Communications and Culture

Communications has been defined as the conveying or exchanging of information and ideas. This wide definition is taken as the starting-point for this series of books, which are not bound by conventional academic divisions. The series aims to document or analyse a broad range of cultural forms and ideas.

It encompasses works from areas as esoteric as linguistics and as exoteric as television. The language of communication may be the written word or the moving picture, the static icon or the living gesture. These means of communicating can at their best blossom into and form an essential part of the other mysterious concept, *culture*.

There is no sharp or intended split in the series between communication and culture. On one definition, culture refers to the organisation of experience shared by members of a community, a process which includes the standards and values for judging or perceiving, for predicting and acting. In this sense, creative communication can make for a better and livelier culture.

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The series has an ancient and laudable, though perhaps untenable, aim—an aim as old as the Greeks and as new as holography: it aspires to help heal the split between cultures, between the practitioners and the thinkers, between science and art, between the academy and life.

P. W.

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GENDER ADVERTISEMENTS

Erving Goffman

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FOREWORD

by Richard Hoggart

Among the pleasures of reading Granville Barker's plays are his stage directions. They are often so long and so weighted with implications that one wonders how any actor who has read them carefully can then actually walk on to the stage. Granville Barker was likely to state that the person about to enter—who might well be a minor character, with few lines to speak—had been deserted by his wife twenty years before and had since been a struggling dentist in Purley given to sad amorous escapades; and that all this showed in his walk and manner of speaking.

Erving Goffman is a professional blood brother to Granville Barker. Granville Barker was so interested in gesture and appearance, in all aspects of the non-verbal presentation of the self in everyday life, that he wrote essays about his characters before he let them appear; there was a novelist *manqué* behind the intellectual dramatist. Goffman is a social scientist particularly fascinated by and brilliantly observant of the language of gesture; here too there is a novelist just below the surface.

I say all this at the start because I approach this book as a literary person, not as a social scientist, and because it raises many important questions about the frontiers between the two kinds of discipline. The analysis of advertisements, with which Professor Goffman is here concerned, has during the last three or four decades received some attention from literary-cultural critics also. Not surprisingly they tend to pay attention to the words rather than to the visual symbols. Among these literary contributions one of the most exciting and most visually responsive is Marshall McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride*, which appeared twenty-six years ago. It is still, for all its characteristic waywardness, seminal in a way most other such books are not; I predict that Erving Goffman's new book will be seminal also. The books are similar to each other in that both gain their impact less from their professional competence (not that that is in doubt) than from the sharp freshness of the perceptions brought to play, and the excitement and hence pleasure both authors feel at moving into a largely uncharted area; and both are witty books.

I am in one sense saying that Professor Goffman brings to his task, apart from the tools of his discipline, skills—insights would be a better word—one normally associates with literary criticism or with literature itself. Reading this book, one is very powerfully reminded of how much in the whole traffic of fiction rests on gesture and “display”. One is reminded also of the enormous range of assumptions a novelist can make about his own rights of interpretation and definition of the world, as well as about his relationships

with his readers. The photographs here recall all this implicitly. Some of Goffman's own comments suggest similar comparisons between the way a creative writer approaches experience and the way a social scientist does. The “we strangers” referred to in the following passage I take to be people in an “objectively outside” position. But I get the strong impression that Goffman himself is more interested in the interpretation of meanings behind this opaque situation. It is the very stock-in-trade of the novelist to deny that outsidersness:

We strangers do not see John and Mary comparison shopping for a brooch to replace the one that was lost last week at Jean's party, nor do we detect that their apparent dallying is due to their having to kill some time before going on to catch the new Fellini. That is what they see. We see a young middle-class couple looking at things in a jewelry store.

An even more striking example of the way Goffman recurrently reaches out to literature for subjective reinforcement of his “objective” observation can be seen in his apt reference to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in his discussion of the meaning of a “withdrawn gaze”.

A reading of Goffman also sharpens the sense of how often in literature gesture is used to focus some of the most crucial moments: Bazarov's parents gesturing at the sky as he dies, in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*; the apostate priest in Greene's *The Power and the Glory* also gesturing helplessly to the sky (though the meaning is different) as his awful wife calls him to bed; K's final moment at the end of Kafka's *The Trial*; Kurtz's last gesture in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; and so on. It seems to me that Tolstoy, George Eliot and Hardy, among novelists, particularly worked through the language of gesture. Among recent poets Auden is most interested in using gesture centrally within poems (as in “Musée des Beaux Arts”) and in discussing its aesthetic and substantial meanings in his critical essays.

To those of us interested in these interrelations, whether we are social scientists or literary critics or interested laymen, Professor Goffman's study gives a large number—in view of its brevity a surprisingly large number—of valuable pointers. One should say first, since it cannot simply be taken for granted, that he has a nice ear for a phrase, and a sharp eye. I have in mind such useful labels as “a situated social fuss” or “small behaviors”; and there are his descriptive identifications of such postures as the “bashful knee bend” and the more elaborate “finger-to-finger with body cant”—which, when you look at the photographs to which they are applied, are exactly right.

I think, however, that the paragraphs towards the end of the main essay on “the critical view of these exploitative arts” and on the opposition to “commercial versions of the world” are too brief to do justice to these points of view or to Professor Goffman's qualifications on them. In general, the approach to sexuality in visuals also seems rather thin. Thus the photographs showing “spoon-feeding” and “beds on floors” have in my view more resonance than is suggested. The treatment of narcissism and self-touching is another instance where one wishes for more. It was, I think, Tom Stoppard who said that the rapt, totally turned-in-upon-itself air of the women in such advertisements only seems narcissistic at first glance, and that it really suggests that the women are being intimately caressed by someone out of

shot. That begins to point towards the ambivalent suggestiveness of such pictures.

The most important issue, the great unanswered question, is that of proof. Professor Goffman recognises this and explicitly sets the problem aside here since this is, though very bold, essentially an exploratory essay. How can we prove that such and such a gesture “means” this and this? What does “mean” mean in this context? The Chinese boxes stretch away. Again, one recalls, a novelist works in a different way. He says that so-and-so made a gesture like that and it “meant” this; and we believe him, because he has set the terms for the relationship and because he has built up a kind of confidence. We would not “believe” a novelist whose relationships between gesture and “meaning” consistently seemed fortuitous; unless of course he were a novelist whose view was that life was fortuitous in such ways. But here the ground becomes very boggy indeed. More firmly, we find ourselves saying: “Yes, I see that”, giving assent to gestures and to their interpretation, gestures which—though we may never have thought of them in that way for ourselves—are “convincing”. This is not at all the same thing as saying that we are then responding to stock responses and conventional counters. But when certain novelists say: “She saw him turn his head in such and such a way and knew at that moment that he was lying, had been lying for months and was near breaking-point”, or “Coming upon them by chance as they stood like that, and even though they were feet apart, she knew by the quietly relaxed angles of their bodies that they had an old intimacy, were indeed lovers”—when we read such things we know that we are in a world of reasonably agreed currency.

At the other extreme, in this issue of proof, is the social scientist seeking to stress as much as possible the “science” in his discipline. The first paragraphs of the section here headed “Gender Commercials” concern themselves with this; Erving Goffman is then talking directly to his fellow social scientists. Those who occupy a middle ground, being neither novelists nor social scientists but—let us say—literary people interested in making cultural observations, have no shelter. The furthest they can go is to borrow from Dr Leavis, apropos of the common pursuit of true judgement, and ask: “This is so, is it not?”. And if, as has happened to me, someone then replies: “Your analysis of the meaning of that habitual gesture by that old woman was interesting in its way but, so far as I am concerned, it is a private gloss. I don’t see why I should not interpret the gesture quite differently”—if that happens, one has to recognise that it is a fair response. Like the novelist, but without the support he gains from received aesthetic conventions, one can only hope to build up over length and time a kind of “convincingness”. Whether in either case one is pointing to more than a shared, contingent, aesthetic and cultural response cannot be taken for granted. Auden’s poem “Musée des Beaux Arts”, to which I have already referred, addresses itself directly to this question of gesture as both aesthetically and humanly significant. “That is the way things happen”, he says with total assurance; that is how we see and respond to tragedy in front of us. It was Auden, too, in an early essay entitled “The American Scene”—very aptly about Henry James and his powers of social observation—who distinguished sharply between the powers of the “objective” and the “subjective”

eye in social observation, and decided that the only trustworthy eye was the subjective:

With the second limitation that James imposed upon himself, however—his decision to reject all second-hand information and sentiment, to stick to those facts, however few, which were felt by him, however mistakenly, to be important, to be unashamedly, defiantly subjective—one can only wholeheartedly agree. In grasping the character of a society, as in judging the character of an individual, no documents, statistics, ‘objective’ measurements can ever compete with the single intuitive glance. Intuition may err, for though its sound judgment is, as Pascal said, only a question of good eyesight, it must be good, for the principles are subtle and numerous, and the omission of one principle leads to error; but documentation, which is useless unless it is complete, must err in a field where completeness is impossible. James’s eyesight was good, his mind was accurate, and he understood exactly what he was doing; he never confused his observations with his interpretation.

To use one last quotation from Auden, from a great many about just this matter, it is the job of the writer to bring out “the images that hurt and connect”.

All these absorbing and difficult questions are shown in sharp relief in this book—above all, because there are, quite simply, so many different possible interpretations of each picture or group of pictures employed here (as, again, Goffman recognises). I almost everywhere found his readings and groupings “convincing”. I could also have made my own groupings, based on—say—“class” issues, or on the implications of exposed teeth. These would not necessarily be conflicting interpretations; they may be parts of compatible multiple interpretations. For any cluster of material there may be a great number of coherent patterns; and all may be in certain senses “true”. This does not mean that they are all necessarily of equal importance or significance; nor have we broached that harder problem of how one judges *between* them. The groupings Professor Goffman chooses are virtually all illuminating and, within the terms sketched out above, “convincing”. He quite simply sharpens our visual imagination of such things.

Yet another large area, which he touches on only lightly at the very end of the main essay, is the role of visual messages in making our day-by-day lives seem “larger than life”, more “meaningful”. Here we are faced with that whole business of the selection of what Joyce called “epiphanies”, moments; and of how daily life can seem to be authenticated by advertisements and other visual blandishments. This area is so far hardly explored. What, for example, is the relationship between the stylized public presentation of the postures of grief and the real thing? And how do they interact, as one suspects they do (see pictures 497 and 498)? This leads into the question of how far the advertisers make “reality” and how far they reflect a “reality” people already assume, and into the complex interplay between the “real” and the fictive. Goffman ends by saying rather briskly that by and large advertisers draw upon and make visual what is already there. Up to a certain point, I agree. Beyond that point there is, I suspect, an area where they do more than this, more than can be wrapped up in his final phrase: “their hype is hyper-ritualization”.

The merit of this brilliant, suggestive book is to raise difficult, open questions such as these; it is a bridge-making enterprise. The world is still all before us for work of this kind; and Erving Goffman could be one of our best guides.