

1. Introduction

Synopsis

This module introduces communication, outlines theoretical ideas and aspects of Visual Communication with selected examples.

Lectures

- 1.1 An Introduction to Communication
- 1.2 On Languages and Grammar
- 1.3 Visual Communication

Before we look more closely at visual communication, we shall touch upon some aspects of languages and grammar.



Fig. 1.2.00

1.2 On Languages and Grammar



Fig. 1.2.01

The ability to formulate a grammar enables us to creatively interpret and describe the world and our experiences. Certain primal communication, such as the cry of a new born baby, communicates directly and draws our attention, just as the roar of a lion may make our hair stand or a cuckoo's song may enchant us. The image above shows two musicians communicating with each other through the language of music. The two human figures look real, inspite of the forms not being anatomically accurate. The sculptures are in the collection of Bharat Bhavan in Madhya Pradesh and communicate a 'folk' tradition of expressive human forms that have a wonderful vitality.



Fig. 1.2.02a



Fig. 1.2.02b

Classical forms in Indian sculpture often sought to express the bliss achieved through devotion and are different from the physical realism of human anatomy seen in Greek sculpture .

Some of the most powerful communication may happen through silences and linguists, philosophers and mystics have acknowledged that some of our most profound experiences make us tongue tied!



Fig. 1.2.03

Often times, our first experience of the expanse of a sea or an ocean is so magical that we look upon it with a sense of great wonder. It is only a little later that we seek to express this wonder through a poem or record it with a camera or paint a watercolour picture.



Fig. 1.2.04

Communication requires as a fuel, experiences. The deeper and more powerful the experience, the more forceful is our need to share this, through some language. If we seek to make use of some existing language, we need to understand its grammar. The advantage of using an existing language, is that anybody else who has learnt the language, is likely to understand what we seek to communicate. If one writes a poem on the sea in Gujarati, a person who knows Gujarati may understand it. If one paints a picture of waves on a seashore, many more people are likely to understand it.

Visual communication is often more universal than spoken or written communication. The above image depicts an elephant, a snake god and an ascetic standing on one leg. The image is from one of the rathas from Mahabalipuram. Another communication that is not visibly evident is that the ascetic is the sage Bhagiratha who is praying so that the river goddess Ganga may descend from the heavens and nurture life on earth. The groove in the middle of the sculpture depicts the river and when it rains water runs down the groove. This narrative was a part of oral tradition and the visible cues merely serve to point to the popular narrative about the river Ganga.



Fig. 1.2.05

Composition is an aspect closely associated with communication. In school, we are asked to write an essay or a composition; a photographer chooses some particular vantage point in order to create a well-composed picture; a painter arranges shapes, forms and colours while composing the painting and a musician composes notes to create a melody. The ability to understand the basic units of some language, helps us achieve a certain elegance in our communication.

One may communicate primary needs such as hunger through crying out for food as a baby does or one may simply yell out loud to communicate a warning about some impending danger. However, to create a special quality it appears necessary to understand the tools that help us communicate.



Fig. 1.2.06

It must be reiterated that experiences enrich our understanding and unless we nurture a healthy curiosity about nature and about ourselves, our experiences are likely to be limited. If a group has been through more or less a similar set of experiences, then speaking about these would communicate to the group. Theatre communicates visually and through words.



Fig. 1.2.07

The recent spate of novels about engineering college life in India, are popular because there are many students who have had similar experiences. However, if everybody speaks from the same set of experiences, all communication is likely to be similar, unless these experiences have been distilled through a special creative filter. Photographs of the setting sun are a very common subject, but out of the many, some stand out because of a creative touch.



Fig. 1.2.08

Creativity allows us access to the realms of communication that is special, magical and charged. There is a poem by a German poet, Rilke, that speaks of how the same 'objective' world, is viewed so differently by different people. One might call these variations in our ways of seeing, as creative subjective variations. In order to live creatively, one must be willing to recognize that there might be multiple realities and multiple viewpoints. Akira Kurosawa, a Japanese film-maker, made 'Rashomon' - a film that presents four equally truthful versions of an event.

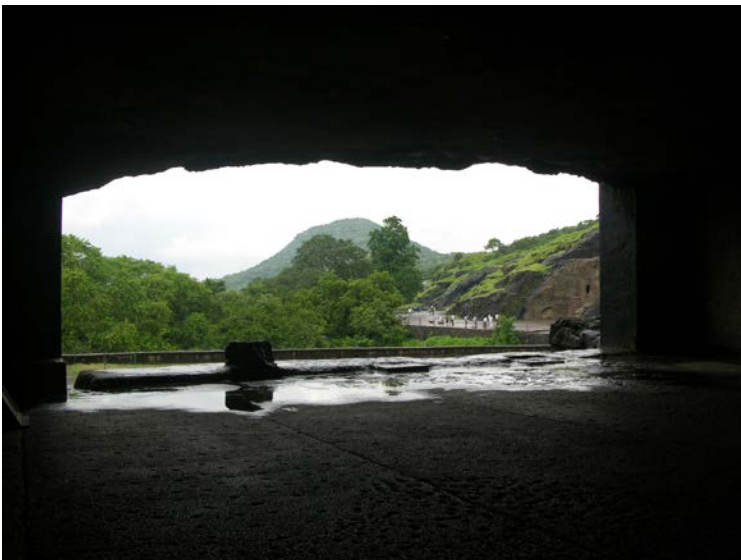


Fig. 1.2.09

To understand that truth can be a plurality of ideas and not some narrow monolithic singularity, is the essence of a creative flowering. This idea might be unsettling for those trained to think in a 'binary' fashion. To think in a binary manner is to weigh ideas using an 'OR' logic in which only one of the binaries is correct and the other incorrect.



Fig. 1.2.10

For example, one hears of the words 'India' and 'Bharat'. Saying 'India' evokes an image of glass-and-steel buildings with flyovers and expressways and metro railways; 'Bharat' evokes fields with rice and also a hard life. Both urban and rural India have a lot of subtleties and complexities that get missed out when we base our understanding on such binary oppositions.



Fig. 1.2.11

While the celebration of plurality is a characteristic of our times, it would be pertinent to make a distinction between anarchy and chaos. The two words nearly mean the same and in order to understand the distinction, we may agree here to attach the quality of an enlightened mind to 'chaos' and agree that anarchy may resemble chaos closely, but is something quite different (and possibly undesirable). To make this point clear, one might consider the example of a 'pinch-hitter' who sways his bat wildly and another 'pinch-hitter' who also sways his bat with

great abandon but not 'wildly'. This sure is tricky, because the two 'pinch-hitters' appear identical in their external behaviour but have very different internal-mechanisms at work.



Fig. 1.2.12

To put these ideas more simply, one may observe that we in the twentyfirst century have access to many different languages for communication. Some are verbal, some non-verbal; some are visual, others use words and still others rely on sound. Some sounds can communicate without being musical and music that is born from a limited experience of nature does not have the richness and harmonics of a music that draws upon some underground spring of creativity.



Fig. 1.2.13

In the early phase of a civilization, languages and words used by these languages are carriers of meanings. Excessive use and abuse of words and languages, reduce the potency of a language. Too little use also makes a language waste away. Many languages today are under threat of dying out, because they are used so less. Languages are not just carriers of meanings but of world-views. The word 'mango' or the word 'monsoon' refer to a juicy fruit and to

rainfall, but they also speak of an entire geography and economics and social interactions of a specific region in the world. While cross-cultural diffusion might help someone in Greenland to appreciate what a mango is, one would need to experience what a monsoon means, to understand it well. There are attempts to create artificial snow and augmented reality seeks to blur the line between the mind and the body, but human consciousness, is something quite different.