

COMMUNICATION IN THE ARTS

In this paper I want to discuss first, generally what is meant by communication in the arts, and then, very briefly, how it takes place in the theatre. The theory I am proposing is by no means complete, the problem of communication in the arts can only be meaningfully understood through an analysis of the numerous conventions and techniques with which the artist works and which form not only his stock in trade but provide him the channels through which he can communicate his visualization. Every art form develops through tradition certain symbols and practices which the artist manipulates in his own way in order to achieve unique effects; these symbols are the result as much of the cultural consciousness of the artist as of his own original experiments with pure form and structure. Nonetheless, they must be understood by the public in order to make communication with the artist meaningful. The analysis of the enormous empirical data is not the kind of undertaking I propose in this paper. I have the limited objective of outlining a tentative explanation as to what is meant when we talk about communication in the sphere of art activity.

In the first place, it is important to realise that the kind of communication that takes place in the arts is quite different from the kind that takes place in the sciences or in everyday discourse. Though this fact seems so evident as to be almost commonplace, it is one that is not always clearly understood, with the result that inferences from one sphere of enquiry are carried over into the other and give rise to ambiguities. In science as in all other disciplines based on the discursive faculty of the mind communication is through concepts, ideas and thoughts, that is, through the intellectual capacity to analyze, infer, abstract and symbolize. Formulation is of ideas, not of images, of abstract form and not of concrete feeling. Aesthetic communication however leaves the sphere of rational discourse. The meaning an artist seeks to convey is of reality as it is experienced and lived through, not as it is described or stated; he is not engaged in intellection but in visualization. Croce emphasises this fact by declaring that the artistic activity is based on intuition (which he takes to be a process of intense and clear

imagining) and not on thinking. Imagination, which the artist employs in his creative endeavour, is the expression of feeling. The fabric of art is fundamentally feeling, which lends itself to formation through the created image.

Communication in art is basically the communication of feeling and it is precisely in understanding this, that the difficulty arises. Feeling is always private and subjective; how can it be publicly verified? Moreover, it might be asked: What is the validity of choosing a particular set of symbols as against another or of formulating a particular pattern of images in preference to another? Imagination, it can be argued, does not conform to the laws of rational discourse and hence seems to imply a descent into delusion and fancy.

As long as the symbols employed in a work of art are confined to the imitation of natural events and objects the artist's intention is understood. Everyone can approve the precise representation of familiar objects drawn from our material environment, but when the work has no longer any obvious link with sense experience, the legitimacy of the images is questioned and a criterion sought for their acceptability.

The communication of feeling can be rationally explained if we understand the various sets of conditions which make it possible, namely:

1. Those which make for a similarity in the aesthetic sensibility of the artist and the spectator.
2. Those which generalize the feeling, removing it from the privacy of the artist's psychological state and objectifying it in the work.
3. Those which evoke and recreate in the spectators consciousness, a feeling similar to that which the artist undergoes whereby he does not only understand it, but actually experiences and lives it.

The first set of conditions referred to, namely those which demand subjective similarity between the artist and the beholder, become possible if both strive to acquire a state of mind free from personal considerations, as also from intellectual categories. Filtered of everyday reactions and detached from

practical interest, such a state is aesthetic, because it becomes potentially sensitive and open to perceive any idea or image in its intrinsic quality. A spectator must be an aesthetic spectator if he is to grasp the artist's intention, while the artist, through his work, can create the appropriate aesthetic attitude in the spectator; however, it is not wholly his responsibility to do so. His work becomes truly meaningful when the public feels a creative obligation almost equal to his and the spectator employs his imagination at its fullest sensitivity; else the labour of the artist is sterilised.

The artist is responsible, however, for the second set of conditions, namely, those which formulate or objectify his feeling in the art object. Even when a spectator is in the potentially aesthetic state and in primary identity with the artist, he may not be able to achieve a perfect communication due to being out of touch with the artist's medium and mode of externalization. While every medium offers challenges and possibilities understood by the artist alone, he can make his intention clear, by employing those techniques which render his objectification comprehensible. This can be called the generalizing process, by which is meant the choosing of those formal structures, or as in the case of the theatre arts, those moods and emotions, which lend themselves more readily to universalization. There are certain recurring themes, both in terms of pure form and subjective content which have a permanent psychological appeal. The appropriateness or fitness of these themes can often be grasped even by untrained minds, if they are simple, because they belong to the instinctive pattern of the human mind. No matter how wild or chaotic the imagination is, in its subjective fancy it will always want to return to order, to a focus point with which it can identify and wherein it finds rest. Every working artist is aware of this, indeed his entire challenge and strife are to provide resolution, by balancing all the contrasting elements in such a way that the mind finds rest and pleasure in the final harmony but not monotony. The choice of such themes, symbols and patterns which go deeper into the structure of the human psyche as against those which have an adventitious and superficial appeal, help to objectify the spectator's consciousness and bring it into further identity with the artist. The theory of *rasa* and *bhāva* in the Indian performing

arts represent an attempt to structure the entire gamut of human experience in terms of feeling and mood into nine permanent and thirty-three transitory states. The nine permanent states answering closely to MacDougalls classification of psychological instincts,¹ provide the points of resolution around which the thirty-three fleeting mental states revolve in a variety of contrasts. The resolution does not take place only at one single moment, but there is a progressive return to it, whereby it is clearly understood and marked. If, for instance, the dominant feeling is one of love (*Sṛṅāra*) it is accentuated and bolstered by a countless variety of moods in their passing phases such as anxiety, annoyance, waiting, longing, impatience etc.,—the Indian aestheticians refer to this as the stringing of a variety of coloured beads in a single thread. Every art form has its generally accepted thematic and structural principles; communication in the arts can take place when the artist is successfully able to project these and the spectator to identify them.

The last set of conditions mentioned above, namely those which permit an evocation in the spectator similar to that which the artist intended, become possible if the other two have been adhered to, that is, if the mind has been initially filtered of all practical considerations and intellectual categories and brought to a state of purity. This is the state in which receptivity is heightened to the maximum; the Indian aestheticians compare it to a crystal clear mirror, or a pool of purified water. The normal modulations of the intellection being at rest, the consciousness becomes capable of focusing on the imaginative. The artist, the quality of whose consciousness is similarly aesthetic, creates the work primarily as an imaginative form, employing techniques which suspend the interference of the intellect and of highly personalized reactions. In the theatre, for instance, in order to suspend disbelief the dramatist employs a number of conventions such as the systematic use of dress, lights, music, poetry etc., the sheer artificiality of the stage heightened by the artificiality of the conventions² succeeds in detaching the emotion so to speak from the privacy of the actor and spectators' psyche and objectifying it. Uncircumscribed by the conditions of actual time and space, the emotion is released from the highly personalized aspect of the individual ego, yet is in contact with its

essential feeling tone. Thus it creates not only the appropriate evocation but permits the spectator to actually relive with the actor the entire experience. The perception of the art work by the spectator is really an after-perception, but because of the experiential recreation he undergoes, it acts like a direct perception. The cognitive art of visualization leads to a non-cognitive emotional participating. As long as the impersonality of the entire aesthetic situation is maintained by both the artist and the spectator, while being in identity with its basic feeling tone, communication continues to function. It is snapped when either party breaks the agreement by withdrawing any one of the conditions. This withdrawal which takes place generally due to certain mental limitations in the case of either side destroys the experience because it creates certain vacuum or interference in an otherwise compact and homogeneous state of consciousness—a state of consciousness which the artist and the spectator achieve as a result of an intricately balanced state of interaction. This is more clearly understood in the case of the performing arts, where the artist as performer is in direct contact with the audience. The argument, however, could be extended to the graphic arts. This is the only sense in which communication in the arts can take place

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NOTES

¹ Except for the ninth rasa, represented as peace (śānta)

² Even highly realistic dramas are by no means natural. The convention of the box theatre itself creates an artificial situation.

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