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Media Language and the Churches: Opportunity or Threat?

The Church draws on the cultural riches of each age to express the Gospel. One danger is that the very success of a past cultural adaptation may frustrate contemporary renewal. Another danger is that some cultural forms may conceal an anti-Gospel. Can media language be 'baptized' into a way to enrich evangelization? This supplement explores a few responses to this question.

Is TV Usurping the Churches' Symbol-Making Power?

Gregor T. Goethals. *The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981).

Society changes so fast, tomorrow's faith expression often only narrowly escapes being irrelevant for yesterday. Partly causing this flux, partly stabilizing society by its culture-forming images, television moves into the gap created as the churches struggle to become once again the anchor of a society's self-definition. Gregor Goethals' particular interest as an art historian is in seeing how television functions in the society-forming role that rituals and icons formerly enjoyed. In this way, to watch television is 'to worship at the video altar' and to partake in the 'TV ritual'. For it is by default that it is television which must tell us who we are, where we have come from and are headed, and how to get there.

Goethals became interested in this topic out of her concentration on the religious symbolism of the American fine arts tradition. Drawing upon her study of the popular 19th century Currier and Ives prints, she became interested in how television has modified the themes of the family, nature and the machine. Her photographs of recent key events — Kennedy's funeral, the moon landing, the Super Bowl — formed the backbone of a successful travelling exhibit, 'TV America's Super Symbols'. The material in the *The TV Ritual* derives from the research for the exhibit.

Symbols and Rituals: in Tradition and Today

Man has been called an animal who creates symbols, which then in turn mold him. Symbols are conventional images that fix the geography of meaning for a community. As an instrument of social communication, television can set the agenda for society as kings and priests once did. Symbols, however, need to be fleshed out and given meaning for people in ritual. For a ritual to be effective, the participants must (1) have a strong belief that the ritual will provide a satisfying meaning, (2) commit themselves to total openness to that meaning, and (3) be present at the prescribed sequence of actions and words that facilitate the exploration of the deeper, mysterious layers of meaning. Such a general definition can apply to religious rituals like a worship service as well as to secular rituals such as a presidential inauguration or funeral.

Today the power of religious rituals confronts the pervasiveness of television images, in sharp contrast with the isolation and relative inaccessibility of religious rituals and places. A further

advantage of television is its power to validate whatever it broadcasts. Negatively, constant exposure to commercial television heroes may well have inured viewers to the sensitivity required to appreciate the deeper life questions of suffering and death that religion treats. And the incessant advertisements may have jaundiced the viewers' sensibility so radically that they respond far more to the call for bodily cleanliness and smelling like a flower than to conversion and salvation. Or such ceaseless exposure to the unfulfillable promises of advertisements may have sharpened a hunger for a profound holiness that traditional religious forms are not yet geared to meeting, and developed a cynical critical sense that no promise of fulfillment is credible.

Sacred and Secular Rituals and Icons

There are similarities and dissimilarities between the religious and secular rituals. Ritual links the isolated individual with a larger and more meaningful whole, which, if religious, means incorporation into the life of God and the community; if secular, into a closer social bond. What is important in both, however, is physical presence at the ritual with fellow worshippers or participants. Viewers of televised rituals lack such presence; their participation is correspondingly diminished.

In the same way, there are links between secular and sacred icons. Icons provide images embodying meaning, models to live by, and an approach to basic life questions. For instance, an icon of the crucifixion recalls salvation history, gives Christ's example, and frames the question of the meaning of human life. Secular icons, such as television commercials, mimic sacred icons by proposing alternative models and life meanings.

So, as a symbol-maker, man posits meaning by fixing arbitrary benchmarks, symbols, as he individually and as a community explores his own meaning in the uncharted terrain of his life. Ritual and icon are common ways for coming to grips with the significance of life considered either with reference to God or without such explicit reference. If the churches are not to let television set the symbols that structure society, they must study how television rituals and icons get their power and influence. An examination of how rituals and icons have been adapted by television may provide insight into how religious broadcasters can utilize their own resources to serve their congregations and society at large by providing meaningful televised rituals and icons.

Religious Adaptation of TV rituals

Television abounds with rituals, but they are not recognized as such. The nightly news is a regular feature of many lives. It functions as ritual because it orients the viewers to their world according to the definition of the news programme producers. Despite what may often be a very limited coverage of only a few of the world's events for that day, viewers generally get a sense of contact with the rest of their world. The nightly news symbolically recasts each day's events and the newscaster acts as a kind of priest or guru who integrates each event into the generally accepted thought patterns and meaning structures of the culture. And, even if the news actually gives only a tiny bit of new information, or perhaps obscures what had been clear to the viewers, still the news links the isolated selves with the larger world of the nation. What can churches do?

It is a rare diocese where the bishop regularly addresses his people on television and updates them on current events within and outside the church which affect church life. Yet this would seem to be consonant both with the mission of the bishop to provide pastoral guidance and with the ritual structure of news programmes. Note that it is the ritual structure of the news that would be complementing the bishop's official position. Thus the style of delivery could be very low key, more like a fireside chat than a pulpit sermon, as Pope John Paul II seems more human the closer the cameras. It may be economical to use television this way to complement (or replace?) the diocesan paper. Station managers would appreciate the audience potential should the bishop speak. The elderly and those with impaired vision would surely welcome the chance to get religious news via television.

Church Attendance vs TV Sports

Another television ritual is the sport programme where the dedicated 'believer' in sports regularly and eagerly makes the necessary sincere commitment of a continuing fervent interest. The eloquent visual language of television satisfies the hunger for closer shots, greater detail and replaying of choice scenes to relish them once again. Through television the viewer is in much closer contact with the essence of the game than spectators in the stands can be, if the interacting of players with the ball is accepted as the essence. The physical presence of fellow participants is not as important for such television sports fans as being able to see what the action is.

What is the cumulative effect of this heightening of interest in the details of the action and the minute movements of the players, so that being able to see the details becomes more important than the group experience of the progress of one's team to success or defeat? Has the very process of the game eclipsed the human context so that contact with fellow participants no longer counts?

Perhaps in this phenomenon lies a partial explanation for the decline in church attendance. How can a religious broadcaster take advantage of this bias towards process and yet bring the viewer around to renewing (or starting!) contact with fellow believers? One possible solution would be to have one or several religious broadcasts before which the commentator prepares the viewers by explaining some point about the liturgy, perhaps drawing upon its history. In this way the potential interest of the viewer in the process of the service could be stimulated.

And a way to involve the viewer in the lives of the believing community might be to imitate what the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) did in a recent documentary on the annual Anglican Glastonbury pilgrimage. The BBC interviewed some of the pilgrims, and as they were shown walking their interviews were replayed. The viewer got inside the minds of a few pilgrims. What was especially interesting was learning that some young pilgrims were there seeking faith, while others came to renew

Gregor T. Goethals is an associate professor art history at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island. She has worked as a graphic designer and has illustrated children's books. Wall hangings and murals she has done can be found throughout the South. Her study of the religious themes in American art history, particularly in Currier and Ives prints of everyday 19th century life, suggested examining how television has taken up and modified these themes.

it. A possible adaptation of this might be to interview a few of the members of the congregation of the televised service or mass to find why they want to participate, what their faith is. Perhaps there could even be some follow-up so the interviewees could be available later for counselling phonecalls or the parish mentioned with an invitation to come and worship there.

Iconoclasm and the 'Values' of TV Ads

Icons capsule the beliefs of the secular or religious community. They are another form of religious communication which can be contemplated apart from the fixed time and place needed for ritual. As rituals require and foster communal participation, icons are best appreciated in quiet solitude. Icons present a graphic summary of the meaningful world view of the believer and put his experience into a wider frame of reference. Icons also portray exemplary behavior which highlights the chief life questions.

Secular 'icons' in this case are television commercials which are the functional equivalent of religious icons. For, instead of a religious faith which gives meaning to life, commercials proclaim affluence, cleanliness, health and happiness through one-upmanship in the possession of the products claimed to cause these. Those in the commercials embody the pseudo-values portrayed. The really important question in the commercial is how to become as clean, healthy, rich and happy as the commercial models seem to be. The one-way television communication and the validation that being televised gives render the persons in the ads quasi-divine.

The challenge for religious communicators is to make use of what is good in this situation while both offering what is better and pointing out what is harmful. There have been some successful religious spots which briefly portray a real-life situation and the way a loving person might act. The power of good example is strong. The Mennonite and Franciscan spots have effectively and pleasantly made a bid for more thoughtful and loving behaviour. Following their example, local diocesan liaison persons may wish to produce similar spots with direct reference to local issues. What these spots lack in skillful presentation may be compensated for by their timeliness and pertinence.

Goethals also stresses the need for cooperation between the churches and other groups concerned for the good of society to speak out whenever there seems to be injustice. She relates such protestation to the long tradition of iconoclasm against false idols that creep into the social fabric. Perhaps on occasion an ecumenical documentary about a current local issue may be the best way to collaborate. Television may at present have the hegemony in establishing symbols that greatly influence viewers' lives, but it does not have the monopoly unless churches neglect to use their locally-based connection with viewers.

Ritual, icon, iconoclasm — the religious tradition of the churches is a treasure field for those who know how to tap it. Until the churches do so, the bulk of the population will of necessity have only the video altar to worship at. If, before, Scripture asked, How will they hear the word of God unless someone tell it to them? now it adds, 'unless someone show it to them on television.'

Photolanguage: Way to Human Development

Ibarra M. Gonzalez, S.J. *Photolanguage: Philippines, A Manual for Facilitators* (Manila: Sonolux AV Service, PO Box 1815, 1981).

Gonzalez applies to the Philippines the catechetical method for total human development that Pierre Babin and Centre Reserche et Communication (CREC) at Lyons, France, have adapted from the work of Paulo Friere for liberation through verbal and visual literacy. To Freire, education can make the person finally see the truth about his situation (read) and want to change it (write). Pictures confront the person with that reality, education helps him decode it, and his group supports him to dare to change it. Gonzalez' own contribution is in the thoroughness and clarity of his presentation, the completeness of his documentation, and the simplicity of the method.

Photolanguage is aimed at several possible users: the catechist seeking a way to apply the Gospel, social workers wishing to document and understand the life about them, and artists whose more sensitive vision of the world equips them to recreate human realities as God's Spirit leads them to. Gonzalez is quick to make use of the Filipino locale, innate ability, and the considerable visual education constant media exposure inculcates.

Skills in Decodification

Freire defines liberating education into three decodification skills: (1) **SKILL IN READING REALITY** means listening correctly during the literal level of picture-reading, without the effects of selective perception. It involves being able to identify, isolate, and label the picture elements — lines shapes, texture, etc. Persons develop this ability the more they are personally involved with something from their immediate experience. (2) **SKILL IN ANALYZING AND CRITICIZING REALITY** is needed in the figurative level of picture-reading and involves both asking the right questions and assimilating the information gotten. Processing the data correctly requires being able to relate the parts to the whole, discovering comparison and contrast, and identifying cause and effect. On the figurative level, the group members discuss the relation of the picture elements to one another, and the parts of the picture to the whole picture. The dominant elements are analyzed for the factors that set them off, and the overall effect of the picture is established. (3) **SKILL IN SPEAKING** about one's inner reality in dialogue with reality-out-there draws upon one's symbolic reading of pictures. Reading the pictures on the symbolic level involves discussing with the group how these effects relate to one's personal experience, forming hypotheses about their meaning, and reflecting on how certain and open one is in responding. Speaking out leads to changing one's environment with others' help. These three skills constitute education for change. It is Gonzalez' hope that there will be a transfer of the knowledge of how to code and decode the pictures provided with the manual to dealing with the actual human realities in the participants' environment.

The procedure of each of the nine sessions is simple. A facilitator gives the nine to twelve participants a theme for which they must use some of the pictures as discussion-starters. The members grow as they express themselves in word and gesture. In turn, the whole group shares more. Thus individual and group grow together. The ultimate goal is to raise the level of critical awareness, sharpen their perception, improve their communication and social skills, and help them develop their creative influence to remake the world in the Gospel.

Three Dimensions of Photolanguage

In explaining photolanguage, Gonzalez distinguishes three dimensions: (1) **THE ARTISTIC DIMENSION**. He relates picture elements with their psychological effects. For instance, a member may say, 'I feel happy to see this blooming tree; it reminds me of my grandfather's orchard.' The pictorial elements which evoke such effects are line, form, shape, light and darkness, texture, and composition. For example, diagonals indicate dynamic movement and life. Each element has a photograph to illustrate the point. For the curved line suggesting motion, grace and beauty, there is a picture of a curved bridge.

Gonzalez stresses that pictures are the products of persons, as the photographer must choose from all he perceives those scenes he wants to capture with his skills. The challenge is to compensate for the camera's limitations (monocular, flat perspective, framed) and produce a picture close to how the eyes prefer to see reality: stereoscopically, with depth, and from an unrestricted viewpoint. Pictures are a form of non-verbal communication that needs a response to their questions about their truth, accuracy, representativeness, origin and meaning.

(2) **THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION**. When the participants consider the figurative and symbolic level of each picture, they project themselves into the picture, associate one element with another, and engage in an inner conversation with themselves. At one point, participants are asked to reflect on their own image. Gonzalez believes that persons are pictures, images. To understand the person, the image he projects must also be grasped. Thus, to change the person, the self-image must first be changed.

(3) **THE SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION**. This concerns how the participants get involved in the discussion, their attitudes towards themselves and others, and their nonverbal language.

General Goals of Photolanguage

There are six aspects of the goal of growth in consciousness by group analysis of pictures: (1) **AWARENESS** occurs through the perceptual change, stimulation and sensitization that analysis of the picture promotes. (2) **KNOWLEDGE** increases as the visual content of the pictures brings more data, facts and information about oneself and the situation. Group discussion enriches this knowledge. (3) **ATTITUDES** mature with the affective changes occurring during dialogue with nature via the pictures and with others in the group. (4) **PRACTICE** is the motor change which happens to eye movement, body language, voice, and posture during dialogue. These motor changes vary with sense perception, cognition, emotional involvement and dialogue with reality. (5) **MAINTENANCE** is developing into a habit a particular new body movement learned through dialogue. Thus repetition of initial behaviour reinforces change. (6) **ADVOCACY** happens when the person who has experienced perceptual, cognitive and motor habit change in turn becomes a change agent inspiring others. These six aspects suggest the wide range of communication and social skills *Photolanguage* inculcates.

Gonzalez has succeeded in localizing Freire's insights both to the Philippine situation and to the visual communication Filipinos are so sensitive to. His book may well be easily adaptable to other similar situations where there is a desire to go beyond verbal literacy and foster total human development through the group process of discussing deeply personal themes through the mediation of pictures.

Bibliography and Resource Material on Religion and The media

- Pierre Babin**, Director, Centre for Research and Communication, Audio-Visual Expression of Faith (CREC-AVEX) (IRPEACS-CNRS, 29, Chemin des Mouilles, F-69130 Ecully, France) CREC-AVEX, founded in 1972 at the request of the Pontifical Commission for the Evangelization of Peoples, annually forms 30-35 participants from at least 25 lands in the language of the media. French, English (and soon Spanish) are used. The 7 months training includes (1) 2 months on the use of the small group media, e.g., slides/tape shows. (2) 2 months on the mass media, press, radio, TV. (3) 3 months' specialization in the production of religious audio and video cassettes, followed by a university level reflection either at the Catholic Institute of Lyons or St. Paul University in Ottawa, depending on the language. The main goal of the formation is to prepare the students to communicate the Gospel through the media. With Marshall McLuhan, P. Babin has published *Autre Homme Autre Chrétien à l'Age Electronique (Another Man, Another Christian for the Electronic Age)* (Lyon: Chalet, 1977) which explores the challenge and opportunities for communicating the Gospel by the media.
- Ronald Holloway**, *Beyond the Image: Approaches to the Religious Dimension in the Cinema* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1977) studies the history, content and stars of cinema in the light of theology and ethics.
- Neil P. Hurley**, *The Reel Revolution: A Film Primer on Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1978) shows how to read beneath the surface of films to their deeper language repeating the enduring themes of protest, conformity and the hunger for justice. His *Toward a Film Humanism* (originally entitled *Theology Through Film*, New York: Delta, 1975) attempts a wedding between theology, usually for the elite few, and film, for the masses, by revealing how films have presented theological themes of freedom, grace and sacrificial love and pointed out human fears, torments, and foibles.
- Gaston Roberge**, (Chitrabani, 76 Rafi Ahmed Kidwai Road, Calcutta-700016, India). Chitrabani is Indian for 'image and sound' and is a centre for media studies where Roberge lectures and writes on cinema and other media. His *Films for An Ecology of Mind: Essays on Realism in the Cinema* analyzes the various theories of film in the light of its growing cultural importance.
- Daniel G. Ross** Department of Sociology, Fu Jen Catholic University, (Husinchuang, Taipeihsien 242, Taiwan, R.O.C.) is studying the social values as presented on Taiwan TV, by first examining what kind of symbol TV is to the viewers. He has studied the viewers under these dimensions: (1) Personal openness within the person. (2) Interpersonal openness in face to face encounters. (3) Social openness in the larger sense. (4) Openness toward mankind in general, beyond one's own immediate cultural group. Computer analysis has shown that the indicators for (1) are weak, but promising for the other three. The results in general show that an openness to others in a small group situation leads to openness to the other two levels. In *Chinese and Western Religious Symbols as Used in Taiwan: A Sociological Study* (Taipei: Fu Jen University, 1980, available from the Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture) Ross has formed cognitive maps of the 20 most common religious symbols for the major religious groups on Taiwan: the Buddhists, adherents of Popular Religion, Protestants, Catholics, and those with no religion. What is particularly interesting is how the icons and symbols of one religious group are regarded by those of another, e.g., the regard for the cross by non-Christians.
- Denys J. Saunders**, *Visual Communication Handbook: Teaching and Learning Using Simple Visual Materials* (London: United Society for Christian Literature, 1974, rev. ed. 1979) gives instruction in the techniques of using visual materials even where there is a limited supply of materials.
- Nazareno Taddei**, Director, Centro Internazionale dello Spettacolo e della Comunicazione Sociale (CISCS, International Centre of Film and Social Communication, Via Siria 20, 00179 Rome, Italy) studies the processes of communication under the semiological, psycho-sociological and pastoral aspects. Publishes monthly journal, *EDAV (Educazione Audiovisiva-Audiovisual Education)*; many books, including *L'avventura Semiologica del Film (The Semiological Adventure of Film)*, *Educare non L'immagine (Education Through the Image)* 2 vols.; *Il Linguaggio Della Fotografia (The Language of Photography)* 360 slides and three guide books; *Dalla Verità All'immagine (On the Truth of the Image)*; and *Lettura Strutturale del Film (Structural Reading of Film, n.d.)*. Part of Taddei's theory stresses how the technically produced image involves a deformation of the image by the lens, camera angle, etc., which the cameraman uses as part of his statement, and how ignorance of this deformation leads to naive identification of the image with the reality.
- Antoine Vallet**, Director, Institut du Language Total (21, rue de la Paix 42000 Saint Etienne, France) with Albertine Faurie offers a comprehensive educational integration of study of the language codes of the media, especially television, in non-traditional horizontal teacher-student cooperation used by Freire to promote social change by developing perception, criticism and creative expression through the media. A bibliography, *Le Language Total*, pp. 23 by A. Faurie, lists the research and publications since its start in 1952. She has also recently completed a doctoral thesis on pedagogy, *Un Itineraire Pedagogique: Le Language Total*, 3 vols., and with A. Vallet, *Le Language Total: Education a la Communication et aux Mass Media*, 1981.
- William A. Van Roo**, *Man the Symbolizer* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1981) studies the process and meaning of the ordinary human experience of making symbols in relation to others and to God.

Evangelization by Using Audiovisuals

"Audiovisuals and Evangelization", special issue of *Lumen Vitae: International Review of Religious Education*, Vol 33, No.2 (1978).

Bartolino Bartolini, Director, Audiovisual Section, Salesian Catechetical Centre, (L.D.C., 214 Corso Francia, 10096 Torino-Leumann, Italy) "Evangelization and Audiovisual Communication". The media language as used in groups is effective for evangelization because it is like biblical language: (1) Both speak a word drawn from communities — the Bible from the early Christians, the media from the team needed to make the media. (2) Both are popular languages, used and understood by the people. (3) Both as richly connotative suggest deeper meanings. The new media can therefore speak to the whole person by getting and holding attention, by engaging the mind through the emotions and the imagination, and by becoming an integral part of the viewer's life by shaping his mentality and convictions.

Pierre Babin, Director, Centre Recherche et Communication, (IRPEACS-CNRS, 29, Chemin des Mouilles, F-69130 Ecully, France) "Policy and Methodology for Group Media." The best method for generating effective media for evangelization is to enter into the biblical experience through a sympathetic recreation of that experience by the media producers. It is wise to aim for a definite group, for such programmes do well commercially, have a better chance to share ideas feelings, and can benefit from accompanying guides. The best programmes provoke discussion within the group and avoid being one-way messages. Finally, programmes should foster communication between groups.

Jesus Montero Tirado, (Cerro Cora 2249, Casilla 1778, Asuncion, Paraguay) "Audiovisual Communication and Pastoral Work". Group media are pastorally necessary aids to help us see reality in ways our senses conceal. For instance, extreme magnification of natural details of our surroundings, studies of our physical make-up as well as of our behavior can deepen our appreciation of our world. Group media also urge the restatement of theological insights in refreshing ways. They challenge dogmatic theology to renew its linguistic and cultural relevance, throw light on biblical use of images from their own more recent experience of image-making, query the unchangeability of liturgical thinking, and offer the chance for a reverent contemplation of God's beauty seen in nature. Group use of the new media can also move viewers to love more deeply after seeing more deeply, restore the individual to a sense of belonging to the group, inculcate creativity, and give peace by satisfying the desire to know and love.

Gregorio and Jeanne-Marie Ferreras-Oleffe, *Lumen Vitae International Institute and Centre for Permanent Education* (8, avenue Bontemps, 1340 Ottignies, Belgium) "New Language, New Formation". There are some practical implications in the new media for leaders to attend to. (1) The new media are not to be considered as new vehicles for already existing thoughts, with the new media being merely the new packaging. Rather, the new media constitute a new interpretation of truth, just as words are one form of interpretation. Neither form will exhaust the truth, but are complementary. (2) The greater practical value of the small media for evangelization should be recognized. They are cheap, locally owned, realistic rather than fictional, able to develop the individual by engaging him on a level deeper than as mere information-provider. The mass media are limited to providing only a certain level of presence; the small media, however, can form and celebrate the individuals in the group by creating a more contemplative atmosphere through the use of slides which stay on the screen longer than TV or film images. (3) It is an abuse of the new media language to choose to use it because it is a quicker and stronger way to say things. Its distinctive interpretation should be respected in its own right, and not made the handmaiden of concepts.

Available from CSCC:

Daniel Ross, *Chinese and Western Religious Symbols as Used in Taiwan* (Taipei: Fu Jen University, 1980, 226 pages) UK £3/US \$6.

Leo Masawe Amani, *Religious Symbolism: A Selected Bibliography*. (London: CSCC, 1980, 43 pages). UK £1.75/US \$3.50. An initial selection of books and periodicals on symbolism, religious symbolism, and Christian symbolism.

Religious Symbolism in Intercultural Communication. Papers from International Seminar, 18-22 August 1980. 3 Vols: *Kerygma*, UK £2.50/US \$5 per vol.