

Cultural Crisis and Reconstruction of Meaning through Mass

Media: Art in a Global Village**

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Paper Outline

- Art as impersonal communication
 - The development of reception
- The context for the reception, meaning and functions of art
 - The risks
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 - The cultural asymmetries
- The new chances
- The crisis

1. Art as impersonal communication

The development of mass communication created new possibilities for all forms of artistic communication, and new forms of art as well. I think that this well-known and therefore trivial fact reveals only one side of the coin. Actually, what has been set by the dawn of the 20th century is nothing less than a new type of cultural reality. This type of reality is and means a

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** This is a draft text of the final paper. Graphs and figures were presented as slides.

lot more than a mere “mechanical” combination between art and some new forms of communication. The birth of a new internal relation is signified by the development of the artistic into a form of mass – that is into a form of impersonal – communication. The appreciation of this development can be seen in the vast amount of literature concerning mass media that includes explicitly the consideration of several forms of art – like the cinema or music. It can also be seen in the sociological analysis approaching art as a form of communication. Besides, artistic communication by its very nature incorporates several features typical for mass communication. An opera, a play or a symphony could hardly accomplish the process of symbolic and aesthetic communication without being exposed to an audience.

The development of the artistic into a form of mass communication had already been routed several centuries ago. Technological and artistic developments like typography, the theater and the opera on the one hand and the formation of modern societies – based on the universal domination of commodity relations – on the other, provided this direction of development. The stage, the concert hall and later on the cinema theater – as institutions for performance and reception – are based on this type of relations. During modernity, artistic communication could hardly exist on a mass scale, without commodity relations. In modern societies no form of art could accomplish the process of artistic communication without exposure to an audience ready to pay – either on an individual or on a collective basis – for the right to have access to the performance regardless of its concrete form (i.e. either presented on stage, or on screen or captured in a recording). Nevertheless, despite its deep roots in the past, mass communication developed in an unprecedented way during the 20th century and – especially by the end of this century – this development led to a new cultural reality.

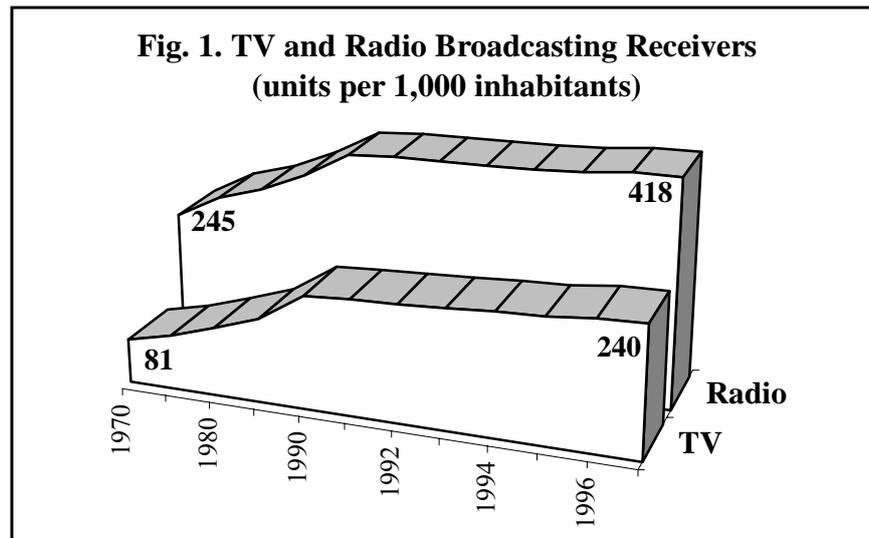
In broad strokes, the development of the artistic into mass communication and the subsequent changes in reception – both as a social practice and interpretative process – can be seen in three phases, each dominated by a different type of dissemination.

- **The reproduction phase.** The reproduction of text on a mass scale, the reproduction of images and later on of moving images and sound provided – within the framework of modern social relations – a new environment for the production, dissemination and reception of art. That is, new conditions emerged for the process of artistic communication to take place. During this phase the formation of distribution networks for the art products has been crucial. A system of agents and retail services was created: book and music stores, cinema theaters, galleries etc. Along with the book publishing, the music and film industry that created a part of them, these networks have been for a long time major control and management institutions for the symbolic and aesthetic forms created by artists. It was during this

long phase that the displacement of the meaning and functions of these forms emerged, as art was becoming an autonomous form of social practice. And it was during this phase that the foundations of the contemporary global industry of culture were laid.

- **The broadcast phase.** The appearance of broadcasting, that is the long distance transmission (the so-called “airing”) signified a second phase. Like typography, broadcasting is not just an extension of the ability to communicate. Neither did art just make use of a new dissemination technology. The extraordinary expansion of the capability to disseminate symbolic and aesthetic forms actually meant the emergence of new types of artistic communication. In several forms of art – like music for example – the work is completely detached from the concrete circumstances of its creation and ceases to be functional. It is no longer connected with particular social events. To be more accurate, the displacement of functions and meaning that started during the previous phase became the norm. Its quality as an exception faded out as the new media that appeared embraced art. Next to the “traditional” cultural industries and their distribution networks – as institutions for the production and dissemination of art on a mass scale – new institutions appear: the radio and the television. In terms of controlling and managing the flows of cultural goods these institutions are far more powerful. By nature they are multifunctional, that is they are not art, entertainment or news dedicated and trends of convergence appear on this basis. The multifunctional feature of these media is an intrinsic condition for the colonization of various extra-artistic sectors and forms of communication by artistic and aesthetic elements (e.g. dramatized news). On the other hand, the aesthetic experience is trivialized and pushed to the background and the meaning is displaced (e.g. Bizet’s *Carmen* in a cleaner commercial that uses also some choreography and lyrics adapted to the commercial message or Mozart’s *Requiem* in yoghurt ads). Actually, through radio and television the aesthetic experience is displaced in the most unusual social and physical places and circumstances. Since artistic communication becomes something that happens *inter alia*, reception is fragmentized and cultural creations are expropriated for inappropriate purposes. Yet, it is precisely through these media that large parts of population got access to a wider range of cultural goods. The worldwide distribution of television and radio broadcasting receivers can be seen as an indicator (fig. 1¹).

¹ Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (http://portal.unesco.org/uis/TEMPLATE/html/CultAndCom/Table_IV_S_3.html, 12/5/2003). Data adapted from the UNESCO 1999 Statistical Yearbook.

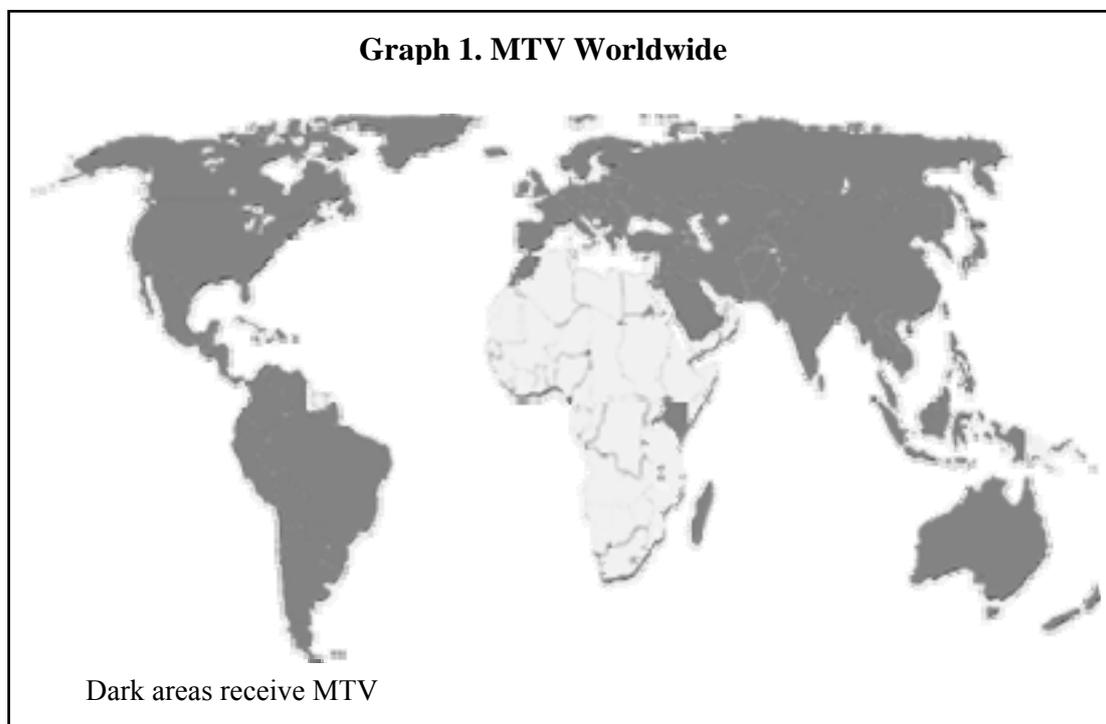


- **The Internet phase.** Finally, digitalization, dissemination and interactivity shift human perception as they compress the time and space needed to communicate symbolic and aesthetic forms. Spatial and temporal constraints fade out. These developments entail new structural modification of the artistic communication and introduce new modes of reception as well. Moreover, new forms of art are introduced – like hybrids, 3D computer modeling, new types of installations, performances, sound art etc. Cultural industries change also as they develop into transnational multimedia corporations that comprise several forms of art. They produce and promote aesthetic and symbolic forms as ever-expanding series of “revenue streams” no longer tied to particular carriers. Text, image and sound are no longer tied to paper, film, vinyl, tape or any specific carrier. Furthermore, the structural changes that result in the formation of multimedia corporations result also in flexible specialization. A new mode of production – based on technological advancement – allows coping with taste fragmentation of viewers, readers and listeners dispersed all over the world, combining both high market concentration and high diversity.

2. A complex and contradictory context for the reception, meaning and functions of art

This rough outline indicates that reception – both as a social practice and interpretative process – changes in a highly complicated and contradictory context. The development of transnational multimedia corporations – technically based on the convergence of all types of cultural goods on the digital mode – along with the collapse of spatial and temporal constraints in favor of a few privileged countries advances a tendency towards a greater concentration and closer control of the artistic creation and dissemination. It favors the expansion and re-

production of the reified social relations thus disintegrating local cultures and finally expanding cultural hegemony. The Music TeleVision (MTV) is a good example for this type of expansion (graph 1²) as well as for the elimination of the distinction between entertainment and advertisement. In this case the displacement of the meaning and functions of a certain



form of art is really a global phenomenon that only a few – least developed and developing countries – got lightly off for the time being. Nevertheless, the MTV channel is not a good example for broadcasting and promoting cultural diversity, but rather for narrowcasting and targeting a niche audience, although – according to some estimation – it is larger than that of the CNN channel.

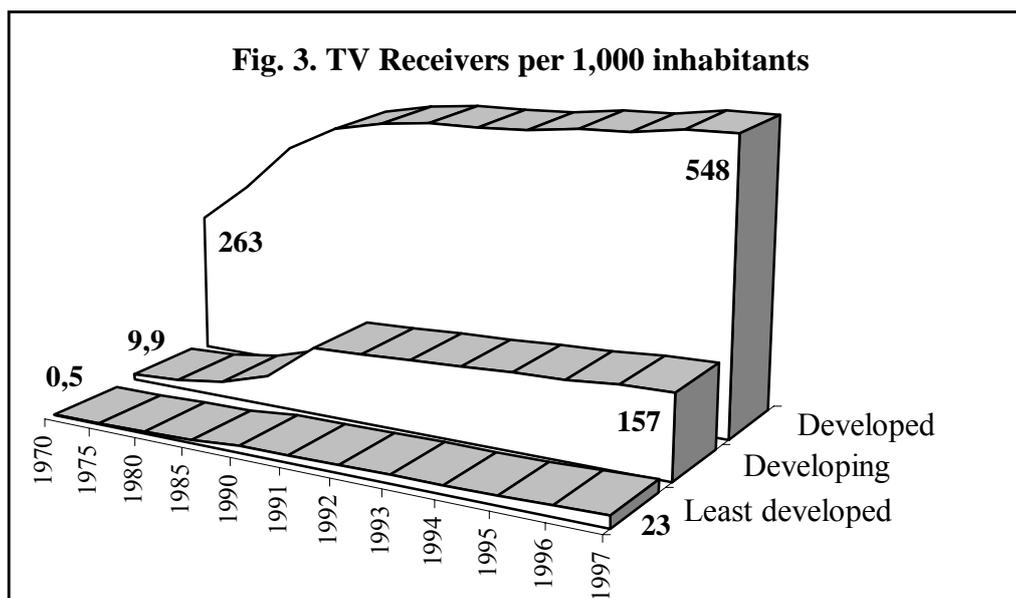
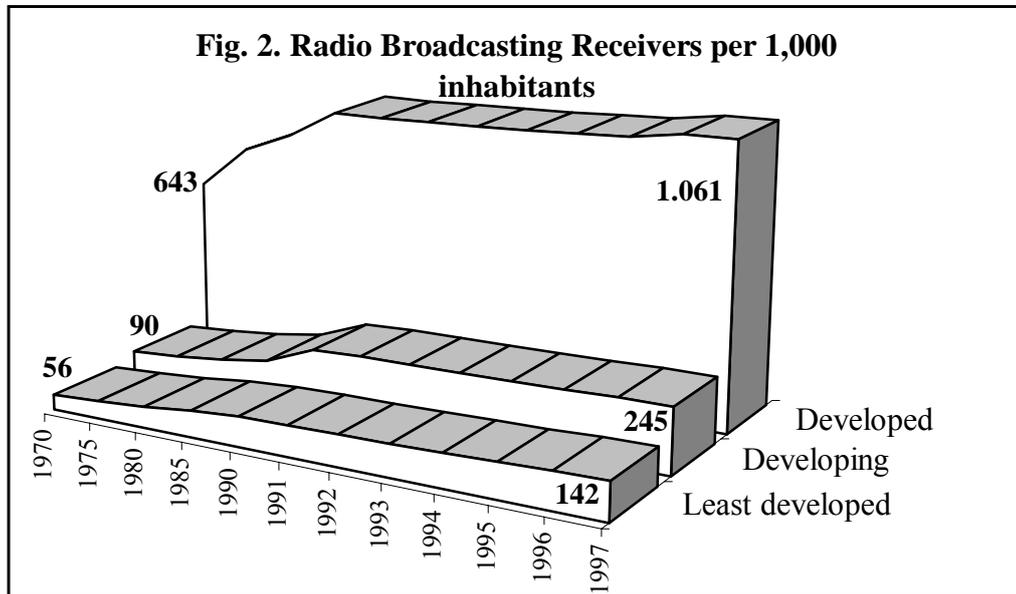
The tendencies mentioned are only a part of the complex and contradictory context where changes in reception take place. Major contradictions and asymmetries are inherited from the broadcast to the Internet phase. As it is already noted “much that seems new in contemporary culture carries within itself unresolved contradictions of the past” (Lipsitz, 1997: 19).

First, *the infrastructure divide* between different groups of countries provides some of these contradictions. The evolution of the radio broadcasting receivers divide between the different groups of countries (fig. 2³) indicates that in 1970 in the developed countries per 1,000 inhabitants there were 587 more radio broadcasting receivers compared with the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and 553 compared with the developing countries. In 1997 in the de-

² Source: Barber, 2001: 180-181, after J. Sinclair.

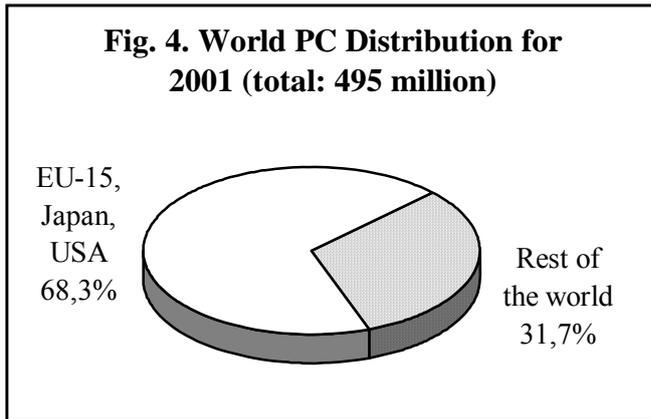
³ Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (http://portal.unesco.org/uis/TEMPLATE/html/CultAndCom/Table_IV_S_3.html, 12/5/2003). Data adapted from the UNESCO 1999 Statistical Yearbook.

veloped countries per 1,000 inhabitants there were 919 more radio broadcasting receivers compared with the LDCs and 816 compared with the developing countries. This divide does not seem to shrink in almost 30 years.



The evolution of the TV receivers divide between the different groups of countries (fig. 3⁴) also indicates that in 1970 in the developed countries per 1,000 inhabitants there were 262,5 more TV receivers compared with the LDCs and 253,1 compared with the developing countries. In 1997 in the developed countries per 1,000 inhabitants there were 525 more TV receivers compared with the LDCs and 391 compared with the developing countries. This divide does not seem to shrink in almost 30 years. Neither this divide seems to be shrinking for

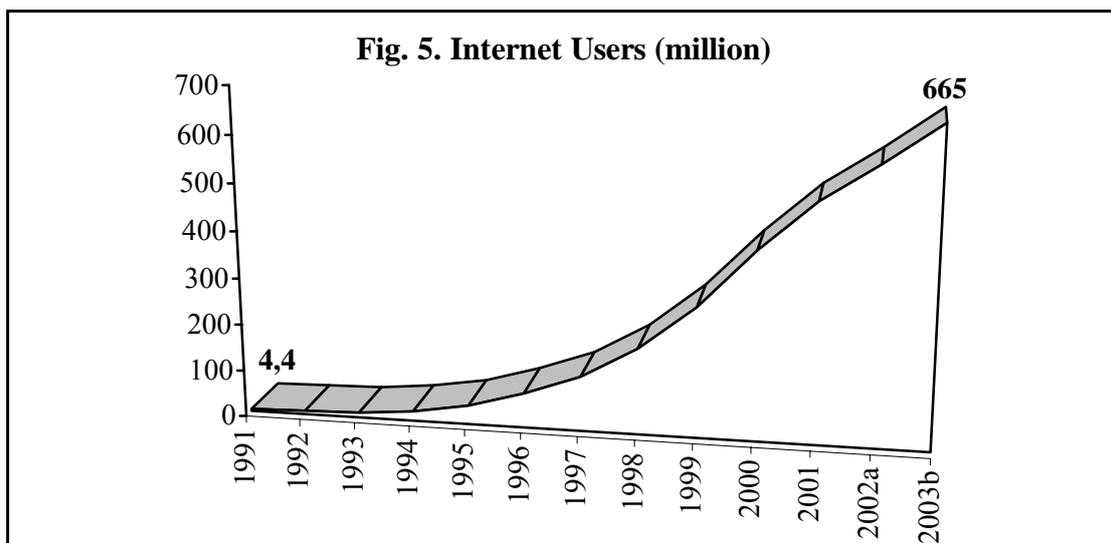
⁴ Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (http://portal.unesco.org/uis/TEMPLATE/html/CultAndCom/Table_IV_S_3.html, 12/5/2003). Data adapted from the UNESCO 1999 Statistical Yearbook.



the same period of time. For the digital technology the infrastructure divide is not a minor one (fig. 4⁵).

Second, the infrastructure divide between different groups of countries entails a *divide of access*. The population having access to Internet is growing (fig. 5⁶), but the data on user distribution by income group of countries is quite explicit (fig. 6⁷).

According to the United Nations International Telecommunication Union (ITU) the 85% of the 280 million Internet users by January 2000 belong to the 15% of the world population with high income. It is obvious that the dissemination and interactivity through this form of communication is not yet global, although there is a strong tendency to be, since the so-called “digital divide” is shrinking.



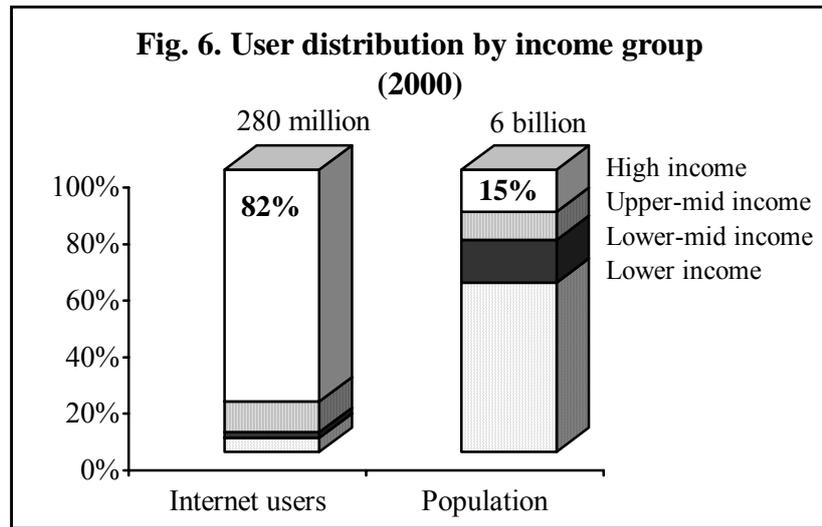
Third, there are several *cultural asymmetries* that should be taken into account, in order to delineate the context of the artistic communication in contemporary world. Apart from the already mentioned concentration of the control over the communication channels and the uneven access to technology, the uneven access to distribution channels, the uneven international system of the intellectual property rights should also be considered. Finally, there is an uneven distribution of cultural capital within local societies that is associated with the reception of art and the aesthetic experience. The social challenge for both the cultural policy and education and for the media as well on a local level is not to create a common culture in order

⁵ Source: EUROSTAT, 2003.

⁶ Source: International Telecommunication Union. Key Global Telecom Indicators for the World Telecommunication Service Sector (http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at_glance/KeyTelecom99.html, 12/5/2003).

⁷ Source: ITU, 2002: 13.

to have cultural capital equally distributed (Garnham, 2000: 161), but rather to ensure equal chances for access to cultural diversity and to creative displacement of the meaning and functions of art. This is not the romantic ideal for a



restoration of the meaning and functions allocated to art in pre-modern societies. It is rather an effort to grasp the displacement of the meaning and functions of the art in a changing world.

3. The new chances and the crisis

To overlook the chances created during the Internet phase would be equally unreasonable as to overlook the risks and the asymmetries already mentioned. Despite the digital divide, it is a fact that there is a good chance for new types of cultural interaction to emerge, since the “traditional” distribution systems disintegrate. The new technology, the new modes of cultural production and the changes in communications create better chances for local or regional cultures to spread worldwide and to promote dialogue instead of the expansion of cultural hegemony. Better chances are created for the enrichment and development of local cultures as cultural goods alternative to the mainstream have better dissemination possibilities and the process of inter-cultural dialogue and interaction is expanded and intensified more than ever. Furthermore, artists and recipients may interact rejuvenating a type of artistic communication and aesthetic experience that has been displaced by certain types of mediation. Neither this complies to the ideal of restoration. Besides, as it has been noted “concepts of cultural practice that privilege autonomous, ‘authentic,’ and non-commercial culture as the only path to emancipation do not reflect adequately the complexities of culture and commerce in the contemporary world” (Liptitz, 1997: 16). Moreover, they do not reflect adequately the complexities of the relations between art, economy, education and politics.

Nevertheless, it is precisely the coexistence of these particular risks and chances that specify the contemporary cultural crisis worldwide (graph 2). Cultural policy and cultural education acquire a central role in this respect both on a local and on an international level. The mediated development of the artistic communication and the aesthetic experience in some

Graph 2. Cultural Crisis

Risks		Chances
Greater concentration and closer control	↔	Democratization of cultural life
Expansion of reified & alienated relations	↔	Alternative cultural expression
Disintegration of local cultures	↔	Enrichment and development
Expansion of cultural hegemony	↔	Dialogue between different cultures

form of escape through amusement has nothing to do with the liberating and emancipating process embedded in the Aristotelian concept of catharsis. This is another type of meaning and functions displacement, comprehensible in societies where borderlines fade out and new types of syncretism emerge. Yet, it is up to the local cultural policy and cultural education to take advantage of the chance to remodel and renovate the artistic communication and the aesthetic experience under these conditions, and – if not to avoid – at least to reduce the risks associated with this type of mediated manipulation. In fact, this is a social challenge for media as well.

4. References

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