Stefan Zweig, “The Monotonization of the World” (1925)

Abstract

The Austrian writer Stefan Zweig (1881-1942) was one of the most famous and successful German-language writers of his time, whose books were translated into several languages. He became a committed pacifist during the First World War. When the influence of National Socialism became increasingly noticeable in Austria, Zweig, who was of Jewish descent, emigrated to London in 1934 and became a British subject in 1940. Meanwhile his books were banned and burned in the German Reich. In 1940, Zweig traveled with his wife Charlotte to Brazil, where they lived in Petrópolis. Although his material existence was secure, Zweig despaired at the destruction that National Socialism had brought to his “spiritual homel of Europe” and its civilization. Without hope for the future, he and his wife took their own lives in 1942.

This cultural critique, written in 1925, was first broadcast as a radio lecture and then printed in several German-language newspapers. Zweig’s criticism of mass culture, which had emerged as a result of technical progress in communication and the media, and in particular his lament about the “Americanization” of Europe, met with approval in wide circles of the German and European public. Not only the financial dependence of European states on American loans, but also the preference of younger generations for American films, music and fashion trends led to anti-American resentment, especially among the educated classes.

Source

The World is Becoming Monotonous

Monotonization of the World. The most potent intellectual impression, despite the particular satisfactions enjoyed, of every journey in recent years is a slight horror in the face of the monotonization of the world. Everything is becoming more uniform in its outward manifestations, everything leveled into a uniform cultural schema. The characteristic habits of individual peoples are being worn away, native dress giving way to uniforms, customs becoming international. Countries seem increasingly to have slipped simultaneously into each other; people’s activity and vitality follows a single schema; cities grow increasingly similar in appearance. Paris has been three-quarters Americanized, Vienna Budapested: more and more the fine aroma of the particular in cultures is evaporating, their colorful foliage being stripped with ever-increasing speed, rendering the steel-grey pistons of mechanical operation, of the modern world machine, visible beneath the cracked veneer.

This process has been underway for a long time: before the war [Walther] Rathenau prophesized this mechanization of existence, the dominance of technology, would be the most important aspect of our epoch. But never have the outward manifestations of our ways of life plunged so precipitously, so moodily into uniformity as in the last few years. Let us be clear about it! It is probably the most urgent, the most critical phenomenon of our time.

Symptoms. One could, to make the problem distinct, list hundreds. I will quickly select just a few of the most familiar, uncompromising examples, to show how greatly customs and habits have been monotonized and sterilized in the last decade.

The most conspicuous is dance. Two or three decades ago dance was still specific to nations and to the personal inclinations of the individual. One waltzed in Vienna, danced the csardas in Hungary, the bolero

in Spain, all to the tune of countless different rhythms and melodies in which both the genius of an artist and the spirit of the nation took obvious form. Today millions of people, from Capetown to Stockholm, from Buenos Aires to Calcutta, dance the same dance to the same short-winded, impersonal melodies. They begin at the same hour. Like the muezzin in an oriental country call tens of thousands to a single prayer at sundown—like those twenty words, so now twenty beats at five in the afternoon call the whole of occidental humanity to the same ritual. Never, except in certain ecclesiastical formulas and forms, have two hundred million people hit upon such expressive simultaneity and uniformity as in the style of dance practiced by the modern white race of America, Europe, and the colonies.

A second example is fashion. Never before has such a striking uniformity developed in all countries as during our age. Once it took years for a fashion from Paris to reach other big cities, or to penetrate the countryside. A certain boundary protected people and their customs from its tyrannical demands. Today its dictatorship becomes universal in a heartbeat. New York decrees short hair for women: within a month, as if cut by the same scythe, 50 or 100 million female manes fall to the floor. No emperor, no khan in the history of the world ever experienced a similar power, no spiritual commandment a similar speed. Christianity and socialism required centuries and decades to win their followings, to enforce their commandments on as many people as a modern Parisian tailor enslaves in eight days.

A third example: cinema. Once again utter simultaneity in all countries and languages, the cultivation of the same performance, the same taste (or lack of it) in masses by the hundreds of millions. The complete cancellation of any individuality, though the manufacturers gloriously extol their films as national: the *Nibelungen* triumphs in Italy and Max Linder from Paris in the most German, most nationalistic constituencies. Here, too, the mass instinct is stronger and more authoritarian than the thought. Jackie Coogan's triumphal appearance was a more powerful experience for our day than was Tolstoy's death twenty years ago.

A fourth example is radio. All of these inventions have a single meaning: simultaneity. Londoners, Parisians, and Viennese listen at the same second to the same thing, and the supernatural proportions of this simultaneity, of this uniformity, are intoxicating. There is an intoxication, a stimulus for the masses, in all of these new technological miracles, and simultaneously an enormous sobriety of the soul, a dangerous seduction of the individual into passivity. Here too, as in dance, fashion, and the cinema, the individual acquiesces to a herdlike taste that is everywhere the same, no longer making choices that accord with internal being but ones that conform to the opinion of a world.

One could infinitely multiply these symptoms, and they multiply themselves from day to day on their own. The sense of autonomy in matters of pleasure is flooding the times. It will soon be harder to list the particularities of nations and cultures than the features they share in common.

Consequences. The complete end of individuality. It is not with impunity that everyone can dress the same, that all women can go out in the same clothes, the same makeup: monotony necessarily penetrates beneath the surface. Faces become increasingly similar through the influence of the same passions, bodies more similar to each other through the practice of the same sports, minds more similar for sharing the same interests. An equivalence of souls unconsciously arises, a mass soul created by the growing drive toward uniformity, an atrophy of nerves in favor of muscles, the extinction of the individual in favor of the type. Conversation, the art of speaking, is danced and sported away, theater brutalized into cinema; literature becomes the practice of momentary fashions, the "success of the season." Already, as in England, books are no longer produced for people, but increasingly as the "book of the season"; as in radio an instantaneous form of success is spreading which is announced simultaneously from all European stations, and annulled a second later. And since everything is geared to the shortest units of time, consumption increases: thus does genuine education—the patient accumulation of meaning over the course of a lifetime—become a quite rare phenomenon in our time, just like everything else that can be achieved only by individual exertion.

Origin. What is the source of this terrible wave threatening to wash all the color, everything particular out of life? Everyone who has ever been there knows: America. The historians of the future will one day mark the page following the great European war as the beginning of the conquest of Europe by America. Or, more accurately, the conquest is already rippingly underway, and we simply fail to notice it (conquered peoples are always too-slow thinkers). The European countries still find the receipt of a credit in dollars a cause for celebration. We continue to flatter ourselves with illusions of America's philanthropic and economic goals. In reality we are becoming colonies of its life, its way of life, slaves to an idea profoundly foreign to Europe: the mechanical idea.

But our economic obedience seems to me minor compared to the spiritual danger. The colonization of Europe would not be so terrible politically; to servile souls all slavery is mild and the free always know how to preserve their freedom. The genuine danger to Europe seems to me to be a matter of the spirit, of the importation of American boredom, of that dreadful, quite specific boredom that rises over there from every stone and every house on all the numbered streets. The boredom that does not, like the earlier European variety, come from calmness, from sitting on the park bench playing dominoes and smoking a pipe—a lazy waste of time indeed, but not dangerous. American boredom is restless, nervous, and aggressive; it outruns itself in its frantic haste, seeks numbness in sports and sensations. It has lost its playfulness, scurries along instead in the rabid frenzy of an eternal flight from time. It is always inventing new artifices for itself, like cinema and radio, to feed its hungry senses with nourishment for the masses, and it transforms this common interest in enjoyment into concerns as massive as its banks and trusts.

America is the source of that terrible wave of uniformity that gives everyone the same: the same overalls on the skin, the same book in the hand, the same pen between the fingers, the same conversation on the lips, and the same automobile instead of feet. From the other side of our world, from Russia, the same will to monotony presses ominously in a different form: the will to the compartmentalization of the individual, to uniformity in world views, the same dreadful will to monotony. Europe remains the last bulwark of individualism and, perhaps, of the overly taut cramp of peoples—our vigorous nationalism, despite all its senselessness, represents to some extent a fevered, unconscious rebellion, a last, desperate effort to defend ourselves against leveling. But precisely that cramped form of resistance betrays our weakness. Rome, the genius of sobriety, is already underway to wipe Europe, the last Greece in history, from the table of time.

Defense. What to do now? Storm the capitol, summon the people: "To the trenches, the barbarians are coming to destroy our world!" Cry out once more in Caesar's words, this time more earnestly: "People of Europe, preserve your most sacred possessions!" No, we are no longer gullible enough to believe that with associations, with books and proclamations, we can rise up against a world-encompassing movement of such a monstrous sort and defeat the drive to monotonization. Whatever one might write, it remains a piece of paper cast against a gale. Whatever we might write, it does not reach the soccer players and the shimmy dancers, and if it did, they would no longer understand it. In all of these things, of which I am mentioning only a few, in the cinema, in radio, in dance, in all of these new means for mechanizing humanity there is an enormous power that is not to be overcome. For they all fulfill the highest ideal of the average: to offer amusement without demanding exertion. And their insurmountable strength lies in the fact that they are unprecedentedly comfortable. The new dance can be learned by the dumbest servant girl in three hours; the cinema delights the illiterate and demands of them not a grain of education; to enjoy radio one need only take the earpiece from the table and hang it on one's head, and already there is a waltz ringing in the ear—against such comfort even the gods would fight in vain. Whoever demands only a minimum of intellectual, physical, and moral exertion is bound to triumph among the masses, for the majority is passionately in favor of such; whoever continues to demand autonomy, independence of judgment, personality—even in entertainment—would appear ridiculous against such an enormously superior power. If humanity is now letting itself be increasingly bored and monotonized, then that is really nothing other than its deepest desire. Autonomy in the conduct of one's

life and even in the enjoyment of life has by now become a goal for so few people that most no longer feel how they are becoming particles, atoms in the wash of a gigantic power. So they bathe in the warm stream that is carrying them off to the trivial. As Caesar said: *ruere in servitium,* to rush into servitude—this passion for self-dissolution has destroyed every nation. Now it is Europe's turn: the world war was the first phase, Americanization is the second.

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