

The Intermedia Network as Nature

The point I wish to make here is obvious yet vital to an understanding of the function of art in the environment, even though it is consistently ignored by the majority of film critics. It's the idea that man is conditioned by his environment and that "environment" for contemporary man is the intermedia network. We are conditioned more by cinema and television than by nature. Once we've agreed upon this, it becomes immediately obvious that the structure and content of popular cinema is a matter of cardinal importance, at least as serious as most political issues, and thus calls for comment not from journalists but from those who work at the matter, artists themselves.

The cinema isn't just something *inside* the environment; the intermedia network of cinema, television, radio, magazines, books, and newspapers *is* our environment, a service environment that carries the messages of the social organism. It establishes meaning in life, creates mediating channels between man and man, man and society. "In earlier periods such traditional meaning and value communication was carried mainly in the fine and folk arts. But today these are subsumed amongst many communicating modes. The term 'arts' requires expansion to include those advanced technological media which are neither fine nor folk."¹⁶

We've seen the need for new concepts regarding the nature of existence; yet concepts are expanded or constricted in direct relation to the relevancy of prevailing languages. In a world where change is the only constant, it's obvious we can't afford to rely on traditional cinematic language. The world has changed immeasurably in the seventy years since the birth of cinema: for one thing "world" now includes the microcosm of the atom and the macrocosm of the universe in one spectrum. Still popular films speak a language developed by Griffith, Lumière, Méliès, derived from traditions of vaudeville and literature.

In the Agricultural Age man was totally passive, conditioned and victimized by the environment. In the Industrial Age man's role was

¹⁶ John McHale, "Education for Real," *Good News*.

participatory; he became more aggressive and successful in his attempts to control his environment. We're now moving into the Cybernetic Age in which man learns that to control his environment he must cooperate with it; he not only participates but actually recreates his environment both physical and metaphysical, and in turn is conditioned by it.

To be free of the toil of old relationships we must first be free of the conditioning that instills it within us. As radical evolution gains momentum the need to unlearn our past becomes increasingly clear: contemporary life is a process of miseducation/uneducation/re-education, at a cost of much precious time. McLuhan has noted that the true significance of Pavlov's experiments was that any controlled man-made environment is a conditioner that creates "nonperceptive somnambulists." Since then science has discovered that "molecular memory" is operative in single-celled and some multi-celled organisms, and there's evidence that memory-in-the-flesh exists in humans as well. Biochemists have proven that learned responses to environmental stimuli are passed on phylogenetically from generation to generation, encoded in the RNA of the organism's physical molecular structure.¹⁷ And what could be a more powerful conditioning force than the intermedia network, which functions to establish meaning in life?

Science has proven that there's no such thing as "human nature." Just as water takes the shape of its container, so human nature is relative to its past and present conditioning. Optimum freedom of behavior and increased self-awareness are implicit in the industrial equation that is trending toward physical success for all men; Paleocybernetic man, however, has not learned to control the environment he creates. "The content of what is available for emulation on the part of the young in each society is itself culturally shaped and limited... the individual typically remains, throughout his lifetime, unaware of how his own habits, which to him appear 'only natural,' in fact result from a learning process in which he never had an opportunity to attempt alternative responses."¹⁸ This process

¹⁷ Bleibtreu, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-114.

¹⁸ Segall, Campbell, Herskovits, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

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of enculturation produces *phenomenal absolutism*, the tendency to interpret our experience as volitional, objective, and absolute; it will have ever-increasing consequences as radical evolution continues to accelerate.

Popular Culture and the Noosphere

Contemporary man is fortunate to have a tool that makes him aware of his own enculturation and thus he enjoys greater psychic freedom than his ancestors. This tool is what Teilhard de Chardin has called the noosphere, the film of organized intelligence that encircles the planet, superposed on the living layer of the biosphere and the lifeless layer of inorganic material, the lithosphere. The minds of three-and-a-half-billion humans—twenty-five percent of all humans who ever lived—currently nourish the noosphere; distributed around the globe by the intermedia network, it becomes a new "technology" that may prove to be one of the most powerful tools in man's history.

John McHale: "World communications... diffuse and interpenetrate local cultural tradition, providing commonly-shared cultural experience in a manner unparalleled in human history. Within this global network the related media share and transmit man's symbolic needs and their expression on a world scale. Besides the enlargement of the physical world, these media virtually extend our psychical environment, providing a constant stream of moving, fleeting images of the world for our daily appraisal. They provide psychic mobility for the greater mass of our citizens. Through these devices we can telescope time, move through history, and span the world in a great variety of unprecedented ways."¹⁹

Like all energy sources the noosphere can be used for negative purposes. Its resources can be manipulated to disguise craft as creativity, especially in these Paleocybernetic days when we're still impressed by the sudden influx of information. Fuller has differentiated craft from industry by demonstrating that craft is inherently local in technique and effect whereas industry is inherently comprehensive and universal in technique and effect. One might make a similar analogy between entertainment and art: entertainment is inherently "local," that is, of limited significance, whereas art is inherently universal and of unlimited significance. Too often today we find that so-called artists working in the intermedia

¹⁹ John McHale, "The Plastic Parthenon."

Art, Entertainment, Entropy

"It is easier to copy than to think, hence fashion. Besides, a community of originals is not a community."

WALLACE STEVENS

The current generation is engaged in an unprecedented questioning of all that has been held essential. We question traditional concepts of authority, ownership, justice, love, sex, freedom, politics, even tradition itself. But it's significant that we don't question our entertainment. The disenfranchised young man who dropped out of college, burned his draft card, braids his hair, smokes pot, and digs Dylan is standing in line with his girl, who takes the pill, waiting to see *The Graduate* or *Bonnie and Clyde* or *Easy Rider*—and they're reacting to the same formulas of conditioned response that lulled their parents to sleep in the 1930's.

We've seen the urgent need for an expanded cinematic language. I hope to illustrate that profit-motivated commercial entertainment, by its very nature, cannot supply this new vision. Commercial entertainment works against art, exploits the alienation and boredom of the public, by perpetuating a system of conditioned response to formulas. Commercial entertainment not only isn't creative, it actually destroys the audience's ability to appreciate and participate in the creative process. The implications become apparent when we realize that, as leisure time increases, each human will be forced to become a creative, self-sufficient, empirical energy laboratory.

D. H. Lawrence has written: "The business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe at this living moment. As mankind is always struggling in the toil of old relationships, art is always ahead of its 'times,' which themselves are always far in the rear of the living present." Jean-Jacques Lebel stated the same idea in different terms when he described art as "the creation of a new world, never seen before, imperceptibly gaining on reality."²⁰

²⁰ Jean-Jacques Lebel, "On the Necessity of Violation," *The Drama Review* (Fall, 1968).

network are little more than adroit imitators, collectors of data and phenomena, which they glean from the noosphere and amalgamate into packages that are far from whole. They're clever and glib; they've made an art of selling themselves, but they know only effect, not cause; they are merchants of mannerisms.

It is precisely this confusion that clouds critical appraisal of "content" in the popular arts. All too frequently eclectic thinking is confused with creative thinking. The distinction is subtle to be sure: integrative thinking can be the highest form of creativity. Indeed both art and science function to reveal similarities within an a priori universe of apparent dissimilarities. As with all else, however, there's an art and a craft to thinking, and the popular entertainments remain at the craft level by the very nature of their purpose.

The intermedia network has made all of us artists by proxy. A decade of television-watching is equal to a comprehensive course in dramatic acting, writing, and filming. Compressed in such constant and massive dosage, we begin to see the methods and clichés more clearly; the mystique is gone—we could almost do it ourselves. Unfortunately too many of us do just that: hence the glut of submediocre talent in the entertainment industry. Paradoxically this phenomenon carries with it the potential of finally liberating cinema from its umbilical to theatre and literature, since it forces the movies to expand into ever more complex areas of language and experience. Evidence of television's effect on the cinema is already apparent, as we shall see in our discussion of synaesthetic cinema. From another more immediate perspective, however, it is quite unfortunate. We live in an age of hyperawareness, our senses extended around the globe, but it's a case of aesthetic overload: our technological zeal has outstripped our psychic capacity to cope with the influx of information. We are adrift on the surface of radical evolution unable to plumb the depths of its swift and turbulent current.

We've seen that man is conditioned by, and reacts to, certain stimuli in the man-made environment. The commercial entertainer is a manipulator of these stimuli. If he employs a certain trigger mechanism, we're guaranteed to react accordingly, like puppets, providing he manipulates the trigger properly. I'm not saying the artist doesn't resort to audience manipulation; we know he often does. The point, however, is the motivation in doing so. If the artist must resort to trigger mechanisms to make himself clear, he will; but it's only a means to his end. In the case of the commercial entertainer, however, it's the end in itself.

Plot, story, and what commonly is known as "drama" are the devices that enable the commercial entertainer to manipulate his audience. The very act of this manipulation, gratifying conditioned needs, is what the films actually are about. The viewer purchases it with his ticket and is understandably annoyed if the film asks him to manipulate himself, to engage in the creative process along with the artist. Our word poetry derives from the Greek root *poiein* meaning "to make" or "to work." The viewer of commercial entertainment cinema does not want to work; he wants to be an object, to be acted upon, to be manipulated. The true subject of commercial entertainment is this little game it plays with its audience.

By perpetuating a destructive habit of unthinking response to formulas, by forcing us to rely ever more frequently on memory, the commercial entertainer encourages an unthinking response to daily life, inhibiting self-awareness. Driven by the profit motive, the commercial entertainer dares not risk alienating us by attempting new language even if he were capable of it. He seeks only to gratify preconditioned needs for formula stimulus. He offers nothing we haven't already conceived, nothing we don't already expect. Art explains; entertainment exploits. Art is freedom from the conditions of memory; entertainment is conditional on a present that is conditioned by the past. Entertainment gives us what we want; art gives us what we don't know we want. To confront a work of art is to confront oneself—but aspects of oneself previously unrecognized.

The extent to which blatant audience manipulation not only is tolerated but extolled is alarming. Alfred Hitchcock, for example, in his interview with François Truffaut, finds merit in his ability to manipulate preconditioned needs for formula stimulus. Speaking of *Psycho*, Hitchcock frankly admits: "It wasn't a message that stirred

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them, nor was it a great performance, or their enjoyment of the novel... they were aroused by the construction of the story, and the way in which it was told caused audiences all over the world to react and become emotional.²¹

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It is essential to understand that Hitchcock openly admits that he didn't even try to expand awareness or to communicate some significant message, but only exploited a universal tradition of dramatic manipulation in order to supply his audience with the gratification it paid for. The audience sees itself and its dreams reflected in the film and reacts according to memory, which Krishnamurti has characterized as being always conditioned. "Memory," says Krishnamurti, "is always in the past and is given life in the present by a challenge. Memory has no life in itself; it comes to life in the challenge [preconditioned formula stimulus]. And all memory, whether dormant or active, is conditioned."²² It is this process that the entertainment industry calls audience identification.

To a healthy mind, anything that is primarily art is also immensely entertaining. It seems obvious that the most important things should be the most entertaining. Where there's a difference between what we "like" and what we know to be vital, we have a condition of schizophrenia, an unnatural and destructive situation. I speak deliberately of a "healthy" mind as one capable of creative thinking. Filmmaker Ken Kelman: "The old cinema removes experience, making us see things along with (or through) a protagonist with whom we identify, and a plot in which we are caught. Such an approach tends toward not only a lack of viewpoint, of definition of whose experience it is, but also filters the power of sight into mere habit, dissolves insight into vicariousness. The spectator is reduced to a voyeur—which is, increasingly, the individual's role in society at large."²³

Minimalist painter David Lee: "When people do not trust their senses they lack confidence in themselves. For the last few centuries people have lacked confidence. They have not trusted

²¹ François Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1968), p. 211.

²² Krishnamurti, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

²³ Ken Kelman, "Anticipations of the Light," *The New American Cinema*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: Dutton Paperbacks, 1967), pp. 24, 25.

their experience to provide a standard for knowing how to act.²⁴ It is quite obvious that most of us not only don't know much about art, we don't even know what we like. Krishnamurti: "One of the fundamental causes of the disintegration of society is copying, which is the worship of authority."²⁵

Imitation is the result of inadequate information. Information results in change. Change requires energy. Energy is the result of adequate information. Energy is directly proportional to the amount of information about the structure of a system. Nobert Wiener: "Information is a name for the content of what is exchanged with the outer world as we adjust to it and make our adjustment felt upon it ... to live effectively is to live with adequate information."²⁶ From the cinema we receive conceptual information (ideas) and design information (experiences). In concert they become one phenomenon, which I've described as the experiential information of aesthetic conceptual design. This information is either useful (additive) or redundant. Useful information accelerates change. Redundant information restricts change. If sustained long enough redundant information finally becomes misinformation, which results in negative change.

In communication theory and the laws of thermodynamics the quantity called entropy is the amount of energy reversibly exchanged from one system in the universe to another. Entropy also is the measure of disorder within those systems. It measures the lack of information about the structure of the system. For our purposes "structure of the system" should be taken to mean "the human condition," the universal subject of aesthetic activity. Entropy should be understood as the degree of our ignorance about that condition. Ignorance always increases when a system's messages are redundant. Ignorance is not a state of limbo in which no information exists, but rather a state of increasing chaos due to *misinformation* about the structure of the system.

The First Law of Thermodynamics states that energy is constant: it cannot be created or destroyed; its form can change, but not its quantity.

²⁴David Lee, "A Systematic Reverie from Abstraction to Now," *Minimal Art*, ed. Gregory Battcock (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1968), p. 195.

²⁵Krishnamurti, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²⁶Wiener, *op. cit.*, pp. 26, 27.

The Second Law states that the amount of energy within a local system is naturally entropic—it tends toward disorder, dissipation, incoherence. And since energy is defined as "a capacity to re arrange elemental order," entropy, which runs counter to that capacity, means less potential for change. We've learned from physics that the only anti-entropic force in the universe, or what is called negentropy (negative entropy), results from the process of feedback. Feedback exists between systems that are not closed but rather open and contingent upon other systems. In the strictest sense there are no truly "closed" systems anywhere in the universe; all processes impinge upon and are affected by other processes in some way. However, for most practical purposes, it is enough to say that a system is "closed" when entropy dominates the feedback process, that is, when the measure of energy lost is greater than the measure of energy gained.

The phenomenon of man, or of biological life on earth taken as a process, is negentropic because its subsystems feed energy back into one another and thus are self-enriching, regenerative. Thus energy is wealth, and wealth according to Buckminster Fuller is "the number of forward days a given system is sustainable." Biologist John Bleibtreu arrived at a similar conclusion when he noted that the concept of time can best be viewed as a function of the Second Law of Thermodynamics—that the measure of entropy in a system is a measure of its age, or the passage of time since the system originated.²⁷ In other words the degree of a system's entropy is equal to redundancy or stasis whereas its negentropy is equal to kinesis or change. So information becomes energy when it contributes to the self-enriching omni-regenerative wealth of the system. When it's not contributing (i.e., redundant) it is allowing the natural entropy to increase.

"It is possible to treat sets of messages as having an entropy like sets of states of the external world... in fact, it is possible to interpret the information carried by a message as essentially the negative of its entropy... that is, the more probable the message the less information it gives. Clichés, for example, are less illuminating than great poems."²⁸ Thus the more information concerning the human

²⁷ Bleibtreu, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁸ Wiener, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

condition that the artist is able to give us, the more energy we have with which to modify ourselves and grow in accord with the accelerating accelerations of the living present.

Commercial entertainment may be considered a closed system since entropy dominates the feedback process. To satisfy the profit motive the commercial entertainer must give the audience what it expects, which is conditional on what it has been getting, which is conditional on what it previously received, *ad infinitum*. Inherent in the term "genre," which applies to all entertainment, is that it must be probable. The content of westerns, gangster movies, romances, etc., is probable in that it can be identified and comprehended simply by classification. The phenomenon of drama itself usually is not considered a genre, but is in fact the most universal and archetypical of all genres. Drama, by definition, means conflict, which in turn means suspense. Suspense is requisite on the expectation of known alternatives. One cannot expect the unknown. Therefore expectation, suspense, and drama are all redundant probable qualities and thus are noninformative.

Drama requires a plot that forces the viewer to move from point A to point B to point C along predetermined lines. Plot does not mean "story" (beginning-middle-end). It simply indicates a relatively closed structure in which free association and conscious participation are restricted. Since the viewer remains passive and is acted upon by the experience rather than participating in it with volition, there's no feedback, that vital source of negentropy. Norbert Wiener: "Feedback is a method of controlling a system by reinserting into it the results of its past performance... if the information which proceeds backward from the performance is able to change the general method and pattern of performance, we have a process which may well be called learning."²⁹ Fuller: "Every time man makes a new experiment he always learns more. He cannot learn less."³⁰

In the cinema, feedback is possible almost exclusively in what I call the synaesthetic mode, which we'll discuss presently. Because it is entirely personal it rests on no identifiable plot and is not probable. The viewer is forced to create along with the film, to interpret for himself what he is experiencing. If the information (either concept or

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁰ Fuller, *Spaceship Earth*, p. 92.

design) reveals some previously unrecognized aspect of the viewer's relation to the circumambient universe—or provides language with which to conceptualize old realities more effectively—the viewer recreates that discovery along with the artist, thus feeding back into the environment the existence of more creative potential, which may in turn be used by the artist for messages of still greater eloquence and perception. If the information is redundant, as it must be in commercial entertainment, nothing is learned and change becomes unlikely. The noted authority on communication theory, J. R. Pierce, has demonstrated that an increase in entropy means a decrease in the ability to change.³¹ And we have seen that the ability to change is the most urgent need facing twentieth-century man.

The notion of experimental art, therefore, is meaningless. All art is experimental or it isn't art. Art is research, whereas entertainment is a game or conflict. We have learned from cybernetics that in research one's work is governed by one's strongest points, whereas in conflicts or games one's work is governed by its weakest moments. We have defined the difference between art and entertainment in scientific terms and have found entertainment to be inherently entropic, opposed to change, and art to be inherently negentropic, a catalyst to change. The artist is always an anarchist, a revolutionary, a creator of new worlds imperceptibly gaining on reality. He can do this because we live in a cosmos in which there's always something more to be seen. When finally we erase the difference between art and entertainment—as we must to survive—we shall find that our community is no longer a community, and we shall begin to understand radical evolution.

³¹ J. R. Pierce, *Symbols, Signals and Noise* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961).