

Mattelart today: between continuity and rupture. A demystifying view of the “new paradigms”^a

Os Mattelart hoje: entre a continuidade e a ruptura. Uma visão desmistificadora dos “novos paradigmas”

Interview with

■ ARMAND MATTELART

MICHÈLE MATTELART

By MARIO KAPLÚN

FROM MARCH 28 to April 8, 1988, the Escola Internacional de Cinema e Televisão de San Antonio de Los Baños, in Cuba, convened a Colloquium of High Studies on “Breaks and continuities in the ways of tackling Communication theories and practices” with French specialists Michèle and Armand Mattelart. The content of the meeting was: the crisis of paradigms; the crisis of linear thinking, and the construction of new conceptual matrices; the ambiguities and ambivalences that critical theories have experienced over the past few years...

Chance – or, more specifically, an invitation to participate in an event organized by Unesco – took me to Havana on those exact days. I glimpse at the possibility of a reunion with the Mattelart after years without seeing them and the project of interviewing them on topics as substantial and current as those stated in their call. So, once the appointment is set, I go to San Antonio de Los Baños one afternoon with the tape recorder in hand. The host official warns me that, on that day, the seminar is extending beyond the usual hours: everyone is absorbed in an intense debate. I am under the impression this is not the best day for an interview. An hour later, Michèle and Armand are finally available. After the friendly hugs that took place when we met again, they logically requested me to give them a half an hour rest. We are finally directed into a classroom at the school, where the two researchers engage in dialogue with depth and passion while ignoring their tiredness.

^aThe edition of this interview by Mario Kaplún (1923-1998), originally published in *Día-Logos de la Comunicación*, no. 21 (July 1988), was suggested by the Mattelart, as a text of historical importance in their trajectory which lacked translation in both Portuguese and English.

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MATRIZES



crédito: Ciespal, Equador, 2016.

THE RETURN TO THE RECEIVER

Mario: In this conversation, I would like to try and rescue not only what took place on this last seminar, but also the way of thinking that you have developed across these years and that the program seems to reflect...

Armand: Yes, yes. It certainly reflects it.

Mario: ... Reconstructing for the reader what is permanent and what is new in the proposals that lead to this “Colloquium of High Studies;” what is still valid and what is weakened in that thought.

Michèle: Yes. I understand.



crédito: Ciespal, Ecuador, 2016.

Mario: Perhaps one way to approach the issue may be to start by recalling the communication theory that you contributed so much to build in Latin America, in the 1970s; as they see it today, from a distance, under a self-criticism filter.

Michèle: (*not very convinced*) That might be. Although the perception that someone may have on their own reflection might not be the same other people have about this same evolution. The word ‘continuity’ takes on full meaning when someone reviews their own trajectory; but ‘continuities’ and ‘ruptures’ are measured differently when it comes to the person’s journey or the assessment that others make of them. That is why I would rather start by visualizing the, in fact truly relevant, changes that have taken place within the critical theories of communication in recent years. Ways of approaching the communication process that are quite different from those used in the years when we started to study the phenomenon have emerged.

Mario: In what years? Let us specify... Pinpoint things for the reader.

Michèle: For us, who live in Chile, the years leading up to the victory of Salvador Allende, the victory of the Unidad Popular (UP), and the years during UP’s government until their fall.

Mario: Well, how can these novelties that have emerged be described, what are these relevant changes?

Michèle: It would put first the need to understand communication as a process of interaction, in which the sender and receiver no longer occupy two opposite poles in a vertical line; this new interest in knowing and analyzing the moment of reception; in short, a new way of seeing the receiver and recognizing them as a subject.

There is no doubt that this great leap in critical theory can be perceived as a step away from the lines we used in those years and with the type of studies

that we carry out... Although I do not know how far speaking in the plural form is ideal – “we” – because, although it is true that, on many occasions, Armand and I work together and sign works in common, it is no less true that each of the two developed their own identity and line of research...

Mario: And your own contributions. Certainly.

Michèle: Well, as for the arise of this reappraisal of the receiver, although it could be perceived as a rupture from the outside, I must say that I see it as a continuity. Because a study that we carried out in 1972 in Chile, under the UP, on the concrete reading that popular recipients made of the messages of mass communication always comes to my mind¹.

For this research, we had to improvise a methodology with the precarious instruments that we had at the time. Even so, we discovered something that remains relevant today: the need to recognize the receiver as a producer of meaning. I feel that it was something capital, the cornerstone that later helped and prepared me to better understand the changes that occurred within the theory of mass communication. At that time, I had intuitions that I was unable to formulate and I had to wait throughout the 1970s to be able finally to precise them.

Mario: For example?

Michèle: For example, this matter – which I think is fundamental – about the pleasure that the popular strata experience while encountering the genres of mass culture. At that time, I felt that this raised inevitable questions to which our ideological reading method did not provide answers. Only many years later was I able to process this intuition. And, if I succeeded, it was because at the same time, within the theoretical field, fundamental advances were made; a new sensitivity was generated concerning the study of the receiver, to popular ways of feeling, and to the genres of popular culture and mass culture.

CHILE IN 1972: LESSONS LEARNED

Mario: Now it is Armand's turn. (*I invite you to answer the same question. And to demonstrate a certain inclination to the retrospective point of view.*)

¹ For the reader interested in exploring and reconstructing the history of Latin American research: I assume that the study that Michèle Mattelard alludes to is Mattelart and Piccini's (1974).



crédito: Ciespal, Ecuador, 2016.

Armand: To understand the path taken, it is important to start by situating the context in which our investigations began. A specific context, as it was also the one in which, almost at the same time, studies on communication started taking place in Argentina and Venezuela... Well, in Venezuela a short time before.

Mario: Yes, just before. It is worth remembering that this is a year that somewhat holds some symbolic value: in 1988, 25 years ago, Venezuelan Antonio Pasquali published his first book. An innovative work, a pioneer for Latin American's critical thinking on Communication (Pasquali, 1963)².

Armand: Precisely. This date and this book attest to the indigenous roots of research in communication in Latin American countries. Because there is a strong tendency to believe and affirm that it has always been directed and structured by the theory of dependency and by dependence. And it was not so. In neither case – be it in Argentina, Venezuela, or Chile – did the first studies address the issue of cultural imperialism. No, what we tried to study was the performance and functioning of local media, which were in the hands of the native bourgeoisie itself.

In the Chilean case, our investigations began with the newspaper *El Mercurio*, photonovelas, and idol magazines, which were eminently local products with no explicit presence of American content. Thus, the object of the investigations and our first concern were directly focused on the national space. I believe this should be highlighted because, over the years, one can sometimes fall into a distorted appreciation; and after selling over half a million copies of a book³,

² In fact, the original edition of *Comunicación y Cultura de Masas* by Antonio Pasquali was published by the Universidad Central da Venezuela in Caracas in late 1963. The subtitle is significant for the author's concerns: *La Masificación de la Cultura en las Regiones Subdesarrolladas. Estudio Sociológico y Comunicacional*.

³ As the reader certainly guessed, the *best-seller* his co-author refers to is: Dorfman and Mattelart (1971), whose first edition was launched in Chile in late 1971.

assume that book marks the beginning of their journey. And it was not like that, it was just a milestone in that trajectory.

If I put some weight on the establishment of the context, it is because it can help to provide a better perception of what has remained and/or changed since then. We began investigating communication in 1967 and our first published work happened in the early 1970s (Mattelart et al., 1970/1976). As I was saying, it is a study of the media in Chile; subtitled *La Ideología de la Prensa Liberal*.

Mario: I am one of those people who still owns and maintains this publication...⁴

Armand: Do you remember that blue notebook? And it is quite significant that these first works were developed within a Center named “Estudios da Realidade Nacional” (National Reality Studies). The first issue that I was personally interested in investigating was the reaction of *El Mercurio* – the largest Chilean press body – against the timid processes of change fermenting in those days of Frei’s Christian Democratic government, such as land reform or university renovation.

Mario: With what methodological focus were these first studies approached?

Armand: With a methodology inspired by linguistic structuralism, fundamentally Barthes, who offered a proposal and introduced a break with orthodox Marxism, in which we did not find instruments of analysis because he, in fact, had never been concerned about the cultural phenomena.

However, this initial period did not last because, with Allende’s electoral victory, Popular Unity came to power; and it is in this new political scenario that we are faced with questions that we were not used to asking ourselves. It was no longer about “what to report,” but more about “what to do?”. It was necessary to propose, to imagine new communication alternatives. All this within an awfully specific and peculiar context: a power relation in which the left party controlled some means of communication, but the bourgeoisie controlled most of them. Thus, in the heat of the Chilean process, we had to move from a phase of investigation and denunciation, of corpus and structures, to conceive and try building alternatives.

⁴ Originally published in the third edition (Santiago de Chile, March 1970) of the *Cuadernos de la Realidad Nacional* (Center for the Study of National Reality) of the Universidad Católica de Chile. The Center was run by Jacques Choncol, who later became a minister of the Allende government. The volume continued with the publication of the book *La Ideología de la Dominación en una Sociedad Dependiente* (Mattelart et al., 1970).

Michèle began to advise the official television channel and, I, to consult for Editorial Quimantú, owned by the government. And we are faced with a methodological vacuum, a vacuum comprised of antecedents and references. The Chilean process was the first to ask these questions because all previous revolutions could allow – or were forced to – building a fence around them; that is, they did not have the opponent’s media presence and competence in their territory. So, all they left us were manuals of agitation and political propaganda worth little or nothing in our case. There were a few texts by Brecht; but, regarding alternatives, there was practically nothing available.

Mario: And what questions should be asked?

Armand: For example: what is a genre in mass culture? Is it feasible or not to invert the sign: use the same mass communication formats and invert the political sign, their ideological sign⁵? Questions that had not been asked before, because no processes until then comprising these characteristics. Such questions could only develop to an embryonic form and were only partially answered; they demanded to understand and know much more about the receiver’s relationship and how they receive and decodes massive messages.

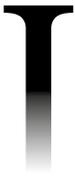
Mario: That is how the matter of the receiver appears in his trajectory, as an interrogation and challenge.

Armand: Yes, with such strength and urgency. Michèle rescues her incipient investigations on reception from that moment; but I can also tell you that fifteen days before the coup, I was working in the industrial belts of Santiago to evaluate the first newspapers and bulletins, the first media produced and printed by the workers in their fight against the boycott and the sabotage of the large employers’ federations to destabilize Allende’s government⁶. Thus, amid the political struggle, we were able to perceive their relevance to formulate an alternative from the actors’ level of awareness.

It is interesting to note that, from the communication point of view, the Chilean process could be split into two periods: in the first, it is the intellectuals

⁵ A good testimony of that period is found in Manuel Jofre’s report, *Las Historietas y su Cambio: Experiencias Prácticas Para la Transformación de los Medios en el Proceso Chileno*, included in Dorfman and Jofre (1974). In it, the author recapitulates the attempts made by Editorial Quimantú to produce comic books with liberating content using typical mass culture comics techniques. The results left more questions than certainties.

⁶ Read the testimony *Prensa y Lucha Ideológica en los Cordones Industriales de Santiago* (Mattelart, 1974). The review is signed with the easily identifiable initials ‘A. M.’



and political leaders who set guidelines, and – explicitly or implicitly – formulate and guide the communication policies; but, from October 1972, when the reaction started mobilizing and the great strike by truck owners and employers’ unions broke out, a new period began to take shape. Other parallel actors arise, proposing a new type of organization and communication. This shocked us a lot and led us to review all our plans.

Mario: And these new actors, the protagonists of this new proposal, were...?

Michèle: The workers, the workers’ movement; but now organized in a totally original way.

Armand: In a territorial, district way.

Michèle: Those were later called “industrial belts,” that is, industrial neighborhoods.

Armand: A new group that came to question the traditional form of organization, that is, the political parties. As everyone remembers, the Chilean left, the Popular Unity, was a coalition of several parties that reinforced the sectarian tradition, the internal struggle for the defense, and the conquest of portions of power. On the other hand, there is a new form of popular organization emerging in the industrial belts that, by overcoming such party divisions and their aftermath of sectarianism, foments a wide alliance between all workers.

Michèle: The belts brought together members from different UP parties and even from outside the UP.

Armand: They are also able to bring neighbors together – men and women – who do not participate in the production industry but want to unite and defend their neighborhoods and their lives, who feel threatened by the reaction’s attack.

Michèle: Then, we witnessed the emergence of what is commonly known today as social movements.

CLASS AND MOVEMENT

Armand: So, we began intuiting and learning that there were other dimensions ignored by the Marxist manuals. Originally, the Chilean process was, so to speak, a classic process, with historical actors whose genealogy was identifiable with the help of the sociological parameters established: Marxist parties, class ideology, a class conception, and a class diagnosis of society and its alliances. So, it was certainly a rich, but at the same

time limiting process. Limiting in the sense that its fundamental issue was merely a class problem⁷.

Well, what has changed in our trajectory over the past fifteen years is that we have finally learned that the class does not solve all issues. It does not embrace everything. In addition to the class problem, there are other categorical interests. And that is the contribution, the teaching of the so-called *social movements*: the women's movement, the ecological movement, and that of human rights, etc. With the emergence of these other interests – which sometimes intersect and/or merge with those of the class –, new spaces start opening within the field of demands. From a world focused only on the struggles that use the production as their stage, we move on to resistances located in a much more multifaceted and vaster field; the struggles for women's rights, human rights, for the defense of the environment... And, even more, these new problems pose a strong question to the very model of productivist development: an aspect often overlooked by workers' movements that did not question this model, but instead legitimized it and adopted it uncritically.

Mario: And this outbreak of social movements, how does it affect communication studies?

Michèle: It profoundly changes their way to approach not only mass communication but also popular culture. Because that political culture is based only on the notion of class, part of a reductionist representation of the popular, of a rational and enlightened matrix that leads it to trace a heroic profile of said working class. For it, the symbol of the popular is the working class, inserted within the world of production and endowed with unlimited potential for dedication and struggle. Meanwhile, the movement's vision is articulated through a different representation of the popular: a broader representation, which overflows the world of production and is not limited to the dimension of the rational and that vision of the heroic worker-producer but is linked to this whole other world of people's daily lives that incorporates the aspect of the sensitive, the affective, the feeling. There I see a change in the approach to communication and culture: the people are no longer perceived only in the sense of class, of the avant-garde class of history. Those people are more open through their multiple facets, which enriches them with a much more complex and mundane characterization of the notion of the popular.

⁷ All the discussion raised in the heat of the Chilean process about the use and role of the media in political actions to promote change was taken up by Armand Mattelart in his richest and most controversial book of the time: *La comunicación masiva en el proceso de liberación* (Mattelart, 1973). In it, the author makes an extremely critical analysis of the way the traditional left deals with the media and seeks to propose new communication policies.

Armand: Yes. However, at this stage of our journey, I believe that we must issue a warning. And it is that, in this transition from the issue of class to that of the movement, one can forget or ignore the issue of class as they go.

Michèle: Yes. That is the risk. And it is a big risk.

Armand: I think, in fact, it is often lost. Very easily. And that loss is extremely serious. It is not enough to adopt a perspective of movement if, from it, a political alternative cannot be formulated for the peoples subjected to oppression and exploitation. I want to highlight this, as it seems especially important to me.

Michèle: Here we are at the heart of the problem...

Armand: Exactly (*they speak at the same time: the issue concerns them deeply*). That is the key to...

Michèle: ... To think about the positive aspects, but also the much more ambiguous dimensions of this change that is taking place in the theories of communication.

Mario: The theme of ambiguity emerged, as already stated on the colloquium agenda.

Michèle: ... and that will reappear more than once as we move forward in this other discussion with you.

Armand: Back to your question, then: where is our continuity? I would say that it is given by the permanence of that central axis. Because we have had and continue to keep in mind that in social relations, in the relationship of forces – both internationally and nationally, and even locally – there is always a class problem. Because there is always a group in power, a sector that seeks to dominate, humiliate, and oppress another. This axis is essential for a healthy and committed researcher. However, to this class problem that seems inevitable to the construction of a collective project, we progressively add – due to a state of consciousness, but also in response to a reality that we perceive and recognize as dynamic and changeable – this second problem of the movement.

Mario: It is “added,” but not replaced.

Armand: Precisely. We try to combine, to articulate the two, although sometimes it is not easy.

Mario: No. Communicators working with the popular movement know that it is not easy.

Armand: And it is not. Because the respective actors are not always in agreement about the political conception of what a social movement is, nor about the redefinition of the role taken by the traditional actors (parties, unions, etc.). That is where difficulty truly lies, the great ambiguity that stresses us today. The risk of trends.

Mario: I believe that the two dimensions, that of continuity and that of rupture, are very well expressed. But perhaps readers are expecting us to focus more on the issues of mass communication.

Armand: Yes, you are right.

Mario: So, the question remains: this broader view, this new perception, how does this translate into the approach to the mass media and mass culture? What is the new reading of the phenomenon?

Michèle: We got to the central point. I would say that what is new is this incorporation of the receiver as a gravitational pole, finally recognizing in them a kind of freedom to read the messages they consume; a possibility to appropriate these products. Underlining this change, this new ability to better understand the bipolar process of communication, which separates itself from the linear thinking standard with which it was previously addressed is particularly important.

But, once the value of this new conceptual matrix is established, we again face the ambiguity that this rupture can contain. I would not speak of “trends”. But certain currents put so much emphasis on one part of the problem and forget another, exalt the active role of the receiver so much and neglect the other pole – that of the sender, that of the product, that of the power networks to which they subscribe – that we are finally tempted to perceive them as a new trend. And I think, I hope, that the flow will be balanced and the lucidity so necessary from us in the facing of the challenges that arise today will finally be restored.

Mario: I share that wish with you, Michèle. But tell us about these challenges.

Michèle: There is where the challenge lies. To the researcher who has a critical stance regarding the societary model in which we are immersed and so many Latin American countries live and suffer, the greatest challenge is assimilating into their research proposal a tension that, in my point of view, is fundamental: the tension between this new episteme of the return to the receiver, of the recognition of the receiver as a subject endowed with

a certain freedom, and all the efforts to restrict that *freedom* that become evident when analyzing the strategies of technological power and the commodification of culture, each increasingly supported by the sciences of organization and control. These two realities coexist; and we must know how to lucidly live the tension of assuming both, without falling into *fads* that bias and fragment the analysis.

Armand: What Michèle is saying is fundamental. The subject of the return to the consumer certainly represents a huge qualitative leap in relation to the structuralist theories that forgot and relegated them to the benefit of an almost invariable structure.

Michèle: Univocal.

Armand: ... Yes! Univocal. That put them aside based on this linear theoretical model of *stimulus/response*. And I say that it implies a great qualitative leap because this rehabilitation of the consumer as a subject is part of a bigger problem: that of the civil society's role in the construction of the democracy (I am obviously speaking of democracy as a process, not as an already given fact). If there's so much insistence on considering the consumer use of messages and new technologies, it is because it is a central problem for the construction of an authentic democratic society. The use of the media has become a terrain of social struggle, a key space for social *enjeu*. And we must say and recognize it as such. However, with that said, there is another side to things. And it is here that ambiguities and ambivalences reappear. This consumer assessment is not the exclusive territory of researchers concerned with the democratization of society and the liberation of peoples; it is also an instrument of modern capitalism.

Mario: What do you mean?

Armand: When studying the redesign of industrial and market strategies, it seems that this "return to the consumer" is deeply engraved on the logic of the capitalist restructuring which, in the face of the crisis brewing within its own production method – simultaneous economic and political crisis –, demands an ever-closer approximation between the moment of production and that of consumption. I would even say that it would be ideal to be able to merge these two moments into one. Of course, there, fortunately, there's human freedom, which cannot be controlled to the point of achieving this merging. Its technological power exhibits a series of quantitative methods; but when it comes to reaching the invisible, internal forum of the individual, capitalism lacks instruments. As, after all, we researchers are also lacking.

In summary, then, there is this other reason to be cautious and aware that, when we turn to the consumer, we are stepping into and moving on ambiguous terrain; and that we are not alone in this endeavor, but that this is a field common to critical researchers, as well as capitalist strategy.

Mario: To make it clearer, would you propose an example of this growing approach between the moment of production and that of the consumption within this strategy of modern capitalism?

Armand: The most concrete example is the expansion of the advertising industry and marketing techniques in today's large societies. Not only in volume, but also in the function assigned to them by the system. Increasingly, the *distribution and sale* stage – which refers to the *consumption* stage – has been integrated with that of the product itself. It is no longer conceivable to manufacture a product first and then design the sales strategy by asking yourself who to sell to, appealing to the needs and motivations of the potential consumer. The advertising industry is increasingly connected to the research and development departments in large companies. Advertising is born with the product itself and, to a large extent, determines the product's characteristics. And how do you determine them? By deeply investigating the consumer, working on their desires and reactions.

Mario: It is a kind of “freedom”. I believe this is a clear example. Let us now go back to the consumer's freedom paradigm. I believe it would be quite relevant that both of you clarify your position on this matter and specify the scope you assign to the receiver's freedom of reading. Do you consider – because this is how some authors postulate it – that this has spread to a dimension such that makes it autonomous in face of the messages from the mass media?

Michèle: Oh, no, these are totally idealistic views. And they are being completely revised, overcome. We cannot speak of an autonomy by the receiver. That would be a mistake...

Armand: ... a sociological error...

Michèle: ... a huge sociological error.

Armand: (*Corroborating the line*) Huge!

Mario: I asked the question because a term that you, Michèle, use during this conversation, the term “appropriation,” is understood this way by many Latin American teachers: as the recipient's autonomy.

Michèle: I accept this term quite well because it involves the receiver, recognizes its role in the communicational process. But without ever forgetting that this process always takes place within a certain social and discursive education.

Mario: Like this...?

Michèle: Thus, given the proposal that the medium presents to its ability to understand and imaginary, the receiver cannot produce any meaning. Bear in mind that when I talked about the receiver's freedom to read, I used the word *freedom* quote-unquote. As per Foucault's expressions, the receiver is enrolled in a social and a discursive formation. And their insertion in this social space determines... (*speaks up*). But no: the verb *to determine* would not be ideal, because we would be falling again...

Armand: ... in a determinism...

Michèle: ... And that is what must be avoided, eradicated. No, this is not determinism. However, we must identify the determinations. Foucault has proven that it is impossible to interpret whatever is proposed by social actors in any way. And the same goes for the media: they are also social actors who speak the language that the receiver has learned, provide and transmit images that have a certain meaning in a given social environment and imaginary context. In this context, we must rescue the social space as a narrative memory and, furthermore, a collective cultural memory. If we take a closer look, this is also how, in this context, the mass culture genres work. The genres speak to recipients who inhabit a particular social and cultural formation and are inserted in a specific discursive formation. And they are decoded, semantized, and re-semantized based on individual freedom, their own personal history, their own personality; but also, at the same time, according to their registration in a global social space, which comprises symbols, language, genres, and common expressive forms.

Armand: I believe the problem is also to avoid the two extremes: first, the deterministic, which comes from behaviorism or functionalism, whether from the right or the left; and second, that of relativistic theories. We must navigate between the two without falling into either. If we postulate the total autonomy of the consumer, we are – whether we like it or not – allying ourselves with the neoliberal myth. And such myth has a perverse effect. If we affirm that everyone is free to read *Dallas* as they wish, that everyone watches *Dallas* from their own cultural point of view and this view finally produces a meaning that is not what intended and anticipated by the emitters, what is the purpose of studying and investigating the production process of this television

series (a study that we know is necessary, inevitable)? Above all – and an even more perverse effect –, for struggling to find alternatives that value their own cultural identity?

I must say that I am not talking about imaginary ghosts, but something very real. Today, one can see and verify the emergence of an impressive set of studies led by the old functionalists within the international field – a Katz, a Sola Pool – that insist on emphasizing and absolutizing this resemantization process that the receiver operates. And they tell us, then: “But the Algerians, the Israelis, the Javanese, they all have their own different ways of reading *Dallas*.” Is it a consequence? Of course! From this point of view, *Dallas* is no longer a problem.

Mario: Furthermore, *Dallas* as such does not exist.

Armand: That is the trick! Why are we interested in the phenomenology of receiving messages, why returning to the consumer? It is, above all, to imagine and propose other methods of production and programming. To replace *Dallas*! If not, what is the use of looking at and being surprised by the discoveries that this return to the receiver brings us?

Mario: It would be nothing but pure and passive contemplation.

Armand: Exactly! No, behind this new attitude from the researcher there’s – there must be – a process of interrogation, of searching for alternatives. Most third world countries that have questioned themselves about means of consumption merge this question into larger ones: how can we finally resist the hegemony of products that dominate the market (such as Japanese animated television films, North American entertainment films, etc.) And that is why consumer knowledge is important; that is why it is worthwhile to dive into the phenomenon of reception. Well, this return to consumption, but as long as we situate it within broader issues. Otherwise, we would end up justifying and legitimizing a policy of idleness, of *laissez-faire*...

Michèle: How can I put it?... It is a paralyzing... Attitude...

Mario: Demobilizer.

Armand: Exactly, a demobilizing policy in the face of the capital problem that remains: what do we do as production?

Mario: The populist allure. So, believe me, Armand, that many Latin American communication workers are concerned with the spread of these currents in their most simplistic forms; the number of followers they are

gaining among Communication teachers. We even feel its demobilizing effect among groups that promote popular communication.

Michèle: Oh, yes. I completely understand.

Armand: They are right to be concerned. Neoliberalism ends up being a form of populism. Neoliberalism is populist when it appeals to this supposed total freedom of the consumer, what it is defending is a kind of market populism. Thus, we must be especially careful and alert regarding the ambiguity of this change. Perceiving it as an extraordinarily positive break within critical theories, but without ever forgetting that the other also deals with this alleged freedom of consumption. And they work with a vastly different objective; that of restructuring and perpetuating a relationship of unequal forces.

Michèle: Hence, I told you that this new paradigm must be experienced in tension. We must certainly celebrate the fact that the processes of interaction that occur between the massive messages, and the groups that receive them are more fairly reframed, as an achievement. Progress has been made in this regard and a more satisfactory relocation has been achieved. But, at the same time, there is the risk of absolving at some point.

Armand: ... Of forgiving ...

Michèle: ... A relationship of unequal forces for which the majorities are condemned to be free, but only at the level of consumption and never at the level of production.

Armand: This is a key issue.

Michèle: And yet, we cannot deny that the methodological approach is now more accurate. We must recognize that many mistakes have been made in the past. We were lost within many mechanisms. And I mean it; a lot of mechanisms. It is not because a particular ethnic group watches *Dallas* that it will necessarily adopt the behaviors of the characters in *Dallas*. We must be aware of the significant impasses that this linear and simplistic methodological approach used to run into.

Armand: Of course. It is not because someone watches *Dallas* that they will end up having their minds *agringadas*.

Mario: But wouldn't it be possible – I push a provocative hypothesis as a twist – to consider the reverse interpretation? If said group enjoys *Dallas*, if they like and continuously watch it, is it due to a certain affinity or consensus regarding the values on which the series is built?

Michèle: (*laughs*) Oh, I am not falling into your trap.

Armand: I would answer with another *provocative hypothesis* that kind of goes in the same direction as yours and is a reality within the current strategies

used by big transnational advertising agencies. These companies – which, in fact, constantly study and probe the consumer – have now concluded that what they call the degree of *audiovisual literacy* of the world's populations has changed dramatically in the past ten years.

Consequently, there is a need to consider all this accumulation of television experience, this degree of audiovisual literacy that viewers from the most diverse cultures and latitudes have access to, in the production of their advertising pieces. Thus, they incorporated this novelty into their strategy to increase sales of products that profess this change. It is imperative to know how to work with the memory built by mass culture over the years. This does not necessarily translate into a new constituted personality, but it is true that there is a new memory across today's popular audiences; a memory that makes the spectator watching a commercial read it in a way that they would not have ten years prior. There is a custom, a new symbol identification system; new codes that have been incorporated.

We live in societies in which mass culture has made huge investments for many years. And it capitalizes on those investments today. Do you want proof? Nowadays, a Nicaraguan child does not like, or is not attracted to cartoons coming from Eastern countries; quite the opposite, they demand and need the pacing, the rhythmic tempo of Japanese and North American animated series. I believe that this finding is part of an answer to the hypothesis you raised. Without saying that, due to this trend or preference, Nicaraguan children will necessarily end up *agringadas*, we are forced to accept and consider the perception of time that the mass culture has imprinted.

Mario: What kind of pleasure? Already in a perspective of recapitulation: we started this dialogue by evoking that ideological reading that the critical current of messages and that now, throughout this conversation, was perceived by you as a limited reading, reducing of the communication phenomena. However, without ever leaving the balance between continuities and ruptures, do you believe that something maintains its validity within this ideological reading?

Michèle: I certainly do. What was shattered is that structuralist position that made of the intellectual the depository of the “keys of meaning.” We must definitively step away from this postulate; assume that the recipients are also the owners of the codes – although even this qualification of owners must be sufficiently nuanced: we already know that there are social determinations that act and imprint their brand within the codes and means of reception. However, in the light of this new paradigm of pleasure, the researcher must

ask if a part of this pleasure would not ultimately involve adhering to the ideology offered by these mass culture products. In other words, they would resume the ideological reading and rescue it in the light of this new pleasure data. Does this pleasure entail adherence to the reactionary ideology that articulates the messages of mass culture?

Mario: Is it a question or a statement?

Michèle: A question; but supported and grounded in experiences we live – in an embryonic and incipient way, although extraordinarily rich and intense – in Chile during the years of Popular Unity, in which we proved that it was extremely hard to infuse liberating contents to the formats of mass culture, inverting their signal. It seems that the fascination that these genres exert is strongly linked to some content that, if we may not be able to qualify exactly as reactionaries, we must at least recognize that they pose serious ideological problems.

(“Wow!” I tell myself. So Michèle is remarkably close to validating that provocative hypothesis that I just launched, and she seemed to reject at once. But I cannot point this out to her, because soon Armand brings up another relevant statement).

Armand: I think we must point out that a perverse effect of this consumer-centered paradigm can be that it leads people to forget the importance of continuously caring for the product. If it is true that the structuralist method of what we would call the first linguistic generation – the one that thought that only a scientist could perform that ideological reading – showed its limits and has been overcome for years, it is important to note also that there are new currents within Linguistics itself trying to articulate sender, receiver, and text (or product).

So, I believe that you should *not fall into trends. All previous issues persist. The issue of power continues.* (Armand emphasizes. Marking that firm tone he uses with these phrases). What has changed is the paradigm behind the analysis of how it works.

The important thing today is to situate the analysis of communication systems from different inputs, multiple angles, and different disciplines: Economics, Anthropology, Political Sociology, etc. And also incorporating the fact that the notion of communication is increasingly inserted into the physical sciences, the environmental sciences, the life sciences. These are new challenges that we had no idea about ten years ago.

Mario: Michèle's answer leads me to a new question. (*I see they are exhausted. I feel heartless. Therefore:*) And I promise you this will be the last.

Michèle: (*with his sweetest smile, but blunt resolution*) Yes. It will certainly be the last.

(*In my mind, five, ten possible questions fight for preference. I must choose one. The answers will prove that I did not make the worst of decisions.*)

Mario: Michèle, you have repeatedly referred to the *paradigm of pleasure*. Are you certain that the relationship that the viewer establishes with television can be expressed under the category of *pleasure*? Or is it of another nature?

Michèle: (*thinks for a moment. So:*) It can be... the pleasure of misery.

Mario: How so?

Michèle: Pleasure... This is a difficult subject... It is a questionable topic... The pleasure that television provides... Oh, I think I am going to do very badly with that question. Do you really have to ask it?

Mario: No, it is not essential, of course. But it is a subject to conjecture, don't you think?

Michèle: It is the very notion of pleasure that must be discussed. The pleasure of consuming television... It is a kind of pleasure. But a miserable one. In Pasolini's words: "Yes, it is a pleasure, but what kind of pleasure is it about?"

Armand: Let us say that it is certainly not the pleasure that Brecht aspired when he spoke of the pleasure of transforming the world.

Michèle: Oh, no. It is more like the pleasure of keeping things as they are. The pleasure of forgetting misery for a moment.

On the way back to Havana, I had to face the censorship of all the important issues that Mattelart's lack of time and fatigue – and perhaps also my own limitation – prevented me from asking about. However, I believe that based on the questions asked, there is already more than enough material for reflection and discussion concerning the new paradigms and perspectives of rupture and continuity that they inhabit. A discussion now more necessary than ever. ■

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