

Excerpts (selected by Ted Lewis) from...

Presence in the Modern World by Jacques Ellul (1946)

Translated by Lisa Richmond

From Chapter Four: **“Communication”**
(starting on page 65; footnotes not included)

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In the sphere of intellectual life, the major fact of our time is a kind of unconscious but widely shared refusal to grasp the real situation that the world reveals. People refuse to see what truly constitutes our world. While this is especially true of intellectuals, it is also true of all people of our day and of our civilization as a whole. It is as though an enormous machine had been designed to keep people from becoming aware, to propel them into unconscious rejection or a flight into unreality. The grave characteristic of this era on this level is that people no longer grasp anything but appearances. They believe in appearances, they live within them, and they die for them. Reality disappears, the reality of people in themselves and the actual things surrounding them.

The people of the twentieth century—and it can be said that this is the first time in history that this situation has occurred—vacillate continuously between the phenomenon and the explanatory myth, that is, between two extreme and conflicting appearances. The phenomenon, let us say, is the external presentation

of some fact. Our contemporaries see only representations of the fact, which the press, radio, television, propaganda, and advertising provide. They no longer have faith in their own experiences, judgment, and thinking. They rely on printed paper, sound waves, or televised images. In their eyes, a fact becomes true when the newspaper prints an account of it, and they judge its importance by how tall the headline is. What they have seen for themselves does not count unless it is officially communicated and crowds have given it credence.

This observation may appear simplistic, but it is in fact how all propaganda works. A fact is false. It gets printed in a newspaper in a million copies. A thousand people know it is false. But nine hundred and ninety-nine thousand believe it is true. This is what I mean by phenomena or appearances, which modern people latch on to and comprehend *exclusively*. Why exclusively? Because each day they have a very small number of actual experiences, and most of the time they behave so much by habit that they do not even notice them. By contrast, each day they learn a thousand pieces of news from their newspaper, TV, and radio, and these matters are very important and sensational! How can you expect their pathetic, individual experiences about [such mundane matters as] the excellence of a plum or a razor blade not to be drowned in such a flood of illusions, on such important topics as nuclear armament, the fate of Europe or North-South relations, strikes, and so on? Yet they will never actually gain true knowledge of these facts.

Such appearances therefore become their life and thought. This means something very important from the intellectual point of view, which is that modern people, caught up in this flood of images that they cannot verify, are in no way capable of mastering them, because these images lack all coordination. One item of news follows another without pause. An issue appears and then disappears from the newspaper columns or screen and from the reader's brain. It is replaced by other issues and is forgotten. People get used to living in this way, without a

present or a past, in complete incoherence. All their mental activity is caught up in these fleeting visions, which themselves have no past or future and only an unstable present.

Within this reality, the actual facts that are available to everyone remain entirely hidden. Since they are not presented as appearances, they must not exist. So, social classes (except for the dictatorship of class!), large cities, and public transit systems (except for questions of urbanism!) [do not exist]. Attention is drawn to facts that have no deep importance and constitute trivial news items, about politics, the military, the economy, the democratic system, the success of the red army or the blue army, the United Nations, or nationalizations and privatizations. Through the appearance that we grant them, all these trivial details are where people focus their passions.

Yet people obviously need some degree of coherence. They cannot reconcile themselves to being just an unmoving eye that registers impassively all of the disjointed and random images of a crazy kaleidoscope. They need sensible connections and coherence for all of these fleeting facts. This cannot be the facts' true coherence, however, because that would require a true understanding of them rather than our superficial view, as well as a prodigiously sharp and far-reaching mind. So as the means of communication and propaganda develop and as the proportion of intellectuals to others declines, the more necessary it becomes to simplify, to summarize these news items and this phenomenology. The more urgent it becomes to provide the explanation and connection for all this trivial news. But the explanation and connection must be at the level of the "average reader," a level that is automatically getting lower and lower.

This brings us to the other pole of our bizarre intellectual situation today: the explanatory myth. In addition to its political and its mystical and spiritual function, the explanatory myth is the veritable spinal column of our whole intellectual

system. It was thought to be inessential, connected with dictatorial regimes, but in fact it forms an essential part of every contemporary kind of politics in our context. Given that appearances produce confusion and coherence is needed, a new appearance unifies them all in the viewer's mind and enables everything to be explained. This appearance has a spiritual root and is accepted only by completely blind credulity. It becomes the intellectual key for opening all secrets, interpreting every fact, and recognizing oneself in the whirl of phenomena. We are all familiar with these explanatory myths: the bourgeois myth of the hand of Moscow, the socialist myth of the families, the fascist myth of the Jews, the communist myth of the anti-revolutionary saboteur, and so forth and so on. But what is obviously very serious is that human beings today no longer possess any other means of intellectual coherence and political inquiry than this myth. If they dispense with it, they can retreat from the world they live in and lead their individual lives, but that is a suicidal way out, because they cannot isolate themselves from the world as we have constructed it.

This myth, which we are not seeking to fully analyze here, is also for our contemporaries their one stable point of thought and consciousness. It provides understanding and coherence and also seems to be the one fixed element amid the swirl of facts. This enables everyone to avoid the trouble of thinking for themselves, the worry of doubt, the questioning, the uncertainty of understanding, and the torture of a bad conscience. What a prodigious savings of time and means, which can be put usefully to work manufacturing some more missiles! People of our day have a good conscience because they have an answer for everything; and whatever happens and whatever they do, they can rely on the explanation that myth provides. This process places them within the most complete unreality possible. They live in a permanent dream, but a realistic dream, constructed from the

countless facts and theories that they believe in with all the power of “mass persons” who cannot detach themselves from the mass without dying.

How did this situation arise, which it seems impossible to escape? A whole assortment of facts contributes to the explanation. In the first place, there is our world’s real, extraordinary complexity. The more we go forward, the more our world is constructed of complicated organizations that are interlocking, with various properties, and all seeming of equal importance. It is impossible to understand them, to grasp them as a whole. We wander aimlessly in this forest.

Then there is the influence of the means of knowledge that are available for encountering these facts. These media are essentially mechanical in nature. And because they require considerable capital for their operation, they necessarily rely on private or state capital. These two characteristics of the means have political or economic repercussions: their mechanical nature requires that they be devoted only to the externality of facts. There are “some things that can be produced on TV, and some things that cannot.” We can understand them from one angle only.

This double condition leads as a result to a mechanical choice in the actual data. We have to look for what fits the means’ requirements. In the end, the mechanical nature makes it necessary to use massive and unqualified assertions—assertions rather than reasoning, because, due to the fact that it is mechanized, we are addressing the crowd. Since the means are subservient to money, they give preference to the spread of some facts over others, they present one aspect of the world based on hidden assumptions. The means are progressively applied in all areas and to everyone, because the business needs a good return (financially so, if it concerns “private information,” politically so, if it concerns “information of state”—it is the same thing either way).

A third element in the explanation comes from the overwhelming nature of the means of knowledge that society makes available to us. We find it difficult to deny information that comes to us in this manner—and even if we have private doubts, this does not keep the crowd from accepting the information, due to how forceful it appears. There can be no dialogue with the media. Their mass power is completely irresistible when used under certain conditions (which special research centers are dedicated to determining more and more precisely).

Finally, we must obviously take into account entertainment, in the Pascalian sense of the word. Every person today is a person for civilization to entertain, and it could be said that our entire civilization, from its pastimes right up to its serious issues, looks on everything from the perspective of entertainment. This is what I meant when I spoke of “keeping people from becoming aware.” Lifestyle, activities, work, political parties, and so on—all this is so absorbing that people become easier prey for these means of knowledge. These means are reinforced by those who use them, since people are profoundly incapable of deep thought and reflection. These phenomena, these obvious explanations satisfy them, because they are entertained, even before the information from film and radio has entertained them a bit more. The intellectual situation of modern people is therefore extremely serious. Although they know more things, have more means, and are theoretically more advanced than at any other period in history, they are advanced in a dream of explanations and a fog of facts.

One would think, though, that this is not the modern intellectual’s situation. It may be the situation of the average person and that is all. In fact, intellectuals are entirely caught up in it, albeit in a different way.

(The next two sections expound on changes in modes of knowing, due to a materialistic worldview that prizes technique, which have affected the modern intellectual.)

These two facts that I have just emphasized, the failure of awareness and the subjugation of intellect to technique, lead in combination to the most frightening situation possible for an intellectual: the absence of communication.

It is a banal observation that the people of our day no longer understand one another. This has not been news since the tower of Babel. But God did preserve to people a certain degree of relationship, thanks to intellect. This is the bridge that our day has just destroyed. Human beings no longer understand one another. At the peasant's level, it is not noticeable; at the bourgeois level, it is an inconvenience. But at the intellectual's level, it is a tragedy, because for intellectuals there is no real reason to live except for communicating, for understanding the world. Today, however, such communication has become practically impossible. In order for people to understand each other they need a minimum of shared true ideas, biases, and values, which are usually held unconsciously.

Yet the mechanics of information progressively destroys this common fund. Other biases are probably created, other shared ideas, but they have other characteristics. Instead of being the deepest and most authentic expression of a particular civilization, they are now the myths and artificial ideas created by propaganda. That is, individuals can no longer encounter one another themselves, along a given civilizational path; they can encounter in each person only the myth that they themselves believe. And this myth is only an *artificial* creation (we must keep returning to this point) that keeps modern people from descending into madness.

Besides, we have seen how the sense of objective reality becomes gradually lost and also how the people whom we encounter have ceased to hold for us this objective reality. We are caught up in this increasingly greater abstraction that is occurring in relation not only to facts but also to human beings. We can no longer communicate with one another because our neighbors have ceased to be real to us. Intellectuals today no longer believe in the possibility of joining with others. They speak into the void and for the wasteland, or else they speak for the proletariat, the Nazi, the intellectual, and so on. People have never spoken so much about human beings while at the same time giving up speaking to them. And this is because they are well acquainted with how useless it is to speak to them: conditions are such that the human person has disappeared. What remains is the consumer, the worker, the citizen, the reader, the partisan, the producer, the bourgeois. What remains are those who tricolor and those who internationalize. In all this, the person has disappeared, and yet it is only to the human person that we can speak authentically. It is only with the human person that we can communicate.

In the end, we can no longer communicate with people because the sole way of intellectual expression is technique. This fact, that intellect has to follow the channel of technique, leads to the destruction of personal relationships because there is no possibility of contact between two beings this way. [Real] communication transcends technique, because it cannot occur unless the two interlocutors are completely engaged in real discussion. But this is precisely what modern intellectual technique both avoids and frustrates.

(Later, Ellul writes about the importance of grounding one's 'knowing' in the context of neighborliness and the 'nearness' of personal relationships. These are the very things, he states, that modern civilization is destroying.)

...By becoming aware, intellectuals recover a ground on which it is possible to find themselves again with others: the place of encounter with reality. But the particular work of Christian intellectuals is to discover today a new language, one that enables everyone to understand one other despite the clamor of advertising, a language that enables individuals to come out of their desperate solitude and that avoids both arid rationality and subjective emotionalism. To seek out a new language that "gives a purer meaning to the words of the tribe,"* with all that this entails of submission to what is real (our language is totally out of step with reality!) and adaptation to different mental structures. A language that might become a living expression of the words of Paul: "I have become all things to all people. . . ."**

*From the poem "Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe" by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898), describing a poet's vocation.

** 1 Cor 9:22.

(The remainder of the chapter focuses on the duties and opportunities of Christians and prophetic intellectuals who provide a unique "presence" in the modern world by their awareness and their actions that spring from "the wellsprings of a life of the mind, rooted in what is real.")
