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space in which meaningful communication is possible for the participants of the culture. Then there would be almost no private space left, namely, a space into which communication cannot penetrate. An omnipresent dialogue is just as dangerous as an omnipresent discourse. But all this shows a wide field for the future activities of the theory of communication.

At the beginning of this essay, it was said that the ultimate aim of the theory of communication is to "explain" the negentropic character of human communication, an aspect of man in his opposition to the world. And it was said that this ultimate aim tends to be forgotten, as new and fascinating problems are being discovered and attacked. The situation seems to be as follows: Aside from the theory of communication, and in part within it, a purely quantifying discipline, the theory of information, is developing, and it is dedicated to the study of negentropy. The theory of information should be a method of the theory of communication, but it is often being confused with it. The proper theory of communication is leaving the problem of negentropy aside, and is dedicating its attention to other problems, some of which have been mentioned in this essay. But negentropy cannot be ignored, nor left for the theory of information to handle. It is a problem that touches the essence of man (his form-giving essence), and merely quantifying approaches do not grasp it. It is true that, with the help of the theory of information, the theory of communication may achieve a rigor comparable with the natural sciences. But it will never be a natural science, and should not be one. It is, owing to its problematic, and should also be through its methods, a "humanistic" discipline. Therefore, it cannot be, and should not be, a "pure" discipline. It requires a commitment alien to the commitment to natural science. It is more like medicine in this respect. And, as in medicine, there should be, in the theory of communication, no neat distinction between theory and praxis.

But because it is a new discipline, it is very difficult to say whether, when, and how it will solve its internal problems, and whether it will ever evolve a unified method.

(ca. 1986–87)

Surfaces are becoming ever more important in our surroundings. For instance, TV screens, posters, the pages of illustrated magazines. In the past, these surfaces were rarer. Photographs, paintings, carpets, vitreaux, cave paintings surrounded men in the past, but these surfaces did not offer themselves either in the quantity or with the degree of importance of the surfaces that now surround us. Therefore, it was formerly not so urgent as it is today to try to understand the role surfaces play in human life. In the past, there existed another problem of far greater significance: to try to understand what lines meant. Ever since the "invention" of alphabetical writing (that is, ever since Western thought began to articulate itself), written lines surrounded men in a way that demanded explanation. It was clear: these lines meant the three-dimensional world in which we live, act, and suffer. But how did they mean it?

We know the answers that have been given to this question, the most decisive for modern civilization being the Cartesian one. This affirms that lines are discourses of points, and that each point is a symbol of something out there in the world (a "concept"). Therefore, the lines represent the world by projecting it as a series of successions, in the form of a process. Western thought is "historical" in the sense that it conceives the world in lines, therefore as process. It can be no accident that historical feeling was first articulated by the Jews—the people of the book, that is, of linear writing. But let us not exaggerate: only a very few knew how to read and write, and the illiterate masses distrusted (and pour cause) the linear historicity of the scribes and clerks who manipulated the civilization. The invention of the printing press vulgarized the alphabet, however, and it
may be said that during the last hundred years or so the linear historical consciousness of Western man has formed the climate of our civilization.

This has now ceased to be the case. Written lines, although appearing more frequently than before, are becoming less important than surfaces to the mass of people. (We need no prophets to tell us that the "one-dimensional man" is disappearing.) Now, what do these surfaces mean? That is the question. Of course, we may say that they mean the world, just as the lines do. But how do they mean it? Are they adequate to the world, and if so, how? And do they mean the "same" world that is conveyed by the written lines? The problem is to find out what adequation there is between the surfaces and the world on the one hand, and between the surface and the lines on the other. It is no longer just a question of the adequation of thought to thing, but of thought expressed in surfaces on the one hand, and thought expressed in lines on the other.

There are various difficulties to be encountered in merely stating the problem. One difficulty has to do with the fact that the problem can only be stated by writing it out in lines—in a way, therefore, that begs the question. Another difficulty has to do with the fact that although thought that is expressed in surfaces now predominates in the world, this kind of thought is not quite so much aware of its own structure as is thought expressed in lines. (We do not have a two-dimensional logic comparable in rigor and elaboration to linear Aristotelian logic.) And there are other difficulties that we cannot evade by saying, for instance, that thought expressed in surfaces is "synoptic" or "syncretic." Let us admit the difficulties, but let us try, nonetheless, to think about the problem.

**Adequation of "Surface Thought" to "Line Thought"**

To begin, we might pose the following question: What is the difference between reading written lines and reading a picture? The answer is apparently quite simple: we follow the text of a line from left to right; we jump from line to line from above to below; we turn the pages from left to right. We look at a picture, instead, by passing our eyes over its surface in pathways vaguely suggested by the structure of the picture. The difference seems to be that in reading lines we follow a structure imposed upon us, whereas in reading pictures we move rather freely within a structure that has been proposed to us.

This is not a very good answer to our question, however. It suggests that both readings are linear (because paths are lines), and that the difference between the two has something to do with freedom. If we think about this more closely, we realize that this is not so. We may in fact read pictures in the way described, but we need not necessarily do so. We may seize the totality of the picture at a glance, so to speak, and then proceed to analyze it by means of the above-mentioned pathways. (And that, as a rule, is what happens.) In fact, this double method—synthesis followed by analysis (a process that may be repeated several times in the course of a single reading)—is what characterizes the reading of pictures. This gives us the following difference between reading written lines and pictures: we must follow the written text if we want to get at its message, but in pictures we may get the message first, and then try to decompose it. And this points to the difference between the one-dimensional line and the two-dimensional surface: the one aims at getting somewhere; the other is there already, but may reveal how it got there. This difference is one of temporality, and involves the present, the past, and the future.

It is obvious that both types of reading involve time—but is it the "same" time? It is so apparently, because we can measure the time involved in both readings in terms of minutes. But this simple fact makes us pause. How can we explain that the reading of written texts usually takes many more minutes than does the reading of pictures? Is the reading of pictures more tiresome, so that we have to stop sooner? Or are the messages transmitted by pictures themselves usually "shorter"? On the other hand, would it not be more sensible to say that the times involved in the two processes are different, and that their measurement in minutes fails to reveal this difference? If we accept this last statement, we may say that the reading of pictures takes less time because the moment in which their messages are received is denser; it is more compacted. It also opens up more quickly.

If, then, we call the time involved in reading written lines "historical time," we ought to call the time involved in reading pictures by a different name, because "history" has the sense of going somewhere, whereas, while reading pictures, we need go nowhere. The proof of this is simple: it takes many more minutes to describe what one has seen in a picture than it does to see it.

This difference between the two types of temporality becomes even more virulent if, instead of comparing the reading of written lines to the reading of pictures, we compare it to viewing movies. We all know that a film is a linear sequence of pictures, but while reading or viewing a film, we forget this fact. Indeed, we have to forget it if we want to read the film. How, then, do we read it? This question has been asked by a number of sciences, and is eliciting detailed physiological, psychological, and sociological answers. (This is important, because knowing these answers
enables film and TV producers to change films and filmmaking, and thereby to change the behavior of those who watch them, i.e., humankind.) But the scientific answers, by being "objective," fail to show the existential aspect of reading films, which is the one that matters in considerations like these.

It may be said that films are read as if they were a series of pictures. But these pictures are not identical with the pictures of which the film is physically composed, with the photographs that compose its ribbon. They are more like moving pictures of scenes in a play, and this is the reason why the reading of films is often compared to the reading of staged drama, rather than to the reading of pictures. But this is an error, because the stage has three dimensions and we can walk into it, while the screen is a two-dimensional projection and we can never penetrate it. The theater represents the world of things through things, and the film represents the world of things through projections of things; the reading of films goes on in a plane, like the reading of pictures (although it is a reading of "talking pictures," a problem we will return to later).

How we read films can best be described by trying to enumerate the various levels of time in which the reading goes on. There is the linear time in which the pictures of scenes follow one another. There is the time in which each picture itself moves. There is the time it takes for us to read each picture (which is similar to, though shorter than, the time involved in reading paintings). There is the time that is meant by the story the film is telling. And, very probably, there are other, even more complex, time levels.

Now, it is easy to simplify all this, and say that the reading of films is similar to the reading of written lines, because it also follows a text (the first time level). Such a simplification is true in the sense that in films, as in written texts, we get the message only at the end of our reading. But it is false in the sense that in films (unlike written texts, but like paintings) we can first grasp each scene, and then analyze it. This discloses a central difference: the reading of films goes on in the same "historical time" in which the reading of written lines occurs, but the "historical time" itself occurs, within the reading of films, on a new and different level. We can easily visualize this difference. In reading written lines, we are following "historically" given points (concepts). In reading films, we are following "historically" given surfaces (images). The written line is a project toward the first dimension (an unfoldment from point to line). The film is a project that starts from the second dimension. Now, if by history we mean a project toward something, it becomes obvious that "history" as embod-

ied in reading written texts means something quite different from what it means in reading films.

This radical change in the meaning of the word history has not yet become obvious, for a simple reason: we have not yet learned how to read films and TV programs. We still read them as if they were written lines, and fail to grasp their inherent surface quality. But this situation will change in the very near future. It is even now technically possible to project films and TV programs that allow the reader to control and manipulate the sequence of the pictures, and to superimpose other pictures upon them. Videoscopes and multimedia shows point clearly to this possibility. In consequence, the "history" of a film will be something that is partly devised or manipulated by the reader. It will even become partially reversible. Now, these developments imply a radically new meaning of the term historical freedom. For those who think in written lines, the term means the possibility of acting upon history from within history. For those who think in films, however, it will mean the possibility of acting upon history from without. This is so because those who think in written lines stand within history, and those who think in films look at it from without.

The preceding considerations have not taken into account the fact that films are "talking" pictures. But this is a problem. Visually, films are surfaces, but to the ear they are spatial. We are merged in the ocean of sound and it penetrates us; we are opposed to the world of images, and it merely surrounds us. The term audiovisual obscures this distinction. (It seems that Olaf, like many others, has ignored this difference when speaking of our circunstancia. Visionaries certainly live in a different world from those who hear voices.) We can physically feel the sound in stereophonic films adds a third dimension to the surface. (This has nothing whatever to do with possible future three-dimensional films, because they will not introduce the third dimension, they will "project" it, just as paintings do through the use of perspective.) This third dimension, which drives a wedge into the surface reading of films, is a challenge to those who think in surfaces; only the future can show what will come of this.

Let us recapitulate what we have tried to say in the preceding paragraphs. Until very recently, official Western thought has expressed itself much more in written lines than in surfaces. This fact is important. Written lines impose a specific structure on thought, in that they represent the world by means of a point sequence. This implies a "historical" being-in-the-world of those who write and read written lines. But, in addition, surfaces have always existed, and these also have represented the
world. They impose a very different structure on thought in that they represent the world by means of static images. This implies an “unhistorical” being-in-the-world of those who make and read these surface images. Very recently, new channels for the articulation of thought have come about (e.g., films and TV), and official Western thought is taking increasing advantage of them. They impose a radically new structure on thought in that they represent the world by means of moving images. This implies a posthistorical being-in-the-world of those who make and read these moving images. In a sense, it may be said that these new channels incorporate the temporality of the written line into the picture, by lifting the linear historical time of written lines onto the level of the surface.

Now, if this is true, it means that “surface thought” is absorbing “linear thought,” or is at least beginning to learn how to do so. And this implies a radical change in the climate, the behavior patterns, and the whole structure of our civilization. This change in the structure of our thinking is an important aspect of the present crisis.

Adequation of “Surface Thought” to “Things”

Let us now ask a quite different sort of question. We can take a stone as an example. How is that stone out there (which makes me stumble) related to a photograph of it, and how is it related to its mineralogical explanation? The answer seems to be easy. The photograph represents the stone in the form of an image; the explanation represents it in the form of a linear discourse. This means that I can imagine the stone if I read the photograph, and conceive it if I read the written lines of the explanation. Photograph and explanation are mediations between me and the stone; they put themselves between the stone and myself, and they introduce me to it. But I can also walk directly toward the stone and stumble over it.

So far so good, but we all know that the matter is not so easy. The best we can do is to try to forget all we were told at school about such matters, for the following reasons: Western epistemology is based on the Cartesian premise that to think means to follow the written line, and it does not give the photograph its due as a way of thinking. Let us therefore try to forget that, according to our school’s tradition, to adequate thought to thing means to adequate concept to extension (point to body). The whole problem of truth and falsehood, of fiction and reality, must now be reformulated in the light of the mass media if we are to avoid the barrenness of academicism.

However, the stone we have offered as an example is not really typical of our present situation. We can walk right up to a stone, but we can do nothing of the sort with most of the things that determine us at present—either the things that occur in explanations or the things that occur in images. The genetic information or the Vietnam War, or alpha particles, or Miss Bardot’s breasts are all examples. We may have no immediate experience of any of these kinds of things, but we are nonetheless determined by them. With such things, there is no point in asking how the explanation or the image is adequate to them. Where we can have no immediate experience, it is the media themselves that are the things for us. To “know” is to learn how to read the media in such cases. It does not matter at all whether the “stone” (namely, the alpha particle or Miss Bardot’s breasts) is “really” somewhere out there, or whether it merely appears in the media; such “stones” are real in that they determine our lives. We can state this even more strongly: we know that some of the things that determine us are deliberately produced by the media, such as speeches of presidents, the Olympic Games, and important weddings. Is there any sense in asking whether the media are adequate to these things?

Nonetheless, we can go back to the stone as an extreme, though non-typical, example. Because, after all, we still have some immediate experience left, even though it is diminishing. (We live in an expanding universe: the media offer us more and more things of which we can have no immediate experience, and take away, one by one, the things with which we can communicate directly.) Now, if we still cling desperately to the stone, we may venture the following statement: we live, roughly speaking, in three realms—the realm of immediate experience (stone out there), the realm of images (photograph), and the realm of concepts (explanation). (There may be other realms we live in, but let us disregard them here.) For the purpose of convenience, we may call the first realm “the world of given facts,” and the other two “the world of fiction.” Now our initial question can be stated thus: How does fiction relate to fact in our present situation?

One thing is obvious: fiction pretends, very often, to represent facts by substituting for them or pointing at them. (This is the case of the stone, its photograph, and its explanation.) How can fiction do this? Through symbols. Symbols are things that have by convention been appointed as representatives of other things (be that convention implicit and unconscious, or explicit and conscious). The things that symbols represent are their meaning. We must therefore ask how the various symbols of the world of fiction relate to their meanings. This shifts our problem to the structure of the media. If we take advantage of what was said in the first paragraph, we may answer the question as follows: Written lines relate
their symbols to their meanings point by point (they "conceive" the facts they mean), while surfaces relate their symbols to their meanings by two-dimensional contexts (they "imagine" the facts they mean—if they truly mean facts and are not empty symbols). Thus, our situation provides us with two sorts of fiction: the conceptual and the imaginal; their relation to fact depends on the structure of the medium.

If we try to read a film, we must assume a point of view that the screen imposes upon us; if we do not do this, we can read nothing. The point of view is from a chair in the cinema. If we sit on the chair, we can read what the film means. If we refuse to take the chair, and approach the screen, we see only meaningless light spots. On the other hand, if we try to read a newspaper, we need not assume a point of view imposed on us. If we know what the symbol "a" means, it does not matter how we look at it—it always means itself. But we cannot read the newspaper unless we have learned the meaning of its symbols. This reveals the difference between the structure of conceptual and imaginal codes and their respective means of decodification. Imaginal codes (like films) depend on predetermined viewpoints; they are subjective. And they are based on conventions that need not be consciously learned; they are unconscious. Conceptual codes (like alphabets) depend on predetermined viewpoints; they are objective. And they are based on conventions that must be consciously learned and accepted; they are conscious. Therefore, imaginal fiction relates to fact in a subjective and unconscious way, while conceptual fiction relates to fact in an objective and conscious way.

This may lead us to the following interpretations: Conceptual fiction ("line thought") is superior and posterior to imaginal fiction ("surface thought") in that it makes facts and events objective and conscious. Indeed, this kind of interpretation has dominated our civilization until recently, and it still explains our spiteful attitude toward the mass media. But it is wrong, for the following reason: when we translate image into concept, we decompose the image—we analyze it. We throw, so to speak, a conceptual point-net over the image, and capture only such meanings as did not escape through the meshes of the net. Therefore, the meaning of conceptual fiction is much narrower than the meaning of imaginal fiction, although it is far more clear and distinct. Facts are represented more fully by imaginal thought, more clearly by conceptual thought. The messages of imaginal media are richer, and the messages of conceptual media are sharper.

Now we can better understand our present situation, so far as fact and fiction are concerned. Our civilization puts two types of media at our disposal: those of linear fiction (e.g., books, scientific publications, and computer printouts) and those of surface fiction (e.g., films, TV pictures, and illustrations). The first type may mediate between ourselves and facts in a clear, objective, conscious, or conceptual way, but it is relatively restricted in its message. The second type may mediate between ourselves and facts in an ambivalent, subjective, unconscious, or imaginative way, but it is relatively rich in its message. We can all participate in both types of media, but participation in the second type requires that we first learn how to use its techniques. This explains the division of our civilization into a mass culture (those who participate almost exclusively in surface fiction) and an elite culture (those who participate almost exclusively in linear fiction).

For both of these groups, getting at the facts is a problem, but it differs for each. For the elite, the problem is that the more objective and clearer the linear fiction becomes, the more it is impoverished, because it tends to lose contact with the facts it wants to represent (all meaning). Therefore, the messages of linear fiction can no longer be made satisfactorily adequate to the immediate experience we still have of the world. For the mass culture, the problem is that the more technically perfect the images become, the richer they become and the more completely they substitute themselves for the facts they may have originally represented. Therefore, the facts are no longer needed; the images can stand for themselves, and thus lose all their original meaning. They no longer need to be made adequate to the immediate experience of the world; that experience is thus abandoned. In other words, the world of linear fiction, the world of the elite, is more and more disclosing its merely conceptual, fictitious character—and the world of surface fiction, the world of the masses, is masking its fictitious character ever more successfully. We can no longer pass from conceptual thought to fact for lack of adequation, and we can no longer pass from imaginal thought to fact for lack of a criterion that enables us to distinguish between fact and image. In both instances, we have lost our sense of "reality," and thus we have become alienated. (For instance, we can no longer say whether the alpha particle is a fact, or whether Miss Bardot's breasts are real, but we can now say that both questions have very little meaning.)

But it may well be that this alienation of ours is nothing but a symptom of a passing crisis. It may be that what is happening at present is the attempt to incorporate linear thought into surface thought, concept into image, elite media into mass media. (This is what the first paragraph tried to argue.) If that should turn out to be the case, imaginal thought
could become objective, conscious, and clear, while remaining rich, and could therefore mediate between ourselves and the facts in a far more effective way than has so far been possible. How might this take place?

This development involves a problem of translation. So far, the situation has been approximately thus: Imaginal thought was a translation of fact into image, and conceptual thought was a translation of image into concept. (First there was the stone, then the image of the stone, then the explanation of that image.) In the future, the situation may become thus: Imaginal thought will be a translation from concept into image, and conceptual thought a translation from image to concept. In such a feedback situation, an adequate model can finally be elaborated. First there will be an image of something, then there will be an explanation of that image, and then there will be an image of that explanation. This will result in a model of something (this something having been, originally, a concept). And this model may fit a stone (or some other fact, or nothing). Thus a fact, or the absence of a fact, will have been disclosed. There would once more exist a criterion of distinction between fact and fiction (fit and unfit models), and a sense of reality would have been recovered.

What has just been said is not an epistemological or ontological speculation. (As such, it is very problematical.) It is, rather, an observation of tendencies at work in the present situation. The sciences, and other articulations of linear thought such as poetry, literature, and music, are having increasing recourse to imaginal surface thinking; they are able to do so because of the technical advance of surface media. And, in a similar way, these surface media, including painting, graphics, and posters, are having increasing recourse to linear thought, and they can do so because their own technical advance permits it. Although what has been said may be theoretically problematic, therefore, it has already begun to be realized in practice.

Fundamentally, this means that imaginal thought is becoming capable of thinking about concepts. It can transform a concept into its "object," and can therefore become a metathought of conceptual thinking. So far, concepts have been thinkable only in terms of other concepts, by reflection. Reflective thought was the metathought of conceptual thinking, and was itself conceptual. Now, imaginal thought can begin thinking about concepts in the form of surface models.

No doubt this is all far too schematic. The actual situation of our civilization is far more complex. For instance, there are tendencies toward thinking in the round, in the third dimension. Of course, such three-dimensional media have always existed, as proved by Paleolithic sculpt-

ture. But what is happening now is very different. An audiovisual TV program that can be smelled and that provokes bodily sensations is no sculpture. It is one of the advances of thought toward representing facts bodily, the results of which cannot yet even be suspected. It will no doubt enable us to think about facts that are presently unthinkable. Certainly, there are also other tendencies within our civilization that have not been taken into account in the foregoing schema. But we hope it will serve its present purpose: to show an aspect of our crisis, and one of the possibilities that might enable us to overcome it.

To return to our argument, at present we dispose of two media between ourselves and the facts—the linear and the surface. The linear are becoming more and more abstract, and are losing all meaning. The considerations before us indicate that they may be conjoined in a creative relationship. A new kind of medium may thus emerge, permitting us to rediscover a sense of "reality"; in this way, we may be able to open up fields for a new type of thinking, with its own logic and its own kind of codified symbols. In short, the synthesis of linear and surface media may result in a new civilization.

**Toward a Posthistorical Future**

Let us now ask ourselves what appearance this new kind of civilization might have. If we examine the present civilization from a historical point of view, it initially appears as a development of thought from imagination toward concept. (First there were the wall paintings and the Venuses of Willendorf, and then there were the alphabets and other linear modes, ultimately like Fortran.) But such a simple historical view at some point begins to fail us. Our present imaginal media (films, etc.) are obviously developments from conceptual thought; for one thing, they result from science and technology, which are conceptual. And, in addition, they are developments from conceptual thought in that they advance along linear discursive lines, which are conceptual. (A Venus of Willendorf may tell a story, but a film tells its story differently; it tells it historically, along a line.) Thus we must rectify our explanation: the present civilization does not look like the result of a linear development from image to concept, but rather like the result of a sort of spiral movement from image through concept to image.

We may state this as follows: When man assumed himself subject of the world, when he stepped back from the world to think about it—when he became man—he did so mainly thanks to his curious capacity to imagine the world. Thus, he created a world of images to mediate between
himself and the world of facts with which, because of this distance-taking process, he was beginning to lose contact. Later, he learned how to handle his imaginal world, thanks to another human capacity—the capacity to conceive. Through thinking in concepts, he became not only subject to an objectified world of facts, but also subject to an objectified world of images. Now, however, by again having recourse to his imaginal capacity, he is beginning to learn how to handle his conceptual world. Through imagination, he is now beginning to objectify his concepts and thus to free himself from them. In the first position, he stands in the midst of static images (in myth); in the second position, he stands in the midst of linear progressive concepts (in history); in the third position he stands in the midst of images that order concepts (in "structures"). But this third position implies a being-in-the-world so radically new that its manifold impacts are difficult to grasp.

Let us therefore use a metaphor—the theater. The mythical position would correspond to that assumed by a dancer enacting a sacred scene. The historical position is represented by the role assumed by an actor in a play. The structuralist position then might correspond to that assumed by the author of the play. The dancer knows that he is acting the ritual; he knows that the symbolic mode is demanded by the reality he is representing. If he were to act differently, it would be a betrayal of reality, a sin; his only freedom therein is to sin. The actor also knows that he is acting; he knows that the symbolic quality of his performance is a theatrical convention. He may therefore interpret this convention in various ways, and thereby change or modify the convention; herein lies his freedom, which is, strictly speaking, historical. The author of the play knows that he is proposing a convention within limits imposed upon him by the theatrical medium, and he tries to give meaning to his convention; his freedom is structural. Seen from the point of view of the dancer, the actor is a sinner and the author is a devil. Seen from the point of view of the actor, the dancer is an unconscious actor, and the author is an authority. Seen from the point of view of the author, the dancer is a puppet, and the actor is a conscious tool from which he (the author) continuously learns.

The example of the theater is, however, not a very good one. It does not adequately display the third position, because this does not truly exist in the theater as yet; it is too recent. Let us therefore try another example, which may reveal the third position more clearly: the future role of a TV spectator. Such a spectator will have at his disposal a video theater, including a magnetic tape library of various programs. He will be able to mix them in many ways, and thus compose his own programs. But he will be able to do more: film his own program, include himself and others, register this on a tape, and then project it on his TV screen. He will thus see himself in his program. This means that the spectator will control the beginning, middle, and end of the program (within the limitations of his video theater), and that he will be able to play any role in the program he desires.

This sketch reveals more clearly the difference between the historical and the structural being-in-the-world. The spectator is still determined by history (by the video theater) and he still acts within history (by appearing on the screen himself). But he is beyond history in the sense that he composes a historical process, and in the sense that he may assume any role he desires in the historical process. This may be stated even more forcefully: although he acts in history and is determined by history, he is no longer interested in history as such, but in the possibility of combining various histories. This means that history for him is not a drama (as it is for the historical position); it is a game.

This difference is, basically, a difference in the temporality of the two positions. The historical position stands in historical time, in the process. The structural position stands in that sort of time wherein processes are seen as forms. For the historical position, processes are the method by which things become; for the structural position, processes are the way things appear. Another perspective on things from the structural position is to view processes as parameters or dimensions that determine things. The historical method decomposes things into phases; it is diachronical. The structural method joins phases into forms; it is synchronical. For this method, whether processes are facts or not depends on one's perspective.

Furthermore, those things that stand in opposition for the historical position (matter-energy, entropy-negentropy, positive-negative, and so on) are complementary for the structural position. This means that historical conflict, including wars and revolutions, does not look like conflict at all from the structural position, but like sets of complementary moves in a game. This is why the structural position is often called inhuman by those who see things from a historical point of view. It is inhuman, indeed, in the sense that it is characteristic of a new type of man who is not as yet recognized as such by members of the older type.

Herein lies a problem. All that has been said concerning the third position has been composed into written lines, and is therefore a product of conceptual thinking. But if the argument is even partly correct, the third position cannot be conceptualized; it must be imagined with the kind of imagination that is now being formed. Therefore, this essay can only be
suggestive. On the other hand, unless we try to incorporate concept into image, we shall fall victim to a new form of barbarism: confused imagination. This fact may offer a kind of justification, quand même, for this essay. For it is a present truth that the third position is now being assumed, whether we can conceive it or not, and it will certainly overcome the historical position as time goes on.

Let us, then, recapitulate our argument, in order to try to suggest what form the new civilization might take. We have two alternatives before us. First, there is the possibility that imaginal thinking will not succeed in incorporating conceptual thinking. This could lead to a generalized de-politicization, deactivation, and alienation of humankind, to the victory of the consumer society, and to the totalitarianism of the mass media. Such a development would look very much like the present mass culture, but in more exaggerated or gross form. The culture of the elite would disappear for good, thus bringing history to an end in any meaningful sense of that term. The second possibility is that imaginal thinking will succeed in incorporating conceptual thinking. This would lead to new types of communication in which man consciously assumes the structural position. Science would then be no longer merely discursive and conceptual, but would have recourse to imaginal models. Art would no longer work at things (“œuvres”), but would propose models. Politics would no longer fight for the realizations of values, but would elaborate manipulable hierarchies of models of behavior. All this would mean, in short, that a new sense of reality would articulate itself, within the existential climate of a new religiosity.

All this is utopian. But it is not fantastic. Whoever looks at the scene can find everything already there, in the form of lines and surfaces already working. It depends very much on each one of us which sort of posthistorical future there will be.

(1973)

The Codified World

The revolution in the world of communications whose witness and victim we are influences our lives more than we usually tend to recognize. We know, for example, the consequences that television, advertising, and film can have. What is meant here is much more radical. The present reflections will propose that the meaning of the world in general and of life in the world transforms itself under the pressure of this revolution in communications.

If we compare our situation with the one that existed before the Second World War, we are impressed by the relative colorlessness of the time before the war. Architecture and machinery, books and tools, clothes and food, all of these things were comparably colorless. Our environment is filled with color, which, day and night, in public and in private, sometimes loud and sometimes quiet, demands our attention. Our socks and pajamas, cans and bottles, displays and posters, books and maps, beverages and ice creams, films and television, everything is in Technicolor. With these things we are dealing not simply with an aesthetic phenomenon, but with a new “artistic style.” The red traffic light means “Stop!” and the obnoxious green of peas means “Buy me!” This explosion of colors means something. We are exposed to a constant stream of colors. We are programmed by colors. They are an aspect of the codified world in which we have to live.

Colors are the manner in which surfaces appear to us. Thus, if a significant number of the messages programmed for us appear in color, it means that surfaces have become important as carriers of messages. Walls, screens, paper surfaces, plastic, aluminum, glass, textiles, and so on have become important “media.” The situation before the war was relatively
Let me try to justify that treason. Erasmus wrote an essay in praise of folly. This is an essay in praise of media culture, which is a pernicious form of folly. Hopefully, this paper is treacherous in the same sense as are Erasmus's writings.

(ca. mid-1980s)

The Future of Writing

This essay will not consider the problems concerning the future of teaching the art of writing in the face of the growing importance of nonliterate messages in our surroundings, although those problems will become ever more important both in the so-called developed countries and in societies where illiteracy is still widespread. Instead, it proposes to consider a tendency that underlies those problems: namely, the tendency away from linear codes such as writing and toward two-dimensional codes such as photographs, films, and TV, a tendency that may be observed if one glances even superficially at the codified world that surrounds us. The future of writing, of that gesture which aligns symbols to produce texts, must be seen against the background of that tendency.

Writing is an important gesture, because it both articulates and produces that state of mind which is called "historical consciousness." History began with the invention of writing, not for the banal reason often advanced that written texts permit us to reconstruct the past, but for the more pertinent reason that the world is not perceived as a process, "historically," unless one signifies it by successive symbols, by writing. The difference between prehistory and history is not that we have written documents that permit us to read the latter, but that during history there are literate men who experience, understand, and evaluate the world as a "becoming," whereas in prehistory no such existential attitude is possible. If the art of writing were to fall into oblivion, or if it were to become subservient to picture making (as in the "scriptwriting" in films), history in the strict sense of that term would be over.

If one examines certain Mesopotamian tiles, one can see that the
original purpose of writing was to facilitate the deciphering of images. Those tiles contain images impressed upon them with cylindrical seals and "cuneiform" symbols scratched into them with a stylus. The "cuneiform" symbols form lines, and they obviously mean the image they accompany. They "explain," "recount," "tell" it. They do so by unrolling the surface of the image into lines, by unwinding the tissue of the image into the threads of a text, by rendering "explicit" what was "implicit" within the image. It may be shown through text analysis that the original purpose of writing, namely, the transcoding of two-dimensional codes into a single dimension, is still there: every text, even a very abstract one, means, in the last analysis, an image.

The translation from surface into line implies a radical change of meaning. The eye that deciphers an image scans the surface, and it thus establishes reversible relations between the elements of the image. It may go back and forth while deciphering the image. This reversibility of relations that prevails within the image characterizes the world for those who use images for the understanding of the world, who "imagine" it. For them, all the things in the world are related to each other in such a reversible way, and their world is structured by "eternal return." It is just as true to say that night follows day as that day follows night, that sowing follows reaping as that reaping follows sowing, that life follows death as that death follows life. The crowning of the cock calls the sun to rise just as much as the rising sun calls the cock to crow. In such a world, circular time orders all things, "assigns them their just place," and if a thing is displaced it will be readjusted by time itself. Because to live is to displace things, life in such a world is a series of "unjust" acts that will be revenged in time. This demands that man propitiate the order of the world, the "gods" of which it is full. In sum: the "imagined" world is the world of myth, of magic, the prehistorical world.

The eye that deciphers a text follows its lines, and thus establishes the univocal relation of a chain between the elements of which the text is composed. Those who use texts to understand the world, those who "conceive" it, mean a world with a linear structure. Everything in such a world follows from something, time flows irreversibly from the past toward the future, each instant lost is lost forever, and there is no repetition. Each day is different from every other day, each sowing has its own characteristics, if there is life after death it must be a new sort of life, and the links of the causal chain cannot be exchanged one for the other. In such a world, every human act is unique, and man is responsible for it. The elements of such a world are, at least theoretically, distinct from each other like the beads on a string, and they can be counted. On the other hand, the string that orders the beads, the "univocal flow of time," is what holds such a world together. In sum: the "conceived" world is the world of the religions, of salvation, of political commitment, of science, and of technology—the historical world.

One may well ask why, six thousand years ago, the effort was made to substitute the world of conception for the world of imagination, why writing was invented. One may ask this at present precisely because a "new civilization of images" seems to be dawning. The answer is, of course: because, six thousand years ago, some people thought that some images needed explaining. Images are mediations between man and his world, a world that has become inaccessible to him immediately. They are tools to overcome human alienation: they are meant to permit action in a world in which man no longer lives immediately but that he faces. Cave paintings are meant to permit hunting of ponies, cathedral windows to permit praying to God, road maps to permit motoring, and statistical projections to permit decision making. One must learn how to decipher those images, one must learn the conventions that give them their meaning, and one may commit mistakes. For instance: it would be a mistake to decipher road maps as if they were cave paintings (magic for hunting tourists), or as if they were projections (proposals to build roads). The "imagination" that produces road maps is not the same as the "imagination" that produces cave paintings and projections. Explaining images with the help of texts may therefore be useful.

But there is yet another, and more profound, reason for the invention of writing and of historical consciousness. There is in images, as in all mediations, a curious inherent dialectic. The purpose of images is to mean the world, but they may become opaque to the world and cover it, even substitute for it. They may come to constitute an imaginary world that no longer mediates between man and the world, but, on the contrary, imprisons man. Imagination no longer overcomes alienation, but becomes hallucination, or double alienation. No longer are such images tools, but man himself becomes a tool of his own tools; he "adores" the images he himself has produced. It is against this idolatry of images, as a therapy against this double alienation, that writing was invented. The early writers in our tradition—the prophets, for instance—knew this by committing themselves against idols and idol making. And so did Plato when he announced his hatred of what we now call the "plastic arts." Writing, historical consciousness, linear, rational thought were invented to save humankind from "ideologies," from hallucinatory imagination.
Now, if we consider history to be the period of writing, which implies that history is a development of prehistory, a rendering explicit of what was implicit in prehistorical myths, we find that it is a slow and painful, not to say tragic, process. For most of its course, historical consciousness was the privilege of a small elite, while the vast majority continued to lead a prehistoric, magico-mythical existence. This was so because texts were rare and expensive, and literacy the privilege of a class of scribes and literati. The invention of printing cracked this clerical class open, and it made historical consciousness accessible for the rising bourgeoisie, but it was only during the industrial revolution and through the public primary school system that literacy and historical consciousness can be said to have become common in the industrialized countries. But almost immediately a new kind of image, the photograph, was invented, which began to threaten the supremacy of writing, and it now looks as if the days of historical, rational, conceptual thinking were numbered, and as if we were approaching a new type of magico-mythical age, a posthistorical image culture.

The reason why rational, conceptual thinking (and acting) is an exceptional form of existence, why history seems to be a brief interlude within the ageless “eternal return” of myth and magic, is that writing, just like images, is torn by an internal dialectic, and that this dialectic takes a more pernicious aspect in writing than it does even in image making. The purpose of writing is to mean, to explain images, but texts may become opaque, unimaginable, and they then constitute barriers between man and the world. The vectors of meaning of such texts turn around and point at their authors, instead of pointing at the world. This inversion of writing may be observed very early in the course of history, but during the nineteenth century it becomes obvious: scientific texts (which are the most characteristic form of writing, and therefore the “aim of history”) tend to become explicitly unimaginable (one reads them erroneously if one tries to imagine their meaning), and scientific research “discovers” the rules that order its own texts (mainly logic and mathematics) “behind” the phenomena it is explaining. Such unimaginable explanations that mirror the structure of literate thought are existentially devoid of meaning, and in such a situation texts begin to constitute a kind of paranoid library wall that triply alienates man from his world. It is against the threatening lunacy of formal rationalism, of a meaningless existence amid speculative, opaque explanations, that the rise of the new image culture must be seen.

However, it would be an error to suppose that life amid posters, traffic signs, TV programs, illustrated magazines, and movie pictures will be like life before the invention of writing, that illiteracy will be restored. The new type of images are unlike their prehistoric predecessors in that they are themselves products of texts, and in that they feed on texts. They are products of history. The essential difference between a TV program and a tapestry is not (as one might believe) that the one moves and talks while the other stands still and is mute, but that the TV program is the result of scientific theories (texts) and that it needs texts (for instance, telegrams) for it to function. The new types of images are best called “techno-images,” and the convention they are based on is best called “techno-imagination,” if one is to distinguish the world of the future from prehistoric existence. No doubt techno-images are a sort of image, and they therefore mean, like every image, a world of myth and of magic. But life in the threatening future will be magical, in a sense quite different from prehistoric myth and magic. This difference may be stated as follows: prehistoric images mean the world, posthistoric ones mean texts; prehistoric imagination tries to seize the world and posthistoric imagination tries to be text illustration. Therefore, prehistoric myths mean “real” situations and posthistoric myths will mean textual prescriptions, and prehistoric magic is meant to propitiate the world, whereas posthistoric magic will be meant to manipulate people.

The easiest way to imagine the future of writing, if the present trend toward a culture of techno-images goes on, is to imagine a gigantic transcorder from text into image. It will be a sort of black box that has texts for input and images for output. All texts will flow into that box (news about events, theoretical comments about them, scientific papers, poetry, philosophical speculations), and they will come out again as images (films, TV programs, photographic pictures): which is to say that history will flow into the box, and that it will come out of it under the form of myth and magic. From the point of view of the texts that will flow into the box, this will be a utopian situation: the box is the “fullness of time,” because it devours linear time and freezes it into images. From the point of view of the images that come out of the box, this will be a situation in which history becomes a pretext for programs. In sum, the future of writing is to write pretexts for programs while believing that one is writing for utopia.

It is not important for the understanding of such a future of writing to try to whiten the black box, to try to understand how it works. The attempt to “demythify” the transcoding apparatus of the future is, of course, one of the most important challenges of “forecasting and planning for the future.” But it is not indispensable where writing is the
problem. One may disregard the wheels and screws that constitute the apparatus (the countless “media,” “programmers,” and other human and quasi-human operators who compose it), and concentrate upon the images as they come out of the box left black, if one wants to see what it will mean to be a “writer” in such a future. In other words, it is not necessary to analyze the whole hopelessly complex system that stands behind a TV program if one wants to understand the present crisis of rational thinking and acting. It is sufficient to analyze that program.

If one does so, one discovers the root of the present crisis: it is an inversion of the historical roles of reason and imagination. History may be said to be the attempt to submit imagination to the criticism of reason. Texts are meant to be critiques of images, and writing, as a code, is an analysis of surfaces into lines. Therefore, during history, imagination was the source of reason: the stronger the imagination, the greater the challenge of critical reason, and rich images permit more powerful linear explanations. There is something iconoclastic about historical reason: the better the icons against which it advances, the stronger is reason. But now writing is becoming subservient to image making, reason to imagination: one can observe this while analyzing any TV program. The better the reasoning, the richer becomes imagination. Planning has become a highly rational process in the service of highly irrational aims. The crisis is therefore not one of oblivion of the art of writing, of reason’s decadence. It is one of reason’s prostitution, of a “betrayal of the intellectuals.” One may sum this up as follows: when it became obvious that reason might be a kind of paranoia, the intellectuals stopped being iconoclastic and became idolatrous, and present TV programs are among the results of that conversion.

TV programs are not, of course, the most impressive examples of what happens when reason betrays itself and serves imagination. Nazism is a better illustration. Still, it may be held that Nazism is one of the cruder advances in the direction of a future culture of images, or that the future techno-image culture will be Nazism perfected. This is why the battle cry “L’imagination au pouvoir!” that shook so many intellectuals out of their dogmatic slumber in May ’68 has such a dubious ring to it. No doubt, rebellion against paranoid reason, against meaningless explanations, is necessary and healthy. But intellectuals are writers. They are committed to clear and distinct concepts, to reason. They are the historical consciousness of their society. If they adhere to the claim that imagination should take over, the dignity of man as a free actor, which means “history,” will be over.

It may be asked, however, what else writers can do in the immediate future but serve imagination. If all the texts are going to be devoured by the gigantic transcoder to become images, how can this trend be resisted? Is it not so that if a text deliberately resists the trend, it becomes even better fodder for the transcoding apparatus? Actions committed to history and against the apparatus, like monks burning themselves to death or students being killed in riots, are even better pretexts for TV programs than are deliberate scripts made by TV programmers. It may look as if the trend, in which writing is becoming subservient to image making, planning to irrationality, and reason to magic, is increasingly automatic and autonomous of individual decisions.

This would be a perniciously wrong interpretation of the present crisis of writing. The purpose of writing is to explain images, and the task of reason is to criticize imagination. This is doubly true in the present crisis. At present, the purpose of writing is to explain techno-images, and the task of reason to criticize techno-imagination. Of course, this implies a sort of qualitative jump onto a new level of meaning on the part of reason. In the past, writing explained images of the world. It will have to explain illustrations of texts in the future. To write meant, in the past, to render opaque images transparent for the world. It will mean, in the future, to render opaque techno-images transparent for the texts they are hiding. In other words, reason, in the past, meant analysis of myths, and in the future it will mean de-ideologization. Reason will still be iconoclastic, but on a new level.

Nothing guarantees that reason will be able to perform such a jump, although there are some symptoms (for instance, cybernetics and structural analysis) that point in such a direction. It is perfectly possible that the general trend toward techno-images will become irresistible, and that reason will degenerate into the planning of programs—that to write will mean not to make “grams” but “programs,” and that all texts will become pretexts. Thus, in fact, we may discern, at present, two possible futures of writing: it will either become a critique of techno-imagination (which means an unmasking of the ideologies hiding behind a technical progress that has become autonomous of human decisions) or it will become the production of pretexts for techno-imagination (a planning for that technical progress). In the first alternative, the future will be unimaginable by definition. In the second, history in the strict sense of that term will come to an end, and we may easily imagine what will follow: the eternal return of life in an apparatus that progresses by its own inertia.
confuse our thoughts with their anachronisms. What other kinds of study are we left with? Is there anything more passionate, more heartwarming and inspiring than reports about famous deeds and the agony of defeat, about the fulfillment of dreams and the suffering of ancestors? The vanity of historiography, even though we are all secretly aware of it, does not take away its charm. In this manner, a new attitude toward history is born, and one does well to describe it with the phrase “wallowing in desire.” For hundreds of years, during the entire modern period, a belief in progress was dominant. Now the climate of the “good old times” arises. In developed countries, functional chairs make room for Baroque chairs, Gothic statues decorate the offices of industrial magnates, and medieval castles are transported—stone for stone, to preserve their authenticity—to the banks of the Hudson River. This “wallowing in desire” is an attempt to consume history and to annex it to the present. These tendencies do not want to accept the fact that we have been dispossessed. Various historicisms, which have been poured into books in order to manipulate our present conduct, seem to me like Baroque doors in a modern home. I do not believe that history can be resuscitated in this manner.

Rilke writes in a frightening poem: “Every dull turn of the world gives us these dispossessed.” Has any turning back ever been as shameful as ours? Never in the history of humankind, that is, if my thesis is correct. Perhaps we find ourselves at the same point as at the origin of the first human being! In the messianic era, the prophet says the following about the goal of history: “You shall be changed.” This is one of the few sayings that originate from the lap of history and direct our gaze beyond the horizon. Shall we perhaps find ourselves changed? The trumpets will sound on the day of wrath, and we shall find ourselves changed. And perhaps the trumpets have already sounded, and the world has already dissolved into ashes without anyone having noticed. Perhaps our sense of unreality is a sign of this change. Perhaps we have already been changed. Perhaps the transformation has already occurred and we did not notice, because it was not a biological transformation. These are thoughts provoked by the experience of the vanity of history.

On the End of History

Whoever speaks of the end of history should be able to explain what he means when he is speaking about history. But, this is fundamentally impossible. It is unfair to expect a clear definition of the concept of history from historians and posthistorians. The explanation for this is the double meaning of the concept and the difficulty involved in disentangling these two meanings. In the first sense, the word means a process, a course of events. In the second sense, it means a narrative. On the surface, these appear to be completely different meanings; yet, there has ever been a process about which no one told a story? This is a metaphysical question. On the other hand, are there any stories that are not based on processes? This is a rhetorical question. To express this in a more radical manner: For a process to be recognized, it must be narrated. And, for a narrative to be a narrative, something must happen. Every attempt to separate history in the first sense definitively from history in the second sense, which is to say, history from historiography, history from story, necessarily creates more confusion instead of eliminating confusion altogether. Added to this is the fact that storytelling itself is a part of the history being narrated; in other words, narratives make history. The Trojan War is a part of history, and it has The Iliad to thank for this. Moreover, The Iliad is part of history, and it has the Trojan War to thank for this. Neither Schliemann's archaeological research nor the philological research of Homer interpreters can alter this fact. Still, both camps are able to place the double meaning of the concept of “history” before our eyes.

Posthistorians, people who tell a story about the end of history, are necessarily storytellers. When they tell a story about the end of history,
a film that he will shoot. People can no longer be persuaded of this. Posthistory.

This vertigo, this whirlwind in which our thought must move when it tries to think about the relationship between natural sciences and natural history, is a symptom of the end of history. The dizziness that has seized us is the screw by means of which we unscrew ourselves from historical consciousness, to drill ourselves into another hole. The turns of the screw are processes, and our thought must move along these turns. Yet, the screw itself is not a process, but rather a form. Thus, we proceed from the process to the form, from the historical into the formal. This is not only vertiginous, but also comprehensible.

The central nervous system is a cluster created by chance. At least this is how it tells its own story, thus developing all other history from this self-narration. But the reverse is also true: history in its entirety is told by the central nervous system, and, in the course of this, the system discovers that it has narrated itself. In this manner, we arrive at what seems to be another sophistic paradox: How can the world be part of the brain when the brain is part of the world? It turns out that this paradox is resolved once the dog stops chasing his own tail. Then, one needs no longer speak of brain-ness in the world and the brain's being-in-the-world, because the brain narrates the world, and the world is narrated by the brain. Then the brain is to the world what Homer is to Achilles or K. is to Kafka. Because it makes little sense to ask if Achilles is in Homer or Homer in Achilles, it also makes little sense to ask if the world is to be sought in the brain or the brain in the world. The world and the brain are related to each other like process and narrative: the process creates the narrative and the narrative creates the process (the brain makes the world and the world makes the brain). It makes one dizzy when one thinks about this historically, but not when one thinks about it formally. The apparent paradox is one of the turns of the screw, out of the historical into the formal.

But now, another turn of the screw: Like the history of every species, the history of the human species is part of natural history. Like the origin of trilobites, great dinosaurs, or the woolly mammoth, the origin of the human species can be explained by what preceded it. Because the extinction of these three species was predictable, the same can be said about the extinction of our own species. Like all other biological species, our species is a transitional excrecence in the accidental, ever-changing, and mutating stream of genetic information. Still, the history of humankind is different in kind than other species. Indeed, it is different in kind than all other natural history. This difference in kind can be formulated in the following manner: All of history—except for human history—concerns processes that have become necessary by chance. The shell of a trilobite, a dinosaur bone, and a mammoth tusk are the products of chance. It is pertinent to ask why they are so and not so. On the other hand, the history of the human species is full of things that demand a different set of questions. Whoever does not ask for what purpose a hand ax, a pitchfork, an automobile, or even a word, a song, or a philosophical thought, has been created has not yet begun to tell the story of human history. The difference between natural history and human history is that natural processes can be explained by the question “why?” and cultural processes by an additional question, “for what purpose?” But wait, now we have to start over from the beginning. Our ancestors—as well as the myths through which they still speak to us—approached all processes with the question “for what purpose?” “For what purpose does the sun shine? So that we can see our way.” “For what purpose is the Christmas tree always green? A symbol for the faithful.” “What purpose does the cow fulfill? To give us blue cheese.” If natural processes do not allow questions of purpose, then our ancestors (and their myths) did not have nature. Everything was human history, and man was on a first-name basis with the animals, plants, stones, and stars.

Then, much later—but certainly not before the pre-Socratic—certain processes were no longer questioned about their purpose. Nature came into being in this manner. First, stars and stones; second, plants and animals; and, finally, people themselves were approached from the perspective of the natural sciences, which is to say, as accidental phenomena devoid of intention. And, now we have to follow another thought process:

On the one hand, it is correct to say—as we have done—that the human species is a biological species, that is, a natural-historical process. On the other hand, it is equally correct to say that natural-historical processes are the processes that were narrated for the first time around 2,500 years ago. On the one hand, the history of the human species is one of the final chapters in natural history. On the other hand, natural history is a late chapter of human history. On the one hand, man is a recent accidental result of nature. On the other hand, nature is a late product of man. He created it with the intention of explaining the world and himself without reference to intention. On the other hand, nature is a consequence of value judgments, like every other product of the history of the human species. Whoever thinks historically is hopelessly confused by this method of argumentation. For how can culture originate from nature
and nature from culture? But this confusion is nothing more than a turning of the screw out of history and into posthistory. In posthistorical thinking, the dog no longer chases its own tail. Natural history is one of the narratives of cultural history. Thus, cultural history is one part of the natural history it narrates to itself.

The one large natural history is measured with scales whose unit of measure is billions of years. One can divide this unit of measure further, but this division is still not precise enough to make centuries visible—not to say, minutes. In fact, it would probably make for a completely uninteresting story, because our life-world is touched by natural history only in seconds flat. Surprisingly, however, it is an extremely fascinating story. It is much more interesting to tell a story about the origin of life on earth two billion years ago than to talk about last year’s weather. It is much more interesting to tell a story about the first lemurs—our ancestral primates who roamed the earth two hundred to four hundred million years ago, similar to modern-day squirrels—than to talk, with permission, about our grandparents. The modified, logarithmic eyeglasses that we put on during storytelling provide an explanation for this. The first billion years may then appear shorter than the last half hour. Like binoculars or reading glasses, we can turn these modified eyeglasses around. If we make this adjustment, history becomes much more interesting. The playful lemurs that roam a forest in comprehensible to us in its details are much closer to us, existentially speaking, than our great-grandmother (out of politeness we should not mention our grandmother). These focal adjustments to our lenses result in what we call history. It is not a somber, plodding litany, in which a monotone voice indifferently recounts one trivial event after another. Instead, it is an exciting, rhythmically orchestrated epic poem, in which fabulous heroic figures, such as trilobites, giant dinosaurs, woolly mammoths, and lemurs, gallop toward us and make our hearts beat a little faster. Moreover, what is good enough for natural history is good enough a fortiori for the history of the human species. It does not tell us of the plight of Homer’s or Hegel’s chambermaid (pardon me, cleaning person).

Third turn of the screw: some people are antiquarians. These are people who collect curiosities, for example, trilobite fossils, giant dinosaur bones, woolly mammoth tusks, and lemur teeth. Other antiquarians collect monstrosities, such as photographs of five-legged calves, double-signatures from Dante, and even more doubtful fountain pens from Kafka. Tourists usually shop at cheap antique shops, while expensive shops deliver to museums. But, serious historiographers despise all kinds of antique shops. Unfairly. For antiquarians are the ones who make history. Historiographers are satisfied with putting their collected curiosities into a row, to make them into processes. But, it is not as if something actually happens in cultural history or the history of the human species. Instead, antiquarians belatedly thread their collected curiosities into processes, like pearls on pearl necklaces. It is not as if lemurs originated from dinosaurs, but rather some natural scientist pulled some threads between lemurs and dinosaurs together, so that it appears that lemurs originated from dinosaurs. Moreover, it is not as if the Baroque originated from the Renaissance, but rather historians visited antiquarian shops, collected some curiosities there, then divided them up into two piles. One pile they labeled “Renaissance” and the other “Baroque.” Ultimately, they connected these two piles together diachronically. And this is all very questionable.

At this point, the sophistic paradox reenters our discussion. Does the world consist of grains of sand, which amass themselves into dunes and resemble waves? Or does it consist of waves, which break against cliffs and then resemble dewdrops? Is a wave a mass of particles, or is a particle a frozen wave? In historical thinking, this is an insoluble ontological problem: Heraclitus on one side, Democritus on the other. In posthistorical consciousness, the problem is solved. History is a suspenseful narrative, because historiographers have processed the particles, the curiosities collected by antiquarians, into waves, into processes. Thus, history only narrates matters of suspense, because banalities are never taken up. Even apparently banal tales of everyday life are really curiosities that have been processed into processes. In comparison, antiquarians put their hands into the foaming waves of processes, to pick out curiosities. Trilobite fossils from banal rock, five-legged calves from a banal cowshed. In posthistorical consciousness, the question whether history (and reality in general) possesses either a particle structure or a wave structure is a non-question. It depends on the manner in which one reflects on history (and the world), whether in an antiquarian manner or in a historical manner. Finally, this insight is a further turn of the screw out of historical consciousness into posthistorical consciousness.