

ARTS AND MEDIA ON THE ROAD TO ABDERA?

In our times changes occur so rapidly that our modes of reading even more than our modes of analysis risk being inadequate, or in any case risk lagging behind. If we wish to analyze relations between the arts and the media, the danger is in fact that we will limit ourselves to established notions or even to stereotypes which are commonly accepted by the general public. Even for persons with some awareness, information remains lacunary. Moreover, like the experts, or those who pass for such, it seems that it is difficult for them to avoid a personal conception, implicit or avowed, which does not fail to influence their judgement. This is almost always the case when the matter of art is raised, even if we take the precaution of placing the term in the plural. Whether one wishes to or not, there is hardly an example where certain preferences do not make themselves known. If it is easy to reach agreement with regard to the facts, it is less easy to agree on their interpretation, especially when values are at stake. Hence the necessity to proceed by different steps and explanations to explain the relationships between arts and the media.

It is also necessary to take into account a factor which is proper to our times and which no other era has known, at least to such

Translated by R. Scott Walker

a degree. *Mobility* is everywhere. Scientific discoveries are being multiplied unendingly. Galaxies thrive in an ever vaster universe; atoms and molecules yield their secrets one by one to the increasingly more sophisticated apparatuses which track them. The infinitely large and the infinitely small meet in a *complexus* which scholars feverishly seek to uncover.

But it is most especially in technology that the manifestations of mobility are the most striking. It has taken but a short period of time for video tape recorders to invade our living rooms; the personal computer is quickly following suit. Airliners weave an ever tighter web across the sky; the first extra-terrestrial colonies will be established within the next decade. Organs are exchanged like so many spare parts.

Shaken by scientific discoveries, and even more by the technological changes whose effects are felt throughout our everyday existence, our modes of sensing, of perceiving and understanding are being transformed, more often than not without our awareness.

As proof, consider the mutations to which is subject the instrument of communication which is language. Dictionaries and encyclopedias cannot keep pace. Not without surprise we discover that these instruments of knowledge have a limited life span, even when they attempt to stay up to date by publishing periodic supplements. If we consult the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, one of the most prestigious reference tools which exist, we note that the articles *Art* and *Technology* only partially correspond to the situation which we know today. This brings out clearly that Knowledge is giving way to the definitions which usage has customarily had the role of establishing. Affected by the mobility of our time, usage itself is in evolution. The stable situation which formerly legitimated usage has given way to an unstable situation, the effect of which is a constant questioning not only of contents and not only of terminology, but of the modes of structuring one and the other. Any study dealing with the present, and even more those dealing with the future, can only be presented in a problematic perspective. Nothing is ensured thereby. It is not, however, a question of giving in to vagueness or approximation. The decisive factor is to evaluate that mobility which is our lot, in order to attempt to sketch from the conditions which we know, the possibilities which are becoming apparent.

With this change in perspective there is a corresponding change in method. In a stable situation knowledge tends to break itself down into delimited fields: philosophy, science, art, each of which has, if not its autonomy, at least its limits which are so defined that they become the prerogative of specialists. It is in this way that research has been focused primarily on changes which have occurred in each one of them through the centuries; hence the flourishing of disciplines institutionalized by the university, such as the history of philosophy, the history of sciences, the history of the arts and letters. The historian has for a long time thus been seen as the guardian of knowledge which he explored through a diachronic method.

On the other hand, the situation of mobility which is our own, by undermining the notion of limit, calls for a different method which can be designated schematically by the term systemic/energetic. Every system is in fact composed of elements featuring properties which participate simultaneously in the properties of the system to which it in some other way contributes. The consequence is that it is appropriate, rather than studying the elements or the systems in themselves, to consider their interactions relative to the complex situation in which they occur.

To limit myself to art, it is evident that the traditional historical approach is insufficient. What we designate today by the term *art*, along with the notions which are associated with it—work, artist, aesthetics—is the product of the interactions of a system in movement in which must be considered elements or agents as different as artists, galleries, dealers, art lovers, collectors, critics, institutions (museums, foundations, cultural centers) national and/or international exhibitions (biennials, triennials, festivals), juries, the media (press, radio, TV, video, video-disks), the art market (fairs, auction sales), art historians, experts, insurers, shippers, reproducers, cultural industries (publishers, tourist agents), public authorities, the public, etc.¹

Each agent plays a role therein, a role which is all the more complex to the extent that it interacts with all the others. Moreover, each of them disposes of powers (and hence the term *energe-*

¹ I discussed this problem in *Art(s) and Power(s)* which appeared in issue No. 120 of *Diogenes*.

tic) giving to the system physiognomies which differ depending on the areas in which it functions. Every work of art (but also every “event”) results from a multidimensional process—political, social, economic, technical, cultural—in which the media play an ever-increasing role. Can this briefly outlined systemic-energetic method be used as a framework of comparison to determine the situation of the arts today?

A first line of force leads us to distinguish the activities traditionally defined by what formerly was designated Fine Arts: architecture, painting, sculpture, literature, music, theatre, dance, etc., each of which was considered as specific and derived from knowledge which was likewise specific. The corpus of works which constituted each of them was the result of a consensus which today we are learning was less that of everyone than that of the dominating cultured class. It was indeed this class which retained the power to make choices, establish criteria and values, and to propagate these through the media which it controlled, in particular through books, as well as through the institutions which it had founded, through universities and more broadly through education.

Over a certain number of decades the situation has changed considerably. Although the traditional activities continue to maintain their role (even if the term Fine Arts is by now obsolete), the media are treating us to the emergence, and then the invasion, of new means of expression to which the Americans have given the name of “Public Arts”.² If cinema and photography are now accepted as art forms, the same is not true—not yet at least—for cartoon strips, photo-romances, television, songs, records, not to mention advertising, video games and all that which European sociologists tend to group under the term “mass arts”. This label, which some deem pejorative, clearly marks the rupture which has occurred with the culture of the elite. Without prejudging their respective values, it is important to bear in mind that this is no longer a matter reserved to a minority. Nor is it a question of a simple dichotomy; even the most refined spirits willingly admit to the pleasure they find in watching a Western, in listening to Georges Brassens at least, if not to Johnny Halliday, or even to

² This is the title of the work originally published in 1956 by Gilbert Seldes, New York, Simon & Schuster.

flipping through the comics. The “mass dimension” envelops traditional forms of culture, even if for many it does not reduce them. In any case it is clear that the notion of art is undergoing an extension which it is no longer possible to ignore; and this represents, for a large part of humanity, a “parallel” culture, sometimes the only one, with which it nourishes itself and which is derived from industrial production alone.³

Such production is subject to the law of the market and all the imperatives which that implies: investments, technological innovation, competition, marketing, distribution, merchandising, etc. In this aspect, mass arts cannot be distinguished from other mass consumer products. The concept of author is eliminated: Goldrake, Superman and video games are products created by specialized teams. Coproductions are becoming the rule for television programs.⁴

This observation, although succinct, brings to light a paradox which merits reflection. On the one hand these new arts are the object of in-depth studies by sociologists and psychologists, just as they are the subjects of reports and seminars so frequently organised by international institutions (Unesco, Council of Europe, etc.); on the other hand they constitute the activities of important industries whose goal is in no respect knowledge, but solely profits.

And thus in our modern civilisation there has occurred a significant and still badly perceived division between *the logic of knowledge* on the one hand, based on historical and critical discourse, and *the logic of the market* on the other, which is less concerned with knowing than with ensuring sale of its products through ever-expanding and accelerating means of distribution.

These two types of logic have radical consequences. Essentially we can say that the statements of experts who deal with the mass arts, and more broadly with mass culture, no matter how refined they might be, have no effect on producers who alone possess the initiative and the power of decision. They are the ones who determine the mass environment in which we are immersed. The logic of traditional knowledge is not without use; simply it has

³ In 1980, out of 4.3 billion publications, 28% dealt with cartoons.

⁴ Cf. the Sixth International Market of Monte Carlo. “*Un maître mot: coproduire*”, *Le Monde*, February 7, 1984, p. 17.

become inoperative under the production conditions of cultural industries.⁵

Another group of artistic expressions is connected with the development of technology. This is the case of video art, of computer art, of laser art, of mail art, of copy art, of sociological art which, like Fred Forest, uses the media as means of expression (newspapers, radio, television, telephone).⁶

These new arts, which can be called “technological”, are all characterised by the use they make of technologies already existing or yet to come. Certainly the Fine Arts, or what was termed such and which has now been replaced by the name of plastic arts, always made use of techniques for the evident reason that there is

⁵ At the most we can hope that it has some effect on the political will which claims still to control, to a certain extent at least, the logic of the market. Such is in any case the postulate of international institutions whose recommendations, and sometimes resolutions, are thought to enlighten governments in order to aid them in taking necessary measures. This does not occur without problems and difficulties.

To be noted as well is the delight proper to intellectuals who love to take apart the mechanism of things over which they have no control. Thus Jean Baudrillard’s fulminations against the modern world in which he sees but “obscenity”. “Obscenity is a desperate attempt at seduction. Its only error is that it claims to seduce through the vulgar evidence of truth and not by the subtle use of available signs.” “What are you doing after the orgy?”, in the review *Traverses*/29, p. 11. The same issue of *Traverses* (No. 29, October 1983), is the occasion for Olivier Kaepelin to note his pleasure in the entwinings of a peep show under the title “*Egorgement discret et chasse violente*”, p. 114. It is astonishing that so many minds take pleasure in denouncing what they consume with the excuse of escaping from consumption through reflection. I see that I myself do not escape from this criticism! The whole problem thus consists, in my opinion, in knowing if stress is laid on a desire to denounce or on a desire to elucidate. At the present time it is the second aspect which seems to me preferable.

⁶ See “Art Press”, *Art et Technologie*, No. 76, December 1983, which gives a general although brief survey of these new forms of expression. Also information on the future projects of the Musée de La Villette which will devote a sizable amount of space to them. For art using computers as well as for video art, see, among others, Abraham Moles, *Art et Ordinateur*, Paris, Casterman, 1981, coll. “Synthèses contemporaines”, and Joseph Deken, *Computer Images, State of the Art*, London, Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1983; on video art see René Berger, *L’Effet des changements technologiques. En mutation, l’art, la ville, l’image, la culture, NOUS!*, Lausanne, Editions Pierre-Marcel Favre, 1983, chapter III, *Aux aguets de la communication*.

Also to be noted is the exhibition *Electra* organized in late December 1983-early 1984 by the Musée d’art moderne of the City of Paris, whose voluminous catalogue, directed by Frank Popper, is an invaluable working instrument dealing with new forms of artistic expression associated with the development of electricity and of electronics.

no art without technique. But from impressionism to today's neo-expressionism, to take the example of painting, it is particularly the iconography which has changed, that is, the modes of representation (abstract painting, surrealist painting, formless painting, etc.). Even the use of acrylics or of air brushes or mixed techniques (Rauschenberg's combine paintings) has not fundamentally modified the media which have remained as stable as the materials themselves. On the other hand, the technological arts draw resolutely on the immaterial representations furnished by electricity and electronics. There is a real breaking off from traditional arts on the technical level. But this is not at all true on an aesthetic level, to the contrary. Technological artists distance themselves resolutely from mass products manufactured by the cultural industries. In the manner of traditional artists they claim not only to escape from anonymous production units, but also to leave their mark on what they do, or in a word, to sign their name. By doing this they align themselves in the continuum of the traditional artist whose vocation is to give form to an inspiration which assumes meaning and value in a work held to be artistic. By doing this still they intend to address in us not so much the consumer, which has its roots in the mass dimension, but the subject which is the seat of our original interrogation about the meaning and value of our existence.

This view is at once schematic and incomplete. The differences are no doubt not so sharp. It should also take into account the trends which are expressed in the two extremes represented by land art on the one hand (Walter di Maria, Richard Long, Robert Smithson); and on the other by happenings, actions, performances—in short, body art (Gina Pane, Nitsch, etc.).

The picture should also take into account certain expressions which are still in the works, generally subsumed under the broad term of "new images" and "interactive images", semi-industrial, semi-artistic productions associated with the development of computers.⁷ Nevertheless, it is sufficient to bring out the hypothesis which underlies what has gone before and which serves as connecting thread for what follows: in the situation of accelerated change

⁷ *La Recherche*, special issue of *La révolution des images*. No. 144, May 1983.

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which has become that of our society, the relation between the arts and the media is no longer the same as the one we knew previously. They have become so interwoven that it is no longer possible to consider them separately.

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This is not the place to undertake an analysis of the media as I have attempted to do with regard to the arts. And so I will limit myself, within the chosen perspective, to three observations which might enlighten my remarks.

The medium is generally thought to be the means of transmitting a message sent by one or more persons to one or more receivers. Along with language, the primary medium, books, and more generally printing, have for centuries been the dominant media. For almost a century the media have multiplied. After the press came the radio, television, video, the video disk, satellites, computers: all means of transmitting, each so many “pipelines” which are no doubt varied in their conception, their material and their production and which have the function of transmitting messages. The neutrality of the “pipelines” seems taken for granted, so much so that it seems an *a priori* to Shannon and Weaver who “canonised” it in their famous *Mathematical Theory of Communication*,⁸ to the point that administrators, technicians, political leaders, manufacturers and strategists accept it without a glance. As soon as a new technology is born, Postal Service authorities deem it sufficient to accept the task of putting it into operation. The content expressed, say these authorities, is the concern neither of the technical partner nor the administrative partner. Which, by enlarging the statement, gives rise to the so often repeated cliché that, “Technology is neither good nor evil; everything depends on the use to which it is put”.

This naive viewpoint, which can hardly dissimulate an awareness of its actual inanity, was destroyed by the radical affirmation of McLuhan: “The medium is the message”. No doubt he went too far, but his phrase is more than a jesting remark. It is evident

⁸ Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Urbana, The University of Illinois Press, 1964.

that every medium is a *process of mediatization*, which cannot be reduced to a simple transmission, and it follows from this that in every communication the very nature of the medium which carries it should be taken into consideration;⁹ this means, in the strictest sense of the term, that every medium disposes of a *power of configuration* which intervenes concretely from the point of emission to the point of reception by creating a field of possibilities to which it seems justified to associate the word *creativity*. This is generally defined as the aptitude of the human spirit to introduce new forms into our environment. This is the case of the paradigms studied by Kuhn¹⁰ which show clearly that “each scientific revolution modifies the historical perspective of the group which lives through it”. This is the case also for artistic revolutions: the adoption of Alberti’s perspective modified the field of representation which imposed itself from the time of the Renaissance and which Impressionism modified in turn at the end of the 19th century by introducing a new vision of the world. In short it is the moment that there is a change in the rules for a practice considered “normal”, i.e., accepted by all, that a new paradigm emerges.

At this point one can ask—and for me the answer to the question is affirmative—if, by modifying the conditions of our existence, technological changes are not the source of new forms through which we see and consider things in a different manner.

This is what was demonstrated recently by, among others, Robert Stéphane, for whom the TV program schedule is nothing other than a metaprogram.¹¹ As the author remarked, television disposes of a language whose syntax is provided by the screen and the camera. It has created an “interstitial art” by introducing “new

⁹ Abraham Moles notes that it is necessary to distinguish between the short term and the long term. If I call the Fire Department for assistance, the contents alone of the message are important, whether the message is relayed by live voice or by telephone. But the practice of TV, and soon that of computers, clearly proves that in the long term we are dealing with a complete reorganization of our field of perception and consequently of a change of cultural dimensions.

¹⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, *La Structure des révolutions scientifiques*, Paris, Flammarion Ed., 1970. Coll. “Nouvelle bibliothèque scientifique”.

¹¹ Robert Stéphane, *Television and Art – Television as Art*: International Conference of the Unity of Sciences, Chicago, 1983 (unpublished). The author is regional director of the RTB production center in Liège. His presentation was made during a seminar which I directed with the title *Art and Technology*.

forms” in the form of logos, jingles, studio design, masters of ceremony style, advertising spots and video clips which embed themselves in the continuous flow of televised news reports, sports programs and comedy series.

In light of this example, too briefly exposed, it is difficult to contest the fact that every medium creates forms which are properly its own, both from the point of view of communication and that of expression, given the possibilities and limitations which are its own (along with the time factor, predominant for radio and television). By doing this, the media mark out the differences from one medium to another which give each of them at least a distinct nature if not an absolute specificity. It is clear, for example, that the radio is not the press plus the sound of a voice, just as television is not simply sound plus image. The media are not constructed in an additive manner; they are made up of *configuring structures* which—and this is not noted frequently enough—impregnate the audience or audiences with *configured structures* which are at once structures of expectation, of reception and of demand. And so each medium includes an element of aesthetics, a manner of sensing, to which I apply the word *topic* to specify the fact that all the “venues” involved in the operation of a medium end up by culturally silhouetting those who use it. The printed page produces a chart of reality in which, no matter what the variety of approaches and the diversity of content, the concepts and their organisation serve as configuring and configured intermediaries. When I turn on my television set, another type of practice is awaiting me and awaited by me: moving images, sound, music, words. These intermediaries function according to modalities proper to the TV medium, and we have made them our own through a progressive interiorisation.¹²

The second observation deals with the special character of the new media. Unlike writing and the printed word which have existed for a long time and which have barely changed for centuries, the new media are subject to an evolution accelerated by the unrelenting pressures exercised by technological innovation. Our

¹² I have already discussed this notion of *topic* in my book, *L'Effet des changements technologiques. En mutation, l'art, la ville, l'image, la culture, NOUS!* Lausanne, Editions Pierre-Marcel, 1983, p. 131-137.

language itself is unable to keep up. English, or rather American, terms are invading it without stop, escaping the efforts which the government has attempted to impose to create French language equivalents. This is a significant phenomenon. On the one hand it reveals the insufficiency of the established languages and their respective topics. On the other it underlines the fact that they hold the technological power which increasingly fashions not only our vocabulary but our thought structures. Data processing jargon is becoming the means of communication required of all at the moment when computers are invading our households. The topic of the computer is becoming a universal one.

But this is but one aspect of the accelerated evolution of modern technology. There is another aspect, paradoxical if not ambiguous. At one extreme is the tendency toward *globalisation*, manifested by the phenomenon of macro-television, represented in Europe by the semi-official State-run stations and in the United States by the veritable monopoly of ABC, NBC and CBS. This tendency has culminated with the arrival of satellite broadcasting, and the first live broadcasts have just been initiated in Japan. Programs are created and distributed which aim at reaching the largest possible number of viewers by overcoming the obstacle of borders and languages. At the other extreme there is the tendency toward *privatisation*, indicated to varying degrees and in various modalities by cable broadcasting, videotext, videotex, home video: in short, by telematics and personal computers. Along this path the stress is laid upon individual usage of the media, and the Walkman appears as its symbol. To each his own choice.

At first glance the two tendencies seem clearly differentiated and even opposed. But ambiguity, which takes the form of paradox, arises from the fact that the techniques which serve one or the other uses lie in the domain of the same industrial producers. This is an indication of the weight represented by the economic factor in the evolution of the media, whether it be a matter of globalisation or of privatisation. The proof of this is IBM's invasion of the market; the firm had barely entered the micro-computer market before snatching up the largest share of sales in just two years time, relegating the original pioneers to second place or dooming them to failure, like Osborne. It is a struggle without pity to see who can eliminate the competition and seize all the opportunities, who can

establish the most effective distribution circuits. In 1975 Sony controlled almost all the video tape recorder market. Today the Betamax machine can still count on only a quarter of sales with the rest going to Matsushita whose VHS system, which appeared two years later, now covers three quarters of the world market. In the techno-economical warfare which governs industrial production, technological innovation has become, alongside capital, the offensive weapon which guarantees a victory. It would be vain to ignore the fact that it also constitutes the dynamic factor in the evolution of our modern culture.

Up until now the term media has been used in particular to designate the press, radio, television, all the means of so-called public information. However, it would be an error to limit the concept to these forms. From my point of view, the term should be extended to the new techniques: video, video disk, peritelevision, cable, telematics, satellites.

Another extension, which has also been improperly perceived until now, involves what I call the *transportation media*: trains, automobiles, airplanes. All modern vehicles are indeed not only means of transportation or of travel but are also agents which have an influence on our conduct and which metamorphose our environment. This is clearly what has happened in the case of the automobile over the last century. This is what is now happening with air travel which is dotting the globe with airports and transforming the sky into superhighways.¹³

The extension should even go further and include the new *processing medium* which is the computer. This is, in fact, more than just a machine for communicating. It has become and continues to become more a machine for simulating the processes of thinking. This is what was announced prophetically by the cover

¹³ I believe, and this is a postulate of my own, in the emergence in the course of our accelerated technological evolution of a "race" or of a sub-genus (or super genus) which will be characterized by having means (or organs) which others will not have, at least not to the same degree, namely the power of moving *at high speed, with regularity, in every direction*. This supermobility corresponds to a dimension which has never before existed and to which I ascribe the name *telemics* (not to be confused with telematics). By this I mean that new space or superspace which is characterized by its being traversed by airplanes and which is "inhabited" by that population in unending movement which I designate with the term *télanthrope*. *Op. cit.*, p. 178.

of *Time Magazine* at the beginning of 1983 when the “Man of the Year” was replaced by the machine with the title “The Computer Moves In”.

In any case, to think of the information media as simple instruments of amplification seems to me a point of view which is both too limited and partial. From this standpoint the temptation is great to reduce them to instruments of popularisation which more refined minds cannot resist decriing. This is not the proper approach to the problem. Whatever one might think of democratisation,¹⁴ and no matter how ambiguous this notion might appear, it is erroneous to confuse it with popularisation. In fact the media provide the masses with information which they would never have the opportunity to receive otherwise. That this often leads to misunderstandings and to naive or fallacious interpretations does not change the fact that the extension of the audience should be seen as a positive development. Even if the analogy is not fully comparable, it is difficult to contest the fact that the arrival of the media corresponds with the arrival of public education which opened the paths to knowledge to all, at least theoretically, and which propagated the democratic spirit favored today in turn by radio, television, video, telematics and the rest.¹⁵ The audiences which they reach make up the new forms which are restructuring society, or at least the cultural environment.

But there is another aspect, and a more secret one, to creativity in the media. In the functional perspective which we assume with regard to them, their effectiveness seems to us to increase as they become more “transparent”, that is, to the extent that they make us forget their existence. Television gives us pleasure as long as the picture is sharp and the screen is forgotten because of the show that is seen. If there is an interruption of the image or if the picture

¹⁴ “The marriage of the micro-computer and the television screen, the multiplication of distribution networks (the first aspect of the democratisation of telecommunications) the interactivity between the sender and the receiver (another aspect of this democratisation) has reopened the discussions of the examiners of the future”, observes Jacques Mousseau in “Le Carnet de notes de Jacques Mousseau”, *Communication et Langages*, No. 58, 4th quarter 1984, p. 2.

¹⁵ It is astonishing that most studies favor the negative side of media; thus there are so many reports dealing with the effects of television violence. Would it not be preferable, rather, to examine with no less attention the effects of the democratisation which they are bringing about?

becomes fuzzy, we are brusquely brought back to an awareness of the existence of the machine. It is a technician who remedies the situation by, literally, putting things back in order, that is, by restoring the machine to its normal use. But as soon as we abandon standard usage, reducing the media to a functional “transparency”, we discover that each of them is fraught with an *existential opacity*. This is what video artists like Paik and Vostell noted who began quite early to provoke disturbances on the screen, either by distorting the image using magnets like the former, or by “plugging” the television set into assorted objects, like the latter.¹⁶ At first glance these would seem but simple deviations. But the actual fact is that the two artists make use of television to divert it from its “normal” use. And precisely therein lies the value of their action. On the one hand they bring out the fact that our participation in TV is in some way contractual, and in any case conventional. On the other they reveal that when the contract is abrogated and the convention dissolved, the medium is ready to open the path to new forms. When photography and cinema, to cite two forerunners, were invented, it was hardly possible to be aware at that time of the extent to which the art of each would develop. And the same is true, to take an even more recent example, with copy art or reprography, in which artists like Pati Hill¹⁷ use Xerox machines no longer simply to reproduce documents, the functional purpose for which they are normally employed, but to invent forms which enjoy an artistic power, just as John Cage or Pierre Boulez sometimes treat a computer like a fully performing musician.¹⁸

¹⁶ Wolf Vostell states, “When I connect a television set to a scythe or to a pile of shoes, it is not a matter of obeying a formalist principle to create a moving plastic object which uses space, but of achieving a psychological truth which is conditioned by the fact that the scythe or the pile of shoes can only assume their true significance to the extent that they are situated in the context of a television program. The result is the birth of both a plastic reality (of a sculpture-event) and of a psychological discovery associated with the television program.”

¹⁷ Cf. F. de Meredieu, “Pati Hill ou le catalogue des objets magiques”, in *Art Press*, No. 76, Dec. 1983, p. 25.

¹⁸ See also Daniel Caux, *Machines complexes et complexité de l'émotion*: “Some aim at enriching an already existing musical concept. This is the case of Pierre Boulez who uses a 4 X digital sound processor to obtain in real time a reduction of tones which is both magical and almost natural. This is the success of *Répons* which, following in the wake of the composer's greatest works, combines conceptual firmness with emotional density.” In *Art Press*, *op. cit.* p. 26.

When we speak of art, we must to note that we have barely left the Aristotelian format of the four causes: the bronze (material cause) is brought to conform to the idea of a statue (formal cause) which the action of the sculptor (efficient cause) in turn brings from a being in potency to the being in act which is the statue (final cause).

Today there is no example of artistic creation which can be reduced to this formula, even though participating to some degree in it. The media, all the media, form a fifth cause which I am tempted to call a meta-cause in the sense that it envelops the four causes traditionally cited while at the same time penetrating each of them down to the very roots. In a media-based society such as our own, it is increasingly the mega-system which counts and which we wrongly try to reduce to simply an instrument of transmission, distribution and broadcasting. In fact it is at the origin of a meta-reality which is more and more, without playing on words, a media-reality. The media cause is not just a simple addition. It restructures the formats which we have a tendency to retain in the name of an outmoded humanist culture. It corresponds to changes in our experience, to what should properly be called the technoculture which has become our new frame of reference.

And so we can even ask ourselves if our age is not turning in an obscure manner to other models than those which have prevailed for so long, particularly those of Plato and of Aristotle. Theories about the essence and the nature of reality which have for centuries emanated from one and the other seem to belong to a type of society which considered stability to be its natural foundation. However, what is today called the information society may be characterised precisely by the accent which it places if not on instability at least on the non-stable, on the changing and mobile. And so it is understandable that theories about substance shift gradually to ask questions of communications, particularly of the media which continue to multiply and which are becoming omnipresent. If substance has not disappeared (how could we talk about something which had not previously assumed a form?), nevertheless it is less a question of quiddity* than a certain duration of configurations within the functioning of the media.

Our society, at least in the action which it undertakes and the

* *Editor's note:* In scholastic philosophy, the nature or essence of a thing.

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spectacle which it offers itself, has less and less need of Being. Technology, which has become both its priority objective and its moving force, can get along quite well without it. Is it not enough that it function in order that it exist?¹⁹

And so one is tempted to return to the pre-Socratic thinkers, particularly to Democritus whom we know left a body of work which is at least as important as that of his famous successors, even though there is little of this work which remains.

But the value of the Democritus “model” seems to me to lie elsewhere, in the fact that this philosopher from Abdera was the first to have postulated that things are made of atoms which assemble through their movement in space. But it is not the prescience of atomism as a contribution to physical knowledge, whether well-founded or not, which I mean to point out. What strikes me is to what point such a concept lends itself to the configurations practiced by the media at present in which messages are made up of a multitude of pixels, that is of tiny homogeneous surfaces, or bits, that is of minimal units of data.

And so it is less a matter of saluting Democritus as precursor of modern atomism than of paying homage to him who, epistemologist of the media ahead of time, understood the disconcerting relationship between the whirl of electrons and what so fleetingly takes shape on our screens, News, Culture, Entertainment or, with the Computer, the omni-generative palpitation of the Cursor. Two ideas from Democritus will serve as a final interrogation. The first: “The word is the shadow of action.” And the second: “‘Nothing’ exists just as much as does ‘something’”. These seem indeed to be the paths taken by the problematic of our times and which illustrate in an exemplary fashion the evolution of the arts and the media. There is no longer a system which is not taking part fully in change. Essence is not supplanted all of a sudden by existence. It is being sent out in the form of messages. The system of Plato and Aristotle now sounds hollow. Is communications not crackling along by pixels and bits under the amused eye of Democritus of Abdera?

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¹⁹ This does not imply that technology, as Heidegger has demonstrated, has no “essence”, which is another problem altogether.