

AESTHETIC PERCEPTION

IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The everyday is that element of our material and social environment that comes closest to us, and is thus the least visible; for it stands to reason that it will neither attract attention to itself, nor catch the eye.¹

For some time, however, the commonplace in all its forms has been elevated to a position of honor: from the psychoanalysts' studies of parapraxes to the analyses of "the drama of daily life" by E. Goffman² and the new American sociologists. It was from phenomenology that these sociologists drew their inspiration, and which had opened up the way. For Husserl, the everyday world ("Lebenswelt," "Alltagswelt") was a primary field of study, just as with Heidegger, whose commentaries upon the everyday, trivial, self are so well known: the "One." From another perspective, the Marxist H. Lefebvre has also con-

Translated by Paul Rowland.

¹ This article is a partially rewritten extract of a book that is to appear shortly.

² E. Goffman, *La mise en scène de la vie quotidienne*, Ed. Minuit, 2 vols., 1973.

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tributed to the rehabilitation of the everyday, placing the emphasis on its particularity and cultural richness.³

The human sciences have, in effect, travelled by a long road which has singularly enough not led towards the distant, but which has on the contrary brought us closer to our everyday experience. The meaning of this centripetal movement becomes clearer when we also see traces of it in all the contemporary arts. Not only do we perceive the everyday there, it becomes acceptable from an aesthetic viewpoint. We shall not retrace here the artistic treatment of the commonplace, and particularly of everyday objects, which after the Middle Ages progressively emancipates itself from religious and spiritual connotations to achieve the still-life, and then subsequently, with the Impressionists, the right to portray things as they are with no other justification than that of research into form. We should recall that this tendency will subsequently be confirmed by the further evolution of painting: from cubism to Pop-Art and hyperrealism, and the majority of the other important movements of the beginning of the century, the most insignificant will find favor in the eyes of the artist, who will reveal its unsuspected poetic aspect. For henceforth, "the Beautiful is everywhere, among your row of pots and on the white wall of your kitchen; more so perhaps than your eighteenth century salon or in the official museum."⁴ After Duchamp, in fact, art tends to shrug off its obligatory circumscriptions in order to become an act, an attitude, a model for perception. "There is no reason," claims R. Rauschenberg, "why the whole world should not be considered as a gigantic painting."⁵ In the same way, for certain modern musicians after John Cage, "the definition of what is music has to be enlarged, extended, who knows how far, to the whole of the *audible*."⁶

³ H. Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, L'Arche, 2 vols., 1958, and 1961; *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne*, Gallimard, "Idées," 1968.

⁴ F. Léger, "L'esthétique de la machine: l'objet fabriqué, l'artisan et l'artiste," in the *Bulletin de l'effort moderne*, Paris 1924, (reprinted in F. Léger, *Fonctions de la peinture*, Paris, Gonthier, 1965, p. 53).

⁵ Cf. "Un 'misfit' de la peinture new-yorkaise se confesse," an interview with R. Rauschenberg by A. Parinaud, in *Arts*, 821, Paris, 1961, p. 18.

⁶ A. Willener, "L'improvisation non-instrumentale," in P. Beaud and A. Wil-

Does the progressive appearance of the everyday on the artistic horizon reveal some evolution (or even a mutation) in the relationship of contemporary man to his familiar universe, a relationship such as the artist would have anticipated and coherently expressed? A certain number of facts seem to confirm this hypothesis.

THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

The expression "urban landscape" no longer shocks us, and is part of current terminology. Beneath its apparent innocence, however, it reveals an alienation, perhaps a rupture. Is not the landscape that which by definition meets the eye, that part of the world which is put in perspective when viewed from afar? How has urban man become able to look at his own life-situation from the outside?

Almost half a century after Kurt Schwitters, assembling together debris and other random objects, in a sense got himself appointed as custodian of the museum of the street, and almost thirty years after Fernand Léger, dazzled by the new urban environment, suggested that the modern commercial street be considered "as one of the fine arts," the artist Claes Oldenburg is in his turn fascinated by streets: "They seem to have an existence all of their own, and I used to discover there a whole world of objects that had previously been strange to me. In my eyes old packaging became sculpture, and rubbish looked like masterly compositions by the hand of chance."⁷

But the artist is no longer alone in seeing the street and its objects as precious works of art. The flea market, second-hand stalls, the taste for kitsch and old-time fashions: people are everywhere taking a new look at the ordinary so as to divest it of its usefulness and set it up as an aesthetic object. Today, to revive the title of the recently held Paris exhibition, "people collect."⁸ "People": these are not few, more or less fetishistic, devotees of some particular article, who in every age have

lener, *Musique et vie quotidienne*, Paris, Mame, 1973, p. 209, (author's underlining).

⁷ Quoted by S. Wilson, in *Pop*, Thames and Hudson, 1974, p. 19.

⁸ "Ils collectionnent," Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1974.

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preserved the face of everyday life from oblivion: now everyone tends to inspect his environment with "the eyes of the custodian of tomorrow."

This is the meaning of the recent craze in the United States for Coca-Cola articles: a tray, ash-tray, or fountain-pen adorned with the famous symbol, the calendar graced with the Thirties-style pin-up, these are exchanged or bought at high prices. Three volumes have already been produced of a luxurious catalogue listing the articles issued since the end of the last century (the first calendar dates from 1891, and the first tray from 1900): an extraordinary inventory, in which the commonplace object pretends to a secret beauty, as though it had to bear witness to a bygone age for future generations.⁹

This is to say that relation with the everyday object is the basic stance of the new perception of the environment. It would not even be out of place to acknowledge that the object, in the meaning that we shall specify, is proper to our Western culture. It does at least constitute a historically established reality, although it is difficult to give its date of origin.

Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an object until that moment in which it is clearly distinguished from the subject. In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre refers to those societies in which the possessions of the deceased accompany him into the tomb: "They were a part of him, and there was no more question of burying the deceased without his articles of daily use than of burying him, for example, without one of his legs. The cadaver, the cup from which he used to drink, and the knife he used *constitute one single corpse*."¹⁰ More recently H. Van Lier distinguished in the development of the article the slow passage from an immediate relationship (the act of creating the utensil just as the act of using it, forms a unity) which characterized societies other than those born out of the Graeco-Roman tradition, to the really objective relationship familiar to our own civilization: the product, conceived and seen as such, lies before man, and he plunges, so to speak, into

⁹ S. and H. Goldstein, *Coca-Cola Collectibles*, 3 vols., Woodland Hills, California, 1971-1974.

¹⁰ J.P. Sartre, *L'être et le néant*, Gallimard, 1943, p. 677. (Author's underlining).

his encounter with it ("ob-jectum"). In the face of a deficiency of language, Van Lier proposes that we write "ob-ject" to refer to the table or vase as understood in the Western world, and "object" when they are part of other cultures.¹¹

It increasingly appears that distance from the "ob-ject" is a function of its visibility. The contemporary product is *evident*. In the shopwindow, on display, or via an interposed image in the newspaper, on the television, or on walls in town, it is everywhere to be seen. By the same token it becomes acceptable to the aesthetic perception. If it took millennia for the products of the Neolithic age to be considered works of art, and if it took nearly a century for us to see the articles of the Victorian era in an aesthetic light, the passage of one or two decades is now sufficient. Antiquaries and junk-dealers may thus happen to offer as "old" articles that are no more than two or three years old, if not quite simply new. In fact, to revert to the phrase of an artist, we have entered the age of *instant archaeology*.¹²

ADVERTISING AND DUPLICATION

Responsible for making the object well-known, and above all for providing it with associations, the advertising image is constantly tempted to break free and set itself up as an autonomous language; but it does not remain any the less faithful to the object. Contrary to painting, which succeeded in emancipating itself from the object at the beginning of the century (to return to it more recently), advertising may well draw inspiration, several decades later, from progress in artistic technique, but it remains in principle subservient to representation and meaning. An advertising image which, in the manner of concrete painting, claimed to be self-sufficient, without representing or meaning anything beyond itself, would be a contradiction in terms.

In advertising, however, representation is fundamentally ambiguous. Here the object states its function in order that the potential consumer may recognize it as useful; but this function

¹¹ H. Van Lier, "Objet et esthétique," *Communications*, 13, 1969.

¹² R. Smith, "Instant Archaeology," in J. Russell and S. Gablik, *Pop Art Redefined*, New York, Praeger, 1969, p. 114.

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being more often than not superfluous (either because it is unnecessary or because it is already fulfilled by similar products), it is taken charge of by a symbolic universe (of social or erotic associations, etc.) which tends to cloak it. These contradictory demands mark the two poles, the two points of tension, between which the presence of the advertised object must come into focus. If the object appears only in its functional aspect (as is the case in certain catalogues), it may respond to a need, but does not create it. On the other hand, if the symbolic packaging steals the show, this will be at the cost of the utilitarian dimension, and the object will risk passing unnoticed. This is why the seduction of the object towards goals other than those inherent in it (utility), and which characterizes almost the entire history of painting, could never be complete in advertising. The latter perhaps seduces the consumer, but it has been a powerful contributor to the exposure and the "liberation" of the object (as is witnessed by Pop Art).

The demand for the relative autonomy of the object is so pressing here, moreover, that if it is placed in too pregnant a context in which there is some risk of its passing unnoticed, it elicits a parallel statement. This comes either in the form of a written commentary which draws attention to it, or in that of a double presence: the object is fully integrated into a situation associated with it, but it avoids that "seduction" by being represented in duplicate, and generally enlarged, in the margin of the image.

This treatment of the object introduces us to an important characteristic of advertising iconography: duplication. Duplication can either occur within the image, as in the case of the double representation of the object, or, most importantly, can be of the real object as present in the realm of the practical and the everyday, simultaneously provided with a double image. "Cut off from the context of its utility," remarks G. Péninou, "communicated through a message of which it is the sole subject, revealed rather than manufactured (the product) is already something else, from the mere fact that we depict its uniqueness, its distinction, or its exemplarity . . ."¹³ Our relationship to the

¹³ G. Péninou, "Physique et métaphysique de l'image publicitaire," *Communications*, 15, 1970, p. 107.

object is not modified superficially by advertising, but fundamentally: the two levels evoked by duplication (between the object and the image, and within the image itself) unite to create a single effect of otherness, of the de-instrumentalization of the object, and at the same time of its revelation.

For this is the end result: the aesthetic scope of the advertising image does not rest solely in the formal treatment to which it submits the object, nor in the use of artistic techniques (of surrealist or other inspiration), nor in the use of sometimes strikingly successful plastic effects. All that comes afterwards, as an extra, and is built upon the primary fact of the disjunction of the object, of making it "e-vident". The advertising image gives the object a universal presence (in the newspaper, on the television, on walls), but as something else: something displayed and communicated.

In this respect packaging plays a special role. It is no longer possible to get a direct view of a particular object: inevitably there intrude between the eye and the object the brand-name, price, instructions for use, and the box or plastic wrapper. Is it, therefore, any exaggeration to claim that the packaging "literally creates the product, and the design counts more than the name. Vim is not a powder carrying the name Vim and contained in a pack. It is a pack, of which the word Vim is one important element among many, and which disguises a product (. . .) that is used for scouring."¹⁴

The preeminence of the packaging, of the poster, of the publicity film reveals the same inversion everywhere: the object ceases to specify the symbols and images and becomes an illustration of them, so to speak. They are permanent, it is ephemeral, accidental, and relative: the "object of an image."

THE UNIVERSE OF THE REPRODUCTION

Even the image cannot avoid the fate reserved for the object, above all when the image is an artistic one: with increasing frequency its double reproduces it, represents it, makes it known, and passes for it.

¹⁴ H. Van Lier, "Objet et esthétique", *op. cit.*, p. 100.

If André Malraux emphasized the advantages of the reproduction, which allows us to contact works that are distant in space and time, it was in order to point out equally that this new freedom is enjoyed at the price of an homogenization: "Those miniatures, frescoes, stained-glass windows, and tapestries (...) even the sculptures — have become *plates*."¹⁵ The negative consequences of reproduction, in comparison with the direct perception of the work of art, had already been made evident by W. Benjamin in his famous essay, i.e., the end of the unique existence, situated "hic et nunc," a devaluation of the authority of the original, the loss of originality and of the "aura."¹⁶

The original does not, strictly speaking, disappear, but tends to become subordinate to its mass-produced reproduction, through which the majority of people make their acquaintance with the work. Furthermore, there is no doubt that it is erroneous to claim that "the uniqueness of the original now lies in it being *the original of a reproduction*";¹⁷ and the authoritativeness of the reproduction is today such as one can only wonder at "if the *raison d'être* of every important work of art were not to constitute the original matrix from which copies can be made."¹⁸

It is in this universe of duplication, in which "the abundance of reproduction (has) transformed the masterworks of yesteryear into clichés,"¹⁹ that the generation of the pop artists grew up. Thus Lichtenstein recalls that, living first in Ohio, his only contact with painting was through reproductions, and although he acknowledges that the reproduction has become the subject of his work²⁰ we shall not see any surrender to artificiality there. Certainly this artist keeps within the limits of the "seduction," but with the intention of reversing its import.

¹⁵ André Malraux, *Le musée imaginaire*, in *Les voix du silence*, La Galerie de la Pléiade, 1951, p. 42-44 (author's emphasis).

¹⁶ W. Benjamin, "L'oeuvre d'art à l'ère de sa reproductibilité technique," 1936, reprinted in *Poésie et révolution*, Denoël, 1971.

¹⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books, 1972, p. 21. (Author's underling).

¹⁸ Daniel Boorstin, *L'image*, Paris, U.G.E., "10/18," 1971, p. 192.

¹⁹ B. Rose, *L'art américain depuis 1900*, Brussels, La Connaissance, 1969, p. 226.

²⁰ Interview with Roy Lichtenstein, in D. Waldman, *Roy Lichtenstein*, Milan, Mazzotta, 1971, p. 25.

In a world in which our perception of works is irredeemably usurped by the reproduction, and in which the authentic is constantly being degraded into a cliché, Lichtenstein seems to be asking whether there is any other way of recovering our contact with art than by holding up to ridicule the symbols of its “socialization.”

By suggesting that the reality of the bombs and aircraft is to be sought in the images of “comics” rather than in Vietnam, Lichtenstein looks to be acting as a humorist (when he is not taken purely and simply as an apologist of war, as has sometimes happened). Looked at more closely, one has to acknowledge that the business of occultation is only apparent. Lichtenstein and Warhol certainly do speak to us concerning reality, but it is historically localized reality, whose novelty resides less in its actual character than in the channels through which it is subsequently communicated: they “do not so much paint ‘life’ itself as the aspect of the advertising images (the ad-mass aspect) with regard to way of life.”²¹ In other words, these artists speak to us, through their appropriate media, concerning the “image civilization” so often referred to by contemporary sociological discussion, even if it has never been very rigorously defined.²²

In the advanced industrial societies information progressively takes precedence over experience. According to Boorstin, and this illustrates the reiterated theme of his book, “there was a time when to read an uninteresting newspaper would elicit the remark: ‘The world is very dull today!’ To read the same makes the contemporary reader say: ‘What a dull paper this must be!’”²³ In the same way, Debord denounces our societies in which the active man is transformed into a spectator: “The more he contemplates, the less he sees,” for “his characteristic gestures are no longer his own, but someone else’s who has portrayed them to him.”²⁴ According to H. Lefebvre, in a society in which “consumption of the spectacle and the spectacle of

²¹ M. Amaya, *Pop Art ... and after*, New York, The Viking Press, 1965, p. 12.

²² See especially: D. J. Boorstin, *L'image, cit.*; E. Fulchignoni, *La civilisation de l'image*, Paris, Payot, 1969; G. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Paris, Buchet-Chastel, 1967.

²³ D. J. Boorstin, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

²⁴ G. Debord, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

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consumption” go hand in hand, a direct relationship with the real is no longer possible: symbols supplant the tangible.²⁵

To view means to review. The internalized image accompanies the tourist into the most distant lands: is it any longer possible to see the Parthenon or Tahiti with one’s own eyes? The lens intrudes between the eye and the monument, and the latter will be appreciated only at home: the transparency will witness to the extraordinary ascendancy of the image, which abdicates its mimetic function in order to set itself up as the standard version of reality.

Once all this has been said, need we stress the obvious role of the cinema and television? According to E. Morin the cinema “revives the double original in the twentieth century.”²⁶ If it is certainly true that the cinema in fact provides reality with its double, must we not also acknowledge that its influence only becomes evident at the moment when the presence of the film becomes so intrusive that life itself, taking the place of the double, seems to imitate the images? The latter form into an autonomous universe to the extent that it can be claimed without any exaggeration that today “the image does not evoke a creature of flesh and blood, but simply other similar images.”²⁷ For such is the topological inversion that operates in the age of mass information: the criterion of the truthfulness of an image resides less in its conformity to external reality than in its internal relevance to the iconic domain of which it is a part.

It is because the new way of perceiving the world through its image is still in the process of formation (the first generations brought up entirely on TV are only now entering school) that it is so scarcely perceptible to us. Yet is this feeling not already prevalent in a diffused form? According to the journal *Chorus*, whose first issue was devoted to this, the “’68 feeling” was not so much the spirit of revolt that had blown through France and elsewhere, as the apprehension of a second degree world received through intermediary images: “the ‘second degree’, the constant rift and symptom of our civilization, when the blood does

²⁵ H. Lefebvre, *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne*, op. cit., pp. 122, 206, and *passim*.

²⁶ E. Morin, *Le cinéma ou l’homme imaginaire*, Paris, Minuit, 1956, p. 52.

²⁷ M. Compton, *Pop Art*. London, Hamlyn, 1970, p. 36.

not flow red but presents the icy aspect of a small grey blot on a photograph, when the eyes can no longer see except through windows, when the hands can no longer grasp save through concepts: it is always 'through' something, with no natural roots, and never any real contact."²⁸

It would be difficult to see in these words no more than the expression of artistic sensibility. For when "the world itself thus becomes a museum of objects already seen in another medium,"²⁹ who would doubt that the "second degree" does not intimate for everyone, just as much as for the artist, an increasingly sour lifestyle in the everyday universe?

Need we thence conclude that the opposition between being and seeming, which has been at the heart of the problem of knowledge since the beginning of philosophy, has no future? Will the mass-media "explode the cave,"³⁰ making a mockery of the quarrel between the realists and idealists? Has a third category slipped irrevocably in between the subject and the object?

It will be replied that it was always thus, since cultural patterns have always directed human perception. Now however, the framework of interpretation is no longer a part of the mental structures, being no longer entirely the work of man. The original feature of photography, in relation to painting, notes E. Fulchignoni, is that "for the first time in the history of culture, nothing else comes between the initial object and its representation than the inert physicality of another object."³¹ This is not so much as to claim in opposition to sociological evidence that the photograph is free from cultural conditioning: it may be loaded with associations, in its subject and form, just as much as a painting. But we must recognize that another kind of relationship with the world has been brought into being by the new iconic environment.

According to Sartre, to imagine is to look at a certain object through its "analogon," by which it is "present by proxy."³²

²⁸ P. Tilman, "Dans la chambre froide..." *Chorus*, No. 1, Paris, Autumn 1968, p. 24.

²⁹ M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1964.

³⁰ R. Berger, *La mutation des signes*, Paris, Denoël, 1972, p. 309.

³¹ E. Fulchignoni, *La civilisation de l'image, op. cit.*, p. 42.

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The new fact, in the civilization of the image, is that the “analogon” no longer begins as a materially realized symbolic production (stained-glass, painting, etc), nor a mental construction, individual or collective, but a technically produced datum that is no less tangible and immediately graspable than “reality” itself.

ALIENATION AND AESTHETIC PERCEPTION

In our societies, the alienation between everyday experience and the omnipresent image of the mass-media, which is superimposed upon it, corresponds to the alienation between different groups, institutions, and areas of activity. This modern alienation that is rooted in the social classes has been too labored by a whole Marxist literature for us to return to it here. The interdependence of these two levels of alienation has been shown, among others, by G. Debord: “The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production predominate appears as an immense mass of *spectacles*. Everything that was once directly experienced is distanced by a representation.”³³ Whether in capitalist societies or bureaucratic societies, “the whole social praxis (. . .) is split up into reality and image.”³⁴ This perverted social relationship, corroded by antagonisms and alienation, means that life *has become visible*.³⁵

Having become visible, life is in a position to be perceived aesthetically. We have seen above the stage at which things have arrived in the realm of daily life, which has commanded enough attention gradually to become the object of an aesthetic attitude. But it is relevant to point out that the aesthetic attitude itself is not “natural.” It belongs to the realm of alienation, simultaneously because, as in the case of the “found object,” it functions on the principle of disturbing the order of things (i.e., the alienation of an element from its proper field of utility), and because such a disturbance only evokes a truly aesthetic perception when in a historical context familiar with this type of perception: in other words from the moment when the

³² J.-P. Sartre, *L'imaginaire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1940, revised 1964, p. 111.

³³ G. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, p. 9; (Author's underlining).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

aesthetic perception is “alienated,” has become independent, and when the beautiful is posited for its own sake.

It is generally agreed that “primitive” societies are not familiar with the fact of art in the sense in which we understand the term today. The shapes and colors of objects, ornaments, and dwellings, etc., however elaborate they may be, do not appear to the aboriginal eye as merely formal relationships or the pure balance of color. In a universe in which the different spheres familiar to us (political, religious, educational, etc.) have still not become independent, the “decoration” of the object is closely identified with symbolic meanings. One might say that the colors of the totem-pole lend color to a collective belief, just as stained-glass does for the Christian. It will be necessary for the gaze of the historian of art to rest upon the totem-pole and stained-glass if the shapes and colors—wrenched from their initial meanings—are to become valued for themselves.

The original undifferentiation between the aesthetic and the other realms of activity is still evident among the Greeks in the double sense of the word “*tekhnê*,” which means simultaneously art and craft. Heidegger has often emphasized this duality of a term which “does not only denote the activity of the artisan and his ‘art,’ but also the ‘art’ of the higher meaning of the word and the fine-arts.”³⁶ And he adds: “Works of art were in no way the object of aesthetic enjoyment. Art was in no way a part of the cultural output.”³⁷ In a world where the manufacture of the utilitarian object and that of the beautiful object still do not stand out as distinct procedures, the perception of the object is itself all-embracing and is still not “specialized.” A whole evolution was necessary, from the Middle Ages in which the work was still complete in its meanings and collective in its language (the stained-glass window is not signed), to the Renaissance which saw the realm of art claim its independence,³⁸ down to Romanticism and its theories of art for art’s sake, for the supervention of the forms that have been

³⁶ M. Heidegger, “La question de la technique”, in *Essais et conférences*, Paris, Gallimard, 1968, p. 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁸ Cf. P. Bourdieu, “Champ intellectuel et projet créateur,” *Les Temps Modernes*, 246. November 1966, pp. 865-906.

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finally liberated from extra-artistic constraints and to which the twentieth century has accustomed us. "Art is obtained by separating music from life," claims John Cage.³⁹

The independence of the artist, the independence of the works, and the independence of the aesthetic attitude; under the guise of this freedom there also speaks a dissociation: that of contemporary man subject to the rule of alienation, torn between the manifold stages and divisions of activity that have become independent. It is tempting, furthermore, to reduce this mutation of perceptual habits to the phenomenon of reification: today we may look upon the circumstances of our own lives with an "ethnological" attitude precisely because those circumstances have become external, if not hostile to us, and lend themselves to being grasped as an object. In the same way, one might also say: in a world dominated by things, perception itself has discarded its encumbering associations to the point at which it can claim validity as a pure perception, just as intelligence and imagination are tending to set themselves up as independent faculties: and in fact it is not irrelevant to point out that this new relationship to the world is developing at a moment when merchandise has just occupied the front of the stage. In linking the new mode of perception to the reign of merchandise and, more broadly, to the dominant socio-economic system, however, there is a risk of neglecting another factor which is also very important, and which is only indirectly the result of social organization as such. This refers to the tendency, increasingly clear from day to day, to see the world from the viewpoint of its presumed future, i.e., to grasp daily life in terms of *retrospection*.

RETROSPECTIVE VISION

When Aldrin and Armstrong landed on the moon on July 20, 1969, the media unanimously hailed the historic character of the event. Sociological literature has remained strangely silent, as though some natural incapacity to grasp the moving prevented it from recognizing whatever was not going to remain static.

³⁹ John Cage, *Silence*, Paris, Denoël, 1970, p. 18.

⁴⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Counterblast*, Paris, Mame, 1972, p. 30.

The artists were more aware of what was happening, and particularly of the advent of that lofty perspective which, for the first time, categorized us as Earthlings. In the middle of the Sixties, while the satellites were keeping the globe under the eye of their cameras, Land Art appeared after Pop Art: giant circles in the desert, the moving of rock formations, and shapes traced out in the snowy expanses. These shapes were completely imperceptible from ground-level and suggested a towering viewpoint. They tell us that the whole Earth is a sculpture: does it not look like one on satellite pictures? The first cosmonauts rhapsodized at the sight of the "light of the Earth": in their own way, and without knowing it, they were baptizing a new "found object."

But the conquest of the moon is only one aspect among many (pollution, the atomic peril) of the process of the "objectivization" of the terrestrial globe. Getting our universe thus into perspective is closely dependent upon the technological evolution of the previous decades: the electronic revolution was a precondition for spaceflight especially. Now this has not only had technical consequences: the relation to our surrounding world, to our "Umwelt," has been profoundly changed by it. It has been one of Marshall McLuhan's merits that he has put the accent upon the new perception of the environment induced by technological changes. Although he has not devoted any searching study to it, this idea runs like a thread throughout his work: the surrounding world is imperceptible, and a new technological environment must take its place or stand out against the old horizon to make it visible. It becomes the substance of the new environment, which it turns into an "anti-environment." It is then that we discern it for the first time, although it has always been familiar to us. The fish, McLuhan loves to repeat, does not know what water is, until the day he is taken out of it.

To this idea of visibility is added another from which it is truly inseparable: the transition from one environment to another is the first step in a work of art. In other words, that which is perceived aesthetically is always internal, a *content*: "The content of the environment becomes transformed into an art-form (. . .) when used inside, the brick becomes a decoration."⁴⁰ Yet all the same, it is when new techniques make beams un-

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necessary that they are laid bare as “visible beams,” i.e., as objects of the aesthetic eye. Old-time fashions and the fad for second-hand goods only confirm the rightness of McLuhan’s intuitions. Note that for him it is not only the object that is turned into a work of art through the process of history, but the entire age: “The machine has turned Nature into an art-form . . . The appearance of the printing-press meant that the Middle Ages became a work of art . . . And the industrial age turned the Renaissance into a work of art . . .”⁴¹

In its own turn, the industrial age has been put into perspective: cars, locomotives, and airplanes enter the museums. On the level of the communications media “television has become the environment of the cinema, and has turned the cinema into art. It will be the turn of television to become an art-form when it has been orbited by a new environment.”⁴² In fact, “we are approaching the time when the total situation of man will be considered as a work of art.”⁴³ In the age of the conquest of space, the whole Earth is already virtually an artistic form: “The capsule and the satellite have created a new environment for our planet. The planet is now the content of new spaces created by the new technology . . . This is to say that the planet has become an anti-environment, an art-form . . .”⁴⁴

Whatever criticisms may have been provoked by McLuhan’s incisive theories, it is nonetheless true that, with his hotchpotch of exaggerated statements and profound insights, he has been able to highlight the most novel aspects of the age we are entering. Certainly, in any account of the aesthetic perception of our daily environment other factors could well be cited: the end of Western hegemony (decolonization), the controversy over life-styles (marginalism, ecology), the contradictions of an urbanism felt to be inhuman, and to crown it all, the decadence—appearing from the Sixties onwards—of New York, the world-capital of commerce and artistic life. It cannot there-

⁴¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

⁴² Marshall McLuhan, *Mutations*, Tours, Mame, 1969, p. 80.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁴⁴ Marshal McLuhan, “Les vieux vêtements de l’empereur”, *L’objet créé par l’homme*, edited by G. Kepes, Brussels, La Connaissance, 1968, p. 93.

fore seem accidental that New York should have been the scene of the development (if not the emergence) of Pop Art and its establishment, for it is precisely the particularity and at the same time the *relativity* of the contemporary urban environment that is displayed by this art. Pop Art signifies the metropolis with the highest buildings in the world that suddenly, with a cleaving open of civilization, discovers itself caught in a stare, the object of the gaze of Otherness. It is in this sense that it could be said of Pop that “the context becomes the content,”⁴⁵ and also in the same sense, but placing the emphasis on the shift in time, that it can be claimed that in Pop “nostalgia becomes instantaneous.”⁴⁶

Pop therefore verifies McLuhan’s theories on two fundamental counts: on one hand by corroborating the environment/anti-environment relationship as a “visibility” factor; and on the other hand by bringing to light that the medium of communication (in this case the image) is more important than what is communicated. But other aspects of Pop Art are sociologically significant, and have been haphazardly cited to account for its occurrence: the frigidity of contemporary urban surroundings, the emergence of the consumer society and its consequent flood of goods, the creation of a highly imagist environment (advertising, television, etc.), and the detachment and passivity of a world which accepts the H-bomb as a keeper of the peace. All these factors contain their own element of illuminative truth, but to go from that to seeing in Pop Art, as some have done, a “capitalist realism”—also teaching us something about socialist realism—is more than an error: it shows a total incomprehension of the intention of Pop which, far from taking pleasure in exploring reality, keeps it at a distance and cradles it in the imaginary.

Paradoxically it is this distancing that most closely ties pop to the social. For to cite its links with urban and consumer society, and to point out precisely that it “would not have spontaneously developed in different places at the end of the Fifties if it had not been a genuine response to a historical

⁴⁵ K. Moffett, in “Pop Art; Two Views”, *Art News*, May 1974, p. 32.

⁴⁶ I. C. Karp, “Anti-Sensibility Painting”, *Artforum*, September 1963, p. 27.

situation”⁴⁷ is quite simply only to recall the element of conditioning that is its lot, just as with every other artistic and cultural production. But in the case of Pop Art, the social does not contain the work: it is not an enclosed space in the midst of which expression beats itself a pathway. On the contrary, it is a space from which one extricates oneself so as to reveal better its co-ordinates. Thus the “civilization of the image”, cited above as one of the conditions for the aesthetic attitude, could not be seen as a “cause”: by going back to mass culture in order to turn it against itself, Pop places itself in a *dominant* position in relation to that culture. It is not the civilization of the image that explains Pop, but rather the latter which, fixing its gaze upon it, shows us its language and meanings. In this sense we would say that Pop Art is less sociological than *socio-logical*: it speaks about the social.

To make visible: this then is the purpose of Pop Art. From the epistemological point of view it allows us to understand that the world reveals itself only on the condition that our habitual relationship with it be disturbed. It is not simply a question of standing at a distance, and setting one’s subjectivity aside, as the positivists invite us to do. Neither is it a question of transforming the world, as proposed by Marxism which has placed the emphasis on the link between knowledge and practice, but which has not distinguished between knowledge and *visibility*. Let us therefore invert the terms and say: practice obscures reality; it is that which is upset in its normal working that is visible, that becomes *strange* to us. This has been shown on the theoretical level by Heidegger, who distinguishes between the “Zuhandenheit,” which permits us to recognize the implement, and the “Vorhandenheit,” which makes it visible. It was also shown by Duchamp on the practical level, by uprooting the object from its utilitarian context.

Thus we would seem to have three types of relation in the world: *practice* (e.g.: speaking), *knowledge* (e.g.: linguistics), and *visibility* (e.g.: words in poetry). Only the latter brings us face to face with “things themselves.” In relation to the

⁴⁷ L. Alloway, *American Pop Art*, Whitney Museum, New York, 1974, p. 16.

⁴⁸ E. Goffman, *Les rites de l'interaction*, Paris, Minuit, 1974.

various disturbance techniques, Pop contributes a new element: the everyday is kept at a distance and is unmasked *by means of its own language*. The civilization of the image provides the image of civilization. There is nothing tautological in this attitude, since we have seen equally well that the reigning imagery is affected by a shift, an unreality index, which puts it in a position to be viewed aesthetically. Furthermore, although this was certainly not its purpose, Pop constitutes an implicit criticism of the majority of theories of knowledge which neglect the new media of communication or, in the best instance, think of them as ideological filters distracting us from "reality," without seeing that the latter is not independent of the former.

In summary, the sociological importance of Pop does not lie merely in what it says about the daily environment and mass images: the simple fact that it is able to turn them into objects of discourse is also revealing. Each of us feels, still confusedly, that our familiar universe is now, as McLuhan states, the "content" of a new environment whose boundaries are electronics and the conquest of space. Haunted by the future, our civilization watches itself in the mirror of its own horizons. Just think, for example, of the vogue for science-fiction films and stories, or the implications of Alvin Toffler's book *Future-shock*. And if the future is the life of tomorrow, it is the death of today: we now comprehend our actions and modes of thought from the point of view of posterity, as "ways and customs," and our objects as archaeological remains. That we can study our daily activities as "interaction rites"⁴⁸ shows that henceforth that lofty perspective, that retrospection, are to become more closely and intimately relevant.

Pop Art and, more broadly speaking, the aesthetic perception of the everyday, witness to this intimation of the transitoriness of the contemporary world. The aesthetic gaze which, according to Sartre, is "life seen from the point of view of death,"⁴⁹ thus manifests the self-knowledge of an age which, for the first time in history, sees its present as the past.

⁴⁹ J.-P. Sartre, *L'idiote de la famille*, volume III, Paris, Gallimard, 1972, p. 527.