

VILÉM FLUSSER

Muniz Sodré: "A Comunicação do Grotesco".

This is an essay which defends a thesis. The thesis may be stated as follows: In Brazil, mass media have a more or less conscious and deliberate purpose, namely to bring about a mass culture which is alienated from the social, economic and political, (even the cultural), real situation. This purpose is achieved by two distinct, but complementary methods. The first method consists of showing specific virtualities inherent in the real situation as if they were real. (For instance: The economic possibilities of the Amazon basin are shown as if they were being already put at the disposal of the nation.) This method allows the covering-up of the real situation, which goes on almost unperceived by the participant in mass culture. But nonetheless, of course, some aspects of the real situation are too obvious to be totally hidden. In order to prevent the "mass man" to see them, the mass media apply a second method. They show those inevitable aspects of reality not as they are, (namely characteristic for the situation), but as if they were grotesque exceptions. (For instance: the shanty-town inhabitant of Rio de Janeiro, ("favelado"), is shown not as a typical inhabitant of Rio, but as a somewhat exotic and ridiculous figure.) This method allows the media to make the "mass man" believe that what is in reality characteristic of the Brazilian situation is only a grotesque exception. Thus the media prevent an identification of the "mass man" with his situation.

To prove this very interesting, and probably correct, thesis, the essay is divided into various sections. In the first section an attempt is made to justify the method of the Theory of communication to analyse any given cultural situation. In the second section the distinction between various culture structures is attempted. The most important distinction is between elite and mass culture, and between popular and mass culture. (In this section the author shows how Brazilian mass culture takes advantage of, (and disfigures), Brazilian popular culture.) In the third section the thesis is demonstrated for Brazilian illustrated magazines. In the fourth section the thesis is illustrated in various TV programs. The argument is very convincing for one who know well the Brazilian mass media, but for one who is ignorant of them it is difficult to follow the argument in its details. Throughout the author shows the enormous influence of the United States on Brazilian mass media, and therefore on Brazilian mass culture. A parallell between the media in America and Europa on one hand, and Brazil on the other, is always given.

The essay is very good, but possibly not suited for European readers. Not only, because it presupposes knowledge of Brazil, but also because it is written very cautiously to avoid Brazilian censorship. I do not believe that it can be published in France in its present form.