

supposed to be left to the masses is that of grazing on the ration of simulacra the system distributes to each individual.

That is precisely the idea I oppose: such an image of consumers is unacceptable.

The ideology of "informing" through books

This image of the "public" is not usually made explicit. It is nonetheless implicit in the "producers" claim to inform the population, that is, to "give form" to social practices. Even protest against the vulgarization/vulgarity of the media often depend on an analogous pedagogical claim; inclined to believe that its own cultural models are necessary for the people in order to educate their minds and elevate their hearts, the elite upset about the "low level" of journalism or television always assumes that the public is moulded by the products imposed on it. To assume that is to misunderstand the act of "consumption." This misunderstanding assumes that "assimilating" necessarily means "becoming similar to" what one absorbs, and not "making something similar" to what one is, making it one's own, appropriating or reappropriating it. Between these two possible meanings, a choice must be made, and first of all on the basis of a story whose horizon has to be outlined. "Once upon a time . . ."

In the eighteenth century, the ideology of the Enlightenment claimed that the book was capable of reforming society, that educational popularization could transform manners and customs, that an elite's products could, if they were sufficiently widespread, remodel a whole nation. This myth of Education inscribed a theory of consumption in the structures of cultural politics. To be sure, by the logic of technical and economic development that it mobilized, this politics was led to the present system that inverts the ideology that formerly sought to spread "Enlightenment." The means of diffusion are now dominating the ideas they diffuse. The medium is replacing the message. The "pedagogical" procedures for which the educational system was the support have developed to the point of abandoning as useless or destroying the professional "body" that perfected them over the span of two centuries: today, they make up the apparatus which, by realizing the ancient dream of enclosing all citizens and each one in particular, gradually destroys the goal, the convictions, and the educational institutions of the Enlightenment. In short, it is as though the form of Education's establishment had been too fully realized, by eliminating the very content that made it possible and

which from that point on loses its social utility. But all through this evolution, the idea of producing a society by a "scriptural" system has continued to have as its corollary the conviction that although the public is more or less resistant, it is moulded by (verbal or iconic) writing, that it becomes similar to what it receives, and that it is *imprinted* by and like the text which is imposed on it.

This text was formerly found at school. Today, the text is society itself. It takes urbanistic, industrial, commercial, or televised forms. But the mutation that caused the transition from educational archeology to the technocracy of the media did not touch the assumption that consumption is essentially passive—an assumption that is precisely what should be examined. On the contrary, this mutation actually reinforced this assumption: the massive installation of standardized teaching has made the intersubjective relationships of traditional apprenticeship impossible; the "informing" technicians have thus been changed, through the systematization of enterprises, into bureaucrats cooped up in their specialties and increasingly ignorant of users; productivist logic itself, by isolating producers, has led them to suppose that there is no creativity among consumers; a reciprocal blindness, generated by this system, has ended up making both technicians and producers believe that initiative takes place only in technical laboratories. Even the analysis of the repression exercised by the mechanisms of this system of disciplinary enclosure continues to assume that the public is passive, "informed," processed, marked, and has no historical role.

The efficiency of production implies the inertia of consumption. It produces the ideology of consumption—as-a-receptacle. The result of class ideology and technical blindness, this legend is necessary for the system that distinguishes and privileges authors, educators, revolutionaries, in a word, "producers," in contrast with those who do not produce. By challenging "consumption" as it is conceived and (of course) confirmed by these "authorial" enterprises, we may be able to discover creative activity where it has been denied that any exists, and to relativize the exorbitant claim that a certain kind of production (real enough, but not the only kind) can set out to produce history by "informing" the whole of a country.

A misunderstood activity: reading

Reading is only one aspect of consumption, but a fundamental one. In a society that is increasingly written, organized by the power of modifying

things and of reforming structures on the basis of scriptural models (whether scientific, economic, or political), transformed little by little into combined "texts" (be they administrative, urban, industrial, etc.), the binomial set production-consumption can often be replaced by its general equivalent and indicator, the binomial set writing-reading. The power established by the will to rewrite history (a will that is by turns reformist, scientific, revolutionary, or pedagogical) on the basis of scriptural operations that are at first carried out in a circumscribed field, has as its corollary a major division between reading and writing.

"Modernization, modernity itself, is writing," says François Furet. The generalization of writing has in fact brought about the replacement of custom by abstract law, the substitution of the State for traditional authorities, and the disintegration of the group to the advantage of the individual. This transformation took place under the sign of a "crossbreeding" of two distinct elements, the written and the oral. Furet and Ozouf's recent study has indeed demonstrated the existence, in the less educated parts of France, of a "vast semi-literacy, centered on reading, instigated by the Church and by families, and aimed chiefly at girls."¹ Only the schools have joined, with a link that has often remained extremely fragile, the ability to read and the ability to write. These abilities were long separated, up until late in the nineteenth century, and even today, the adult life of many of those who have been to school very quickly dissociates "just reading" and writing, and we must thus ask ourselves how reading proceeds where it is married with writing.

Research on the psycho-linguistics of comprehension distinguishes between "the lexical act" and the "scriptural act" in reading. It shows that the schoolchild learns to read by a process that parallels his learning to decipher; learning to read is not a result of learning to decipher: reading meaning and deciphering letters correspond to two different activities, even if they intersect. In other words, cultural memory (acquired through listening, through oral tradition) alone makes possible and gradually enriches the strategies of semantic questioning whose expectations the deciphering of a written text refines, clarifies, or corrects. From the child to the scientist, reading is preceded and made possible by oral communication, which constitutes the multifarious "authority" that texts almost never cite. It is as though the construction of meanings, which takes the form of an expectation (waiting for something) or an anticipation (making hypotheses) linked to an oral transmission, was the initial block of stone that the decoding of graphic

materials progressively sculpted, invalidated, verified, detailed, in order to make way for acts of reading. The graph only shapes and carves the anticipation.

In spite of the work that has uncovered an autonomy of the practice of reading underneath scriptural imperialism, a *de facto* situation has been created by more than three centuries of history. The social and technical functioning of contemporary culture hierarchizes these two activities. To write is to produce the text; to read is to receive it from someone else without putting one's own mark on it, without remaking it. In that regard, the reading of the catechism or of the Scriptures that the clergy used to recommend to girls and mothers, by forbidding these Vestals of an untouchable sacred text to write continues today in the "reading" of the television programs offered to "consumers" who cannot trace their own writing on the screen where the production of the Other—of "culture"—appears. "The link existing between reading and the Church" is reproduced in the relation between reading and the church of the media. In this mode, the construction of the social text by professional intellectuals (*clercs*) still seems to correspond to its "reception" by the faithful who are supposed to be satisfied to reproduce the models elaborated by the manipulators of language.

What has to be put in question is unfortunately not this division of labor (it is only too real), but the assimilation of reading to passivity. In fact, to read is to wander through an imposed system (that of the text, analogous to the constructed order of a city or of a supermarket). Recent analyses show that "every reading modifies its object,"² that (as Borges already pointed out) "one literature differs from another less by its text than by the way in which it is read,"³ and that a system of verbal or iconic signs is a reservoir of forms to which the reader must give a meaning. If then "the book is a result (a construction) produced by the reader,"⁴ one must consider the operation of the latter as a sort of *leitor*, the production proper to the "reader" (*leitor*).⁵ The reader takes neither the position of the author nor an author's position. He invents in texts something different from what they "intended." He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something unknown in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings. Is this "reading" activity reserved for the literary critic (always privileged in studies of reading), that is, once again, for a category of professional intellectuals (*clercs*), or can it be extended to all cultural consumers?