

Bazon Brock

Propositions on the dark age of televisions

THE CULTURE CRITIC AS BACK ALLEY ABORTIONIST

Certain determining terms of criticism seem to be recurring in public discussion and in expert circles, their main justification seeming to be the frequency with which they are being used. Among those terms are: the medium is the message, total electronic simulation, television illiteracy; and recently, culture critics have developed these catchwords into an all-embracing systematic structure termed "we amuse ourselves to death".

It is a remarkable fact, at least in the Federal Republic of Germany, that culture critique of this kind is being spread by the very social groups that, at the same time, maintain that only a decisive expansion of the media market can safeguard the free and uninhibited development of citizens. Is there any other reply to his ambiguity than the statement that literates complain about television but spend most of their evenings in front of their sets?

FIRST PROPOSITION

Never before has there been a period in history when the sensibilization of wide groups of the population for problems of technological evolution, destruction of the environment, social conflicts, armament race, machine-ruled medicine was greater than today. McLuhan himself, who had developed the formula of "the medium is the message", has illustrated the connection between sensibilization of the population and the expansion of the media in many examples (e.g. opposition against the war in Vietnam). By no means has the said illiteracy of TV consumers made them commit greater follies than did the praised literacy of classically educated Central Europeans at the beginning of our century. The things educated elites of Western Europe said about God and the world at the beginning and during World War I can easily be made out as inexplicable nonsense even by the average TV consumer of our days. The reproach of TV illiteracy obviously disregards the fact that cultural techniques in the electronic age are and have to be different than those of the age of book culture. Those new cultural techniques have been caused by the changed forms of perception and acquisition.

SECOND PROPOSITION

Television aesthetics, primarily an aesthetics of reception and not so much of production, has led to an increase of the population's average capacity to reflect in images. In fact, the primacy of the word in communicative relations has been eliminated; this, however, does in no way imply a decrease of cognitive capacities. Because of the naturally existent modes of functioning of our "world image apparatus" it is easily possible to satisfy the highest demands on our judgement in images and with the development of grammar for the image languages.

THIRD PROPOSITION

It has become a fashion to maintain that the TV consumer is unable to evaluate correctly, i.e. critically, the claim to reality of the mass of electronic images. The world of images is said to have become independent; it had no correlating facts in the real world: the signs have become separated from what they were meant to explain. A total simulation of a world of images like this, existing in our minds only, is supposed to lead to a loss of reality, the effects of which will undermine and finally destroy the structures of society. Judgements like these are easily recognizable as helpless gestures of rejection. They resemble our instinctive gestures of averting those occurrences of reality that we can no longer identify directly with our natural organs of perception.

Just as we have learnt to account for the non-perceptible radio waves, radio active radiation, etc. as "real" components of our lives, we will also learn to identify image simulations by

adequate mediation as nothing but a different manifestation of the one reality; for those conditions of human life on which we do not, at the moment, have any influence, are nevertheless real and not only dreamlike, fantastic or psychopathically distorted.

These dimensions of our life performance have up to now been addressed in the hypothetical structure of a divine ruler of the world or as fate. On the level of human perception, one tried to find an equation to the structure of a ruling deity by, e.g. forming the topos of paradise. The total simulation of worlds of images in the electronic age today is of equal significance than the "heavenly Jerusalem" was for medieval lay and scientific theology.

The question now is, what do we have to accept as real, as a power beyond our influence and reach? Because it is highly improbable that we might again identify a divine creator of the world. We experience the total electronic simulation as sham, nevertheless, it is not at any individual's discretion. Everything around us seems to be formed by mere conventions and yet we cannot change them at random. In total electronic simulation we appeal to the allegedly unlimited power of our mind. This simulation presents us with what has been long since known in science fiction literature as the "Weckglasgehirne" and has been attracting and disgusting us at the same time. Not only science fiction writers but also experts of various disciplines are discussing the question of the existence of an immaterial spirit beyond our physical existence. The evaluation of total simulation depends on the answer to this question. Right now, we may be reassured by the answer that it is not the dead but the living who dream about paradise.