

Tectum Theatrum

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It's easy to understand how images have come to replace the realities at the heart of our lives. When reality appears to have nothing to offer us half so seductive as images, why not? On the subconscious level, we "know" that the world has little to give in the way of bliss, ecstasy, love, adventure, luxury, joy, etc.—little but work, disappointment, rejection, failure, sickness, isolation, boredom, and death. We "know" this because we learn it at school—it's the unspoken subtext of nearly all "education" and other forms of therapy.

Even more stunningly effective, the message is embedded in every commodity we buy. When capital realized that materiality acts as a limitation on economic growth, it launched itself into the limitless ether of the image. The image was to be made more valuable than the thing itself, than the mere lump of excremental reality so abject in its slavery to space and time, supply and demand, production and consumption. In contemplating the Paris market price of apples and pears in 1799 and deducing therefrom the miseries of civilization, even Charles Fourier never dreamed that the apple could be virtually replaced by its own image.

The breakdown of things into images is already presaged or contained in nuce in the earliest technologies of our modernity. For instance, writers on the first railroads noted how the landscape—once experienced at organic speeds such as that of humans and horses—was now leached of its actual physical presence by railway speed and reduced to a flickering-past of images. This flickering already foretold kinematics and the fetishized image of the modern it made possible. (Edison's first film: *The Train Robber*.)

Although the image would appear to have no limits, and in theory can be eternal and omnipotent, in practice it may suffer a certain mysterious fatigue, analogous in the bodiless realm to metal fatigue in the densest realm of materiality. Now that we seem to have reached a certain plateau of image-perfection, perhaps even a terminal state, one might expect a parallel perfection of seductivity. But in its apotheosis, the image is suddenly unveiled to the subconscious as nothing but an image.

The result: panic. The first impulse is to believe that more money and state-of-the-art image machinery will restore the image to its powerful anodyne effects and once more anaesthetize the unbearable desire for authentic lived experience. The zenith of this panic is the Internet, in which all media without exception have been subsumed, And almost without exception, everyone I know has succumbed to its intoxication. If TV is fifth-rate heroin, the Net is almost second rate. Most remnants of the movement of the Social—in this country anyway—seem to have, accepted the illusion of interactivity as a substitute for action. "Activism" now means running a website. The others, it appears, simply immerse themselves in the image and carry on in the old Work/Consume/Die pattern they were educated and trained for.

Given all this, what really strikes me as astonishing is the poor quality of the illusion. The road-to-Damascus moment came for me about six years ago when I was standing one day on the corner of Broadway and Houston St., looking idly about at the hundreds of advertisements and images on display and suddenly realized that there wasn't one item on offer that I'd take as a free gift, much less pay for. What a sad unseductive collection of useless crap. True, there were many bimbos, hunks, and Kute Kidz on display (appearing to enjoy the various commodities

with downright erotic intensity) and perhaps I might've bought one of them if they were on sale—but of course, they weren't. They were only images.

Another dire truth known to the subconscious is this: the interests of Capital are so powerful that any overt opposition to them combining coherent critique with actual praxis can and probably will be violently suppressed and eradicated by the force of a technology beyond the comprehension much less control of any mere human being. Carrot and stick: commodity intoxication and driveling fear, lightly tamped down and kept out of sight by a consciousness that needs six to fourteen hours a day immersion in media just to remain functional. I do it myself, but with books and writing, a form of mediation over which I feel I can exercise some control, if only because the tech-level is so outmoded and declassé. Writing was the first “media,” of course, and shouldn't be exempted from any critique of the image; all technologies of information are still “text-based.”

Leaving aside the question of any practical strategic revolutionary response to the tyranny of the image, the question of a cultural response still remains. On one hand, all cultural activity can be subsumed into the Image and rendered into commodity forms. But, in order to accomplish this, the cultural activity must be mediated, “drawn away into representation.” So, on the other hand, cultural activities—arts, creativity—appear to escape absorption into the totality to the extent they remain unmediated. Given the vampiric hunger of the media for “content,” this avoidance of mediation (or at least some rough practical form of avoidance) can only be achieved through (a) total abysmal failure, or (2) great deliberation. Years ago, I envisioned various deliberate tactics of avoidance and advocated “Immediatism,” or creative activity free of (or at least antagonistic towards) mediation by the totality. I suggested that physical presence, and non-use of certain technologies, might constitute two practical sine-qua-nons for Immediatist art.

Every music recording is the tombstone of a live performance. Every film/video the sepulchre of Artaud's real theater. Every text the grave of some speech-act. In the past, and even now, we value all these reproductions for the traces they contain of some imaginable experience. But by now, perhaps, we are buried and suffocated in so much lack of presence, so much unrealized desire, that art itself has taken on sickly and sinister airs, charnel-house odors, ectoplasmic taints.

One possible form of Immediatism might be called the *Tectum Theatrum* or Secret Theater (tectus-a-um, subterranean, hidden, secret; protected, tectonic). I visualize it as quite conventional and old-fashioned in form, although making use of all old forms simultaneously—the Romantic ideal—theater, speech, painting and sculpture, music, dance—perhaps also ritual and entheogenic ceremonialism—or pure festival—etc. There might even be “roles” for us tech-bound types like writers and filmmakers if we can act within the confines of “media-free” art.

The only new formal aspect of the *Tectum Theatrum* would be its “secrecy,” its active and conscious resistance to mediation and commodification. Ivan Illich never once appeared on television, because he felt it could only distort the delicate complexity of his philosophy and ethics. Guy Debord never granted an interview (and withdrew his films from circulation). This kind of purism can make inhuman demands on working artists. How to earn a living?

Tectum Theatrum would have to try to avoid martyrdom on the Scylla of rigid principles as well as the Charybdis of mediation and “success.” But it would seem necessary to adopt some degree of militancy, even with all the attendant dangers of Puritanism, in an attempt to build a culture of secret disengagement from the emptiness of the Image. A certain iconoclasm seems called for, a certain deliberate “poorness” (as Grotowski called it). Possibly “failure” remains the last possible outside in a universe of enclosure. In this sense, we could speak of the luxury of failure as well as the pleasure of secrecy.

Everything that becomes implicated in the totality of the Image seems somehow “always already” known and yet never wholly our own. The only possible means to keep creation open to adventure and risk, and to meaning and value, would constitute a refusal of mediation and commodification. This doesn't mean that the artist must starve; we can have direct exchange between artists and enjoyers of art, without the mediation of Capital in its denser manifestations such as the “recording industry,” or advertising.

Luddism is not “anti” techne, it only wants to smash machines that “hurt the community,” whether economically or spiritually. In this sense, *Tectum Theatrum* might be called luddite art. Beyond this, I resist all temptation to speculate about what it ought to be, or could be. Such theorizing would threaten the specificity and presence of “Our Art,” which needs no manifestoes, ideologies, theoreticians, or leaders. It either will be or it won't, and mere speculation will never decide the issue.

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