



Market in Banfora, Burkina Faso. Picture by Marco Schmidt

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Culture in a Globalized Society

Today our planet, inhabited for ages by a small group of the free and by throngs of the enslaved, is getting filled up with a growing number of nations and communities characterised by an increased sense of importance of their own, separate value*. This process often takes place among great difficulties, conflicts and dramas. We may well be heading in the direction of a world so completely new and different that our experience of its history so far will prove insufficient for us to grasp it and be able to cope in it. At any rate, the world we enter is the Planet of Great Opportunity, not an unconditional opportunity but an opportunity open only to those who treat their responsibilities seriously, thereby manifesting that they treat themselves seriously. It is the world that potentially gives a lot but at the same time requires a lot, and in which an attempt to take easy shortcuts is often a way to nowhere. We will keep encountering in it a new Other, who is going to begin to emerge slowly from the chaos and confusion of contemporariness. It is possible that the Other will arise from an encounter of two contradictory trends shaping the culture of the modern world – a trend toward globalisation of our reality and the other, preserving our divergences, our differences, our uniqueness. They will be their offspring and inheritors, and that is why we should seek a dialogue and agreement with them¹.

Europeanism means a recognition of equal status and equivalence of all cultures, the ability to co-exist with them and be enriched by their values². European thought has been trying to build bridges of understanding with Others. Identifying with these efforts and continuing them is not only an ethical obligation but also an urgent task of our time in the world where everything is so fragile and in which there is so much demagoguery, confusion, fanaticism and ill will³.

Europe is surrounded by an immeasurable and continually growing multiplicity of cultures, communities, religions and civilisations. Life on the planet on which there exists an ever increasing number of mutual links calls for awareness of this fact and for adjustment to the radically new global conditions⁴. Encounters and co-existence on our "globalising" planet are inevitable. After all, we live in a multicultural world, and not because the number of cultures is bigger today than before (actually, it is decreasing). Already Herodotus, writing two and a half thousand years ago, mentions in his book hundreds of tribes, beliefs and languages which he encountered himself or of which he heard⁵. Herodotus knows the sedentary nature of man and he knows that in order to get to know Others one must take to the road, reach them, manifest readiness to make contact; and that is why he continually travels, visits Egyptians and Scythes, Persians and Lydians, remembers everything he hears from them and also what he sees with his own eyes. In a word – he wants to get to know Others since he understands that in order to get to know yourself better you must get acquainted with Others because, after all, it is they who constitute that mirror in which we examine our reflection; he knows that in order to understand ourselves better we must

* The text presented here has been prepared on the basis of the author's publications as a compilation of his reflections on culture, its significance in the modern world, in the era of globalisation. The main texts from which the author's reflections concerning these issues were taken are the following: *The Other* (several different editions, which in the footnotes have been put together for the sake of convenience and which refer to the 2006 edition by Znak), *A Reporter's Self-portrait and Lapidaria* 1-3. The selected text fragments in a few places only are connected with a hyphen, which is then always put in square brackets, and in some sections single statements were removed if they could blur the comprehension of texts coming from various sources and combined into one consistent whole. Removal of longer fragments is signalled by this sign: [...]. The authoress of the compilation would like to express her gratitude to Dr Alicja Kapuścińska and to the Literary Agency Puenta for their kindness.



understand Others better and be able to compare with them, pit ourselves against them, confront them. He, a citizen of the world, is against separating oneself from Others, against slamming the gates in front of them. Xenophobia, Herodotus seems to be saying, is the disease of the frightened, of the suffering from an inferiority complex, of being terrified by the thought that they will have to examine their reflection in the mirror of Others' culture⁶.

My first journey [with Herodotus*] to Asia in 1956 and my later journeys to Africa have made me aware of the fact that I am bearing witness to an extraordinary event, which is one of the most significant moments in the history of the 20th century. Usually it is the two World Wars or the history of totalitarian systems, Nazism and communism, that are commented upon, whereas the fact that the 20th century has witnessed the birth of the Third World and a new political-geographical map of humanity is little emphasised. I was lucky to have witnessed that historical wonder, history at the moment of happening, of being shaped; a kind of non-book-like, non-academic history⁷. In the middle of the 20th century the process of decolonisation began, whereby two thirds of the world's population acquired, at least nominally, the status of free citizens. Now they are reaching back to their roots, reviving their cultures. With pride, they are starting to emphasise their culture's importance and draw strength from it. Europe, still confined and frozen in its eurocentrism, seems not to notice – or prefers not to notice – that on our planet various non-European civilisations are growing in significance and acquiring a new dynamism and life, and that they are demanding more and more firmly and forcefully a place at the table of the world. It is the time of great challenge for Europe⁸.

In the contemporary world cultures do not exist any more on their own, separately, far, far away, in isolation. Today each culture is mediated, hybrid, marked with eclectics – though to varying degrees. All cultural rivers meet today in one big delta of contemporary civilisation where, thanks to modern communications encompassing and uniting the planet, they penetrate each other, unite and later – already in one stream – flow into a new epoch to create a future cosmic civilisation⁹. Civilisation clash is not a modern invention; the phenomenon has been present throughout the whole history of humanity. Besides, it must be kept in mind that conflict is only one form of contact among civilisations, and not at all a necessary one; for another form, even more frequently occurring, is exchange, very often happening simultaneously, somehow within the context of conflict¹⁰.

The relations of Europeans with Others may be divided, very briefly and in a simplified manner, into a number of periods:

- 1 – the period of merchants and envoys, the time when it is the people on the road who make contacts with Others, either on merchant routes or when sent by one of the contemporary magnates as emissaries to other countries. This period lasted more or less until the 15th century.
- 2 – the period of great geographical discoveries (Third World loyalists fret and foam when they hear the term. Why, they keep asking, were America or Asia "discovered"? We have known those

* For his first expedition as a reporter Kapuściński went to India with Herodotus's book *Histories*. He described that journey in his later autobiographical book *Podróże z Herodotem*. [Journeys with Herodotus]. Kraków: Znak, 2004. [MS]



continents since the dawn of time. We have always lived there!) It is the time of conquest, slaughter and pillage, of authentically dark ages in the contacts of the Europeans with Others. It went on for a few hundreds of years.

3 – the period of Enlightenment and humanism, of opening to Others, of first attempts at understanding them, making human contacts, developing exchange not only of material goods but also of cultural and spiritual values.

4 – the Enlightenment opened a new period, the ongoing one, which has been characterised by three subsequent breakthroughs: the anthropologists' breakthrough, the breakthrough of Lévinas*, the breakthrough of multiculturalism¹¹.

In the 19th century the reasoning proceeded in terms of nation, region or continent. We, however, have neither tools nor experience which would allow us to think on a global scale – in order to see in what way other regions of our planet affect us and how we influence them. In other words – it is very difficult for us to understand that each of us is an individual related to other people, that numerous threads lead to us and unite us, and later branch out in all directions¹². The world is in motion on a scale unknown in history. People of miscellaneous races and cultures meet everywhere on the more and more densely populated planet¹³. After the experience of the second half of the 20th century we are at last beginning to wonder why some communities develop while others do not. And we come to the conclusion that something must lie there in culture, that the factor of culture should be regarded as triggering either growth or stagnation. It has always been blamed on economic, systemic and very often ideological reasons. But today we can see that countries of the same political and economic system, applying the same political solutions and, finally, having an almost identical geographical location, develop differently. Therefore, there evidently must be something in culture itself¹⁴. Culture is like a riddle: in its values, hierarchy, and contents there probably lies an answer to the question of why we are what we are, why we are backward or progressive. Why do some communities in the United States develop and others do not, when all of them function within an identical framework? Again, the answer is – culture. Hence, the attitude towards culture and its examination are essential in understanding the whole process of growth and – most importantly – the place of the society on the scene of the world¹⁵.

Nothing will better disperse superstitions than knowledge of many peoples of dissimilar customs, laws and views – the difference which, with little effort, will teach us to reject the things with respect to which people differ and to regard the things with respect to which all peoples agree as the call of nature: for, after all, primary laws of nature are the same in all nations. Do not offend anybody and give everybody his due**¹⁶. Three options have always been there for men whenever they met the Other: they could choose war, *shutting themselves off* from the Other with a wall, or establishing a dialogue. In the course of history men have always hesitated between these options and, depending on the situation and culture, chosen one or another. We can see that they have been unsteady in their choices, that they have not always felt self-confident or stood on stable

* Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995) - a Lithuanian-born Jewish-French philosopher and Talmudic commentator who insisted that we are defined as individuals by our attitude to the Other. [MS]

** The author quotes here views of Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777) an 18th century philosopher and naturalist - which were popular in the intellectual milieu of that time. [MS]

ground¹⁷. The better we know the world, the greater becomes in us the awareness of our ignorance of it and the conviction of its enormity, not spatial but relating to its cultural abundance, so vast that it can't be recorded in the files. In the times of James Frazer, when he was writing *The Golden Bough**, and when numerous anthropologists of the 19th century thought that in the world there lived a well-defined number of tribes or nations, an attempt at their classification or description was still possible. Today we are aware that the cultural dimension of the world is infinite in its vastness and richness.

Traditionally, human imagination and sensibility have had a limited range of reference. In the course of hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of years, man has perceived himself as a member of some tribe, community, a confessor of some faith, a resident of some place on the Earth. They were the central points, the pillars of his spiritual homeland. The existence of such centres has shaped our imagination and our sensibility. In the father we saw the centre of the family; in a leader, the centre of a nation; in the Church, the centre of faith. The existence of such centres ordered our world and allowed us to have a good grasp in it. During our life we made an effort to stay in direct proximity – physical or emotional – to those central points¹⁹. And now technology and communication have multiplied our world. The central points have multiplied – and by virtue of this they have stopped being central, they have become equivalent, difficult to arrange in a hierarchy. Man has found himself in a reality which for him is opaque, chaotic and hard to identify. This is the reason why we, residents of the Earth entering the 21st century, suffer deeply from confusion and often also from relativism or nihilism²⁰.

As early as 1912, Bronisław Malinowski** remarked that the world of cultures is not a hierarchical world (at that time it was blasphemy for all eurocentrics), that there are no inferior or superior cultures, that all of them are equal, only – simply – different²¹. The texts created as a result of field studies have had a great impact on the perception of Others by the Europeans. After all, they prove that Others are not hordes of unpredictable and lazy barbarians, but that they live in highly developed cultures, characterised by complex, sophisticated structures and hierarchies. In our relations with Others, in the way we approach them, we have moved up one more level²². In Malinowski's times and in the ages preceding them the white man, the European, set out outside his continent with almost exclusively conquest in mind – to acquire new lands, to capture slaves, to trade or to convert. Frequently, these were incredibly bloody expeditions – the conquest of both Americas by Columbus' people, and then the conquest of Africa, Asia, and Australia by white settlers. Malinowski set out to islands in the Pacific with a different goal in mind – he wanted to get to know the Other, to get to know his neighbours, customs and language, to see how they live. He wanted to see and experience it by himself, personally, experience in order to testify to it later.

* James George Frazer (1854-1941) a Scottish social anthropologist, philologist and expert on history of religion. His work *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion* is the most widely known comparative anthropological study in the field of mythology and religion, which was first published in 1890, whereas its third edition, consisting of as many as 12 volumes, in 1915, with the additional 13th volume edited in 1936. Its issue from 1922 is also available, at the following address: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/frazer/>. [MS].

** Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1946) a Polish anthropologist, considered one of the most important 20th-century anthropologists. His pioneering ethnographic fieldwork in the Trobriand Islands have made a major contribution to the study of phenomena relating to reciprocity. [MS]



However, as obvious as the project of Malinowski may seem, it proved to be revolutionary, world-shaking. After all, it laid bare the weakness or perhaps simply the feature by which every culture is characterised, occurring – admittedly – to varying degrees, lying in the difficulty each culture has understanding a different culture, the weakness shared by the people from these cultures – their participants and advocates²³. Malinowski [...] formulated an important and yet so rarely observed by others thesis that: *in order to make a judgment about something one has to be there. [...] there are no inferior and superior cultures – there are only different cultures, fulfilling needs and expectations of their participants in varying ways*. For him another man, of a different race and culture, is still a person whose behaviour, quite like that of all of us, is characterised by dignity, respect for recognised values, and a deep respect for tradition and custom²⁴.

Malinowski was commencing his work at the moment of the birth of mass society; nowadays we live in the period of transition from that mass society to a new, planetary one. Many things are conducive to this transition: the electronic revolution, the unparalleled growth of all kinds of communications, and – also – the resulting changes taking place in the consciousness of the youngest generations and in culture understood in its broad sense. How will it change our attitude – the attitude of people from a single culture – towards people from a different culture or from other cultures? How will it affect the relation I–The Other within my own culture and outside it? It is very difficult to answer it unambiguously and finally, for it concerns the ongoing process in which we ourselves are immersed, without a chance to look at it from a distance that makes reflection possible. Lévinas examined the relation I–the Other in a single, historically and racially uniform civilisation. Malinowski studied Melanesian tribes at the time when they were still in their primeval state, yet untouched by the influences of western technology, organisation and market. Today, however, it is more and more rarely possible. Culture is becoming increasingly hybrid, heterogeneous²⁵.

Today, in our multicultural world, so widely varied, the particular cultures are increasingly strongly related and penetrative of each other. The point is to succeed in creating among cultures relations not of dependence and subordination but of harmony and partnership. Only then is there a chance for harmony and goodwill to overcome all the hostilities and conflicts in our human family. From my minute, microscopic section I would like to make a contribution to it – and that is why I write²⁶. A foreign reporter is an interpreter of cultures. He attacks the commonly prevailing ignorance, stereotypes, superstitions. He is by nature an eclectic and lives on cultural exile from his own society. The solitude of a reporter who travels the world to faraway countries is that he writes about those who do not read him and for those who are little interested in his heroes. He is somebody in-between, suspended among cultures – their interpreter. His question and problem is this: how far is it possible to explore and get acquainted with another culture knowing that it has been created by inner, secret codes which we, arrivals from a different world, will never be able to decode and comprehend? The reporter is a certain attitude to life, a character²⁷. Personally, I was interested in a phenomenon, the wonder lying in the fact that an old, traditional culture and civilisation rejects attempts to impose on it some other cultural pattern, a progressive model; it is also a universal phenomenon²⁸. The world has always been for me a huge Tower of Babel – a to-

wer, however, in which God has mixed up not only languages but also cultures and customs, passions and interests, and whose inhabitants He has made into ambivalent beings, combining in them I and non-I, themselves and the Other, their own and the strangers'²⁹. I think that people who have a chance to travel are under an obligation of its own kind - to show that other people have their own feelings and needs, that we must get to know and understand them, while those who have already got to know them - should somehow manifest it and interpret it'³⁰.

During my journeys around the world in recent years I observe more and more frequently and clearly how relations, links and exchange develop among people coming for example from Africa and Asia or from islands on the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean, who have never been to Europe and know little of it, or are even not interested in it. Many factors contribute to the presently typical, planetary migration fever; let us name only two of them:

– the first one is the ongoing electronic revolution and the accompanying enormous growth of communications, transport, connections etc. Humanity moves on from slow water routes to air routes, which greatly shortens the travelling time, increases man's mobility, extends contact with Others;

– the second one is the deepening of inequalities in the world and, most importantly, a growing awareness of those inequalities.

In our times the poorer are trying to diminish, to level those differences, not by confrontation but by penetration, by migration to wealthier regions and countries.

In such a reality the number of inter-human encounters and contacts is rapidly growing, and the climate of the world in which we live will, after all, depend on their evolution and quality, on our contacts with Others – increasingly frequent and more and more varied. Like in every other sphere of life also in this one, discussed here, everything begins to take on the structure of a network – changeable and dynamic, lacking permanent points of reference. There is an increase in the number of people having difficulty defining their own identity, naming their own social or cultural affiliation³¹.

Man is by nature a sedentary being and this feature has become established in him especially since the invention of agriculture and the art of town building. Most often, man leaves his nest only under coercion – expelled by war or hunger, by plague, drought or fire. They sometimes take to the road because they are persecuted for their beliefs, and sometimes in search of employment or opportunities for their children. In many people large spaces evoke anxiety, fear of the unexpected and even fear of death. Each culture knows an entire set of magic spells and actions which are supposed to protect those leaving for a journey, who are being seen off with bursts of lamentation and sorrow as if they were going to the scaffold³². A deeper curiosity of the world is not a common phenomenon. Most people are little interested in it. History knows entire civilisations which never manifested any interest in the external world. Africa never built any ships to sail away and see what stretched behind the seas surrounding it. Its people did not even try to get to Europe, located after all so very close to them. The Chinese civilisation went even further than that: it simply got separated from the rest of the world with a gigantic wall³³. The Empires mounted on horses - Persians, Arabs, Mongols - behaved differently. Their objective, however, was not to get to know the world. It was armed conquest and enslavement. Besides, the periods of



their rise and prominence were relatively short and then those empires collapsed, forever buried by sands. In this march of civilisation Europe has been an exception. For it is the only civilisation which since its very beginnings, since Greece, has been manifesting curiosity of the world and readiness not only to seize and dominate it, but also to get acquainted with it, and in the case of its best minds – exclusively to get acquainted, comprehend, make close relations and create a human commonwealth. Our contacts with the remaining inhabitants of the planet – Others – very clearly and dramatically have run through here in all their complexity³⁴.

Later, however, the encounters of the Europeans with non-Europeans often had an extremely violent and bloody character. After all, it was like that even before Herodotus, when Greece clashed with Persia; it was like that during the conquests of Alexander the Great, in the years of expansion of the Roman Empire, at the time of the Crusades, of the Spanish Conquest etc., etc³⁵. The end of the Middle Ages in Europe and the beginning of modern times – of Europe's great outing to conquer the world, of enslavement of the Other and of pillage of what they possessed – have left in the records of our planet pages that are cruel and written in blood. The scale of genocidal practices of that period, which lasted for over three centuries, was exceeded only in the 20th century, when they took on the macabre form of the Holocaust³⁶.

Ideology when changing its geographical location gets tinted with another culture and sometimes even changes its original sense. Each cultural environment provides the same ideology with a different shade, adds something to it and takes something away; idea migration is a dynamic process and at the end of such migration the idea may appear in a most surprisingly different incarnation. Each movement of ideology in space – from country to country, from continent to continent, from one cultural region to another – creates a potential danger of schism – potential, or perhaps even inevitable³⁷. All civilisations have inclination to narcissism, and the stronger a civilisation is, the more explicitly will that inclination manifest itself. This tendency pushes civilisations into conflicts with others, and releases their arrogance and craving for domination³⁸.

At a time of cultural change – of transition from narrow eurocentrism to more universal visions including the whole world, a new branch of social sciences has arisen – anthropology. Anthropology is directed at the Other, devoted exclusively to them. It embraces the idea of understanding the Other by getting acquainted with them, the idea of accepting variety and divergence as constitutional features of mankind³⁹. Lévinas' philosophy separates the individual, differentiates them, indicates that beside me there is yet Someone Else and that, if I do not bring myself to make effort and notice them, and show readiness to make contact, we will walk past by each other – they and I – indifferent, cold, insensitive, expressionless and without soul. And yet, Lévinas says, the Other has got a face and it is a book imprinted with good⁴⁰.

At the beginning of the 20th century our planet was a planet of peasants – the population of towns at the beginning of the century did not exceed a small percentage. We were villagers and the culture of that time was also a rural culture. It was predicted that the growth of towns would be very slow. Nevertheless, the mass migration of peasants had completely changed the shape of

towns. Mankind entered the 20th century as a community of peasants, and leaves it as an urban-peasant society. The structure of the world has changed – the urban factor began to have an increasingly decisive influence on the shape of culture, on people's appearances, interests and occupations. Moreover – in highly developed countries all the decision-making takes place in cities. That's not all – it is the feature of the highly developed society and modern world market that they have practically eliminated peasantry as a class. That is why the peasantry so strongly defend themselves against modernity! By virtue of their very existence, by definition, they will always keep declaring themselves against it – since for them it means death⁴¹. There comes the time of accelerated and intensified migrations, when millions and millions of people move to cities and the support of tradition – the country – is getting depopulated, while its inhabitants are being decimated by hunger, civil wars, droughts and epidemics. And yet the individual that we encounter and meet in great cities of the Third World is already a different Other – a product of a difficult-to-define hybrid urban culture, a descendant of various self-contradictory worlds, a non-uniform creature characterised by fluid, unstable contours and features. Today, we have to do most frequently with just such Other⁴². Man has a chance to become a being with his roots struck in various soils, quenching his thirst in thousands of springs. But many people reject that opportunity, not feeling strong enough to meet the challenge. They cloister themselves away in a cultural xenophobia, mark the boundaries, build impenetrable walls. They claim their superiority over others, full of fear of them hidden under arrogance and contempt. This tendency can be observed in the modern world. Man, when facing difficulties, has a choice either to fight them or to escape from them. Today more and more frequently he chooses the latter solution – hence the unprecedented multiplication of all sorts of refugees and emigrants on all continents, everywhere⁴³. Provincialism as a form of life and a way of thinking has stopped going unpunished. Today the parochial condemns one to isolation, to a heritage park, to being left behind, to a worse and poorer variant of life in terms of its culture and living conditions. The big city destroys the beauty of the country, spoils the charm of the land, disgraces the landscape⁴⁴.

Culture is a complex phenomenon, and, quite obviously, it may also be outdated, conservative or reactionary. There are many ancient cultures which the modern expansion will not manage to destroy, it must reach a compromise with them and enter the state of co-existence. On the other hand, there exists an indirect danger for traditional cultures: after all, they are based in the country, whose slow extinction we can observe today all over our globe⁴⁵.

[The 20th century] in Europe was the period of formation of mass society and two totalitarian systems, i.e. communism and fascism. The mass society man was characterised by anonymity, lack of social bonds, indifference towards the Other and, due to lack of cultural rooting, defencelessness and susceptibility to evil⁴⁶. Mass culture was not only the mass recipient, but also the mass creator – or maker. The creators wanted to draw attention to themselves at all costs with gaudiness and strength of colour, sound and word⁴⁷. With the contemporary crowdedness on the market, the issue of promotion gained a special significance: galleries, publishing houses, commercials, concert halls, festivals and contests, all kinds of culture canvassers. It did not suffice any more to produce the thing. Now the work of art must reach the receiver, the viewer, the reader.



Earlier, it was they who undertook the effort to find the work of art and its creator. Today it is the author himself who must seek his audience. Nowadays the situation requires on the part of the creators a doubled effort. They must be makers and sale canvassers at the same time⁴⁸. [We are facing] a crisis of culture: growth of the irrational factor in the lives of individuals and societies (sects, parapsychology), decline of traditional values (honour, loyalty, solidarity, kindness, sacrifice, etc.), and in the area of inter-human communication - predominance of monologue over dialogue. Triumph of technology over culture. Utopias have gone but the world still remains overpowered by myths⁴⁹.

The cultural dialogue has always been a dialogue of high minds, a dialogue of deep reflection, concentration and silence. When everyone starts talking simultaneously, as happens on the Internet, the level of conversation falls down to that of the bazaar. After all, most people do not usually have anything sensational to say in their day-to-day contacts. This is our elementary experience as journalists: when we collect notes for our reporting materials from conversations with the so-called ordinary people, it turns out later, at the time of editing, that ninety percent of them are of little value⁵⁰. History of culture of everyday life is more and more often history of gastronomy: Where have they recently opened (or closed) a new restaurant? Where can you eat well? What new dish should you try? Who makes the best veal? Who prepares the best oysters? Conversations about food have replaced conversations about the weather. Or, more precisely, the weather is the main subject of conversation while eating⁵¹.

The mass culture man's mind is a different mind. The difference between such a mind and the mind of an intellectual is not a matter of degree but of kind. They are brains imprinted with dissimilar codes. The distinction between the inferior and the superior cannot be introduced here since it is divergence, distinctness of mental structures, which is involved. The mass culture man's mind is characterised by the following traits: a) lack of curiosity of the world, they refuse to know; b) indifference, passivity, mental nap; c) if any thinking, it is then slow, without flow, without inspiration; d) blind faith in stereotypes, myths, nonsense; reluctance to revise or reject them; e) mistrust⁵². Mass societies are highly susceptible to all types of ideologies. After all, when those peasant masses there move into cities, they have no cultural rooting, they find themselves in a void. As a result, in order somehow to take root, they readily listen to various demagogues and utopian ideas. Country masses in cities easily become first-rate prey to all types of totalitarian systems. And even if it is not a totalitarian ideology, it is then populism, which is also harmful. These ideologies find support in masses and thus they manage to develop. That is why the 20th century went down in history as the century of totalitarianism, and that is its another trait. The third characteristic of the 20th century is that it was the time of birth of the Third World, of the movement of large continents - Africa, Asia, Latin America - towards at least formal independence⁵³.

The division of the planet into two opposing blocks is coming to an end; a new world is being created, more mobile and more open than ever. Two factors are particularly favourable for this mobility and freedom. The first one is the renaissance of democratic spirit which occurred at the fall of the previous century. It marks the end of military coups and regimes, the end of the age of dicta-

tors, single-party systems, economic autarchy, censorship, borders enclosed in barbed wire. Democracy is becoming fashionable, no one counters it, even the most undemocratic parties have the adjective *democratic* in their names⁵⁴. When democracy is being discussed, all too seldom attention is paid to the dependence of democracy - its strength, authority and efficiency - on the level and type of society's culture. After all, a low level of culture weakens democracy, drags it down, prevents it from developing and taking deeper roots. All discussions concerning the future chances for democracy are useless unless they are accompanied by an evaluation of the state of society's culture, its level and vitality. If the level of society's culture is low, democracy gets replaced with its own caricature⁵⁵.

The fourth feature [of the 20th century] is the rapid development of technology, especially of computing and electronics. They have incredibly changed our world and our societies. Some say directly that it is the main revolution of our century. Entirely new concepts are being created: of *cyberspace*, *info highway* and so on; new intellectual and conceptual categories are being developed, ones which we find increasingly difficult to master. However, the formation of that new global system of world communication leads to yet another phase of social changes. At first – only in highly developed countries – a mass society came into being. Now we are witnessing the transformation of that mass society into a global society, in which everyone is already participating. The means of communication have become so advanced that they incorporate the whole planet, all of mankind into this new, enormous society whose characteristics and contents we cannot fully grasp yet. We only know that it exists, that it is being formed and that we are simultaneously witnessing it and participating in it. Thanks to it our planet is becoming an open space – or at any rate potentially open. I think that it will shape the future fates of mankind, at least in the next decades*.

In the meantime the mass media have created a vision of the world that is very political and chaotic, completely separated from "long-term duration", i.e. from social institutions, attitudes, mentalities and problems of ordinary people, who make up ninety-nine percent of every society. We could of course describe yet another coup, revolution, mutiny, yet another spectacular event, but all that keeps recurring and does not clarify anything for us. We should reach more deeply, get to causes, and they lie just there - in culture. We need to descend into the depth of the river. How else if not in relation to culture can we explain the fact that today some African countries are more developed than others although they all started from a similar level? Culture manifests itself more explicitly in everyday life than in coups and that is why we need to pay more attention to it⁵⁸. For, after all, we can't get acquainted with other civilisations and cultures during a three- to seven-day visit⁵⁹. Large squares and large streets have one thing in common all over the world: man is replaced there with a crowd. One needs to get to little streets, go to the peripheries, enter the gates, so as to rediscover the human being. Time passes by at differing speeds depending on the spot on the earth's surface where we find ourselves, depending on culture⁶⁰.

* The current events in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and other African countries, which are as if reminiscent of the events in Middle and Central Europe in the 1970s and 80s of the 20th century, in which the Author himself unfortunately was not able to participate, show how deep his reflections were. [MS]





Palmyra,
an ancient
Arab city ruins.
Picture by
Tomek Śliwiński

A positive aspect of the media is that they have overcome two barriers with which humanity has struggled so far to no avail: time and of space. It is a great revolution in the history of man's life on Earth⁶¹. But the paradoxical character of this medial situation goes beyond that. On the one hand, globalisation of the mass media is growing, and on the other – so is their triviality, incoherence, and chaos. The more contact people have with the media, the more they complain about their confusion and solitude. It was in the early 1960s, at the time when television was still in its infancy, that Marshall McLuhan* coined the term *global village*. McLuhan, a Catholic of a great missionary passion, thought that the new medium would make us all brothers and sisters living in one commonwealth of faith. The term McLuhan coined, repeated thoughtlessly today, has proved to be one of the great mistakes of the contemporary culture. This is because the essential point about a village is that its inhabitants know each other very closely, associate with each other and share a common fate. And yet, nothing to that effect could be said about the society that inhabits our planet today, it resembles an anonymous crowd at one of the big airports, a crowd of people rushing hastily, mutually indifferent and not knowing one another⁶².

Today, information has to be a nicely wrapped product in order to be sold more quickly. The switch of criteria from truthfulness to attractiveness constitutes an enormous cultural revolution. We are all its witnesses, participants and, partly, victims. The boss does not want to know if a product is genuine but if it will sell, if it will attract advertising, for he lives off it. It is the mass media

* Herbert Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) - a Canadian philosopher and communication theorist.[MS]

which divert our attention from important issues and direct it to less important, technical problems. Who will do it more quickly, more colourfully, dully or virtually, who has a satellite, direct relation and who – a retransmission? In a word, who will leave the recipient with no time to think⁶³?

Mass media standards reflect accurately the situation in culture with its division into high culture and mass culture. There are serious journals, broadcasting stations and television channels, and the responsible journalism of the old type has survived in them. But they are of course in the minority. For the majority of media are part of the world of services – dynamically developing on a planetary scale. That is why we need to remember that a reporter and a media employee are two different concepts. [...] *A media worker* is today a TV presenter in the news programme; tomorrow he may become a government spokesperson, the day after tomorrow a stockbroker, and three days from now a managing director of a big oil company. For them work is not attached to any social obligation or ethical responsibility. Their job is selling goods, just like that of all the employees of the service sector – the sector that includes an enormous and still growing number of occupations in highly developed societies⁶⁴.

Such inventions as fax, modem, e-mail or cellular telephone are at the same time a step forward and backwards for the correspondent. For, on the one hand, they facilitate the process of acquisition and transmission of information, but on the other, fast, instant and unproblematic contact with the head-office makes the correspondent stick closer to it than to the place and culture in which they are set. Such uninterrupted contact with their head-office results, in spite of their geographical relocation, in their actual presence, cultural and environmental, in the premises of their headquarters (usually in New York, London or Paris). As a result of the fact that due to that *electronic attachment* the correspondents never leaves their head-offices, they treat their stay with other cultures as temporary, casual and superficial. There is nothing there to encourage them to get more closely acquainted with that new culture and the people among whom they have found themselves⁶⁵.

The worldwide reach of the Internet seems to be a reaction to the globalisation of television. Those who do not want to watch what everyone else does establish their private online contacts. Global computer networks seem, therefore, to be an attempt at media privatisation – except that surfing the Internet means moving around in a mass of junk information⁶⁶. The technological revolution in communications, in information transmission, is such a new phenomenon that we have hardly had time for anything else than getting captivated with it. We are at the stage of plain fascination with a new toy, which is an unprecedented opportunity for us. But we have not yet had enough time to think what uses we should put it to and what contents should these amazing devices be sending. The Internet is after all just another tool created by civilisation. It is like a knife, which can be used both to slice bread and to chop somebody's head off. Every technological revolution requires from people that they revise their conceptual framework. And that always takes time⁶⁷.

Development of the mass media, and especially of television over the last 20 or 30 years, has caused unimaginable changes in our thinking and understanding of the world. Until then – say, – 50,



100 or 200 years ago – there was only one history for us. It was the history passed down to us either orally or in documents and school history books. But a couple of years ago we started to live in a different dimension, as side by side with the already-known history there begins to emerge a different history, that which is broadcast to us by the media, the history that we watch on television screens. It appears more and more frequently, but it is also increasingly fictional. The paradox of contemporary culture is that because we most often see history on television screens and do not see it in reality, in its authentic context, we start to perceive it as fiction. Fictional history is becoming more and more the only history that we know⁶⁸.



Traditionally dressed man at his house in a half-desert Thar (Rajasthan, India).
Picture by Tomek Śliwiński.

Haile Selassie I (1892-1975) of Ethiopia.
Photo of the G. Eric and Edith Matson Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress



Does contemporary literature help us break our prejudices, ignorance or at least indifference? Again, I think that it is happening to a limited extent only⁶⁹. The same thing happened to literature as it did earlier to painting: there occurred a mass spread of correctness. There is more and more of everything, but this "more" comes through expansion of that prevailing correctness. Correctness – this category causes us a lot of trouble when it comes to making choices and evaluations⁷⁰. A total discrepancy between literature and the world drama happening just in front of our eyes, the absolute entrustment of coverage of great events to cameramen and sound operators is for me a symptom of deep crisis on the line: history-literature, of helplessness of this literature when faced with phenomena of the contemporary world. [In contrast], one of the problems with reception of poetry, its understanding and experiencing, arises from the clash of two different rhythms: that of poem writing and that of its posterior reading. Generally, poems are not produced in big numbers. They are born slowly. Sometimes a poet laboriously adds one

poem to follows the "choking": attention fatigue, loss of feeling. Only an awareness of incompatibility of another for years to complete a tiny volume (Philip Larkin* published a small volume every ten years). The reader, however, takes that small volume and tries to read it all at one go, poem after poem, often in one breath. Then there quickly follows the 'choking': attention fatigue, loss of feeling. Only an awareness of incompatibility of the two rhythms may prevent us from swallowing too fast the thing that calls for an unhurried and concentrated tasting⁷¹. Art is aristocratic. There can be mass culture but never mass art. Art is the aristocracy of culture⁷².

Just as it used to be in the 19th century and despite the fact that the world map looks totally different today – studying, comprehension, interpretation and description of philosophy and existence, of the reasoning and life of the three quarters of world population, still remains in the hands of a narrow group of experts: anthropologists, ethnographers, travellers and journalists⁷³. Travelling and life in different parts of our planet at that time - still in the pre-TV era - meant discovering the truth, very remarkable, that we are not alone in this world, that we belong to the great family of man, which is both increasingly numerous and multicultural, multilingual, and multiracial⁷⁴. Indeed: the family of man. Around the time when I was beginning my discovering of the world there took place an important and famed event. In 1955, in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, an exhibition entitled *The Family of Man* opened. The team directed by the famous photographer, Edward Steichen** selected - out of the total of over two million pictures - 503 photos illustrating the life of inhabitants our planet. The pictures show the common course of our fate, the common nature of sentiments, feelings and experiences of all brothers and sisters living at all degrees of geographical latitude and longitude. There is one Man, the exhibition authors say, and there is one world. We are all the world⁷⁵.

Nevertheless, culture – nay! Man himself, is shaped through contacts with Others (that is why everything depends so much on the quality of these contacts). For Simmel*** the human individual becomes created in a process, in a relation, in connection with Others. Sapir**** claims the same thing: *The true setting for culture to happen is in interpersonal interaction*. Others, let us say that again, constitute the mirror in which I examine my reflection, which makes me aware of who I am. When I lived in my own country, I was not aware that I am a white man and that this fact can have any significance in my life. It was only when I arrived in Africa that a glimpse on its black inhabitants made me realise it instantly. Thanks to them I have discovered the colour of my skin, about which I would have never thought myself. Others have shed a new light for me on my own history⁷⁶.

* Philip Arthur Larkin (1922-1985) widely regarded as one of the great English poets of the latter half of the twentieth century. After graduating from Oxford in 1943 Larkin became a librarian at the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull where during thirty years he produced the greater part of his published work.[MS]

** Edward J. Steichen (1879-1973) an American photographer, painter, and art gallery and museum curator. After World War II he was the Director of the Department of Photography at New York's Museum of Modern Art until 1962. Steichen was regarded as the best known and highest paid photographer in the world of 1923-1938. [MS]

*** Georg Simmel (1858-1918) a major German sociologist, philosopher, and critic.[MS]

**** Edward Sapir (1884-1939) a German-born American anthropologist-linguist and a leader in American structural linguistics. He was a highly influential figure in American linguistics, influencing several generations of linguists across several schools of the discipline. [MS]



Societies inhabiting our planet live in two diametrically different cultures: in culture of consumerism, i.e. culture of luxury, opulence and surplus, and/or in a culture of poverty, i.e. of scarcity of everything, of the fear of tomorrow, of the empty stomach, of a lack of opportunity and prospects. The border between these two cultures, so noticeable when travelling around the globe, is so full of tensions, detestation and hostility. It is the most important and the most dramatic borderline separating the planet today⁷⁷. A high price is paid for being torn out from one's own culture. This is why it is so important to have a clear identity and a sense of its strength, value and maturity. Only then will people be able to confront other cultures. Otherwise, they will keep sheltering themselves in their hideaways and fearfully separating themselves from others⁷⁸.

*Excerpts selected by Maria Śliwińska and accepted by Alicja Kapuścińska
Translation by Alina Boniewicz & Elżbieta Maćwicka*

The Larabanga
Mosque,
Ghana.
Picture by
Stig Nygaard



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63. *Self-portrait*, pp. 127-128.
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69. *The Other*, p. 48.
70. *Lapidarium III*, pp. 64-65.
71. *Lapidarium III*, p. 63.
72. *Lapidarium III*, p. 63.
73. *The Other*, p. 49.
74. *Self-portrait*, p. 28.
75. *Self-portrait*, pp. 28-29.
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