

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 "non-perceptive 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.