbol is neither arbitrary nor solely the product of fantasy. Those who have interpreted it in this fashion have seen the process very superficially. It has long been known, for example, that the cross in Christianity, the scales representing justice and the swastika in Nazism are not arbitrary and could not be replaced with any other symbols. But these are primordial examples of a symbol as an image uniting in itself a multiplicity of symbols in relationship to each other, all in special fictive and imaginative relationships with reality. This is the other sense of the Greek *syn*—together. A symbol is nothing more than a sign if one separates it from its symbolic universe. Therefore there is, on the part of man, a creation of a universe different from the one in which he is situated, but fully a part of his real milieu. This approach differs from that of Lewis Mumford, for example. According to Mumford, the specificity of man is found in the fact that he dreams, and that dreams reveal to him a world that is different but possible, permitting man to be situated at once in the real world and the dream world. I believe that there is an activity much more conscious and explicit. Assuredly, dreams play a large role in the creation of symbols. Every time we discover a symbolic universe we find that the symbolizing agent recognizes dream as being among his various inspirations. But it is not the activity of dreaming that creates symbols, it is the utilization of dream for a symbolization of reality. Thus man does not live in two universes equally—two *contradictory* worlds—but rather in one universe in which he is, relatively speaking, master, and another in which he is set down without power. Of all the animals, man was the weakest and most poorly adapted to his natural environment and should have disappeared. Man's symbolic universe is neither passive, useless, nor a flight from the real world. Religion, contrary to Feuerbach, is not the opiate of the people but exactly the contrary. By the symbolic transformation of reality man, on the one hand, establishes a mediation between reality and himself, and on the other, becomes adept at manipulating reality by manipulating symbols. In other words, he creates the possibility of acquiring a non-material grasp on reality, without which he would be completely unprovided for. It is this function, and the threat to this function by the growth of technology, that I shall attempt to elucidate.

The symbolic transformation of nature

The first point to emphasize is the aptitude of man to engage himself in a certain mastery of nature thanks to the symbolic function. If he is only in a direct physical relationship to his natural environment he is completely disarmed. Scholars have attempted to explain man's survival and domination by his utilization and fabrication of tools, but what they have not realized is that in order to effectuate the transformation of a stick picked up by chance into a utensil, it is necessary that the stick become other than a simple piece of wood and be symbolized as something else. The stick used by man ceases to be merely a piece of wood and becomes, for example, a bludgeon. The function of symbolization precedes the fabrication of the tool and that is what makes it possible to develop the conception of a tool or of a weapon; man makes himself capable of mastery over nature by symbolizing it. If we imagine 'man cast into the world' in a simple material environment, he is the feeblest of creatures and is necessarily vanquished. Moreover, he recognizes this vulnerability.

If, on the other hand, man transforms the real into a universe in which he has power—that is to say a power which he bestows upon and attributes to himself—then he can conceive that he is also capable of dominating the real world. If an avalanche is an avalanche, pure and simple, man can only live in terror and powerlessness. But if it is symbolized as a force comparable, although superior, to man; endowed with will, consciousness and intent, man can situate himself within a relationship to that force, exactly as he recognizes that he can modify the intentions or the will of another person. Therefore the material fact of the avalanche is no longer ineluctable and man is no longer disarmed. He can conceive of preventing it by acting on that which inspires the avalanche.

One must here address the objection which has been current for so long. Because of the above, it is said, man contented himself with offering prayers and making totally ineffective sacrifices *in place of* seeking means of conquering and turning aside natural forces. This argument is infantile, because we have attestation that the exact opposite happened. When man left for the hunt at the risk of meeting lions, he conducted rituals over a drawing of the lion or of the animal hunted. That is, he placed these animals in his universe, symbolic *to him*, where he holds power. From that moment he can leave for the hunt or confront the lions with the conviction that he has already won; already gained victory. Of course, he does not expect that the game will come to him on its own, or that the lion will flee. He does, from the material point of view, that which he must and that which he can, but he embarks with the certitude of being stronger, because the animal, situated in man's symbolic universe, is already vanquished. Put otherwise, man, thanks to symbolization, renders himself able to act. The material means are themselves transformed by symbolization and thereby become more efficacious in fact than they would be in their simple materiality. This is not just the psychological trick of giving oneself confidence; it is the *attestation* that man gives to himself confidence; it is the attestation that man gives to himself that he is different and therefore invincible. An animal does not have any hold on this symbolic universe and man, thanks to this awareness, affirms himself different from all the rest of nature. He situates himself as subject in relation to a world which becomes object. He is not included in that world as an animal among other animals, and it is not because he uses fire or tools that he comes to recognize himself as a subject who can modify his environment. The material modification of the environment is the consequence of its transformation into a system of signs and beyond that into a symbolic universe. The interpretation of this world is already, by itself, the act of a subject who separates out himself and who deposits everything else into another universe of objects upon which he can, and is prepared to, act. This creation of an 'other world' furnishes him with a justification. And, finally, in the measure to which he is able to imagine a dimension other than that of the immediately sensible—a universe of which he is the constituent and where he continues to reinterpret and to institute new things—he becomes also the master of the real world. The number of possible combinations of actions is no longer limited by the material facts that surround him but open out in response to his symbolic inventions. This forces him to realize that the symbolic imagination has revealed himself as an inhabitant of this universe. Thus because he has transformed the real environment into a symbolic universe, he is called upon constantly to make real that which appears possible to him in the symbolic world. By this fact he can look for the hidden possibilities in the real world, instead of contenting himself merely with what falls into his hands, in the order of what is manifest. From this schematic review we can say

that symbolization has made possible man's material survival and his progressive victory over the natural environment; it was the necessary precondition.

The symbolic transformation of society

The operation just described for the natural environment is even stronger in the social world. The organization of every human society, however primitive it may be, rests upon symbolization. It has long been recognized that the primitive human group could not exist without organization: the ritualization of relationships, the institution of taboos and prohibitions and the formulation of myths. All of these taken together form a collection of materials for symbolization: the symbolization of relationships relating to sex practices, the family, the habitat, clothing and food.

For every social act, there is the double aspect of the material and the symbolic. When man eats, it is not only to nourish himself—to subsist because he is hungry, etc.—he performs each time a symbolic act, as has been demonstrated by Lévy-Strauss. Symbols can be expressed and made explicit; they can be ritualized consciously or perhaps even hidden in the collective unconscious. Although they may be rendered clear only for a few, they are significant for all. The most direct expression of this symbolism of society is language. Language is not only made up of symbols and it is not concerned solely with inter-human relationships to the natural environment. Human language is not comparable to the transmission of signs which we know well among bees. This always consists of reports of information relative to the facts of nature such as distance, orientation or the quantity of a source of food. Nor is language what ethology teaches us to notice in the rituals and parades of animals. It is above all the symbolization of social relations. To say that language is made of signs and symbols is to say nothing.

Equally without value is the statement that language is an expression of society. It is best elucidated as the *rapprochement* of the two propositions: (1) symbolization of *what?* (the social relationship) and (2) what is the *mode* in which society expresses itself? (symbolization). Human language cannot be reduced strictly to a transmission of information. Communication/information theory is extremely impoverished for it reduces language to a reality, doubtless scientifically knowable, but one that excludes the principal aspect of the phenomenon. The symbolization of society is effected through language and, since the beginning, this process has considered the social relationship as not merely the immediate contact of human being to human being, but as a *mediated* relationship. This mediation creates a symbolic space for the obligatory interpretation of relationships. It provides a 'windbreak' between man and man and causes brutality to be excluded so that coexistence becomes possible. Man cannot subsist on mere physical contact alone; he must symbolize it and situate it in a symbolic universe.

Man cannot have a relationship with another save by the intermediary of symbolization. Without mediating symbols, he would invariably be destroyed by raw physical contact alone. The 'other' is always the enemy, the menace. The 'other' represents an invasion of the personal world, unless, or until, the relationship is normalized through symbolization. Very concretely, to speak the same language is to recognize that the 'other' has entered into the common interpretive universe; to display recognizable or identical tattoos, for example, is an expression of the same universe of discourse. Any such ensemble of signs or marks which are not neutral can express the symbolic transformation of the social environment and of the situation of every person in the

group. People recognize each other among themselves by the recognition of symbols which have no other function or reality than to express the reality of the human relationships that are normalized thanks to their transformation into a symbolic universe which always has the character of being appropriated similarly by everyone.

This created universe is not congealed, or stopped, or blocked, once for all. It is ceaselessly in a state of reinterpretation and of new creation. It is completely wrong to consider ritualization as having stopped social evolution. All rites change in content and meaning at the rate, and to the extent, of changes in the social body. Put otherwise, there is a mutual interaction between the changes of fact and the transformation into symbols. It is here the man reveals himself as an 'historical animal'. Marx is right in saying that nature has no history and that it is man, who by working with and by changing nature, thereby produces history. But this is too rigid a formula. For history does not exist apart from man's consciously grasping his historic destiny. And that is what Castoriadis (op. cit.) expresses well in the following passage: 'History is impossible and inconceivable outside of the productive and creative (of symbols) imagination . . . such that it manifests itself once and indissolubly in an historical deed and in the constitution, before any explicit rationality, of a universe of *significances*. . . This historic fact means more than that it simply exists; it is inhabited by *meanings* which are neither reflections of perceptions, nor a simple prolongation and sublimation of the tendencies of immutability—nor yet a strictly rational elaboration of the facts. The social world is each time constituted and articulated as a function of a system of such significances; and these significances *exist*, once constituted, in the mode of that which we have called the effective imaginary. . . .' Thus the symbolic universe is constantly *produced* at the same time it is *acquired*. One can demonstrate this easily by analyzing the evolution of myths and rituals.

Each time the social imagination furnishes new symbols, a new organization of symbols, or a new interpretation of symbols, this happens as a function of the way a change in the natural facts—or a social change, such as a demographic transformation—inscribes itself on the conditions of the group. So long as the evolution of the symbolic universe remains possible, the normal evolution of society is possible without crisis and within humanely acceptable bounds. Social evolution becomes aberrant only when transformations within the symbolic universe become impossible, because this potentiality is what assures the persistence of the group. Similarly, people often speak of a social memory (nothing in common with what historians produce). It exists certainly, but what sometimes causes doubt about its validity is that we moderns do not find in this collective memory an exact and correct transmission of what we consider to be the facts. This is true because not all the facts lived by the group are tolerable or accessible: they cannot be incorporated or assimilated except in their symbolic transformation. It is never a fact in itself (the exact quantity or date) that counts, because a mere fact is at once insignificant and destructive. It is significant only from the moment when it is re-endowed with a meaning, that is, when it has entered the world of symbols where man is master and is secure in his dominion. Consequently, that which will be retained in the collective memory is not the materiality of a fact, but its significance—its position in relation to the ensemble of symbols by which the group lives and the possibility of mastery over fact which is thus given to man. Hence the collective memory assures the transmission of this universe of meanings, constantly enriched by new symbolic acquisitions which permit new symbolic possibilities that can only be constituted because they can be inserted into a

previously existing system of symbolization. Thus, when we have underscored the fact that symbols are not arbitrary, that means not only that they are directly linked, in presentation, to certain symbolic facts, but also, that they can only be constituted according to certain fixed processes which, though they can be different in different societies, must be coherent with the symbolic universe inscribed in the collective memory.

We find a good example of the transformation of historical facts into symbols, and of their instituting power on the social plane, in the existence of an aristocracy. I have demonstrated that the aristocracy in primitive Rome could not have emerged except by the process of symbolization. Formerly, it was claimed that the aristocracy arose from physical force, or the courage of a war chief, or from riches, and so on. Such simplistic positivistic expressions completely contradict the facts. In reality, when one minutely analyzes the patrician families and goes back, generation through generation, to the historical conditions of their origins, one perceives that all patrician families are connected to some primordial ancestral hero celebrated for his excellence. The important term is celebrated. That is to say, his great deeds were collected, transformed into an epic *account*, and then reconstructed in such a fashion as to become symbolic. At this moment a double movement is produced: one moves towards the heights, further from the origins, as the eponymous ancestor becomes the concentration point of symbols and is attached to a higher symbolic origin. This results in a god—goddess or demigod—who is established symbolically as the true origin and as the explanation of the progenitive power of the ancestor. Thus one passes from the universe of symbolized facts to an imaginary symbolic concentration which, however, reinforces the original meaning. Secondly, there is, at the same time, a downward movement: the symbolic account of the hero, as told in an ancestral epic poem, is carefully transmitted to the generations which come in such a fashion as to introduce them into exactly *that* symbolic universe so that they themselves will be capable of reproducing the acts and the virtues of the ancestor. There is thus an existential model that is transmitted by means of symbols. Every time one of the members of the family embarks on a similar quest or accomplishes a corresponding deed to what is symbolized by the ancestor, then at once the descendant proceeds to perform the same operation. That is, one transforms the event into a symbol which carries the same meaning as, and which also enriches, the primitive account. In other words, every aristocratic family distinguishes itself from all others in that it possesses an emblematic symbolic ensemble which plebeian families do not have. And it can be said that a family is aristocratic in the degree to which it has just such a known and recognized 'history'—not a history in the modern sense, but in the traditional sense of a coherent, symbolized account of real deeds. An aristocracy has the possibility of constituting a symbolic historical universe. But that means equally that the existence of symbols can produce a certain social structure.

The final effect of symbolization derives from the naming of things. From the moment man proceeds to the denomination of things he has made them enter his universe and they belong to a coherent ensemble. They belong to man by virtue of the name he has bestowed on them. He has not only put his mark on things, he has also made them exist. There are two orientations. Concerning objects and animals, it is the case of beings that are outside of man. They become subject to him by the forcible symbolic imposition of a name. In the same way in the social context, one strips the individual of his autonomy, but also of the risk that he will run into others capable of imposing a name on him. A name has no utilitarian value at the beginning.

It is the symbolic hold of the group over the individual. But a name refers to data which do not have a real existence; denomination really causes the element in question to exist. It is evident that 'abstract' words like liberty, dignity, honor, virtue and the like do not designate anything definable and pre-existent. These qualities only began to exist from the moment when they were symbolized by means of denotational acts. To name the class of events which are selected to be carriers of the denominated quality from this moment, inducts them into the symbolic universe and they henceforth exist in a most lively fashion. A symbol is not merely an evanescent social phantom, it is perfectly constrained and carried along to a certain behavior and capable of inducing a certain attitude or action. By this analysis of symbol we escape the famous contradiction: either a concept like liberty exists in itself in the real world and man merely discovers it, or it is only an arbitrary word having no content. Starting from the symbolic operation of denotation, a concept like liberty really exists, and man, as a member of its symbolic universe, knows perfectly well what it is. This is neither fortuitous nor inconsistent; we are in the presence of the creative denomination of a reality which will exist effectively for man from that instant onward.

This explanatory ensemble shows the degree to which the traditional theories in this domain are poor and simplistic. Neither physical force—the aptitude to dominate the environment—nor the physiological structure, nor even work, can serve as a legitimate explanation to denote the special characteristics of *Homo sapiens* and his evolutionary success. Reciprocally, the interpretation of B. F. Skinner reveals an alarming speculative poverty in its reductionist approach to the human psychic universe. Manifestly, he understands nothing of the reality of phenomena such as 'freedom and dignity', because he cannot even envisage their symbolization. He ignores this ever decisive process which has permitted man to affirm his own autonomy and which has also made possible both work and social organization. But, on the other hand, the theories of Skinner (1970) and of many of his imitators are very significant in that they reflect the modern situation. But they are neither scientific nor exact accounts of man's permanence; in no way do they allow us to understand man's specificity. Whether one likes it or not, the history of the human species manifests these special qualities. If one confines oneself to cerebral aptitudes and to the analysis of reflexes, then obviously one makes comparisons and analyses of behavior of a physiological nature. Consequently, one discovers that after all man is not so extraordinary and that despite the superiority attributable to the frontal lobe of the brain, he is essentially at the level of the other animals—the dolphin, for example. This falsely scientific discourse neglects the fact that intelligent animals like the dolphin have not had man's history, nor indeed, any history at all. Certain 'humorists' have therefore proposed the hypothesis that the dolphin, being wiser than man, did not want to engage in this adventure, as if there was a possibility of recognizing this adventure before having lived it. Far from having explained anything, Skinner's process of elimination by reduction prevents him from accounting fully for the facts, despite his scientific pretensions. He has not situated himself 'beyond freedom and dignity', but is, on the contrary, prior to them. Therefore this order of reflection, which is pseudo-scientific and explains nothing, is, regarding the specificity of man, totally devoid of philosophic interest. Rather, the theories of Skinner and his followers reflect all too eloquently the situation in which man now finds himself: they do not present a true scientific theory but only a formalization of the particular reality created by their own methodology. If we consider their doctrines as expressing *our* situation, that means in effect that the process of symbolization is in fact excluded and

that symbols become stripped of sense. Indeed, if a Skinnerian mutation were to be possible, it would require man to situate himself in a perspective characterized by the elimination of an immutable human nature. If, in effect, there were such an immutable nature, the important symbolic function we have recognized could not disappear. On the contrary, if man is but an aleatory organism who constitutes himself under such circumstances but whose self-possession can be placed in question, or even annulled, then the symbolic function can disappear. But given the considerable importance which this function has played in the development of individual man and of society, that could only occur through the catastrophic debacle of all that which up to now has been considered human. That is indeed our present situation.

The sterilization of the symbolic function

Can one say that there is today a tendency toward the disappearance of the symbolic function? I cite only a few indices that are readily available. We have, since the start of the twentieth century, participated in a proliferation of symbols that are contradictory and incoherent. We have expressions of political ideas, revolutionary impulses, religious novelties and intellectual and scientific paradigms, but we have not elaborated a significant and meaningful symbolic universe. Our former cultural universe has disappeared. The upwelling of symbols expresses, on the one hand, the impossibility of constituting ones that are truly significant and, on the other hand, our powerlessness to reconstruct a social body as a function of such symbols. Symbols are quickly produced and just as quickly disseminated, but they do not penetrate deeply into people's consciousness. They command no more than a pragmatic and superficial adherence. Frequently they exist only at the level of propaganda and are as rapidly eliminated, lost or trivialized as they are born. These symbols of our time have ceased to assure us of permanence; ceased to call forth a deepened consciousness and thus cannot be creators of history. The most frequent attitude is that, basically, when a symbol no longer corresponds to the immediate situation or no longer has a current practical utility, one rejects it to search for something new, abandoning the fruitful traditional attitude which proceeded by *deepening* and *reinterpreting* symbols. In other words, symbols are victims of a double character of the occidental world (which drags the whole rest of the world after it): the extreme variability of situations and the primacy of consumption. Instead of establishing fixed points in the variation—points from which one could situate oneself in the variable, as has always been the role of symbols—one delivers up symbols to this multiform and changing flood. They no longer retain any interest and man does not attach himself to them. Symbols, as in France in 1968, have become purely a matter of fashion and carry with them no means for interpreting facts. They change with the facts. One looks for an immediate equivalence between the symbolic expression and the experienced reality of appearances, but from such facts there can come no significance. This is also one of the weaknesses of modern art, which, for example, has declared itself symbolic at precisely the moment it was no longer symbolic. To this corresponds the de-signification of language.

To reflect upon an object, by way of scientific pretension, denotes the autonomous reality of the object itself, independent of human volition. Thus, structuralist linguistics pretends to be a study of language in its permanence and its universality but devotes itself to discovering structures without applying itself to meaning. To make a correct structural analysis it is necessary to avoid the question of meaning. Eventually meaning can sprout up, but that is not the preoccupation. It is a study of signs and

of the significant rather than the signified, which remains uncertain and finally devoid of interest. This is not only because structuralist linguistics amputates language from its principal, nor because of its reductionist approach to its objects; on the contrary, it renders account accurately of precisely what exists. Language is, in fact, reduced to this and its meanings tend to disappear. Communication is established otherwise and information finishes by being destructive of its own vectors. Meaning is more and more eliminated: language becomes, in effect, a system of signs which answer to certain archetypes, to certain uses and to certain habits, but the symbolic dimension of language is destroyed. Many factors are responsible for this, such as the utilization of language in propaganda and publicity, and many witnesses of it appear in modern poetry, modern songs and the theater. But when language becomes no more than a sort of organized noise, it is evident that a whole part of man's symbolic activity is rendered impossible. Among other things, he is capable neither of true consciousness nor of recognition. This corresponds to the organization of the 'mass society, mass consumption and mass media'. Finally, the last verification we can make is the voluntary manipulation of symbols. They still exist, by tradition and heritage, but instead of playing their traditional role, linked to a community structure, they are used and manipulated for other ends, by specialists who have knowledge of them but who employ them for such things as propaganda. One finds oneself in a completely falsified situation because the symbolic function has been dried up. We shall see later why man, finding himself deprived of this source of his protection and his natural mediation, is at the same time delivered up to an exterior influence which plays upon that which once was his protection.

It is a matter of utilizing, as well as possible, everything that exists in 'human nature' to draw the maximum return, with everything subjected to a utilitarian efficaciousness; symbols as well as other psychic structures. Psychological techniques can reach all these factors. Symbol, as we have shown, is itself useful and is endowed with a certain efficaciousness. But there was a coherence among all human groups in the creation of symbols, not a division between the few who know how to manipulate symbols and the masses which can only undergo sterilization and submit to manipulation. They are sterilized because, from the moment rigorous techniques exist for manipulating symbols, those who hold them seek above all to restrict the people on whom they act as captives within their former symbolic universe. It is not necessary for this universe to be modified or that there be a spontaneous upwelling of new symbols which would raise again the issue of the achievement reached by the ancients. This sterilization and immobilization within congealed symbols explains, in particular, the immobility of the symbolism of political parties and labor unions, which are always utterly behind reality and maintain their adherents in a sort of infantilism. In depth, this situation is directly the expression of their attitude towards symbols.

If we now consider the different points just sketched, we perceive easily that in all these cases, the active factor in this new situation is technology. Rapidity of change, consumption, manipulation and efficaciousness are characteristics given by technology to all the situations where it intervenes—particularly, the sterilization of the symbolic function in a direct fashion by the mass media. In effect, the spectator no longer lives in a real world, but in a world imagined by the media. It is a perfectly artificial world, recomposed by the images and sounds of these media. Consequently, there is no place for symbolization to occur. Reciprocally, exactly because he is held in that universe, man has ceased to know the real world where he effectively lives. It is never more than an interpreted world and he does not know the nature of his true situation.

Because of this, he is incapable of creating a universe of symbols that can be mediators and function actively. He does not even know what dangers he runs because he lives only with artificial images. One might suppose that this universe instituted by the media is precisely a symbolic universe. But this is absolutely not the case: it is a universe of incoherent images, transmitted for information or knowledge—or indeed for distraction, diversion or fun—but they are not really symbolic images with an ultimate grasp on the real on behalf of the human community and permitting its existence. They are, so far as ‘grasp’ is concerned, a grasp over the reality of the spectators effected by the owners of Mass Media Culture. Thus, on one side, technology sterilizes the symbolic function; on the other, it utilizes the old symbols with a view toward their manipulative efficacy.

Technology as man’s new environmental order

We must attempt to uncover why this situation has developed. Is it simply a bad use of technology that has prevented man from being able to continue in his traditional path? There are two fundamental reasons why this is not so: technology constitutes a new human environment that is unsuited to human symbolization; technology has turned into its own symbolic transformation.

Consider first the proposition that technology is a new environment. I have demonstrated elsewhere (Ellul, 1977) that man does not any longer live in a ‘natural’ environment but rather in a milieu composed of the products of his technology. Man’s environment is completely a function of technology, to which it unceasingly adapts itself. Man’s knowledge is of nothing more than technology and it occurs only by the intermediary of technology. He can no longer take any significant action without technological intermediation. In other words, technology constitutes an engulfing universe for man, who finds himself in it as in a cocoon. He cannot have any relationship with the ‘natural’ world except through technological mediation. By the same measure, he can only have relationships with other men through technological mediation, i.e. through material technologies like the telephone, radio and videophone: technology is at the same time immediate to man and the universal mediation between men. On the one hand, technology devalues all other mediations and man seems to have no need of symbolic mediation because he has technological mediation. It even appears to man that technology is more efficacious and permits him a greater domination over what threatens him and a more certain protection against danger than does the symbolic process. On the other hand, one does not perceive the need for the creation of new symbols because man has not become conscious that technology no longer constitutes a means, but is rather his environment. Hence it is now the relationship to technology that man must proceed to symbolize, for technology is the source of his principal traumas and the cause of his being put in permanent danger. But there are here two obstacles, beyond the absence of consciousness and the failure to comprehend. The first is that technology is immediate to man. No distancing is possible. The situation of man in the technological universe is exactly comparable to that of animals in the natural environment. An animal is a part of nature, he adapts to it or he disappears. There is no distance between his environment and himself. He is a component of his environment. Yet, as we have seen, the specificity of man is just that he could establish a distance, permitting symbolization. Notice that man has constituted for himself a new environment which is completely coherent to him even though ‘by nature’ it is perfectly strange. The world of minerals is not a human world. But there is no distance between man and his technological universe because it has been entirely fabricated by

man who has put himself into it entirely. This was even a prominent ideology some years ago with the slogan that man had 'humanized' the natural world by means of technology. To the degree that all herein is the product of man, he has no resource to distance himself from it. This is the Marxist-Hegelian drama of the 'subject and object'.

On the other hand, technology presents itself as an environment so coherent and so unitary that it does not seem to have a point where man can insert anything else. Without any doubt, this new man experiences a great misery in the technological environment, but he cannot get out of it. He cannot escape from the totality of this mediation in order to go back to a purely natural environment. That is, in relation to technology, man is at once bypassed and, at the same time, rendered part of the technological fact. Thus man finds himself disarmed at all levels by his inability to effect a symbolization of technology and he does not even perceive that this is his only chance to subsist in his human specificity.

The second proposition is the corollary, namely that technology is itself productive of symbols and becomes by itself its own symbol. Consequently, it sterilizes man's desire for such creation. But it is precisely those symbols that technology itself furnishes that are rigorously integrated into its own system. Technology is not only an environment, nor merely an ensemble of means and instruments; it is itself a symbolic universe. It furnishes itself with its own symbols. This was analysed by G. Debord as 'the society of the spectacle'. It produces itself as both spectacle and as symbol. Furthermore, there was in the first stage of the creation of modern technology a *mise en œuvre* by man equivalent to that which he gave the symbolic universe. Western man since the seventeenth century, in creating technology, has obeyed exactly the same process he had followed for millennia in producing symbols. But the demultiplication of techniques has ended by becoming a complex ensemble of auto-production. Now it is technology which has taken over and which produces for man the coherent symbols that are attributable to the technological universe.

Because of this, man, when confronted by challenges, is unable to put at a distance both the environment and the problem of its mastery. This is due to the simple factor of his supplemental integration. Man no longer feels specifically the need to launch himself into the adventure of initial symbolic creation precisely because he sees himself surrounded by those symbols that are actually produced by the technological system.

Moreover, it has long been established that consumption in our society has become less a consumption of material objects than a consumption of symbols (Baudrillard, 1970). One purchases an automobile of such a type and such a horsepower not only because one has a real need of it but because it symbolizes in our society a social status that is indicative of power and wealth. It is the same for most ordinary objects such as bath powder, deodorants and breakfast foods (Barthes, 1962). We consume symbols that are coherent with the consumption of the objects produced by technology. This is exactly what sterilizes the faculty for symbolization in man. He no longer needs to hunt in order to find the meat which he buys at a butcher's shop without effort. Just as vaccines have progressively reduced the capacity of the organism to create spontaneously natural immunities, so in the same way, man no longer creates symbols because too many are offered him at too simple a level of consumption. These symbols no longer permit him to situate himself in his new technological environment and still less to master it. This is exactly what explains the general disarray of modern man in technological society. It is only necessary to add that the

symbolic function was probably a fundamental psychological function and one of the essential constituents of the condition of 'being man'. Hence, to the degree to which it has been rendered useless or has been sterilized, the result can only be serious trouble for the human personality. That is the sense in which we must analyze, from a different perspective than Freud, the malaise of man in contemporary civilization.

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