

Published in  
*Annali della Facoltà di Lingue e Letterature Straniere*  
Terza serie /2000/XIV, Fasano, Schena Editore, pp. 47-61.

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### **Storytelling and the great narration of global communication**

The aim of this paper is to consider the practice of storytelling present throughout all world cultures whether orally, in writing or through the various nonverbal sign systems at our disposal, and contrast this practice with the great narration of global communication as it characterizes the world today.

Telling stories is a practice with traces throughout the whole world interconnecting different peoples in a way that is altogether different from the kind of interconnection achieved through recent forms of global communication. And as emerges from the patrimony of legends, fables, myths, and stories common to humanity, storytelling has acted as a sort of connective tissue throughout the centuries allowing for the circulation of common themes, subjects, values and discourse genres through time as well. However, as much as storytelling is a common practice shared by different peoples it also differentiates them, favouring encounter and mutual understanding.

On the contrary, given its subservience to the global market and condition of general commodification, global communication leads to homologation and levelling of the differences unless they are related to competition, conflict and mutual exclusion.

Narrativity today unfolds through different discourse genres, including the novel, and through different media which are not only writing and orality, but cinema for example. The common aspect of storytelling is that it is always an end in itself and is founded uniquely in the pleasure of involving and listening to the other. This aspect distinguishes what we intend by storytelling from the type of narrativity that serves power: the power of control and punishment (the story told to the judge or police commissariat), the power of information (journalistic chronicles), the power of healing (the case history, the story that interests the psychoanalyst), the power of redeeming and saving (the story told at confession), the power of registering and of establishing the Sense of History (reconstruction of the facts by the historian, etc.).

Global communication is functional to the order of discourse; on the contrary, story-telling suspends the order of discourse offering a space for reflection, critical re-thinking, dialogue, encounter, hospitality.

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The expression "telling stories" refers to the practice of storytelling, of narrating stories, as well as to the signifying value and import of stories, stories that are telling, significant, and to the value of storytelling as a practice.

In the current phase of capitalistic production, economy confirms identification between being and communication. In this phase, characterised by the industrial revolution of automation, by the processes of the globalisation of communication and of the universalisation of the market (which does not simply consist in the quantitative fact of expansion, but also and above all in a fact of quality, represented both by the translatability of anything into goods and by the production of new goods-things), communication is no longer just an intermediate phase in the production cycle (production, exchange, consumption) but has become the constitutive modality of production and consumption processes. Not only is exchange communication, but production and consumption are also communication. So the whole productive cycle is communication. This phase in capitalistic production can be characterised as the "communication-production" phase.

Communication-production is the communication of the world as it is today. It is *global* communication, not only in the sense that it has expanded over the whole planet but also in the sense that it sticks to and relates to the world, it accomodates the world. It may be better to say: it is communication of this world. Communication and reality, communication and being coincide. Realistic politics (and if it is not realistic, it is not politics) is politics which is appropriate for global communication, for the being of communication-production. The relationship between politics and ontology (politics proper which as such is pre-disposed for war, the crudest and most brutally realistic face of being) is nowadays specified as the relation with the ontology of being communication, which is world communication, communication-production.

On the other hand, persistence of communication-reproduction is *persistence of the same social form*, the capitalistic. Capitalist society with its continual adjustments and metamorphoses functional to its maintainance has not yet ceased to set, has not

yet finished finishing, in spite of its only having emerged at sunset (Hegel's noctule), in spite of the signs of its finishing. Only ideology that is functional to the maintenance of capitalism will identify *being*, in this case *being communication-production*, with the *being communication* of social reproduction in general. Such identification is so close that the capitalist phase in social reproduction would seem to be natural for the human being, the only possibility, as though it were an inherent part of human nature. In other words, once high levels of economic growth, cultural perfection and scientific-technological progress have been reached according to the processes of linear development, *being communication* is passed off as being a necessary and unchangeable modality of existence for the human species.

We shall now return to the communication-ontology relationship in the current form of global communication-production. *Global*, as we mentioned, not only in the sense that it expands over the whole planet, but also in the sense that it fits the world and is adequate for it, for this world, so that communication is reality, so that communication and being coincide. Realism in politics must keep faith to ontology thus described and even goes as far as to accept the *extrema ratio* of war as dictated by the inexorable law of the force of things. World planning for the ongoing development of communication and for its control goes hand in hand with reinforcement and continuing assertion of the being of communication-production. This plan is based on the full awareness of the productive character of communication and of the identification of communication with being as now achieved in the current phase in capitalist communication-production society. But, as hinted above, this plan is also based on the clear awareness that the command of capital can only be achieved by controlling communication. Communication-production ideology, therefore, is the ideology of full control over communication. It is so realistic, so coherent, so consistent with the being of things as they are presented to us without hesitating to flaunt the good news of the end of ideologies that communication-production ideology appears, in fact, more like the logic of communication-production than its ideology. Let us propose then the expression "*ideo-logic*" of *global communication-production* for the phenomenon we are describing. Indeed, as already hinted, the ideology functional to maintaining this particular social form ends by passing it off, in good or bad faith, as corresponding to social reproduction in general. On the contrary, social reproduction must escape from the established order, the being-communication order, to reinvent and reorganise social relations and therefore get free of social systems like the current one which actually obstacle and endanger social reproduction itself.

The preservation of the being of communication-production is destructive in character. Reproduction of the same production cycle is destructive:

- of machines which it replaces with new machines, not because of wear but because of competitive needs;

- of jobs, to make space for automation, with the subsequent increase of unemployment; of products on the market, stimulating forms of consumerism which are wholly at the service of reproduction of the production cycle;

- of previous products, which once already purchased would exhaust the demand, by means of bringing out new similar products which immediately make the former obsolete;

- of goods and markets, which cannot withstand the competitiveness of global communication-production.

The *conatus essendi* of communication-production is destructive of natural environments and life forms. It is also destructive of different economies and cultural differences which the processes of homologation operated by market logic cancel to the point of rendering not only habits of behaviour and needs identical (though the possibility of satisfying such needs is never identical), but also desires and the imaginary. It is also destructive of traditions and cultural patrimonies that contrast with or obstacle or are simply useless to the logic of development, productivity and competition.

The *conatus essendi* of communication-production destroys those productive forces that tend to escape the limits of the current forms of production. And therefore the forces of intelligence, inventiveness, creativity are all humiliated and mortified by their subjection to market trends, "to market logic".

The destructive character of the current form of production is also made evident by the fact that it produces increasingly large and increasingly widespread areas of underdevelopment as a condition of development, areas of human exploitation and misery to the point of nonsurvival. This causes the spreading phenomena of migration which the "developed" countries are unable to contain due to objective internal space limitations — such limitations being undoubtedly greater than in other forms and phases of social organisation.

Global communication-production is also destructive because it is the communication-production of war. War needs ever new markets to place its conventional and unconventional weapons. War also needs ever more widespread approval by which it is recognised as just and necessary, as a necessary means of defence against increasing dangers represented by the menacing "other", and as a

means of obtaining respect for the rights of one's "own identity", "one's own difference". In fact, the values of identity and difference are not at all threatened or destroyed by the "other". Paradoxically it is this social form itself that is destructive for while on the one hand it encourages and promotes identity and difference, on the other it renders such values totally fictitious and phantasmal. At the same time, this is exactly why they are clung to parossistially: and from the viewpoint of the communication-production of war this is no doubt a good thing.

Destructive in character is the universalization of the market, that is, extension of the character of merchandise to everything and to all relationships, and the more illegal and illicit such merchandise is, the more it is expensive: drugs, human organs, children, uteruses, etc. The principle of exploiting other people's work is already destructive in itself. When labour is paid by the hour the less it costs, the more it produces profit: developed countries are increasingly turning to low cost work in underdeveloped areas, with the help of global communication ("stay where you are, we'll bring work to you"). Something which evidences the shame of the communication-production world even more clearly is the widespread use of children for heavy and dangerous work (much needs to be said and done about children as today's victims of underdevelopment, misery, war, about children on the streets, in illness, in work, on the market).

This almost total correspondence in the human world between communication and communication-production, at least at the level of ideology and planning, means that the *conatus essendi* of the subject, both individual and collective, the assertion and confirmation of identity, both individual and collective, coincide with the *conatus essendi* and with the preservation and reproduction of the advanced phase of capitalist society. They are in fact the subjects and the identities produced by this particular social form. However, we have observed how this phase in socio-economic development contrasts not only with human life but with life in general to the very point of proving fatal to being and therefore to communication.

World communication is subject to the world market and to general commodification as it characterizes today's communication-production society. As such one of the distinctive features of world communication today is the tendency to homologation, to leveling the differences. To compensate, homologation gives rise to delusory identities, individualisms, separatisms and egoisms of both the individual and communitary order, which are complementary to competitiveness, conflict, mutual exclusion. The parossistic search for identity paradoxically excludes otherness. Consequently, the kind of difference necessary to identity for recognition and self assertion is indifferent difference, that is, difference that is indifferent to

other differences. Indifferent difference is achieved through sacrificing otherness to various degrees and in varying ways, where our reference is to both internal otherness, to what internally identifies with difference, and external otherness, the difference of others.

On the contrary, storytelling is a common practice that does not deny the differences but if anything exalts them and relates them on the basis of the principle of mutual hospitality. Not only does storytelling favour encounter and mutual understanding among different peoples, but is itself structurally and genetically the expression of putting differences together as dialogical relationships are established across languages and discourse genres, based on hospitality and on an interest for the other. Storytelling has acted as a sort of connective tissue among peoples throughout the centuries thereby favouring the circulation of varying themes, subjects, values and discourse genres. This emerges strongly in the presentday from our common patrimony of legends, tales, stories, myths, parables, sayings, proverbs, etc. In storytelling, communication with the other which nowadays tends to be pathologically goal-oriented, that is, centred around one's own interestedness, one's own gain, is replaced by communication where what counts is the *interesting*, where the relationship with the other is based on one's interest in the other as other.

Nowadays the practice of telling stories is manifested in different types of discourse, in different discourse genres including the novel which among literary genres is the most representative of our times. Also story telling today is developed through different kinds of media such as cinema, and not just through writing and orality. The shared aspect of storytelling consists in its being an end in itself, of its being founded uniquely in the pleasure of involving and listening to the other. This aspect distinguishes what we intend by storytelling from the type of narrativity that serves power: the power of control and punishment (the story told to the judge or police commissariat), the power of information (journalistic chronicles), the power of healing (the case history, the story that interests the psychoanalyst), the power of redeeming and saving (the story told at confession), the power of registering and of establishing the Sense of History (reconstruction of the facts by the historian, etc.).

On the contrary, storytelling suspends the order of discourse which, instead, is served by world communication, in other words, world or global communication is functional to the order of discourse; consequently, storytelling creates pauses in communication-production processes for reflection, critical rethinking, dialogue, encounter, hospitality towards the other. For this very reason story telling is subversive as regards the order of discourse and, therefore, more or less suspect. In

the present paper we intend to deal with an aspect of this general issue referring particularly to storytelling as related to black culture, in Africa and in America.

We have introduced the term "oraliture" in our subtitle, which evokes the term "orature" coined by analogy with "écriture", writing, as proposed by Claude Hagège (1985). The term "oraliture" or "orature" designates orality or the oral style. Similarly to writing its validity in vehicling knowledge is also acknowledged. The term "orature" is used by Joseph Paré (1997) to designate the elements of orality manifested in novelistic discourse, which indeed represents one of the many aspects of orality. We prefer the term "oraliture" to "orature" for the various genres of oral literature, which include stories, legends, proverbs, rhymes, songs, etc., where oral storytelling presents itself in the form of writing, where oral storytelling is translated into written genres and reelaborated, or transcribed, or repropounded in new more or less complex literary forms of expression.

"*Oraliture*" evokes "*écriture*". Reference to the word "writing" does not only concern the fact that *oraliture* becomes writing given that it makes its appearance in the various forms of literary writing or that it is transposed or transcribed into writing. The fact that "*oraliture*" echoes "*écriture*" also indicates that orality in the various forms of non written literature is already writing, writing *avant la lettre*. As such "*oraliture*" presents ways of modelling the world — the expression of a sort of play of musement, of the pleasure of inventiveness, of encounter, of involvement and listening — no differently than from written literature.

Who better than a writer knows about literary writing both in the written form and in the form of writing-*oraliture*? A writer like Italo Calvino understands the "pleasure of narrating", "the fun of inventing ingenious plots", the "friendly and communicative humorism" of the funny or the terrifying stories of the "African tales" collected in the volume *Fiabe africane*. Here Calvino captures the importance of the modalities of narration beyond the interest of content, the importance of "style", attitude, of the gesture of narrating in this case about black (cf. Calvino, "Introduzione", in Paul Radin, *Fiabe africane*, 1994: 8).

Calvino insists on encounter and exchange which is not based on the utility principle, on the logic of giving and receiving, of profit, of a counterpart, but which, as Georges Bataille would say, is pure *dépense*. Exchange conceived in terms of *dépense*, of excess can be traced in the cultural history of different peoples throughout the whole world in the practices of storytelling and listening. Such practices cut across communication relationships understood in terms of interestedness, of achieving precise goals, of relationships based on hostility and conflict. We could

even go as far as saying that storytelling "takes advantage" of markets, fairs, shows, of slave trade, slave work on plantations, of the military camps set up in support of endless wars, of voyages undertaken for the sake of commerce, etc. in the sense that these are the places where relations that are other with respect to the dominant logic of equal exchange can be established and are established through the practices of storytelling, thereby creating channels through which traditions in *oraliture* have been able to reach us.

In his own analysis of the African post-colonial Francophone novel, Paré (1997) shows how the African novel puts together the novelistic genre, a typically Western form of expression, and typical genres of African oral literature such as myths, legends, songs, proverbs, parables, etc. As Mikhail Bakhtin in particular has helped to evidence (Paré himself recalls Bakhtin), the novel lends itself to this mingling thanks to its character as a genre that uses the most diversified discourse genres to construct its own discourse: literary and extraliterary discourse genres, written and oral, modern, traditional genres, etc. (cf. Bakhtin 1975). For an adequate interpretation, this dual inheritance of the post-colonial novel, says Paré, calls for a "hermeneutics of hybridity".

This relationship between the past and the present which subtends and structures narrativity in the African novel has consequences on the structure itself of discourse from the point of view of temporality. The novel genre adapts well from this point of view also given the generally non linear character of its temporality and the multiplicity of times and tempos that enter it and relate to each other without ever being reduced one to the other, without any form of leveling. Nor is it a question of time that can be inserted into a single, unitary time, a time that contains them all, making them flow towards a single and unitary sense. On the contrary, what the novel has the potential for portraying are times that are reciprocally other, times that are made to meet as a consequence of the novels availability and openness in terms of dialogicality, polylogism, polyphony. From this point of view we could even go so far as to say that the word of the novel is "anti-historical". The African novel evokes such anti-historicity as a means of getting free from both the dominant historical vision of our times, which is the history of the imperialistic West, as well as from the linear time of millenarism according to which the African worldview had previously conceived its own resistance to the history of the reality of exploitation and dominion.

Storytelling in the African post-colonial novel — which together with the short story is the most popular literary form among Francophone African writers in the South of the Saharah — develops a panchronic form of temporality. The African post-colonial novel emerges as a place where different narrative paths from the



African tradition and from modernity, from writing and from *oraliture* at last meet, intersect and regenerate each other. Such hybridity is organized into a creative synthesis so that we may now speak of a "dynamic reappropriation of writing practice".

Reappropriation also concerns language. The specific character of literary writing (above all the word of the novel) which consists of working with language while standing outside it, while standing outside the order of discourse, allows for greater distancing, parodization, dialogization, critique, especially when used by the African writer using a dominant foreign language such as French. Linguistic interference is perceived not only on the stylistic and semantic levels but also on the ideological, though not in the form of direct and often dogmatic and sterile contrast but of dialogized dialectics. Linguistic interference thus described ensues from gazing at a language and its literary discourse genres from the point of view of another language and of other genres and traditions; it ensues from interference which obviously is not simply lingual interference, as emerges from speaking Wolof, Arabic, Malgascian or Bantu in French.

Paré observes that in the light of such considerations it is possible to establish connections between the Francophone African novel and the novel as it is developed by other "periphery cultures", between the Francophone novel, on the one hand, and the Anglophone, Magreb, or Latin American novel on the other. And similarities in fact emerge that are not just superficial analogies but profound homologies. The novel today also thrives, flourishes and is renewed thanks to such "periphery cultures", so that a communitariness that is *other* comes to be created through the enhancement and appreciation of dialogization and unindifference among the differences; such communitariness is other with respect to the community of global, homologizing communication which is only capable of indifferent, non dialogized differences.

A condition of communitariness is thus engendered from the periphery. And owing to its capacity for innovation on reappropriating writing practices and on regenerating the *oraliture* tradition, says Paré, it questions the notion itself of the periphery.

Communitariness of the "periphery" through the full appreciation of resources in writing and *oraliture* genres especially as achieved in novelistic storytelling, communitariness in the area of "African literature" arising, for example, from the relation between literary production on the African continent and in the Carribean, communitariness thus conceived evidences the limits of literary criticism when it

insists too much on the abstract idea of "national literature". This latter concept ends up proposing worldviews that are fragmented and partial, new expressions centred on identity and functional to the totalizing discourse of state power and, in the last analysis, of communication-production.

The concept of "national literature" loses sight of the shared subversive character of "literature from the periphery". But even more than this, on an ideological level (whether consciously or not) literature from the periphery is stopped from becoming aware of its position which, in reality, is anything but peripheral. On the contrary, it is a regenerating force not only in literature of the abstract museum-type, but also in the renewal and development of a vision of the world that may be considered humane.

Taking a critical stand towards the limits of the concept of national literature, Paré proposes we privilege "meta-national literatures", in accordance with Abiola Irele whom in 1977 had already pointed out the impossibility of talking about national literature in relation to African literature: the necessary plural in the expression "meta-national literatures" indicates difference and otherness in communitariness which is precisely difference and otherness.

On Paré's account the African novel has particularly contributed to reactivating the genres of the African oral tradition as they enter into a dialogic relation with the novelistic genre. In this way not only does the African novel contribute to regenerating the novelistic tradition freeing it from any tendency towards mummification, but it also contributes to developing a worldview "from the periphery", "from below", from the "south of the world". Such a worldview is not only capable of proposing a mere alternative view to the world as it is, but far more than this it is capable of effective otherness within the sphere of dominant communication and, therefore, within the world, within reality, within the being of things as determined and circulated by dominant communication and its ideology.

This conception of the African novel evidences the narrowness and sterility of those conceptions, for example, that deny an African character in literary texts produced by writers who continue writing in the language of their colonizers; or that exhort us to embark on the useless search for "archeological identity". On the contrary, as says Paré, we must capture the lesson concerning identity and difference that comes from storytelling as practiced by the African Francophone post-colonial novel. And the proposal made by the latter is that we form a "polymorph identity" achieved in terms of an encounter among *recognizable differences*. Thus conceived,

polymorph identity effectively exceeds and is *other* with respect to the concept of identity as forged by dominant communication and its practices.

The way the African novel relates to and uses foreign languages is paradigmatic of the work that literary writing can in fact carry out with regards to language. It is also paradigmatic of the critical work that needs to be carried out as regards dominant communication. And it is precisely literature from the periphery, the peripheral "Geworfenheit" of such literature that evidences the inexorable need for such a critique. Paré proposes that we describe this relationship with language and the order of discourse in terms of "glottophagia". African languages greedily gobble up the French language, in this sense "glottophagia", transforming it into an instrument capable of expressing the polymorphic identity of a new conception of the world and not archeological and delusory identity.

This is the glottophagia characteristic of literary writing which Western writers are also familiar with and practice as the condition itself of literariness. But, in the face of communication-production and its dominion over the world, literary writing now looks to the practices of the storytelling traditions of *oraliture* for renewal and enhancement of its expressive and signifying potential. From this point of view Africa with its great traditions in oral literature can contribute greatly to this sort of "cultural anthropofagia", similarly to other areas from the "periphery". On the contrary, however, the main approach in cultural anthropological research as carried out by colonizing or neo-colonizing countries has been to recover the African oral tradition as the expression of naivety and genuineness and thus to put it under spirits. The perspective we are proposing, then, consists in overcoming the humanism of monologic identity to the advantage of a new form of humanism, the humanism of otherness, the humanism of a form of identity that is polypmorphic and polylogic.

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