

THE THIRD MAN:

SCIENTIFIC POPULARIZATION AND RADIO

Our society in the Far West is evolving toward a consumers' society. The differences between social classes tend to be erased by affluence and by ways of life that are becoming more and more common to those on the highest as well as the lowest level of the social scale. Thus the idea itself of social class is tending to disappear. On the other hand, a new differentiation is emerging which is based on culture and the form that culture takes in a society nourished by the means of mass communication. We may suppose that in the society of 1990 human groups will be differentiated according to the tastes and aptitudes of each of their members.

For the time being, what is commonly called culture tends to be standardized rather than differentiated: everyone reads the same news disseminated by the same agencies, sees the same presentations on the tv or movie screens, has read the same

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books put out by the hundreds of thousands by the same publishing houses.

Hence we are inclined to live with the same ideas and to have the same reactions. In fact, the real differentiation that is established in the domain of culture resides less in the number of things we know or do not know than in our *attitude* toward these things.

On the one hand, for practical and economic reasons, the immense majority of world society tends to be distinterested in the way in which culture is created and to accept it as a *product* which is proposed to it and guaranteed by the organs that disseminate it. At the same time, a small nucleus of individuals are becoming cultural *professionals*. As Edgar Morin points out, our society recreates, in fact, a new cleavage between consumers and creators. The gap between these can only increase steadily from the moment that culture is based on the means of mass communication, whose functioning is complex and involves enormous capital investment. Lazarsfeld, Schramm, Berelson and others have clearly indicated this distinction, which emerges between the one who speaks, who creates the message, and the one who listens, that is, the one who consumes it, by allowing his mind to be permeated by what he calls culture. Sociology gives a precise yardstick to this idea in the term *cultural alienation*, a measure of the disequilibrium that exists between those who participate in the creation of culture and those who, essentially consumers, leave all this activity to the specialists.

THE SPONTANEOUS AND THE INTELLIGIBLE

All the means of mass communication, whatever they are, have a certain standard of ethics. They claim—even though this claim may be groundless—that they *contribute* to the culture of society as a whole, bringing to their listeners, to their readers or spectators, the rudiments of thought and eventually of action. In any event, all proclaim the authenticity of knowledge acquired by contact with the creators. They insist on the importance of spontaneity in this area, frequently relying on it as a means of operating, for example, by suggesting a choice between an interview with Ionesco on the origins of the theatre or an interview with pro-

fessor X, a specialist on Nietzsche. And if they could, they would propose an interview with Nietzsche himself! What could be better than to learn about the ideas of existentialism from the mouths of its founders, or the theory of relativity from that great mathematician who created it. In fact, we know perfectly well that the value of this authenticity resides essentially in the *fetishism* which the crowd experiences confronted with the sacred cows of culture.

However, whenever a more serious study of these questions has been attempted—the various radio networks, in particular, have made numerous surveys—it has been realized that, except for absolutely exceptional cases which have no value in founding a general principle, the creators of culture remain almost *inaccessible* to the broad public, which speaks another language, has other immediate preoccupations and other amusements, and does not possess the intellectual agility which is perhaps the essential characteristic of the philosopher, the researcher, the specialist. When an interview is successful, then for the most part it is due either to the fact that the subject touched on an immediate human aspect of a scientific problem (the “human angle” of the journalist or the rewriter) —that is, that it went outside the question, either because a completely minor and perfectly irrelevant aspect, extracted from a general problem, a detail which could lend itself to immediate practical application within the framework of our everyday life, was considered sufficient, or because the “creator” was manipulated in a skillful fashion by the producers, the journalist, or the lay-out artist. The “programmer” extracts sentences, images and elements in an ingenious way from the raw material furnished by the specialist who is being interviewed, and inserts them into a program advertised in advance. In fact, the direct approach to understanding is the exception. The language of the creators in our society is becoming more and more abstruse, more and more specialized, more and more difficult. Yet this language for them is a *necessary* tool; it constitutes their own mental shorthand: *there is therefore no question of them renouncing it*, no more than a mathematician would renounce algebra in order to express himself in everyday language.

The consumer, the listener, the spectator then build for themselves a general culture, a culture in which they have heard about

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everything without ever having gone deeply into anything, with the essential aim of being diverted, that is, of furnishing their leisure hours, either directly, by absorbing curious, original, exciting facts, or indirectly for the enjoyment of showing how brilliant they are in the society of friends. Sometimes they also hope to draw from the reading or listening some concrete advantage in their profession.

MOSAIC CULTURE OR ADULT EDUCATION

We tend in fact toward a *mosaic culture* composed of bits and pieces placed together without any relationship, registered in the minds of the public through the “mass-media”—a culture which moreover may be enormous, but which is based on the absence or refusal of an *effort* at understanding. Thus every individual manages to know a little about everything without effort. In his mind effort is reserved to the hours of work, and the means of communication are hence only for distraction.

This association work-diversion is what the producers, that is, those who actively contribute to mass communications, cleverly aim to promote. The majority, if only out of a kind of humanism from which they cannot consciously dissociate themselves, would like to introduce culture into contemporary society by uniting these two irreconcilables: pleasure and knowledge.

The problem arises especially with radio and television networks. For these the preoccupation with culture is never absent, but it is certainly manifest at very different levels. For some the radio is an excellent means placed at their disposal to mystify the public, selling it simultaneously peas, refrigerators, and culture. If they introduce some strains of Mozart or quotations from Pascal in order to remain at peace with their conscience, this is not exclusively to promote sales, but to disseminate a little culture, to enhance music or literature.

Still others seek to use their positions as owners of mass media to promote their personal ideals, whatever they might be. But all accept the idea that the radio should in some way serve culture, at least partially. In fact, this problem has enormous importance: our society tends to be the victim of the cultural alienation that we described earlier, and its members therefore tend to lose

their sense of the value of participating in society. It is not unusual to hear a man in the street respond to an interviewer: "This is not my business," or "This is beyond me," etc... This refusal resembles that of an animal in a laboratory, which is harassed by contradictory stimuli, and which in the end remains motionless and dispirited without reactions. With the complexity of the modern world the individual, saturated by heterogeneous solicitations, gives up understanding. This results from the intuitive feeling we all have that the real decisions are taken outside of ourselves by a select circle of specialists, for reasons so abstract, so difficult to explain and to understand that it is simpler to leave it to those who know. One may legitimately think that this is a true disease of society.

The problem relates to the one of *adult education*. In order to participate, we must know, understand and be interested, and in order that we know, things must be explained to us. We have said it is evident that the creators cannot explain to the public validly, completely and easily what they create. Thus the social necessity emerges which Lazarsfeld has called the *third man*, a necessary intermediary between cultural creation and the assimilation of culture. A new function imposes itself on society: the function of *mediation*. The intermediary would be responsible for the *communication* of the rudiments of thought between those who produce them, in an abstract language but one necessary to a highly coherent system, and those who, eventually, after having been informed, should have the right to be in on the decisions that result from them, whether it is a question of policies to do with space programs or of a new theatre, decisions which too often are taken by remote authorities whose reputedly infallible oracles alone have access to the "file." The present means of mass communication, especially radio, have never been satisfactory for this function. They have established themselves at the level of amusers (entertainers), as C. Wright Mills has described them, and are incapable of making us participate in modern culture.

The surveys on this subject are quite revealing. First of all they emphasize the cleavage which can exist between the scholars and the population. The former are generally convinced of the keenness of the latter to absorb new knowledge. Surveys demonstrate that this is illusory; so-called cultural radio networks suffer from dull-

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ness, which sometimes, as in Italy for instance, have led to their complete extinction. Others, as in England and in France, have secured a faithful but inconsequential clientele, and the analysis of this clientele proves that the consumers of culture are generally those who lack it the least. The figures moreover are curiously convergent. American stations that are specialized in high-level programs in fact congratulate themselves with having an audience of about 1% to 2%. This same proportion is true for the cultural networks of national European radios.

The mass of the public does not accept entertainment that is difficult of access. For the worker, leisure *for the moment* consists in an extreme simplification of intellectual or physical pursuits. Perhaps one day an increase of the oasis of leisure time or of week ends will allow him something other than a diametrical opposition to work. Some scientific reportages are highly appreciated, but an analysis of the reasons for this popularity has not been seriously undertaken, and we must take into account their unforeseen, unusual and therefore "entertaining" character, in the broadest sense of the word, which has only a very loose connection with culture.

THE FIRST STEPS

The necessary intermediary can take from the necessity itself a role that is not his in allying himself with any technocracy, in transforming himself into a representative of the cultural "trusts." His role is broad but well defined. And his function designs itself.

What tools does he possess to achieve his mission, whose importance is novel, even if its concept is ancient? The problem of the diffusion of knowledge is not new. It has been posed as a problem of "communications" in the sense of the theory by this name. How can we assure optimal communication at least "cost" between the creator of culture and the consumer? We have the impression from the many studies on this subject, especially in the field of radio by Beighly, Hovland, Allport, Cantil, Berelson, Vernon, Flesch, that we are in reality equipped with scattered elements of a technique of mass communications, a problem which resembles very much that of adult education. The

question is one of transmitting a certain type of message to the consciousness of a certain number of people, and of giving them the possibility of integrating these messages into a structure of knowledge.

The intermediary therefore must on the one hand know how to assimilate sufficiently the necessary concepts of knowledge, and on the other, to bow to the psychological imperatives of those who expect to be amused. Nevertheless, in spite of the numerous failures, which we deplore as being the rule, it has not *yet been proven that it is impossible to interest the broad masses in an important cultural element*, for this difficult undertaking, which would require the *systematic* application of all the techniques available to us—to present a subject so that it would be within the grasp of a predetermined public—, *has never been attempted*.

We know however that, in the domain of the weekly press, the magazines, which return to subjects week after week, have been able sometimes to present difficult ideas, and to present them at the level of a large public. We know that the extensive recourse to graphic illustrations, in particular the use of designers with talent for illustrating statistics, working together with competent people, has made it possible to “put across” relatively difficult ideas, for example, on political economy. We also know from isolated experiences, such as those of the major popularizers, that *sometimes* occasional excellent radio programs, through a happy combination of circumstances, ideas, cultural items, scientific facts, to which it might have been believed that the public would be entirely impervious, have had enormous success and have reached a wide public rapidly.

Could not what had proved a concurrence of favorable circumstances be studied, systematized, and analyzed, instead of being left to chance or passion? Is interest something purely irrational whose laws it would be idle to seek? The few studies which we mention above seem to show clearly that this is not the case, and that every radio network, which has other preoccupations than merely to satisfy the public at the least possible intellectual effort, must tackle this problem sometime in the immediate future. This would be the specific role of the new intermediaries, whose new social importance we have shown. What form could their action take?

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A FEW DEFINITIONS

By definition this third man would be situated between the intellectual creator and a public whose interest may eventually be aroused in intellectual programs. The *intermediary is himself in fact a creator*; he creates the mode of communication, the access to what is most modern, new, worthwhile, and, in principle, important in the culture. He knows how to choose, to discriminate, and, eventually, to bring to the public, whose knowledge is regulated by the law of least effort, the elements that are novel in the scientific, economic, artistic, political, and industrial world.

This role is prominent and fraught with danger. It requires, among other things, an extraordinary culture, a capacity for synthesis, intellectual aptitude, unusual will and tenacity. Do individuals endowed with these qualifications exist? Can so many qualifications be united in one person? Certainly a few rare personalities who are truly remarkable have come to the fore in the mass media, and if their reputation hardly reaches beyond professional circles, all the important directors of a communications system—radio press, etc.—cultivate them intensively (at the same time that they are careful not to acknowledge specifically the potential value of their social function for fear of becoming tributary to it).

The problem then poses itself: how can we unite all these attributes, if not in all the cultural fields, at least in a certain number? The role of the intermediary, as we have said, is first of all that of making a choice, without being tempted by the sensational, then to *find* original ideas in order to fashion a message that is fascinating, assimilable, esthetic, and subtle, while rejecting the all too current compromise between schematization and depth, and without falling prey to the easy charm of watering down the original idea. This concept of intellectual honesty is perhaps today one of the most rare in the field of mass communications. These are perennially taken up with immediate ends; they skirt the issue by the easy facility whereby incompetent people are placed in a position to judge worth.

The radio, for example, broadcasts twelve to sixteen hours a day varied programs in which the specifically cultural parts take up about one quarter of the time: that is, for one network

alone more than 1,000 hours in 365 days. To prepare these programs conscientiously, very few mistakes must be made: in fact, one alone is enough to jeopardize the future by destroying the precarious balance which must be established for the mass of listeners between enjoyment and enrichment.

By way of example, in order to be correctly prepared, a one-hour program on a scientific subject would require the time comparable to that necessary to the scientist, that is, a matter of months. If we keep in mind the 1,000 hours mentioned above, the figure becomes rather staggering. The handful of those courageous people who fight for real as opposed to "mosaic" culture—in Paris, London or New York—is obviously insufficient. A corps of several thousands would be needed.

THE TWO CHANNELS

The obligations, the talents that the intermediary would require would imply categorically that he know at the same time what the scientists are doing, and also that he understand the behavior and the psychology of those to whom the communication is addressed. If, on the one hand, he is in the service of a science or a technique, on the other, it is he who must literally have command of a science or a technique, that of the psychology and the sociology of individuals, of small groups, and, finally, of societies. Today this science and this knowledge are drawn principally from public opinion polls. These surveys have become such an important factor in human relations, and hence in communications, that it is difficult to see how the gap that separates the intellectual world and the public could be bridged without their systematic utilization. The need has been created, and the tool will be perfected and refined; it will be sublimated in function of the growing requirements on the one hand of the active members of the intellectual community, and, on the other, of that mass which is by no means unanimous and whose individuals, through the interplay of circumstances, will affirm their individualism and their consciousness of being.

If the intermediary transmits, thanks to his scientific competence, the messages from the scholar to the public, conversely, in interpreting them, he is led to transmit to the scholar from the

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public messages whose origins are at base and without exception badly formulated, inconsistent and vague, so much so that the scholars themselves cannot determine the reactions of the individuals who compose the public. It is up to the intermediary then to see that these messages are understood by the scholars. These two polarities have at the same time a practical importance and almost a moral influence in the sense that all is done in order to improve the reciprocal relations between humans according to an ethical code.

The public opinion poll has been conceived for a long time in a one-way direction: in principle, it was to provide a politician or a business firm with the elements that would make an election or an advertising campaign more effective. But this meant neglecting two essential aspects:

a) The person who answers a survey questionnaire thereby becomes a transmitter of a message. He communicates it to someone who is specifically awaiting information on the person's behavior, his tastes, and what he has retained of the communication.

b) What is even more important, the individual, who had been swallowed up in society, is no longer anonymous. Suddenly a poll-taker arrives to remind him of his own existence, to take into consideration his impulses, dislikes, to lead him to take a position in scientific fields, which he had given up judging himself, without sometimes being aware of it. The isolated human being suddenly remembers that he is an active member of the community and the consequence is obvious: his normal taste for knowledge is reconstituted; he is liberated from the lethargy that results from the complexities—which appear to him inextricable—of social life; he no longer feels that he is an anonymous pawn of a conglomerate entity too complex for him to comprehend; and he becomes interested again in the life of the city. Thus, the principle of a *dialogue* between the creator and the consumer of culture would be established through this reciprocal exchange between the creator of the message and the consumer of cultural material, facilitated by the intermediary, and controlled by the polls in both directions. It would rectify the cultural alienation, which we have deplored here as the plague of our society, and

which tends more and more to be constituted into aggregates to the detriment of a global structure.

POPULARIZATION OR LASTING EDUCATION

Scientific popularization through mass communications appears from this analysis to be one of the *major functions* of our society. Whatever the difficulties it presents, it tends more and more to be dissipated in *adult education*, that is, to attain the idea of a *permanent culture* in which the individual is subject to a flow of cultural elements on which he works in order to build his own place in the world. The mediation, which would be carried out by the cultural engineer, the popularizer, the commentator, or eventually by the creator himself—when he happens to be capable of it—becomes a quantitatively important function which cannot be fulfilled by the handful of people who, because of their education or predilection, have tried to realize it in the past decades. It requires other means of another scope. It cannot be artisanal; it is situated within the stage of mass production; and it calls for the establishment of a *science* or at least of a technique. We believe that the bases of these techniques already exist, dispersed somewhat all over.

This popularization first requires work on the theoretical level, followed by the establishment of doctrines, the collection and the synthesis of disparate ideas on the modes of presentation, on the levels of knowledge, on the recruitment of culture, on intelligibility, on the rules of radiophonic production, etc...

On the other hand, radio and television can provide an excellent field of action for experimental work of a scientific nature through their daily contact with millions of listeners, confronting a world which is constantly being renewed, and which at every moment must be explained, that is, revealed to the people who inhabit it. Cultural productions can attempt to establish the elements of this doctrine through trial and error—something they are perhaps doing at the present, although primarily through error. Finally, the work of polling and of control should make it possible to establish what really is taking place within the public, to determine its wishes. There is reason to believe that, if the necessary means are employed, the systematic rejection of culture, which is the

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most apparent constant for the mass of average citizens, will eventually give way to a search for *cultural entertainment*, a concept that is yet to be defined.