

BABEL

We live in an another world: we do not have a television, and have not had one for twenty years. We do not read papers or listen to the radio at home- Caroline listens to the French radio on the way to work and brings home the latest French perspective on the world and from this, and weekly telephone calls to our family, we learn what is called 'news'. Apart from our food shopping, we have practically given up going to the shops and, when possible, at the weekends we escape to the silence of the mountains away from the crowded ski slopes.

From here the world seems crazy.

We are building the tower of Babel: cast into a babble of disconnected voices speaking a million tongues with insistence. Language divorced from experience, metaphor separated from culture. Symbolised in my mind by the shop window I saw last year where Santa, Buddha and Christ stood next to each other, all reduced in a Christmas sale. This year I saw a window of a gun shop where a machine gun was decorated with tinsel and had miniature Father Christmases clambering all over it. All this outdone in incongruity by a friend's story of a Japanese shop window where Santa was proudly displayed on a cross.

I am growing old – perhaps my mind is becoming stiff-jointed like my morning body: after all, did not the Catholic church graft its metaphor very successfully onto the cultures it embraced? The eternal mythology of death and renewal and the mysticism of the deep midwinter celebrations entwined with Christianity:

"There is very little difficulty in recognising in the myth behind Catholicism the myth of Venus and Adonis. both are obviously variants on the myth of Love and Mother Goddess and her dying, resurrected god."

Ted Hughes: "Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being"

But this was an enrichment and development of experience, an evolution of a culture and an Understanding:

"The deeper understanding, the instinctive prompting of ritual drama recognises, presumably, that a human being is only half alive if their life on the realistic, outer plane, does not have the full assent and co-operation of their life on the mythic plane."

Ted Hughes: idem

Myth and ritual come out of experience and bind into Meaning and Understanding. Now our mythology is formalised into advertising: no longer a result of experience, but injected by the mechanism of advertising itself. Health, intelligence, care of nature, beauty and sexuality are carefully mixed into your pot of yoghurt. Dairy products are a multimillion Eurodollar industry which is not going to let the small, rational consideration that dairy products are not necessarily good for us spoil the image.

"Nous vivons dans le premier système de domination de l'homme par l'homme contre lequel même la liberté est impuissante. Au contraire, il mise tout sur la liberté, c'est là sa plus grande trouvaille. Toute critique lui donne le beau rôle, tout pamphlet renforce l'illusion de sa tolérance douceuse. Il vous soumet élégamment. tout est permis, personne ne vient t'engueuler si tu fous le bordel. Le système a atteint son but: même la désobéissance est devenue une forme d'obéissance."

Frédéric Beigbeder: "99F"

I walk to work across Lausanne in the mornings and see a Kafkaesque landscape decorated with the disjointed messages of our culture – BUY THIS: THIS CAR WILL MAKE YOU FREE: THIS INSURANCE WILL MAKE YOU HAPPY AND SECURE: YOU A CAN BE THIS SEXY WOMAN IF YOU SHOP HERE. The values of our culture – to be put along side the churches, statues and frescoes of the Renaissance. The celebration of the power of a few or that of the many. The work of Verrocchio against that of Duane Hanson.

"Pour la première fois dans l'histoire de la planète Terre, les humains de tous les pays avaient le même but : gagner suffisamment d'argent pour pouvoir"

ressembler à un publicité."
Frédéric Beigbeder: "99F"

My obsessions don't change: the relationship of Form to Absolute; between Reality, Language and Meaning. How to deal with the Deconstructionalist paradigm: meaning is contextual – this reading of this text, by this person, at this moment in time.

Put this in context: I try to teach principles of web design to students with little or no graphic training and certainly no experience of typography. Now, graphic designers do not, on the whole, make good web designers since they bring all the assumptions and traditions of a two dimensional, fixed language to a three, that is time dimensional, flowing medium which is content-directed and user-oriented (the browser decides how to interpret the instructions to create the page and the user decides how long he stays). A predefined language does not exist for the web – the old is not always appropriate but the new seems to me too often chaotic. From what experience should the form come? I look back to books, painting, classical music and architecture. My students live in a world of video clips and fast moving computer games where reaction times and instant decision making is the key to survival. They learn programs faster than I can possibly match. They listen to music, play games, answer the mobile 'phone, write an email all at once, while still managing to work on their project. The very nature of this world is change itself. To ask them to sit down and look at one object for more than thirty minutes and draw it is nigh on impossible (I teach drawing every Monday morning). I am not sure if one set of skills is compatible with the other.

What do we teach our children?

Tap any word into the meta search-engines Copernicus or Sherlock and you shake out a million possible connections stretching out or down. Knowledge is endless. "To the making of many books there is no end" and we now have thousand league boots to range far and wide. You can weave whatever form you want; but does our "life on the realistic, outer plane *have* the full assent and co-operation of our life on the mythic plane?

On one hand a tendency to global culture and international marketing reduces experience to its own, glib 'signature'; a "Macdonald's" tastes the same in Bangkok as it does in Memphis. Orange is supposed to automatically remind you of a telecommunications company, not any localised symbolism. On the other hand, my friend Boris who is in charge of the network in one of the places that I work lives entirely within the 'Goth' culture (www.sanctuary.ch) – he listens to Goth music and watches Goth films. He communicates with a world-wide community of like-minded people. He organises Goth parties, wears Goth clothes and holds to very clear, moral values. Perhaps this is the future – global villages weaving their meaning across fibre -optic cables rediscovering and reinventing meaning as man has always done.

Yet we are still cast down from our vision of unity and global communication:

*"And the Lord said, Behold the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do; and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.
Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language that they may not understand one another's speech."
Genesis 11/v.6-7*

I wish you a very happy, successful and communicative year...