

On the State of Writing in Global Communication

According to widespread prejudice, writing in today's society is overwhelmed by other kinds of sign systems. Part of this prejudice is based on the conviction that images dominate over writing as though all forms of human sign production were not in themselves already forms of writing.

The fact is that we are victims of a limited view of writing: *writing* is commonly identified with *transcription*, with the written registration of oral language, considered as a sort of outer covering, subjected to and subservient to orality. Described in such terms writing is no more than mnemotechny. This restricted view of writing is not only connected to primacy of the oral word, the *phoné* and therefore to the tendency toward phonocentrism, but also to the tendency toward ethnocentrism. In the latter perspective, the conviction is that writing—reduced to the status of transcription—is the privilege of certain societies and not others representing a fundamental stage in the development of human history. Indeed writing thus understood is signaled as a discriminating factor between prehistory and history, between "cold" societies devoid of history and "warm" societies endowed with history, capable of evolution and historical memory.

In reality, the invention of writing as transcription presupposes *writing* in a far more complex sense and in a greater temporal sphere than the period of man's historico-cultural evolution. It concerns the process of homination, that is, the formation process of the human species. Writing is a human species-specific modeling device through which man, resorting to various means—including his body or external physical devices—, organizes his experience of the world, his surrounding reality, both spatially and temporally. Indeed, man is capable of constructing different worldviews, of inventing an infinite range of new senses with recourse to the same elements. All animal species are capable of constructing their own world and of conferring sense upon it; the distinctive feature of the human species is the capacity to construct a plurality of different possible worlds and, therefore, to confer an infinity of different senses on the same limited number of elements.

Thus intended, writing, "*ante litteram*" writing, writing antecedent to the written sign, to transcription, represents a fundamental stage in the process of homination, it precedes speech which has wrongly been privileged with respect to other—even earlier—means of communication. Writing thus understood is not a means of communication like speaking and its transcription, but rather subtends and precedes all forms of communication.

As transcription writing is connected to "culture" in the narrow sense according to which writing is opposed to "non culture" and is attributed to the "man of culture". In this perspective writing is connected with power and control, with consolidation of the dominion of man over man. On the contrary, the species-specific capacity for writing belongs to "culture" in a broad sense, in an anthropological sense, where writing is opposed to "nature" and attributed to humanity.

The development of speech and relative verbal sign systems, that is, languages, presupposes writing: if he had not been endowed with the capacity for writing man would not have been in a position to articulate sounds and identify a limited number of distinctive features, phonemes, to reproduce phonetically; without the capacity for writing man would not have known how to assemble phonemes in different ways so as to form a multiplicity of different words (monemes), nor could he have assembled words syntactically in different ways to form different utterances with different meanings and senses

Writing as a modeling device is *language* as it subtends human sign systems; and the latter, therefore, may be distinguished in species-specific terms from other forms of nonhuman animal communication. In fact, as much as nonhuman animal communication involves the use of signs

typologically homologous to human signs, it is not fixed in the same kind of structure subtending human sign systems and therefore it cannot take on the character of human languages.

And when, as in the case of deaf-mutes, the development of language in the phonic form is impossible, writing—if adequately elicited—finds other possibilities of grafting (gesture, drawings) that—at times—allow for development of the language capacity unaccompanied by speech.

Today we are witnessing a flourishing of languages thanks to developments in technology, and to encounter and exchange between different cultures (blocking frontiers and insistence on community identity will not stop this process which cannot be confined to the limits of market exchange). Writing today, understood in a broad sense, has more possibilities of manifesting itself in different ways. And thanks to language as described above, photography, cinema, television, video-cassettes, computers all offer new possibilities of writing, consequently increasing our capacity for the "play of musement". Furthermore, traditional forms of expression—theatre, music, the figurative arts—are now enhanced by technology and consequently can now invent new forms of writing both within the same sign system as well as through reciprocal contamination favoring the formation of new expressive genres. Design, photography, film, music are forms of writing that should be reconsidered in this light and appreciated as representing high levels in creativity through writing intended as the human capacity for language.

The crisis of writing indeed! No other historical era has ever been so rich in writing as the present era. *Today's civilization is the civilization of writing!* And this should be said emphatically to anyone who, confusing writing with the written sign, writing with transcription, complains—through ignorance or for ideological reasons—about the "loss" or "debasement" of "writing".

We now need to commit ourselves to achieving the conditions for the diffusion and proliferation of presentday writing systems, freeing them from any form of subservience to control over communication. The real problem in today's world of communication is not that of opposing "writing" and "images", but that of the objective contradiction arising from the opposition between the continuing increase and expansion of writing systems, of languages, therefore of the free "play of musement", on one hand, and the increase of control over communication, on the other, which among other things implies concentrating control in the hands of a few.

Literary writing is another important place, and perhaps the most ancient, where writing attains independence from transcription, that is, where the written sign attains independence from its ancillary function with respect to oral language, where writing is no longer reduced to mnemotechny. Film, as Ejzenstejn had already clearly understood ("film begins exactly where all forms of literary art 'end up'"), and other forms of writing in the present era develop and supplement the work of literary writing.

Disengagement of literary writing—that is, its disengagement with respect to the obligations characterizing other writing practices intended as transcription—frees writing from the limits of circumscribed responsibilities, from responsibilities restricted by alibis. And disengagement from partial and relative responsibilities charges literary writing with the kind of responsibility that does not know limits, with absolute responsibility, the kind of responsibility that delivers man from anything that may obstacle the free expression of what characterizes him in his specificity as a human being: language, in other words, the capacity for play, for the construction—and deconstruction— of an infinite number of new possible worlds. "Play" and not "work", insofar as it is independent with respect to need, represents an excess as regards function, productivity, and therefore is alien to the "reign of necessity".

As writing and not transcription, literary writing is refractory to any form of power wishing to obstruct it: the only form of power that literary writings admit is the power of imagination, to evoke a slogan from 1968. Non functional, unproductive, creative imagination, like that attributed to God: the human lies in man's vocation to divinity, so that man is human insofar as he is endowed with the divine capacity for language, for writing.