

become more and more «serious». To the extent that sports must be placed, more and more, in the same direction as work. Don't sportsmen go on vacation anymore? It is hard for us to imagine vacations in reference to games or festivities. The parade of Modernity under the flags of secularization, specialization, rationalization, quantification and bureaucratization has taken play from the field of «festivity» to the area of «work». And it is not —paradoxally— the festivity of work. Hence Western society has discovered the excellencies of the sports model in order to cross the threshold of the end of the Twentieth Century untroubled.

AESTHETIC THEORY AND MASS MEDIA

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It is a well known fact today that aesthetic values are not something absolute but are intimately related to the socio-historical situation in which they appear. They reflect criticism of or submission to the economic, ethical, artistic of whatever context they are inserted in. They are, therefore, fruit of a temporal and not eternal truth.

Defining what is or is not fit to be included in the category of aesthetic value becomes, in this sense, a task that lends itself to polemic from the moment the hermeneutic sense of history in the very concept of aesthetic value is accepted. This is what happens with attempts to establish artistic criteria in the iconic media of mass communication: polemic becomes an essential element in the development of these media from the moment they are born.

First it was photography, then the poster, then the cinema, comics, later television and now video and the computer; the history of all these media has been marked by confrontations between those who admit their artistic potential and the possibilities of their creating a product of outstanding unimpaired aesthetic quality, and those who, on the other hand, see nothing in these media but the triumph of vulgarity and the trivialization of true art, which plunges us into the crudest of sub-cultures.

At the moment the dispute appears to have withdrawn from the clamour of only a few years ago; today a weakening of these contrary positions is found in all areas as a tribute to the new order of postmodernism. This, according to Lipovetsky, has as its object

the relaxing of the artistic space parallel to a society in which hard ideologies no longer enter, where institutions look for choice and participation, where roles and identities are confused, where the individual is floating and tolerant.

Today, art, fashion, publicity or design are not radically distinguished; they are presented in mixed forms and are consumed without demands for purity of origin. The work of art has lost at this level its special character of transporter of quasi-mystic experiences and carrier of essential values. Its uniqueness and genius are no longer fundamental facts to take into consideration in the era of mass reproduction. This state of affairs has undoubtedly been fed by the contribution of accelerated technological progress and the enormous proliferation of communication resulting from the mass media.

All of this serves to outline our present situation, which we shall analyse in greater depth later. But first it would be wise to take another look at the confrontation we referred to above between those who opened the gates of aesthetics to the iconic culture of masses and those who rejected this with an aristocratic defence of the meaning of traditional art.

During the nineteenth century the growing industrialization and the advance of techniques related to cultural mass production (lithography, the photographic camera, rotary presses, photogravure etc.) caused the number of images per inhabitant to increase dramatically compared with previous centuries. The process of iconographic intensification had meant a change in the value of the image: from being a ritual to be contemplated by a few it had become something accessible to most. This brought with it a profound change in the way of looking at the image and, as a consequence, a new way of approaching and seeing the work of art. The repercussion which the birth of photography had on the

impressionist painters is well known, as is the way in which, taking as their starting point the changes provoked by these painters in their treatment of light and colour, new pictorial movements were to destroy traditional painting at the beginning of the twentieth century and give rise to new types of vanguard art. Some of the most important of these, such as Futurism, Surrealism, Expressionism or Cubism had a close and creative relationship with a new medium of mass expression which was just the coming of age: the cinema. If until that moment the masses had gradually been consuming images in a way that was more individual than social (neither photograph nor poster nor story permitted instantaneous agglomerations, in time and space, when looking at them), the conditions of cinematographic exhibition raised the enjoyment of the image to heights undreamed of a few years before.

The consequences that these transformations of the iconic culture of masses and the use of technology in artistic production were to have on the philosophy of art were not clearly perceived, at least with such lucidity, until Walter Benjamin published, in 1936, his essay *The work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility*. The existence of the traditional work of art, according to Benjamin, was identified by its unique, original, authentic character, the basis of which found expression in secularized worship or ritual. But then, when there arose the first truly mass medium based on reproduction, that is to say, photography, art began to see its secular possessions under threat. For Benjamin, by about 1900 technical reproduction had become something normal and was even fighting for a specific place among artistic processes. As the century went on, the effects of the new media, with the cinema at their head, did not pass unnoticed. The result was that in the age of the technical reproduction of the work of art the loss of the cultural value of such a work led to a crack in its «aura». This disintegration of the aura did not escape the notice of Benjamin, who depended on the growing importance which the masses were assuming and on their aspiration to draw the objects together, spatially and humanly, for themselves. These facts lead us to an important conclusion:

For the first time in universal history, the possibility of technical reproduction frees the artistic work from its parasitic existence in a ritual. The reproduced work of art increasingly becomes the reproduction of an artistic work prepared to be reproduced... But at the same instant that the norm of authenticity fails in artistic production, the integral function of art is upset.

Here is one of the principal discoveries of Benjamin: the establishment of the breach in the stable and homogenous order of art. Solemnity and contemplation before a work of art were about to give way to shock and distraction. Also to be seen was the combative attitude of the vanguard against academic art and its vestiges of aura. Writing of the dadaists, Benjamin himself said:

They attached less importance to the mercantile utility of their works of art than to their lack of utility as objects of contemplative immersion... What they achieve in this way is a high-handed destruction of the aura of their creations. With the means of production they impress on them the stigma of reproductions.

The modification of the artistic function was a fact. The halo of autonomy and beauty as characteristics of art had slipped away. The masses had taken over a significant ethical-aesthetic space and thus had to a large extent changed behaviour when face to face with works of art. But this undeniable triumph of the mass media was not far-ranging enough to still opposing voices. Those who defended the ritual unique value of art did not let slip any chance of belittling the value of the media to which the masses had easy access. For G. Duhamel, for example, the cinema was a «passtime for pariahs», a «dissipation for the illiterate». A. Huxley, on his part, felt that

technical progress has led to vulgarization... So the result is that the reproduction of rubbish in all the arts is greater than before; and it will

continue thus as long as people continue with their disproportionate consumption of reading material, pictures and sound.

This redoubt of elitism, which would also be the habitual and suspect resort of all the detractors of mass culture, was, of course, denounced by Benjamin. For him,

quantity has become quality: the massive increase in the number of participants has modified the nature of their participation. Let the observer not cry fraud because such participation suddenly seems to be a discredited form... We can see that at bottom it is a question of the old complaint: the masses look for distraction but art means concentration.

Opposed to attention, distraction; opposed to exclusivism, democratization; opposed to veneration, amusement. There had been a momentous qualitative change of course in aesthetic sensibility.

The reflections of W. Benjamin, as we have seen, were able to reach down to the basis of the key points of interconnection between the mass media, technical reproducibility and traditional art. He spoke for the artisticity of the media, the validity of technology (used progressively) and confirmed the loss of esteem undergone by the work of art. The way was open to new research.

What happened during the forties and fifties, years which saw the introduction of that most revolutionary and controversial means of mass communication, television, is that studies of the culture and society of masses were aimed almost exclusively at diagnosing their harmful effects on culture in general. Few were the voices raised in defence of Benjamin and of continuing along his path. It was precisely his colleagues in the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, Adorno, Horkheimer and Fromm, who were conspicuous for their criticism of culture brought through the new mass media. It is, however, true that the recent experiences of manipulation of the masses which had been lived through under Italian fascism or nazism and the cultural situation of the United States, subject to the dictates of the tycoons of communication concerned only with obtaining good profits at any price except that of an honest non-alienating culture, were decisive factors in the judgements emitted by those Frankfurt colleagues about the culture of masses and its nonexistent aesthetic character.

Soon it would be the American theorists themselves such as B. Rosenberg, D. Macdonald or I. Howe who would be responsible for a proliferation of anti-mass media essays. They were all convinced that the mass media contributed nothing to culture. First, above all, they debased and trivialized it. As the audiences for these media increased, aesthetic taste was considered to deteriorate proportionately owing to the low levels imposed by the products of the culture industry. The result was the substitution of true art by a vulgar pseudo art, immersed in mere consumerism and far from the purity of artistic contemplation.

As we see, no one took into account the fact that the audience generated by the new media in an approach to the arts had experienced a historic change such that now, in place of minority art, one could speak of art of the masses. And this fact was overlooked because it was this that was not accepted: that there was an art of the masses. Guided by an elitist spirit, those authors opposed to the diffusion of art through the media and not disposed to admit the artistic nature of these products took refuge in pointing out that nothing was being done in these media in the way of quality or originality, that they generated aesthetic passiveness, prevented creativity and only encouraged consumption at the lowest artistic level. And so they must be rejected.

This series of discrediting opinions were those generally shared by all who studied the relations between art and the mass media. Two authors who, without drifting too far away from the orthodox line, acted in a less critical vein, were the sociologists F. Lazarsfeld and R. Merton, who in 1948 after a series of investigations into the effects of the mass media on the aesthetic taste of the public came to the conclusion that there was no binding relation between the decline in aesthetic tastes and the rise of means of mass communication. What did seem clear to them was that

while yesterday the elite comprised virtually the whole audience, today it is but a tiny fraction. Consequently, the average level of aesthetic standards and audience taste has gone down, in spite of the fact that the tastes of certain sectors of the populations has undoubtedly risen and the total number of persons exposed to the content of the means of communication has increased enormously.

This means that, although quantity has not brought quality, neither has it been the catastrophe proclaimed by Huxley or Adorno. Moreover, Lazarsfeld and Merton dared to propose that artists and intellectuals should participate creatively in the organization of the mass media to ensure that «nothing should be permitted in the press, on the air or in the cinema that was not the best that had been thought or said in the world», although, admittedly, immediately afterwards they add that

the possibility that a radical change in the contribution of art for the masses might remodel in due course the tastes of mass audiences still remains pure speculation.

And this lack of faith displayed by the authors in their own proposal is hardly surprising since the intellectuals and artists of the time were not partisans of the task. Their disdain of the mass media was such that they did not give the slightest consideration to the chance of participating actively. They were content to criticize the ideological and artistic manipulation to which, according to them, the media subjected the public, without trying any positive solution for improvement. The idea of art which they defended did not fit in, of course, with what was being mass produced as they continued to be bound to the exceptional quality of art as something unique, the artist as a genius and the enjoyment of the work of art as limited. These tendencies were proper to the spirit of the elite, which has always been inclined to dominate most of the theorists of the society of the masses, at least until recent times, when the role of the mass media in the development of art has begun to be taken seriously.

The hierarchical and culturally conservative character which typified the critics of the society of masses was unerringly brought out by John Fisher in his article «The masses and the arts», published in 1957. Here he set out four ideas which, in his opinion, were shared by all the anti-media theorists:

1. True culture is the product and the property of an intellectual elite; it can, therefore, only flourish in a hierarchical society.
2. In such a society, which has been the European type for several centuries, the intellectual holds a special, defined and privileged position as the guardian of the Higher Culture. An open society, mobile and non-hierarchical, is a Bad Thing because it does not give them the deference of the caste privileges which they consider their due.
3. The moment the masses stumble on culture, they dirty it. Moreover, they commit blasphemy by approaching the holy object without the permission and guidance of the priestly caste.
4. Whatever is popular is, by definition, bad. Thus it would be a waste of time and effort and unworthy of an intellectual to attempt to distinguish between the degrees of its badness.

Acceptance and proclamation of these beliefs was common among the intellectuals of the fifties. By their attitude they denied part of the people the possibility of access to a culture worthy of them. As he was not instructed in the refinements and entanglements of «true» art, the normal citizen had no right to enjoy it, let alone enter the circle of connoisseurs. Instead of trying to lift the whole community to a higher level of culture which might weaken the differences between the high and low sectors, what they did with their criticism and rejection of the art of the masses was to widen the breach separating the people, who enjoyed the mass media, from the intellectual elite, who censured these media for their negligible aesthetic value (since clearly it is the aesthetic of genius alone that this elite enjoys). The situation worsened without seeming to cause its true instigators much concern, since as J. Dewey saw in 1934,

when, because of their complexity, the products which the cultured describe as fine arts seem to the masses to be anaemic, then hunger for the aesthetic tends to look for the cheap and the vulgar.

This hunger for the aesthetic, which is peculiar to all citizens, was denied, however, to most of them by the elitist intellectual. For him the only thing the mass hungers for are pseudo-artistic products of rapid consumption and digestive pleasure. They look like art but are really artistic rubbish.

This was the situation. It was necessary to wait until the sixties before these judgements of the «cultured class» began to vary considerably. In this decade and a little more than half of the following there took place the definitive boom in communications and the massculture industry, and not only in the sphere of the western countries but over the whole planet. Television took over a large slice of the media market and video and the computer made their appearance with the new technologies. And, as sign of the changes in thought, the cinema succeeded in being recognized almost unanimously as «the art of our time».

These were the years when conflicts became acute in the capitalist countries as they looked for a change in their arthritic structures. They were the years in which the youthful countercultural movement was to reach the apogee of its claims and struggles, filled with hopes and new desires. They were the years when the social and cultural sensitization of the masses was going hastily in pursuit of improvements in the level of life and active participation in society. They were years, in short (and this is what interests us), in which all these events and the most rigorous study of the mass media would influence beyond measure the new course taken by the theorists of mass culture when faced with a positive appreciation of such culture.

«Iconic revolution», «aesthetics of abundance», «communicative mosaic», «global village», «Kitsch era» etc. are terms to designate facts widely debated in the course of almost twenty years which we will now analyse (1960-1978).

The reproductive and visual civilization now imposed itself without any possible limits and with it the new theorists of mass media, finally open to the new experiments and less enclosed within the catacombs of elevated art, began to drag out of obscurity the proposals and ideas launched by Benjamin thirty years earlier. Now the tables were turning and those who defended the notion that the loss of prestige, power and aura was a process to be desired in the work of art and positive for the future of art itself (no longer understood in the traditional sense but in that of an art adapted to new techniques and new media), had passed from being a few and had become the majority. It is true that unanimity was not achieved but in these matters one might say that it will never be achieved. There were still those who clung to their aristocratic vision of the relationship between art and society and continued arguing in an «apocalyptic» style, to use an expression made popular by U. Eco in those years. One example suffices to symbolize this combative, although limited, anti-media group. This was Guillermo de Torre, who in scarcely thirty pages of his work published in 1963, *Minorities and masses in contemporary culture and art*, displayed a contemptuous attitude that was difficult to equal towards everything that appeared as art or culture of these masses:

On the level of culture, the most urgent thing would be to withdraw this from the ravages of the multitudinous world or, at least, reserve certain areas, certain isles of immunity.

Could there be a greater declaration of elitist and anti-populist faith? It seems difficult. In any event, as representative of an elite that saw itself threatened, De Torre seemed to consider that the best defence is attack and did not hesitate to put this into practice. Of John Steinbeck he said that he showed «rudimentary mental conduct», for daring to defend comics as a new artistic form of literary and visual expression. Of Edgar Morin he said that he was dominated by a «certain intellectual perversion» ready to «procure sadomasochist satisfaction for itself», for daring to defend the cinema, television, illustrated magazines and, above all, for affirming that

the old elevated culture is horrified by what revolutionizes ideas and forms. There was no golden age of culture before industrial culture.

And even without personalizing their «scorn and indifference» and leaning on the ideas of D. Macdonald, an outstanding US theorist who defended cultural elitist groups, he gave assurances that, with the advance and establishment of the mass media and the subculture they generate, an irremissible degeneration and loss of public taste was produced. There was, then, a regression of intelligence and a multitudinous besotting that led the public to escape along the paths of Kitsch, the paths of adulterated culture.

G. de Torre saw no salvation whatsoever from the dire situation of the masses, which he considered easily manageable by the custodians of the mass media owing to their surrender to simple and primitive impulses (illustrated stories, the cinema, television, all demand the minimum attention: looking «without any mental effort»: no instruction, only distraction). Therefore, he affirmed:

Any hope that this majority culture might overcome its low levels is Utopian.

Meanwhile, what the elite must do to avoid being steamrollered by the vulgarity and consumer product imposed by the masses is to become fully aware that lack of action on their part will lead to the disappearance of the conditions needed for culture to blossom and endure as something unique.

Fortunately for the development of mass culture and, we might well say, of culture in general, opinions of this nature began to be heard less often and the opinions of others gained in importance: those latter maintained that the universe of mass communication was the universe in which life was inescapably lived and where it was impossible to create and theorize by turning one's back on it, let alone, opposing it. The bad effects of the aesthetic abundance so loudly voiced by those who opposed the progress of the reproductive technologies of the mass media began to be considered disproportionate and lacking in rigour. The new idea that was spreading was that

we have no conclusive proof that technological production and repetition in the visual arts have been harmful to taste, to appreciation and to enjoyment to any significant extent; and we have much evidence of desirable effects.

What was now being attempted was not a systematic rejection of the progress of iconic culture of masses as something pernicious but an assumption of greater moral and aesthetic responsibility towards it so as to lead it along paths which would take it as far as possible from the fever for consuming and the vulgarity which unscrupulous businesses sometimes prescribed with impunity. The mass media had excellent potential for delving more deeply into a better, more democratic type of culture and the error of so many years had been to deny precisely this. Now, however, notable authors were hastening to study the mass media and their qualities from within and with their work to offer a better perspective of the values, and also of the defects to be corrected, in relation to the claims of mass culture and the art arising from it. There was no longer any barrier to considering that the mass media were not only a social, but also an aesthetic fact. McLuhan said:

The means of communication are not toys; they must not be in the hands of Peter Pan type executives. They can only be entrusted to the new artists, because they are forms of art.

This challenge did not go unheeded and almost at once various artistic movements began to devote themselves to the production of objects of art, taking into account the stylistic and structural contributions of the mass media. Of outstanding importance in this work were the followers of pop art, critical realism, land art, the underground and body art.

Pop art showed interest from its beginnings in the techniques and subject matter of the iconic mass culture and withdrew from the im-

sitions of the elite. It looked for specific aspects of the industrial society, consumer orientated and reproducible in what their work was developing; thus they found inspiration in the images and facts transmitted through the most popular media. The technique of pop composition owes much, both syntactically and semantically, to media such as photography, the comic, the cinema or the poster. Serigraphy, photomontage, collage, suppression or repetition were means of approaching art that differed completely from traditional artistic creation but not so from the visual methods of popular culture. By its labours, pop art helped to raise the aesthetic level of the mass media and obliged many theorists and artists to look at them anew. In the long run, however, like other breakaway movements in the field of art, pop art finished by being absorbed by the traditional channels of creation and distribution of artistic works, selling itself profitably as one more vanguard movement taken into the system.

Critical realism is considered to be a critical tendency of pop art. Simón Marchán said of it that

the superficiality of pop tends to surpass itself through a discussion with economic and social mechanisms. While pop is affirmative, the new realisms can be defined as non-affirmative... They cannot support indifference when faced with the events of the day, but place themselves in a direct relationship with life and history.

Although in its ends it differs from pop art, in its means it adopts most of the techniques used by this. It is, therefore, under the strong influence of photographic techniques, cinematographic processes, publicity assemblies etc. In Spain its most notable representative has been the Equip Crónica, which in the period between 1964 and 1966 claimed to have based its work on iconography extracted from mass means of communication and to have taken its subjects from daily life, both characteristics connected with the general claim to artisticity of the mass media.

Land art and body art brought to this panorama the novelty of the use of television and video, a new medium of which they were pioneers. Their works emphasize the criticism of the uniqueness and imperishability of the work of art, since they are characterized by their physical dematerialization although they are recorded temporarily by the media.

As for the underground artistic movement, their demands are linked to the character of counterculture, which acquired its greatest relevance in the late sixties and early seventies, before becoming systematically diluted. Animated by a spirit filled with hopes and a desire to change the consumer and bureaucratic society in which they lived, the underground artists and the young political movements associated with them understood perfectly that a critical and liberating attitude came from participating in the culture of the masses with creativity and solidarity. But not in the culture and mass media of the capitalist society, but through the establishment of alternative channels of communication to emit constant counter-information aimed at revealing the manipulation and suppression of news and the moralizing, hypocritical slant which pervaded the official media. Instead of making out of them a creative instrument, the economic and political groups that manipulated them only pursued lucrative ends and sought to benefit their class interest. The scorn of the intellectuals for these media had prevented the introduction of correctives to this situation, which given the momentous conflicts in which the western system was being debated, was now becoming shameful and unbearable.

G. Dorfles then launched an accusing cry against those who wished to attribute responsibility for the decline of taste and the debasement of culture, wrapped up in mere consumer appeal and profit-seeking, to the people themselves, not to those who manipulated them and offered them inferior corrupting products. The planners and directors of the different mass media, with their lack of concern for dignity and their zeal in obtaining the highest possible profits, were without any doubt guilty of the pitiable state of the ethical and aesthetic work of most of the media. But for Dorfles

most of those who are really responsible for the debasement of the mass-produced product, do not, in fact, genuinely participate in it and continue to consider themselves as invested, by divine grace, with a capacity for highly specialized enjoyment, from which would be excluded all, or almost all, the rest of the inhabitants of the planet.

The undeniable force of pressure which intellectuals possess, as has been demonstrated on countless occasions, and the fact that this was not used conscientiously to avoid the degradation of the media, is one of the criticisms most revealing of certain anti-democratic attitudes hidden behind a supposed honesty.

Be that as it may, the countercultural and underground involvement was to shake up, in spite of a final failure of its ideals, many of the excessively petrified structures of the capitalist system. It was to serve as a revulsive agent above all in the improvement in the production of the mass media, as its creative work in daily papers, magazines, the cinema, editorials, record companies, information agencies etc. of an alternative type, would alert many social groups and provoke them to demand, from within the system itself, the renovation and increase in quality of the products and art intended for mass consumption. In the artistic activity of the underground, therefore, what came first, what the basic structure of creation supposed, was communication-information. And, for our discourse, what interests us is precisely this: the artistic utilization of mass media whether they are official or alternative.

The underground movement accepted without hesitation the aesthetic potential of the mass media and with this succeeded in creating a special type of production:

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An art which has little to do with traditional canons, now unusable and useless; an art which, according to those canons, is no longer art, or at best is non-art. An art which proceeds parallel to events and which refers to them and which spreads them: an art which... has much of the documentary in it: I do not entirely reject the metaphor, the symbol, fantasy, but I do not consider them authentic components of the artistic product.

The consequences for the world of art and the cultural position of the mass media resulting from the action of the new artistic movements, added to those of reformed groups of intellectual activists, were immediate. Interest in the production of means of communication increased, but now no longer to accuse them of profaning traditional art and disseminating the lowest quality of programmed consumer products but with the aim for actively participating within them in order to improve the cultural level of what issued and place it at the service of the masses who were claiming a renewed type of education and not mere pseudo-artistic bait.

Studies then made on the sociology of mass communication abandoned the elitist tradition and concentrated on the new demands for analysis generated by a society in a continual process of change and discussion. Consideration of what was offered in the mass media changed gradually but radically. In 1971 F. Rositi in his *Contraddizioni di cultura* corroborated this transformation when he affirmed that the mass media were no longer seen

as a chaotic universe or amalgam of the most varied cultural stimuli nor as a mere negation of intellectual organization or as a weakening of reasoning power, but as a structured cultural universe, endowed with its own frequencies and irregularities.

Hereafter the idea was to achieve two unrenounceable objectives:

1. In the ethical field to make sure that the mass media were not a repressive form of communication aimed at manipulating their public but rather media reorientated towards the effective democratization of their products. It would be necessary to aim them at social progress and fight against their proclivity towards distortion and their tendency to serve only certain economic-political pressure groups with very well-defined interests. In this respect during the seventies and eighties the

hegemony of the cultural industry as a creator of consumer products has met with progressive opposition from new cultural initiatives coming from groups and organizations whose aim (and it is being achieved) is both to widen the base of producers of culture and to improve the cultural products themselves. To this end, special importance has to be attributed to the educational task of teaching people to exercise their reason and their faculty of discrimination when faced with information emanating from the mass media.

2. In the aesthetic field to ensure that the mass media, and more specifically the iconic media, were recognized as a new art that belonged to the age of technical reproducibility and a society of masses. Until then mass art has depended on the theoretical-aesthetic judgements of Great Art and these judgements were not in the slightest degree favourable towards it. But the crisis of Great Art as a criterion by which one could discern what should be included in the category of art and what did not fit and should, therefore, be discredited had been deepening relentlessly and was dragging down with itself the classical evaluation of the work of art. Every day fewer people accepted that the aesthetic assessment of the intellectual minorities who defended Great Art had to be admitted as a sign of quality and true art. Theorists of mass culture came down heavily, from the beginning of the sixties, in favour of conferring on the mass media credentials of an artistic nature.

McLuhan, as we said, did not hesitate and in subsequent years others followed him. In 1962 U.Eco, within his study of the plurality of meanings coexisting in a work of art, valued as present-day art everything from the cinema to comic strips, including poetry of commitment and non-formal painting. Three years later he maintained that products destined to be appreciated by a vast public through the mass media could not be described as of inferior cultural value since they offered features of structural originality, an ability to overcome the limits imposed by the circuits of sales and marketing, new schemes of perceiving, etc., which made many of them worthy of being judged as works of art of absolute validity even though they did not comply with the aesthetic demands of the higher culture.

More drastic were the affirmations of G. Dorfles that art was no longer eternal but rather ephemeral and dynamic. It was a mistake to continue in the belief that true art was only that which was found in museums and to forget that the art which surrounded us today was precisely what was spread by the mass media. These had the task of transmitting aesthetic messages since the traditional techniques, bound up as they were with manual labour and not yet industrialized, were no longer capable of correctly fulfilling this function.

As an alternative to this ineffectiveness of the secular concept of art, which was linked moreover to the dominant classes, Alberto Corazón proposed in a little paper written in 1973 that elitist artisan practices should be overtaken by the development, in form and content, of the means of communication. His idea of a perfectly useful type of art thus changed into something representative of the period which, in the art-media relationship, was being lived through at the time. This usefulness arose from the decisive transformation which the mass media exercised on the following three basic points related to the means of artistic expression:

- the breaking down of the monolithic structure of the art market (galleries, criticism, publications);
- the breaking of the control of artistic production until now in the hands of privileged craftsmen, jealous defenders of their privileges;
- the enrichment of levels of communication and expressions and the possibility of direct and generalized access to these.

According to this vision, the artist was to work as an agent of the people and his social value would be measured by how he took advantage of the creative and emancipatory possibilities of the mass media and not by his artistic self-sufficiency.

The different opinions so far described demonstrate examples of phenomena that were undermining the normative, cultural and aesthetic schemes imposed by historical tradition. The process of socializa-

tion of the work of art, based on the production and unlimited spread of the new media, had changed the traditional individualized reception of the artistic object and had finished with such classical notions as «singularity», «difference», «solemnity» or «veneration». In a universe characterized by ideals of adaptability and accessibility to all type of messages, the work of art now appeared «as a historical mistake», which only existed «as a sacred monster of culture, as an aberrant museum piece».

However, in spite of all these changes which were taking place in the consideration of mass media and its artisticity, those authors directly connected with the history of art or aesthetics continued, in their studies, to ignore the assimilation of the iconic media into the field of their respective disciplines.

It was necessary to wait until the mid-seventies before the resistance of this group finally collapsed. It was doubtless symptomatic of the changes which were beginning to be procured among the cultivators of the history of art that an author of such prestige and so many years of study of the so-called «traditional art» as W. Tatarkiewicz should prove to be reluctant to exclude *a priori* the means of mass communication and industrial culture from the field of art. He even came to recognize the need to take into account the peculiarities of the new media when it was a matter of establishing a definition of art which would do justice to all the creations separated from traditional culture. For this Polish author, the line of demarcation between fine arts and iconic mass production, although it had been established of old, had never been determinant and perfect: the posters of Toulouse-Lautrec, the caricatures of Daumier, the photographs of Man Ray or the films of Eisenstein were not isolated examples but works of art of the highest quality, which served as examples of what it was possible to achieve through the mass media.

The relationship which had to occur between art and the means of communication was not, then, one of mutual exclusion but rather of fruitful understanding. In fact, in recent decades, the mass media, said Tatarkiewicz,

have acquired some of the characteristics of art, but art has in its turn adopted some of the characteristics of the means of communication,

although it was true that this osmotic movement had not been symmetrical but had been of greater benefit to the means of communication, that is to say,

art has been incorporated into the means of communication more than the means of communication have been incorporated into the world of art.

The iconic media were now something essential for understanding and evaluating our visual culture. Uniqueness and permanence of artistic value could not subsist on the arbitrary rejection of all mass art as if this itself did not possess every right to be an art that was nearer to our experience and behaviour. The opposition to the inclusion of these media in the history of art was the fruit of a stale inoperative vision of the concept of art, exclusively devoted to valuing the *sacred cows*. But the assimilation of the iconic media into the field of the history of art was inevitable and would take the same steps as any art that had arisen outside the valuing canons of traditional art: first it would be rejected, then as it developed it would acquire adherents to its artistic potentialities and, finally, it would triumph over the conservative spirits. This last phase was what was being experienced in the seventies. It was at this time that an art historian so little given to sharing traditional criteria as J. A. Ramirez asserted in an excellent study of visual mass culture that

what can be compared to the painting and sculpture of the Renaissance or the Baroque is not the art that is in our galleries but the images of the comics, the posters, the cinema or the television.

Intellectuals, theorists of mass culture and also theorists of art had come to accept the aesthetic validity of the mass media. The refugees of

those who clung stubbornly to the traditional ordering of the arts, which excluded the art of the repeatable and of macroconsumption, which is without any doubt the art of today, were becoming increasingly few and far between.

With the arrival of the eighties confrontation had practically disappeared. As in so many other facets of thinking and social behaviour, so there had been in the art-mass media relationship a general weakening of the conflicting theories. Mass art was in the museums and, indeed, had its own museums, and traditional art pressed for space and attention in the mass media. Visiting a gallery to see an exhibition of video art and seeing a detailed analysis of the work of Velázquez on television were daily, and compatible, facts; and, of course, quite free from the aggressive conflicts of yester-year.

There had been a progression from a phase of mutual rejection between the defenders of an elite art on one hand and those of mass art on the other to the present state of agonistic lethargy. It was even possible to assert that

from now on art integrates the whole museum of the imagination, legitimizes memory, treats the past and the present on equal terms, makes all styles live together without contradiction.

Fragmentation and eclecticism have imposed themselves on the world of art as signs of the present postmodern sensibility which brings along with it a change in direction in aesthetics. If we accept that the distinctive badges of modern art are those reflected by Benjamin in his essay mentioned above, that is to say, the aura, exceptional creativity, genius and uniqueness, the new postmodern aesthetics, on the contrary,

begins by deconstructing the performing space, disturbs the co-ordinates of reference and meaning, denies the privileges of the original, does not suppose that art is revelation or message and is interested less in the author's intention and the feeling of the work than in the play of its effects and reverberations.

This explains its preference for collage, pastiche, Kitsch, in short, for techniques and means stemming from the mass media and their conditions of reproducibility.

All this has meant that some say that today we are living in a show business culture designed aesthetically by the mass media and in which artistic experiences are passive and prefabricated; but we believe rather, with José Jiménez, that

we can talk, with absolute propriety, of a highly dynamic situation in which we are witnessing a continuous display of new artistic operators and new non-institutional areas which permit the functioning of artistic processes outside the traditional channels or at least parallel to them.

It is one of the results of the democratic revolution produced by the mass media that, far from being the distorters of today's aesthetic experience, they are, in fact, those that permit the spread of artistic values into the whole sphere of daily life. Thanks to the decisive action of the new media, there has been a freeing of artistic spaces, formerly the exclusive domain of privileged minorities, to be used for independent artistic expression open to all citizens. Before falling into artistic manipulation, the media have served for the cultural emancipation of their recipients. Before generating a diffuse aesthetic system, they have achieved «a general aestheticizing of existence» (Vattimo).

Many were the intellectuals and artists who, on feeling threatened by the mass media, protected their «authentic» art from all contact with the masses, but all they achieved by their attitude was to make it even more enclaved and to aggravate the process of accelerated obsolescence which the Great Art they defended was living through. By denying the evidence for its decline, traditional art sank even deeper into it. The motions it carried with it were lost and the postmodern sensibility took over the old spaces. The final direction of this change has not been negative. The art of the aura has been eliminated (there still remain shameful ghettos of peddlers who move millions with Great

Art, and even with not so «great» art, but fortunately these are minute exceptions to the general rule). It is possible, then, to speak of the death of the art of concentration and of the triumph of the art of «distracted perception» (Benjamin).

In this line, Vattimo has said that

the death of art signifies two things; in a strong, Utopian sense, the end of art as a specific fact separate from the rest of experience in a redeemed and reintegrated existence; in a weak or real sense, the spread of the aesthetic as an extension of the domain of the means of mass communication.

But perhaps, as Vattimo himself admits, it is better to speak of the decline of art rather than of its death, since traditional art, in spite of everything, still counts on important representatives and manifestations linked to the aesthetic concepts transmitted by tradition.

In any case, what is clear at this point, is the general recognition of the artistic worth of the mass media. Interest in its products is so great that it has shattered every forecast made thirty years ago. It is obvious that, like all art, art of the masses also produces good objects, bad objects or those that pass unnoticed, but it is not, as attempts were made to have us believe, the box of aesthetic evils opened by a new Pandora desirous of avenging affronts to pure art. And neither are the mass media the promoters of what E. Subirats calls the simulacrum culture where, according to him,

everything becomes equal and vulgar in the unity of such fiction (that of the world produced through the media) including conscience itself, which is dilute in this fragmentary multitude of images, its juxtapositions and collages and montages, like one shadow more amidst the vague succession of spectres. There is nothing solid subsisting beneath the uniform mantle of the simulacrum, neither the Ego nor the world.

204 This neoapocalyptic vision, which regards man as a being who receives obediently and inevitably the whole mountain of images emitted by the mass media, succumbs to them and becomes converted into an automaton of the neotechnological society, can only be opposed if we accept a more hopeful evaluation of the capacity of intellect of the human being. The values that it is aimed to impose are not always accepted in the end and in many cases the opposite occurs (the failure of innumerable mass media products launched onto the market with the sole object of generating quick profits, regardless of any cultural or aesthetic value, is an example of the public's wakeful attitude). People are not so blind and brainless as to do what they do not wish to do or to accept everything they are told, whatever the medium might be.

It is possible to fight against the alienating uniformity, which Subirats believes the mass media impose, by means of education in aesthetics and with the use of the multiplicity of means available for helping to distinguish and eliminate ethical and artistic manipulation. It is not true that the public wants trivial messages that are easy to digest culturally and proof of this is the increasing participation of the masses in the field of artistic production, which, as Benjamin saw, meant not only an increase in quantity but in quality too.

Let this serve to reinforce and conclude this analysis of the relationship between art and the mass media. As we have seen, the path that the latter have followed throughout the length of this century has been difficult. They have passed through moments of discredit, perhaps deserved for having been used improperly; moments of uncertainty, when intellectuals and artists could not decide whether to approach them creatively or to ignore them; but also moments of solid development and definitive establishment in the world of the arts. What awaits us between now and the end of the millennium is a growing improvement of the technology related to mass culture, which will generate new artistic forms that will be used, we trust, in the service of the public and not to serve the media themselves.

*E*MERGING CULTURES, DECADENT CULTURES

ENRIC SAPERAS

OUR TIME: A PERIOD OF TRANSITION

Our time is a period of transition. Our society today represents both the culmination of a long process of evolution known as «modernity» and the oncome of a new model of civilization which we refer to as «postindustrial society», «informatized society», «complex society» or «postmodern society». We find ourselves between one society that is not yet dead and another that is just beginning to emerge.

Our generation is one of transition. The past has ceased to be a secure framework of reference to understand the present and we see the future as an imprecise projection of present tendencies. We often feel confused and perplexed when we observe the changing reality of our days.

Unlike the latest generations who went through changes in civilization (end of the XVII century, XVIII century, end of the XIX and beginning of the XX centuries) ours is a generation that lacks comprehensive thought, incapable of creating new and emancipating ideals. We are aware that we are a living a change of civilization but are incapable of understanding it totally. As spectators of this process it is difficult for us to break loose from the apparent anonymity of technological innovation, scientific progress and the new type of rationality imposed by our transnational industry, great capital financing, public administrations and the techniques of social engineering.

Ours is an opaque reality. Society gets progressively more complicated and the individual is lost in the midst of the transformations brought about by technology, science, industry and the administration. It becomes more and more difficult to understand how one social component is inserted in society as a whole. This is because every sector of society tends to organize itself in an autonomous way, mainly due to the specialization of the body of knowledge that is peculiar to it. Ours is a decentralized society, with no vertex, as Luhmann says, in which the different sectors are progressively becoming more interdependent.

In an opaque reality such as ours it is very difficult to establish the exact limits between culture and economy, between the latter and politics, between the space that is public and privacy.

CULTURE IS A CHANGING REALITY

Culture is a changing reality. During a period of transition such as ours, culture always manifests itself as one of the most sensible social realities. In fact, cultural transformations announce future social transformations.

Culture is one of the social sectors that has experienced the transforming impact of our days with most intensity. If we reflect on culture we observe all the components that define society today: the growing opacity, its complexity, the decadence of our modern world, the impact of technological innovations, the pseudoindividualization of our consumers society, the impact of the new technical and administrative rationality, the increasing centralization in the production of culture and knowledge/thought, the new creators of public opinion and the downfall of traditional intellectuals.

The reflection on culture has, in the past few years, acquired an important public dimension as a result of an evident need to understand