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Lecture 3 – Anti-Alphabetic Revolutions

In today's lecture, I shall work mainly with three concepts and I will temporarily give them the following names: first-degree imagination, discursive reason, and second-degree imagination (supported by discursive reason). In order to allow you to visualise my aim, I will give you the following examples of phenomena that result from these three concepts: cave paintings at Lascaux, scientific texts, and images synthesised by computers. And I propose the following model: Western, alphabetic culture, emerged from a culture of first-degree imagination, and currently a new culture of second-degree imagination is emerging, from Western culture (and possibly also from the far East). What matters in this model is above all the distinction between these two types of imagination as cause; between the one that is responsible for the images of the type Lascaux, and the one that is responsible for images of the type that are computed. If we cannot make this distinction, we will not grasp the revolution that is shaking us up.

I suggest that first-degree imagination characterises the human species: *Homo sapiens sapiens* is an image-maker. Let us try to intuit how images are made. Man, just like any other living being, is immersed within a circumstance that advances against him, and against which man advances. So that we may say that man, just like any other living being, is part of a given concrete [world] that is four-dimensional: space in movement. The human species previous to ours managed to freeze part of the circumstance in movement when they produced instruments. The flint knife is frozen circumstance: still (understood, *verstanden*). The temporal dimension was abstracted from the knife. The species previous to ours were human for having abstracted time from space, for having fixated instruments. The three-dimensional, still circumstance, is palpable for the hands and visible for the eyes. But it is difficult for the eyes to orient themselves in it: it does not allow for an encompassing view. In order to reach such a view it is necessary for man to take a step back from the circumstance, to distance himself from it, to "alienate" himself from it. Homo sapiens sapiens took that step. He retreated from the circumstance into his subjectivity and thus opened that abyss that separates us from the world. He managed to achieve that distanced view of the world that the Germans call "*Weltanschauung*."

Let us consider the *Weltanschauung*: the world is no longer palpable, the hands no longer reach it. It is a world that is only apparent for the eyes; it is "phenomenal," it deceives. It is an imagined world. It has lost its concretion but has gained amplitude. Effectively: it is superficial and plane, the dimension of depth has been abstracted from it. Well, the bi-dimensional world of the imagination allows itself to be used as a map for interventions in the three-dimensional, concrete world. *Weltanschauung* orients praxis. However, in order to serve as a guideline for orientation, the *Weltanschauung* needs to be adapted. First-degree imagination is swift and subjective. In order to serve as a map it

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needs to be fixated and intersubjectified. It may be fixated as it is projected onto the concrete world (for example onto cave walls). The concrete world serves as a medium for subjective imagination. And in order to be intersubjectified, the imagination may be codified. The code – intersubjective consensus – makes subjective imagination accessible to other subjects. Images are codified *Weltanschauungen* projected onto the concrete world. And first-degree imagination is the ability to abstract one dimension from the concrete world, re-project such abstraction onto the world, and codify it.

Images serve as maps for action in the concrete world, however, given the internal dialectics of any mediation, they start to conceal the world. First-degree imagination tends to be hallucinatory, and the action informed by it tends to be ritual and inoperable. Western culture elaborated a code that is able to rupture the veil of imagination: the alphabetic and the numeric codes and the use of these codes allowed the development of discursive reason. It is the ability to analyse, to critique, to enumerate, to align, and to calculate, in sum: to count the content of images, of "ideas". The process of discursive reason consists of the following phases: images are decomposed into pixels and ideas into concepts. Concepts are ordered according to specific rules in order to form the lines of the discourse. And these lines of ordered concepts are integrated into sequences in order to form arguments. Within discursive reason, this is the recoding of first-degree imagination, the recoding from plane to line. As much as the discourse may ramify and fan-out, its uni-dimensional structure will always be preserved. Discursive reason is more abstract than first-degree imagination: it has one dimension missing.

The function of discursive reason is to explain, to make explicit what is implicit in images. If all images were made explicit, if all ideas were analysed and critiqued, discursive reason would become inoperative. To aim towards an end is an integral part of the uni-dimensional nature of reason. It is structurally utopian; it demands perfection and the fullness of time. However, it is not this entelechial dynamism of reason that makes it "historical" in the strict sense of the term. The rules that order the concepts are univocal; they form unrepeatable chains, of which the chain of cause and effect is just one example. The famous reversibility of mathematical propositions is illusory, as Kant proved in analysing synthetic *a priori* propositions. Discursive reason is historical because its rules impose on the mind a model of an irreversible linear time, which flows, coming from the past, towards the future, dragging space with it. This dramatic nature of discursive reason (every instant is unique, and every opportunity lost is lost for ever), is the climate of our culture. The biggest triumph of discursive reason is exact science, and the acts that result from it: applied technique. Science is dramatic, as it tends to explain all of the ideas in relation to the world and to man within the world, and technique is the method for the realisation of the utopia: perfection and the fullness of time. The world, man and society, scientifically explained and technically conducted, would be a reasonable paradise.

As it is codified alphanumerically, discursive reason projects its linear structure and the rules that order its concepts through explained images, onto the world and onto the mind. For a long time it was believed that this structure and these rules were not projected but discovered by reason, and that world and mind somehow mysteriously reflect discursive reason. This adjustment of reason to its object was believed, above all because technique, this praxis informed by

reason, works. However, currently there is evidence being gathered that suggests that reason is projected onto its object by the subject, just as much as images are. This evidence is gathering because reason has advanced with its analyses, critiques and explanations, into layers of the world and the mind, in which the structure and the rules of reason refuse to be applied. Thus, reason advanced until the limits of its competence, precisely for being so efficient. Within these limits, the trust in the explanatory capacity of reason becomes unreasonable, and the alphanumeric code stops being considered adequate to the structure of the object.

To put it very schematically, the inadequacy of such code to the object, of discursive reason to world and mind, owes to the quantic character of the phenomena within the deeper layers. Within these layers, punctual elements behave in leaps and not according to the rules of the discourse. Categories such as chance and symmetry, and not categories such as causality and sequence are adequate to these layers. Examples: the behaviour of the particles that constitute the nucleus of an atom is falsified when described linearly, and the behaviour of the bits of information that constitute the mind is falsified when explained discursively. The progressive knowledge of cerebral functions, of the quantic leaps of particles above the intervals between the nervous synapses, insistently suggest that discursive reason, as well as first-degree imagination (and all the other cerebral functions), are computations with punctual elements, a kind of mosaic made up of little pebbles. The imagination, codified into images, would be the computation of punctual elements in order to form planes, and discursive reason, alphanumerically codified, would be the computation of punctual elements in order to form lines.

Well, this view of the world and mind as vacuities in which zero-dimensional particles leap by chance demands that a new mental capacity and new codes be elaborated. I propose that we may call this new emerging capacity as “second-degree imagination”, and that the new codes, through which the new imagination articulates itself, have already been elaborated: they are the digital codes, above all the binary ones, which we learn as we manipulate computers.

Here is how second-degree imagination works: clear and distinct elements, of which rational thought is composed, are being pulled from their linear structure in order to be inserted into other structures. They form thus mosaics, generally of two dimensions (as in computer screens), but may equally acquire additional dimensions (as in the case of moving holograms). Strictly speaking, these are zero-dimensional structures, since they are composed of punctual elements and intervals. This zero-dimensionality justifies the term “immaterial”, which has been applied to the culture that produces such manifestations of this new imagination. What matters, however, for a comprehension of the new consciousness behind these images, is not so much their mosaic structure, or their zero-dimensionality, and not even the digital codes through which the new consciousness articulates itself. What matters is the inversion of the vectors of significance, which the anti-alphabetic revolution operates.

First-degree imagination produces images that represent the concrete world. To decipher such images is to discover in them what they represent. This is valid for both the so-called “figurative” images (the concrete world represented in them is the objective world), and for the so-called abstract images

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(the concrete world represented in them is the subjective world). Discursive reason produces texts that explain the concrete world. To decipher such texts is to discover in them the problem that they explain. In both cases (first-degree images and texts), they are the signifier and the world is the signified. Well, this semantic analysis no longer applies to second-degree images. They are projections onto the causal and absurd vacuity once called "world and mind", and their aim is to confer meanings (*Sinngebung*) to the absurd. They do not represent: they model. To decipher them is to discover in them the meaning intended. This deciphering does not seek the tip of the arrow of meaning (as in first-degree images), but the bow that propels the arrow: the intention behind the images. The new imagination is intentional: it proposes, it does not represent. In synthetic images of mathematical equations, this character of the new mentality becomes obvious: they are propositions to several meanings, of the concepts of which the equations are composed. We, the ones that witness this revolution, still have not learnt to decipher these new images adequately. Our second-degree imagination is till underdeveloped, which explains the relative poverty of such images. Undoubtedly, however: a new horizon for creativity is opening up.

During the last lecture I shall speak of this new horizon. I must, however, rectify the model that underlines the present lecture. The model was this: man, just like any other living being, exists within a situation with four dimensions, in a situation where objects present themselves. The human species previous to ours, fixated some objects, produced instruments, and lived within a three-dimensional circumstance, within objective culture. Our species introduced an imaginary zone between man and the three-dimensional circumstance, a bi-dimensional zone of first-degree imagination. Western culture introduced a conceptual zone between man and the imagined world, a uni-dimensional zone of alphanumerically coded explanations. Currently, a new zone is emerging, a zero-dimensional one, of computed and digitally coded images. The rectification to be made is this: the model is not a pyramid of univocal abstractions, a ladder that we climb step by step. On the contrary: as we live and think, we are constantly going up and down through the steps of abstraction, we remain in the lower steps for most of our lives, and we manage to fixate ourselves onto the more abstract steps only for fleeting moments. Second-degree imagination is the level of abstraction that is difficult to sustain, and we are being called upon in order to learn to live in it. That is the challenge that the present throws at us.

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