

Advertisement and Invitation

THE POSTER

The work is complete. Now the need is to inform the public! The artist may even ask himself what purpose such information may serve. The advertiser considers only what form this publicity should take, in order that the work should be a desirable product. In the artist's question there is a feeling that the work is self-sufficient, as well as a narcissistic coquetry that claims that by advertisement and by every public appearance 'the idea is prostituted' (which is not only pathetic, but also destructive, since such an attitude would support the wisdom of silence and the purity of inaction, which is the opposite of artistic creation). There is also a timid 'creation for self', which indeed it would be only in so far as the work remained entirely in the domain of the author's privacy. The advertiser, on the other hand, does his best to make the 'product' at his disposal an event, a fact from which not even works of art are immune, since here too the presentation of a work is equal to the sale of a product. Therefore every public advertising situates art between the cultural event and the commercial commodity.

In the same slot we find also the most well-known of all forms of advertisement - the poster. Let us leave aside here all the various functions of the poster, from dry, official announcements and strict, at times even fateful warnings by authorities, through *agitprop* posters and invitations and those pre-election posters that offer political ideas like goods for sale, to commercial advertisements which woo the purchaser's tastes, suggesting to him a need and evoking in him a desire. The question remains: what is the relation of the poster/advertisement to the work of art which it advertises? Perhaps here one should first mention that the poster is not just one more invention of the 'consumer society', which we so readily and hastily accuse of every possible desecration of art and degradation of 'man'. Pliny the younger notes that the painter Kalud painted wooden posts and depicted upon them the names of the actors. From Roman times to the present day, the poster has changed its external form, but its intention has basically remained unchanged. The poster is

both an announcement and a notice, a message and information. It is a notification that both advertises and promises. In its essence self-advertising, the poster praises what it represents. No matter whether its subject is the sale of a product, the advertising of an event or the display of an idea, the visual and verbal message of a poster must attract the attention of the person to whom it is addressed. As a means of communication, the poster offers and invites, suggests a desire and promises its fulfilment; it addresses the purchaser, solicits him, though in such flattery of the purchaser's choice and its own product, the implicit disqualification of all similar products is ever present. In its aim at celebrity, prestige and domination, the poster in conditions of competition must tend towards originality, so as to impinge upon senses inured to the poster as to the standard ornamentation of an urban landscape. This struggle to be different, in which all known means of advertisement are employed and in which aggression on the senses makes it that in the uproar even the loudest cannot be heard, results in a general uniformity in which every new attempt at achieving originality is merely a contribution to a petrified style of provocation and shock, with the result that not only do hoardings and advertisements begin to resemble one another, but, in a paradoxical way, they become the representatives of their own competitors. One might even say that at the foundation of all commercial and advertising posters lies the same slogan which, like the famous American poster calling for mobilisation in the First World War, attempts, on a different plane, indeed, to carry out the mobilisation of all sensual and spiritual desires: **I want you for ...**

The advertising nature of the poster is ever present in its publicising of artistic works. They tell us that this is the book we have been waiting for, that we shall see a film that will move us, they convince us that these works are excellent not for themselves, but for our sake. Urged on by a competitive desire for prestige, they seek to gain us and win us over so that we, in return, should glorify what they advertise. Every season has its 'book of the year', every season its 'film for all times', on every poster are proudly displayed awards, as are displayed on beer bottles the medals gained at fairs devoted to the opponents of sobriety. This element of self-advertisement sometimes drives the advertiser to resort to a conscious deception of his public, which is gained through a hypertrophied accentuation of qualities and a conscious avoidance of anything

that suggests any defect whatsoever: true that such and such a performance was the best in such and such a year, but the fact is omitted that this flattering title was gained at such and such local festival of amateur theatricals. And although this petty deceit can assure apparent greatness for only a brief period, the advertisers happily resort to it, thinking that in this way they contribute to the illusion of the work which they are presenting, although their only real aim is to sell it. Therefore they do not shy away from utterly imaginary and falsified facts, employing a great variety of shams and minor deceptions. The distributors and producers announced the Italian 'Spaghetti Western' to be an American film, put on their poster the name of a famous actress who did not appear in the film, concealed the anonymity of their actors with the combination of a high-sounding name and surname, took pride in a single sentence taken from a negative criticism and even served their own praises as being the generally accepted judgement. But the more skilful the poster's deception, the greater was the disappointment with the work. Every unfulfilled promise and unrealised expectation is followed by disappointment, scorn and fury which at times lead to contempt as the dominant reaction. The public vents its accumulated disapproval on the work, taking for granted that the poster is also an integral part of it. But is it?

It is not, but it should be. Both in origin and in function the poster is external to the work. Although most often the work of someone other than the creator of the work itself, nonetheless the poster arises from the need of this work for publicity, for this requires advertisement in order fully to exist. In this sense the poster, in various ways and in various senses, is the sign of the work. It marks the completion of the work, makes it public, notifies and informs about it, invites people to partake in it ... These are reasons why a poster should act as an 'introduction' to the work, since it is the first contact the public has with it. The function of the poster must serve that which it announces and recommends. For this reason in the poster's message concerning a work of art one may often discern a note of didacticism and a tendency to educate and, in its graphic design, a tendency to stylisation and form. Although such efforts may at times descend to unjustified praise and trivial coquetry with art, under the hand of a skilful master, the poster may become a true work of art, taking on in this way an existence of its own which may, for a wonder, do more harm than good to the

work which it presents, not merely because at times it becomes a superior competitor to the work, but because it becomes independent of that which it presents. It is just here that one may seek the possible origin of the idea concerning the independence of the poster, which culminates in the attempt at creating the poster as a branch of art in itself. In such a view there is an evident absence of function. The poster, then, may exist exclusively for itself, as an independent visual creation, that is to say a 'picture' done in a specific technique which is always a reproduction and never an 'original'. Hence every reproduction is equal to its original, and the original is possible only as a reproduction. With every respect that they may feel towards such works, in which the element of pure artism dominate, the authors of a work and particularly the institutions which present the work by means of the poster, prefer the specialised poster that assists the work's circulation. Such a poster, by whose aid an institution makes contact with the public, does indeed try to avoid the propagandist tone of a political poster advertising 'higher aims', yet, due to its purpose and the growing competition, cannot resist mercantile aggression, especially at a time when author and work are seeking affirmation and the institution identity. That which is insufficiently known must resort to cheap attraction: only fame frees one from the need for inappropriate aggression and immoderate vanity. By its design, the poster does not, indeed, attempt to attract the experts, to whom the name might directly refer - the product, author or institution - but the public who also soon begins to consider itself 'knowledgeable'. A great name attracts more than the most spectacular poster. Serious institutions have long ago taken account of this fact. Therefore they do not hesitate to reduce their posters to bare information, for the mere announcement of the name of the author or performer is in itself spectacular, though one should remember that such a 'spectacular quality' is the result of a long and resounding advertisement of the work and its author. The cause of the regular and striking promotion of the most famous names lies in the struggle for prestige and in the attempt to make a consumer commodity out of the most subtle products of the human mind, which, luckily or unluckily, is generally not achieved. So, the very nature of the poster is formed between the artistic and advertising-commercial, and such is its function in the advertising of artistic production. A poster, which, with time, becomes a relevant historical document, firstly informs the public that a work is available. Like a public invitation, the poster is the first to protect the work publicly, for it diverts

all those who, for any reason, might not be favourable. It is finally the first public approval of the work on the part of a group or institution: only that which is considered worthy deserves public announcement. In this sense, the poster becomes a statement of its own time and its proclaimed spiritual attitude, a statement which not only reveals what was glorified but also what was concealed and passed over in silence.

The invitation that is sent in the form of a special letter to specially (non)interested people, is both a mark of courtesy, and of attention and flattery. Although its aim is to remind of or to announce some event, to draw attention to something, the basic intention of an invitation - no matter whether it calls for participation and solidarity, appeals to mutual affinity, woos, animates or simply informs - is expressed in the attempt to bring the invited to the side of the inviter. Indeed, the invitation may be both a joke and a deception, a trap or unexpected news, may be provocative information and a confidential notification, it can be almost anything. But no matter in what form it appears, it always remains merely an external sign of the artistic work and a type of exclusive, almost intimate advertisement. It is a sign that one is not free to appear where he wishes, when he wishes: it is now obvious, that by means of public advertisement or poster, the theatre is merely informing the public of its first night, but not inviting it, since the invitation both negates the democracy of a public advertisement and of the possibility of free purchase of tickets, which, at the same time, confirms that art has, to some degree, remained of the 'salon', for, of necessity, it has retained its exclusiveness and selectiveness, which, at times, is a sign of its pride, but also of its limitation which is the cause of many troubles as well as of some advantage. And this is all well-known to those with whom the invitation communicates. Or at least it should be. And in the end: surely the very act of advertisement and invitation, at least to some extent, proves that the completed work is not an event which we seek, that the theatre performance is no longer for us a need, in any sense of the word, but more often - unfortunately - a mere cultural convention which has lost the inner sense of its existence. And this is one of the reasons for the need to convince a weary public, to persuade it to attend a performance, to invite it ... And so on, until the theatre becomes once more an event in itself.

THE INVITATION

They receive greetings from all over. They are recognised on the street, encountered in private clubs where the waiters address them by their Christian names, they are spoken of in whispers. They have a great number of acquaintances whom they do not know. We meet their names in the newspapers, their picture looks down on us from the TV screen ... They are public figures who shun the public, for their understanding of 'public' is limited to the circle of their profession. Theatre managers and directors of galleries pedantically inform them of new performances and exhibitions. They receive invitations, since they are the people who are 'invited'.

We are referring, then, to invitations to first nights and the like.

This is to ignore those strictly official notifications and those ominous commands and legal summonses which, obligatorily demand that such and such report and appear. The invitation in question politely requests that someone come, if they can ... Such invitations are sent only to 'the selected few'. In them the pale echo of the invitation as epistle, denoting distinction and eminence, still survives. This sense includes both him who sends the invitation and him who receives it: the arrival of the first invitations is a sign to the receiver of social promotion, the regularity of such invitations a proof of social establishment. With time, those invited begin to differentiate between the various invitations. It is not a question simply of being satiated with invitations or of the full diary of the invited, but also of creating a priority among those who do the inviting. Unimportant invitations often remain unopened, while the more prestigious are readily responded to; and if the invited is truly prevented then he hastens to give a written apology; but if he is not invited this becomes a cause of offence and even of a lie that he has been invited but, alas - was unable to respond ... As much as the invitee is interested in the invitation, so much is the sender of the invitation concerned with the response (reciprocity is not necessarily the case). Many institutions maintain lists of persons who should be invited on one or another occasion which, at the same time, implies whom it would be undesirable to invite. The lists of those to be invited are constantly reviewed with reference to the social status of the invited, so that the 'policy' of invitation is a mere reflection of the proclaimed, official policy on which the inviting institution

depends. Therefore the inviter humbly invites all those in whom, for any reason whatsoever, he takes an interest, even when, in private, and sometimes even openly, he despises them, and so he invites the influential person even when he already knows that he will not come, invites him because he expects his support and favour, invites him even though he knows that this self-important dignitary, who imagines that no one would dare not invite him, will ignore this effusion of undeserved respect. But not to invite such a one would be even worse: for the institution since it might become the target of the anger of the person in power; for the man in power, since it might be the sign of the beginning of the end of his power. Although somewhat exaggerated, such a statement nonetheless finds partial support in the knowledge that the 'chosen' do not treat lightly the fact that someone has neglected them, even if such neglect is temporary and naïve. The chosen one believes firmly in his unquestionable importance. Therefore it is simpler to send an invitation, for such a courtesy, in its stereotyped politeness, is no more than a set convention which is an integral part of hypocritical etiquette. Does the customary "for two persons" imply the wish that the established citizen have a 'normal', bourgeois life? Is this a sign of intrusion on privacy? Or is it a sign of appreciation, of respect for the partner of the one who is invited? Or is it just one more proof of established superficiality? Such questions become superfluous, if we bear in mind that the invitation is never sent to an individual, but to a desirable number known as the *premier* audience. In this sense invitation becomes an assembling of the initiated.