

Lewis Mumford

Art and Technics

1952

AN EXCERPT

Lewis Mumford (b. 1895) is best known as an historian and social critic of cities, city planning, and utopias. Here he addresses the problems raised by mass mechanical reproduction, principally the photomechanical reproduction of images, which he claims has removed us from direct contact with life to the position of spectators of a simulacrum. And although nineteenth-century commentators expected the spread of images of art to raise the general level of taste, Mumford contends that it has vitiated the impact of art by dulling the senses.

The fact is that in every department of art and thought we are being overwhelmed by our symbol-creating capacity; and our very facility with the mechanical means of multifold and reproduction has been responsible for a progressive failure in selectivity and therefore in the power of assimilation. We are overwhelmed by the rank fecundity of the machine, operating without any Malthusian checks except periodic financial depressions; and even they, it would now seem, cannot be wholly relied on. Between ourselves and the actual experience and the actual environment there now swells an ever-rising flood of images

which come to us in every sort of medium—the camera and printing press, by motion picture and by television. A picture was once a rare sort of symbol, rare enough to call for attentive concentration. Now it is the actual experience that is rare, and the picture has become ubiquitous. Just as for one person who takes part in the game in a ball park a thousand people see the game by television, and see the static photograph of some incident the next day in the newspaper, and the moving picture of it the next week in the newsreel, so with every other event. We are rapidly dividing the world into two classes: a minority who act, increasingly, for the benefit of the reproductive process, and a majority whose entire life is spent serving as the passive appreciators or willing victims of this reproductive process. Deliberately, on every historic occasion, we piously fake events for the benefit of photographers, while the actual event often occurs in a different fashion; and we have the effrontery to call these artful dress rehearsals "authentic historic documents."

So an endless succession of images passes before the eye, offered by people who wish to exercise power, either by making us buy something for their benefit or making us agree to something that would promote their economic or political interests: images of gadgets manufacturers want us to acquire; images of seductive young ladies who are supposed, by association, to make us seek other equally desirable goods, images of people and events in the news, big people and little people, important and unimportant events; images so constant, so unremitting, so insistent that for all purposes of our own we might as well be paralyzed, so unwelcome are our inner promptings or our own self-directed actions. As the result of this whole mechanical process, we cease to live in the multidimensional world of reality, the world that brings into play every aspect of the human personality, from its bony structure to its tenderest emotions: we have substituted for this, largely through the mass production of graphic symbols—abetted indeed by a similar multiplication and reproduction of sounds—a secondhand world, a ghost-world, in which everyone lives a secondhand and derivative life. The Greeks had a name for this pallid simulacrum of real existence: they called it Hades, and this kingdom of shadows seems to be the ultimate destination of our mechanistic and mammonistic culture.

One more matter. The general effect of this multiplication of graphic symbols has been to lessen the impact of art itself. This result might have disheartened the early inventors of the new processes of reproduction if they could have anticipated it. In order to survive in this image-glutted world, it is necessary for us to devalue the symbol and to

reject every aspect of it but the purely sensational one. For note, the very repetition of the stimulus would make it necessary for us in self-defense to empty it of meaning if the process of repetition did not, quite automatically, produce this result. Then, by a reciprocal twist, the emptier a symbol is of meaning, the more must its user depend upon mere repetition and mere sensationalism to achieve his purpose. This is a vicious circle, if ever there was one. Because of the sheer multiplication of esthetic images, people must, to retain any degree of autonomy and self-direction, achieve a certain opacity, a certain insensitiveness, a certain protective thickening of the hide, in order not to be overwhelmed and confused by the multitude of demands that are made upon their attention. Just as many people go about their daily work, as too often students pursue their studies, with the radio turned on full blast, hearing only half the programs, so, in almost every other operation, we only half-see, half-feel, half-understand what is going on; for we should be neurotic wrecks if we tried to give all the extraneous mechanical stimuli that impinge upon us anything like our full attention. That habit perhaps protects us from an early nervous breakdown; but it also protects us from the powerful impact of genuine works of art, for such works demand our fullest attention, our fullest participation, our most individualized and re-creative response. What we settle for, since we must close our minds, are the bare sensations; and that is perhaps one of the reasons that the modern artist, defensively, has less and less to say. In order to make sensations seem more important than meanings, he is compelled to use processes of magnification and distortion, similar to the stunts used by the big advertiser to attract attention. So the doctrine of quantification, Faster and Faster, leads to the sensationalism of Louder and Louder; and that in turn, as it affects the meaning of the symbols used by the artist, means Emptier and Emptier. This is a heavy price to pay for mass production and for the artist's need to compete with mass production.

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