

**Cross-Cultural Pathways:
Visual Communication and Socio-Cultural Change**

**Percorsi Interculturali:
Comunicazione Visuale e Cambiamento Socio-Culturale**

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The analysis of communication flows plays a key role for a deeper understanding of cultural contact models. In this perspective, I argue that communicative processes are critical in the construction of the concept of Otherness¹. In fact, control and dominance as forms of power are historical processes heavily engaged with specific ways of managing communication.

The two sections “Use and Consumption as Information Production” and “Visual representation of the “Otherness” can be looked at as two sides of the same discourse, parts of which overlap. The proliferation and horizontal diffusion of high/low cost technologies and no linear media (i.e. the Internet) in every day life augments the number of information “hot-spots”; that is to say, places where communicative flows are particularly intense. The same circumstance is often coincidental with the encounter of different cultural identities.

Commodities and objects in general, the most visible parts of consumer culture, are permeated of “otherness”.

Consumption of commodities, through their visual components and along with the extended consumption of low cost information, represents a privileged channel to move cross-cultural dialogue forward.

Visuality and technologies play a central role in the process of encounter of cultures. Our times are characterized by a large amount of communication of reproducible content, which employs technology for its access and experience.

Contemporary consumption processes own active (vs. passive) attributes. Along with their “social lives”, both commodities and technologies become fraught with new meanings that replace or add to the original function they were supposed to serve. This process rests on the premise of fluid and bidirectional influences between “high” (aristocratic) culture and “low” (popular) culture, and between form and substance. As an indirect consequence, the same consumption processes contests a vision that sees the world moving in the direction of a globalization intended as homologation.

¹|Otherness| is here intended as category in its abstract form as well as in its historical specific expressions.

Culture Contact as Communication

It is largely understood that communication is a component of human life, as being social is an ingrained quality of being human.

Communication is of outmost importance in the investigation of cultural phenomena, and here I will briefly discuss the bases of such assumption.

- a) Culture is “the dialectical ensemble of psychic and experiential individual baggage formed (through socially integrated relationships between each individual and his/her social and ecological environment) in the frame of a historically determined society” (AA.VV, 1958, now in Tentori, 1983).

This idea points to the implicit idea that a set of cultural components (beliefs, fantasies, ideologies, symbols, standards and rules, techniques and behavioral and action schemata, values and derived attitudes) are shared in a human group just through communication processes starting from the inculturation stages.

Geertz (1973) gave further credit to this view, as he introduced the concept of culture as a semiotic text. Now the value of communication as a theoretical and analytical lens is even amplified.

- b) Culture contact is a communication act.

This is true even skipping over the idea of reciprocal acculturation in cases of cultural contact with a strong unilateral force.

The colonialistic and imperialistic periods, for example, where there has been a unilateral more or less violent transfer of Western cultural features and patterns into “other” cultures, is nevertheless to be considered as a communication act.

Agreeing with Lanternari (1974) and spousing the idea of reciprocal acculturation adds a layer of complexity to the dynamics. According to this hypothesis, the relations between West and the so-called Third World are to be considered a bifront²

²Several examples of “other” cultural traits later assimilated in the western culture show how the West has been acculturized from the so-called Third World. For instance, Jazz or African Art had much influence in “Western” art — witness Fauves and Picassian cubism of the twentieth century’s early decades. The same can be said for the use of non-violence in our societies as a pacific form of protest: it can well also be attributed to Gandhi’s method to struggle for Indian independence.

phenomenon — which is to say bidirectional, dialogical —, communication becomes a privileged perspective, indeed.

In line with theories of communication and semiotics of culture (J. Lotman, M. Bakhtin), acculturation seems to be inevitably reciprocal. Both terms of one relationship are inevitably affected and altered by one another, even if only one of the two is “active”.

Reciprocal acculturation phenomena are then communication processes, in that a mutual exchange of information (distinctive features of a certain culture) takes place. Thus, historical and cultural dynamics must also be looked at from a communicative point of view.

Anthropological Otherness as Semiotic Construction

Power — in the sense of power-over, according to the definition of Fromm (1982) implying dominance — very often takes place and shape thanks to particular managements of communication processes and modes.

I present two examples that — although historically well distinguished — address the problem of the Other.

That is how, through communication, is possible either to symbolically construct the Other, or (second example) to weaken the Other up to reducing “it” to complete absence by not giving any opportunity to participate in a discourse.

The first case demonstrates that the relation between power and communication always existed, even before technologized communication came into play. In his analysis of the conquest of America, Todorov (1992) notes that Spanish authors, in their narratives and reports always talked *about* native Indians, but never *to* them.

Yet, it is speaking *to* the other (not commanding but opening a dialogue) that I inherently acknowledge the Other’s existence (as holder of my same status). This way the Other is recognised as subject, comparable to the other subject that is “I”.

Conversely, in most instances the Other is treated as object, being only subject of the discourse. In this case, the Other undergoes the discourse itself: it is object, topic of the discourse.

This clearly takes to say that information management is a successful strategy to build power³.

In the second case I report here, Sol Worth observed (1972) that while some forms of communication are horizontally accessible to everyone (speaking, body communication, etc.) other forms are managed, controlled and (with)held by *élites*. New power *élites*. To have the opportunity and capacity to divulge particular images, values and lifestyles presumes political factors as forms of cultural hegemony.

In principle, new media, and mass media in general⁴, are democratic and accessible to everyone. None the less, the vertical distribution of the opportunity to transmit signals makes them no democratic. National policies on broadcasting systems, holdings of telecommunication cables and networks, in addition to equipment and infrastructure costs, constitute practical obstacles to equal opportunities in making symbols and meanings available to big audiences via the new and the mass media.

Sol Worth's reflection carries along ethical as well as epistemological criticisms, and indicates by contrast alternative pursuable routes to reflection.

New forms of symbolic production need to be monitored, as they can promote and enhance power-over other human groups.

And Worth's no nostalgic solution to this historical distortion hopes for a horizontal distribution of media and instruments.

The two instances above sketch some possible areas of study with focus on the relations between communication and power.

Yet, examined from a different angle, the dimension shared by these problems is that of the relationship between |identity| and |difference|.

Everything is senseless until someone assigns some sense to it. On the line of Max Weber, Bateson strengthened (1972) that nothing exists, if not as human invention. Or fiction (from the Latin "fingere": to make, to form) (Clifford, 1986).

³Geertz reached same conclusion in a very interesting analysis on religion as a cultural system (1973).

I omit several studies on groups and on business administration and organization that treated the same topics from a more sociological point of view.

⁴In media theories definitions may vary. Mass media usually include press, radio, and TV; New media usually just refer to radio, TV. Nonetheless, today no linear media (hypertexts, CD-Roms, Internet) are considered as part of this latter category.

Touched by various reasoning (evolutionistic thoughts in the first place) the neutral semantic field of *difference* — as purely factual observation — becomes filled with value judgments such as: *negative because diverse*.

History is centred in, and dependent upon, such ways of proceeding from the category of difference. Put it simply, the terms in which we think are: “only those who are the same as us merit the same rights as those we have”. We think in terms of identity as *sameness* (identity), rather than in terms of *equality* (equal value of different identities). The question of identity must in deed be looked at not only from the point of view of *belonging*, but also from that of *recognition*. It is true that identity defines itself by declaring (marking boundaries of) its sphere of belonging; but from an external point of view this must be *acknowledged* and *respected* according equal value, worth, and importance, rather than letting the outsiders merely *survive* thanks to us *tolerating* them (Taylor, 1994: 63-64)

Here is a syntactic curiosity that deserves attention.

It is more familiar to couple “equality” with “identity”, and “value” with “difference”. The first coupling may be for the same original semantic referent [in latin: equal = the same; *idem* = *the same*] or because of introjected links with uprisings for independence. But the second association (value-difference) certainly tells a different story. To value is almost spontaneously related to the mental habit of producing a value hierarchy.

What is curious is that, apart from rare cases — see the vision of the “good savage” of the Enlightenment age — the Western modern history has conceptualized in these terms: what is “other” than me is more distant from me, thus has to be distinguished, differentiated; the more similar to me is closer to me, and it deserves more positive value judgment.

Yet, filling the neutral semantic field of |difference| with certain value criteria instead of others is a discretionary operation, culturally shaped.

Originally $A^1 \neq B$.⁵ That is all.

This shows once again how communication, language in this case, influences the forming of values, but it can also help to reveal them.

⁵In the spirit of a dialogue between disciplinary domains and (meta)languages, ¹ is the mathematic symbol opposite to “=” equal to. Thus ¹ denotes pure difference: A is not B.

Use and Consumption as Production of Information

As Featherstone observed (1990), there is a mixing up between aulic culture and popular culture. These two levels are intertwined, and their boundaries blurred. This contamination is not peculiar to the contemporary moment. Cases of hybridization that took traits and values from popular culture up to hegemonic strata of culture and vice versa are traceable in the Arts: Rabelais in Renaissance period; Dada, Bauhaus and Surrealism in the early decades of the twentieth century. However, “exchanges” between the two cultures have increasingly intensified. While leaving out the modes in which this process took place in specific cases, it can be said that material culture is one of the aptest contexts to perceive the process itself.

Yet, the anthropological definition of “material culture” needs to be historicized and broadened. Other than handcrafts, tools, furnishing, now the class of material culture includes other sets of objects. From personal computers to peripherals, goods, commodities of every kind and most things used during leisure time to liberate the Western world from the sense of obligation and constriction of the work time, come to be part of the new historical definition of “material culture”. Dynamics of consumption changed as well.

Objects, but also events, the same ones created for a passive mass homologated consumption, so as theorized by some extraordinary cultural commentators — T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer in primis (1972) but also H. Marcuse (1964) — changed their role thanks to the process of consumption.

An object (commodity) does not univocally correspond to one sole function anymore. Conversely, it opens to an infinite variety of potential usages: the use value mixes up with the symbolic one and falls upon the exchange value, changing it at its turn.

It is a systemic circular feed-back dynamic. Economic elements and distinctive identity components flows converge into a form-object filling it in with continuously changing contents. Just to give an example, the PC is not an “inert” object, and it is not even possible just consider it as a mere work tool. It can be a machine for work as well as a machine for pleasure.

Huge economic and human capitals are invested into the breathless and untiring technological research and development of telecommunications with the precise objective of impacting the way information propagates and circulates. Goals and objectives unpredictably multiply because users are variegated.

More interestingly, it is from a low level though — from consumers — that the meaning of an object comes to be modified, given semiotic value and launched back in to the market, now fraught with other added and additional values (Gottdiener, 1995).

Another important observation about how technological innovation unfolds and comes into being.

As time elapses and technological innovation becomes available, everybody can use each new tool in increasingly customized ways, tailored to one's needs.

In consumer culture objects and events detach from the original purpose to which they were connected (finalized) and thanks to the process of consumption become re-elaborated by users. Internet is a clear evidence of this. From an electronic network created for limited, specific uses, its exponential expansion eventually slipped away from the control of those who originally created it. The Internet primary purpose is just one among the others, today. Its users, at one time called “surfers”, have transformed the Internet. It has been shaped by its most diverse uses and abuses.

The extreme dilatation of the use of technologies has also contributed to the fading of criteria that establish clean-cut boundaries between high (aesthetic) and low (popular) culture adequately. Barriers crumble from a territorial-geographical point of view. At reasonably low costs, everyone can meet “on the net” and exchange information.

Such enhancement in *transmitting* information was precisely what Worth yearned (see former section in this paper).

The same tools allow everybody to potentially affirm one's constant presence — thus existence — for example by being able to afford and create a personal web site.

Needless to say, we are far from any ultimate resolution: to gain access to publication on paper support and being able to ensure a wide, fast distribution of information is much more difficult and costly. But ironically, in the cyberspace a monopoly of knowledge is unlikely to occur and stay. Information tends to gain horizontal propagation, such that regenerates and diversifies itself in unique ways, each different as produced in relation to the social and cultural context in which that very same information presents itself (Canevacci, 1995).

The Visual Representation of “Otherness”

After having illustrated how incorporeal territories promote encounters of multiple “voices”, I now turn the attention back to objects of consumption, commodities, this time from a specific standpoint: their qualities, or features.

Couching my argument on a post-rationalistic assumption, which sees a strong relation between form and substance and a reciprocal fluid influence between the two, rather than dichotomy or dualism, below I discuss why the “visible” part of culture deserves a renewed attention.

Nowadays we live in a consumer culture, where consumption and goods circulation are crucial aspects of worldwide reality that cannot be underestimated in any way. Consumption of commodities and their visual component represent a privileged path towards cross-cultural dialogue.

The incidence and incisiveness of visual communication increase if we consider reproducible images that technology makes available to large audiences.

The Image comes before the word.

Seeing as act of knowledge comes before reading, both historically and ontogenetically, as Jenks (1995) reminds us. The eye captures an image faster than reading a word. It is a sensory form of knowledge, which follows metonymic, analogic associations. Although sensory knowledge is not free from cultural implications — according to the Gestalt psychology theories —, certainly this mode of knowledge does not require the same amount of dedicated attention as the word does (Benjamin, 1969).

It follows that sometimes images, or some of their elements, are perceived subliminally. The act of seeing does not require as much competence to be acquired by complex learning processes (Chomsky, 1965; Hymes, 1974) as reading (verbal language) does.

The greater value assigned to the word, to the prejudice of the image, is still a peculiar Western feature which, in time, took to downgrading *aesthetic* knowledge — giving back to the term its original Greek etymological roots: *aisthánomai* = to perceive through senses, and *áisthetis* = sensation — in Western modern hierarchy of values.

Our time, the present, is increasingly enmeshed in the *imago*. Imago as image (in Latin *image* = *imago*) and imago as lexical root for imagination.

Whether this is what caused the explosion of visual media — which many see as a negative event — or is a re-conquest of an earlier (and prime) mode of knowledge

coming before discrete modes of communication is only a matter of theoretical choice, which does not affect the proportions of the phenomenon.

In contemporary objects non-Western cultural traits are easily noticeable.

By looking at objects synchronically one can trace diachrony.

A close and careful look can find/see their “history” (Appadurai, 1986): their cultural “travel(s)”, all those which influenced their shape, their form. In objects lies an open dialectic between form and content.

By looking at the formal, physical, “somatic” characters of objects we can glimpse cross-cultural dialogue. “Other” cultures traits that we find in objects used in our Western everyday life are often conveyed by Fashion as purely formal style qualities and features.

Their access is legitimated uniquely in the world of *Style*, the most superficial level of consumption.

On a large and mainstream scale, what is not “familiar” is not allowed other legitimate admission, if not through channels that are exempt from the scrutiny of the “common sense”, the norm. But the “strange(r)” that Clifford talks about (1988) passes through, travels embodied in objects, and moves to different cultural frames than the original one.

In consumption the strange(r) finds a “life” it/he could not otherwise own.

Another key observation is devolved to the first consumers/users of the “strange”. Who are they?

Objects *contaminated* by the “strange(r)” are often consumed/used/experienced in popular cultural contexts and/or by those marginal social segments, and/or by cutting-edge experimental people.

In a word, *outsiders* first experience these objects.

Or, contaminated objects are used in all those fragments of life excluded from ordinary “mainstream” lifestyles, finding their way in circumscribed times/spaces: play, joke, and social fiction areas.

In fact, this situation of *limen* (Turner, 1982) is fertile ground where innovation comes into being.

Innovation as assimilation in deeper strata of style-costume-habits-practices in a cultural system will be later on “captured” by few groups (to continue the style metaphor, designer labels) or hegemonic cultural *élites*.

Couturiers will embellish the earlier innovative trait with an “exclusive” light and distinctive quality, and direct it to an exclusive smaller consumer audience.

The same trait will then fall back down in the “lower” layers of culture, but this time as integrated element of large-scale serial (re)productions for broader consumer audiences.

This is the semiotic process of consumption, where a sign, an object, anything acquires meaning through its users.

Italy offers itself as good example. A country whose pride of its own cultural elements such food, music, style is so high, hosted this process. “Exotic” *cuisines* and not western musical rhythms and melodies entered the mainstream experience just thanks to the process described above.

The simplest instance of the mechanism just identified can be found in Fashion (clothing). Fabrics, designs, and ornaments well exemplify the process, so I will outline the sequential phases.

Leather collars transformed in gracious chokers, nickel to silver anklets, no Western fabrics design patterns and colors used for business suites: all this is visible in the streets of our bigger cities. And all of them speak of cultural boundaries intersections. How does this happen?

Traits of foreign cultures entered our everyday life thanks to either youth counter-cultures and their “extreme” use of communication, or thanks to our increasingly multi-ethnic realms, where immigrants try to negotiate their identity in countries that are foreign, “other” to them. This includes spaces and times perceived as “exotic”: escapes from everyday life, which the West considers for leisure or holiday, construed around Rousseau’s myth of “*le bon sauvage*”

Clearly, limited circulation of such foreign qualities did not take them to burst into popular culture as fashionable *per se*. Some changes occurred along their progressive entrance into the different cultural frame. Wide latitude of individual decisional making, ranging from the thickness of the leather to the combination with other “classical” elements or even details of clothing, is maintained. This creates curious but interesting juxtapositions.

One or two fashion seasons later, we see the same elements presented in prestigious *Haute Couture* catwalk designs, directed to the most exclusive audiences. Those are the same catwalks supposed (or believed to) to start up “new” trends — innovation. Those elements undergo a *cascade* effect downwards, and finally the same elements become legitimate once for all in the common sense.

The trade-off is that their former critical disturbing potential has been nullified, despite their original “otherness”.

The strange has been made familiar.

Conclusions

In seeking cross-cultural dialogue it is not worth to indulge with nostalgic visions or utopist desires of restoring presumed “original untouched identities”, as if they ever existed as such. Rather, it is more useful to detect actual intercultural pathways in the present hybrid cultural ensembles, and to individuate their potentials.

The first step is *to see, recognize*, these paths. This has been part of my intent.

After having illustrated how even in earlier times communication entertained a strict relationship with power, I discussed the reasons why I see visual communication and technologies as two areas leading toward, and promoting, cultural exchange.

The intentional element is absent for the most. No particular policy led to the way the Internet is currently used, nor intentional cross-cultural policies fostered the presence of “other” cultures’ features in commodities and clothes. Interestingly, some people use non-Western clothing elements despite their self-declared or evident discriminatory beliefs and attitudes otherwise.

Of course I am referring to the last part of the process of consumption as described in the last section of the paper, when the “Alter” feature becomes just fashion(able) —. In this final stage the consumer is often not aware of the origin of what s/he likes to wear. These channels transcend conscious level of choice making. Similarly, the intentional element becomes weaker as the cultural trait (information) propagates.

This paper wanted to offer an unusual analysis of the ways in which cultural change occurs today, accounting for historical changes. Further understanding is certainly needed as to how intentional policies and unintentional course of history intersect and what the products of their interferences are.

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