

There seem to be several types of introductions, to books as much as to other messages submitted to a public unknown by the author of the message. One type of introductions is a belated attempt at justification. (Belated, because, although introductions appear at the beginning of books, they are usually written after the conclusion of the message. This poses, by the way, a curious problem of "diachronicity" for theoreticians of communication.) Another type of introductions is an attempt to condense the message to follow. A third type is the well known, (and slightly comic), ^{ritual} to thank several people including famous names, one's wife and one's secretary, for the assistance without which the book could not have been written, but which does not exempt the author from responsibility for the errors in the message to follow. A fourth type is the result of the author's conviction that almost nobody has the leisure, nowadays, to read long messages, (although almost everybody has the leisure to watch long programs of television), and that it is necessary therefore to lead the reader into reading what follows. And there are other types of introductions. The present introduction does not fall under any of these categories, (at least, this is the hope of its author). Not under the first one, because I do not feel to need any justification, except the fact that I like to write and communicate with others. Not under the second one, because I believe that if a message can be condensed, it should be presented only in the condensed form. Not under the third one, because the number of influences on everything, (including messages), is so enormous, that it is both uninteresting and futile to try and pick out some among them, in order to prove that one is, like everything else in the world, conditioned. And not under the fourth one, because the present book is a short one, in any case, which is probably one of the reasons why it was bought by the reader in the first place. The purpose of the present introduction is to place this book in a specific context: the context of theory of communication.

Now this is a curious purpose. Some may even say that it is self-defeating. They may say that either the message belongs to that context, and in that case no attempt at placing it there is necessary; or that the message does not belong to it, and in that case the attempt is futile. Though this seems to be a reasonable objection to the purpose of this introduction, it is not valid in this case. For the following reason: The theory of communication is a recent discipline, and one of its problems is that it has not yet succeeded in defining its field of competence, its context. It either tends to extend its context too far, and thus dilutes its competence like a drug that cures no illness, because it wants to cure too many. (This is a danger for every youthful discipline: to become a "dernier cri", a fashion applicable to all problems.) Or it tends to limit its context too modestly, in order to achieve a concentrated competence, and thus be able to compete with other and older disciplines, which are more dignified, being more academic. (This

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is another danger for every youthful discipline: pretended and "precious" academism.) In trying to place the present book within the context of the theory of communication, this introduction attempts to contribute to the delimitation of that context.

This book is about things in our surroundings. About some of the enormous amount of things that surround us. They were chosen out of that amount, because they seemed to be interesting to the author for reasons which he would have trouble to point out. Now the things that surround us can be experienced, handled and explained in many ways, and one of these ways is to consider them to be means of communication. They do not merely stand around us, they also stand between ourselves and other people. In fact: the recent populational explosion among the things of the type "consumer goods" has increased the amount of the things that stand between ourselves and other people to such a degree, that we can no longer see other people, let alone reach them. This is one aspect of our loneliness, our "lack of communication", and it explains, in part, the rise of the theory of communication as an effort to solve this problem. But in standing between ourselves and other people, things are not only barriers, they are also mediations. They are, all of them, like the air that stands between myself and the other person: it separates me from him, but I can also communicate with him thanks to the air that is there. Things, all of them, are potential channels. To study them in this aspect of theirs is one of the basic tasks of the theory of communication.

But although all things are potential means of communication, some of them, (like books, and paintings, and television sets), are being obviously used for that purpose, and others, (like tobacco pipes, and tooth brushes, and water closets), seem to obstruct rather than serve communication. Now this is a very superficial way to look at the things that surround us. At closer inspection one can discover that the obvious means of communication also obstruct communication in a very important sense, (for instance: the TV set separates me from my neighbor, and even from those men that own and manipulate the TV network); and that the obvious obstacles to communication also serve as means of communication in a very important sense, (for instance: the tobacco pipe is not only a message which I receive from its maker and designer, but also a means to insert me within a specific level of a specific culture, therefore within communication). In fact: if we limit ourselves to the obvious communication aspects of things, we shall never discover the communicational structure of the situation we stand in. We shall, in such a case, be doing the exact contrary of what a theory of communication should be doing.

It goes without saying that the obvious means of communication, (those among the things that surround us which are labelled "channels"), must get the first attention of a discipline as young as the theory of communication.

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And they must get it in such a way that the dialectic "means of communication x obstruction of communication" mentioned above should become apparent. And in fact this is what most theoreticians of communication are doing. They are analysing obvious channels like the press, shop displays, posters, art exhibitions and so forth, and are providing us with sometimes penetrating insights into the dialectical contradictions both internal and external to this type of thing in our surroundings. And it is not surprising that many concentrate their attention on the most advanced and dominant channels, like the television and films. But this is not sufficient, and it may, in the long run, become dangerous for the further development of the theory of communication. For the following reason:

Those things in our surroundings which are labelled "channels", (and more especially the advanced and dominant ones), have been labelled that way for the implicit purpose to direct our attention to them and away from other things, if we want to communicate with others. Those who manipulate our society, (what is vaguely called "the establishment"), have a vested interest in our recurrence to labelled channels when we communicate, because those labelled channels are under control and permit therefore the control and manipulation of our communications. If we should learn to communicate through tobacco pipes instead through the telephone, this might become subversive to the established order. Now by following those labels as clues to investigations, some theoreticians of communication are in danger of falling unwittingly into the trap the "establishment" has set for us. And, incidentally, they thus narrow unnecessarily the field of their investigation.

It is for this reason that books like Abraham A. Moles's "Théorie des objets", (Editions Universitaires, 1972), are important. In it the author draws our attention to the mediating aspect inherent in all things around us, and although he apparently wants us to consider his book as a text in social psychology, it is nonetheless an important contribution, also, to the theory of communication. I did not know the book when I wrote the essays that follow this introduction, (although I knew that he was working on it), and I am convinced that both his approach to the problem and the way he tries to solve some of its aspects are indispensable for a sound foundation of the theory of communication. In some way the present book may be considered an attempt to furnish an approach complementary to Moles's, in another way it may be considered a reply to Moles "avant la lettre", and in a third way it may be considered an attempt to achieve an even more radical distance from things, a distance that opens up the field in which Moles is working.

Let me take the second consideration first and say that what follows is a reply to "Théorie des objets" in the sense that it questions some of Moles's suppositions. To give two examples: Moles believes that we are no longer very much determined by "things of nature", and that what determines us

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mostly now are "objects of culture". I try to show, both in "bottles" and "walls", that such a distinction has become problematic, and in "canes" I try to show that the distinction pre-supposes criteria, (for instance the criterium of "given" and "made"), which I^{am} highly doubtful. Moles says, quite correctly, that one of the aspects of our situation is our tendency at reification. But even when enumerating several forms of our relationships with objects, he does not give its due, I feel, to the other side of the problem, namely our tendency at alterification. I tried to point this out in "motor cars" explicitly, and implicitly in other essays as well. And the reader will discover many other dialogical moments in the present book, if he compares it to Moles's.

This book may be considered complementary to Moles's in the sense that it follows an entirely different method. Moles's effort is directed toward a systematisation of our investigations of the things that surround us. Mine is directed toward a possible attitude such investigations may assume, if they are to be truly "humanistic", namely inter-subjective. Now these efforts are complementary in at least two senses. They are so, because Moles tends to cover the whole field of investigations, whilst I tend to choose a few sectors of it and try to see what can be done with them. And they are so, because Moles tends to quantify the problems, whilst I tend to qualify them. And, no doubt, other aspects of complementarity may be discovered.

But, most important: this book may be considered to assume a greater distance from things than Moles's, (a more radical "Ausklammerung" in Husserl's sense of the term), in that Moles accepts the mediating character of things as his point of departure, whilst I try to see this character as something to be shown through investigation. In other words: Moles starts from a point which I hope to reach at the end of my efforts. Now if my understanding of both Moles's and my own efforts is correct, (which is not at all certain), then here is a possibly fruitful situation. A situation, in fact, that is characteristic of youthful phases in the development of a science. (I draw, in this connection, the reader's attention to Thomas S. Kuhn's "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions", The University of Chicago Press, 1970). It is a situation that might prove that the theory of communication is coming of age in the sense of becoming aware of its own structure.

I believe that this introduction has now achieved its purpose. It has shown that by placing this book within the context of the theory of communication, an effort was made to contribute to both the foundations and the delimitations of that theory, and to participate in its investigations. There remains now the duty to point out to the reader the origin of the various essays that will follow. "Beds" have appeared both in "Comentário", Rio de Janeiro, and "Cause Commune", Paris, although in both cases in slightly different forms than the present. "Walls", "Carpets", "Mirrors" and "Canes" all appeared in the literary supplement of "O Estado de São Paulo", S. Paulo,

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and "Wall" and "Carpets" shall also appear shortly in "CRÉE, Revue de Design
et d'Environnement Contemporain," Paris. "Bottles" have appeared in "Main
Currents of Modern Thought", New York. "Books", "Fountain Pens" and "Motor
Cars" have not been published prior to this edition.

It is possibly not quite uninteresting to add that none of the ~~thix~~
things about which the following essays are going to speak are things of na
ture, in the sense that they are all made by men for a purpose. But, with
the possible exception of motor cars, they are all traditional things, in
the sense that we have got accustomed to them and they do not surprise us.
In this sense they are more like a "second nature", because, although they
are obviously made, they are also given. Now things that do not surprise
us are hardest to see, because they are covered up with custom. To see them
one must "discover" them, take off the custom. They may then again surprise
us. And surprise is, as Aristotle says, the root of all philosophy, and,
one may add, all science as well. This is one way the following essays might
be read: as an attempt to surprise, and therefore provoke thought, both in
the philosophical and in the scientific sense of the term.