

Autodialogue on New Babylon

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Q. You have always maintained that New Babylon could never be achieved in present society and that in any case, your project would not work, under present social conditions. So it is a utopian project. I notice, however, that you have concentrated on this project for more than twelve years, as if you were turning your back on present-day human problems, as if you were escaping from them. In my opinion: instead of taking refuge in a culture he entirely invents, an artist owes it to himself to seek the artistic expression of the culture which he is part of.

A. Unfortunately this alternative does not exist. I am unable to see any culture today of which one could be part, and that is why I took the road to New Babylon. One cannot choose between existing culture and a so-called revolutionary culture, which still remains to be invented. The real choice is between the complete abandon[ment] of all creative activity and the preparation of a future culture, desirable, though as yet unachievable. It is true that, to choose the latter position, one has to believe in the success of the revolution.

Q. What other artists are doing in protest against present society; undermining art, the 'arteurs' actions,^[1] occupying of museums, all these seem to be more effective than creating an image of a future society, which runs the risk of being idealized.

A. The fact that no one appears shocked proves the ineffectiveness of that kind of display. What threatens bourgeois society is not an abandonment of the creative spirit, but that spirit itself. To change society one needs, above all, imagination.

Q. What you say seems to be inconsistent. If you object to all modern artistic activity, how can you claim to defend creativity? With what right do you replace the notion 'art' with 'New Babylon'?

A. Art is only a historical form of creativity. This form is typical of what I call 'utilitarian' society: the society in which nearly all of humanity is forced to produce, in order to subsist. In utilitarian society, the relative freedom enjoyed by a creative individual is conditional on the enslavement of the working masses. If the enormous creative potential of the masses were one day to be aroused and put into action, today's so-called 'art' would lose all meaning.

Q. It is very possible that the future will see a culture of the masses. But how can one pick out today the form it will take tomorrow?

A. You seem to think that, with the establishment of mass culture, behavior will be defined once and for all, just as past or present repressive forces have tried, or wanted to try to do. It is the opposite which is true. The creativity of the freed masses would prevent any fixed behavior pattern. The life of recreation of New Babylon is to be found in the continual changing of behavior. The project only envisages the creation of the material conditions capable of giving free rein to recreational activities. Planning as we know it will prove to be

out of date. From now on, we need to study an alternative, capable of developing a free environment.

Q. But how can one know these conditions now? Your plans and models give the impression of a technocratic world, whose scale alone arouses fear. But will not man need a less artificial environment, more linked to nature, in the future?

A. Fear of technology is reactionary. Liberation of the masses is only rendered possible by technological development. Without automation of production, the masses' creative potential remains an illusion. Technology is a necessary condition for New Babylon. What is more, I think that in the world to come, nature will no longer be able to offer a satisfactory environment for cultural fulfillment.

Q. But if the future behavior of the masses and the artificial environment needed to facilitate it are two unknowable factors, what then is the use of providing, as you do, images or illustrations of New Babylonian life?

A. Above all, my project serves as a provocation. Towns as we know them will never be able to become areas for a revolutionary life. To create this space in a post-revolutionary period, a new principle of urbanization will be needed, based on the socialization of land and the means of production. The essential thing about New Babylon is its urbanistic principle.

Q. New Babylon's structure is based on a network, whilst existing towns are centralizers. Is this difference really essential when it comes to a life of recreation?

A. Automation of production means that man ceases to be a producer. He is no longer forced to be fixed, sedentary. His life can again become nomadic, as it was before Neolithic times. Independent of nature, he can create his entourage at will.

Q. The New Babylonian network represents the traces left by his passage across the surface of the earth. In the plans one can clearly distinguish these urbanistic trails, and the natural or artificial landscape which they mark. But all the same, one cannot spend one's life following trails! Everyone feels the need to concentrate on some activity, to preserve goods acquired or manufactured. Even the nomads. . .

A. If men preserve goods and take them with them when they move, it is because these goods are difficult to acquire or replace. One does not transport that which one finds everywhere in abundance. So the question is, to find out if it will be possible to produce in abundance the goods which man needs to live decently wherever he wants to go. Is it utopian to maintain that the conditions for such an abundance are there, provided that production is rationalized, which is only possible in a socialized economy?

Q. My principal objection is that from time to time everyone feels the need to be alone, to isolate themselves, to make love, rest or in the case of illness. To be continually on the road is impossible, unbearable. You speak of the masses, yet these same masses are made up of human beings, each one different from another, with a diversity of needs. New Babylon does not offer any possibility for individual withdrawal.

A. It is present-day society which really obliges us to isolate ourselves. It imposes solitude upon us through the lack of communication. But communication is the first requirement of creativity. At present, individual social space is extremely limited and without any relation to actual space. In New Babylon, these two notions overlap, thanks to fluctuations of the population. You see a problem arising, where I only see the *solution* to a problem. Of course, in New Babylon an individual can easily manage to retreat temporarily, just as in any other system of urbanization.

Q. Thus the largest part of New Babylon's urban space is destined for collective use as a social area. But what relationship does this area have with a culture of the masses? Ought one not fear that all these ephemeral contacts between individuals will hamper rather than stimulate creativity?

A. Within present-day social structure, each individual finds himself in permanent competition with all the others. The consequence of this is a considerable loss of creative power. But the compounding of all the creative forces into a dynamic collectivity will offer the individual inexhaustible inspirational matter. The individual act will doubtless be lost, but an infinitely richer and more varied activity will result from this. It is a process which will be far beyond the capacities of the solitary individual and which will permit him to reach a higher level than his own personal rung.

Q. But could this phenomenon not happen in a completely different environment? In the one which already exists? For example, I am thinking of certain 'happenings.'

A. A bad example, because the 'happening' does not work, precisely because of that lack of social communication. Despite the artists' intentions, happenings remain poor spectacles for passive spectators. Urban construction is the expression and mirror of social structure; one cannot change it without first changing society. My projects are not just mere architectonics. They are the foundations for a greater liberty, to be used for a greater flexibility of very varied surroundings, which unite and separate continuously. The true builders of New Babylon will be the New Babylonians themselves.

[1] Perhaps 'arteurs' is a typo and 'auteurs' was intended.

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