

CULTURE

By John Zerzan

Cul-ture n. commonly rendered as the sum of the customs, ideas, arts, patterns, etc. of a given society. Civilization is often given as a synonym, reminding us that cultivation - as in domestication - is right in there, too. The Situationists, in 1960, had it that "culture can be defined as the ensemble of means through which society thinks of itself and shows itself to itself." Getting warmer, Barthes remarked that it is " a machine to showing you desire. To desire, always to desire but never to understand."

Culture was more respected once, seemingly, something to "live up to." Now, instead of concern for how we fail culture, the emphasis is on how culture has failed us. Definitely something at work that thwarts us, does not satisfy and this makes itself more evident as we face globally and within us the death of nature. Culture, as the opposite of nature, grows discordant, sours, fades as we strangle in the thinner and thinner air of symbolic activity. High culture or low, palace or hovel, it's the same prisonhouse of consciousness; the symbolic as the repressive. It is inseparable from the birth and continuation of alienation surviving, as ever, as compensation, a trade of the real for its objectification. Culture embodies the split between wholeness and the parts of the whole turning into domination. Time, language, number, art-cultural impositions that have come to dominate us with lives of their own.

Magazines and journals now teem with articles lamenting the spread of cultural illiteracy and historical amnesia, two conditions that underline a basic dis-ease in society. In our postmodern epoch the faces of fashion range from blank to sullen, as hard drug use, suicide, and emotional disability rates continue to soar. About a year ago I got a ride from Berkeley to Oregon with a U.C. senior and somewhere along the drive I asked her, after talking about the '60s, among other things, to describe her own generation. She spoke of her co-students in terms of loveless sex, increasing heroin use, and "a sense of despair masked by consumerism." Meanwhile, massive denial continues. In a recent collection of essays on culture, DJ. Enright offers the sage counsel that "the more commonly personal misery and discontent are aired, the more firmly these ills tighten their grip on us." Since

anxiety first sought deliverance via cultural form and expression, in the symbolic approach to authenticity, our condition has probably not been this transparently bankrupt. Robert Harbison's "Deliberate Regression" is another work displaying complete ignorance regarding the fundamental emptiness of culture: "the story of how enthusiasm for the primitive and the belief that salvation lies in unlearning came to be a force in almost every held of thought is exceedingly strange."

Certainly the ruins are there for everyone to see. From exhausted art in the form of the recycled mish-mash of postmodernism, to the poststructuralist technocrats like Lyotard, who finds in data banks "the Encyclopedia of tomorrow... 'nature' for postmodern man," including such utterly impotent forms of "opposition" as 'micropoliticS' and "schizopolitics," there is little but the obvious symptoms of a general fragmentation and despair. Peter Sloterdijk (Critique of Cynical Reason) points out that cynicism is the cardinal, pervasive outlook, for now the best that negation has to offer.

But the myth of culture will manage to survive as long as our immiseration fails to force us to confront it, and so cynicism will remain as long as we allow culture to remain in lieu of unmediated life.