

Words are much more conservative than their meanings. The meaning of the word "family", for instance, has changed several times during the last century, but it was difficult to notice the change, as it went on under the cover of a word which remained constant. The bad synchronisation of word and meaning, (of language and the universe), the fact that they develop in two different processes, poses difficult problems for knowledge. On the one hand knowing means naming, (one knows a thing by its name), on the other hand knowing means removing names, (one knows a thing by forgetting the name which covers it up), and the family is a good example for this epistemological problem. A way to formulate it is this: The word "family" projects a rather wide parameter of meanings. This parameter covers a stretch of a certain type of social organisation which is developing, (for instance: the stretch between the so-called "matriarchal" palaeolithic organisation and the so-called "mass media" present organisation), but it does not cover previous and posterior stretches of the same development, (for instance: it does not cover the Neandertal Horde nor the Gang in present-day cities). "Family" therefore means a certain type of social organisation as it develops from Horde to Gang, which is to say that it does not mean a structure, but a process.

If we formulate the problem in this way, the question arises: what place within the parameter of meaning projected by the word "family" is occupied at a given moment? In other words: what does the Code Napoléon mean when it says "family", and what does Mr. Pétain mean, and what do we mean when we say it? The answer within this formulation is, of course, that all three of us mean the same process, but each of us means a different structure. Which means that if we dialogue with the Code Napoléon or with Mr. Pétain, we shall use the word "family" with different meanings, and our dialogue will be merely verbal. This fact is a source of permanent misunderstanding and mystification. And this becomes even more troublesome, if we consider that we, ourselves, continue to use the word "family" in the sense of the Code Napoléon and of Mr. Pétain, and can therefore not avoid misunderstandings and mystification due to verbal confusion within our own thinking. One of the most important roles of intellectuals is to try and clear up this misunderstanding and mystification within their own thinking.

Let us simplify the task by proposing a few definitions taken from theory of communication. The word "family" shall mean a stretch in the development of a social organisation that aims at transmitting some essential cultural information from one generation to another. Let us call this type of information "basic education". When used by the Code Napoléon the word "family" means a certain structure of this type of transmission, which can be called the "bourgeois" structure. When used by Mr. Pétain the word means a different structure which can be called "decadent bourgeois" structure. When used by ourselves the word means another structure again, which can be called the "mass media" structure.

VILÉM FLUSSER

ture. (Of course, the word "family" means a whole series of other structures as well, for instance the Roman, the early Christian, the feudal, the proletarian structures and so forth.) Although all of these structures have the same communicological purpose, they provide entirely different existential climates. The task is now to distinguish between those structures and thus avoid mystification.

The bourgeois structure of the family can be stated as follows: It is centered around a memory which stores the information to be transmitted. Let us call the memory the "grandmother". This memory emits information in the direction of a very limited number of circularly disposed receivers. Let us call them the "grandchildren". There is feed-back between emitter and receiver. The grandchildren may ask the grandmother questions. There is dialogue among the receivers. The grandchildren may discuss the information received among them. The information comes in the form of myths, (fairy tales and other types of behavior models of an origin which is usually ancient). At least two, (possibly more), memories are coupled to the "grandmother" emitter. One of these memories, (which can be called "mother"), serves to channel the information emitted by "grandmother" into immediate praxis. In this practical sense it is the "mother" that occupies the center of the situation. The other memory, (which can be called "father"), provides additional, original and therefore highly imperative information. It is an authoritative memory, in the sense of being imperative, and in the sense of being an author of information. The three, (or more) emitting memories are organized in an hierarchy in which the "father" memory transcends the situation, (it is partly outside the family), and in which the "mother" and "grandmother" memories divide broadcasting competence according to the messages to be emitted; The family functions on behalf of a wider context, (the bourgeois society), and the "father" memory works as a channel between family and context. From the strict "father" point of view the family is therefore a father function, and from the wider point of view of bourgeois society it is a social function. It is obvious that this type of structure demands a specific architectonical setting: the bourgeois house in the 19th century sense of the term.

The decadent bourgeois structure of the family can be stated as follows: It is centered around a memory which stores the information to be transmitted. Let us call the memory the "maid servant". This memory emits information more or less by the same method and with the same dynamics the "grandmother" memory uses in the bourgeois structure. But the difference is that the "maid servant" memory works as an "ersatz" for the "mother" memory in two senses. It provides the practical behaviour models the "mother" memory provides in the bourgeois structure, but its emission is periodically interrupted by "mother" emissions which provide behaviour models which partly contradict those emitted by the "maid servant". And it is therefore not the true center of the situation, but has to compete for central position with the "mother". The result is the re

VILÉM FLUSSER

ceivers, ("children"), are being programmed with two partly conflicting programs. The "grandmother" memory is practically eliminated from this structure. The result is that the mythical form of the information transmitted is reduced to a minimum, and there is a rupture between the information provided within the family and the flow of information which sustained Western society for several centuries. This is one of the symptoms, (and causes), of the decadence of the bourgeois order. The role of the "father" memory is very similar to the one it had in the bourgeois structure. The architectonical setting for this type of family is therefore a relatively slight modification of the bourgeois house in the 19th century, with servant quarters substituting the quarters reserved for the precedent generation in the original form.

The two types of family structures described above were models, during the time of their dominance, for the whole of Western society, although they were rather inappropriate models for proletarian and rural settings. In order to be impressed upon those settings, these types of structures were clothed in various ideological, (mostly religious), trappings, and in this "sanctified" form they succeeded to be accepted more or less universally as the only possible, or the correct, family structure. This acceptance was made possible through ignorance of previous family structures, and through a social opprobrium of competing family models. This is a typical example of alienation: a sanctified model is ideologically imposed on society, in order to prevent the articulation of more appropriate models.

But the revolution within the means of communication which set in after the second war, (and which is one of the most radical revolutions in history, although it did not, strictly speaking, disrupt "infra-structures"), exploded the bourgeois family structure, (be it original or decadent), and replaced it with a new, the mass media structure. It can be stated as follows: It is based on a television screen, which functions like an umbilical cord between the family and a memory outside the family horizon. It transmits information to a small number of receivers semicircularly disposed and facing the television. (There is no longer any "family circle", but a semicircle, and the family has a theatre, no longer an amphitheatre, structure.) There is no feed back between the receivers, (the "members of the family"), and the television. The dialogue among these members is restricted to a minimum, because it interrupts a practically continuous TV transmission. The information comes in the form of various, scientifically elaborated messages which, when analyzed, reveal one single behaviour model: the behaviour of consumption. The TV is an authoritative transmitter, in the sense of being imperative, and in the sense of allowing no answer. But it is an authority quite unlike the one the "father" memory possessed in previous family structures. It does not provide original information, but stereotyped information. There is no hierarchy within the members of the family: father, mother and children are on the same level of passive receivers of imperative behaviour patterns. Therefore, if

VILÉM FLUSSER

were to call the previous family structures "patriarchal" ones, (because they were based on a "father" authority), we may call the mass media family structure a "fratriarchal" one, (because it is based on TV authority which is disruptive of hierarchical orders). The TV is not a father, but a big brother. The result is that every member of the family disposes of the same information and has the same competence to transform it into action. And this action functions on behalf of a memory which lies outside the horizon of the family members. It is obvious that this type of structure demands a specific architectural setting, and it is equally obvious that such a setting has not yet been successfully elaborated.

There are at least two reasons why architects have not, so far, provided the mass media family with its appropriate setting. One has to do with the fact that the mass media structure of the family is not yet totally dominant, and that it did not eliminate some aspects of bourgeois family structures. The other is that bourgeois ideology being still dominant, (though much feebler than before), the mass media family structure is not recognized as such, but covered up with ideological masks which do not allow the architects to see it. But once the mass media structure eliminates bourgeois archaic family aspects, it will be easier for architects to see it. They will then project houses which will be more like cinemas or theatres with adjoining sleeping quarters, than like bourgeois houses. Tendencies in such a direction can be already detected.

But it is of course a fact that tendencies in human affairs are subject to the dialectic "determination - freedom". The tendency toward a mass media family structure is determined by, among other things, the technological development of communication apparatus. But it is still possible to divert such a tendency toward a different sort of family structure, if there is a sufficiently strong will to do so. Architects are among those who can direct the tendency toward entirely new family forms, if they incorporate TV in their settings, but reserve a place for it which is not the one to which it tends "spontaneously" as the big brother. Let us hope, (those of us who do not see in the mass media family structure a very brilliant future of mankind), that architects will show enough free will to project such a setting. This is one of the few hopes left to avoid the victory of a totalitarian mass culture.