

technological revolutions, by the way.) Lacking roofs and walls, such architecture standing wide open to the world (i.e. made up entirely of reversible windows and doors) would alter the nature of existence. People would have nowhere to cower any more, nowhere to go to ground or take cover. All they would be able to do would be to offer one another their hands. They would no longer be subservient slaves; there would be no lord over them anymore to hide from or in whom to seek refuge. (Schiller is wrong when he claims that a good father must be *living* above the millions of brothers.) And there would no longer be any Nature threatening them and which they had to dominate. On the other hand, these houses standing open to one another would produce a hitherto unimaginable wealth of projects: Connected up to the network, they would be projectors of alternative worlds accessible to all human beings.

Such a method of building houses would be a dangerous adventure. Less dangerous, however, than hanging on in the ruins of the houses of today. The earthquake that we are witnessing forces us to embark on the adventure. Should it meet with success (and that is not totally out of the question), we would then be able to live again, process noise into information, experience something. If we do not embark on the adventure, we are, for the foreseeable future, damned to huddle between four walls under a roof full of holes in front of our television screens or to drive around in our cars, experiencing nothing.

## The Non-Thing 1

Until recently, our environment consisted of things: houses and furniture, machines and motor vehicles, clothing and underwear, books and pictures, tins and cigarettes. There were also people in our environment, but science had largely made them into objects: Like all other things, they are measurable, quantifiable and easily manipulated. In short, the environment was the condition in which we existed. Finding our way around it was the same thing as distinguishing ourselves from artificial objects. No easy task. Is this ivy on the wall of my house a natural thing because it is growing and because botany, a branch of science, is concerned with it? Or is it an artificial thing because my gardener planted it in keeping with an aesthetic model? And is my house an artificial thing because designing and building houses is an art, or is it natural for people to live in houses just as it is for birds to live in nests? Is there any sense at all in wanting to distinguish between nature and culture when it comes to finding your way around the world of things? Should one not resort to other 'ontological' criteria – for example, by distinguishing immovable from movable things, apartments from appurtenances? This too creates difficulties. A country would appear to be an immovable thing, but Poland has moved further west. A bed would appear to be movable, but my bed has moved less than Poland has. Any catalogue of the world of things, whatever criteria are used to set it up – e.g. 'animate-inanimate', 'mine-yours', 'useful-useless', 'near-far' – is bound to have grey areas and gaps. It is no easy matter knowing your way around things.

And yet, as we are acknowledging with hindsight, it was rather cosy living in a world of things. Of course, one did have what could be called epistemological difficulties, but one knew more or less what one needed to do in order to be able to live. 'To live' means to proceed towards death. On the way, one

came across things that blocked one's path. These things called 'problems' had therefore to be removed. 'To live' then meant: to resolve problems in order to be able to die. And one resolved problems either by transforming intractable things into manageable ones – this was called 'production' – or by overcoming them – this was called 'progress'. Until eventually, one came up against problems that could not be transformed or overcome. These were called 'last things', and one died of them. This was the paradox of living surrounded by things: One thought one had to resolve problems so as to clear the way to death, so as to 'escape from circumstances', and it was the unresolved problems one died of. This does not sound very pleasant, but it is basically comforting. One knows what to hold on to in life – i.e. things.

Unfortunately, this has changed. Non-things now flood our environment from all directions, displacing things. These non-things are called 'information'. 'What nonsense,' one is tempted to say. There has always been information, and, as for the meaning of the word *in-forma-tion*, it has to do with 'form in' things. All things contain information: books and pictures, tins and cigarettes. One has only to read things, 'decode' them, to bring the information into the open. It has always been like that; there is nothing new in it.

This objection is totally without substance. The information that now floods our environment displacing the things in it is of a kind that has never existed before: It is immaterial information. The electronic pictures on the television screen, the data stored in computers, all the reels of film and microfilm, holograms and programs, are such 'soft' ware that any attempt to grasp them is bound to fail. These non-things are, in the true sense of the expression, 'impossible to get hold of'. They are only open to decoding. Of course, as with old-style information, they also appear to be inscribed within things: in cathode-ray tubes, celluloid, micro-chips, laser beams. But although this sounds 'ontological', it is an 'existential' illusion. The material

basis of new-style information is negligible from the existential point of view. Evidence in support of this is the fact that hardware is getting cheaper and cheaper and software more and more expensive. The vestiges of materiality still adhering to these non-things can be discounted by looking at the new environment. The environment is becoming ever softer, more nebulous, more ghostly, and to find one's way around it one has to take this spectral nature as a starting-point.

But it is not even necessary to be fully conscious of the new nature of our environment. We are all imbued with it. Our existential concerns are shifting before our very eyes from things to information. We are less and less concerned with possessing things and more and more concerned with consuming information. Not just another piece of furniture or article of clothing but another holiday trip, an even better school for our children, another music festival – these are what we want. Things start to recede into the background of our area of concern. At the same time, a larger and larger section of society is engaged in the production of information, of 'services', of management, of systems, and a smaller and smaller section is involved in producing things. The working classes, those producers of things, are becoming a minority, and managers and apparatchiks, those producers of non-things, form the majority. Bourgeois morality based on things: The production, accumulation and consumption of things give way to something new. Life in an environment that is becoming immaterial takes on a new complexion.

One can object to this picture of change on the grounds that it does not take into account the mountain of junk accompanying the advent of non-things. This objection is without foundation: The junk proves the demise of things. What is happening is that we feed information into machines so that they spew out such junk in huge quantities and for next to no cost. This throw-away material, all those lighters, razors, pens, plastic bottles, are not true things; one cannot hold on to

them. And just as we get better and better at learning how to feed information into machines, all things will be transformed into the same kind of junk, even houses and pictures. All things will lose their value, and all values will be transformed into information. 'Revaluation of all values'. This is also by way of a definition of the new imperialism: Humanity is becoming dominated by those groups who have control over information, be it the construction of atomic power stations and weapons, aeroplanes and motor vehicles, or genetic engineering and management systems. Such groups sell this information at inflated prices to a dominated humanity.

That which is happening before our very eyes, this displacement of things to the outer limits of our concern and this focus of our concerns on information – is without precedent in history. So it is very unsettling. If we wish to find our way around it, despite the lack of precedents, we must look for some parallel. Otherwise, how are we supposed to try and imagine how we shall have to live in such an immaterial world? What will a human being be like who is not concerned with things, but with information, symbols, codes and models? There is one parallel: the first Industrial Revolution. At that time, concerns shifted from animate nature, cows and horses, farmers and artisans to things: machines, the products of machines, the labouring masses and capital, and so arose the 'modern' world that was, until very recently, the norm. At that time, one could claim with some justification that a farmer in 1750 BC had more in common with a farmer in AD 1750 than the latter had with an industrial worker, albeit his son, in 1780. Something similar is true again today. We are closer to a worker or citizen of the time of the French Revolution than to our children – yes, those children playing with electronic gadgets. Of course, this parallel may not make the current revolution any less unsettling, but it may help us to get a hold on things.

We will in fact come to realize that our attempt to get hold of things in life is not exactly the rational *modus vivendi* we

were inclined to think it was, but that our 'objectivity' is something relatively recent. We will come to realize that one can also live differently: perhaps better even. Besides, 'modern' life, life surrounded by things, is not the absolute paradise our ancestors perhaps thought it might be. Many non-Western societies in the Third World have good reason to reject it. If our children too are starting to reject it, this is not necessarily cause for despair. On the contrary, we must try and imagine this new life surrounded by non-things.

Admittedly, this is no easy task. This new human being in the process of being born all around us and within us is in fact without hands. He does not handle things anymore, so in his case one cannot speak of actions anymore. Nor of practice, nor of work for that matter. The only things left of his hands are the tips of his fingers, which he uses to tap on keys so as to play with symbols. The new human being is not a man of action anymore but a player: *homo ludens* as opposed to *homo faber*. Life is no longer a drama for him but a performance. It is no longer a question of action but of sensation. The new human being does not wish to do or to have but to experience. He wishes to experience, to know and, above all, to enjoy. As he is no longer concerned with things, he has no problems.

Instead, he has programs. And yet he is still a human being: He will die and he knows it. We die of things like unresolved problems; he will die of non-things like program errors. If we think of him along these lines, he comes closer to us. The advent of the non-thing in our environment is a radical change, but he will not be able to alter the basic mode of existence, being unto death. Whether death is seen as the last thing or as a non-thing.

Since human beings have been human beings, they have been handling their environment. It is the hand with its opposable thumb that characterizes human existence in the world. This hand characteristic of the human organism grasps things. The world is grasped, by the hand, as being made up of things. And not just grasped: The things grasped by the hand are possessed so as to be transformed. The hand in-forms the things grasped by it. Thus the human being is surrounded by two worlds: the world of 'nature' (of things that are to hand and to be grasped) and the world of 'culture' (that of handy, in-formed things). Until quite recently, one was of the opinion that the history of humankind is the process whereby the hand gradually transforms nature into culture. This opinion, this 'belief in progress', now has to be abandoned. It is in fact becoming more and more apparent that the hand does not leave in-formed things, as it were, alone but that it continues to wave them about until the information contained within them is worn down. The hand consumes culture and transforms it into waste. The human being is not surrounded by two worlds, then, but by three: of nature, of culture and of waste. This waste is becoming more and more interesting: Whole branches of knowledge such as ecology, archaeology, etymology, psychoanalysis, are concerned with studying waste. And it turns out that waste returns to nature. Human history, then, is not a straight line leading from nature to culture. It is a circle turning from nature to culture, from culture to waste, from waste to nature and so on. A vicious circle.

To be able to break out of this circle, one would have to have non-consumable, 'memorable' information at one's disposal. Information that the hand could not wave about. But the hand waves all things about; it tries to grasp everything. Non-consumable information must therefore not be stored in

things. A culture without things would have to be produced. If this was successful, there would be no more forgetting; then human history would in fact be a linear progression. An ever-growing memory. Today we are witnessing the attempt to produce such a culture without things, such an ever-growing memory. Computer memories are an example of this.

A computer memory is a non-thing. Similarly, electronic images and holograms are non-things. These are non-things simply because they cannot be held in the hand. These are non-things because they are non-consumable information. It is true that these non-things are for the moment trapped within things like silicon chips, cathode-ray tubes or laser beams. But Hermann Hesse's *Glass Bead Game* and similar works of futurology make it at least possible to imagine the liberation of non-things from things. The liberation of software from hardware. In fact, we do not need to go in for futurological fantasizing: The lack of solidity of the culture from which things are increasingly absent is already a daily experience. The things around us are contracting (what is called 'miniaturization') and are getting cheaper and cheaper, and the non-things around us are expanding (what is called 'information'). And these non-things are ephemeral and eternal at the same time. They are not to hand, and yet they are handy: They are memorable.

In such a situation, there is nothing for the hands to get up to or do. As this situation is impossible to grab hold of, nothing in it is capable of being grasped, and nothing can be handled. In it, the hand – the grasping and productive act of handling – has become redundant. Whatever can still be grasped and produced is done automatically by non-things, by programs: by 'artificial intelligences' and robotic machines. In such a situation, the human being has been emancipated from grasping and productive work; he has become unemployed. Unemployment today is not an 'economic phenomenon' but a symptom of the redundancy of work in a situation without things.

The hands have become redundant and can atrophy. This is not true, however, of the fingertips. On the contrary: They have become the most important organs of the body. Because in the situation of being without things, it is a matter of producing and benefiting from information without things. The production of information is a game of permutations using symbols. To benefit from information is to observe symbols. In the situation of being without things, it is a matter of playing with symbols and observing them. To program and benefit from programs. And to play with symbols, to program, one has to press keys. One has to do the same to observe symbols, to benefit from programs. Keys are devices that permutate symbols and make them perceptible: viz. the piano and the typewriter. Fingertips are needed to press keys. The human being in the future without things will exist by means of his fingertips.

Hence one has to ask what happens existentially when I press a key. What happens when I press a typewriter key, a piano key, a button on a television set or on a telephone. What happens when the President of the United States presses the red button or the photographer the camera button. I choose a key, I decide on a key. I decide on a particular letter of the alphabet in the case of a typewriter, on a particular note in the case of a piano, on a particular channel in the case of a television set, or on a particular telephone number. The President decides on a war, the photographer on a picture. Fingertips are organs of choice, of decision. The human being is emancipated from work in order to be able to choose and decide. The situation of being unemployed and without things makes his freedom of choice and freedom of decision possible.

This freedom of fingertips without hands is rather unsettling, however. If I hold a revolver against my temple and pull the trigger, I have decided to take my own life. This would appear to be the height of freedom: I am able to free myself from any predicament by pulling the trigger. But in reality,

with this pulling of the trigger I set in motion a process that is pre-programmed in the revolver. I have not, as it were, made a 'free' decision, but I have made a decision within the limits of the revolver program. And the typewriter program, the piano program, the television program, the telephone program, the American administrative program, the program of the camera. The freedom of decision of pressing a key with one's fingertips turns out to be a programmed freedom. A choice of prescribed possibilities. I choose according to the regulations (outlined in the manual).

It looks, accordingly, as though the society of the future without things would be split into two classes: those programming and those being programmed. Into a class of those who produce programs and a class of those who behave according to programs. Into a class of players and a class of puppets. This is to look at things from too optimistic a point of view. Because what those programming do when they press keys in order to play with symbols and produce information is the same movement of the fingertips as the one carried out by those being programmed. They too decide within a program that could be called the 'metaprogram'. And the players with the metaprogram in turn press the keys of a 'metametaprogram'. And this regression from meta- to meta-, from the programmers of programmers of programmers, proves to be infinite. No: The society of the future without things will be classless, a society of programmers who are programmed. This, then, is the freedom of decision made available to us by the emancipation from work. Programmed totalitarianism.

Mind you, an extremely satisfactory totalitarianism. Since the programs are patently getting better and better. That means that they contain astronomical numbers of possibilities to choose between. Numbers that go way beyond the human capacity for making decisions. So that I never, while making decisions, pressing keys, come to the limits of the program. The keys at my disposal are so numerous that my fingertips

can never touch all of them. Hence I get the impression that I am making completely free decisions. The totalitarianism doing the programming, once it has realized itself, will no longer be identifiable by those participating in it: It will be invisible to them. It is visible only in the embryonic state it is in today. We are perhaps the last generation to be able to see the way things are going.

We can see this because for the time being we still have hands with which we can grasp things so as to be able to handle them. Hence we can see the approaching totalitarianism doing the programming for what it is: a non-thing, since we can't grasp it. Perhaps, however, this inability to grasp the state of things shows how 'outdated' we are? For, after all, is not a society emancipated from work, believing that it can make free decisions, the kind of utopia that has always beckoned to humanity? Perhaps we are approaching the fulfilment of the ages? In order to be able to judge this, one would have to make a closer analysis of the term *program*, this key term of today and tomorrow.

## Carpets

The cave, the womb of the mountains, is our dwelling. However tall, however functional, however open they may be, our buildings are, and remain in spite of everything, imitations of caves. The more comfortable our rooms, the more similar they are to caves. Our troglodytism is confirmed on the one hand by history and on the other by depth-psychology. Is the cave really the original habitat of human beings? The answer depends on the meaning we give to the word *origin*. The caveman is a descendant of those who lived in nests. The cave is only a stage on the journey from the nest towards the coming into being of humanity. Because 'origin' means something different in the case of human beings than in the case of horses, for example. There is in fact an original horse, Eohippus, but no truly original human being. Neither a nest (tent) nor a cave (house) is a natural human dwelling. Nothing human is natural. That which is natural about us is inhuman. Nevertheless: A nest and a cave, even if they are human, are opposites.

The dialectic between nest and cave, between steppe and river, between herdsman and farmer, between tent and house, is at issue here. In other words, what is at issue is the carpet. The carpet is to the culture of the tent what architecture is to the culture of the house. But it has flown out of the tent across the steppe and in through an open window of our dwellings. Now our floors have become the base for carpets. And carpets have turned into pretexts.

The first carpets known to us appear in Egypt in the sixteenth century BC as a contribution by the plains of Asia to the marvellous architecture of the river. Carpets triumph on the banks of the great rivers of China and India, brought from Mongolia by Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan. The greater Persian empire of Tamerlane can be seen as a synthesis