

AETATIS NOVAE

FACING MEDIA REALITY IN TIMES RULED BY ELECTRONIC PSEUDO-REALITY

by Karen Watermann

Dialogue with the modern world

In 1917, the so-called Codex Juris Canonici allowed all Catholics to read Catholic newspapers - non-Catholic newspapers should only be read by businessmen or job-interested people. Now after 76 years, the pastoral instruction Aetatis Novae urges the members of the Catholic Church to eagerly engage themselves in a sincere dialogue in a respectful manner with the modern world - in and through the mass media structures operative today. It seems that this development counters the argument of the critics of the Catholic Church that we are only interested in preserving the status quo. It might be correct to say that we are not always the quickest regarding changes or movements towards modernizing structures, having in mind *Communio et Progressio* which - since 1971 - lies gathering dust in the drawers of church-related communicators. That this might become the destiny of Aetatis Novae could be avoided by its instruction to develop concrete pastoral plans in which communication has to be a main element. In addition, the realization of Aetatis Novae will depend on the initiative and creativity of all members of the Catholic Church.

All social groups at the round table

One great challenge is Aetatis Novae's request to gather all relevant social groups together at the round table. With regard to the keen competition for seats around this table, some voices have already belly-achingly been raised: Utopian. I think it's not impossible having in mind these words: "Some men see things and ask: Why? I'm dreaming of things and say: Why not!" The Western world seated with the so-called Third World, the landlord seated beside the farm labourer, the Moslem beside the Hindu, the woman beside the man. How can these dialogues be initiated and supported by the use of media as a tool for the realization of the world village?

Limitation of the access to media and information

Aetatis Novae emphasises the danger that mass media is worsening the existing social and individual barriers for a solid and entire development of the people. Due to some oppressive systems which limit the rights of women and men to obtain information, certain countries, groups or classes don't have access to communication media and information. The on-going process of privatizing and commercializing the media is regarded as one main reason, but also the simple act of dealing with media can have important influences on the culture of mankind itself due to the intrinsic laws of each medium.

Media changes people's life

One example that will be introduced here, namely an analysis of certain TV influences, might give an idea of where and how a medium can cause basic changes in people's lives and worldviews which might be comparable to a cultural revolution.

In Asia, illiteracy is still an unsolved problem. Millions of people are affected by this learning handicap, especially in the rural areas. At the same time, electronic media is gaining ground. Actually there are more than 40 broadcasting and communication satellites above the Asia-Pacific region. Satellite dishes have already been discovered in the remotest areas in Asia where viewer collectives can afford the price of the equipment. CNN and STAR-TV belong to village life sometimes more frequently than the daily bread.

The secondary illiterates

Nowadays the societal, tacit or implied, condition of the authority of the unread letter text is becoming obsolete through the appearance of a new species: the secondary illiterates. These individuals innovatively recognized that in a new electronic industrialization, the culture of writing and reading becomes counter-productive. The television is for them the "ideal" medium which requires and produces simultaneous behaviour-imperatives e.g. the rationality of recognizing signs during the operation of TV-sets and differentiated symbol registers, which

make an intelligent handling necessary. In addition, television provides perception-imperatives which are assimilated unobtrusively by Logos, signals, optical marks, time-structuring and pictograms. The result of this TV perception culture might be called "Audiovisual intelligence". Above all, terms like "being switched on", "wired up", "connected to" or "cabled with" indicate a world of images comprising invisible relationships and powers.

This result of constant contact with TV sets, computers or Walkmen and the reception of their perception- and behaviour-imperatives can however trigger a social cocooning process, which the secondary illiterate is undergoing, orientated towards the ultimate self-reference which causes the disappearance of the social horizon. Electronic media provides ideal grounds for a culture which is defined by autism and narcissism due to the apparent absence of distance between the perceiver and perceived. Pure superficial absorption of actions not understanding the sense becomes - so to speak - a social pattern.

This "pure communication" is shorn of all polyvalent interpretations that have been caused and produced by every-day communication through spoken or written language.

The social figure of the secondary illiterate manifests in oneself the wired personality and the non-language behaviour-imperatives: The perfect handling of technical symbol registers of media is one's socialisation, and the sovereign operating with technical connections, wires and their optical control is his social acknowledgement. The linear progressive logic of the Alphabet medium is replaced by the regressive circular logic of the switched and wired medium like TV.

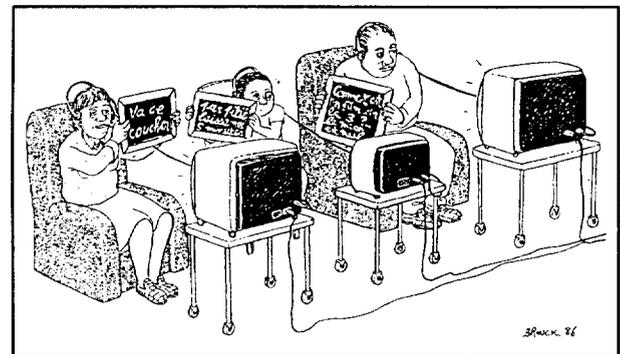
Illiterate switching circle models replace the spoken and written "World". The whole traditional world context of spelling, writing, speaking and thinking seems to become a part of our past-history, if this new ideal model of world which consists of processing piecemeal data, operating in switching-circles, will be the replacement. The parameters of all philosophies up till today - the material and moral meaning of work and initiative/activity - will be led ad absurdum - to an old fashioned post medieval construction of world. Old-fashioned in the sense that the human species is manifested in the act of initiative and work as an essential articulation and assimilation model. The world is now a game between mankind and machine, the message, hyper-reality or - more truly - pseudo-reality constructed by high-speed transmission and high definition screens. The camera angle and the zooming methods - above all - serve the obsessive objective of TV to provide an apparent transparency of events. The viewers' perception with regard to these secondary illiterates is dissociated from imagination and therefore left in banality.

The world of secondary illiterates is characterized by a further phenomenon. In the Age of Enlightenment the leading sense was the so-called sovereignty of the eye-sense. This worldview was carried by the interest in the discovery of reality. This rationality of an orientated seeing, resting a glance on a certain object or scenery, focussing on an object, was the commonly acknowledged way of creating the ability to judge or understand the environment or the "world". The contamination of the environment by visual materials, especially by the TV medium, makes this worldview obsolete. Now the short, superficial, neither object - nor goal - orientated-way of looking, is developed by the consumption of the picture flood of the 20th century.

Replaced, is the pathos of the moment and the resting eye, by the busy, restless viewing of short videos or spots, switching and searching for new pictures, more pictures which pretend to carry fresh and authentic information about the world and understanding it. Even entertainment films are produced with short, shorter and shortest cuts which can provide various sceneries in a narrower time span. Gone is the time when a long lasting gaze in a film symbolized solidarity, friendship, love or simply something mysterious which could inspire our minds to association, image and fantasy. In this context, messages become secondary, the

TV perception culture

Culture of autism and narcissism



Source: "La Croix", 14 septembre 1993

The mother: "Go to bed !"
 The child: "Please, still five minutes!"
 The father: "How is your movie? Mine is worthless!"

Apparent transparency of events

Short superficial way of looking

Cult of live

Courtesy of Index on Censorship



Illusion or reality

omnipotence of the visual material is the non plus ultra. The omnipresence of images and the speed with which they are transmitted relieve us of the necessity to imagine an elsewhere, to project our thoughts through time and space. Everything is here and now; everything comes to us without our having to go and search. The cult of live transmission, immediacy and the close-up, conspire to make us believe we are in direct contact with the event.

The ambiance in which the individual now exists, e.g. video screens in public places like railway stations, replaces former communication situations by glimpses, meetings, chats. Rushing eyes in search of symbols, information and messages on screens now characterize the tele- and videophil character. Individually it means: A cognition "wired-up" for these constructed images providing an illusion of reality and prone to accept this reality as a given, unchangeable phenomenon perceiving no necessity to change it either. He/she manages to exist amidst these images, satisfied and illusorily fulfilled as a human.

Socially it means: The world of electronic images provide a "total institution" sociologically speaking. Two traits characterize it: 1. self-sufficiency and 2. isolation from the mainstream. Immersed in and bomarded always by these images, signals etc., he/she feels no great urge to relate with and discover the mystery of the other persons. His/her knowing and experiencing the other human persons does not go beyond the character typologies constructed for them by the electronic media which provides a sense of predictability and hence security. In other words, and this appears tragic, he/she feels no great urge to exist with others. To know and discover oneself in knowing and discovering others through events of inter-human relationships.

Autonomy of the person

Nevertheless the autonomy of the individual person is not totally immobilised. It, time and again, asserts itself. More and more individuals are on the way to developing intelligent adaption achievements, which can be regarded as path-finding in this delirious and meaningless image-world of TV and Video. This is the search for an orientation which is developing, in its own right, a cultural habitus or cultural capability.

Resistance to the power of immediacy

Aetatis Novae requests us to analyse and judge the media and their influence on culture, critically. If the above mentioned phenomenon of social and cultural mutation of the human being can be regarded as a possible result of dealing with electronic media, what shall be our initiative? Possibly: We must halt the flow of images and resist the seductive power of illusory immediacy of the electronic media. If we do this, perhaps we shall witness the return of the truth potential. Images of world can only take on meaning again when they are related to our own mental images, experiences, mystic structures and memories, integrated into our own time-frame, vibrating in sympathy with our bodies and feelings, the storehouse of our memories.

The distance between perceiver and perceived

Coming back to the starting point on how to gather all relevant social groups around the table might also be possible by this approach. A civilization, conditioned by electronic media that has forgotten how to "see", and due to the cocooning of the individual, erases all forms of otherness, cannot pave the way to the round table. A distance must be kept between perceiver and perceived, to a love directed towards the "mystery of the Other". One proving example of this approach might be the endless fascination which has captured masses of people regardless of race, religion, class or gender when facing the picture of Mona Lisa. This shows how a glance or a smile can convey the mystery of another person. It seems that mankind is in need of more mystery instead of virtual reality that already prevails over reality itself. One concrete way out appears to be to encourage more face-to-face oral communication in inter-personal and group communication situations. This might help us move from an impersonal society towards an interhuman relation-based community that acknowledges and attempts to unravel the mystery of the other, and this exercise discovers the depths of oneself.