From theWorld of Communication to the Utopia of the Body[1]
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The succession of so-called "dominating ideologies" in the course of time is one of the most remarkable social phenomena. These ideologies are indeed rather unstable formations with a tendency to evolve and re-arrange themselves continuously. As with everything symbolic, they are endangered by wear and tear, they start to crumble, fail to be acknowledged by the public and finally strive for renewal by restructuring their constitutive elements.[2]

What we are concerned with here is a case in point. On the one hand, it is the ideology of communication which re-shaped the old Republican ideology in its own way, and on the other hand, it is the development I call "utopia of the body", a newly emerging phenomenon restructuring the elements of communication in a different way and at a different level.

1. THE OLD REPUBLICAN IDEOLOGY REFORMULATED BY COMMUNICATION

The symbolic figure uniting liberty, equality and fraternity in a universal project had come to lose its appeal in a world in which technological progress has replaced these three old humanistic and ethical values. Worn out as it was, it was no longer a driving force. However, its elements remained significant for real social life. The hegemony of communication, its expansion and power have developed in such a way that the elements can be re-arranged, re-combined and fine-tuned in technology. Thus, equality, dear to every democratically minded person, recurs in the guise of "access to information for everybody". What remained unanswered in politics may now be solved by means of technology:

The transparency of information ensures equal opportunities while liberty becomes interactivity by the same token, a process of change ends in the technological progress of communication machinery, progress that leaves individuals the freedom to intervene vis-à-vis the determinism of machines. As for fraternity, it is guaranteed by the combination of transparency and interactivity: conviviality*) becomes the third notion replaced in the old tri-partite system.

This goes to show how the figure uniting technical modernity and humanistic values "came into being" — the artefact of the industrial machine and human nature in its striving for a better world, better informed, more adaptable, less hierarchical: the notions of the network, self-organisation, autopoiesis, the concepts of paradoxa and the construction of reality reflect the shift away from ethical voluntarism and hierarchical systems. That's what happiness is. All one needs to know is how to reach out for it, techno-science ensures it.

The figure of communication becomes omnipotent under these circumstances, there is no limit to its expansion as it blurs the boundaries of time and space. It is no longer universal, but global. It is no longing dominating, but totalising and totalitarian. It is even "tautistic", as I remarked in Critique de la Communication 3. "Tautism" is a new term I coined by combining "autism" (enclosing individuals in a web of information they cannot escape) and "tautology" (pertaining to the repetitiveness of the information provided by the mass media, which imitates and supports itself). Finally, it is also "totalitarian" because it has the sole power to collect and administer all the information there is: neutrality, immediacy, transparency, the end of conflicts due to the emergence of a universal science, happiness, equality. All the ideologies of communication thus cause time and space to vanish, make history and symbolic

mediation disappear. They know how to obliterate them so as to generate their own symbolism of machines which is to replace all the others.

We have heard a lot of hot air about values and techniques: "new" knowledge, "new" thinking, "new" electronic democracy, even the emergence of feminine values in the global mind, if we believe the ineffable Joel de Rosnay, and all this would be owing to the accumulation of techniques, their addition and digital cross-breeding in the audio-visual media and telephony. The seventh wonder of the world is here. It is called the "information super-highway". The lingo, the machinery consisting of things juxtaposed and added bear the mark of postmodernism. Communication is a perfect match for this wired society — undiscerning, heterogeneous, diversity adorned with veneer and marquetry, chain-quoting, with quotes strung together resulting ultimately in a book, a recipe, a film, more or less erratic randomising, pensiero debole, the peremptory affirmations of scientists who are not subject to the supervision of whatever scientific community there is — here, where you cannot distinguish true from false, in the era of the true-false, of unisex, when the gender difference has been abolished because it is considered reactionary. Great narratives have ceased to exist, says Lyotard, all there is are short, fragmented stories which are not interrelated. There is no more history. There is no more power and, so it seems, reality does not exist any longer, either.

If we believe what intellectuals, philosophers or sociologists say, postmodernity continues. Its last rays still enlighten us, broken and at the same time carried by the electronic media of communication technology.

THE FIGURE OF COMMUNICATION IN DECLINE

If we leave this specific market and geography and move from the United States to Japan, postmodernism is being shaken, starting to teeter, blurs and disappears like the images on a badly adjusted TV screen. Intellectuals, albeit of a different kind, are at work with great zeal. They are biologists or ecologists, supporters of a biospheric notion of life. They tell us, each in his/her own way, that reality has returned; and history and power, too. Science is talking and the postmodernity of communication is unable to answer, practitioners don't have to do anything but translate their words into practice. They do.

The information super-highway is the acme of technological knick-knack ushering in the decline of communication as the dominating symbol. After this peak, this veritable Mount Everest, the only way is down. All one can do is move on to another organisation of meaning, a new dominating symbol: after all, societies cannot do without images or figures to ensure their coherence and consistency.

With its bards, its prophets, its gurus, its ideologists, but also with its practitioners, its inventors and industrialists, communication was well on its way to become a global gospel and to rule supreme over all people. However, the reckoning did not take into account what the historical law of the decline of dominating powers says — once they have reached their zenith, they are burnt out, they no longer represent a project, but a fact. They become reified in a state of affairs and lose their ability to move things.

This is especially true of cases where the state of affairs is far from satisfactory. Access for everybody? And what about the Third World? What about the weight of economic investments? Liberty? What about the mass media, which construct the social image and build themselves in terms of tautological imitation, all of them? Of course, the transparency of a

void is a transparency of sorts, and the freedom of channel-hopping or switching the TV set off is a liberty of sorts, albeit a rather miserable one. The relation between a total deficit in terms of information prevailing in the non-developed countries and the surfeit of information and means of communication in the advanced countries is unbalanced.

This is where a different figure emerges — and this is the theory I would like to set forth — a figure that is, in a different way, more powerful than communication because it does not aim at the external relations between people and the reduced time available for their episodic relations, but a much wider field: that of life and of what is alive - not the human being in the 20th or 21st century, but humanity as a living species. I would like to suggest the utopia of the body, or utopia of great health.

II. THE UTOPIA OF THE BODY OR "GREAT HEALTH" RECONSTITUTING OLD IDEOLOGIES

This new foundation of meaning rests on a material. A very materialistic basis, i.e. our apparatus for the perception of the world and for action in the world, our body which cannot be separated from the body of the planet. For both bodies, an interdependency ensures perfect health, they can only find health in one another and through one another. Perfect health is both end and means. Health for life. Live to be in good health. Live to give life to biotechnology and ecotechnology, without which the idea of Great Health could not exist. This can be compared to the communication technologies forming the basis of the religion of communication.

The point is not to justify or to destroy, but to understand. What is at stake is neither bioethics nor ecology, they are not the objects of our argument, it is an emerging utopia we do not seem to have grasped in all its implications, its dual totality — the human body and the body of the planet — so far. We call it utopia, not ideology. It involves a gradual waning of ideology and a gradual rise of the utopia, culminating in the latest fad among techno-fashions in the United States — "Artifical Life".

This utopia is the new figure, which is also due to a process of re-composition. What is re-composed here are the characteristic elements of the communication ideology.

1. Transparency, Equality and Purity

Transparency — which had already replaced equality -is in fact interpreted as an absolute imperative in our Great Health context. We all must have a holistic view of ourselves, we must know what we are made of. The most concealed and secret elements must be revealed. The genes which make us what we are, the map of our biological organisation, our development programme must not escape us. We must know all about the most wide-spread diseases, our potential problems, the future of our body. Each of us must engage in unravelling the secret of our organs, but we must also make our knowledge available to others, our physicians and families. This is the basis of potential social transparency. Information technology, which is at the roots of development in the biological sciences (the coding and de-coding of the DNA), enables us to trace and record the elementary data constituting the living body. Techno-biology forges ahead in the conquest of the human genome, mapping and sequencing (i.e. the reconstitution of DNA sequences) will allow for detailed knowledge of our cell development.

The collection of "good genes" and the hunt for "bad genes" are in line with the object of transparency, which is synonymous with purity here. After having dealt with the imperative of transparency in communication pertaining to the social field, we are now preoccupied with purity in the biological domain.

2. Liberty, Interactivity and the Invention of Man by Technology

Liberty, which has taken the shape of interactivity through communication, is also re-interpreted in the utopia of Great Health. If we know our genes and are in a position to remove the most minute impurities, we are able to intervene in the course of destiny of illness and death. Genetic manipulations give us the freedom we have been deprived of due to the original destiny of our biological heritage. The technology of interactivity in thinking and communicating machines is replaced by genetic intervention, an activity directed at ourselves, a kind of autopoiesis in the literal sense: we construct ourselves with the help of biotechnology. Efforts to facilitate external determination by sociopolitical means give way to our "concern with ourselves", the responsibility we have for our own destiny: preventing illnesses. prolonging life expectancy, aiming at immortality. The Human Genome project unites all that is important among biologists in a tight international network, it mobilises an enormous amount of financial resources and numerous institutions: Law, philosophy and history collaborate in a huge bioethical enterprise in which all advanced countries of the world participate.

However, our concern with ourselves does not end in our bodies, it also goes for the food we eat, the air we breathe: everything must be pure, our environment must be clean. Like everything alive, nature has bad genes, too. The correct application of technical means give R the qualities R has lost or is unable to activate: the example set by Biosphere II may serve to show us the way to a biotechnical Garden of Eden where technology mediates the balance between man and nature. Technology may in fact maximise the purest conditions of life in an artificially monitored and maintained world. It is a closed-off world, isolated from the rest of the (impure) world, independent. It goes without saying that it requires beings — the Biosphedans — who are as pure and transparent as the huge glass dome set up in the Arizona desert.

The last stage in this quest for the purity of what is alive with the help of technology is artificial life or the creation of artificial living creatures. The two notions of artificiality and life, seemingly contradictions in terms, are merged in the most state-of-the-art technology, artificial intelligence. This greatly facilitates the work of genetic engineers: they work with elements created artificially by auto-evolutionary programmes of "living groups" and monitor the growth and death of these groups. Auto-intervention loses the prefix "auto-" because the method no longer involves the self, but a population of living beings created by artificial intelligence. Their purity is guaranteed, their "genes" have been calculated, and as they exist "like" real living beings, they must also have rights: human rights applied to artificial beings.

3. The Cosmic Spirit of Fraternity

Purity and biological auto-intervention, even the creation of artificial life, contribute to the third notion in our tri-partite concept: in this case, fraternal conviviality is transported, expanded and sublimated; it is no longer only concerned with human beings, those small uncertain living entities, those fickle elements of the planet subject to a great variety of moods, living in cosmic conviviality with Gaia, nourishing Mother Earth, the Goddess of fertility and life, who plays a decisive role in the destiny of the human species among all the

other species. To those who have attained a holistic approach, the communion with sanctified nature, and who devote themselves to the religion of bio-eco-ethics, the Republican notion of fraternity is far removed and seems rather limited. The rational goddess of Revolution and Enlightenment appears rather weak and convivial interactivity is a non-committal gadget.

Here, we have a tri-partite concept with all the values of former overdeveloped and overblown ideologies in a fundamentalist ethical project concerned with the relationship we have with ourselves and the life of the supreme being: the planet. In the days when the ideology of communication was a surrogate religion to us, we were far off target. The utopia of the Great Health is a true religion.

It is certain that the effectiveness of this utopia is to do with what it touches, with what is "most profound" within ourselves, with the secret of life, of man and the universe. It is sure that it spans millions of years and that this utopian project is about the origin and the end … of the world. This great narrative has far-reaching implications and it has the same potential the ideology of communication had in its days, i.e. to be the technological progress mostly brought about by communication technologies in with the fearful questions which are no longer directed at the social texture and its values, but at life on this planet and the lives of its inhabitants.

III. THE TWO FORMS OF THE NEW FIGURE: IDEOLOGY AND UTOPIA

The force of the new figure depends on its expansion in all areas of the individual and planetary bodies.

It is an ideology.

In part it is an ideology for several reasons which I can only enumerate, not discuss here: Firstly, there is the idea that the object processed, be it a gene or biosphere, represents the ultimate destiny and reality -purification is sought to eliminate bad genes or impairments of Gaia's harmony. Secondly, there is the idea that the theory of information about communication unifies everything, information as a basis of life and generalising communication of all living matter as symbolised by Gaia. These examples are about the old metaphor "communication" reconstructed in the new shape of the Great Health. Thirdly, there is the idea that we are searching for the original at the boundary between the living and the inanimate: "The earth as a living being that suffers … that's perfectly absurd," says Altan.[4] Finally, there is the idea that biologically and ecologically speaking, life is supreme: astute people are astonished and claim that the meaning of honour, liberty and responsibility could well have supremacy over life.[5] Do we have to be reminded that this supremacy has often been central to the mechanism of tragedy? These are as many ideological elements as required.

IT IS PRIMARILY A UTOPIA.

This is not the most significant quality of the new figure. After all, its power lies in its utopian shape. It is an ideology and a utopia, or rather, more of a utopia than an ideology. What do we mean by this?

We want to say that utopias, all utopias, have common traits, qualities defining them as discursive genres. In terms of their substance, they have always been highly diversified, from the moral and social utopias of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries to the technological utopias

of the modern age. Yet they have retained all the features which characteristically constitute the narrative. Here is a rather schematic survey of these features.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF UTOPIAS

1) The location removed from all complications isolated, isola, an island, a self-contained site protected from any kind of contamination. The island is shielded from everything that goes on outside. The shield may take the shape of a dam, fortress wall and moat or stormy sea and inaccessible shore. The approaching traveller is carefully examined before he is allowed to enter.

2) The omnipotent narrator who is a 'doppelganger' of the author. The writer is thus ubiquitous and becomes the master of his narrative. This is part of the self-contained and authoritarian qualities of the utopia, reinforcing the feeling of isolation on the island.

3) Hygienic rules governing life. The inhabitants have to be beautiful and shapely and must love pleasure (l'Abbaye de Thelem). Only elements of good are allowed to enter (Icarie de Cabet). Tobacco is prohibited, votes are taken on the choice of food (idem). The law prescribes chastity and purity, adultery is censured (in Burton, the death penalty is inflicted; in the Histoire des Sevarambes by Varaisse, women are publicly scourged). A clean body is tantamount to a clean soul. "Wash, wash … ", Jules Verne tells us in Les 500 millions de la Begum. Cleanliness and transparency belong together. Much as in the ideology of communication, transparency is a fundamental rule. Everything is visible, nothing is concealed, The model city has to be perfectly legible.

4) Technical Imaginings. Technology is invariably used in utopias. Physical machinery (Cyrano de Bergerac) or social (common) institutions have a supernatural power. This means that they help nature, complementing it by correcting its faults. The mechanics of numbers (Fourier), of tools (Jules Verne), of the laws by which wealth is distributed (Cabet), of energy (Villiers de l'Isle Adam) are cases in point. Technology allows for instant transformation: it is the driving force behind the narrative. The utopian universe is hierarchical, categorised and specialised: therefore, engineers and experts are required. Technology creates a world modelled on itself. Coincidences are excluded. It is a world without uncertainty, without contamination, death and disintegration, without dust and peculiarities. It is a supernatural world owing its supremacy to the artificial.

5) Back to the Origins. The object of technology is to reach a state of grace, a Paradise Regained. The travelling missionaries of the 18th century had only one purpose in mind when they met the Indians, and that was to instruct them. They had to give them new names (by baptism), give them language anew (teach them a new language), rebuild their villages (after having destroyed them) and censure them (by prohibiting sexual licentiousness and nakedness). The Jesuits are the greatest teachers and experts in matters utopian. This return to the origins is a re-foundation.

What about the bio-eco-religion, the utopia of the body we have described? It corresponds to the five utopian characteristics we have enumerated above, at least if we trust the information we have on three objects of research of the past few years: the global Human Genome project (the first object), Biosphere II, the second project of its kind, brings together the five main biomes of the planet. 3,200 plants, several animals and some human beings, on several acres of land near Tucson, Arizona, in a place called Oracle (you can't invent a name like this) — this is the second object. The third one is "Artificial Life", a project involving the creation of

numerical beings developing, eating, making love and procreating; they will be our veritable successors, say the prophets of this new universe. Well, these three objects are governed by the rules of the utopian narrative.

THE UTOPIAN RULES GOVERN THE OBJECTS OF CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH

Isolation: Biosphere, a spherical object, is anchored in the Arizona desert like an island. To the visitor, it displays the transparency of impenetrable glass protecting, at the same time, the Biospherians, the new human race. The genetic engineering labs are fortresses defended by the scientists against potential enemies who want to steal or exploit their secrets (the history of patents gives evidence of this).

The omnipotence of the narrator: The narrator has become a first person plural, anonymous and rooted in a collective. The collective talks, transmits messages to the outside, publishes and debates. For a lay audience — which encompasses most of us — the language of committees and research societies is incontestable, they are the masters of their narrative, i.e. their works, which are no longer protected by the status of literature, but that of knowledge.

Technical imagination has become the actual substance of research, it is no longer a tool for machinations. The projects would not have been embarked on if R had not been for omnipotent technology. Even though often designed by "pure" scientists, machines play a central role. They are fully-fledged agents.

The hygienic rules governing life are especially evident in Biosphere II. They are exemplary, strictly adhered to inside the "bubble" and, as far as the Biospherians are concerned. they should become mandatory rules for everybody. The ecologists, Biospherians without a surrounding "bubble", as it were, are definitely not stingy when it comes to making recommendations for humanity and the earth. Less easily discernible for the community of genetic engineers, these rules of perfect life represent the final purpose and end of their work. The means to attain it are like commandments: once delivered from bad genes, a new race will obey the governing principles of a "good" genome.

Finally, the return to the origins haunts both projects: it is a dreamt-up origin, a time before the ailments of society evolved, a pure origin where nature and human artifice are linked and form a whole before they are separated. This wholeness of matter/mind takes the shape of a technosphere in the atheistic version and that of a noosphere in the spiritual context.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I would like to give you my reading of Fritz Lang's beautiful film Metropolis. It illustrates very well the transition from a utopia to an ideology and subsequently sketches the birth of a second utopia.

The industrial society at the beginning of our century, machines, output mechanisation and machinations -an ingenious architect has built a gleaming city, white, suspended architecture presenting itself as isolated, protected, regulated, ritualised and pure. The inhabitants are as "white" as the city they live in. The purity is contrasted with the machine-like, black, shadow world of assembly-fine work, with machines craving energy. The architect is the master of the narrative, which is a classic utopia with all its characteristic features. Entirely preoccupied

with its own existence and self-centred, the white city knows no time. It has emerged ex nihilo and maintains itself due to the rules that exclude most of the "black" workers.

Second section: a "white" man, a man from "up there", tries to mediate between the two worlds. The first narrator vanishes. We are no longer in a utopia, but a discursive adventure with unforeseen events, in a novel, so to speak. This is the world of communication we see emerge. The object envisaged is transparency between the while and black worlds. In spite of all the difficulties, the final handshake between the upper and the lower societies (between the ingenious architect and white boss on the one and the worker, the black leader, on the other) gives us reason to expect a bright future for communication. This is no longer a utopia, but an ideology. The world of communication and all kinds of mediations evolves, with white and black doppelgangers (the pure young girl and the creature, duplicates advancing the action). Do transparency, good will, fraternity and machines go together well? This is the note on which Metropolis ends. The question of generalised communication poses itself. It seems promising …

Of course, the contemporary viewer has doubts about it … he/she has seen the ideology of communication at work. Due to backward developments, which are rather common in history, what he/she needs now has become … a utopia! Communication has not bridged the gap, transparency has not done away with inequalities. Furthermore, what happens if a more radical genetic transformation causes the re-composition of the protagonists themselves instead of the way they act and mediate? What if the use of all conceivable means resulted in all of them becoming "white", what if they freed themselves from everything bad in their bodies, on the face of the planet? This would be the dawning of a new — utopian — era: that of general purification.

1 Individual parts of this article are being dealt with systematically and in greater detail in my forthcoming book La Santé parfaite, Le Seuil autumn 1995.

2 The law of the degradation of symbolic figures and their successive re-composition as new figures was presented and developed in my Leçons sur l'égalité, Presses de la FNSP, 1984

3 le Seuil 1988. third edition 1992.

4 In Questions de vie (interviews with Catherine Bousquets), le Seuil 1994, p. 50.

5 Cf. Alain-Gérard Stama, interview in the magazine La Point. August 6, 1994.

*) Translator's note: In French. "conviviar" has a second meaning, i.e. "user-friendly".