Knowledge and the Communicational Sphere

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The communicational sphere emerges as a heterogeneous, polyphonical, interference-breeding and event-harboring frame, not lastly pseudo-gnoseological, in which the symbolic forms, as instruments of communication and knowledge, are structuring an interpretive and constructive process, while delineating standards for the status-quo of knowledge. The operational, the functional and the exploitable, as well as the ideological narrowing resulting from tracing and reconfiguring certain meanings determines an erosion of the critical conscience and even a defeat of reason in the battle for the domination over information, social values and patterns that are instrumental in decrypting meanings.

Keywords: communication, conformism, confirmation, consensus, conscience, social context, media culture, rational knowledge, decrypting, event, reason, ideology, intelligibility, interpretation, understanding, mediation, social order, power, reality, sign, meaning, simulacre, symbolic system, public space, print.

We find ourselves today amidst a culture of communication rather than a culture of knowledge, that is, a loquacious culture in which it is not the thing itself that receives our focus, and likewise not the very concept of idea yielded by knowledge, but the *signum* instead, generated and enhanced by the system of mass media as it is. The content or message enunciated by this media establishment has a purely formal character, does not claim to be holder of authority and validity in a certain field, suppressing the sequential relation between information and reaction. On looking for reference and meanings, we discover opinions of authors unknown, patterns, terribilism stripped of identity but unquestionable in character, stereotyped, incessantly repeated without proper mental control, composing a code that is eroding the content, transforming the message in nothing else than "a pretext to reaffirm the code and the referent, these being strictly identical" (Thom 2005, 117). This immeasurable *corpus* of *signs* that are translations of things, facts and phenomena ultimately determines an inevitable gnoseological compromise.

From a perspective of sociology of symbolic forms, the means of communication become structuring structures, i.e. instruments of knowing and constructing the world. "The symbolic power represents the power to construct reality, tending to establish a gnoseological order which is the immediate significance of the world (especially the social world)" (Bourdieu 2012, 178). As instruments of knowledge and communication, the symbols also exert a function of social integration, "making possible the consensus regarding the sense of the social world, that contributes fundamentally to the reproduction of the social order" (Bourdieu 2012, 178). The circulation of this symbolic power exercised by a body of specialists within a given field of production describes a relation between those who wield it and those subjected to it, meant to lead to a "construction

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files/2015/03/C.-Wright-Mills-at-Columbia-Flyer.jpg

of the given through enunciation" (Bourdieu 2012, 178), to a confirmation or transformation of the vision and action upon the world.

When referring to the symbolic construction of the public space, we embrace the prerequisite of a collective interpretive memory. The participation to the mediated experience presupposes a process of interpretation of symbolic forms that is grounded socially, historically and discursively, mediated by a hermeneutical model owned by the individual, as part of a pre-existing social and historical context. In other words, by interpreting symbolic forms, we are merely reinterpreting something that is pre-interpreted. Symbols receive an instrumental function of pointing to or reconfirming meanings, and the medium becomes a context favorable to the birth of ideologies[1] and to an ideological solidarity by blurring out differences and opposition.

The simplification and gliding of narratives into the public tongue, the construction of dominant definitions and their perpetuation due to the approval of the public, as well as the transposition of reality within the categories of common sense are all shaping this ideological character of the communicational space. Defined by Gramsci as "a worldview borrowed in a non-critical manner by various social and cultural contexts which are cultivating the moral individuality of the common person" (Gramsci 1971, 419), common sense manifests itself as a consensual conviction, embedded in popular wisdom, that helps us into configuring a world in simple terms, without retorting to logic and without argumentational constraints.

The only one meant, through its opening towards the world, to counter the ideological enclosure, by generating prospective meanings, is the event. As Claude Romano declares (Romano 1998), an event distinguishes itself from mundane facts. Romano's

event-related hermeneutics defines the event as negative instance (something that was never before); an event rather traces an absence, it always occurs to a subject, thus reconfiguring the entire context of its outbreak. The communicational space bestows an event-marked character upon daily life, but Romano distinguishes the event from the daily intra-mundane happenings that mostly bear an impersonal character, by not happening to somebody in particular. The event does not have a preliminary context, is not etched in the sequel of daily life; but re-articulates the sense of this daily life. Thus, reconfiguring every time the reality within which it occurs, it often creates a sense that is inaccessible to any immediate explanation.

Departing from Austin's theory that the analysis of communication is intrinsically related to an analysis of action within its social context, Thompson (Thompson 2000) develops a hermeneutics of mass-media, treating the media products as symbolic forms *par excellence*, whose perception involves a process of interpretation, construction and creativity. The entire act of production, transmission and reception of the symbolic content involves a process where new types of social relations, new ways for individuals to relate to themselves, a new sense of history and, consequently, a new pattern of knowledge are created. The symbolic power is "this capacity to interfere with the course of events, to influence actions of others and to truly create events, by producing and transmitting symbolic forms" (Thompson 2000, 21). The symbolic content, or what Bourdieu calls „cultural capital" is within the economic, political or knowledge-governed milieus, perceived as displaying power and authority. Consequently, as Harvey affirms, "mediatization becomes the illusory, transient and elusive means in which a society of fluctuating values expresses its nostalgia for the bygone common values" (Harvey 2002, 290) or, as we could add, a nostalgia for a way to something considered to be absolute and unconditional.

It is unanimously agreed upon that all perceptions are schematically determined, and therefore the selection of stimuli is to be achieved by virtue of a tendency of receivers to construct patterns. If the process of perception be at the same time a process of construction, then the receiver is more likely to select those stimuli that best match the construction, reducing the degree of ambiguity and eliminating what is strikingly different, in order to achieve harmony for the entire construction. Understanding takes place when the receiver engages an unconsciously possessed code in order to decrypt the symbolic constructions provided by mass-media, in tune with his own key of understanding. This schematic process of decryption creates the illusion[2] of immediate, yet most of the times faulty understanding.

Media productions provide something akin to

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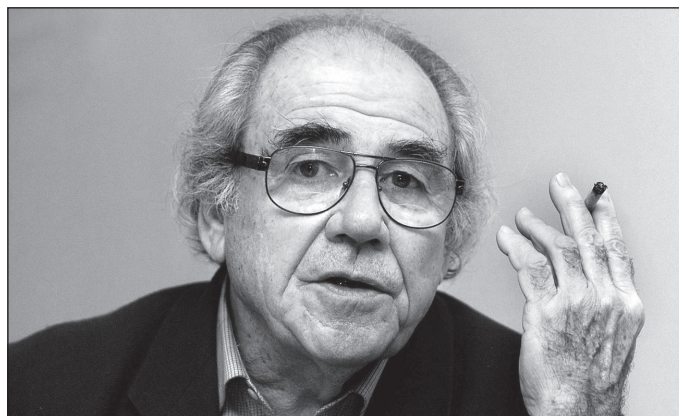
standards of orientation and ordering that belong to the status quo which the same media proclaim the necessity to confirm. These standards that the mass-media etches into consciences will engage in a process of being accepted without being analyzed or verified, in other words, without being tested for substance. By contrast with a Kant imperative requirement, as Adorno says (Adorno 2005), "the categorical imperative of the cultural industry has nothing in common with the idea of freedom". The industry of culture proclaims conformity to what exists "as reflex of power and omnipresence of this imperative", by determining the replacement of conscience with confirmation, the result being an erosion of the conscience's critical function and the immediate identification of the individual with the perceived product. Therefore, those opinions, ideas and values that transcend the pre-established schematic edifice of understanding and action will end up being devalued, redefined or even removed.

C. Wright Mills, Herbert Gans, Dallas W Smythe or Douglas Kellner record a rise in authority inside the „cultural establishment"[3], very visibly manifested in the acts of communication. Kellner considers that the distinction between culture and communication is much too rigid and also arbitrary to a certain extent, since culture is by its very nature communicational, and communication is culturally mediated; the latter representing the manner in which culture becomes disseminated, updated and simplified. While intimately connected to the mechanisms of power, "the media have colonized the culture" (Kellner 2001, 48), while culture cannot be defined any more as media culture, and the struggle of social groups for the control over „the resources of society" is nothing else than "the fight for the power to determine or control social values, myths, symbols and information" (Gans 1969).

The dilution of the critical spirit and the power to reason, fueled by a shift of emphasis from conceptual to an iconic symbolism[4] determined Alvin Gouldner to consider that "the very foundational values shared by any ideology are prone to being eroded". This possible demise of ideology is seen by Gouldner not as the death of reason, but as its transformation into "a higher model of conscience", or "higher rationalism" which has its technological, scientific and rational-pragmatic support. (Gouldner 1990)

On revealing the „defeat of the mind" by the hedonism of daily consumption, Alain Finkielkraut (Finkielkraut 2015) notices how the planning, the knowledge of operating principles, the functional and the exploitable become exclusive ways of the mind, and what cannot be integrated into this instrumental reasoning, that is, what we call meditative thinking or culture, becomes dissolved into the cultural, entering into the realm of pleasure and entertainment. The public space, as forum for the exchange of rational arguments, turns into a simple place for free expression, outside norms, under the urge of expediency, spontaneity and efficiency.

This technique, also decrypted by Heidegger (Heidegger 1980) as a supreme form of the rational conscience, as a system of controls that gets to dominate the very handler, at the same time depriving him of an experience of authentic truth, becomes for McLuhan (McLuhan 2005) an extension of one's being, by which we are trying to discover the principle of intelligibility. The predominant preoccupation for the effect of communication, to the detriment of its meaning, as well as the dissolution of the referent within the system of *simulacre-signa* determines an implosion of reality into the hyper-reality of a universe emptied of its essence, with no separation between objects and representations, between concrete and fiction (Baudrillard 2008). Therefore, the practices of communication and knowledge are situated at a crossroads between social logic and technical logic, taking shape around a double mediation: "technical,

because the used instrument structures the practice, and social, because the mobile, the ways of use and the granted meaning find new forces within the social body" (Jouët 1997).

We can state that the ways in which we relate to knowledge are conditioning the way in which we perceive ourselves and the others, delineating an array of possible ways of action in relation to ourselves and to the others. In its role as generator of knowledge, the communicational space greatly operates by creating an illusion of normality, according to which we are urged to weigh the truth. If we have abandoned the search for certainty in favor of interpretations prevailing by virtue of power they are vested with contextually, we have the duty to not abandon the quest for rightness and reason that the latter are grounded in.

Note:

1. Insofar as knowledge is socially determined, ideology is a co-extension to the sociology of knowledge. We will therefore regard the concept of „ideology" from a perspective of the knowledge-power relation.If the symbolic forms are forms of knowledge, then their use in determined circumstances can serve to create and maintain certain relations of power. Consequently, the symbolic forms and systems are not bythemselves ideological, they become such by the way in which they are used and understood in specific social and historical contexts.
2. The term *illusion* has to be understood in the key of sociological anaysis applied by Bourdieu on the artistic discourse, that of an effect from "agreement among the presuppositions, or more precisely construction schemes that the narrator and reader (…) engage in producing and receiving the literary work and that, if shared, serve to edifying the universe of common sense". (Bourdieu 2012, p. 414)
3. Mills defines the cultural apparatus as as a medium in which individuals interpret and render what they observe. Positioned between conscience and existence, this cultural apparatus is the source of opinions, intepretations, definitions that we bestow on reality, on the standards of credibility and even on the channels of feeling. (Kim Sawchuk 2001).
4. The televisual message, with its analogical and synthetic structure involves a cultivation of sensitivity to the detriment of the critical spirit or intellectual clarifications.

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