

44 HIGH ON: What does it mean to be cool?

The Eiffel Tower

world, on the intellectual (and not only emotive) structure of the entertainment. The Colt's abrupt extraction from the jacket in an impeccable parabola in no way *signifies* death, for the usage has long since indicated that we are dealing with a simple threat, whose effect can be miraculously reversed: the revolver's emergence here has not a tragic but merely a cognitive value; it signifies the appearance of a new *period*, the gesture is argumentative, not strictly terrifying; it corresponds to a certain inflection of reasoning in a play by Marivaux: the situation is reversed, what had been an object of conquest is abruptly lost; the ballet of revolvers makes time more *labile*, inserting into the narrative's itinerary certain returns to zero, regressive leaps analogous to those of the Monopoly board. The Colt is language, its function is to maintain a pressure of life, to elude time's closure; it is *logos*, not *praxis*.

The gangster's "cool" gesture, on the contrary, has all the concerted power of a halt; without excitement, swift in the infallible search for its terminal point, it severs time and questions rhetoric. Any "cool" asserts that only silence is effective: knitting, smoking, raising a finger, these operations impose the notion that real life is in silence and that the action has the rights of life and death over time. Thus the spectator has the illusion of a positive world which is modified only under the pressure of actions, never under that of words; if the gangster speaks, it is in images, for him language is merely poetry, the word has no demiurgic function: to speak is his way of being idle and showing it. There is an essential universe which is that of well-oiled gestures, always halted at a specific and foreseen point, a kind of *summa* of pure effectiveness: and then, over and above, there are a few festoons of slang, which are like the useless (and therefore aristocratic) luxury of an economy in which the only exchange value is the gesture.

But this gesture, in order to signify that it is identical with

action, must smooth out any emphasis, be filed down to the perceptive threshold of its existence; it must have no more than the density of a link between cause and effect; here "cool" is the surest sign of effectiveness; in it, each man regains the ideality of a world surrendered to a purely gestural vocabulary, a world which will no longer slow down under the fetters of language: gangsters and gods do not speak, they nod, and everything is fulfilled.

Power and "Cool"

Final assertion

IN GANGSTER FILMS, WE HAVE NOW COLLECTED a considerable vocabulary of "cool" gestures; slack-jawed molls puffing their smoke rings into the faces of assaulting men; Olympian snaps of the fingers to give the clean, economical signal for a burst of gunfire; the gang leader's wife imperturbably knitting through the most horrifying situations... *Grisbi* had already institutionalized this vocabulary of detachment by giving it the warrant of a recognizably French ordinariness.

The gangster world is above all a world of *sang-froid*. Phenomena which common philosophy still judges to be considerable, such as the death of a man, are reduced to a diagram, presented under the volume of an infinitesimal gesture: two fingers snapped, and at the other end of our field of vision a man falls down in the same convention of movement. This universe of litotes, always constructed as an icy mockery of melodrama, is also, as we know, the last universe of fantasy. The exiguity of the decisive gesture, has a whole mythological tradition from the *numen* of the ancient gods, who with a nod overturned men's fate, down to the tap of the fairy's wand. The firearm had doubtless distanced death, but in a manner so visibly rational that it has been necessary to refine the gesture in order to manifest, once more, the presence of fate; which is, precisely, the "cool" of our gangsters: the residue of a tragic movement which manages to identify gesture and action within the slenderest volume.

I shall insist further on the semantic precision of this

better point? gestures

stuff to French film example

coolness topic sent

elab. gestures example

new statement

elab. s.w. ex. 5

shifts the firearm note design 45

emphasis of earlier statement re. the

guns long, complex sent. 3 semicolons 2 colons

* 18th Cent. Fr. playwright

contradictory assertion on cool

elab. silence conclusive assertion (rhyme)

the universe of 'cool' slang

concluding assertion

adder reversal

reason drive wisdom

How to make this note?

Barnes & Andy

Afterward * discuss signs of rural cool

★ Mention Andy Griffith

"Toys" From
MYTHOLOGIES by Roland Barthes (pronounced: Bart)

Continue
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complicated objects, the child can only identify himself as owner, as user, never as creator; he does not invent the world, he uses it: there are, prepared for him, actions without adventure, without wonder, without joy. He is turned into a little stay-at-home householder who does not even have to invent the mainsprings of adult causality; they are supplied to him ready-made: he has only to help himself, he is never allowed to discover anything from start to finish. The merest set of blocks, provided it is not too refined, implies a very different learning of the world: then, the child does not in any way create meaningful objects, it matters little to him whether they have an adult name; the actions he performs are not those of a user but those of a demiurge. He creates forms which walk, which roll, he creates life, not property: objects now act by themselves, they are no longer an inert and complicated material in the palm of his hand. But such toys are rather rare: French toys are usually based on imitation, they are meant to produce children who are users, not creators.

The bourgeois status of toys can be recognized not only in their forms, which are all functional, but also in their substances. Current toys are made of a graceless material, the product of chemistry, not of nature. Many are now moulded from complicated mixtures; the plastic material of which they are made has an appearance at once gross and hygienic, it destroys all the pleasure, the sweetness, the humanity of touch. A sign which fills one with consternation is the gradual disappearance of wood, in spite of its being an ideal material because of its firmness and its softness, and the natural warmth of its touch. Wood removes, from all the forms which it supports, the wounding quality of angles which are too sharp, the chemical coldness of metal. When the child handles it and knocks it, it neither vibrates nor grates, it has a sound at once muffled and sharp. It is a familiar and poetic substance, which does not sever the child from close contact with the tree, the table, the floor. Wood does not wound or break down; it does not shatter, it wears out, it can last a long time, live with the child, alter little by little the relations between the object and the hand. If it dies, it is in dwindling, not in swelling out like those mechanical toys which

TOYS

disappear behind the hernia of a broken spring. Wood makes essential objects, objects for all time. Yet there hardly remain any of these wooden toys from the Vosges, these fretwork farms with their animals, which were only possible, it is true, in the days of the craftsman. Henceforth, toys are chemical in substance and colour; their very material introduces one to a coenaesthesia of use, not pleasure. These toys die in fact very quickly, and once dead, they have no posthumous life for the child.

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French toys: one could not find a better illustration of the fact that the adult Frenchman sees the child as another self. All the toys one commonly sees are essentially a microcosm of the adult world; they are all reduced copies of human objects, as if in the eyes of the public the child was, all told, nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplied objects of his own size.

Invented forms are very rare: a few sets of blocks, which appeal to the spirit of do-it-yourself, are the only ones which offer dynamic forms. As for the others, French toys *always mean something*, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life: the Army, Broadcasting, the Post Office, Medicine (miniature instrument-cases, operating theatres for dolls), School, Hair-Styling (driers for permanent-waving), the Air Force (Parachutists), Transport (trains, Citroëns, Vedettes, Vespas, petrol-stations), Science (Martian toys).

The fact that French toys *literally* prefigure the world of adult functions obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature which has at all times created soldiers, postmen and Vespas. Toys here reveal the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual: war, bureaucracy, ugliness, Martians, etc. It is not so much, in fact, the imitation which is the sign of an abdication, as its literalness: French toys are like a Jivaro head, in which one recognizes, shrunken to the size of an apple, the wrinkles and hair of an adult. There exist, for instance, dolls which urinate; they have an oesophagus, one gives them a bottle, they wet their nappies; soon, no doubt, milk will turn to water in their stomachs. This is meant to prepare the little girl for the causality of house-keeping, to 'condition' her to her future role as mother. However, faced with this world of faithful and

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