

Brydillard

Mass Media Culture

THE NEO—OR ANACHRONISTIC RESURRECTION

As Marx said of Napoleon III, sometimes the same events occur twice in history: the first time they have a real historical impact, whereas the second time they are no more than its farcical evocation and its grotesque avatar — nourished by a *legendary reference*. Cultural consumption can thus be defined as the time and place of the farcical resurrection and parodic evocation of that which is already no more — of that which is 'consumed' in the original sense of the word (consummated and terminated). Consumers are like those tourists who journey by coach to the Far North to retrace the steps of the gold rush, and who hire prospecting equipment and Eskimo costumes to lend a touch of local colour: they consume in ritual form what was once a historical event, necessarily re-enacted as legend. Historically, this process is called restoration: it is the denial of history and the fixist resurrection of earlier models. Consumption, too, is completely saturated with this anachronistic substance. Take a typical example: in winter, ESSO sells firewood and barbecue kits at its service stations — here are the champions of petrol, the 'historical liquidators' of firewood and its whole symbolic value, who serve it up to you again as the neo-firewood ESSO. What is being consumed here at the same time as the pleasure in the automobile is the mixed and complicit pleasure in the defunct charms of everything killed off by the automobile — and those resurrected in the automobile! This should not be seen as simple nostalgia for the past: throughout this 'lived' dimension, consumption can be historically and structurally defined as *the exaltation of signs based on the denial of the reality of things*.

We have already seen how the news in mass communications pathetically and hypocritically exalts the tranquility of everyday life with all

the signs of catastrophe (deaths, murders, rapes, revolution, etc.).¹ But this same pathetic overabundance of signs is legible everywhere—in the exaltation of all youth and extreme age, in the thrill of blue-blood marriages on the front page, in the mass media hymn to the body and sexuality. Everywhere we witness the historical disintegration of certain structures which in a sense celebrate, under the sign of consumption, their real disappearance as well as their farcical resurrection. The family is breaking down? We exalt it. Children are no longer children? We make childhood sacred. The elderly are lonely, left by the wayside? Old age moves all of us to tears. And more clearly still: we glorify the body in direct proportion to the atrophy of its real possibilities, and to its increasing harassment by the system of inspection with all its urban, professional and bureaucratic constraints.

CULTURAL RECYCLING?

One of the characteristic features of our society in relation to professional knowledge, social position and personal advancement is *recycling*. For those who do not want to be left behind, held back or excluded, it implies the necessity of 'parading' their skills, their knowledge, and all told their 'practical experience' on the labour market. Today this notion applies particularly to management trainees and, to a lesser extent, teachers. It thus professes to be scientific and based on the continual advancement of skills (in the exact sciences, in marketing techniques, in teaching, etc.), which normally everyone must take into account in order to keep up 'with the pack'. In fact, the term 'recycling' can prompt certain remarks: it inevitably evokes the 'cycle' of fashion—here everyone also feels compelled to be '*au courant*', and to update themselves annually, monthly or seasonally in their clothes, possessions and cars. If they don't do this, they can't be true citizens of the consumer society. But here it is clearly not a question of continual progress, since fashion is arbitrary, changeable or cyclical, and adds nothing to an individual's intrinsic worth. It nonetheless has a deeply constraining character, sanctioning either social success or failure. We might enquire whether the supposedly scientific 'updating of skills' does not actually conceal the same type of accelerated, obligatory and arbitrary recycling as occurs in fashion; and whether it does not bring into operation, at the level of knowledge and individuals, the same 'planned obsolescence' imposed on material goods by the cycles of production and fashion. If this were the case, then what we have before us is not a rational process of scientific accumulation, but a social and non-rational process of consumption consistent with all its other forms.

Take the medical 'check up', or the upgrading of one's body, muscles, and fitness—health clubs for men, diets and beauty treatments for women, holidays for everyone. But this notion can (and *must*) be extended to phenomena on an even wider scale. The very 'rediscovery' of the body is a recycling of the body, just as the 'rediscovery' of Nature—in the form of a countryside trimmed down to sample specimens framed against an immense urban sprawl, partitioned and 'domesticated' as green belts, nature reserves, or as a backdrop for weekend cottages—is actually a recycling of Nature. In other words, Nature is no longer at all a primeval and original presence symbolically opposed to culture, but a *simulation model*, a '*consommé*' of the recirculated signs of nature; in short, it is nature *recycled*. If this is not yet the situation everywhere, it is nonetheless the current tendency. And whether it is called the management or preservation of nature reserves and the environment, it always involves the recycling of a nature condemned by its very existence. Nature as event, and as knowledge, is governed in this system by the *principle of the latest trend*. Functionally, it has to change like fashion. It has the value of *ambiance*, and therefore is subject to a cycle of renewal. Today the same principle encroaches upon the professional domain, where the scientific and technical values of education and competence yield to a process of recycling; in other words, to the pressures of mobility, status, and a career *profile*.²

This organising principle dominates the whole of 'mass' culture today. That to which all the acculturated have a right is not culture, but *cultural recycling* (and ultimately not even the 'cultured' can or will escape it). It is to be 'in the know', to be 'in the swing of things', to parade one's cultural baggage at monthly or annual intervals. It is to suffer the constraint of the short-term, to perpetually change like fashion, and this is the *total opposite* of culture conceived as:

1. The inherited characteristics of works, thoughts, and traditions;
2. The continuity of theoretical reflection and its transcendent critical and symbolic function.

Both of these are repudiated by this cyclical subculture composed of obsolescent cultural ingredients and signs, by this culture of the *latest trend* running from kinetic art to weekly encyclopaedias. It is culture recycled.

It is clear that the problem of the consumption of culture is not strictly linked to its content, nor to a 'discerning public' (this is the eternally false problem of the 'vulgarisation' of art and culture, to which practitioners of 'elitist' culture and champions of mass culture both fall victim). The decisive factor is not how many thousands or millions

partake of a specific work, but that this work, like the car of the year, or nature in green belts, is condemned to be nothing more than an ephemeral sign—condemned because produced, intentionally or not, in a dimension of production which is universal today, that of the cycle and of recycling. Culture is no longer produced to last. Of course, it remains a universal authority, an ideal reference, and all the more so when it loses its essential meaning (just as Nature is never more exalted than when it is universally destroyed); but in its reality, as much as in its mode of production, culture is subject to the same demand to be 'up to date' as are material goods. Once again, this does not concern the *industrial diffusion* of culture. It is quite beside the point whether Van Gogh is exhibited in major department stores or Kierkegaard sells 200,000 copies. The *meaning* circulated by these works is that *all signification has become cyclical*: in other words, it is precisely through the system of communication that the same mode of succession, alternation, and combinatorial modulation is imposed upon them as is imposed upon the length of skirts or television broadcasts (cf. 'The Medium is the Message'); and thus that culture, as a pseudo-event in 'current affairs', as a pseudo-object in advertising, can also be produced (or potentially so) *from within the medium itself* and its referential code. Here we again link up with the logical mechanism of 'simulation models'⁴ or that which can be seen operating in gadgets, which are no more than *the manipulation of technological forms*. At the very limit, there is no difference between 'cultural creativity' (in kinetic art, etc.) and this technical and ludic combinatory, just as there is no difference between 'avant-garde creations' and 'mass culture'. The latter simply combines stereotyped themes as its content (ideological, populist, sentimental, moral or historical), whereas the former combines modes of expression as its form. But above all, both manipulate a code through a calculus of amplitude and longevity. It is furthermore curious how the system of literary awards, currently scorned for its academic decrepitude (it is indeed stupid to award a prize to *one book per year*, covering everything), has remarkably managed to survive by adapting itself to the functional cycle of modern culture. But the regularity of such awards—an absurdity at any other time—is again compatible with the current tendency to recycle cultural fashions. Formerly, these awards singled out a book for posterity, which was comical. Today, they single out a book for the latest trend, and this is effectual. It is in this way that they have found their second wind.

TIRLIPOT⁵ AND COMPUTER⁶, OR THE LOWEST COMMON CULTURE (L.C.C.)

The mechanism of *Tirlipot*: theoretically, it is the exploration through question and answer of the definition of a verb (*tirlipoter* is equivalent to the 'thingummybob' [*machin*], a floating signifier for which a specific signifier is substituted by a random process of selection)—thus theoretically a kind of intellectual instruction. But, in reality, contestants are for the most part incapable of posing genuine questions: questioning, probing, and analysing bothers them. They begin by guessing the answer (any verb that comes into their head), and try to deduce the question by putting its dictionary definition into an interrogative form. (For example, a contestant might ask: 'Is "to *tirlipot*" to put an end to something?' If the compere says, 'Yes, in a certain sense', or even simply, 'Perhaps . . . what do you think it is?', the automatic response is 'to finish' or 'to complete'). It is like the approach of a handyman who tries one screw after another to find one that fits, a rudimentary exploratory technique of assembly by trial and error without rational investigation.

Computer works on the same principle: no instruction necessary. A mini-computer asks you questions, and for each question presents a list of five answers. You select the right response. The time counts: if you respond immediately, you get maximum points—you are the 'champion'. Hence it is not the time of reflection, but reaction time. The device doesn't set in motion intellectual processes, but mechanisms of instant reflex. You shouldn't weigh up or deliberate over the suggested responses; you have to *see* the right answer, to register it as a stimulus, like the motor-optic system of a photoelectric cell. To know is to see (cf. David Riesman's 'radar', which is a means of instantly identifying positive and negative responses in one's dealings with others, and thus of making or breaking contact with them). Above all, there is no analytical reflection: this is penalised by a low score proportional to the amount of time wasted.

So if the function of these games is not one of instruction (which is always advanced by the comperes themselves and the ideologues of mass media), then what is it? In *Tirlipot*, it is clearly participation: its content is of no importance. For contestants, it is the thrill of occupying the air waves for the twenty seconds it takes to get their voice across, to blend in with the compere's voice, to hold his attention while engaging in a brief dialogue with him, and to establish through him a magical contact with that benign and anonymous multitude which is the public. Most contestants are clearly not at all disappointed by their

failure to answer correctly. They've got what they wanted, which is a sort of *communion*; in other words, that modern, technical, and aseptic form of 'contact' which is *communication*. Consumer society is not in fact characterised by its lamented absence of ceremony: radio game shows are just as ceremonial as the religious mass or sacrifices in primitive society—except it is no longer a ceremonial communion consecrated by bread and wine, said to be flesh and blood, but by the mass media (which are composed not only of messages, but of transmitters, networks, stations, receivers, and, of course, programmers and the public). In other words, *communion is no longer achieved through a symbolic medium, but a technical one*: this is what makes it communication.

What is shared, then, is no longer 'culture': a living body, the actual presence of a collectivity (all those things which once comprised the symbolic and metabolic function of a ceremony or feast); nor is it even knowledge in the strict sense, but that strange corpus of signs, references, school reminiscences and signals of intellectual fashion called 'mass culture', but which could be named the L.C.C. (Lowest Common Culture)—akin to the lowest common denominator in arithmetic, or else [Riesman's] 'Standard Package', a term designating the lowest common collection of objects that the average consumer must possess in order to gain a certificate of citizenship in this consumer society. Thus the L.C.C. defines the lowest common collection of 'correct answers' that the average individual must possess in order to gain a certificate of cultural citizenship.

Mass communication precludes culture and knowledge. There is no question of genuine symbolic or didactic processes coming into play, since it would only compromise the meaning of this ceremony, which is collective participation—a participation that can only occur in the form of a *liturgy*, or as a formalised code of signs meticulously emptied of every drop of meaning.

We can see that the term 'culture' is laden with misunderstanding. As a cultural 'consonné', 'digest', or repertoire of codified questions and answers, this L.C.C. is to culture what life insurance is to life: it is designed to conjure the risks of life and to exalt, by means of a denial of living culture, the ritualised signs of *culturalisation*.

Fuelled by a mechanical process of question and answer, this L.C.C. nonetheless has many affinities with school 'culture'. Indeed, all these game shows are inspired by the model of the EXAM. And this is no accident. The exam is the preferred means of social advancement. Everyone wants to pass exams, even in such bastardised forms as radio, because to be examined is a matter of prestige today. A powerful mechanism of social integration thus exists in the endless proliferation

of these game shows: one can ultimately imagine the integration of the whole of society into these mass media contests, all social organisation becoming dependent on their sanction. History has already seen one society where there was a total system of selection and organisation based on exams: China under the Mandarins. But that system only extended to a privileged few. With our society, it would be the entire masses mobilised in a endless game of double or nothing, where everyone would ensure or put at risk their own social destiny. Thus would the archaic machinery of social control come to comprise an economy, since the best system of social integration has always been ritualised competition. But we haven't reached that point yet. For the time being, let us simply note a powerful longing for the process of examination—a twofold process since everyone can be examined in it, but also integrated into it as examiner or judge (insofar as everyone is a member of that collective authority called the public). As with splitting in dreams, this desire to be both one and the other is truly fantasmatic. But it also involves a tactical process of integration through the delegation of power. *Mass communication* can thus be defined as its technical supports in combination with the L.C.C. (and *not the total number of the mass participating*). *Computer* is also a mass medium, even if it seems to be an individualised game. Your choices are still programmed by a collective agency in this slot machine—an admirable synthesis of knowledge and household electrical appliances—where mental dexterity registers as blips and beeps. The medium of *Computer* is simply a technical materialisation of the collective medium, of that system of 'lowest-common-cultural' signals which prescribes to each the participation of all, and to everyone the same participation.

Once again, it is useless and even absurd to compare and contrast the merits of High Culture and Mass-Mediated Culture. The former has a 'complex' syntax, while the latter is a combinatorial of elements always dissociable in terms of stimulus/response and question/answer. This schema is most vividly illustrated by radio games shows. But, apart from governing the ritual of these spectacles, it also governs the behaviour of consumers in their every transaction and in their general conduct, organising all tastes, preferences, needs and choices as a series of responses to various stimuli. With regard to objects as with relations, consumers are constantly solicited, 'quizzed', and summoned to respond. In this context, a purchase is comparable to the radio game show: it is today less the personal transaction of an individual with the view to satisfying a concrete need, than first and foremost *the response to a question*—a response that engages the individual in the collective ritual of consumption. A purchase is a game to the extent that each object is

always presented within a range of options, from which the individual is required to choose: the act of purchasing is a choice, the determination of a preference — exactly as one chooses from among the various answers presented in *Computer*. This is how the purchaser plays, by responding to a question with no direct bearing on the object's utility, but with an indirect bearing on the 'play' of variation in the object. This 'game' and the choices it sanctions characterise the purchaser/consumer as the complete opposite of the traditional user.

THE LOWEST COMMON MULTIPLES (L.C.M.)

The L.C.C. (Lowest Common Culture) of media broadcasts or mass-circulation weeklies has branched out into art today. It is the miraculous multiplication of artworks, whose prototype can be found in the Bible and the famous miracle of the loaves and fishes on the shores of Lake Tiberias — the very same Bible that is now multiplied and delivered to the masses in weekly instalments.

A great democratic wind has blown across the celestial Jerusalem of culture and art. 'Contemporary art', from Picasso to Rauschenberg, from Chagall to Vasarely and the younger generation, is now on preview at Printemps department stores (admittedly on the top floor, so as not to compromise the 'Interior Decoration' section on the second floor, with its seaports and sunsets). The work of art as a unique object and privileged moment has escaped the solitude to which it was confined for centuries. Museums, as everybody knows, were once sanctuaries. But now the masses have taken over from the private owner or enlightened amateur. What delights the masses is not only the industrial reproduction of a work of art, but that it is simultaneously unique and collective: the Multiple Edition. 'A bold initiative! Jacques Putman, in collaboration with Prisunic department stores, has just published a collection of original engravings at a very affordable price (100F) . . . No one will think it strange in the future to acquire a lithograph or etching *along with a pair of stockings or garden chair*. A second "Prisunic Collection" has just been exhibited at the Galerie L'Œil, and can now be purchased at its stores. This is not a promotion, nor a revolution [!]. The multiplication of images is a response to the growing public demand for them, which fatally [!] leads to the demand for new venues. Experimental research no longer indicates the enslavement to money and power: the amateur/benefactor has given way to the customer/participant . . . Each engraving, numbered and signed, is printed in editions of 300 copies . . . The victory of the consumer society? Perhaps. But what does it

matter so long as quality is preserved . . . Those who don't want to understand contemporary art really have to try hard today.'

Art speculation based on the rarity of the product is finished. With the 'Unlimited Edition', art moves into the industrial age (it just so happens that these editions, which in reality are limited in number, very quickly become almost everywhere the object of parallel speculation on the black market — such is the cunning naivety of those who conceive and produce them). Works of art find their way into delicatessens, and abstract canvases into factories . . . Don't say: 'Art, what's that?' Don't say: 'Art, it's too expensive.' Don't say: 'Art, it's not for me.' Read *Les Muses*.

It would be facile to say that a Picasso canvas on a factory wall will never abolish the division of labour, and that the multiplication of multiple editions, were this to be realised, will never abolish social division and the transcendence of Culture. There is nonetheless something quite revealing in this illusion shared by the ideologues of multiple editions and those who generally believe in the dissemination or promotion of culture (without mentioning those dealers and artists who, as conscious or subconscious speculators, are by far the most numerous in the affair). Like those designers who would like 'to create beautiful objects accessible to all', their noble effort to democratise culture is blatantly at odds with the failure to achieve this goal — or, which amounts to the same, has been so commercially successful that culture becomes suspect. But this is only an apparent contradiction: culture survives because these good souls persist in *treating it as a universal, all the while attempting to distribute it in the form of finished objects* (whether unique, or multiplied in their thousands). But they do no more than submit to the logic of consumption (or to the manipulation of signs) certain contents or symbolic activities formerly not subject to it. The multiplication of these works does not in itself imply any 'vulgarisation' or 'loss of quality': what happens when works are multiplied as serial objects is that they indeed become commensurate with 'a pair of stockings or garden chair', and assume meaning in relation to them. They no longer exist as *works of art*, as materials with meaning, and as *open* significations in opposition to all other *finished* objects, but have become finished objects themselves, entering into the constellation of those displayed accessories by which the 'socio-cultural' standing of the average citizen is determined — at least, in the ideal circumstances where everyone would have real access to them. For the time being, while these pseudo-works may have ceased to be works of art, they nonetheless remain rare objects, economically or 'psychologically' in-

accessible for most people, because as distinctive objects they cater to a parallel and somewhat larger market for Culture.

It is perhaps more interesting—even though the problem remains the same—to see what is consumed in weekly encyclopaedias like *La Bible*, *Les Muses*, *Alpha*, *Le Million*, or in mass-circulation music and art publications like *Grand peintres* and *Grand musiciens*. The potential public they reach is clearly enormous: all those office workers, juniors, and secretarial staff with an average secondary or technical education (or with children so educated).

To these recent mass publications we should add those, like *Science et Vie*, *Historia*, etc., which have long catered to the demand for culture among the 'rising classes'. What do they seek in familiarising themselves with esoteric scientific, historical, and musical knowledge? In other words, what do they seek in these established and recognised disciplines whose content, unlike that disseminated by the mass media, has a specific function? Do they seek instruction and a real cultural education, or a sign of increased standing? Do they seek in culture a training or a commodity to appropriate, knowledge or status? Don't we discover here that 'display effect' which we have already seen to designate—as one sign among other signs—the object of consumption?

In the case of *Science et Vie* (here we refer to a survey of its readership carried out by the Centre de Sociologie Européenne), this demand is ambiguous: there is, in the accession to technical culture, a camouflaged and clandestine aspiration to 'literate' culture. To read *Science et Vie* is the result of a compromise: the aspiration to elite culture, but with a defensive counter-motivation in the form of a refusal of elitism (which is to say, an aspiration to the upper classes and at the same time a reaffirmation of class position). More precisely, this reading operates as a sign of acceptance—but into what? Into the abstract community, into the potential collectivity of all those driven by the same ambiguous requirement, and who also read *Science et Vie* (or *Les Muses*, etc.). It is an act of allegiance of a mythological order: the reader dreams of a group whose presence he consumes *in abstracto* in his reading—an unreal, mass-scale relation whose effect is literally 'mass' communication, an undifferentiated complicity which nonetheless constitutes the profoundly real substance of this reading, with all its mythical qualities of recognition, acceptance and participation (a process also readily detected among the readers of *Nouvel Observateur*, since to read this periodical is to associate oneself with its readers, and to engage in 'cultural' activity as a class emblem).

Of course, most readers (we should say 'adherents') of these mass publications, of these vehicles for 'undercultured' culture will argue, in

all good faith, that they are interested in their actual content, and that their aim is knowledge. But the objective finality of this cultural 'use value' is largely overdetermined by its sociological 'exchange value'. It is this demand, indexed to a statutory and increasingly lively competitiveness, that the huge quantity of 'culturalised' material in reviews, encyclopaedias, and pocket editions fulfils. All this cultural material is 'consumed' to the extent that its content does not cater to autonomous practice, but to the rhetoric of social mobility—a demand which aims at an object *other* than culture, or rather which aims at culture insofar as it is a *codified element of social status*. There is thus an inversion, and the strictly cultural content no longer appears here except as a connotation, as a secondary function. We could therefore say that it is consumed, just as a washing machine is the object of consumption, once it ceases to be a tool and becomes an aspect of well-being or prestige. We know that it then ceases to have a specific purpose, and that many other objects could be substituted for it—among them, precisely culture. Culture is an object of consumption to the extent that, gravitating towards this other discourse, it becomes substitutable for and commensurate with other objects (even if hierarchically superior). And this is not only true of *Science et Vie*, but also of 'high' culture, 'great' painting, classical music, etc. All these can be sold together in drugstores or newsagents. But it is not strictly a question of where they are sold, the size of their editions, or the 'cultural level' of their public. If they are all sold together, and consumed in this way, it is because culture is subject to the same demand for competitive signs as any other category of objects, and because it is *produced as a function of this demand*.

At this point, culture is reduced to the same form of appropriation as those other messages, objects, and images responsible for the 'ambiance' of our daily life: it is reduced to a form of *curiosity*—not necessarily a casual or indifferent curiosity, since it can be particularly passionate for those sectors in the process of acculturation, but a curiosity subject to the constantly changing cycles and dictates of fashion, thus one replacing the elitist practice of culture as a system of symbolic meaning with a ludic and combinatory system of signs. 'Beethoven, what a groove!'

At the very limit, what individuals undergo in this process of 'culture'—from which the autodidact, that marginal hero of traditional culture, is just as much excluded as the cultured man, that fragrant garland of a humanism now rapidly beginning to decay—is 'cultural' recycling, an aesthetic recycling which forms part of their overall 'personalisation', of their cultural grooming in a competitive society, which generally speaking is not unlike dressing up the object through

one of the major manifestations of the object, and one of the most fertile branches of commerce. This era is without end, since our societies are now virtually in a state of perpetual mobility.

In fact, kitsch reaffirms the value of rare, precious, or unique objects (whose production can also be industrial). Kitsch and the 'authentic' object thus combine together to organise the world of consumption, according to the logic of distinctive material forever changing and expanding today. Kitsch has a minimal value of distinction, but this minimal value is linked to a maximum statistical profitability, since kitsch appeals to whole classes. This can be contrasted with the maximum distinctive quality of rare objects, linked to their limited supply. What is in question here is not their 'beauty', but their power of distinction, which is a *sociological* function. In this sense, all objects arrange themselves into a hierarchy of values determined by their statistical availability and their relative supply. At any moment, and for any condition of the social structure, this function makes it possible for a given social group to distinguish itself and to designate its status through a particular category of objects or signs. But when groups with the greatest number appropriate a particular category of signs, the upper classes are obliged to distance themselves through other signs which are restricted in number (either because of their pedigree, like genuine antiques and paintings, or because they are artificially limited, like deluxe editions and custom-made cars). Kitsch adds nothing new to this logic of distinction, since it is characterised by its derivative and minimal value. In return, this weak valency is one of the reasons for its limitless multiplication. Kitsch *increases itself in quantity*, while, at the top of the scale, 'high-class' goods *restrict themselves to quality*, rejuvenating themselves by becoming rarer.

This derivative function is also linked here to its 'aesthetic' or anti-aesthetic function. What kitsch opposes to the aesthetic of beauty and originality is the *aesthetic of simulation*: everywhere it reproduces objects on an unnaturally small or large scale, it imitates materials (paste, plastic, etc.), it mimics forms and combines them discordantly, it *repeats fashion* without belonging to its process. All things considered, kitsch is homologous to the gadget at a technical level: the gadget is also this technological parody, this functionally useless excrescence, this constant *simulation* of function with no real practical referent. This aesthetic of simulation is profoundly linked to kitsch's socially assigned function of expressing high-class aspirations and social expectations, as well as a magical affiliation with culture, with the forms, manners and signs of the upper classes⁷, an aesthetic of acculturation leading to a subculture of the object.

THE GADGET AND THE LUDIC

The machine was once the emblem of industrial society, whereas the gadget is the emblem of post-industrial society. There is no rigorous definition of the gadget. But if we can agree that the object of consumption is defined by the relative disappearance of its objective function (as a tool) to the benefit of its function as a sign, and if we can agree that the object of consumption is characterised by a kind of *functional uselessness* (since what is consumed is precisely something other than the 'useful'), then *the gadget is indeed the truth of the object in consumer society*. In this sense, *anything can become a gadget*; and everything is one, potentially. The definition of the gadget would be its potential uselessness and its ludic combinatory value.⁸ Thus gadgets are just as much like badges which have had their moment of glory, as they are like 'Venusik', a 'pure' cylinder of polished metal which is perfectly useless (or perhaps useful only as a paper-weight, but such is the function ascribed to every object that is good for nothing!). 'For all you lovers of formal beauty and potential uselessness, the fabulous "Venusik" has arrived!'

But they are just as much like — for where does 'objective' uselessness begin and end? — that typewriter which can type in thirteen different character registers, 'depending on whether you are writing to your banker, your notary, a very important client, or an old friend'. It is like cheap imitation jewelry, or even the I.B.M. dictaphone: 'Imagine a small device (12 x 15 cm) that can accompany you everywhere, on trips, to the office, over the weekend. You hold it in one hand, push a button, and whisper your decisions, dictate your instructions, and proclaim your victories to it. Everything you say is committed to its memory . . . Whether you are in Rome, Tokyo, or New York, your secretary will not miss a single word you utter . . .' Nothing could be more useful, and nothing more useless: when the technical process is given over to a magical type of mental practice or a fashionable social practice, then the technical object itself becomes a gadget.

Are gadgets those chrome fittings, two-speed windshield wipers and power-operated windows of a car? Yes and no: they do have some usefulness in terms of social prestige. The negative connotations associated with the term 'gadget' are quite simply the result of a moral perspective on the utility of objects: some are thought to have a purpose, while others none — but on the basis of what criteria? There is no object, neither the most marginal nor decorative one, that is without purpose, because, even if this purpose is to serve no purpose at all, it still becomes a distinctive sign.⁹ Conversely, there is no object that does not in a sense serve no purpose (which is to say a purpose other than its

packaging. The industrial aesthetic, or design, has no other goal than to imbue mass-produced objects, deeply scored by the division of labour and marked by their function, with a second function: that 'aesthetic' homogeneity, formal unity, or ludic character which binds them all together into a kind of 'environment' or 'ambiance'. This is the work of 'cultural designers' everywhere today: they attempt, in a society where individuals are deeply scored by the division of labour and their fragmented tasks, to 'redesign' them through a process of 'culture', to integrate them with the same outward appearance, to promote exchange under the sign of cultural advancement, and to 'acclimatise' people like design refashions objects. But we should not lose sight of the fact that, just like the 'beauty' packed into objects by the industrial aesthetic, this cultural packaging or recycling is, as Jacques Michel has said, 'incontestably a commercial argument'. 'It is a recognised fact today that a pleasant environment, created by the harmony of shapes and colours, and of course by the quality of materials [!], has a beneficial effect on productivity' (*Le Monde*, 28 September 1969). And he is right: people acculturated in the same way as designed objects are socially and professionally better integrated, better 'synchronised', more 'compatible'. This functionalisation of human relations finds in cultural advancement one of its most fertile fields – here 'human design' links up with 'human engineering'.

We need a term which would be to culture what 'Aesthetics' (in the sense of an industrial aesthetic, a functional rationalisation of forms, a game of signs) is to beauty as a symbolic system. We have no word to designate this functionalised material of messages, texts, images, classical masterpieces or comic strips, this codified 'creativity' and 'receptivity' which have replaced inspiration and sensibility, this *planned* collective labour on significations and communication, this 'industrial culturality' haunted by cultures of every description and from every epoch, which, at the risk of total misunderstanding, and for want of a better word, we continue to call 'culture' – forever dreaming, in this hyperfunctionalist cultural consumption, of the universal, of the myths enabling our epoch to be deciphered without being at the same time mythological overproductions, and of an art enabling modernity to be deciphered without causing it to disappear.

KITSCH

Kitsch, along with the gadget, is one of the major categories of the modern object. Knick-knacks, rustic odds-and-ends, souvenirs, lampshades, and African masks: the kitsch-object is collectively this whole

plethora of 'trashy', sham or faked objects, this whole museum of junk which proliferates everywhere, with a decided preference for holiday and tourist spots. Kitsch is equivalent to the 'cliché' in discourse. And this should help us to understand that kitsch, just like the gadget, concerns a *category* – one which, while difficult to define, should not be confused with any *real* objects. Kitsch can be found anywhere: in the detail of an object as in the general design of a matching set, in an artificial flower as in a photo-novel. It can best be defined as a *pseudo-object*, which is to say as a simulation, copy, facsimile, or stereotype; as the paucity of true signification and as the overabundance of signs, allegorical references, or disparate connotations; as the exaltation of detail, and as the saturation by detail. Furthermore, there is a direct relationship between its internal organisation (a disconnected overabundance of signs) and its appearance in the market (a heaped mass of assorted objects). Kitsch is a *cultural category*.

This proliferation of kitsch – which results from industrial multiplication, from the vulgarisation, at the level of the object, of distinctive signs borrowed from every register (the bygone, the neo, the exotic, the folkloric, the futuristic), and from the disordered escalation of 'ready-made' signs – has its basis, like 'mass culture', in the *sociological* reality of the consumer society. The latter is a mobile society: large sectors of the population move up the social ladder, attaining a higher status at the same time as complying with a cultural demand, which is nothing but the necessity of demonstrating this status through signs. At all levels of society, generations of 'parvenus' need their displays. Thus, blaming the 'vulgarity' of the public or the 'cynical' tactics of manufacturers wanting to peddle their shoddy goods is pointless. Even if this were an important factor, it cannot *explain* this cancerous excrescence in the population of 'pseudo-objects'. Demand for them still has to exist, and this demand is a function of social mobility. There is no kitsch in a society without social mobility: a limited quantity of luxury goods would suffice to lend distinction to the privileged elite. Even the copy of a work of art still had, in the classical age, 'authentic' value; whereas the grand epochs of social mobility saw the object flower as different species. With the rising bourgeoisie of the Renaissance and the 17th-century, there emerged 'preciosity' and the baroque – which, though not the direct ancestors of kitsch, already testify to the explosive surge of distinctive material in a conjuncture of social tension and the relatively mixed character of the upper classes. But it was above all with Louis-Philippe, and with the *Gründejahre* in Germany (1870-1890), and, in all Western societies, since the end of the 19th-century and the era of the great department stores, that the ubiquitous knick-knack becomes

designated one). There's no getting away from it, at least from defining the gadget as something explicitly devoted to secondary functions. Thus, once they become part of the logic of fashion and prestige, or of a fetishistic logic, not only do the chrome fittings become a gadget, but so do the steering column and the entire car. For the systematic character of objects today drives them all in this direction.

The world of the pseudo-environment and the pseudo-object is a source of constant delight for all 'creators' of 'functional objects'. Witness the work of André Faye, 'technician in the art of living', who creates Louis XVI cabinets whose doors open to reveal the smooth and dazzling surface of the turntable or speakers of a hi-fi system . . . 'His objects stir, like Calder mobiles: in their construction they serve as ordinary objects as much as genuine works of art, whose alternation coordinated with chromophonic projections brings them ever closer to the *total spectacle* to which he aspires . . . There is cybernetic furniture, revolving and adjustable desks, a calligraphic teleprinter . . . A telephone finally become an integral part of man, making it possible to ring up New York or to take calls from Honolulu alongside the pool or deep within the estate.' For Faye, all this represents the 'subserving of technology to the art of living'—irresistibly evoking the Lépine competition. Is there any difference between an office videophone and a cold-water heating system dreamt up by some eccentric inventor? But there is a difference. Whereas the good old invention of the artisan grew out of curiosity and the somewhat delirious poetry of heroic technical skills, the gadget itself forms part of a systematic logic grasping all of everyday life as a form of spectacle, with the result that the whole environment of objects and, by extension, all its concomitant human and social relations, becomes suspiciously artificial, bogus, or useless. In its widest sense, the gadget attempts to supersede this general crisis of the *finality* and utility of things *through a form of game*. But it doesn't achieve, nor can it achieve, the symbolic freedom of a plaything for the child. It is limited to being an effect of fashion, a kind of artificial booster for other objects; it is caught in a vicious circle where the useful and the symbolic end up merging, as in those 'total' visual spectacles, into a sort of useless combinatory, where the festival itself is a gadget, which is to say a social pseudo-event or game without players. No doubt the pejorative tone conveyed by the term today ('It's so much gadgetry!') reflects both a moral judgment and an anxiety produced by the general disappearance of use value and the function of the symbolic.

But the reverse is also true: which is to say the 'new look' combinatory of gadgetry can oppose—and this applies to any object at all, even the gadget itself—the *exaltation of novelty*. Novelty represents in a sense the

sublime phase of the object, and in certain instances can even acquire, if not the quality, then the intensity of the emotion of love. This phase is the one of symbolic discourse, which involves neither fashion nor any reference to others. The child experiences his objects or toys as this form of intense relationship. And what later attracts us to a new car, book, article of clothing, or gadget is nothing less than the charm of immersing ourselves in perpetual childhood. This logic is the inverse of that of consumption.

It is in fact neither its utilitarian nor its symbolic function that defines a gadget, but its LUDIC function. Our relationship to objects, people, culture, leisure, sometimes work, and even politics is increasingly governed by the ludic. The dominant tonality of our daily activities is becoming ludic, precisely to the degree that all objects, goods, relations and services become gadgets. The ludic corresponds to a very specific type of investment: not economic (since objects are useless), nor symbolic (since the object-gadget has no 'soul'), it comprises a game with combinations or a combinatory modulation—a speculation in the varieties or technical potentialities of the object, *a game with the rules of the game* through innovation, and a game with the ultimate combination of life and death through destruction. Here, our domestic gadgets link up with slot machines, *Tirlipot* and the other cultural game shows on radio, the drugstore *Computer*, automobile dashboards, and the whole range of 'serious' equipment from telephones to computers which comprise the modern 'ambience' of work—everything with which we more or less consciously *play*, through our fascination for the way it functions, through our childlike discovery and manipulation of things, through our vague or passionate curiosity in the mechanical 'workings' of things, in the play of colours and changing patterns. Its soul is the very passion for play, but a diffuse and generalised passion, thus one that is all the more barren, devoid of pathos and reduced to *curiosity*—something between indifference and fascination, which could be described as the opposite of *passion*, since passion may be understood as a concrete relation to the *whole person*, or to some object that stands for the person. Passion implies a total investment and assumes an intense symbolic value; whereas ludic curiosity is only interested, however violently, in the *play of elements*.

For example: the pinball player becomes engrossed in the sounds, jolts and flashes of the machine. He plays with electricity. By manipulating the controls, he sees himself as releasing impulses and currents across a network of multicoloured filaments, as complex as a nervous system. This manipulation creates the illusion of a magical participation in science. To prove this you only need to go to a café and observe

the crowd gathering around a repairman when he opens up a pinball machine. No one comprehends its network of wires, but they all accept this foreign world as an absolute and indisputable given. Their relationship to the machine has nothing in common with that of a knight to his horse, worker to his tool, or amateur to a work of art. Here the relationship of man to his object is truly magical, which is to say hypnotic and manipulatory.

This ludic activity can give the appearance of being a passion. But it never is. It is consumption—here, the abstract manipulation of blips, flippers, and electrical reaction times; elsewhere, the abstract manipulation of signs of prestige through changes in fashion. Consumption is always a combinatorial investment: it precludes passion.

POP: AN ART OF CONSUMPTION?

As we have seen, the logic of consumption can be defined as the manipulation of signs. The symbolic values of creation, and the symbolic relations of interiority are absent here: it is pure exteriority. The object loses its objective finality and its function to become a term in a much wider combinatorial or series of objects, in which its value is purely relational. In another sense, it loses its symbolic meaning, its millennial anthropomorphic status, and tends to disappear in a discourse of connotations, which are also relative to one another in the framework of a totalitarian cultural system, which is to say one capable of integrating all significations whatever their origin.

We have based our analysis on *everyday* objects. But there is another discourse on the object: the discourse of art. A history of the changing status of objects and their representation in art and literature would be revealing on its own. Having played a minor symbolic and decorative role in all traditional art, objects in the 20th-century ceased to be tied to moral or psychological values, ceased to live in the shadow of man as his proxy, and began to take on extraordinary importance as autonomous elements in an analysis of space (Cubism, etc.). By the same token, they became fragmented to the point of abstraction. Having celebrated their parodic resurrection in Dada and Surrealism, and their decomposition and volatilisation through Abstraction, we now find them in Neo-Figuration and Pop apparently reconciled with their image. This raises the question of their contemporary status; in any event, it is forced upon us by this sudden elevation of objects to the pinnacle of artistic figuration.

In a word: Is Pop an art form contemporaneous with this logic of signs and of consumption under discussion? Or rather, is it not simply

an effect of fashion, and thus a pure object of consumption itself? The two are not mutually exclusive. It could be argued that, whereas Pop Art turns this object-world upside down, it still ends up (according to its own logic) in objects pure and simple. Advertising shares the same ambiguity.

Let us pose the problem another way: the logic of consumption eliminates the traditionally sublime status of artistic representation. Strictly speaking, the object is no longer privileged over the image in terms of essence or signification. One is no longer the truth of the other: they coexist in the same physical and logical space, where they 'operate' equally as signs¹⁰ (in their differential, reversible, and combinatorial relations). Whereas all art before Pop was based on a vision of the world 'as depth'¹¹, Pop claims to be at one with that *immanent order of signs*, with their industrial and serial production, and thus with the artificial or manufactured character of the whole environment, with the physical saturation as well as culturalised abstraction of this new order of things.

Does it succeed in 'rendering' this systematic secularisation of objects, in 'rendering' this new environment of signs in its total exteriority—in such a way that nothing remains of that 'inner light' which once constituted the mystique of all earlier painting? Is it an *art of the non-sacred*, which is to say an art of pure manipulation? Or is it itself a non-sacred art, which is to say productive of objects and thus non-creative?

Certain people will say (including Pop artists themselves) that things are much simpler, that they make their art because they feel like it, that they're basically having a good time, that they simply look around, paint what they see, and that it's a spontaneous form of realism, etc. But this is mistaken: Pop signifies the end of perspective, the end of evocation, the end of testimony, the end of the expressive gesture, and, last but not least, the end of the subversion and malediction of the world through art. It not only aims at the immanence of the 'civilised' world, but at its total integration into this world. It reveals an insane ambition: to abolish the annals (and foundations) of an entire culture of transcendence. Perhaps it is also simply an ideology. Let us dispense with two objections: 'It is American art', in its subject matter (including the obsession with 'stars and stripes'), in its optimistic and pragmatic empirical practice, in the incontestably chauvinistic infatuation of certain patrons and collectors who 'identify' with it, etc. Even though this objection is tendentious, let us reply objectively: if all this is *Americanism*, then Pop artists, according to their own logic, cannot but adopt it. If manufactured objects 'speak American', it is because they have no other truth than the mythology that inundates them—so it is

only logical to integrate this mythological discourse, and to be integrated into it oneself. If consumer society is engulfed by its own mythology, if it has no critical perspective on itself, and if *this is its exact definition*¹², then there can be no contemporary art that is not, in its very existence and practice, a compromise with and an accomplice of this manifest opacity. Indeed, this is why Pop artists paint objects according to their real appearance, since *it is how they function mythologically—as readymade signs, 'fresh from the assembly line'*. It is why they prefer to paint the logos, trademarks, or slogans transported by these objects, and why they can only finally paint these things (like Robert Indiana). This is not due to chance, nor to 'realism', but to the recognition of an obvious fact about consumer society—namely, that the truth of objects and products is their *trademark*. If this is 'Americanism', then such is the very logic of contemporary culture, and Pop artists can hardly be reproached for bringing it to light.

No more than they can be reproached for their commercial success, and for accepting it without shame. The worst thing would be to damn them, and thus to reinvest them with a sacred function. It is logical for an art that does not contradict the world of objects, but explores its system, to become itself part of the system. It is even the end of hypocrisy and total illogicality. Unlike the early painting of the 20th-century, whose inventive and transcendent spirit did not prevent it becoming a *signed* object and being commercialised in terms of its signature (Abstract Expressionists carried this triumphant inventiveness and shameful opportunism to new heights), Pop artists reconcile the object of painting with the painting as object. Is this coherent or paradoxical? Pop, as much in its commercial success as in its predilection for objects, in its infinite figuration of 'trademarks' and consumables, is the first movement to explore the very status of art as a 'signed' and 'consumed' object.

Yet this logical enterprise—whose extreme consequences, were they to contravene our traditional *moral* aesthetic, could not but meet with our approval—is coupled with an ideology into which it is in danger of sinking: the ideology of Nature, Revelation ('Wake Up!') and authenticity, which evokes the better moments of bourgeois spontaneity.

This 'radical empiricism', 'uncompromising positivism' and 'anti-teleologism' (Mario Amaya, *Pop as Art*) sometimes begins to look suspiciously like a form of *imitation*. Oldenburg: 'I drove around the city one day with Jimmy Dine. By chance we drove along Orchard Street, which is crowded with small stores on both sides. As we drove I remember having a vision of *The Store*. In my mind's eye I saw a complete environment based on this theme. It seemed to me that I had

discovered a new world. Everywhere I went I began wandering through the different stores *as if they were museums*. I saw the objects displayed in windows as precious works of art.' Rosenquist: 'Then suddenly the ideas seemed to flow toward me through the window. All I had to do was seize them in mid-air and start painting. Everything spontaneously fell into place, the idea, the composition, the images, the colours—everything began to happen of its own accord.' On the theme of 'Inspiration', we can see that Pop artists are in no way inferior to early generations. What this theme implies, since Werther, is an idealised *Nature* to which one only needs to be faithful in order to be true. All you have to do is awaken or reveal it. In the words of musician and theorist John Cage, who inspired Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns: '. . . art should be an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order . . . but simply a way of *waking up* to the very life we are living, which is so excellent, once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of the way and lets it act of its own accord.' This affirmation of a revealed order—of an underlying *nature* shining through the universe of images and manufactured objects—leads to mystico-realist professions of faith: 'A flag was just a flag, a number was simply a number' (Jasper Johns). Or again John Cage: 'We must set about discovering a means to let sounds be themselves'. All this presupposes an essence of the object, a level of absolute reality which never belongs to the everyday environment, but which plainly constitutes a surreality with respect to it. Wesselman thus speaks of the 'superrealism' of a common kitchen.

In brief, we are confronted with a bewildering sort of behaviourism produced by the juxtaposition of things as they appear (something resembling an impressionism of consumer society) coupled with a vaguely Zen or Buddhist mysticism stripping the Ego and Superego down to the 'Id' of the surrounding world, with a dash of Americanism thrown in for good measure!

But there is above all a grave equivocation and inconsistency. For, by manifesting the surrounding environment not as it is, which is to say first and foremost as an artificial field of manipulable signs, a total cultural artifact where neither sensation nor vision comes into play, but differential perception and the tactical game of significations; by manifesting it as a revealed nature and essence, Pop takes on a double connotation: on the one hand, the ideology of an integrated society (contemporary society = nature = an ideal society; but we have seen how this collusion forms part of its logic), and, on the other, the restoration of the whole *sacred process of art*, a process destroying its basic objective.

Pop claims to be an art of the commonplace (it is for this very reason

that it is called Popular Art). But what is the commonplace if not a metaphysical category, a modern version of the category of the sublime? The object is only commonplace in its use, at the moment of its use (as with the 'working' radio in Wesselman's installations). But the object ceases to be commonplace once it begins to signify: as we have seen, the 'truth' of the contemporary object is to serve no purpose other than to signify, to be manipulated not as an instrument but as a sign. And the success of Pop in its better examples is that it demonstrates this to us.

Andy Warhol, whose approach is the most radical, is also the one who best epitomises the theoretical contradictions in this artistic practice, and the difficulties it encounters when it tries to envisage its real object. He says: 'The canvas is an absolutely everyday object, like this chair or that poster.' (Always this will to absorb and reabsorb art, where we find both American pragmatism – terrorism of the useful, black-mail of integration – and something like an echo of the mysticism of sacrifice.) He adds: 'Reality needs no intermediary, all you have to do is isolate it from the environment and put it on canvas'. But this is the whole problem: since the everydayness of this chair (or hamburger, tail-fin, celebrity pin-up) is precisely its context, and specifically the serial context of all similar or slightly dissimilar chairs, etc. Everydayness is *difference in repetition*. By isolating a chair on canvas, I remove it from all everydayness, and at the same time I remove from the canvas all its character as an everyday object (which should, according to Warhol, make it absolutely resemble a chair). This is a familiar impasse: art can no more be absorbed by the everyday (the canvas = the chair) than it can capture the everyday as such (the chair isolated on canvas = the real chair). Immanence and transcendence are equally impossible: they are two sides of the same dream.

In brief, there is no essence of the everyday or the commonplace, and thus no art of the everyday: this is a mystical aporia. If Warhol (and the others) believe that, it is because they delude themselves about the very status of art and the artistic act, and this is not at all uncommon among artists. Furthermore, this mystical nostalgia can even be found in the productive act or gesture: 'I'd like to be a machine,' says Andy Warhol, who indeed paints with stencils and silkscreens, etc. There is no worse arrogance for art than the pretence of being machinic, and there is no worse conceit for someone who enjoys the status of creator, whether he wants it or not, than being dedicated to serial automatism. However, it is not possible to accuse Warhol and the other Pop artists of bad faith, since their rigorous logic runs up against the sociological and cultural status of art, about which they can do nothing. Their ideology reflects

this powerlessness. When they try to desacralise their practice, society sacralises them all the more. And from this one can conclude that even their most radical attempt to secularise the themes and practice of their art ends up as an unprecedented exaltation and manifestation of the sacred in art. Quite simply, Pop artists fail to see that if a picture is to avoid being a sacred super-sign (a unique object, a signature, a noble and magical object of commerce), then content or the intentions of the author are not enough; it is the structures of cultural production that decide this. Ultimately, only the rationalisation of the market for paintings, as with any other manufacturing enterprise, could desacralise them and turn them into everyday objects.¹¹ Perhaps this is neither thinkable, nor possible, nor even desirable – who knows? In any case, it is the point of no return: either you stop painting, or else you continue at the cost of regressing to the traditional mythology of artistic creation. And this downhill slide leads to the recuperation of classical pictorial values: Oldenburg's 'Expressionist' treatment, Wesselmann's Fauvism à la Matisse, Lichtenstein's art nouveau and Japanese calligraphy, etc. What are we to make of these 'legendary' resonances? What are we to make of these techniques that seem to say: 'It's all painting just the same'? The logic of Pop is not to be found in an aesthetic of multiplication or in a metaphysic of the object – its logic is elsewhere.

Pop could be defined as a *game* of manipulating different levels of mental perception – a kind of mental Cubism which would seek to diffract objects not in terms of spatial analysis, but according to the modalities of perception elaborated across the centuries by an entire culture through its intellectual and technical apparatuses: objective reality, image as reflection, drawn figuration, technical figuration (the photo), abstract schematisation, discursive utterance, etc. On the other hand, the use of the phonetic alphabet and industrial techniques have imposed schemas of division, doubling, abstraction, and repetition (ethnographers have described the bewilderment experienced by 'primitives' upon being shown *absolutely* identical books: their whole view of the world is turned upside down). We can see in these various modes the countless figures of a *rhetoric of designation* and recognition. This is where Pop comes into its own: it works on the differences between these diverse levels or modes, and on the perception of these differences. Thus the silkscreen of a lynching is not an evocation, because it presupposes the transmutation of this lynching into a news item, into a journalistic sign by virtue of mass communications, a sign taken one step further by silkscreening. The repetition of the same photo presupposes the unique photo, and beyond that the real being of whom it is a reflection; furthermore, this real being could

figure in the work without disrupting it—it would be only one more combination.

Just as there is no order of reality in Pop, but levels of signification, so is there no real space: the only space is that of the canvas, that of the juxtaposition of different sign-elements and their relations. Nor is there any real time: the only time is that of reading, that of the differential perception of the object and its image, of a particular image and the same repeated, etc. It is the time necessary for a *mental correction*, for an *accommodation* to the image or artifact in its relation to the real object (it doesn't involve reminiscence, but the perception of an *immediate* and *logical* difference). Nor can this reading ever be a search for articulation or coherence, but always an extended scan, a verification of succession.

We can see that the activity Pop prescribes (once again in its ambition to be rigorous) has little to do with our 'aesthetic sensibility'. Pop is a 'cool' art: it demands neither aesthetic ecstasy nor affective or symbolic participation ('deep involvement'), but a kind of 'abstract involvement', an *instrumental curiosity*—one preserving something of childhood curiosity or the naive enchantment of discovery (and why not?, Pop can also be seen as popular illustration, or as a Book of Hours for consumers), but above all one triggering those intellectual reflexes of decoding, deciphering, etc., which we described before.

In a word, Pop is not popular art. For the ethos of popular culture (if it exists at all) is based precisely on unambiguous realism, on linear narration (and not repetition or the diffraction of levels), on allegory and the decorative (that is not Pop Art, since these two categories refer to something essentially 'other'), and on emotional participation associated with moral vicissitudes.¹⁴ It is only on a quite rudimentary level that Pop can be mistaken for 'figurative' art, colourful imagery, a naive chronicle of consumer society, etc. It is true that Pop artists take pleasure in this pretence. Their candour is immense, as is their ambiguity. As for their humour, or the humour they are credited with, once again we are on tricky ground. In this regard, it would be instructive to observe public reactions. For many, the works provoke a laugh (at least the inclination to laugh) which is both moral and obscene (these canvases are obscene from the classical point of view). Then, a smile of derision, such that one cannot tell if they are judging the objects painted or the painting itself—a smile that turns willing accomplice, all more or less contorted in the shameful desolation of not knowing what angle to take on it: 'That can't really be serious, but we're not going to be scandalised by it, because perhaps deep down . . .' Even so, Pop is both full of humour and humourless. By all logic it has nothing to do

with subversive or aggressive humour, with a surrealistic telescoping of objects. What is precisely involved is no longer the shortcircuiting of objects in their function, but the juxtaposition of them in order to analyse their relations. This approach is not terroristic,¹⁵ but at best entails effects more like cultural estrangement. In fact, something entirely different is involved. Let us not forget, to return to the system being described, that a 'certain smile' belongs to the *obligatory signs* of consumption—a smile no longer comprised of humour, of critical distance, except as a reminder of that transcendence of critical value manifested today in a knowing wink. This false distance is present everywhere, in spy films, in Godard, in modern advertising which continually uses it as a cultural allusion, etc. At the very limit, one can no longer distinguish in this 'cool' smile between the smile of humour and that of commercial complicity. This is also what happens in Pop, whose smile sums up its whole ambiguity: it is not the smile of critical distance, but the smile of *collusion*.

THE ORCHESTRATION OF MESSAGES

TV, radio, the press and advertising comprise a heterogeneous mass of signs and messages where all orders are equivalent. Here is a selection taken at random from radio:

- an ad for Remington razors,
- a summary of social unrest over the past fortnight,
- an ad for Dunlop SP-Sport tyres,
- a debate on the death penalty,
- an ad for Lip watches,
- a report on the war in Biafra,
- and an ad for new blue Crio laundry detergent.

In this litany alternating between the story of the world and portraits of objects (altogether forming a kind of poem in the style of Prévert, with alternate gloomy and rose-coloured passages—the latter of course being advertising), the accent apparently falls on information. But it also falls, paradoxically, on neutrality and impartiality: the discourse on the world tries to be detached. Its 'bland' tone directly clashes with the valedictory discourse on objects, with its shrill note of rapturous cheer—the whole pathos of real vicissitudes, of real persuasion, is transferred to the object and its discourse. In this careful blend of discourse on 'world affairs' and discourse on 'consumption' to the exclusive emotional advantage of the latter, advertising tends to function as backdrop, as a reassuring litany of interwoven signs, into which the vicissitudes of the world are inscribed as a diversion. These latter, neutralised

by cutting, immediately fall victim to consumption themselves. The newscast is not the hodgepodge it seems: its systematic alternation dictates a single form of reception, that of consumption.

It is not just because the valedictory tone of advertising suggests that the story of the world is fundamentally unimportant, and that the only things worthy of consideration are consumer goods. This is secondary. Its real efficacy is more subtle: it prescribes through the systematic succession of messages an *equivalence* between story and news item, between event and spectacle, between news and advertising *at the level of the sign*. This is where the true effect of consumption lies, and not in the express discourse of advertising. It consists, thanks to the technical supports, the technical media of TV and radio, of cutting up events of the world into discontinuous, successive, and non-contradictory messages, into signs which can be juxtaposed and combined with other signs in the abstract realm of broadcasting. What we consume, then, is not a particular spectacle or image as such; it is the potential succession of all possible spectacles — and the certainty that this law of succession and division of programs will ensure that nothing will emerge from them which is not a spectacle or sign of one kind or another.

'THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE'

Here we need to accept, in this sense at least, McLuhan's formula 'the medium is the message' as fundamental to the analysis of consumption. It indicates that the true message delivered by the media of radio and TV, one decoded and 'consumed' at a deep unconscious level, is not the manifest content of sounds and images, but a coercive system, linked to the very technical nature of these media, for disarticulating the real into successive and equivalent signs — the *normalised*, programmed, and miraculous transition from Vietnam to the variety show through their total mutual abstraction.

And there is something like a law of technological inertia which says that the closer you get to 'live' documentary reportage, and the more finely attuned to reality is the colour and resolution, the wider becomes the gulf between perfection in technical perfection and the real world; and the 'truer' becomes the assertion that, for TV and radio, the primary function of each message is to refer to another message, as Vietnam does to advertising, and advertising does to the newscast, etc. — their systematic juxtaposition being the discursive mode of the medium, its message, its meaning. But in thus uttering itself as the message, we can easily see how it imposes a whole divisible system of interpretation on the world.

This technological process of mass communication delivers a highly imperative sort of message: *the message of message consumption*, of fragmentation and spectacularisation, of misrecognition of the world and the valorisation of information as commodity, the exaltation of content as sign. In brief, its function is one of packaging (in the publicity sense of the word — in the sense that advertising is the 'mass' medium par excellence, one whose devices permeate all the others) and of misrecognition.

This is true of all the media, and even of the medium of books or 'literacy', which McLuhan made into a major demonstration of his theory. He maintains that the appearance of the printed book was a fundamental turning point for our civilisation — not so much through the content (ideological, informational, scientific, etc.) passed from one generation to the next, but through *the profound constraint of systematisation exerted by its technical nature*. He maintains that the book is first a *technical model*, and that the order of communication which governs it (the visible fragmentation into letters, words, pages, etc.) is ultimately a more fruitful and far-reaching model than any symbol, idea, or phantasm constituting its manifest discourse: 'The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions and concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.'

It is obvious that the content mostly conceals from us the real function of the medium. It presents itself as message, whereas its real message (compared to which the manifest discourse is perhaps only a connotation) is the profound structural change brought about in human relations in terms of scale, models, and habits. Put crudely, the 'message' of a railway is not the coal or passengers it transports, but a new vision of the world, a new state of conurbation, etc. The 'message' of TV is not the images it transmits, but the new modes of perception and relations imposed by it, the alteration of traditional family or group structures. Further still, in the case of TV and modern mass media, what is received, assimilated and 'consumed' is less a particular spectacle than potentially all spectacles.

So the truth of mass media is that they function to neutralise the unique character of actual world events by replacing them with a multiple universe of mutually reinforcing and self-referential media. At the very limit, they become each other's reciprocal content — and this constitutes *the totalitarian 'message' of the consumer society*.

What the medium of TV circulates through its technical organisation is the idea (or ideology) of a world visualisable and divisible at will, one that is readable as images. It circulates the ideology of *the total dominance of a system of reading over a world now become a system of signs*. 'The

images on TV aspire to the metalanguage of an absent world. Just as the most minor technical object or gadget promises the universal assumption of technology, so are these image-signs the presumption of an imagination exhausting the world, and a total assumption of the mode of reality to images which would be something like its memory cell, that of universal reading. Behind the 'consumption of images' is outlined an imperialistic system of reading: what will increasingly tend to exist is only that which can be read (or *must* be read: the 'legendary'). And then the truth of the world and its history will no longer be in question, but simply the internal coherence of a system of reading. It is on this chaotic, conflictual, and contradictory world that each medium thus imposes its most abstract and coherent logic; or imposes itself, according to McLuhan's formula, as the message. And it is the substance of a world fragmented, filtered, and reinterpreted according to this technical but 'legendary' code that we 'consume'. All actual cultural or political value has vanished from the whole materiality of the world, from a whole culture industrially converted into finished products and the material of signs.

If we consider the sign as an articulation of signifier and signified, then it is possible to specify two types of confusion. For the child, or for the 'primitive', the signifier can disappear in favour of the signified (like the child who mistakes his own image for a living being, or those African television viewers who wonder what becomes of the man that disappears from the screen). Conversely, in the image centered on itself, or in the message centered on the code, the signifier becomes its own signified; there is a confused circularity of the two in favour of the signifier, an abolition of the signified and a *tautology of the signifier*. This is 'what defines consumption, or the systematic effect of consumption, at the level of mass media. Instead of arriving at the world via the mediation of the image, it is the image which turns round on itself via the detour of the world (it is the signifier which designates itself behind the alibi of the signified).

One passes from the message centered on the signified (the transitive message) to the message centered on the signifier — in the case of TV, for example, from the events signified by the image to the consumption of the image as such (which is to say as something precisely different from those events, or as Brecht would say, as a spectacular and 'culinary' substance, devouring itself in the very course of its absorption, and never referring beyond it). Also different in the sense that the image presents them neither to be perceived nor comprehended in their historical, social, or cultural specificity, but delivers all of them to indiscriminant reinterpretation according to the same code, whose

structure is at once *technical and ideological* — in other words, in the case of TV, the ideological code of mass culture (the system of moral, social, or political values), and the mode of division and articulation of the medium itself, prescribe a certain type of discursivity which neutralises the multiple and fluctuating content of messages, for which it substitutes its own rigid constraints of meaning. This profound discursivity of the medium is, as opposed to the manifest discourse of images, decoded *unconsciously* by the spectator.

THE MEDIUM OF ADVERTISING

In this sense, advertising is perhaps the most remarkable mass medium of our epoch. Just as it potentially glorifies all objects when speaking of a particular one, and just as it actually refers, when speaking of a particular object or trademark, to a totality of objects and a universe entirely made up of objects and trademarks, so does it address all consumers through each of them, and each consumer through all of them, thus simulating a *totality of consumers*, and retribalising them in a McLuhanesque sense; in other words, through an immanent complicity or collusion at the direct level of the message, but above all at the level of the very code of the medium itself. Each advertising image prescribes a consensus among all those individuals potentially summoned to decipher it; which is to say, in decoding the message, to automatically conform to the code in which this image has been encoded.

Thus the function of advertising as mass communication is not related to its content, its modes of diffusion, its overtly economic or psychological objectives, or the actual size of its audience (even though all of this has its importance and serves as its support), but to its very logic as an autonomised medium: which is to say, a medium no longer referring to real objects, to a real reference in the world, but referring *one sign to another, one object to another, one consumer to another*. In a similar fashion, the book becomes a means of mass communication when it refers one of its readers to all the other readers (thus the substance of reading is no longer meaning, but quite simply the sign of cultural complicity), and when the book-object refers to others in the same collection, etc. One could analyse the way in which the symbolic system of language itself becomes a mass medium at the level of the trademark and the discourse of advertising.¹⁶ Everywhere mass communication is defined by this systematisation at the level of the technical medium and its code, by this systematic production of messages — not about the world, but about the medium itself.¹⁷

THE PSEUDO-EVENT AND NEO-REALITY

Here we enter the world of the pseudo-event, of pseudo-history and of pseudo-culture described by Daniel Boorstin in *The Image*; in other words, a world of events, history, culture and ideas produced not from the fluctuating and contradictory nature of reality, but *produced as artifacts from the technical manipulation of the medium and its coded elements*. It is this, and nothing else, which defines all signification whatsoever as *consumable*. It is this generalised *substitution of the code for the reference* that defines mass media consumption.

The raw event is exchange, and not the material of exchange. It is not 'consumable' unless filtered, fragmented, and re-elaborated by a whole series of industrial procedures — by the mass media — into a finished product, into the material of finished and combined signs, analogous to the finished objects of industrial production. Makeup on the face undergoes the same operation: the systematic substitution of its real but imperfect features by a network of abstract and coherent messages made up of technical elements and a code of prescribed significations (the code of 'beauty').

We should be careful not to interpret this immense enterprise for producing artifacts, makeup, pseudo-objects and pseudo-events that invades our everyday existence as the denaturation or falsification of authentic 'content'. Given everything mentioned thus far, we can readily see that the misappropriation of meaning, depoliticisation of politics, deculturation of culture, and desexualisation of the body in mass media consumption is situated quite beyond the 'tendentious' reinterpretation of *content*. It is in *form* that everything has changed: everywhere there is, in lieu and in place of the real, its substitution by a 'neo-real' entirely produced from a combination of coded elements. An immense *process of simulation* has taken place throughout all of everyday life, in the image of those 'simulation models' on which operational and computer sciences are based. One 'fabricates' a model by combining characteristics or elements of the real; and, by making them 'act out' a future event, structure or situation, tactical conclusions can be drawn and applied to reality. It can be used as an analytical tool under controlled scientific conditions. In mass communications, this procedure assumes *the force of reality*, abolishing and volatilising the latter in favour of that *neo-reality of a model* materialised by the medium itself.

But once again, let us be wary of language which automatically refers to the 'false', the 'pseudo' and the 'artificial'. And let us return with Boorstin to advertising in our attempt to grasp this new logic, which is also a new practice and a new 'mentality'.

BEYOND THE TRUE AND THE FALSE

Advertising occupies a strategic position in this process, since it is the dominion of the pseudo-event par excellence. Advertising turns the object into an event. In fact, it constructs it as such by eliminating its objective characteristics. It constructs the object as a model, as a spectacular news item. 'Modern publicity was born when advertisements ceased to be spontaneous recommendations, becoming instead "fabricated news items"' (this is why advertising is commensurate with the 'news', both being subjected to the same 'mythic' labour: advertising and the 'news' thus constitute the same visual, graphic, acoustic and mythic substance, whose succession and alternation at the level of all the media appears *natural* to us — they give rise to the same 'curiosity', to the same spectacular and ludic absorption¹⁰). Journalists and publicists are *manipulators of myth*: they stage an object or event as fiction. They 'liberally interpret' it — at the very limit, they deliberately construct it. And thus it is necessary, if one wants to judge them objectively, to apply to them the categories of myth: the latter is neither true nor false, and the question is not believing or disbelieving it. Whence this endless debate on two false problems:

1. Do publicists believe in what they do? (for which they could be partly forgiven).
2. Don't consumers truly believe in advertising? (from which they could be partly saved).

Boorstin thus presents the idea that publicists should be exonerated — all this persuasiveness and mystification is much less due to their lack of scruples than to our desire to be deceived; it proceeds less from their desire to seduce than from our desire to be seduced. And he points to the example of Barnum, whose 'genius lay not in discovering how easy it is to fool the public, but rather in how much the public loved to be fooled'. It is a seductive hypothesis, but a false one: all of this does not rely on a certain reciprocal perversity, on a cynical manipulation or collective masochism revolving around the true and the false. The truth is that advertising (and the other mass media) doesn't fool us: *advertising is beyond the true and the false*, just as fashion is beyond the ugly and the beautiful, and just as the modern object, in its sign function, is beyond the useful and the useless.

The problem of the 'veracity' of advertising should be posed in the following manner: if publicists really 'lie', it would be easy to unmask them — but they don't do this. And if they don't, it's not because they are too intelligent for this, but because 'above all the art of advertising involves the invention of persuasive arguments which are neither true

nor false' (Boorstin) — for the very good reason that, since things no longer find their origin or reference in reality, advertising has to find a different type of *verification*, as do all myths and magical speech, that of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' (a statement which becomes true by its very utterance). 'The successful publicity agent is master of a new art, that of rendering things true by asserting that they are true. He is well versed in the technique of self-fulfilling prophecies.'

Advertising is a spoken prophecy to the extent that it isn't meant to be comprehended or apprehended, but to be foretold. What it says doesn't presuppose a prior truth (like the object's use value), but a posterior confirmation through the reality of the prophetic sign it emits. This is its mode of efficacy. It turns the object into a pseudo-event which, through its incorporation into the consumer's discourse, becomes a real event in everyday life. One can see that the true and the false are indistinguishable here — just like electoral opinion polls, where one no longer knows if the voting simply confirms the polls (and thus is no longer a real event, but a mere substitute for these polls which, as *indexical simulation models*, have become *determinant* agents of reality), or if it is the polls that reflect public opinion. This relationship is impossible to untangle. Just as nature imitates art, so does everyday life end up as a replica of its model.

The mode of 'self-fulfilling prophecy' is tautological. Reality is nothing more than this model of self-utterance. So it is with magical speech, so it is with simulation models — and so it is with advertising which, among all those discourses available to it, prefers to operate through tautological discourse. Everything in it is a 'metaphor' for one and the same thing: the trademark. Phrases like 'A Better Beer' (but better than what?), and 'Lucky Strike, A Toasted Cigarette' (of course, they all are!), patently rely on a circular argument. As Hertz (the world's number one in car rentals) concludes in a long advertisement: 'Let's be logical. If you didn't get that little bit from us, we wouldn't have achieved the position we occupy . . . And perhaps someone else would be doing this advertisement.' What else is this but pure tautology, argument after the fact? It is thus repetition itself that everywhere ensures effective causality. Just as certain laboratories work on the artificial synthesis of molecules, so does advertising work on the 'artificial synthesis' of the true by means of efficacious speech. 'Persil Washes Whiter' is not a sentence, but Persil-speak. Like other advertising syntagms, it does not explain or offer meaning — they are neither true nor false, but precisely eliminate meaning and proof. They substitute for the latter indicatives without sentences, repetitive imperatives. And as with magical speech, this tautology in discourse attempts to

induce tautological repetition *by an event*. Through his purchase, the consumer can do no more than consecrate *the event of myth*.

We could take this analysis of advertising discourse further in this direction, as well as extend it to the different modern media, in order to see that everywhere, according to a total inversion of the traditional logic of signification and interpretation based on the true and the false, it is this myth (or model) that finds its event, according to a production of speech now industrialised in direct proportion to the production of material goods.

NOTES

1. [See 'Le vertige consommé de la catastrophe', *La Société de consommation*, pp. 30-35.]
2. [Fr. *Recyclage*, also 'retraining', 'reprocessing' and 'upgrading'.]
3. If beauty is in the 'line', then the career is in the 'profile'. The connivance of this lexicon is significant.
4. Cf. below, 'The Pseudo-Event and Neo-Reality'.
5. [Fr. *Tirlipol* is a reference to a famous quiz show on French radio during the 1960s.]
6. [Fr. *Computer* would appear to be the brand name of a specific type of slot machine that tests people's mental reflexes and grades them accordingly.]
7. In this sense, there is a certain relationship between kitsch and snobbery. But whereas snobbery is linked to a process of aristocratic or bourgeois acculturation, kitsch is essentially the product of the rising 'middle' classes in bourgeois industrial society.
8. But it is not a plaything, since for the child this serves a symbolic function. Yet, by this very fact, the 'new-look' or latest plaything can also become a gadget.
9. The *pure* gadget, defined by its total uselessness for anybody whatsoever, would be nonsensical.
10. Cf. Daniel Boorstin, *L'Image* [*The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961), New York, Atheneum, 1971].
11. Cubists still searched for the 'essence' of space, attempting to unveil its 'secret geometry', etc. With Dada, Duchamp and the Surrealists, objects were stripped of their (bourgeois) function and paraded in their subversive banality, as a reminder of lost essence and that order of authenticity evoked through the absurd. For Ponge, there was still an active poetic consciousness or perception in his attachment to naked and concrete objects. In brief, whether critical or poetic, all art, 'without which things would be no more than what they are', feeds (before Pop) on transcendence.
12. Cf. below, 'The Consumption of Consumption' [*La Société de consommation*, pp. 311-16].

13. In this sense, the truth of Pop would be the wage and the billboard, not the commission and the art gallery.
14. 'Popular' art is not attached to objects, but first and always to man and his exploits. It wouldn't depict a delicatessen or an American flag, but a man-eating or a man-saluting-the-American-flag.
15. In fact, we often read this 'terrorist' humour into it. But through critical nostalgia on our part.
16. It is easy to see how language [*langage*] can be 'consumed' in this sense. Language becomes an object of consumption or a fetish from the moment that, instead of being a vehicle for meaning, it takes on the connotations, vocabulary, and inflections of membership in a group, class, or caste (the intellectual jargon of the 'smart' set, or the political jargon of parties and cliques); from the moment that language, instead of being *the means of exchange*, becomes the *material of exchange* for the private use of a group or class (its real function being, behind the alibi of a message, one of collusion and recognition); and from the moment that, instead of bringing meaning into circulation, it circulates itself as a password or token of passage in a tautological group process (the group is what it speaks).

It is no longer language [*langar*] employed as a system of distinct denotative signs, but consumed as a system of connotation, as a distinctive code.

17. The same process applies to the 'consumption of medicine'. We are witnessing an extraordinary inflation of the demand for health, directly linked to raised standards of living. There is no longer any distinction between the demand for 'basic' health care (but on what definition of minimum health and bio-psychosomatic equilibrium could it be based?) and the compulsion of consumers for medical, surgical and dental services. The practice of medicine has changed into *the use of doctors themselves*; and this extravagant and ostentatious use of the doctor-object, of medication as an object, links up with the dual residence and the automobile for displaying one's social standing. Here again, medication, and above all doctors for the well-heeled classes (Balint: 'The medication most frequently dispensed in general medicine is the doctor himself'), have become an end in themselves, after having been a means to health considered as the ultimate good. They are thus consumed, according to the same systematic misappropriation of practical and objective functions for the purpose of mental manipulation, of a kind of fetishistic calculus of signs.

In all truth, we need to distinguish two levels of this 'consumption': the 'neurotic' need to receive medication and medical care for reducing anxiety. This demand is no less objective than the one relating to organic complaints, but it still involves an aspect of 'consumption' to the extent that the doctor no longer has a specific value: as someone who reduces anxiety, or as an agent of care, he is substitutable for any other mechanism of partial regression — alcohol, 'shopping', and collecting (the consumer 'collects' doctors and medicines). Here the doctor is consumed as one sign among others (in the same way that the washing machine is consumed as a sign of wealth and status — see above).

Thus, in a very real sense, what the 'consumption of medicine' institutes is, through this neurotic logic of individuals, a logic of social status that integrates the doctor — beyond all objective usefulness and on a par with any other *means* of worth — into the general system as a sign. We can see that medical consumption is based on the abstraction (or reduction) of the medical function. Everywhere we discover this form of systematic misappropriation as the very principle of consumption.

18. This is why the whole resistance to the introduction of advertising on TV and elsewhere is simply a moralistic and archaic reaction. The problem really lies at the level of the system of signification.