

Reports From The Global Village, Umberto Eco

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Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare

Not long ago, if you wanted to seize political power in a country, you had merely to control the army and the police. Today it is only in the most backward countries that fascist generals, in carrying out a coup d'état, still use tanks. If a country has reached a high level of industrialization the whole scene changes. The day after the fall of Khrushchev, the editors of Pravda, Izvestiia, the heads of the radio and television were replaced; the army wasn't called out. Today a country belongs to the person who controls communications.

I'm not saying anything new, by now not only students of communication but also the general public is aware that we are living in the Age of Communication. As Professor McLuhan has suggested, information is no longer an instrument for producing economic merchandise, but has itself become the chief merchandise. Communication has been transformed into heavy industry. When economic power passes from the hands of those who control the means of production to those who not only control information media but can also control the means of production, the problem of alienation also alters its meaning. Faced by the prospect of a communications network that expands to embrace the universe, every citizen of the world becomes a member of a new proletariat. But no revolutionary manifesto could rally this proletariat with the words: "Workers of the world, unite!"

Because, even if the communications media, as means of production, were to change masters, the situation of subjection would not change. We can legitimately suspect that the communications media would be alienating even if they belonged to the community.

What makes the newspaper something to fear is not (or, at least, is not only) the economic and political power that runs it. The newspaper was already defined as a medium for conditioning public opinion when the first gazettes came into being. When someone every day has to write as much news as his space allows, and it has to appear readable to an audience of diverse tastes, social class, education, throughout a country, the writer's freedom is already finished: The contents of the message will not depend on the author but on the technical and sociological characteristics of the medium.

For some time the severest critics of mass culture have been aware of all this, and they agree: "The mass media do not transmit ideologies; they are themselves an ideology." This position, which I defined as "apocalyptic" in a previous book of mine, implies this further argument: It doesn't matter what you say via the channels of mass communication; when the recipient is surrounded by a series of communications which reach him via various channels at the same time, in a given form, the

nature of all this disparate information is of scant significance. The important thing is the gradual, uniform bombardment of information, where the different contents are leveled and lose their differences.

You will have observed that this is also the familiar position expressed by Marshall McLuhan in his *Understanding Media*. But, for the so-called apocalypticists, McLuhan's conviction was translated into a tragic consequence: Liberated from the contents of communication, the addressee of the messages of the mass media receives only a global ideological lesson, the call to narcotic passiveness. When the mass media triumph, the human being dies.

But Marshall McLuhan, on the contrary, setting out from the same premises, concludes that, when the mass media triumph, the Gutenbergian human being dies, and a new man is born, accustomed to perceive the world in another way. We don't know if this man will be better or worse, but we know he is new. Where the apocalypticists saw the end of the world, McLuhan sees the beginning of a new phase of history. This is exactly what happens when a prim vegetarian argues with a user of LSD: The former sees the drug as the end of reason, the latter as the beginning of a new sensitivity. Both agree on the chemical composition of psychedelics. But the communications scholar must ask himself this question: Is the chemical composition of every communicative act the same? Naturally there are educators who display a simpler optimism, derived from the Enlightenment; they have firm faith in the power of the message's contents. They are confident that they can effect a transformation of consciousness by transforming television programs, increasing the amount of truth-in-advertising spots, the precision of the news in the columns of the newspaper.

Both to them and to those who believe that "the medium is the message," I would like to recall an image we have seen in many cartoons and comic strips, a slightly obsolete image, rather racist, but a splendidly suitable example in this situation. It is the image of the cannibal chief who is wearing an alarm clock as a necklace. I don't believe that cannibals so adorned exist any longer, but we can translate the original into various other experiences of our everyday lives. The world of communications, for example, is full of cannibals who transform an instrument for measuring time into an "op" jewel.

If this is so, then it is not true that the medium is the message; it may be that the invention of the clock, accustoming us to think of time in the form of space divided into regular parts, changed some people's way of perception, but there are undoubtedly others for whom the clock message has a different meaning.

But if this is so, it is still equally untrue that acting on the form and contents of the message can convert the person receiving it. For the receiver of the message seems to have a residual freedom: the freedom to read it in a different way. I say "different" and not "mistaken." A brief look at the mechanics of communication can tell us something more precise on this subject.

The communication chain assumes a Source that, through a Transmitter, emits a Signal via a Channel. At the end of the Channel the Signal, through a Receiver, is transformed into a Message for the Addressee. Since the Signal, while traveling through the Channel, can be disturbed by Noise, one must make the Message redundant, so that the information is transmitted clearly. But the other fundamental requirement of this chain is a Code, shared by the Source and the Addressee.

A Code is an established system of probabilities, and only on the basis of the Code can we decide whether the elements of the message are intentional (desired by the Source) or the result of Noise. It seems to me very important to bear in mind the various links in this chain, because when they are overlooked there are misunderstandings that prevent us from observing the phenomenon with attention. For example, many of Marshall McLuhan's theses on the nature of the media stem from the fact that he uses the term "media" broadly, for phenomena that can be at times reduced to the Channel, and at other times to the Code, or to the form of the message. Through criteria of economy, the alphabet reduces the possibilities of the sound-making organs but, in doing so, provides a Code for communicating experience; the street provides me with a Channel along which it is possible to send any communication.

To say that the alphabet and the street are "media" is lumping a Code together with a Channel. To say that Euclidian geometry and a suit of clothes are media is lumping together a Code (the elements of Euclid are a way of formalizing experience and making it communicable) and a Message (a given suit, through codes of dress-conventions accepted by society-communicates an attitude of mine towards my fellows). To say that light is a medium is a refusal to realize that there are at least three definitions of "light." Light can be a Signal of information (I use electricity to transmit impulses that, in Morsecode, mean particular messages); light can be a Message (if my girlfriend puts a light in the window, it means her husband has gone out); and light can be a Channel (if I have the light on in my room I can read the message-book). In each of these cases the impact of a phenomenon on the social body varies according to the role it plays in the communication chain.

But, to stay with the example of light, in each of these three cases the meaning of the message changes according to the code with which I interpret it. The fact that light, when I use Morse code to transmit luminous signals, is a signal-and that this signal is light and not something else-has, on the Addressee, far less impact than the fact that the Addressee knows Morse code.

If, for example, in the second of my hypothetical cases, my girlfriend uses light as a signal to transmit in Morse code the message "my husband is home" but I continue to refer to our previously established code, whereby "light" means "husband absent," my behavior (with all the ensuing unpleasant consequences) is determined not by the form of the message or its contents according to the Emitting Source but by the code I am using. It is the code used that gives the light-signal a specific content. The move from the Gutenberg Galaxy to the New Village of Total Communication will not prevent the eternal drama of infidelity and jealousy from exploding for me, my girlfriend, and her husband.

And so the communication chain outlined above will have to be modified as follows: The Receiver transforms the Signal into Message, but this message is still the empty form to which the Addressee can attribute various meanings depending on the Code he applies to it.

If I write the phrase "no more," you who interpret it according to the English-language code will read it in the sense that seems most obvious to you; but I assure you that, read by an Italian, the same words would mean "not blackberries," or else "No, I prefer blackberries"; and further, if, instead of a botanical frame of reference, my Italian reader used a legal one, he would take the words to mean "No, respites," or, in

an erotic frame of reference, as a reply: "No, brunettes" to the question "Do gentlemen prefer blondes?"

Naturally, in normal communication, between one human being and another, for purposes connected with everyday life, such misunderstandings are few; the codes are established in advance.

But there are extreme cases, and first among them is that of aesthetic communication, where the message is deliberately ambiguous precisely to foster the use of different codes by those who, in different times and places, will encounter the work of art.

If in everyday communication ambiguity is excluded, in aesthetic communication it is deliberate; and in mass communication ambiguity, even if ignored, is always present. We have mass communication when the Source is one, central, structured according to the methods of industrial organization; the Channel is a technological invention that affects the very form of the signal; and the Addressees are the total number (or, anyway, a very large number) of the human beings in various parts of the globe. American scholars have realized what a Technicolor love movie, conceived for ladies in the suburbs, means when it is shown in a Third World village. In countries like Italy, where the TV message is developed by a centralized industrial Source and reaches simultaneously a northern industrial city and a remote rural village of the South, social settings divided by centuries of history, this phenomenon occurs daily.

But paradoxical reflection also is enough to convince us on this score. The American magazine *Eros* published famous photographs of a white woman and a black man, naked, kissing; if those images had been broadcast over a popular TV channel, I presume that the significance attributed to the message by the governor of Alabama would be different from that of Allen Ginsberg. For a California hippie, for a Greenwich Village radical, the image would have meant the promise of a new community; for a Klansman, the message would have signified a terrible threat of rape.

The mass communication universe is full of these discordant interpretations; I would say that variability of interpretation is the constant law of mass communications. The messages set out from the Source and arrive in distinct sociological situations, where different codes operate. For a Milanese bank clerk a TV ad for a refrigerator represents a stimulus to buy, but for an unemployed peasant in Calabria the same image means the confirmation of a world of prosperity that doesn't belong to him and that he must conquer. This is why I believe TV advertising in depressed countries functions as a revolutionary message. The problem of mass communications is that until now this variability of interpretation has been random. Nobody regulates the way in which the addressee uses the message—except in a few rare cases.

And here, even if we shift the problem, even if we say "the medium is not the message" but rather "the message depends on the code," we do not solve the problem of the communications era. If the apocalyptic says, "The medium does not transmit ideologies: It itself is ideology; television is the form of communication that takes on the ideology of advanced industrial society," we could now only reply: "The medium transmits those ideologies which the addressee receives according to codes originating in his social situation, in his previous education, and in the psychological tendencies of the moment." In this case the phenomenon of mass communication would remain unchanged: There exists an extremely powerful instrument that none of us will ever manage to regulate; there exist means of communication that, unlike means of production, are not controllable either by private will or by the

community. In confronting them, all of us, from the head of CBS to the president of the United States, from Martin Heidegger to the poorest fellah of the Nile delta, all of us are the proletariat.

And yet I believe it is wrong to consider the battle of man against the technological universe of communication as a strategic affair. It is a matter of tactics.

As a rule, politicians, educators, communications scientists believe that to control the power of the media you must control two communicating moments of the chain: the Source and the Channel. In this way they believe they can control the message.

Alas, they control only an empty form that each addressee will fill with the meanings provided by his own cultural models. The strategic solution is summed up in the sentence "We must occupy the chair of the Minister of Information" or even "We must occupy the chair of the publisher of The New York Times." I will not deny that this strategic view can produce excellent results for someone aiming at political and economic success, but I begin to fear it produces very skimpy results for anyone hoping to restore to human beings a certain freedom in the face of the total phenomenon of Communication.

So for the strategic solution it will be necessary, tomorrow, to employ a guerrilla solution. What must be occupied, in every part of the world, is the first chair in front of every TV set (and naturally, the chair of the group leader in front of every movie screen, every transistor, every page of newspaper). If you want a less paradoxical formulation, I will put it like this: The battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Communications Era is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives. I mention guerrilla warfare because a paradoxical and difficult fate lies in store for us—I mean for us scholars and technicians of communication. Precisely when the communication systems envisage a single industrialized source and a single message that will reach an audience scattered all over the world, we should be capable of imagining systems of complementary communication that allow us to reach every individual human group, every individual member of the universal audience, to discuss the arriving message in the light of the codes at the destination, comparing them with the codes at the source.

A political party that knows how to set up a grass-roots action that will reach all the groups that follow TV and can bring them to discuss the message they receive can change the meaning that the Source had attributed to this message. An educational organization that succeeds in making a given audience discuss the message it is receiving could reverse the meaning of that message. Or else show that the message can be interpreted in different ways.

Mind you: I am not proposing a new and more terrible form of control of public opinion. I am proposing an action to urge the audience to control the message and its multiple possibilities of interpretation.

The idea that we must ask the scholars and educators of tomorrow to abandon the TV studios or the offices of the newspapers, to fight a door-to-door guerrilla battle like provos of Critical Reception can be frightening, and can also seem Utopian. But if the Communications Era proceeds in the direction that today seems to us the most probable, this will be the only salvation for free people. The methods of this cultural guerrilla have to be worked out. Probably in the interrelation of the various communications media, one medium can be employed to communicate a

series of opinions on another medium. To some extent this is what a newspaper does when it criticizes a TV program. But who can assure us that the newspaper article will be read in the way we wish? Will we have to have recourse to another medium to teach people how to read the newspaper in a critical fashion?

Certain phenomena of "mass dissent" (hippies, beatniks, new Bohemias, student movements) today seem to us negative replies to the industrial society: The society of Technological Communication is rejected in order to look for alternative forms, using the means of the technological society (television, press, record companies . . .). So there is no leaving the circle; you are trapped in it willy-nilly. Revolutions are often resolved in more picturesque forms of integration.

But it could be that these nonindustrial forms of communication (from the love-in to the rally of students seated on the grass of the campus) can become the forms of a future communications guerrilla warfare—a manifestation complementary to the manifestations of Technological Communication, the constant correction of perspectives, the checking of codes, the ever renewed interpretations of mass messages. The universe of Technological Communication would then be patrolled by groups of communications guerrillas, who would restore a critical dimension to passive reception. The threat that "the medium is the message" could then become, for both medium and message, the return to individual responsibility. To the anonymous divinity of Technological Communication our answer could be: "Not Thy, but our will be done."

1967

The Multiplication of the Media

A month ago the TV gave us a chance to see again a classic we remembered with admiration, affection, and respect; I refer to Kubrick's 2001. After this revisitation, I talked with a number of friends, and their opinion was unanimous: They were disappointed.

That film, which had stunned us only a few years ago with its extraordinary technical and figurative invention, its metaphysical breadth, now seemed to repeat wearily things we had seen a thousand times before. The drama of the paranoid computer still maintains its tension, though it no longer seems amazing; the beginning with the monkeys is still a fine piece of cinema, but those non-aerodynamic spaceships have long lain in the toybox of our now-grown children, reproduced in plastic (the spaceships, I believe, not our children); the final images are kitsch (a lot of pseudo-philosophical vagueness in which anyone can put the allegory he wants), and the rest is discographic, music and sleeves.

And yet we considered Kubrick an innovator of genius. But that is the point: The mass media are genealogical, and they have no memory (two characteristics that ought to be incompatible). The mass media are genealogical because, in them, every new invention sets off a chain reaction of inventions, produces a sort of common language. They have no memory because, when the chain of imitations has been produced, no one can remember who started it, and the head of the clan is confused with the latest great grandson. Furthermore, the media learn; and thus the spaceships of Star Wars, shamelessly descended from Kubrick's, are more complex and plausible than their ancestor, and now the ancestor seems to be their imitator.

It would be interesting to enquire why this process does not occur in the traditional arts, to ask why we can still understand that Caravaggio is better than the Caravaggeschi, and that Dallas cannot be confused with Balzac. It could be said that in the mass media it is not invention that dominates but technical execution, which can be imitated and perfected. But that isn't the whole story. For example, Wenders's film Hammett is technically much more sophisticated than Huston's classic The Maltese Falcon, and yet we follow the former only with interest and the latter with religious devotion. So a system or a horizon of expectations operates in us, the audience.

When Wenders is as old as Huston will we perhaps see his work again with the same emotion? I'm not up to handling here so many and such formidable questions. But I believe that in The Maltese Falcon we will always enjoy a certain ingenuousness that in Wenders is already lost. Wenders's film, unlike the Falcon, already moves in a universe where these relationships have inevitably mingled, where it is hard to say that the Beatles are alien to the great musical tradition of the West, where comic strips enter museums via pop art but museums' art enters comic strips via the far from ingenuous culture of men like Crepax, Pratt, Moebius, and Drouillet. And for two evenings in a row the kids pack into a Palasport, but on the first night it's the Bee Gees and the next it's John Cage or a performer of Satie; and the third evening they would go (and, alas, can go no more) to hear Cathy Berberian singing a program of Monteverdi, Offenbach, and—in fact—the Beatles, but sung like Purcell. And Berberian added to the Beatles' music nothing that it was not already quoting, and only in part without knowing, without wanting to.

Our relationship with mass-produced goods has changed and also with the products of "high" art. Differences have been reduced, or erased; but along with the differences, temporal relationships have been distorted, the lines of reproduction, the before and the after. The philologist is still aware of them, but not the ordinary consumer. We have achieved what the enlightened and enlightenment culture of the '60's was demanding, that there should not be, on the one hand, products for helot masses and, on the other, difficult products for the cultivated, refined public.

The distances have been reduced, the critics are puzzled.

Traditional criticism complains that the new techniques of enquiry analyze Manzoni and Donald Duck with the same precision and can no longer tell them apart (and it's a cheap lie, contrary to all the printed evidence) without realizing (through lack of attention) that it is, on the contrary, the development of the arts itself, today, that tries to obliterate this distinction. To begin with, a person of scant culture today can read Manzoni (how much he understands is another question) but he cannot read the comic strips of Metal Hurlant (which are sometimes as hermetic, specious, and boring as the bad experimenters for the "happy few" in previous decades could be). And this situation tells us that when such shifts of horizon occur, they don't have to mean things are going better or worse: Things have simply changed, and even value judgments must be formed according to different parameters.

What's interesting is that, instinctively, high school kids know these things better than some seventy-year-old pedagogue (I refer to arterial, not necessarily calendar age). The high school teacher is convinced that the boy is not studying because he reads Batman, and perhaps the boy isn't studying because he reads (along with Batman and Moebius—and the difference between them is the same as that between Barbara Cartland and Ivy Compton-Burnett) Hesse's Siddharta, but as if it were a gloss to

Pirsig's book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. It is clear at this point that the school must also review its manuals (if it ever had any) on how to read. And on what is poetry and what is nonpoetry.

But the schools (and society, and not only the young) must learn new instructions on how to react to the mass media. Everything that was said in the '60's and '70's must be re-examined. Then we were all (perhaps rightly) victims of a model of the mass media based on that of the relationship with authority: a centralized transmitter, with precise political and pedagogical plans, controlled by Authority (economic or political), the messages sent through recognizable technological channels (waves, wires, devices identifiable as a screen, whether movie or TV, radio, magazine page) to the addressees, victims of ideological indoctrination. We would only have to teach the addressees to "read" the messages, to criticize them, and perhaps we would attain the age of intellectual freedom, of critical awareness. . . . This was another dream of '68.

What radio and television are today, we know—incontrollable plurality of messages that each individual uses to make up his own composition with the remote-control switch. The consumer's freedom may not have increased, but surely the way to teach him to be free and controlled has changed. And, for the rest, two new phenomena have slowly progressed: the multiplication of the media and the media squared.

What is a mass medium today? A TV program? That, too, surely. But let's try to imagine a not imaginary situation. A firm produces polo shirts with an alligator on them and it advertises them (a traditional phenomenon). A generation begins to wear the polo shirts. Each consumer of the polo shirt advertises, via the alligator on his chest, this brand of polo shirt (just as every owner of a Toyota is an advertiser, unpaid and paying, of the Toyota line and the model he drives). A TV broadcast, to be faithful to reality, shows some young people wearing the alligator polo shirt. The young (and the old) see the TV broadcast and buy more alligator polo shirts because they have "the young look."

Where is the mass medium? Is it the newspaper advertisement, is it the TV broadcast, is it the polo shirt? Here we have not one but two, three, perhaps more mass media, acting through different channels. The media have multiplied, but some of them act as media of media, or in other words media squared. And at this point who is sending the message? The manufacturer of the polo shirt? its wearer? the person who talks about it on the TV screen? Who is the producer of ideology?

Because it's a question of ideology: You have only to analyze the implications of the phenomenon, what the polo-shirt manufacturer wants to say, and what its wearer wants to say, and the person who talks about it. But according to the channel under consideration, in a certain sense the meaning of the message changes, and perhaps also its ideological weight. There is no longer Authority, all on its own (and how consoling it was!). Shall we perhaps identify with Authority the designer who had the idea of inventing a new poloshirt design, or the manufacturer (perhaps in the provinces) who decided to sell it, and to sell it on a wide scale, to make money, as is only right, and to avoid having to fire his employees?

Or those who legitimately agree to wear it, and to advertise an image of youth and heedlessness, or happiness? Or the TV director, who to characterize a generation has one of his young actors wear the polo shirt? Or the singer, who, to cover his expenses, agrees to sponsor the polo shirt? All are in it, and all are outside it: Power is elusive, and

there is no longer any telling where the "plan" comes from. Because there is, of course, a plan, but it is no longer intentional, and therefore it cannot be criticized with the traditional criticism of intentions. All the professors of theory of communications, trained by the texts of twenty years ago (this includes me), should be pensioned off.

Where are the mass media? In the festival, the procession, the conference organized by the Culture Commissioner on Immanuel Kant, which now finds a thousand young people seated on the floor to hear the stern philosopher who has taken as his motto the admonition of Heraclitus: "Why do you want to pull me in every direction, ye unread? Not for you did I write, but for those who can understand me." Where are the mass media? What is more private than a telephone call? But what happens when someone hands over to an investigating magistrate the tape of a private phone call—a call made to be taped and delivered to the magistrate, and then leaked by someone in the government to the newspapers, so the newspapers will talk about it, thus compromising the investigation? Who produced the message (and its ideology)? The idiot who spoke, unawares, over the phone? Or the one who delivered it? The magistrate, the newspaper, the reader who failed to understand the game and who, in passing the message on to others, assured its success?

Once upon a time there were the mass media, and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives, for those who were not prisoners of the mass media. Well, it's all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what's going on.

1983

Culture as Show Business

The years 1979 and 1980 were a time when, as some ripened novelties were already being theorized, the first puzzled questions were beginning to be asked about other novelties even newer, forgive the expression. The riper novelties concerned an evident shift in the concept of spectacle: a phenomenon of the '70's. Slowly, the crowds, and not only the young, had emerged from the confinement of the theaters. First there was streetcorner theater, with its Brechtian flavor, and then its younger sibling, the street fair, and then happenings, then, the celebrations: theater as party, and parties as theater. . . .

All subjects on which, as I was saying, a vast theoretical literature now exists; and theoretical literature, as is well known, either kills or at least makes "respectable" spontaneous developments— which are then no longer spontaneous. Now that festivities have come under municipal management, involving all the less marginal strata of an entire city (and thus entertainment has slipped through the fingers of those who, in fact, were improvising at the margin), we will not be so snobbish as to say they have lost their flavor, but they have unquestionably become a "genre," like the detective novel, the classical tragedy, the symphony, or square dancing. And in the face of all these new aesthetics, sociologies, and semiotics of the festa, there is nothing further to be said.

The upsetting innovation, on the other hand, came about with the appearance of something that has been labeled, with or without innuendo, "culture as show business."

The wording is ambiguous—as if theater and festival, or the village band playing in the square, were not culture. But despite decades and decades of cultural anthropology (which has taught us that even defecatory positions are part of a community's material culture), we still tend to speak of culture only with reference to "high" culture (literature, philosophy, classical music, gallery art, and stage theater), so the phrase "culture as show business" is meant to denote something quite specific—and to denote it in the light of an ideology (however unspecific) of culture with a capital C. In other words, the premise is that show business is amusement, faintly culpable, whereas a lecture, a Beethoven symphony, a philosophical discussion are boring experiences (and therefore "serious"). The son who gets a bad grade at school is strictly forbidden by his parent to go to a rock concert, but may attend a cultural event (which, on the contrary, will supposedly be good for him).

Another characteristic of the "serious" cultural event is that the audience must not participate. It sits and listens, or watches; in this sense a spectacle (or what was once a spectacle in the "bad" sense) can become "serious" when the public takes no active part but simply attends passively. So it is possible that the audience of Greek comedy watched while spitting out fruit pits and taunting the actors; but today, in a dutifully archeologized amphitheater, the same comedy is more culture than entertainment, and people keep quiet (and, it is hoped, are bored).

Now in the last year some disturbing events have taken place.

Cultural centers, which for years have been organizing debates, lectures, round tables, found themselves faced by a third phase. The first phase was the normal procedure up until '68: Someone spoke, the audience, in reasonable numbers, listened, with a few polite questions at the end, and everybody was back home in the space of two hours. The second phase was '68: Somebody tried to speak, an unruly audience contested his right to take the floor in an authoritarian manner, somebody else in the audience spoke in his place (just as authoritarian, but we realized that only gradually), in the end some sort of motion was made and carried, then everybody home. The third phase, on the other hand, proceeds like this: Somebody speaks, the huge audience is unbelievably crammed in, seated on the floor, packed into the adjacent rooms, sometimes even on the front steps; they allow the speaker to go on for an hour, for two, three hours, they participate in the debate for another two hours, and they never want to go home.

The third phase can be dismissed in a very highbrow, academic fashion. Bored by politics, the new (but also the old) generation now wants to hear "the truth"; High Culture, in fact, returns in triumph. But even the most rigid academic must feel a certain malaise, because these new masses (and I believe we can call them "masses," even if they are not the same masses that attend sports events or rock concerts) go to cultural events, listen, and with alert attention, speak up, with observations ranging from the acute and learned insight to the howl of the soul, but they behave as if they were at a show. They don't spit out apricot pits or strip naked, but clearly they come partly for the collective occasion, or in other words (to use an expression somewhat overworked, but worth recycling, I believe, for these experiences), to be together.

I could cite countless examples (ranging from open-air symphony concerts to debates on epistemology—all occasions where you no longer see the old, familiar crowd), but the one that most struck me (also because I was

involved) was the series of lectures or encounters with philosophers organized by the municipal library of Cattolica. People have talked about it a great deal. It is surprising that a small city of a few thousand inhabitants should organize, in the off season, evenings devoted to philosophy (an ancient ghost, about to be eliminated even from upper school curricula). There was further amazement when it turned out that as many as a thousand people came to some of these meetings.

And it was still more amazing to learn that the meetings lasted up to four hours, and that the questions came not only from those who already knew everything and wanted to conduct a learned argument with the speaker but also from those who asked the philosopher his thoughts about drugs, love, death, happiness—to such a degree that some speakers had to ward off the questions and remind the questioners that a philosopher is not an oracle and mustn't be too charismatized (who would ever have said this ten years ago?). But the amazement is bound to increase when certain quantitative and geographical calculations are made. I am speaking of my own experience. Obviously Cattolica by itself didn't suffice to supply so many "clients." And, in fact, many came from out of town, from Romagna, the Marches, even farther away.

I realized that many came from Bologna, the city where I teach three days a week. Why should anyone come from Bologna to Cattolica to hear me talk for less than forty-five minutes, when they can come as much as they like to the University during the year, where admission is free (whereas a trip from Bologna to Cattolica, what with gas, tolls, dinner in a restaurant, comes to more than a theater ticket)? The answer is simple: They didn't come to hear me. They came to experience the event: to hear also the others, to take part in a collective happening.

A show? I would feel no hesitation or embarrassment or bitterness in saying yes. There have been many historical periods in which a philosophical or legal debate was also a show: In Paris, in the Middle Ages, people went to follow the discussions of the quaestiones quodlibetales, not only to hear what the philosopher had to say, but to witness a competition, a debate, an agonistic happening. And don't tell me that the Athenians packed their amphitheaters to hear a tragic trilogy plus a satyr play just in order to remain quietly seated to the end. They went to experience an event, where the presence of the others also counted, and the food and drink booths, and the ritual that was part of the general character of a "cultural" festival—as people went to Lincoln Center to see Einstein on the Beach, whose action lasts just over five hours and which was conceived in such a way that the audience could stand up, go out, have something to drink and argue a bit, then come back in, then go out again. Entering and leaving is not obligatory.

I presume people who go to the stadiums to hear Beethoven follow the symphony from beginning to end, but what counts is the collective ritual—as if that which used to be High Culture can be reaccepted and placed in a new dynamics provided it also permits encounters, experiences in common. If a conservative objects that, absorbed in this way, capital-C Culture doesn't give anything, because the necessary concentration is missing, he is told (if his interlocutor is polite, but there are more curt alternatives) that there is no knowing how much used to be absorbed by the normal client of a lecture or concert, who would doze off only to wake with a start at the concluding applause.

The conservative would have no objection to anyone's carrying Plato to the beach, even if he had to read the philosopher among a thousand noises; and he would praise the good will of this cultivated and

enterprising bather; but he doesn't want that same reader to go with his friends to hear a debate on Plato instead of going to the disco. Perhaps it is hard to make him understand that turning something into a show does not perforce mean distraction, frivolity, loss of intensity. It is only a different way of experiencing the cultural debate. During these past months, more or less everywhere in Italy we have perceived the first signs. Perhaps it was a transitory phenomenon. If it lasts, we must examine, with the same coldness that has been used so far, what could happen when we attain the levels of institutionalized cultural showmanship that have been reached in the United States.

In that country, conferences are not organized for specialists alone; meetings, symposia, cultural marathons are frequently presented on every subject, from religion to literature to macrobiotics. The conferences are advertised in the papers, and (often considerable) admission is charged. The organization spends whatever is required to guarantee the presence of personalities who draw audiences, then the event proceeds like a theatrical event. The idea may horrify us. Sometimes it must horrify. I remember, in 1978, "The Event," organized by Jerry Rubin, former hero of '68 protest and hippie leader.

"The Event" lasted from nine in the morning until one the following morning, and it promised an "extravaganza of selfawareness," exhibitions, debates, lectures on Zen, macrobiotics, Transcendental Meditation, sex techniques, jogging, discovery of one's hidden genius, art, politics, religion of various types, popular philosophy. Among the stars were Dick Gregory, the sexologists Masters and Johnson, the prophet-architect Buckminster Fuller, preachers, entertainers. Tickets cost a fortune; advertising in all the leading papers promised happiness and radical discoveries for one's personal development, vegetarian buffets, books on Oriental doctrine, prostheses for sexual organs.

The result was horrible because it had been conceived as a music hall, to make the public gape. There was no participation, and in any case the participants didn't know one another. The cultural show had been organized like a singles bar (for that matter it isn't rare in America to find advertising for a series of concerts, where it is suggested, in all seriousness, that the intermission is an ideal place to find your soulmate). If cultural performance is going to follow this road, then we have little to be content about. Not because the show is "cultural," but because it is a "show" in the worst sense of the word: a false life depicted on the stage so that the witnesses, in silence, may have the illusion of living, through an intermediary.

But these are the degenerations of a society known, in fact, as "theatrical." Culture as show business, as we have been talking of it, is not inevitably a product of a theatrical society, it can also be the alternative. A way of eluding organized entertainments, in order to create others for ourselves. And bearing this in mind, keep calm. We must wait and see.

1980

Sports Chatter

There is one thing that—even if it were considered essential—no student movement or urban revolt or global protest or what have you would ever be able to do. And that is to occupy the football field on a Sunday.

The very idea sounds ironic and absurd; try saying it in public and people will laugh in your face. Propose it seriously and you will be shunned as a provocateur. Not for the obvious reason, which is that, while a horde of students can fling Molotov cocktails on the jeeps of any police force, and at most (because of the laws, the necessity of national unity, the prestige of the state), no more than forty students will be killed; an attack on a sports field would surely cause the massacre of the attackers, indiscriminate, total slaughter carried out by self-respecting citizens aghast at the outrage.

You can occupy a cathedral, and you'll have a bishop who protests, some upset Catholics, a fringe of approving dissidents, an indulgent left-wing, the traditional secular parties (secretly) happy. And you can occupy a party's headquarters, and the other parties, with or without a show of solidarity, will think it serves them right. But if a stadium is occupied, apart from the immediate reactions, the disclaiming of responsibility would be total: Church, Left, Right, State, Judiciary, Chinese, League for Divorce, anarchist unions, all would send the criminals to the pillory. So there is a deep area of the collective sensibility that no one, whether through conviction or demagogical calculation, will allow to be touched. And there is a profound structure of the Social whose Maximum Cement, if broken up, would cause a crisis in every possible associative principle, including the presence of man on earth, at least as he has been present in the last tens of thousands of years. Sport is Man, Sport is Society.

But if an overall revision of our human relationships is in process, let it also touch Sport. At this ultimate root it will discover the inconsistencies of Man as a social animal. Here what is not human in the relationship of sociality will emerge. Here the deceptive nature of Classical Humanism will become clear, founded on Greek anthropophilia, founded in turn not only on contemplation, the notion of the city or the primacy of Doing, but on sport as calculated waste, as masking of the problem, "chatter" raised to the rank of tumor. In short—and this will be explained below—sport is the maximum aberration of "phatic" speech and therefore, finally, the negation of all speech, and hence the beginning of the dehumanization of man or the "humanistic" invention of an idea of Man that is deceptive at the outset.

Sports activity is dominated by the idea of "waste." In principle, every sports act is a waste of energy: If I fling a stone for the sheer pleasure of flinging it—not for any utilitarian end—I have wasted calories accumulated through the swallowing of food, earned by work.

Now this waste—I must make myself clear—is profoundly healthy. It is the waste proper to play. And man, like every animal, has a physical and psychic need for play. So there is a recreational waste that we cannot renounce: It means being free, freeing ourselves from the tyranny of indispensable work. If, as I fling my stone, another man beside me aims to fling one still farther, the recreation takes on the form of "contest," also a waste, of physical energy and of intelligence, which provides the rules of the game. But this recreational waste proves a gain. Races improve the race, contests develop and control the competitive spirit, they reduce innate aggressiveness to a system, brute force to intelligence.

But in these definitions lurks the worm that undermines the action at the roots: Contest disciplines and neutralizes the aggressive charge, individual and collective. It reduces excess action, but it is really a mechanism to neutralize action.

From this nucleus of ambiguous healthiness (a healthiness that is "healthy" up to the point where a boundary is crossed—as you can die of an excess of that indispensable liberating exercise that is laughter, and Margutte explodes from exaggerated health) leads to the first degenerations of the contest: the raising of human beings dedicated to competition. The athlete is already a being who has hypertrophied one organ, who turns his body into the seat and exclusive source of a continuous play. The athlete is a monster, he is the Man Who Laughs, the geisha with the compressed and atrophied foot, dedicated to total instrumentalization.

But the athlete as monster comes into existence at the moment when sport is squared, when sport, that is, from a game played in the first person, becomes a kind of disquisition on play, or rather play as spectacle for others, and hence game as played by others and seen by me. Sport squared equals sports performance. If sport (practiced) is health, like eating food, sport seen is a defrauding of health. When I see others play, I am doing nothing healthy, and I am only vaguely enjoying the health of others (which in itself would be a sordid exercise of voyeurism, like watching others make love), because in fact what I enjoy most are the accidents that will befall those who are healthily exercising, the illness that undermines this exercised health (like someone who watches not two human beings but two bees making love, while waiting to witness the death of the drone).

To be sure, someone who watches sport performed by others becomes excited as he watches; he yells and gesticulates, and so he is performing physical and psychic exercise, and reducing aggressiveness, and disciplining his competitiveness. But this reduction is not compensated, as when one exercises sport, by an increase of energy or by an acquired control and self-mastery. On the contrary, for the athletes are competing in play, but the voyeurs compete seriously (and, in fact, they beat up one another or die of heart failure in the grandstands).

As for disciplining competitiveness, which in exercised sport has the two aspects of increasing and losing one's own humanity, in athletic voyeurism it has only one aspect, the negative. Sport is presented then, as it has been over the centuries, as instrumentum regni. These things are obvious: The circenses restrain the uncontrollable energies of the crowd.

But this sport squared (which involves speculation and barter, selling and enforced consumption) generates a sport cubed, the discussion of sport as something seen. This discussion is in the first place that of the sports press, but it generates in turn discussion on the sports press, and therefore sport raised to the nth power. The discussion on the sports press is discourse on a discourse about watching others' sport as discourse.

Present-day sports, then, is essentially a discussion of the sports press. At several removes there remains the actual sport, which might as well not even exist. If through some diabolical machination of the Mexican government and chairman Avery Brundage, in agreement with all the TV networks in the world, the Olympics were not to take place, but were narrated daily and hourly through fictitious images, nothing in the international sports system would change, nor would the sports discutants feel cheated.

So sport as practice, as activity, no longer exists, or exists for economic reasons (for it is easier to make an athlete run than to invent a film with actors who pretend to run); and there exists only chatter about chatter about sport. The chatter about chatter of the sports press constitutes a game with its full set of rules: You have only to listen to those Sunday morning radio broadcasts where they pretend (raising sport to the nth power) that some citizens gathered in the barber shop are discussing sport. Or else you can go and listen to such talk where it occurs.

It will be seen, as for that matter everyone knows already, that evaluations, judgments, arguments, polemical remarks, denigrations, and paeans follow a verbal ritual, very complex but with simple and precise rules. In this ritual, intellectual energies are exercised and neutralized; physical energies are no longer in play, so the competition shifts to a purely "political" level. In fact, the chatter about sports chatter has all the characteristics of a political debate.

They say what the leaders should have done, what they did do, what we would have liked them to do, what happened, and what will happen. Only the object is not the city (or the corridors of the state house) but the stadium, with its locker rooms. Such chatter seems therefore the parody of political talk; but since in this parody the strength that the citizen had at his disposal for political debate is vitiated and disciplined, this chatter is the ersatz of political speech, but to such a heightened degree that it becomes itself political speech.

Afterwards, there's no more room—because the person who chatters about sport, if he didn't do this, would at least realize he has possibilities of judgment, verbal aggressiveness, political competitiveness to employ somehow. But sports chatter convinces him that this energy is expended to conclude something. Having allayed his doubt, sport fulfills its role of fake conscience.

And since chatter about sport gives the illusion of interest in sport, the notion of practicing sport becomes confused with that of talking sport; the chatterer thinks himself an athlete and is no longer aware that he doesn't engage in sport. And similarly he isn't aware that he could no longer engage in it, because the work he does, when he isn't chattering, tires him and uses up both the physical energy and the time required for sports activities. This chatter is the sort of thing whose function Heidegger examined in *Being and Time*, under the head of "idle talk":

Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one's own. . . . If this were done, idle talk would founder; and it already guards against such a danger. Idle talk is something which anyone can make up; it not only releases one from the task of genuinely understanding but develops an undifferentiated kind of intelligibility for which nothing is closed off any longer. . . . [Idle talk does not] aim to deceive. Idle talk does not have the kind of Being which belongs to consciously passing off something as something else. . . . Thus, by its very nature, idle talk is a closing-off, since to go back to the ground of what is talked about is something which it leaves undone. *

Certainly Heidegger wasn't thinking of idle talk or chatter as totally negative: Chatter is the everyday manner in which we are spoken by preexistent language rather than our bending language to ends of comprehension and discovery. And it is a normal attitude. For it,

however, "what matters is that there is talk." And here we come to that function of language that for Jakobson is the phatic function, that of contact.

On the telephone (replying "Yes, no, of course, fine . . .") and in the street (asking "How are you?" of someone whose health doesn't interest us, and he knows it, and in fact he plays along, in answering "Fine, thanks"), we conduct phatic discourse indispensable to maintaining a constant connection among speakers; but phatic speech is indispensable precisely because it keeps the possibility of communication in working order, for the purpose of other and more substantial communications. If this function atrophies, we have constant contact without any message. Like a radio that is turned on but not tuned, so a background noise and some static inform us that we are, indeed, in a kind of communication with something, but the radio doesn't allow us to know anything.

Chatter then will be phatic discourse that has become an end in itself, but sports chatter is something more, a continuous phatic discourse that deceitfully passes itself off as talk of the City and its Ends.

Born as the raising to the nth power of that initial (and rational) waste that is sports recreation, sports chatter is the glorification of Waste, and therefore the maximum point of Consumption. On it and in it the consumer civilization man actually consumes himself (and every possibility of thematizing and judging the enforced consumption to which he is invited and subjected).

A place of total ignorance, it shapes the ideal citizen so profoundly that, in extreme cases (and they are many), he refuses to discuss this daily availability he has for empty discussion. And so no political summons could affect a practice that is total falsification of every political attitude. Thus no revolutionary would have the courage to revolutionize the availability for sports chatter; the citizen would take over the protest, transforming its slogans into sports chatter, or suddenly rejecting, and with desperate distrust, the intrusion of reason in his reasonable exercise of highly rational verbal rules. Thus the Mexican students have died for nothing.* It seemed reasonable for an Italian athlete to say nobly: "If they kill any more, I refuse to jump." But it was not established how many they would have to kill for him not to jump. And if he then didn't jump, it would be enough, for the others, to talk about what would have happened if he had jumped.

1969

The World Cup and Its Poms

Many malignant readers, seeing how I discuss here the noble sport of soccer with detachment, irritation, and (oh, all right) malevolence, will harbor the vulgar suspicion that I don't love soccer because soccer has never loved me, for from my earliest childhood I belonged to that category of infants or adolescents who, the moment they kick the ball—assuming that they manage to kick it—promptly send it into their own goal or, at best, pass it to the opponent, unless with stubborn tenacity they send it off the field, beyond hedges and fences, to become lost in a basement or a stream or to plunge among the flavors of the ice-cream cart. And so his playmates reject him and banish him from the happiest of competitive events. And no suspicion will ever be more patently true.

I will say more. In an attempt to feel like the others (just as a terrified young homosexual may obstinately repeat to himself that he

"has" to like girls), I often begged my father, a sober but loyal fan, to take me with him to the game. And one day, as I was observing with detachment the senseless movements down there on the field, I felt how the high noonday sun seemed to enfold men and things in a chilling light, and how before my eyes a cosmic, meaningless performance was proceeding. Later, on reading Ottiero Ottieri, I would discover that this is the sense of the "everyday unreality," but at that time I was thirteen and I translated the experience in my own way; for the first time I doubted the existence of God and decided that the world was a pointless fiction.

Frightened, as soon as I had left the stadium, I went to confession to a wise Capuchin, who told me that I certainly had an odd idea, because reliable people like Dante, Newton, Manzoni, T. S. Eliot, and Pat Boone had believed in God without the slightest difficulty. Bewildered by this consensus, I postponed my religious crisis for about another decade—but I have been telling all this to indicate how, as far back as I can remember, soccer for me has been linked with the absence of purpose and the vanity of all things, and with the fact that the Supreme Being may be (or may not be) simply a hole. And perhaps for this reason I (alone, I think, among living creatures) have always associated the game of soccer with negative philosophies.

This having been said, the question could arise as to why I, of all people, should now discuss the World Cup. The answer is soon given: The editors of L'Espresso, in an excess of metaphysical vertigo, insist that the event be discussed from an absolutely alien point of view. And so they have turned to me. They couldn't have made a better or shrewder choice.

Now, however, I must say that I am not against the passion for soccer. On the contrary, I approve of it and consider it providential. Those crowds of fans, cut down by heart attacks in the grandstands, those referees who pay for a Sunday of fame by personal exposure to grievous bodily harm, those excursionists who climb, bloodstained, from the buses, wounded by shattered glass from windows smashed by stones, those celebrating young men who speed drunkenly through the streets in the evening, their banner poking from the overloaded Fiat Cinquecento, until they crash into a juggernaut truck, those athletes physically ruined by piercing sexual abstinences, those families financially destroyed after succumbing to insane scalpers, those enthusiasts whose cannon-crackers explode and blind them: They fill my heart with joy.

I am in favor of soccer passion as I am in favor of drag racing, of competition between motorcycles on the edge of a cliff, and of wild parachute jumping, mystical mountain climbing, crossing oceans in rubber dinghies, Russian roulette, and the use of narcotics. Races improve the race, and all these games lead fortunately to the death of the best, allowing mankind to continue its existence serenely with normal protagonists, of average achievement. In a certain sense I could agree with the Futurists that war is the only hygiene of the world, except for one little correction: It would be, if only volunteers were allowed to wage it. Unfortunately war also involves the reluctant, and therefore it is morally inferior to spectator sports.

For I am speaking of spectator sports, mind you, not of sport. Sport, in the sense of a situation in which one person, with no financial incentive, and employing his own body directly, performs physical exercises in which he exerts his muscles, causes his blood to circulate and his lungs to work to their fullest capacity: Sport, as I was saying,

is something very beautiful, at least as beautiful as sex, philosophical reflection, and pitching pennies.

But soccer has nothing to do with sport in this sense. Not for the players, who are professionals subjected to tensions not unlike those of an assembly-line worker (except for questionable differences in pay), not for the spectators—the majority, that is—who, in fact, behave like hordes of sex maniacs regularly going to see (not once in their lifetime in Amsterdam but every Sunday, and instead of) couples making love, or pretending to (something like the very poor children of my childhood, who were promised they would be taken to watch the rich eating ice cream).

Now that I have posited these premises, it is clear why these weeks I have been feeling very relaxed. Rendered neurotic, like everyone else, by recent tragic events during a three-month period when we had to devour newspapers and stay glued to the TV, awaiting the latest message from the Red Brigades, or the promise of a new escalation of terror, I can now skip reading the papers, avoid TV, at most looking on page eight for news of the Turin trial, the Lockheed scandal, the referendum. For the rest, the papers and the TV talk about the thing I want to hear nothing about—and the terrorists, who have a keen sense of the mass media, know this very well and don't attempt anything interesting, because they'd end up in the local news or on the food page.

There's no need to ask ourselves why the World Cup has so morbidly polarized the attention of the public and the devotion of the mass media: From the famous story of how a comedy by Terence played to an empty house because there was a trained bear show elsewhere, and the acute observation of Roman emperors about the usefulness of circuses, to the shrewd use that dictatorships (including the Argentinian) have always made of great competitive events, it is so clear, so evident that the majority prefers soccer or bicycle racing to abortion, that it isn't even worth reflecting about. But since external pressure impels me to reflect, I might as well say that public opinion, especially in Italy, has never needed a nice international championship more than it does now.

In fact, as I have remarked in the preceding essay, sports debate (I mean the sports shows, the talk about it, the talk about the journalists who talk about it) is the easiest substitute for political debate. Instead of judging the job done by the minister of finance (for which you have to know about economics, among other things), you discuss the job done by the coach; instead of criticizing the record of Parliament you criticize the record of the athletes; instead of asking (difficult and obscure question) if such-and-such a minister signed some shady agreements with such-and-such a foreign power, you ask if the final or decisive game will be decided by chance, by athletic prowess, or by diplomatic alchemy.

Talk about soccer requires, to be sure, a more than vague expertise, but, all in all, it is limited, well-focused; it allows you to take positions, express opinions, suggest solutions, without exposing yourself to arrest, to loyalty oaths, or, in any case, to suspicion. It doesn't oblige you to intervene personally, because you are talking about something played beyond the area of the speaker's power. In short, it allows you to play at the direction of the government without all the sufferings, the duties, the imponderables of political debate. For the male adult it's like little girls playing ladies: a pedagogical game, which teaches you how to occupy your proper place.

And at a moment like this, concerning oneself with the running of the government (the real one) is traumatic. So faced with such a choice, we are all Argentines, and that handful of Argentine nuisances who are still reminding us that, down there, people are "disappeared" from time to time, should be more careful not to mar our pleasure in this sacred mystery play. We listened to them before, and quite politely, so now what do they want? In other words, this World Cup has arrived like Santa Claus. Finally some news that has nothing to do with the Red Brigades.

But while we're on that subject: The reader who is not completely distracted knows that there are two theses in circulation (naturally I consider only the extreme hypotheses, but reality is always a bit more complicated). According to the first thesis, the Brigades are a group obscurely maneuvered by some Power, perhaps foreign. According to the second, they are "misled comrades," who behave execrably but, all things considered, for noble motives (a better world). Now if the first thesis is correct, Red Brigades and organizers of World Cups belong to the same articulation of power: The former destabilize at the right moment, the latter restabilize at the right moment.

The public is asked to follow Italy-Argentina as if it were Curcio-Andreotti and, if possible, to place bets on the number of kneecaps involved in the next outburst of violence. If, on the contrary, the second thesis is correct, the Red Brigades are comrades who are really very misled indeed—because they insist so readily on assassinating political figures and blowing up assembly lines, but that, alas, is not where power is. It is in society's capacity for redistributing tension, immediately afterwards, on other poles, far closer to the soul of the crowds. Is the armed struggle possible on World Cup Sunday? Perhaps it would be best to engage in fewer political discussions and in more circenses sociology. Is it possible to have a revolution on a football Sunday?

1978

Falsification and Consensus

The student I met last October in the Yale University Library came from California. We were both reaching for the same copy of an Italian paper, and so I discovered that he had lived in our country. We went down to the café in the basement for a cigarette and, in the course of our chat, he mentioned to me an Italian book that had made a deep impression on him, though he couldn't remember the author or the title. "Wait a minute," he said, "I'll ask my girlfriend in Rome. Have you got a dime?" He dropped the dime into the nearby telephone, spoke for a moment with an operator, waited thirty seconds, and Rome was on the line. He chatted with his girlfriend for a quarter of an hour, then came back and handed me the dime, which the telephone had returned to him. I thought he had called collect, but instead he told me that he used the code number of a multinational.

In the American telephone system (about which the Americans, who know no other, are always complaining), you can call Hong Kong, Sydney, or Manila by dialing the number of a special personal credit card. Many executives of big firms use a collective company card. The number is top secret, but countless students, especially in the technological departments, know it.

I asked him if the multinational didn't eventually find out that everybody was using their number, when they checked their bills. Of course, they find out, but they have an annual fixed fee they pay the

phone company, and running detailed checks would take too much time. They budget a few tens of thousands of dollars to cover illicit calls. But what if they did check? All you have to do is call from a public phone. But what if they checked the number being called?

The other party is already in the know, and just has to say that one evening he or she did receive a long-distance call, but it must have been a joke (and, this is also conceivable: Many people call random numbers, just for fun). It's not the immediate saving that counts, the student explained, it's the fact that you're screwing the multinationals, who support Pinochet and are all fascists.

The thousands of students who play tricks of this sort are not the only example of electronic dissent. Joseph La Palombara was telling me that a California protest group two years ago invited the public to pay their telephone bills regularly, but to add one cent to the sum on their checks. Nobody can sue you for paying your bill, especially if you overpay. But if large numbers do it the whole business management of the telephone company is thrown out of whack. Its computers, in fact, stop at every irregular payment, record the difference, send out a credit notice and a check for one cent to each customer. If the protest operation succeeds on a large scale, the system breaks down. In fact, for several months the phone company was in trouble and had to broadcast TV appeals to persuade the customers to stop the joke.

The great systems are extremely vulnerable and a grain of sand suffices to send them into "paranoia." When you think about it, airline terrorism, hijacking, is based on this principle: You couldn't hijack a bus, but an airplane is like a baby. To bribe an accountant takes time, money, and perhaps beautiful women, whereas an electronic brain goes mad for much less: All you have to do is insert into its circuit, perhaps by telephone, a piece of "wild" information.

And so, in the era of electronic information, the call has gone out for a form of nonviolent (or at least nonbloody) guerrilla warfare: that of falsification. Recently the papers told how easy it is for a color photocopier to counterfeit railroad tickets, and how you can drive the traffic lights of a whole city berserk. Someone produces by the dozen photocopies of a letter, whose signature is photocopied from another letter.

The theoretical idea behind these forms of falsification stems from the new criticisms of the idea of power. Never created by an arbitrary, top-level decision, Power lives thanks to thousands of forms of minute or "molecular" consensus. It takes thousands of fathers, wives, and children who recognize themselves in the family structure before a power can base itself on the family ethic as institution; it takes a myriad of people who find a role as physician, nurse, guard before a power can be based on the idea of the segregation of those who are different.

Only the Red Brigades, those last, incurable romantics of Catholic-papist origin, still think the state has a heart and that this heart can be wounded; and they fail because the kidnapping of one Moro, or ten or a hundred, doesn't weaken the system, but rather recreates the consensus around the symbolic ghost of its "heart," wounded and outraged.

The new forms of guerrilla protest are aimed instead at wounding the system, upsetting the fine network of consensus, based on certain rules of living together. If this network breaks down, collapse results. That is their strategic hypothesis.

About ten years ago, in Italy, there were two clamorous cases of falsification. First someone sent to *Avanti!* a fake poem of Pasolini. Later, someone else sent to the *Corriere della Sera* a fake article by Carlo Cassola. Both were published and caused a scandal. It did not spread far because the two episodes were exceptional. If they were to become the norm, then no paper could publish a piece that had not been hand-delivered by the author to the editor.

But this has already happened in the last two years: Political proclamations have been printed and posted by group A with the signature of group B; the fake correspondence of Berlinguer was published in a fake Einaudi edition; a fake text by Sartre was produced. We still notice them because the fakes are blatant and, for the most part, clumsy or too paradoxical—but what if it were all done better and at a faster pace? We could react to the falsifications only with other falsifications, spreading false news about everything, even about the falsifications; and—who knows?—perhaps the article you are now reading is only the first example of this new trend toward disinformation. But this very doubt shows the potential suicide inherent in the falsifying techniques.

Every top-level power is supported by a network of molecular consensus. But we have to distinguish between the kind of consensus that allows the spreading of macroscopic forms of control and that which satisfies what we might call a biological pace and doesn't come close to the establishment of power relationships in the true sense.

Let's take two examples. A modern state succeeds in making its citizens pay their taxes not by using force from above but through consensus. Consensus is born from the fact that the members of the group have accepted the idea that certain collective expenses (for example: Who's buying the sandwiches for the Sunday picnic?) must be redistributed collectively (answer: We all pay for the sandwiches at so much a head). We'll grant that this custom of microconsensus is mistaken: The sandwiches, let's say, should be paid for by the person who has derived the greatest benefit from the picnic, or who has the most money. If the base of microconsensus is destroyed, the ideology on which the taxation system is based also totters.

But let's look at the second example. A group of persons exists, united by normal relationships. Among these people, as in any group, the convention prevails that anyone who announces a piece of news is telling the truth. If a person lies once, he is reproached (he has deceived the others). If he lies habitually he is considered unreliable; the group no longer trusts him. At most the group takes its revenge and lies back to him. But let's suppose that the habit of ignoring the minimal condition of truth becomes widespread, and everybody lies to everybody else. The group breaks up, war begins—everyone against everyone else.

At this point power relationships have not been destroyed. The conditions of the group's survival have been destroyed. Each becomes in turn oppressor and victim, unless power is somehow reestablished in someone's favor—in favor of the group or person who works out some more effective technique, who lies better than the others, and more quickly, soon becoming master of the others. In a universe of falsifiers power is not destroyed; at most one holder of power is replaced by another.

To put it simply, a political group capable of broadcasting false news bulletins signed "Fiat" achieves an advantage over the Fiat company, causing a crisis of Fiat's power—but only until the company hires a more

skillful falsifier who issues false news bulletins attributed to the group of falsifiers. Whoever wins this battle will be the new Boss. The truth, actually, is less romantic. Certain forms of consensus are so essential to community life that they reestablish themselves despite every attempt to shake them. At most they are reestablished in a more dogmatic or, I would say, more fanatical way. In a group where the technique of disruptive falsification is spread, a very Puritan ethic of truth would be reestablished; the majority (to defend the ideological bases of consent) would become fanatical about "truth" and would cut off the tongue of anyone who lied, even in a figure of speech. The Utopia of subversion would produce the reality of reaction.

Finally, is there any sense in proposing to break up the fine network of micropowers (mind you, not to create a crisis by criticism of its premises, but to break it up by making it suddenly untenable) once it has been assumed that a central Power doesn't exist and that power is distributed along the threads of a finespun, widespread cobweb? If this cobweb exists, it is capable of healing its local wounds, precisely because it has no heart, precisely because it is—let us say—a body without organs.

For example:

The triumph of photocopying is creating a crisis in the publishing industry. Each of us if he can obtain, at less expense, a photocopy of a very expensive book avoids buying that book. The practice, however, has become institutionalized. Let's say a book of two hundred pages costs twenty dollars. If I copy it in a stationery store at twenty cents a page I spend forty dollars, and this is not economically feasible. If I use a machine that can reduce two pages onto a single sheet, I spend the price of the book. If I go in with some others and make a hundred copies, I cut the cost in half. Then the operation becomes feasible. If the book is scholarly, and is also two hundred pages long, it will cost forty dollars, then the cost of the photocopy is reduced to a fourth. Thousands of students in this way are paying a fourth of the list price of expensive books. An almost legal form of confiscation, or expropriation. But the big German and Dutch publishing firms, who bring out scientific works in English, have already adapted to this situation. A two-hundred-page book now costs fifty dollars. They know full well that they will sell it only to libraries and research teams, and the rest will be xeroxes. They will sell only three thousand copies. But three thousand copies at fifty dollars comes out the same as fifty thousand copies at three dollars (except that production and distribution costs are lower).

Further, to protect themselves, they don't pay the authors, claiming that these are scholarly publications destined for public-service organizations.

The example is only an example, and it applies exclusively to indispensable scientific works. But it serves to demonstrate that the capacity of the big systems for healing their wounds is considerable. And that, indeed, big systems and subversive groups are often twins, and one produces the other.

That is to say, if the attack on the presumed "heart" of the system (confident that a central Power exists) is bound to fail, likewise the peripheral attack on systems that have neither center nor periphery produces no revolution. At most it guarantees the mutual survival of the players of the game. The big publishing houses are ready to accept the spread of photocopying, as the multinationals can tolerate the phone calls made at their expense, and a good transportation system willingly

accepts a fair number of counterfeit tickets—provided the counterfeiters are content with their immediate advantage. It is a more subtle form of "historic compromise," except that it's technological. It is the new form that the Social Contract is preparing to assume, to the extent that the Utopia of the revolution is transformed into a scheme of short-range, but permanent, harassment.

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The end