

# Culture as an interface between communication and comparison. The concept of culture from the systems theory perspective

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**Abstract:**

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## 1. The Nature of Culture

In his System Theory, Luhmann describes the transition to the Modern Age as an explosion from the uniformity of the hierarchical order to the diversity of the hierarchical order: an order, which contains a variety of coexisting, equivalent hierarchies. The heterarchy does not constitute a situation of disorder, but an exaggeration of order. Through modern age is marked a turning point, which coexists with the past and the tradition under a completely different relation. In this theoretical context, the term Culture is redefined. While in the past Culture was identified with stable identifying points, in modern age we stand in front of a repeal of the modern identity that arises from differences. Culture doesn't exist not in stable pictures of semantic transfers and deliveries [1], but in forms.

The cultural work is not observed simply as an object, but as a form of perspectives, including also those of critics and artists, who produce it. It is – as with any form according to Luhmann – a trauma of the world, an incision, a distinction with two sides: on the one hand we accept culture as a plan and a construction and on the other hand we see culture as an observation of the constructed. “Culture is a perspective for the observation of the observers” [2]. We are not simply focused on the importance of culture, but rather on the comparison between the objects and the perspectives on the objects. “Through the concept of culture, the orientation from equality to comparability is remodeled and activated” [3], consequently from the unit to the diversity. This duplication of reality characterizes the total semantics of modern culture. Culture turns therefore into

power, which produces the possibility of a doubling form, because it is constructed as a double, which duplicates anything cultural and as a result exposes any possible comparison [3]. According to Luhmann, the duplication of the world together with the cultural importance serves the comparison: this duplication makes each object that becomes perceptible as a cultural phenomenon, comparable with alternative forms. Through the comparison, all cultural identities, situations and entities are relativized and subjugated. In Luhmann's words: "The comparative interest makes relative all entities and natural forms, in which the old society determined itself and its world" [4]<sup>1</sup>. Dirk Baecker, who brought Luhmann's theory a step forward, defines culture as comparative knowledge, emphasizing to the comparison: "culture is what makes the incomparable ways of life comparable. The modern concept of culture is the result of the intellectual practice of comparing." Everything can be compared, everything can be made interesting or uninteresting. Everything appears twice: once as it is and once as what it means in the context of comparison. The comparison is thus led in the context of the System theory through the differentiation between the matter and the semantics, namely between the first-order observation (sense of use) and the second-order observation (sense of communication). In other words: objects are a part of culture only as a communication result.

## 2. The Function of Culture

Luhmann defines Semantics as a "Fixation of Meaning" [5], which is specified in the communication. According to Luhmann, the function of culture is first introduced in close stretto on communication. Culture however, never becomes identical with communication. On the contrary, culture is released by the media of communication. In the book Social Systems, culture receives the role, which includes the memory of society during a communication, to which no one can ever return again.

The result is a type of reservoir of possible topics, which are available for rapid and fast understandable absorption in concrete communication processes. This thematic reservoir is called culture, and when it is used for communication purposes, it is called semantics [5].

Unlike in the past, where culture was conceived in the context of Rhetoric<sup>2</sup> as collection and treatment of a real use of Topoi, culture is now expressed in the communication process as a structural model of self-description of the society. Through the communication process, ideas, forms, terms, ritually, processes of new meanings and semantics are produced, which are decoupled from the idea of a memory<sup>3</sup>, where everything is kept as memory or tradition. We should therefore recognize a dynamic function within the culture, through which cultural works are constituted in the perspective of their production as selections, which are communicatively connected to each other. This leads to the development of a connection ability, a contiguity which is determined from the code interesting/uninteresting.

<sup>1</sup> Similarly comments also Dirk Baecker: "Culture is the tertium datur as a protest against everything that this society believes it is able to bring in the form of either-or" [7].

<sup>2</sup> The rhetoric can also be more prestigious than the mnemonic apparatus, as a technique of repetition and redundancy of testing under conditions, in which the coherence is not made by the order of the world under warranty.

<sup>3</sup> While Plato was talking about a memory of the present, past and future things, the memory according to Aristotle's is connected with what the past has accumulated. It is a type of memory, in which the traces of the experiences are stored as images. It is a sharp distinction between sign and signified, between image from itself and image as a sign. This marks the transition to abstraction, which is characteristic of modern culture.

In other words: It is a transition from a form of ritual cohesion (of which the pleonasm is based on the repetition and the imitation) to a form of communicational cohesion (of which the pleonasm is based on the observation and the comparison). Cultural forms can be treated as communication. In other words: ritualistic behaviour, myths and transferable documents are characterized as symbolized patterns of meaning. They don't constitute static monuments, but dynamic structures, which supply the observation with distinctions. Luhmann characterizes the whole process as attended semantics, which is a self-description of the communicational society.

### 3. Culture as Memory

The self-descriptions and the (attended) semantics belong, according to the opinion of Luhmann, to the memory of society. The social systems, part of which is also culture, have a memory just as the personal systems, and when the social systems are constructed and reproduced beyond communication, then the memory of society becomes a communication memory, which however is not incorporated in personal supports<sup>4</sup>, but is installed in the organization of communication itself and, in what Luhmann calls Semantics, is almost identical with it. According to Luhmann, culture in modern ages is defined as the memory of society. More specifically, culture is "the filter from forgetting/remembering and the utilization of past in the determination of the differentiated frames of the future" [3]. Memory is synonym with the reclusiveness of operations, which record, which is repeated (pleonasm) and for this reason it remains at the memory, while the rest fall in oblivion. "Memory functions [...] with the things that have been successfully described and tends to forget the other side of distinction." Memory is not just a store of passed facts, but most of all an organization of access to information. The information is the difference, which constitutes as a fact the updated possibility that comes from the "knowable world of knowledge" [1]. Memory is therefore composed of selections that make a difference and create this way a piece of information. These selections produce information, which Bateson determines as "a difference, which makes a difference". The comparability via culture increases consequently the wealth of information of the world enormously, by duplicating the world at a level, in which everything can be virtually informative for an observer. Memory determines, through the difference between remembering and forgetting, how the structures are selected and vary within the framework of a communication. Memory, which used to be complex and connected to the object, the name, the holy and the fabulous, takes nowadays a written form and releases the society from the individual memories. Memory makes sure that communication ensures the conditions for the different varieties [3]. The phenomena, which according to Luhmann are shaping the social memory and therefore the culture, are symbolic. Writing and modern communication media, which Luhmann describes in his theory as "symbolically general media", complete the "object-related memory by a more mobile memory, which can be reproduced, but in the process requires decisions between recollection and oblivion" [3]. This clarification strongly collides with the form of a virtual memory, which results from a potentiality available to communication and a complex variety. Virtual (strong) is something that does not exist really, but

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<sup>4</sup> Therefore, social memory is not a collective memory, which would be a collection of consciousnesses. According to Luhmann's theory, psychological and social systems are separately operating systems. It concerns the memory of the comprehensive social system society.

potentially and constitutes however a world of possibilities, which cannot be limited to potential:

In virtual reality, the transition from the level of perception of an object-oriented reflection to the abstract level of a communications-related reflection is completed - where the communication, which constitutes an argument, is not reflected in a static area [6].

In virtual reality, a reflection is created, at which, what is reflected, is the communication, or in other words the relation, which is expressed in the contingency. The dimension, in which memory moves, is contingency. The particular attention that is given to the contingency of the prospects is the perception in an increasing and not invisible disparity of prospects, which creates the need of comparability of the prospects. As a possibility of variety, culture is not a conflict with the past, but a relation with the present. The identities are not related with the past (through the identification - and so through the repetition and the imitation), but they are created during the process of observation - through distance and differentiation - namely through the differences. And the differences in the course of time or over others are provided through culture, through the possibility to make comparisons. Comparison is the dialectics of discovery and downsizing of observation to a second level. Therefore, the process is a constitutional condition of culture in modern age.

Returning to the term of memory, we can say following: culture as memory is not only the memory of the past, the order of which has a spatial character and corresponds to the arrangement of the matter, but the archived definition of reference symbols and connections between contents or between recordings that function as an organizational principle for information. The Archive contains, as base of all cultural lectures, the texts and discourses, the syntagms and the paradigms, the topics and the rhetoric of a culture. This way, the Archive is the opposite side of communication. In contrast to the communication, which is fugitive and will be forgotten, the Archive is stable over time and maintains the communication. The Archive however is not only the other side of communication. It is also the solidifying and solidified opposite of cultural materials. It is a trans-situational solidification of culture as a sense of use<sup>5</sup>.

What culture has left behind depends on the Archive. The Archive is at the same time the borders of culture, the borders of its potential importance, its dissemination. The Archive corpus contains the virtual infinite possible meanings of a culture, because it contains search and find places at the same time. Through the references that run the Archive, culture is not necessary based on the objects, but on the communication above the objects. Historically Pragmatic assignments of historical significance can be reconstructed only through the culture-semiotic communication about historical facts and objects. Communication is a repeatedly available object with meaning; it is an ipso facto part of a cultural Archive and therefore belongs to an almost infinite semiotic.

The organization of the Archive is based primarily on the catalog, but it is established however on an abstract order guided by semantic or conventional criteria, which differs from the physical arrangement of the materials [6]. In this sense, the base of memory is not in the books, but only in the catalog, namely in the

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<sup>5</sup> "I suggest that all systems of testimony (facts on the one hand and objects on the other), should be called archive. By this term I do not mean the sum of all texts, which were preserved by a culture as documents of its own past or as evidence of its identity; I also do not mean the facilities that permit a given society to register and conserve the discourse, which we want to keep in memory. [...] The archive is t the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as individual events" [9].

link between the possible information. Elena Esposito provides a detailed definition of the catalog:

The catalog has to do with a sign or better with a complex of signs, which refer to the information kept in the relevant library. The Archive allows oblivion under the condition, that in memory are kept the signs that are summarized in the catalog and remain firm and always refer always to the same information [6].

The power of culture lies consequently in the power of oblivion, which isn't a deletion of information, but the production of a surplus of information, not an absence of culture, but a reproduction and simultaneity of cultural presences, that according to Luhmann create a "semantic hypertrophy of variation" [3].

The place, where the modern cultural semantics are maintained, is - as mentioned before- the communications media, including writing. Culture is not the fixed, but the inexhaustible thematic store rather arises where contributions are made, where ideas are set in motion and thus disturb the communication that probably makes culture. Culture in modern ages does not consist of objects, but of communications, that according to Luhmann are facts that open a certain horizon of expectations, in which we can connect a further communication. Only through updating thematically bundled meaning potentials, as an object of communication, culture becomes socially relevant. Society is what is being communicated, while Culture is the Way to preserve the structure of society, namely its blind spot:

This memory however is not the memory in the simple form of storing the past or a memory of the archived and the not archived. It is more an updated operation of an objection of excluded possibilities against perceived possibilities. This assumes that excluded possibilities are existing as excluded possibilities (sociology uses the term latency) and are therefore included [7].

Communication media are based on the differentiation of stored materials (stabilization) and the possible communications (selection and variation). It's about the places, where the memory can act and express itself. This involves the transition from a spatial to a temporal order, which is connected with a change of the memory's structure and a change of the cohesion's form. Communication media are characteristic for the modern memory. Their organization is based on an abstract, guided from semantic criteria order as a difference to the physical arrangement of materials. They are the framework, are presented within their cultural objects as forms, not as a real, but as an intransparent and potential world of possibilities, which signals the passage from the perception's level of an object-oriented reflexion to an abstract level of a communication-related reflexion.<sup>6</sup> That has as result the fact that culture consists of representations of the absent origin and not just of things that mean something. It is a culture- poetic action in the mode of "As If". Already Luhmann, according to Baecker, "supposes that the contribution of culture does not lie on placing the signs in the place of objects, but above all on the ability to see the objects as signs" [7]. On the other hand, objectivity is the tertium comparationis between the objects and the signs, and consequently the point, at which it arrives. The sign becomes the replacement of the object. "As always, with the excessive demand through the complexity appears even at this point the directed orientation to symptoms instead of the object, which is meant. Reputation is created by the symptoms and serves also itself as a symptom of truth" [3].

At the level of abstraction take place similar analyses, through which culture participates in the structures that are characteristic of the multicentral and multicontextual modern societies. The moment of abstraction, which constitutes the

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<sup>6</sup> In memory research we speak about the opposition between a representative model, which aims to bring back a past event and to constitute a performative model, which has the duty to present the same event in a permanent new present.

condition of the transmission of rhetorical models, allows a greater freedom to find something similar in the archive. Within the functional differentiated society<sup>7</sup> does not exist anymore any semantic cultural center. No cross-cultural system, no dominated culture, no leading ideology. Modern society has to get on without the representation of society in the society. The functional differentiation creates contingency, therefore modern society is not a single, holistic world any more. This does not only require a cultural concept, which will apply to comparison, contingency and reality, but it forces the functional systems to develop their own culture. Cultures exist only in the plural, as an instance of each different social construction of reality, which now appear next to the real world. It is about auto-descriptions of each individual system, which are actually “imaginary constructions” [3]<sup>8</sup>.

#### **4. Culture as Communication**

Culture as communication implies that it is given as a medial form. The instance, which is related to this extreme abstract form of coherence, according to the theory of Luhmann, is the system of the mass media: the system that includes and repeats communications that require an interruption of the interaction between persons present under the condition of anonymity. In relation to the task of guidance and control of the world constructions that make possible the orientation of the communication, the mass media can be considered as substitutes of the rhetoric. That is their function: the creation of a second reality in terms background knowledge. The culture is in this way observable. The function of the mass media in other words is to create conditions for the continuation of communication. They reproduce the configuration of the objects. Representativeness can be achieved only in the context of mass media, because they arrange a compact and polyvalent transmission of information.

In this sense, mass media make, as places of observation, available the contents, by which the memory of society is created, however they achieve it in a way, which leaves space for the contingency and second-order observation. It is therefore a second reality and for that reason we need a control of coherence, which in this way is kept abstract and can create a duplicated reality in its interior. The memory of the mass media is based on the constitutive instability of surprise, of the new. Mass media have always something new to report about the world and that is precisely the reason why oblivion, and with it memory too, play a critical role, since remembering means also forgetting. Space for something new exists only, if the old disappears, when the excluded possibilities become perceptible possibilities. For this reason, Esposito attributes the mnemonic function for the modern society to the mass media, as a result of the dynamic of the opposite adoptive pressure between the historical form of differentiation and the communication technologies. This approach allows us to place culture in a communicative relationship. The scientist refers back to historical information material and restructures according to this material the communication importance of culture. Through the mass media is materialized the basic function of memory, which is found in the oblivion of the not-worth preserving, or better: “in the prevention of self-blockages of the system through the coagulation

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<sup>7</sup> Functional differentiation states, that the aspect of unity, under which a difference between system and environment is differentiated, is the function that describes the differentiated system [3].

<sup>8</sup> The place, where such self-descriptions are reflected, since the end of the 18th Century is occupied with the term of culture, according to Luhmann. More than that: “The invention of ‘culture’ at the end of the 18th Century ‘is’ the invention of a form of reflection that reflects as culture everything that is not natural” [2].

of the results of earlier observations” [3], therefore in the release of traditional cultural patterns. Culture is a second-order level, a double, where descriptions can be shaped and reflected.

From the above, results the following: we are experiencing and reflecting culture as unit in an auto logical circle, once in the direction of the medium, in which the difference is shaped, and once in the direction of the form, the formation of which makes the difference possible. The form is not the result of culture, but culture results from the differentiation, from the arrangement of the differences. This does not result in fixed and unified perspectives, but in the difference of a variety of perspectives that reconstruct time always in a different way. In other words: within a system-theoretical and a difference-theoretical constructed way of thinking, we rely on the distinction between medium (loosely-coupled elements, which can be recognized as external incidents) and the form (solid-coupled elements, which can be recognized as internal incidents).

The distinction between the medium and the form leaves enough scope for experimentation. In a society without hierarchy, the second-order observation is achieved as a “general way of challenging social assurance of reality” - with deep consequences for the total semantics. The second-order observation is not only based on the form, but also on the medium and it searches other possibilities, that only win diversity and the clarity based on the comparative technique and the experimentation with certain, already acquired or structuring forms. It is a composition of processes that are based on the evidence and the practice of the experiment.

As already mentioned, modern memory is directed in its modern version to the production of innovations. Culture as communication consists of temporalized events, which contain always a moment of surprise. The surprise is to be found not only in the incomprehensibility of the concrete, but also in its temporal discontinuity. This system- theoretical theory of culture, which indicates the transition from a mnemonic to a documentary semantics, corresponds to the needs of a modern society that depends on stabilities, which are settled at the level of second-order observation. Culture thus becomes the operand and the operator of itself and reflects itself. It becomes the medium. The potential of form, which lies in this, remains inherent as diversity between the self- and the foreign-reference, so that culture is related with itself as a medium (notification) and as a form (information). This implies that culture is the systematic place of its own formation and semantic interpretation. In this regard, this paradox does not contradict the construction, but it is implicit in it as constitutive dynamic element, by forcing to a displacement of the perspective of the observer to another observer, who also recognizes their blind spot – namely they observe their own unobservability. This means that culture represents and reproduces its own contingency [3]. Cultural comparisons and observations are located within culture, so that culture is based on itself. Culture is something culturally determined through the auto-logical approach.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, it should be noted that in Luhmann’s Theory, culture is beyond the semantics and the communication, the symbolic abstraction, the ideal form, the contextual forms or the contextual models. Cultural systems are typically complex contextual patterns, which direct the communication of society. This cultural horizon of meaning should not be considered as a horizon of given communication, but in the form of potential paradigms for a given object, as a function of the

cultural archive. Culture liquefies into a meaningful and generalized horizon and is materialized where it appears as an event present in the communicational process. It is about contingent attributes of meaning ascribed by observers on the basis of thematically sorted patterns of meaning, as a result of the process of definition of meaning, which however presents the transport of the structure - the reference surplus of meaning forces the system to a permanent change. Culture thus becomes a kind of dealing technique regarding the surplus of meaning and the cultural development presents itself as an increase of comparative possibilities, which Luhmann interprets at this point as controlling possibilities. Culture as a form of meaning, makes the movement possible, without being moved. It is the unmoved mover. That means that it generates time as the difference among the simultaneous, the former and the later. Practically, the transformation of the temporal semantics is based from a former orientation on stability on the stability of change. This implies the re- conceptualization of the past or the present. The realization of culture in the time as a process does not exist in the sequence of information, but only in the connections, through which we can pass to the present. Ironically, this fragmented into pieces and always restructured time is calculated through an abstract and universal chronology [3]. This is precisely the function of culture, namely a liquid spatial continuum, in which space appears to move as a compression of time. It concerns an observation related chronological movement of space, a re-entry of history to the present. All the past wins reality only in its potential communicative update, here and now, as a kind of latency in the archived data.

Such a foundation of cultural forms, which is the result of the arrangement of the differences, is transmitted from the past (as resistance) to the future (as variant). The perspective, from which time is observed, is now the temporal perspective of the present. In the modern age the present is shrinking, according to Luhmann, into a single event, which disappears at the same moment in which it occurs and it is purely connected into the past and the future: into the septum without any length of time, which transforms, what it is jet, to what it is no more. The presence, in which the entire temporal dimension is generated, is also an outward of the time moment, the excluded third, which makes possible the procreation of the distinction between the present and the future, but without being involved in this distinction - as well as the modern semantics excludes the observer, on whom at the same time everything depends. We are therefore confronted with the problem of non-simultaneity of the simultaneous (and vice versa). The presence is connected into an experience of instability and insecurity. The reality of time as process does not consist in the fact of the continuity of the data, but only in the links, through which we can move from a present to another present. Under these circumstances, the time itself transfers the indeterminacy of the future to the present, which is always observed as a past of a future, initiated from the present: because the present can be equally uncontrollable and confusing like the future and it can not offer anymore strong determinacy, but only an abundance of potential and fragmentary cultural perspectives. In place of divination (the orientation in the cosmos) and rhetoric (the orientation to a vocabularly founded truth) enters the orientation into the new, into the progress in an open horizon of the future. As mentioned above, for modern culture the consciousness of contingency and the experience of difference, ambiguities or polycontextuality are characteristic. This observation leads to an interaction or a symbiosis of time and society: "cultural models provide for the reactivation of behavior patterns, for the reactivation of roles and different types of action in situations temporal far apart from each other" [8].



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