

Imagology. Extracts from Immortality by Milan Kundera

Some one hundred years ago in Russia, persecuted Marxists began to gather secretly in small circles in order to study Marx's manifesto; they simplified the contents of this simple ideology in order to disseminate it to other circles, whose members, simplifying further and further this simplification of the simple, kept passing it on and on, so that when Marxism became known and powerful on the whole planet all that was left of it was a collection of six or seven slogans, so poorly linked it can hardly be called an ideology. And precisely because the remnants of Marx no longer form any logical system of ideas, but only a series of suggestive images and slogans (a smiling worker with a hammer, black, white and yellow men fraternally holding hands, the dove of peace rising to the sky, and so on and so on), we can rightfully talk of a gradual, general, planetary transformation of ideology into imagology.

Imagology! Who first thought up this remarkable neologism? ...It doesn't matter. What matters is that this word finally lets us put under one roof something that goes by so many names: advertising agencies; political campaign managers; designers who devise the shapes of everything from cars to gym equipment; fashion stylists; barbers; show-business stars dictating the norms of physical beauty that all branches of imagology obey.

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All ideologies have been defeated: in the end their dogmas were unmasked as illusions and people stopped taking them seriously. For example, communists used to believe that in the course of capitalist development the proletariat would gradually grow poorer and poorer, but when it finally became clear that all over Europe workers were driving to work in their own cars, they felt like shouting that reality was deceiving them. Reality was stronger than ideology. And it is in this sense that imagology surpassed it: imagology is stronger than reality, which has anyway long since ceased to be what it was for my grandmother, who lived in a Moravian Village and still knew everything through her own experience: how bread is baked, how a house is built, how a pig is slaughtered and the meat smoked, what quilts are made of, what the priest and the schoolteacher think about the world; she met the whole village every day and knew how many murders were committed in the country over the last ten years; she had, so to speak, personal control over reality, and nobody could fool her by maintaining that Moravian agriculture was thriving when people at home had nothing to eat. My Paris neighbour spends his time in an office, where he sits for eight hours facing an office colleague, then he sits in his car and drives home, turns on the TV and when the announcer informs him that in the latest public opinion poll the majority of Frenchmen voted their country the safest in Europe (I recently read such a report), he is overjoyed and opens a bottle of champagne without ever learning that three thefts and two murders were committed on his street that very day.

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Imagologues create systems of ideals and anti-ideals, systems of short duration which are quickly replaced by other systems but which influence our behaviour, our political opinions and aesthetic tastes, the colour of carpets and the selection of books just as in the past we have been ruled by the systems of ideologies.