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THE CIVILIZATION OF ILLITERACY

BY

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IN order to understand how illiteracy is produced, we should first consider what determined the need for literacy and how this need progressively changed¹. Semiotics is entitled to introduce its own perspective in this respect since literacy is nothing more than the degree of competence an individual or a group has acquired in the use of language, verbal language being only one among others. (The term *competence* should not make you think that what follows is a discourse in Chomskyan linguistics, quite to the contrary in some respects, although any polemic will be indirect). The main instrument I discovered that I have to use in order to explain the processes involved in the transition from illiteracy to literacy and now to a new stage of illiteracy is the traditional concept of labor division. Language, as the most complex semiotic system we know of, corresponds to that stage of evolution of the natural species *homo sapiens* which provided the latter with a social characteristic. Elementary forms of praxis (I prefer the Greek *praxis* to the often used and obscured English *practice*) such as hunting, fishing, agriculture, cattleraising, seeking shelter, involved relatively simple sign systems generally kept near the objects represented, i.e., relating indexically or iconically the represented and the representamen (for orthodox Saussurians, the signifier and the signified, respectively). In fact, this represents a pre-semiotic stage to be transcended as soon as the division between material and mental labor takes place, i.e., as soon as the field of the interpretant becomes possible and necessary.

However, we must distinguish between the signs involved directly in praxis and those participating in the interactions between individuals or, to put it in a different perspective, between the *relational* and the *functional* aspects of the sign as used by man. The relational dimension of the sign is expressed by the *way (modus)* the human subject represents his knowledge, belief, feelings, etc., the functional by the *goal (telos)*, practical, theoretical, aesthetic, etc., that the sign has to accomplish. The development towards literacy — and the variety of ways literacy is embodied in different cultures — offers enough reasons to conclude that verbal language plays an important but contradictory role in the progress of mankind; that is, it participates in the further differentiation of human praxis but also in the continuous alienation of human beings. Anthropologists keep disputing language's contribution to the historic process leading to contemporary society. Although they are united in explaining the need for literacy, they panic before the reality of a highly developed society in which illiteracy has reappeared and spreads at a fast pace. Contemporary society is far more fragmented than any other earlier society. Earlier types are recognized as being local, sometimes parochial, and generally quite homogenous. Perspectives and premises were formed and shared within a group, and consequently verbal language was adequate to the task of communication in which the essential function accomplished was the conveying of the denotative value of the signs used. Sharing of meaning progressively appears in the field of the interpretant and

together with it, specialized languages referring to differentiated contexts participate in new forms of the semiotic pragmatic.

In general, there is a tendency towards confusing cause and symptom; and the low calibre of the educational system or the influence of the new media are symptoms of a much deeper process in which our entire axiology is involved. Mankind is at the beginning of a new phase of its social development, a phase in which the human praxis determining our identity in the world we live in changes from direct relation between the subject and object of its work towards *mediated relation*. The mediation is one carried out through *signs* — in fact, the definition of the sign should be that of a mediating entity — and it extends from material to intellectual praxis. Labor division in modern society causes traditional activities to become either nonessential and symbolic or turns them into forms of work mediated through new technology. In contemporary praxis, the human subject comes less and less in contact with the primary object, be it from the natural environment (soil, animal, meteorological element, etc.) or even from the cultural environment. The cause of labor division is the perceived need to attain the highest possible level of efficiency in order to provide enough, not only at a certain qualitative standard, but also on a competitive basis. In the first stages of this process, verbal language provided the perspective of the whole. It was even said (Marx, 1844) that the conflict involved in the division between intellectual and material activity could be avoided by transcending labor division, an idea which has proven to be not only romantic, but also unrealistic.

The new phase in the development of industrial society is that of predominantly semiotically oriented human praxis. The semiotization of praxis means not only that mediatization marks each type of activity, but also that specialization imposes the need for *languages* able to take part in productive activities. Specialization improves professional competence mainly in terms of higher efficiency but also continually undermines the reciprocal communication between those forced by labor division to specialize and the same seen as beneficiaries of specialization. We

know that the quality of language diminishes, the perception of meaning deteriorates; we know also that language, as it developed through history, is less and less trusted even by those who we can call professionals in language. This phenomenon extends to all forms of what we call culture, to the sphere of interpersonal relationships (love and family included). At the same time, semiotization, taking both the forms of mediatization and specialization, extends outward to social praxis. Labor division, as an objective necessity stemming from our urge to fulfill our needs and desires in an efficient way² participates in processes through which we are continuously turned into illiterates in respect to those languages shaping our lives: the language of the lawyer, of the physician, the financier, educator, philosopher, artist, of the politician, and so on. The phenomenon of illiteracy is thus the reflection of the fact that in a social reality set on high efficiency, people are coming to need written and spoken language, as we have known it up to now, less and less. Phrases like “my lawyer”, “my agent”, “my representative” are evidence of the fact that responsibility is passed on to those especially trained and skilled for the particular job and tends to disappear from our traditional set of values. In current social praxis, the use of language is progressively taken from the individual and transferred to professionals with high semiotic competence in their specialties. Mediatization takes place also in the sphere where traditional contact between subjects was direct, due on the one hand to an expanded normative social status (extending to the intimate) and on the other, to the same subjects’ striving for efficiency. It is not the computer that changed the relationship between the physician and the patient, the seller and the buyer, the teller and the holder of a bank account, the library and the reader, the language laboratory and the student, etc., but, again the increased mediatization and specialization resulting from labor division, and this the result of our very conscious striving towards more, better, faster, sooner, etc. at the lowest cost (as we perceive that to be). In our days, influence and power are no longer exercised through verbal language³. And here we must

introduce an aspect related to today's illiteracy : the unprecedented growth of visual modes of communication.

In contrast to that period when written language was the most efficient way of reaching the intended audience (either monarchs, clerics, philosophers, professors, i.e., those who made decisions that effected the material or spiritual life of man, of the masses) and enhanced by Gutenberg's printing press, that period which saw the flowering of literature and language as an art, we are living in an era in which the visual has become the most efficient means of communication. The impetus behind this means has changed due to the intentions of the users and their level of instruction, competence and moral values. Here, a false sense of democracy equalizes messages to their lowest common denominator where proper use of verbal language is *perhaps* secondary to the aim of getting the intended message across⁴. Televised debates are a good example of this. During the debates between the Presidential candidates, for instance, the nominees, often not answering the questions put to them, followed the instructions given by their semiotic experts (public relations people, as they are commonly called) : If you are asked a question you cannot answer, say anything but don't show anger or confusion. (I paraphrase from a news report aired on NBC on the evening of September 26, 1980). We seem to be following the maxim that "One picture is worth a thousand words". And when the verbal and visual are combined, the experts know that it is what we see which will reach the mind of the perceiver⁵. And why not ? That each and every person was ever meant to or could be literate to the degree that humanists hope for or that modern life demands is an idea which should be re-examined. The disgust and despair resulting from too much language — propaganda in its capitalist and communist forms which obscure meaning where it once could exist bear the greater guilt here — and the terror towards specialized languages are reactions that do not historically justify the transition to the current illiteracy but which should be seen in the proper perspective. In view of these developments, we are obliged to cultivate alternative types of literacy that encom-

pass all its subsystems (the visual, the auditory, probably the olfactory, the tactile, etc.). In the domain of communication, we must abandon centralization around the verbal model and return to a concept of decentralization, i.e., a framework in which several semiotic centers co-exist.

The new forms of praxis we are assimilating and adapting to generally reflect, at the beginning, the structure of verbal language. In the process of their better adaption to the semiotic exigencies of specialization, this structure changes, and accordingly we must develop new ways of approaching the semantics and pragmatics involved. Specialization isolates the individual, whose world tends to be limited to the direct environment while at the same time, new semiotic devices integrate the individual into the most comprehensive system of interrelations and interdependency. The world is semiotically brought into his house; work can take place there; education, enjoyment, privacy, everything becomes a terminal matter. The arsonist from Hugo's poem *L'Année Terrible* (1872)⁶, has less and less chance to set a library on fire; it is turning into a means of terminal(ized) instruction in which reading, after writing, becomes a matter of visual perception.

This is not science fiction and should neither be seen as a humanist's appeal to save our traditional view of literacy. The worry and furor surrounding today's illiteracy reflect the inability to understand why the civilization we have been moving towards since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution has to abate so that we may free ourselves from a certain use of language and the values corresponding to it and cease thinking in terms of a unique literacy. The semiotization of human praxis means the expansion from the civilization dominated by one type of language to one in which several systems function simultaneously⁷. The civilization of illiteracy transforms mankind's sign-related activity into a major force of production. Man thus turns to the stage of *zoon semiotikon* (semiotic animal), one more phase in an evolution in which we should never think or believe that mankind is an end in itself. Hugo's poem can be read through the centuries. Libraries will have been built and burned many times. The

character under interrogation is none other than historic necessity, and as we know, necessity is illiterate. Our only hope is to understand it. Semiotics, in its interdisciplinarity and exercising

its integrative nature, can assume the challenge and responsibility that historic developments have laid before us.

M.N.

NOTES

1. "That person is literate who, in a language he speaks, can read with understanding anything he would have understood if it had been spoken to him; and can write, so that it can be read, anything that he can say". Sarah GUDSCHINSKY, *Literacy: The Growing Influence of Linguistics*. The Hague, Mouton, 1976.

"The meaning of literacy (...) changes according to the context, and it is the responsibility of the historian to specify the appropriate level of literary skills consistent with his understanding of the context". R.S. SCHOFIELD, "The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-Industrial England" in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Jack GOODY (Ed.). Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Other references can be found in *Speech, Writing, and Sign*, Naomi S. BARON. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981. Eric HAVELock, *Origins of Western Literacy*. Toronto, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1976.

"A man sitting alone in his personal library reading is at once the product and begetter of a particular social and moral order. It is a *bourgeois* order founded on certain hierarchies of literacy, of purchasing power, of leisure, and of caste". George STEINER, "After the Book?" in *Visible Language*, 6 (1972), pp. 197-210.

2. "The division of labor is a true division only from the moment a division of material and mental labor appears (/The first form of ideologists, *priests*, is concurrent/). (...) From this moment on consciousness can emancipate itself from the world and proceed to the formation of "pure" theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc." Karl MARX and Friedrich ENGELS, *The German Ideology*. cf. *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* edited and translated by Lloyd D. EASTON and Kurt H. GUDDAT. Garden City, Doubleday, 1967.

3. Claude LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Tristes Tropiques*. Paris, Plon, 1962. "Si l'écriture n'a pas suffi à consolider les connaissances, elle était peut-être indispensable pour affirmer les dominations. (...) La lutte contre l'analphabétisme se confond ainsi avec le renforcement du contrôle des citoyens par le pouvoir.

Car il faut que tous sachent lire pour que ce dernier puisse dire : nul n'est censé ignorer la loi".

4. R. HEILBRONER, "The Demand for the Supply Side" in *The New York Review of Books*, June 11, 1981.

5. Anne Rawley SALDICH, *Electronic Democracy* (Television's Impact on the American Political Process). New York, Praeger Publishers, 1979.

See also Erich FROMM, *To Have or to Be?* New York, Harper & Row, 1976.

6. L'année terrible

Tu viens d'incendier la Bibliothèque ?

— Oui. J'ai mis le feu là !

Mais c'est un crime inouï !

Crime commis par toi contre toi-même, infâme !

As-tu donc oublié que ton libérateur, c'est le livre ?

Le livre est ta richesse à toi ! C'est le savoir

Le droit, la vérité, la vertu, le devoir

Le progrès, la raison dissipant tout délire.

Et tu détruis cela, toi !

— Je ne sais pas lire.

The Terrible Year

You have just burned the Library ?

— Yes. I set it on fire !

But that is an unheard of crime !

A crime committed by you against yourself, villain !

Have you forgotten that your Liberator is the book ?

The book is your wealth ! It is knowledge

Right, truth, virtue, duty

Progress, reason dissipating all madness.

And you, you destroy that !

— I don't know how to read.

7. "The words of the language, as they are written or spoken, do not seem to play any role in my mechanism of thought. The physical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be 'voluntarily' reproduced and combined". Albert Einstein. See Ghiselin BREMSTER, *The Creative Process*, 1955.