

# Dehumanization or the Disappearance of Pluralism?

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The 'dehuman' and the inhuman are not, even partially, exterior to the human, as are the material and the living, the animal and the bestial; they represent rather the extremes, the very limits of the human. The inhuman forms the interior facet of the boundary which makes us human and concerns us as such. In that sense, it is never exterior to us.

The inhuman is the exclusive potentiality of the human as a human – which is the cultural shift of natural evolution – it is first and foremost alienation. Indeed the human is not a condition of complete immobility but the very movement that projects the living members of this species into the impossible transfer of their world *into words*.

The inhuman is the human pushed to extremes, and, since the human is the alienation of the living by culture, the inhuman is thus the extreme of alienation. As malaise and as alienation, culture is the overt tension, never stabilized, between the real and the symbolic, with the latter never able to catch up with the former, *in truth*, even if it always achieves this in practice.

The extreme of alienation – and thus of the inhuman – is the shift of this tension to the point where culture would abolish itself, eliminating itself as malaise.

Thus there necessarily exist two absolute forms of the inhuman:

- the inhuman approached through the destruction of the living;
- the inhuman approached through the destruction of the symbolic.

By the same token there exist, just as necessarily, two related forms of the inhuman:

- one which follows on from domination of the symbolic by the living;
- one which follows on, conversely, from control of the living by the symbolic.

Insofar as cultural history is merely the movement which slips between the four polarities of the inhuman, this history presents itself as the evolution of a dialogue between four extreme positions.

To make the picture more concrete, we can attempt to characterise each of these polarities of the inhuman as the apex of that which is human:

the destruction of the living by the symbolic, of life by utterance, specifically self-destructive, comes within what we have been able to understand partially in the psychiatric category of 'psychosis', that is to say the tendency to get rid of the body by stripping away the flesh, intellectualisation, abstract coherence, or, on the other hand, the disintegration of words. This is

what I will call here, quite simply, Mind, in its various ways of becoming absolute in time and space;

conversely, the destruction of the symbolic by living beings will be called rather 'autism', (in the individual as well as the collective sense which Bleuler and Freud gave to this term) because it concerns a search – voluntary or involuntary – for the real by isolating it and freeing it from the Mind. More simply still, I will call this the Body.

Passing now to the intermediary polarity concerning the precedence of the body over the mind (and no longer its mere destruction), we arrive at what psychiatric categorization, which came from religious persuasion, used to call perversion: without automatically disparaging the term, let us merely note its connection with the question of belief in objects, and the aesthetic creativity which accompanies it.

The final polarity relative to the inhuman, characterized by the mind prevailing over the body, lies in the element of ritual, rule and law. This is the most common position adopted, that of individuals worried about culture, without necessarily being able to disengage from it. Generally this is produced either by the indirect means of an obligation to curb the pleasure of acting according to the rule, or by means of arranging the various kinds of acts in relation to each other.

Thus, to sum up without being too reductive, we can identify these four potential polarities of the inhuman – temporarily and for the purposes of demonstration – as spiritualism, autism, fascination and ritualism.

It is now important to be quite sure about where we are with respect to the cultural and historical dialogue between these polarities, and above all to recognize which of the polarities of the inhuman concerns us most today, which challenges us more today than yesterday. This implies the resolution of two conditions:

- first of all, we must accept that our cultural history is produced by a succession of cultural polarities, and thus of the inhuman, rather than by their simultaneous existence in all the societies which form part of that culture. But it is easy to consider this condition fulfilled as soon as we admit that the collective experience of a polarity of the inhuman necessarily leads to fear, dread of its consequences and thus escape from that polarity. Thus, by definition, one can only escape from one polarity towards another: for example, from the body to the mind, or conversely, from the mind to the body, passing through the intermediate states between extreme relationships;
- secondly, we should ask ourselves whether movement from one polarity of the inhuman to another comes about in a relatively erratic and unpredictable way. There again the answer is, obviously, negative: for example, when one is part of an era characterized by Mind, and thus by its tyranny which has a tendency to oppress and then abolish the bodies in it, the movement of the historical dialogue can only take place in the opposite direction: that of a dismissal of the Mind, and of a corresponding recognition of bodies. The movement of culture between this pole of inhumanity is therefore always made up of a cycle, of a sinusoidal shift opening out – more or less quickly, more or less directly – between the most important polarities of Mind and Body.

The crucial question can now be asked: what stage are we at with this shift? What is the central form of inhumanity which we are experiencing today? How can we work it out from the development of the historical dialogue in which we are active participants?

It is clear that to reply to questions such as these requires a great deal of work to put the connection between theory and history in place. We can only propose a hypothesis: if it is true that the European West has known a continuous and practically irreversible movement of intellectualization since the 12th century, then, in spite of the changes in the integration of peoples and nations – which characterized the 20th century – we are today at the acme of an age of the Mind. We are experiencing the triumph of this principle and of its own inhumanity, and by the same token we can foresee a time for resistance and a return to the body.

The inhumanity of the time does not lie in a reduction in this integration, the disappearance of an important Other, and the elimination of spirituality, but rather in globalized vision, radical theorizing of the world, the idealistic pretence of understanding the total combined reality of culture and nature in the mind, and in the entity of rational management which the planet has become.

It is this spiritual order which fills and transcends the former hybrid thoughts of the body and the mind, and which is taking over as a major tendency of humanity *and thus* of the prevailing cultural inhumanity.

To claim that the present inhumanity could be rather the effect of individualism, the limitless scattering of bodies and the corresponding fascination with objects, means on the one hand being unable to see the main dangers of the present inhumanity, nor to understand how scattering of individuals and fascination with objects contribute today to the globalizing spiritual order, but also means risking supporting, if not actually promoting, this inhuman principle, and impeding the most human movement of historical dialogue, the principle of which is to be part of the sphere of humanity whilst avoiding succumbing to a succession of seductions of extremes.

To maintain that autonomy, possession of oneself, lawlessness and symbolism are the principal pathologies of the time, leads first of all to being unable to hear the complaints of those who are suffering from the extreme authoritarianism of the major technical and political social systems. That can make one quite insensitive to even the most obvious symptoms, by which large numbers express their feelings about the times. Thus, by highlighting depression as a pathology of current individualism, we forget that dietary and health phobias, or hysteria about sexuality are perhaps even more important symptoms which define the present situation. It also means we are mistaken about the causes of depressing frustrations which spring rather more from weariness caused by suffering constant consumer injunctions, as well as management disciplines, contractual barriers which are more and more restrictive and effectively reduce the subjects of exchange to subjects for commercial and bureaucratic circulation, . . . than from the weariness of being oneself, according to Alain Ehrenberg.

It means not wanting to know that the rational and synthetic mind in power at the moment is simultaneously a technoscientist, a theoretician, a politician and a police officer. Consequently it means running the risk of increasing police surveillance, which is already so omnipresent, keeping things so wholly under video surveillance, so oppressive for a large number of today's human subjects.

What the powerful gene-manipulating institutions, the organizers of *Loft Story*, profiting from an eagerness to seize on intimacy as an ultimate value, have in common with moralists of the return to the great Other (in the name of ecological danger) is the desire (possibly shared by the majority: there is no question of a plot, rather a cultural tendency)

to take complete hold of collective power over the spontaneity associated with the human being. It is a common desire to capture what remains of the autonomy of living people within a global theory shared by everybody. Without knowing it, and possibly hostile to each other, they are all working for the final victory of Mind.

For what does *Loft Story* show us? It shows that the more sophisticated the situation of combined sadistic pressures in which one places people, the more those people will subtly demonstrate their humanity. And that the more inhuman the rules of mutual elimination are, the more the scene of imprisonment seems to reduce the subjects to insignificance, and the more people manage, within this pernicious game, to emphasize an emotional and intellectual sensitivity of great value. Is it the inhumanity of the pernicious game or the evocation of this sensitivity which fascinates the hordes of young television watchers?

This is not to say that, in order to prove our humanity, we ought to submit ourselves even more to the great *Loft Story* which forms the backdrop to our current society. But I simply use it to emphasize that global spiritual dictatorships of the body, intimacy, autonomy, etc., of the time call irresistibly for the pursuit of historical dialogue. The theology in power, that of an omniscient camera-god means an almost automatic progression, once the living have been devoured as the presumed sanctuary of residual sense, to the next metaphor.

The next metaphor which insists on emerging (and whose emergence in the presumably non-conformist scattered resistances to the regime of the Mind it would be inadvisable for the Intellectuals to suppress in advance), is the necessary return of living bodies to their legitimate demand to bear the human in their own way. The next metaphor – the return of the body – should not be considered here in isolation, but as a proof of more fluid circulation within the sphere of plurality, as the human essence of culture. Indeed, it is not in itself alone that the return of living bodies as opposed to the machine for comprehending the world and life will serve as proof of humanity, but as a corrective, an amendment in actuality of the always inhuman potential for cultural alienation which defines us as humans.

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Translated from the French by Rosemary Dear