Art Criticism - theories of information - the art of criticism

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Lafontaine, Céline. *L'Empire cybernétique : des machines à penser à la pensée machine*, Paris : Seuil, 2004

A bunch of Martians lands on Earth, at Garges-les-Gonesse, for example, meet a human, and ask him what civilization consists of. "It's a long story! In more recent times, humans have been killing one another in a most brutal fashion... 50 million dead... and since then, to ward off such tragedies, they've been cobbling information together, not without a certain brilliance, what is more". A lengthy silence follows; the Martians look at the parking lot at the shopping mall where their vessel has landed: "And all these sheds and depots are full of information?", the chief Martian asks.-Yes, in a way! But, you know, there's information to suit every taste: spectacular or invisible, of paramount importance or alarmingly futile, true or false, physical or cognitive, to do with computers or biology... In a word, and to cut a long story short, after several millennia spent roaming around, we have finally entered the age of control and programming". So saying, the human turns into an Angel of history, and spreads his wings: "We call this tempest progress". At these words, first uttered by Walter Benjamin, the Martians hasten back to their spaceship. Never to be seen again.

- 1 The word *information* covers a multitude of physical, technical, political and symbolic situations; thus it is that everyone explores their informational world: physicists, geneticists, computer scientists, researchers in the human/social sciences, artists, philosophers... not forgetting "media pros", needless to add. Since the emergence of the society of information after the Second World War, the notion has been occasioning many an inextricable debate about an epistemological fracture line which is the quintessence of modernity: the division of the world into scientific and other discourse. Based on Claude

Shannon's quantitative theory and Norbert Wiener's cybernetics, people's minds have run a little wild, the mathematical model having been appropriated as widely varying analogies and metaphors.

- 2 As a thoroughly new and rich transdisciplinary vehicle of intelligibility, the informational model thwarts the age-old dualities of western metaphysics: body, mind, man, machine, animal, matter, energy. This is not the place to unravel this epistemological and semantic imbroglio in which both the arts and criticism are similarly entwined. We shall merely describe two recent books which re-posit the topicality of this question.
- 3 As we were saying, let us take a look at the fracture line between the so-called exact sciences and the human sciences. For *L'Empire cybernétique* described by Céline Lafontaine extends well beyond its initial boundaries. This book is first and foremost a history book. The author traces the rise, and rise, of the informational paradigm: cryptography, the nuclear bomb, computer technology, the communication sciences, psychiatry, artificial intelligence... A thrilling tale during which C. Lafontaine also demonstrates how the paradigm has, in a way, contaminated all of contemporary thinking: linguistics, psychology, economics, sociology, ethnology (where we bump into Gregory Bateson, Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Peter Sloterdijk...). The tone is not polemical but it is nevertheless a book with a thesis, in so much as it postulates that this reductionism reluctantly gives rise to an anti-humanism by way of the objective link struck up between the informational goal and the neo-liberal economics of globalization. Whereas in the mind of N. Wiener and others it was a matter of checking martial fury—never again!—by making society fluid, ambiguous, transparent for itself, self-monitored and no longer subject to the tyranny of a reactionary (Nazism) or freedom-destroying (Communism) ideology. A book which extends the works of Philippe Breton (who prefaces the volume) and lends a dramatic consistency to what Michel Foucault called “The Death of Man”. A must read.
- 4 The fortune of the paradigm is proven in the territory of art and art criticism, even if, in the landslip between cybernetics and linguistics, inspiration for the semiology of art, the dream of an understanding of artworks based on the yardstick of theories of information has fallen through. Art is not an object with a message—everyone is agreed about that! But how many times does the rhetoric of criticism, not to mention those all-purpose, jack-of-all-trades texts called for by the wholesale communication of the so-called meaning of works, not convey such a sound intention? It must be acknowledged that works are often disarming; the jargon and vulgate of the New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT) thus propose lexical and cognitive solutions which make it possible to tame these “informational holes” represented by a good many contemporary artworks.
- 5 If the model fuels epistemological utopias, particularly the utopia involving a unification of knowledge and learning, it is also a very profitable ideological platform. But the world of everyday information is first of all a sensitive world, where art might proceed from an “aesthetics of communication”. This is the credo of Fred Forest, designer and producer of technico-politico-media actions which are part of an insolent criticism of institutions and beliefs—in the city, in cyberspace, and in our minds. F. Forest has often demonstrated as much by way of the emptiness and absurdity of the existence of phenomena of communications and power; nurtured by a fantasy of ubiquity, his “media feats” attest to a merry freedom of thought.

- 6 But if information is an incurable disease or a virus, then let us live with it by trying to do it the odd good turn. This is what Jean Baudrillard does in his latest book¹, when he smithereens the paradigm in the constellation of a circular gay science. The faithful will appreciate this new variation of his hermeneutic seismograph which, at moments, forms a loop about itself, taking its own convulsions for the seismic activity of the world. The fact remains that we are indeed living on a volcano with *Le Pacte de lucidité*, the one whereby we accept the agonistic game between the real and the virtual, one another, the impossible exchange of certain data. And perhaps this is precisely what the art of an artist or writer is: not nothingness, not noise, not meaning, but the style of this remnant that grows as the cybernetic empire waxes!
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NOTES

1. Baudrillard, Jean. *Le Pacte de lucidité ou l'intelligence du mal*, Paris : Galilée, 2004