

VILÉM FLUSSER

Communication in Underdevelopment.

For the purpose of these considerations I shall classify communications from two different points of view, the formal one, and the one concerning the content of communication. In other words: I shall first classify communications according to their structure, and then according to the messages they convey. I shall distinguish between two communication structures: the discursive one, and the dialogical one. In discursive communication there is an emitter and a receiver, and information flows from emitter to receiver. Examples of this kind of communication are lectures, books and TV programs. In dialogical communications two or more participants in the communication process exchange information. Examples of this are gossip, conferences and parliaments. There were times in Western history when the dialogical structure predominated and impressed itself on civilisation. An example of this is Enlightenment. Other times where dominated by the discourse. An example of this is Romanticism. Discourse is characterized by the straight line in which information flows: it is dynamic and progressive. Dialogue is characterized by the circular information flow: it is static. Discourse pre-supposes an hierarchy of participants: an emitter in authority, and a receiver who accepts this. Dialogue pre-supposed equality of participants. Therefore discourse is in a sense authoritarian, and dialogue is in a sense democratic. But one may also analyse dialogue as a series of discourses arranged in a circle, and one may therefore understand ^{any} discourse as part of a wider dialogue. It depends on the distance from which one looks at the process. For example any gossip if observed closely reveals the various discourses it is composed of. And any book, if observed from afar, appears as part of that dialogue called "literature". But such relativisation cannot obliterate the factual difference between the two structure.

I shall now distinguish between three types of messages that are communicated: knowledge, experience and behavior models. A knowledge communicated takes typically the form of an indicative containing the verb "to be". For instance: The Earth is round, and: one and one are two. An experience communicated takes typically the form of an exclamation without verb. For instance: how beautiful! and: what an ugly person! A model of behavior takes typically the form of an imperative containing the verb: "ought to be". For instance: one ought to love God! and: one ought not to eat fish with a knife! A typical channel for the communication of knowledge is science, for the communication of experience is art, and for the communication of behavior models is politics. Given its typical form the communication of knowledge may be symbolized in a very abstract way and subjected to the calculus of propositions. It is doubtful whether experience and behavior can be symbolized in a like way. (Because if experience and behavior are thus symbolized, they may show formally that their communication is nonsense.) The communication of experience aims at expressing and publishing something that was private. The communication of behavior aims at impressing and making private something that was public. The

VILÉM FLUSSER

communication of knowledge is unpersonal and public, and it does not seem to aim at anything. Therefore it is value-free, whilst the communication of experience and behavior implies values. All three types of messages may be very easily translated into each other. For instance: knowledge may be communicated as experience or as behavior model. But if so translated, the message changes its character. For instance: if the model of behavior "one ought not to steal" is translated into knowledge thus: "he who steals is a thief", the imperative character of the behavior model has been lost, and with it the value implied by the model. There is, at present, a tendency to try and trans-late all messages into the knowledge type, and this is called "scientificism". It shows one aspect of the so-called present "crisis of values", (the trans-lation of arts and politics into para-scientific forms).

Any of the three types of messages may be communicated in either the dialogical or the discursive structure. But knowledge and behavior are most frequently communicated in discourses, and experience in dialogues. (Although the dialogues of Galilei are counterexamples of knowledge communicated, and the Platonic dialogues of behavior communicated in dialogical structures, and although some TV programs are counterexamples of experience communicated in discursive structures.) If knowledge is communicated discursively, the dynamic and progressive character of discourse becomes evident in the form of branching out arguments, and this is the "tree structure" characteristic of science. This is the formal aspect of the progressive^{ness} of knowledge. If behaviour is communicated discursively, the dynamic and progressive character of discourse becomes evident in the form of a hierarchy of models, and this is the hierarchical structure characteristic of political systems, law codes and religious commandments. This is the formal aspect of the author-itarian character of morals. If experience is communicated dialogically, the static character of the dialogue becomes evident in the form of a cyclical feed-back, and this is the circular structure characteristic of art styles. This is the formal aspect of the reappearance of art styles in the history of art, unparalleled by anything in the history of politics and science. But it should always be borne in mind that what has been said is very schematic. In reality both communication structures and all three types of messages im-ply each other and almost never occur in a pure state. However, a schema like the one here offered may help to understand our situation.

.-.-.-.-.-

The revolution in communication which occurred after the Second War, and which brought about efficient mass media on the one side, and computarisation on the other, is having a profound effect on the situation. In fact, it subversed the structure of previous communications. Previous to that revolution the structure was approximately thus: There were three levels, the popular one, the national one, and the universal (Western?) one. On the popular

VILÉM FLUSSER

level, experience was communicated mostly in very static dialogical forms, (popular art). Behavior was communicated mostly in very rigid authoritative forms, (popular custom). And knowledge, (popular wisdom), was rapidly decaying. On the national level, the communication of knowledge and experience, (national art and national science), was practically abandoned, but the communication of behavior, (national politics implying national "values"), was being stressed by the emitters, (those in power), in a strictly authoritarian, discursive form, although in some cases a show of dialogue, ("democracy"), was periodically inserted in the discourse. On the universal level knowledge was communicated discursively as science, experience dialogically as art, and behavior did not succeed to communicate itself as "universal values", in spite of cosmopolitan attempts at such communication by churches and ideologies. These attempts failed, because, unlike in science, there was no universal authority, and there can be no discursive communication without it. There was intense dialogue, (feed-back), between the three levels of communication, and, in fact, the dynamics of society consisted of this feed-back.

The revolution of which I spoke is sweeping aside both the popular and the national levels. Through its efficient universal mass media it is disrupting popular and national "cultures" and reduces its remains to archaeological curiosities. It is creating, instead, a new communication level, the mass culture. And it has maintained intact the universal level, although it has changed it. On that universal level communication tends to assume the following form: There is one process which communicates between the participants of the universal level, and another process which communicates between the universal and the mass level. In the first process knowledge is communicated in ever more abstract and formalized channels, which possess an ever increasing dynamic, made possible by computarisation. It requires an ever growing specialisation to even understand these messages, let alone participate actively in them. Experience is communicated in this process in ever more refined and sophisticated forms, which tend to an ever increasing rate of turn-over. These art styles of the elite are just as difficult to understand and require just as much specialisation as the messages of science. And most traditional behavior models are being translated in this process to knowledge, (through psychological, socio-political and other anthropological sciences). The communication of behavior models becomes therefore ever more senseless, and ideological differences are therefore disappearing on this level.

In the second process, the one that communicates between the universal and the mass level, the emphasis is, on the contrary, on behavior models. The whole process can be understood, in fact, as an attempt to impress upon the mass level a single behavior pattern: the one that makes the receiver of the message consume those material or ideal goods in which the emitter of the message is interested. To this main purpose the communication of the two other types of messages is subordinated. Knowledge is communicated, not as it ap

VILÉM FLUSSER

pears during the first intra-level form, but in the form of easily graspable indicatives, the "vulgarized science" form. Experience is communicated, not as it appears in the intra-level form, but in the form easily understandable and forgettable exclamations, the "mass art" form. But these two types of messages, which form by far the largest part of mass culture, are not true knowledge and true experience communicated, for two reasons: they are untrue, because they are knowledge and experience translated from the universal to the mass level, and manipulated during the translation. (This is their "Kitsch" and sensationalist aspect.) And they are untrue, because they are communicated not for their own sake, but for the sake of communication of models of consumption behavior, and aim at masking that only important type of communication. (This is their demagogical and alienating aspect.) The characteristic of the process which communicates between the universal and the mass level is therefore this: Models of consumption behavior are communicated both directly, (in the form of imperatives), and indirectly, (masked in the form of vulgarized science and Kitsch art).

On the mass level communication is being progressively restricted to the reception of messages from the universal level. All previous forms of communication which occurred on the popular and national levels are being disrupted progressively by this omnipresent reception, even such apparently basic forms like family and club communication. The result of this is not, as one might have supposed, an increasing feeling of impotence and revolt on the part of the participants in mass culture. On the contrary, being exposed almost exclusively to messages coming from the universal level, and being unable to respond to them, (i.e. being structurally irresponsible), the participant in mass culture assumes himself in possession of all available information, therefore as a kind of omniscient being. Which distinguishes him radically from the participant in universal level culture, who feels increasingly ignorant, due to his difficulty to understand the messages of art and science.

But this is only one aspect of the growing gap between the universal and the mass level. The structure of the communications which go on within the universal level ~~are~~^{is} approximately thus: knowledge is communicated in discursive form through increasingly narrowing channels like scientific publications and computerized data. Experience is communicated in dialogical form through increasingly smaller and more rapidly revolving circles like exhibitions, happenings and mini-concerts. And behavior is communicated in a dialogical form that destroys the essentially imperative aspect of behavior models. This means that communication on the intra-universal level is progressively dividing that level in small groups that do not communicate between each other. A feeling of loneliness and lack of communication prevails therefore on that level.

VILÉM FLUSSER

The structure of communications which go on between the universal and the mass level is approximately thus: the type of messages that shall be communicated are elaborated by small groups within the universal level in a somewhat dialogical form, and then transmitted to the mass level in ever broadening and deepening strictly discursive channels like films, TV programs, posters and illustrated magazines. The result is that the groups that manipulate the mass media are forming one of the many isolated groups within the universal level, and that mass culture is becoming increasingly more compact and unarticulated.

The structure of communications which go on in the mass level is increasingly the structure of unified and unifying discourse which branches out in a pseudo-tree structure to reach every participant of that level. The result is a levelling out of the mass level on the lowest common denominator.

What characterizes this revolutionary change in the structure of communication is however the total lack of feed-back between the universal and the mass level. This implies an increasing separation of the universal from the mass level, and therefore its isolation and sterilisation. All communication within the universal level is becoming senseless, unless its sense be the manipulation of the mass level. This sensation of futility of universal level culture, coupled with the sensation of high efficiency of mass level culture, is characteristic of the revolution in communication.

There is, however, a dialectical contradiction in this situation. It is most clearly seen in the communication of behavior models. On the one hand behavior models are being translated into knowledge, and therefore lose their "value" aspect. On the other hand the whole of universal culture is dedicated to the communication of a specific behavior model: consumption. This is the internal contradiction of technocracy: being scientific, it is value-free, and being technical, it aims at the value of "progress", i.e. increasing consumption. This internal contradiction might explode the whole structure of communication in the future.

.....

The term "underdevelopment" pre-supposes this technocratic "progress value", and has no meaning outside that pre-supposition. But this is not its only limitation. It pre-supposes also that there is a geographic aspect to technical progress. Therefore the term "underdeveloped countries" or, as one now says more elegantly: "developing countries". Both these pre-suppositions are however highly doubtful. The situation, if looked at from the communicological point of view, presents itself more in the following way:

On the universal level the "progress value" has lost every meaning, and consumption behavior is being abandoned. In this sense the universal level is no longer developing. But there is a vaguely geographical aspect to the universal level, thus: there are centers of political, econ

VILÉM FLUSSER

omic, social and other type of decisions within that level which have a geographical distribution. But these centers are growing ever more problematic for two different reasons. One has to do with the fact that decision making itself is problematic in a situation where there are no behavior models, and where therefore it is the value-free sciences and their discursive inertia which program and plan for the future. The other reason has to do with the fact that the universal level is so broken up in small groups of specialists that the decision centers do not really communicate all through the level.

The basic reality however is that the universal level does not allow any true geographic division. He who participates in any of the specialized groups, be he wherever, participates in the universal level. In this sense he is just as much alienated from his social "reality" if he lives in Paris or Timbuktu, in Moscow or on the Easter Island. In this sense the universal level is becoming truly universal. The high geographical mobility, (which is a form of communication), of the participants on this level prove this. From this point of view the term "underdeveloped country" has no meaning. Its elite is just as developed or underdeveloped as anywhere else in the world.

The situation is different if we look at the mass level however. We can then observe that mass culture is penetrating through the mass media into the popular and national levels at a very uneven pace, and that there are geographical, (among other), aspects to this progress. Roughly the following may be said of this progress: it first reaches those regions which are close to the traditional centers of decision, disrupts there the traditional forms of communication, and then substitutes them with the new forms of mass culture. It goes forward to ever wider and farther geographical regions, and does the same there. We can therefore, at present, distinguish between various stages of development: places where mass culture is victorious are fully developed. Places where popular and national cultures are being disrupted but mass culture is not yet victorious are developing. And places where popular and national cultures are still at work are underdeveloped.

This is of course far too schematic, because mass media progress in a very spotty manner. They may institute mass culture in a few fields, and leave popular and national culture untouched in others. Nonetheless it allows for a sort of understanding of our present situation. And the most interesting aspect of the situation are the places which I have called "developing", like the one I come from.

Let me describe superficially such a situation. Mass media are at work and create around them increasing islands of mass culture. These islands swim in an ocean of amorphous masses whose popular culture was destroyed by mass media, but which have not yet been included in the mass culture.

VILÉM FLUSSER

The elite that manipulates this process is on the universal level, and is therefore linked much more to the participants of the universal level abroad than to its geographical position. And there are remnants of a traditional national elite who cling desperately to traditional forms of communication.

The problems which arise from such a complex situation may be enumerated thus: The amorphous masses have lost all communication structure, and are driven by both the universal and national elites toward mass culture. This is called "progress". The participants in mass culture assume themselves as elite, if compared to the amorphous masses, and in this sense are even more alienated from their true situation than elsewhere. The national elite believes that it uses the universal elite for its own purpose, which is the defense of traditional values. But it is obviously mistaken, because if these values were achieved they would cease to exist and be diluted in the universal level. And the universal elite is using this situation as a sort of laboratory for the construction of an efficient mass culture, and takes the national elite as a willing tool to achieve this purpose.

Now such a situation is interesting not only from a purely formal point of view. Formally it is interesting because it shows well the clash between two forms of communication. For instance, on the elite level, the clash between communication of knowledge and of behavior models, and, on the mass level, the communication of consumption and production behavior. The amount of misunderstanding, and therefore the amount of friction, (a form of communication), is very great in such a situation. But it is interesting for another reason also. The situation is highly dynamic, (not to say explosive), and it therefore questions the mass culture in a way it is not being questioned in the developed places. In the developed places mass culture is taken for granted, and all endeavors of those who oppose it are directed toward changing it. But in places like the one I am speaking about the whole question of those opposed to mass culture is how to avoid it.

It may be a rhetorical question. It may be that the inertia of mass media is such that the victory of a totalitarian mass culture can no longer be avoided. But it may also be that in the developing places an alternative to the mass culture is being worked out amid suffering and perplexity, an alternative that may, in the future, irradiate to the developed places. This is the suggestion I wanted to submit to your appreciation and discussion.