KITCH AND POST-HISTORY

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Thesis: Kitsch is recycled rubbish. Rubbish imposes a circular model of culture. This model obliges us to abandon linear, «historical» explanations of culture. It obliges us to elaborate criteria which are adequate to circular, «post - historical» experience, values and knowledge. Thus a consideration of Kitsch may assist us in the endeavor to grasp the painful transition from the industrial to the post-industrial society, from progressive discourse to a more dialogical form of communication.

A linear model of culture: «Man transforms nature progressively into culture». This implies a specific anthropology: Man, as opposed to other animals, can transmit acquired information. («history»), and he can stock it. («culture»). This is how such a model looks like:

Objects are torn, one by one, from their natural context. «Production». They are then manipulated to acquire a new form. «Work». Example: The hide of a cow is torn from the cow and the form of a shoe is imposed on it. The objects thus transformed. («in-formed») are the «cultural objects». In their totality, they make up «culture». This process of transmission and storeage of information is cumulative: «history». It starts with nature entirely uninformed by man, and it tends toward nature entirely informed, toward «total culture». Man inhabits culture, (he recognizes himself in his information). Thus the progessive transformation of nature into culture implies a progressive «naturalisation» of man in the world, a progressive emancipation of man from natural conditions.

This sort of model is typically «modern». It articulates faith in science, in technology, in progress. It contains all the modern political commitments, be they liberal or Marxist. It contains most of the modern values, such as those of work, of creativity, and of innovation. This is why it is painful to have to admit that the model is no longer useful.

Its implied anthropology cannot stand criticism by present neuro-physiollogy, which no longer distinguishes clearly between acquired and genetic information. (between the hardware «brain» and the software «data»). Its concept of a cumulative stock of information, «culture», contradicts the Second principle of thermodynamics, which states that every information tends toward dis-informa-

tion. And its optimism concerning a progressive transformation of nature into culture is contradicted by the phenomenon «rubbish», which shows concretely how information is degraded. The model must be abandoned.

Which means that Modernity must be abandoned. However, if we do this, if we give up faith in progress, we are in danger of falling into the abyss of circullar myth and magic. This danger may be observed if one considers TV reception. On the other hand, the abandon of Modernity may open the way toward a new circularity. I shall project my cultural model into this opening.

A circular model of culture: «Man changes nature into a material support for information. He then informs it and changes it into culture. Culture is deformed into rubbish. And rubbish is disinformed to become nature». This implies a specific anthropology: Man is committed to preservation of information for as long as possible, he knows that he must die and be forgotten, and he attempts to delay death. This is how such a model looks like:

Objects are torn, one by one, from their natural context. in order to be known and understood. «Investigation». They are then manipulated to acquire a new form. «Work». This form will be dilluted by consumption or by natural entropy. «Consumption». Finally it will be entirely extinguished by entropy to become nature. «Decomposition». Example: A cow is understood to be a material support for a shoe form. Its hide is torn from it and the show form is imposed on it. The shoe is worn and thrown away. It then decomposes. Another example: The surface of the Moon is understood to be a material support for interplanetary travel. A platform is built on it by NASA. This building goes on until the Moon surface becomes crowded with debris. It is then abandoned. The sum of objects understood to be information supports can be called «resources». The sum of informed objects may be called «culture». And the sum of deformed objects may be called «rubbish».

The model is circular: «Nature - resources - culture - rubbish - nature». Man is committed to a regulation of this circulation. He intends to keep it, for as long as possible, in the stage «culture». If this model is applied to the present situation, it will show its power. «Nature» will be seen as disappearing from our field of vision. Almost everything we call «nature» will

be seen as «resources»: cows, the Moon, atoms, human brains. «Resources» will be seen as a limited region: the exhaustion of material and energy resources. This limitation is due to improved «work»: resources are informed ever more rapidly and ever more «deeply». «Culture» will be seen as an inadequate storage for such an avalanche of informed objects. It overflows into rubbish. «Rubbish» will be seen as a circulation dam: the deformed objects which flow into it are not disinformed rapidly enough, and they accumulate. Rubbish thus flows back into culture and inundates it. The model will show that we suffer at present from disturbances of cultural circulation.

It will also show the methods to regulate these disturbances. Slow down «work», to prevent resources to be exhausted and to permit culture to store the less numerous informed objects. Example: economic crisis. Improve the storage capacity of culture. Example: computation. Accelerate decomposition from rubbish into nature. Example: the ecological movement. Recycle rubbish into culture. Example: Kitsch. These methods may be combined, and the combination «economic crisis - computation - econuts - kitschisation» is in fact characteristic of our present cultural situation.

Some implications of the circular model: The linear model «nature - culture» implies two regions for research: «sciences of nature», and «sciences of culture». The circular model «nature - resources - culture - rubbish - nature» adds two new regions: «sciences of resources», and «sciences of rubbish». Examples for sciences of resources: informatics, (the study of information impressed on supports), and genetics, (the study of information impressed on living support). Examples of sciences of rubbish: archaeology, (the study of material rubbish), etymology, (the study of linguistic rubbish), analytic psychology, (the study of mental rubbish). These new sciences result in powerful techniques. Examples: robotisation, genetic engineering, reconstruction, psycho-analytical treatment. They also result in new categories of understanding. Examples: Chance instead of causality, probability calculus instead of laws, program instead of purpose. All those new categories imply a circular instead of a linear structure of space-time. Example: rubbish is seen both as a «past» and a

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· future · of culture. (the ruins of Carthage are future understanding, repressed complexes are future behavior).

The linear model · nature - culture · implies a linear evaluation. Nature is value-free, culture is value. The circular model implies a circular evaluation. Nature is value-free, resources are valuable, culture is value, rubbish is negative value. Which results in the following evaluation of human existence; we are surrounded by objects of positive and negative value, those objects are surrounded by valuable objects, and those again by value-free objects, and all this turns in eternal repetition. Positive values become negative, negative ones become value-free, value-free ones become valuable, valuable ones become positive values, and so on ad nauseam. Such an absurd evaluation of human existence will no doubt result in new ethical, political and aesthetic criteria; · transvaluation of all values ·.

Thus the substitution of the linear by the circular model of culture, undertaken in order to accomodate the phenomen · rubbish ·, will be seen to imply a revolution in our epistemological, moral, political and artistic thinking. And in fact we may observe how this revolution is occurring at present.

Communication: The circle · nature - resources - culture - rubbish - nature · may be divided into two sectors. The sector · nature - resources - culture · may be called · communication ·, (production, transmission and storage of information). The sector · culture - rubbish - nature · may be called · dis - communication ·, (oblivion of information). Cultural circulation will then be seen to be an epicycle which sits upon a straight line which tends toward dis-information, (Second principle of thermo-dynamics). Thus: Informations are produced, impressed upon objects, transmitted into a memory, and forgotten. This requires a short consideration of communication.

Informations are produced from previous informations through synthesis, (com-putation). For instance: this paper is information produced through synthesis of informations stocked in the memory of this author. Or: a new chemical substance is produced through synthesis of information stocked in the memories of researchers and in artificial memories of a laboratory. This process may be called a · dialogue ·. The information thus produced is transmitted toward other memories to be stocked there. The transmission may be broadcast, (Example: TV), it may be aimed, (example: teaching), or it may have a more complex structure, (example: transmission of scientific information). This process may be called a · discourse ·. The memory which receives the information, (be it human or otherwise), will stock it until it is obliterated. The three phases of communication imply

each other: no dialogue without previous information stockage, no discourse without previous dialogue, no information stockage without previous discourse. If one of the three phases weakens, communication is in danger of collapsing. Example: the present feeling of lack of communication, inspite of ever more efficient and universal discourse, for lack of dialogue. Thus, the sector · nature - resources - culture · of cultural circulation may be seen as a dialectical opposition to the sector · culture - rubbish - nature ·. However, there are elements which disturb this dialectics.

What I have called the · sciences of rubbish · are in fact an attempt to disturb this dialectics. They aim at lifting rubbish back into communication. The tyre which has been thrown away is to be re-informed. The complex which has been repressed is to be made conscious. In short: the informations which tend from memory into oblivion are to be re-inserted into communication. We thus have an epicycle of communication which sits upon the epicycle of cultural circulation. In this sense it may be said that the three phases of communication: · dialogue · discourse · stockage - dialogue · form a circle which aims at sucking in the cultural circulation. No longer can we see communication as a progressive, · discoursive ·, process, but now as a recurring, · dialogical ·, process. And memory is no longer seen as an aim of communication, but as the place of origin and of destruction of communication. This consideration of communication was necessary, if we are to understand the present kitschisation of culture.

Kitsch: It is a disturbance of the dialectics between communication and oblivion, but a disturbance which works against what I have called the · sciences of rubbish ·. A tyre which has been thrown away is to be reinformed, (sciences of rubbish). A tyre which has been thrown away is to be kept in the garange, (Kitsch). The purpose of Kitsch is to preserve rubbish. To prevent it from being re-inserted into communication, but also to prevent it from becoming nature. Kitsch is committed to rubbish. In order to avoid communication. This commitment demands an explanation.

New information is difficult to store: it has to be adapted in the memory to other informations already stored there. · Learing ·. Rubbish is easy to store: it is partly consumed information and fits well. Kitsch is committed to storing rubbish in the memory, in order to render rubbish less abhorrend. Thanks to Kitsch man is not menaced by rubbish: he can dwell within it. Recycled rubbish, Kitsch, is therefore a solution of the present circulatory dysfunction of culture. Like slums are a solution for economic dysfunctions.

Kitsch results from a regulation of the back-flow of rubbish into culture, of semi-forgotten information back in-

to communication. Example: colonial gothic, where the semi-forgotten information · gothic · is stored without re-information. However, this re-insertion interrupts communication. Since no dialogue follows such a storage, culture becomes devoid of communication. Kitschisation of culture is elimination of communication from culture. And therefore the sucking in of culture into rubbish. Kitsch is an epicycle which sits upon the cultural epicycle, and turns it in the opposite direction of the one in which the sciences of rubbish are turning. This improved model of culture may be visualized as follows:

There is the linear trend of nature from information toward dis-information, (entropy). On it sits an epicycle which results in culture and returns toward nature, (cultural circulation). On this epicycle sit two secondary epicycles. One tries to regulate cultural circulation in a negative entropic manner, by lifting rubbish back into communication, (the sciences of rubbish). The other one tries to regulate cultural circulation by an entropic manner by recycling rubbish into culture, (Kitsch). Thus:

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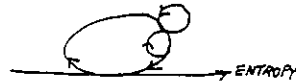
The important aspect to grasp in Kitsch is its convenience for memory storage. It is a convenient method for regulating cultural circulation. It is · pretty ·. As culture becomes kitschisized, it becomes prettified, and ever more agreeable, (ever less difficult), to live in. This is so, because new information is ever better prevented from penetrating into culture, and memory becomes a place for re-processing over and over again the same already consumed informations. A kitschisized culture is one of eternal return. In fact, as kitschisation progresses, culture becomes ever less distinguishable from rubbish. Except that it is rubbish made inhabitable. The attraction which kitsch offers is that it is an effortless circulation regulation. That it satisfies the · nostalgie de la boue ·, which is the longing for effortlessness, for death, for losing oneself in the amorphouse.

Kitsch results when rubbish is lifted back, recycled, into culture. Thus rubbish must be dived into, and brought to its surface. There are various layers of rubbish: of objects in various stages of decay, of deformation. These layers may be sticked together to form agglutinations of various disinformation levels. The more levels are sticked together, the prettier they are: they seems to carry a great amount of information, and still are easily digested by memory, and easily forgotten. Examples: A plastic fountain pen which shows St. Peter's cathedral with snow falling on it, when it is appropriately handled. Here spent technology has been agglutinated with spent tourism and spent romanticism.

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Nazism, which solves the problem of preserving the Arian race by settling Germans in Russia. Here spent socialism, spent scientific hypotheses, and spent cultural criticism have been agglutinated with spent myths. These rubbish agglutinations recycled into culture are efficient in preventing new information to penetrate into cultture. They are efficient in eliminating communication from culture.

Anti-communication: I have defined «communication» as the process of production, distribution and storage of information. I shall define «anti-communication» as the process of distribution, storage and oblivion of redundant information. Anti-communication charactarizes kitschisized culture. It may be visualized as a distorted mirror of true communication. And then described as follows:

To « discourse » in true communication corresponds « program » in anti-communication. Kitsch is irradiated through broadcasting channels, (TV, movie theatres, radio, newspapers), in the direction of memories to be stocked there. To « memory storage » in true communication corresponds ««sensationalism» in anti-communication. The program received by a memory is almost immediastely obliterated, and new programs are required to take the place of the first one. To «dialogue» in true communication corresponds « feed-back » in anti-communication. The programs received evoke passive reactions in the receptor memories, and these reactions are fed back into the emittor memories to provoke the emission of new programs. Some feed-back channels are: marketing, public opinion research, political elections. Thus anti-communication forms a circle: program-feed back-program. Since in the course of this circle no new information is produced, but the same Kitsch disinformations are constantly being recycled under the form of apparently ever new programs, the process may go on automatically, until the Kitsch disinformation is entirely exhausted.

While true communication is a negatively entropic process, (it synthesises new information from preceding ones), anti-communication is an entropic process, (it exhausts information). As culture becomes ever more kitschisized, anti-communication replaces true communication. Which is what is happening, and which is sometimes called « the culture of the masses », and at other times « the universal village ».

Prognosis: Kitsch corrects the dysfunction of cultural circulation by recycling rubbish into culture, and by thus making it to decay within culture. But there is a different method to control rubbish accumulation, and we can observe how it begins to work at present:

Rubbish accumulates because its input is larger then its output. The input of rubbish are partly disinformed, (consumed), objects. The output

is totally disinformed, (decayed), objects. The output is smaller than the input, because objects decay more slowly than they are disinformed. It has been discovered recently that information may be produced, transmitted and stored without the support of objects. That there is such a thing as « pure information ». Namely information which passes through electro-magnetic fields, (example: computer terminal). This discovery of supportless information is sometimes called « information revolution ». It does away with rubbish accumulation.

As pure information will penetrate culture, informed objects will become rarer. Not only books and paintings, but also shoes and refrigirators will become rarer. If the receiver can have pure information, he will no longer be interested in accumulating information impressed in objects: he will not ask for one more pair of shoes, but for one more computer software. At the same time, informed objects will tend to become more rapidly decomposable: no need for bronze and marble, if electromagnetic memories are more « eternal ». Rubbish input will become smaller, and its output will become quicker.

Thus pure information will render Kitsch unnecessary, but it will render it inoperative at the same time. Pure information will inaugurate a new type of true communication, based on dialogues through apparatus, (example: cable). The result of such a new form of communication will be an avalanche of ever new informations. Thus: dialogical synthesis of new information, (for instance: synthetic images), discourse of these informations through « telematic » channels, storage of the new informations in artificial memories, and therefrom new

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synthesis of information. In such a negatively entropic sort of « telematized » communication there will be no place for Kitsch, for anti-communication.

Summery: We are at present menaced by rubbish accumulation. Rubbish accumulates because Industrial revolution has accelerated the impression of information upon objective resources. The results are: the resources become scarce, culture can no longer stock the mass of informed objects, they overflow into rubbish, and do not decay with sufficient rapidity to return to nature. Thus rubbish flows back into culture. Kitsch is a method to regulate this flow-back. It renders it pretty. Thereby it eliminates communication from culture, and replaces it with anti-communication.

But there are symptoms which suggest that the Industrial revolution is over. Instead of impressing information on objective resources, the new revolution uses electro-magnetic fields to produce, transmit and store information. Society is about to change from an industrial one to a new one. For reasons discussed in this paper, the new type of society which is emerging may be called a « post-historical » one. In post-history there will be no place for Kitsch, because rubbish will no longer be a problem. To be sure: new problems of cultural circulation will arise, but they are outside the scope of this paper.

In sum: Kitsch is a transitional phenomenon: it marks the passage from industrial society to the post-historical society of pure information. But it is a phenomenon which characterizes the present. A future post-historical historian may well name the 20th century as the period of Kitsch and anti-communication.

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