

Critical Notice / Étude Critique

Delivering our Attention: Ian Angus's *Primal Scenes of Communication: Communication, Consumerism, and Social Movements*
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By defining communication as “the form of awareness that shapes the articulation of thought,”¹ any communication theory inches closer to addressing its philosophical presuppositions. Such is the project of Ian Angus's *Primal Scenes of Communication*, a book that offers a critical assessment of the core categories of the communication field: media and mediations. Angus faces off three major theories of communication to show how each of them presupposes a formal neutrality to the mediation process. As we wind our way through his analyses, it becomes increasingly evident that the transformative power of media and mediation cannot be said to leave either the form or vehicle of what is mediated untouched.

To demonstrate what amounts to a non-identity thesis as applied to medium, as it were, Angus investigates the idea of object within communication studies. He demonstrates how even within communication theory object properties arise immanently from the *relations* and *functions* by which they acquire body and form. It turns out that communication theory adheres to the dominant spatial configurations that organize the mathematized sciences today. In a theory of language as act, the motifs of fabric, network, and webs are particularly active types of descriptive configurations. This immediately opens onto the significant tension found within mathematical philosophy regarding the precedence to be designated to relation theories as the capital shaper of a realist ontology. I shall give closer consideration to the epistemological structure of the philosophy of communication as developed in *Primal Scenes of Communication*.

By epistemology, I refer to the economy of the conceptual construction of communication as theoretical object. This includes the reference-creations employed and directedness implied by the dynamic methodological body Angus implements as it moves through historical situations, as well as the role it plays in the wider scope of the sciences as they shape and are shaped by claims to referential realism. My comments and questions will proceed in accordance with the following themes: 1) the process of object-creation within communication theory; 2) the preconditions of reflexive discourse; and 3) fallibilism and style.

The Process of Object-Creation within Communication Theory

In *Primal Scenes of Communication*, Angus's ambition is to construct a philosophy of the method he coins Comparative Media Theory (CMT). He accepts the assessment of a discursive or linguistic turn as an epistemic shift overlapping the one that leads modernity to unfold into postmodernity. This turn comes about as

much as a real, observable phenomenon as it does a theoretically constructed one; keeping indeterminacy between the two is vital. Angus constructs less a history of the way Husserl's theory of expression sets the discursive turn into movement than a history of the way in which Husserl's work *de facto* revolutionizes reflexivity. What *Primal Scenes of Communication* describes is a critical history and philosophy of reflexivity, but reflexivity as it is constituted discursively. In this picture, while reflexivity may prove to be a powerful means of protecting attention, a point linked to the political dimension of the book to which I shall return, it can never deal entirely with the vague, formless "excesses" that motivate our attention. The last thing we would like to install at this point is some powerful, reductive theory of reason and desire that allows a type of causal control to be used efficiently against the very condition it is invented to protect. Assuming this observation to be true, Angus's work on the model of CMT presupposes a historical model in which reflexivity satisfies the formal demands of being a regulative idea for thought, and not simply its content. In short reflexivity, exemplified for example in self-reference, the idea of a logical substratum to thought, processes of subjectivation, or what Angus calls mediations, all partake of the conditions that allow acts of theorizing to be postulated and validity claims to be directed at situated happenings. Here I would like to quote Angus regarding his objectives: "if it is to be more than a catalogue of technological inventions, CMT must link historical changes in media of communication to human perception of Being" (53).

What is the situation today regarding the pressures facing theoretically constituted reflexivity in a communication framework? Let us consider the following: No critique of capitalism can do without delicate analyses of the way the economy vies for consumer attention. That the economy of developed countries today is increasingly turning toward a renewed form of monopoly capitalism is made plain in the corporate mergers we read about monthly, and on occasion daily. Such practice is typical of, though by no means restricted to, the major conglomerates that organize our *cultural* landscapes. At most recent count they number only six, with their headquarters located in the countries of greatest affluence, but the rate of their shrinking number has but one absolute limit. In Canada, their techniques are mimicked by the new book business monopoly and in the subservience of the Federal Competition Bureau to various government departments and agencies. Culture, sports, and computers are the names of the field; entertainment is their game.

Attention is the particular target of the sensory-inclined, marketing-driven capitalist economics that rally to form—Angus would say "institute"—culture. In due course, the critical and innovative content of the culture industry does far more than "sell out," be "recuperated" or "assimilated." It is subjected to immediate recycling as innovation is that on which the resourcing of the formal directions of marketing thrives. The complex linguistic model Angus has created regards the

immanent link of identity creation involved in communication theories, but behind the analyses and on the margins of the model his concerns deal with this struggle for and the shaping of our faculties of attention.

This drama brings poignancy to the stoic tone of the book. It comes with the terribly neglected vulnerability in which our "educated," "knowledge-based" libertarian or communitarian—the difference here is almost irrelevant—country leaves our own attention when faced with the ongoing process of instituting identities central to the capitalist strategy of self-perpetuation through the purchasing of innovation. To ward off exhaustion and extinction of markets, monopoly capitalism must at the very least create new identities that will in turn form additional markets. These identities are structured according to attention emission and reception. A philosophy of communication would thereby be caught in a dual constraint regarding this massive move toward seizing attention. By embracing such a system, philosophical innovation regarding formation of identities participates in refining the cycle of production for profit at the expense of public control over what are, at bottom, limited private interests. In contrast, through the concept (by which I mean conceptual analysis) one can break down the mystification of the marketplace and at least make our lives miserable by portraying the bad faith involved in supporting the way such a market deals with innovation. To that extent, philosophers must be weary of the pressure for philosophy to become more sensuous, fleshier, more attention-grabbing. This weariness is incumbent on the reflexive tool within philosophy that through logical analysis breaks down the models of communication to confront a theory with its presuppositions. Philosophical analyses of communication thus seem to give rise to a philosophy of communication in continuity with the phenomenological tradition.

The conditions for such a philosophy are certainly in place. Citing Angus from a previous work, he locates them thus:

Contemporary public discourse is blocked by both the tribalizing devolution of the politics of identity and the globalizing forces of corporate political economy. They erase commonality through a reduction to self-interest, consumerism, and the depressive adjustment to fate. It is therefore not sufficient simply to begin to speak as if the commonality that the public intellectual would like to address were simply intact. There must be a preliminary construction of the possibility of commonality itself. At this point the public intellectual becomes a public philosopher.²

It is important to recall the political commitment of Angus's work. I say this somewhat in opposition to the growing aesthetic scaffolding he builds in *Primal Scenes of Communication*, though its aim is to zero in on defining commonality in the very theoretical discourses used to bolster new social movements whose

identity they end up creating. For it is a central argument to his work that extant communication theories all fall short of grasping the function of identity. Through the transmission of knowledge, whose ends are diverse, one cannot presuppose the constitution of identity as independent and prior to the discourse used to transmit it. The meaning of discourse is here widened to correspond to a medium, one that *affects* and not just effects every step of the communication process. This theory *itself* participates in constituting identity as a cumulative process at the end point, as it were, of the communication, about which, similarly, one cannot assume a stable and coherent form prior to the set of communications in which it develops.

CMT is committed to the conceptualization of culture as a type of discourse aesthetics. It can be said to exceed any indexation of theory to art. It is not of this type of aesthetics that I speak. Aesthetics should be taken in the wider Greek sense as a logic of sensibility, or rather, to quote Jacques Ranciere, according to "the Kantian sense—ultimately revised by Foucault—as the system of a priori forms that determine what is given to be felt and sensed."³ However, it would appear that in our times we must be ever more weary of an aesthetic drive within philosophy, whose outcome is separation from the political and the economic. If in the past one could decide on the political or economic effects of a work of art, today political and economic decisions are endemic to its production, i.e., its marketing, by which I mean its distribution and very access to a public. Nonetheless, as Angus moves into psychoanalytic theory and integration of an apparently Freudian, and presumably Lacanian, unconscious, I am myself excited in speculating about the type of turns this sensorial philosophy of communication might take in its future inception.

As mentioned previously, my interest here is drawn primarily to the epistemological dimension. The reason for this has much to do with Angus's apparent presupposition of a division in his theory between knowledge of science and knowledge of culture. He argues that only through the latter can new social movements grow into new mediations, i.e., new projects for living and new demands on capitalism. Furthermore, he sets culture as the always already formed background on the basis of which intentions are formed—which confirms his need to overhaul Husserlian phenomenology. Deriving culture as background involves both *construction* and *identification* with something observer-independent, though it is clearly a process tied to collective being, whereby its status can accordingly be deemed quasi-physical. Indeed, in deriving culture in this manner, Angus sets up a strategy that involves rediscovery of "the pre-industrial fundament of cultural experience in oral expressions rooted in the interplay of the human senses in bodily presence" (136). He situates this rediscovery in terms of a "fundament," for its presentation and justification are required by the present state of culture. In other words, Angus comes across a kind of plinth regarding the processes by which assumptions take shape according to which some such expression passes as a cultural object, informed of its meaning for a particular culture in the here and now.

He can thereby be seen to widen the contours of what is basically a meaning theory into the Husserlian idea of epoch, arché, or *source* of culture.

Capturing this background becomes an ultimate aim for his theory. From its basis new forms of social mediations can be seen to emerge. By rallying to Volosinov's notion of the absolute singularity of "theme" as opposed to "meaning," Angus participates in the peculiar use of *terms*, i.e., nouns that function *de facto* as proper names or deictics (73–74, 139). He does this in order to exploit their demonstrative power in constituting the here and now of an event, whose consequence he feels is that this background culture is irreducible to logical description. But as far as propositional recursivity is concerned, he repeats the science vs. culture split. This is evident when he asserts that "by describing the precise point at which a theory of communication diverges from a theory of scientific meaning, it is possible to note a significant convergence between phenomenology and a Marxist critique of a semiotic theory of language" (73). Culture in his sense may indeed be but a form or background from which meaning is raised. But to make this claim do we not need a stronger sense of referentiality, i.e., both the conceptual and historical coordinates by which we come to a wider understanding of what is seemingly invariable and constant in the use of a single term? In other words, when we qualify a background as a "culture-background," endowing it with a minimal set of properties, do we not need to speak in terms of referentiality, if not realism, regarding what is presupposed to the method being used?

My first set of questions is thus the following. Does this interpretation of culture not invest reflexivity itself with a preconditioned meaning, whose effect is a function of the chosen style of philosophical exposition espoused? Is there not a type of *discursive* identity presupposed here that places culture above science, or associates culture with a more comprehensive ontological field?

What is curious is that Angus's work otherwise gives us all the ingredients necessary to abolish this division between science and culture as regards meaning, though his work here does not tackle this reflexively. This is not to say that the intended direction of his work does not reach its end. Quite the contrary. It simply appears that doing away with that split and synthesizing science and culture could provide an even stronger communication philosophy, namely one freed from the regulated limits in which opinions or ideology leaves it. With the science-culture split still active, the upshot of describing "antagonistic" discourses and lauding the emergence of new social movements, as Angus does in the later chapters of *Primal Scenes of Communication*, leaves intact their *fragmentary* structure. The results of fragmented social movements over the past twenty-some years should warrant the conclusion that fragmentation involves great weakening of the political as such. Indeed, it confuses the work toward radical democracy and economic egalitarianism with the demands of so many special interest groups.

Preconditions of Reflexive Discourse

CMT proposes a way of ferreting out the unquestioned presuppositions of the way identity is handled in theories predominant in the field of communication. The question of reflexivity is central to the creation of identity. In logic, one of the conditions whereby an object leaves a trace to a form of *logos*—i.e., reason, language, or the letter—is its identity. CMT takes shape in the hinging together of three large panels. In its theorizing of the dual nature of communication and the idea of medium, CMT engages a merging of post-Husserlian phenomenology (including Gurwicz's gestaltian reformulation of the horizon-subjectivity distinction as one of background-foreground), the communication theory of Harold Innis and its extension into Marshall McLuhan's idea of media, and the systems theory of Bateson. The three paradigms are chosen for their innovation and epoch-forming theories of consciousness.

Among these theories, the reflexive operator is expressed in various ways: intentionality, recursivity of the part on the whole in systemic patterns, and medium as allowing transmission. Other theories posit the existence of shaped presuppositions of identity, which must be developed to mean subjective identity, in notions such as background, theme and the unconscious, as Angus himself indicates. Still, there remains an omitted presuppositional mode. It deals with the layer prior to the science/culture division: there must be operators whereby one can speak of division in the first place, not to mention identity, difference, etc. This concerns epistemological ontology or the logic of being. What I am getting at is that in the logic of being, there are two conceptions of object. Object can be taken as something whose identity is determined prior to any function that converts and transforms its properties as it becomes another object: e.g., $f(x)=y$. I assume that Angus's critique and exclusion of knowledge of science as opposed to knowledge of culture in terms of what meaning is takes root in what can be inferred from this type of object theory.

On the other hand, logic also speaks of a type of object wherein identity is not presupposed prior to a functional operation upon what is basically a letter, i.e., a mark or point in space-time. Here it is the function or relation that establishes the identity, despite the fact that identity to self, quite akin to notions such as background, theme or Peirce's Oneness, is a given. Angus unfolds this notion of object as the immanent dimension to his work.

Both of the fundamental themes of CMT, medium and communication, are objects whose properties are established through a relational grid. Both of these concepts are ascribed with a dual, recursive, and methodologically contradictory constitution. Dual structure (or subtraction from the One), recursivity (transformational self-reference), and internal self-elimination (objectile evanescence prior to transmission) are the three features of the singular category of Angus's epistemology of reflexivity. From this he seeks to derive the idea of a pool of

culture as precondition of knowledge in general and, by extension, of the continual validity of movement for political change. Moreover, in CMT Angus situates this pool in the alternate cultural configuration presented by *oral* cultures. Culture, then, acquires historical properties, not to mention ethnological ones. It thus compels one to realize that even with background, there lie logical presuppositions to what and how we accept its independence from context and opinions.

While these features easily compound and, furthermore, confound a classical determination of object, we are dealing with the very objective features here that impose a requirement from within, an immanent pressure, onto CMT to display its own assumptions. Despite the notion of recursivity—or precisely because of it—we are led to confront the problem of naming or, more pertinently, our use of metaphor to describe reflexivity. Angus pinpoints this so quickly at the beginning of his book that it is breathtaking to confront the accuracy and clarity of his interpretation of the structural metaphoricity that informs conceptual thought as well as the dual configuration of the object at hand. For metaphor is a concept given through the organon of rhetoric to a trope, a figure of speech, an event within language which lends itself to perfecting the names bound to phenomena. As Angus writes: "The concept of metaphor is itself a metaphorical one, based on the Greek for 'carrying-over.' Metaphor carries over a meaning from one domain to another or, as we often say now, from one 'level' to another. Thus theoretical discourse is necessarily elaborated through metaphorical use of experiential materials" (3). As a concept, "metaphor" also names a set of properties specific to the rhetorical function in respect to which the term operates. Can we claim so quickly that the dual conceptual and metaphorical status of the term "metaphor" escapes conceptuality? While the motifs of transportation and displacement may meet up in the ancient Greek, the term "logos" continues to *refer* to something beyond the content realm of discourse whose filling-up, as it were, is automatic to engaging in discourse itself.

As is well known, the paths have historically split and further diffracted in the questions raised to address the dual object arising here. Self-referentiality, i.e., constitution of self through referentiality, and recursivity upon a meaning through different contexts are both constitutive of the discursive turn—which is why in addition to adopting the standpoint in his book that "the discursive turn, at least in its general outline, [works] as a productive root-metaphor for a contemporary philosophy of the human sciences," Angus also "looks for an expression of the limits of metaphor from within the formulations available after the discursive turn" (13). To this end, Husserl's *Urstiftung*, "instituting," or "primal instituting," becomes the key operator to CMT, referring to the "setting-into-play of a primal scene that founds a scientific or philosophical tradition—i.e. a distinct formulation of temporality" (12). Yet it appears that neither of these notions conceptualizes what Angus otherwise describes as a background in terms of a universal and *atemporal* material resource simultaneously allowing for ideas and reflexivity to

alter its structure and content. While steeped in the virtual, it is that from which identity as always exceeding its naturalized shape, is surmised and made possible.

Grasping metaphoricity merely indicates that there exists formal awareness of the limitations of language. The conceptual extension of this notion is left to another, a fundamentally other, order of discourse. Stretched beyond bounds, metaphor is no longer operational. Then again nor is a theory when it confronts the limits of the scope in which it makes claims to validity, at which point it either leads to contradiction or comes to a kind of halt. Angus seems to attribute this halting function to a point corresponding to poetry, or the sacred (189–191). As he writes, “We may find [the limit of communication] in those components of social life that resist closure and which open human identity to its possibility of reflexive self-constitution, but this possibility itself emerges at the border of human culture, the region where the sacred begins” (191)—which is where, it appears to me, we hastily jump from the standpoint of theory into a world. Indeed, *from theory* we jump into a preset world before subjecting the entire theory to fallibilist and counterfactual instances which can test the universalist accuracy of the world-claims being made. One of the favorable results of this process is to resist the projective urge that drives theory to represent worlds at the expense of perpetually subjecting its categories to revision and refining. Such would be a requirement of the kind of “object” presupposed by CMT, for it is an object inseparable from the tension between referential independence and observer-related modification.

Let me issue my second set of questions. Does not the choice in favor of a poetics over a rhetoric not skip over the possibility that the referential relation to the notion of culture as background is a phenomenon best described by logic? Is CMT not deprived of a stronger set of operators when turning to the poetic and sacred, in which potentially lie the very instruments by which to overcome fragmentation, especially explicit in theories that legitimate the fragmentary nature of new social movements?

Fallibilism and Style

Philosophies that incorporate fallibilism and fallibilist operators have historically taken diverse shapes. One may legitimately complain that these philosophies have generally been exclusive of the poetic, the unconscious, and the sacred, save perhaps for Peirce's. By contrast, they all lend a stubborn slowing down of analyses and halting of thought on the very specific and detailed matters of reference and universality as well as identity, especially as regards objective description of preexisting objects or fields. For example, Wittgenstein, while at first initiating the model of a logical sketch of deduced propositions meant to recursively repeat the world as it logically is, increasingly relies on a revised form of the maxim style by which he goes on to ferret out presuppositions of analytical and dubitative thought. Habermas, and especially Apel, redefine the meaning of the

(Kantian) transcendental as sets of conditions of possibility of assertoric statements, identical to those used when discussing and arguing. Angus as much as either of these thinkers uses recursivity to turn speech back onto itself and onto its own materiality. Recursivity proves itself as a means by which to confirm that there is no identity prior to the construction of identities in diverse discursive situations, termed in CMT as “media.”

Generally speaking, the sciences can be said to attend to phenomena that either are or become object and objects, or something in the process between. Both knowledge of science and knowledge of culture rely on understanding the innovations brought to the process of objectifying if either form of knowledge, assuming that there is such a split, ever hopes to muster up a more coherent and less ideologically excluded theory of subjective formations.

The absence of fallibilism among the conceptual operators here is notable with respect to guaranteeing reflexivity, self-referentiality and attention on the matter of communication itself. Angus's focus on attention is rooted, as it must be, in the here and now. But terms that allow its postulation are often the keystone to *realist* epistemologies. The derivation of “the source of culture,” which can only be realist epistemologically speaking, is certainly a highpoint of this remarkable book. I shall not go through its steps. Suffice it to say that it follows up on the rigorous historical montage of expression and genealogical recovery of theme, poetry, and mediations whereby the method of CMT is made explicit. Being the most exciting, it is also subject to the greatest degree of skepticism, for skepticism hounds the prescriptive. Can we surmise that a “culture-background” can be postulated independently from a historical montage?

If not, it seems hard not to assume that “culture” refers to the atemporal logical operators that lend universality to limited, general, but structurally fundamental ideas by which, short of some catastrophe, radically differing interests can see eye to eye. On this last point, let me add in passing that I speak less about multiculturalism here than about attempts at receiving Native American creation myths and the rejection of the migratory hypothesis, on the one hand, and the tentative re-appearance of a North American left as observed from the perspective of Latin American philosophers, for example, on the other hand.

Indeed, this is the key question regarding attention. How does one exert the mildest control over one's constituted identity as it is confronted with multiple and self-contradictory discourses, only some of which vie for social change and economic betterment? Should one not begin by integrating contradictory discourses fully into one's own by means of decentering one's hypotheses as an exemplar of what is at stake in discursive antagonism: perhaps less of the sacred and more of self-sacrifice in terms of theoretical fallibilism? Angus clearly does this from a political angle when discussing elsewhere the philosophy of George Grant.⁴ He also involves himself throughout his book in critique of representations made of the new social movements. As for the notion of culture, I would question its distinction

from science, particularly in light of the monopolization of the means by which culture is ultimately made indistinct from capital.

Communication theory certainly grows in complexity as it confronts contemporary monopoly capitalism. The bottom line is that mediations occur; they are events. About mediations, theory can at best try to identify why they are truthful and deserving of our attention, if not our participation. Legitimacy and circulation are what condition the efficiency of transformations and identity creation. My central question regarding Angus's theoretical presuppositions is thus the following. As we see with habit and voicing, transformation is also a naturalizing phenomenon, as is circulation and change. The upshot is that they all have their share of causally operative components, which when given time to settle in can be quite unchangeable. Consequently, a culture-science split, which inevitably redetermines culture according to criteria of physical nature, exceeds the reduction and deconstruction to rhetoric. While I cannot spend further time on Angus's theory of orality, I would like to assert that voicing is a real physical event, as is governing—demonstrated in the idea that society itself is in many ways a naturalized structure.

Do we not, then, need to accept naturalization of discourse in order precisely to see that habit and desire are moments of reflexivity set in previous patterns? What of the relation of theory to the real, of its effects and affects? The element of habit can be said to be a most bodily type of reflexivity, and one that is quite resilient to sudden change. Call this logic, bio-logic, or naturalized discourse. Are we not required within philosophy to accept and face off these challenging claims by testing them? Does not testing them make them more persuasive models from which the explicitation of new mediations also has relevance regarding truth as process, instead of casually accepting the relativist consequences seemingly internal to social constructivism?

Ian Angus has offered us a fascinating and rigorous book. Rather than analyzing communication within consumer culture, his book raises questions toward which we ought to turn our awareness as we deliver our attention to a culture industry now under the control of monopoly capitalism.

Notes

1. There are several variations on this definition given throughout the book. See, for example, 40–41 and 190.

2. Ian Angus, "The Possibility of Public Philosophy" in *A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality, and Wilderness* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 6. He continues: "A philosophy centering on the

possibility of public discourse needs to reach into the socio-historical formation of the polity in order to construct the commonality through which the polity may confront its destiny."

3. J. Ranciere, *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (Paris: Editions la fabrique, 2000), 13.

4. He also discusses multiculturalism according to a universal-leaning, particularist model which is critical of Ignatieff's nonethnic civic context model and Taylor's intercultural one in "Multiculturalism as a Social Ideal," in *A Border Within*.