

SOME THOUGHTS ON EXTENDING THE RANGE OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION

The conquest of space signals the end of the Mechanical Age. For centuries man depended for his survival on his ability to invent means of extending himself beyond the specific limits set by his biological nature. In travelling into space, communication has become, in conjunction with a perfected mechanical technology, mans new lifeline in a hostile environment. Thus the space age has ushered in a new age of communication. It established COMMUNICATION as a new standard of reference. In the past man communicated within certain prescribed limits, a process which was usually taken for granted in terms of the consequences of communication. Today its role is revealed in a new critical light relative to its extra-terrestrial function and the multiplicity of its terrestrial potential. It is communication which enables man to extend himself once more beyond the all too visible limits of his biology into the vast regions of outer space. Throughout history man has struggled to find new ways of extending himself. Man's culture is a mirror of this quest and religion, art, literature and education are a direct consequence of this process. It is an unavoidable defect of the historical perspective by which we measure the events which have brought on the present, that it tends to impart to the past a higher degree of unity and cohesion than it can possess. Save that we view it through the UNIFYING MEDIUM of literature, or painting, or history. Thus we are reluctant to consider the present in different terms than the past, although we know that culture is a composit made up of many elements, we still tend to hold the view that culture as a force can be conceived more in terms of UNITY than DIVERSITY. But in any serious analysis one will come to conclude that such cultural unity existed only as long as man was forced to function imaginatively on a single plane within specific limits. For instance, one may reasonable ask would Shakespeare be only a poet in an age which is on familiar terms with film and television? On the other hand what about the inhibition of human imagination by state controlled information media? And its impact on the whole conscious personality of man? Human freedom is assuming a different meaning in an age which is characterized not by the SCARCITY OF MEANS OF COMMUNICATION by which ideas can be transmitted. But a diversity of means for expressing religious, artistic, or political ideas. This was not the case in the past. Contemporary man, living in an age of multiplying means is puzzled and perplexed by the power of institution can be but a frame of reference, a container but not a means and an end in itself. But has religious thought not become synonym with institutionalized religion? And there are many who think that religious thought is properly expressed only within the UNIQUE and ISCLATED space of the church. For some art has become synonym with the formal characteristics of some art forms. As art had been defined as "dramatic art" or as "fine art" - art has been redefined by some as that which can be seen at a museum.

The same can be said of education. It was education, especial lay after it had been sanctified by the state, as "universal education" - which managed perhaps more than religion and art, to ISOLATE MAN from MAN. Mainly by excluding in the learning process most references to reality and experience.

Institutions which had been created for a certain purpose in the past have shown an inflexibility in dealing with the present. Most institutions lack the ability to deal with the challenges which must be faced by any member of human society. The criticism of institutions can be expanded further with regard to the attitude of institutions towards the methods of communication which are being (or not being) practiced by a large segment of society. In the field of EDUCATION the area of VISUAL EDUCATION must be singled out as one of the most neglected of areas. In reviewing the methods of communication which are the backbone of public interaction, one would have to conclude that electronic communication has not yet superseded the more traditional methods of two dimensional representation.

If there is good ground for criticising these institutions for the absence of adequate communication, one must point to the highly successful use of communication in other areas such as in space travel. Why is this so? The reason is quite simple. There its crucial role is fully appreciated.

One could ask with some justification, why is it that educational systems engaged in the preparation of society for the challenges of tomorrow, perpetuate the methods of communication which were adequate to the needs of another century? Why do educational systems impose outdated frames of reference on man's imaginative horizon? Especially now, when there is the possibility for the expansion of awareness by the many modes of communication techniques which can be applied simultaneously with other media as new techniques of learning?

It is difficult to understand the society can ignore adequate communication on one level, while it applauds its expansion on another level. A moon landing will be followed by millions of viewers. But the educational challenges implied by this feat are only slowly being accepted and acted upon.

An expression of this slowly awakening need to redefine and revise methods of visual communication is the concept of MULTI MEDIA. This concept has aroused the interest of a number of artists, of engineers and educators. But MULTI MEDIA as a concept is widely misunderstood. For some multi-media simply a MULTIPLICATION OF TECHNOLOGY. So much hardware, or so many screens, etc. But an abundance of technology will not produce an understanding of a complex concept, still to be defined!

Multi-Media is a concept which does not deal only INCIDENTALLY with problems of visual communication. It can be seen as offering alternative modes of conception and translation of concepts of all sorts into visual equivalents. These equivalents imply not so much an opposition to, as an extension of the traditional methods of expression. Thus Multi-Media visual communication as an alternative mode does NOT abolish the printed page, painting, drawing or illustration by exchanging these means for motion picture, television images or holography. Multi-Media as a concept is still in search for form. From what we know at the present it is quite apparent that this form implies the NEW ORDERING of the traditional forms and the relating of the traditional forms to the possibilities of the present. Permitting the creative person to go beyond the limits of the two dimensional approach, enabling the artist to generate VISUAL GESTURES not only on a surface, but within man's natural medium of SPACE. Multi-Media as a concept means perhaps the dissolution of the rigid rules of SYMETRY which have been passed onto us as from the Renaissance. It means also a reintegration of all the senses in forming man's consciousness.

Extra terrestrial communication and multi-media do not appear to be related concepts. But both are emanations of the present time. And it is apparent that during this century man has been groping toward a new standard of communication. Man has travelled to the moon to prove this. That problem has been solved to be handled today almost routinely. But placing a number of sequential images in a common context in space of such dimensions that it can be encompassed by the senses awaits still the needed synthesis. Can this lack of success be attributed to man's old habit of ISOLATING KNOWLEDGE from EXPERIENCE?

Some colleges are taking steps today to expand the levels of the students awareness, by placing him in a learning environment which will lead to a QUESTIONING of the existing patterns of thought and of process of learning. Colleges of art beginning to consider the contemporary media. What artist has not felt a certain competitive disadvantage during some nightly TV newscast? For the artist seeks to communicate his ideas to the widest possible public not less than any commercial sponsor. But usually he lacks the necessary means. And what is even worse, at times he lacks even the competence and the understanding required by the methods of communication which can be available to him. Certainly it must be one of the main responsibilities of educational institutions to close this gap. How can this be achieved? Not without a complete overhauling of existing curricula. And not without re-establishing a more active patterns of communicating with the world at large, beyond the classroom.

Using the available means of electronic communication, it should be possible to interconnect existing social institutions, such as a museum, a theater, a TV studio, a factory, a city square, a library or a computer center and a class room through an electronic NETWORK SYSTEM. Such a system possessing an infinite numbers of potential sending and receiving terminals could provide vastly more useful information to the student (and at a faster rate) than can be conveyed to the student by the use of books, periodicals, etc. What is even more important, by connecting a Visual Laboratory with a factory, an artist studio, a city square etc. the artist would break out of his HISTORICAL ISOLATION. Beyond that the artist would regain an important FREEDOM to choose that data from the INFORMATION STREAM which at a given time is most useful to him. He would be conditioned to be less a dispenser of synthetic entertainment and to be more true to himself. He will have regained a FREEDOM OF CHOICE, a measure of INDEPENDENCE and PERSONAL FREEDOM which we have taken for granted in the past, but have been unable to exercise fully!

By connecting such a LABORATORY with the LIVING SOURCE of information via such networks the artist will become more aware of his true role, which is to deal with REALITY on its OWN TERMS, as he perceives it.

One can envision connecting institutions of learning at times with a museum, a library, a city park, a street corner, etc. or any remote source. At a given time the Laboratory would receive, than it would send information. Becoming thus the source of information useful to other remote receivers.

Possibly one could develop new public institutions which would be in part centers of instruction and centers of entertainment. Utilizing the latest advances in communication, the concepts of Multi-Media and concepts of participation, new theatres could be created which would use all known methods of dramatic presentation. Which at times could be purely visual, expanding the range of experience which can be afforded by the means of the most complex means created during the 20. century. This theatre would use at time the actor, at time the audience would be actor and spectator alike, producing a form of entertainment and learning which at once would be sophisticated and free, responsive to the needs of those being adressed and those who are chiefly involved in the preparation of a given event. To realize this goal one would need a new type of creative personality, artists who are capable of functioning simultaneously on many levels. Who would be the artist? Possibly anyone who has the ability to speak, sing, draw, who could become a maker of gestures which can be communicated and can be understood. That is anyone who wishes to express himself. It is up to the institutions of society to provide the means by which such a goal can be reached. If this goal is to be reached frædom of communication will have to take presedence over man's old desire to exercise power over the flow of information between one person and another.

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