Body Language & TV

By Panos Ioannides

(On a year's leave of absence as Deputy Head of Television Programs, Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation, the author is studying Communication and Mass Media at Atkinson College, York University.)

The first section of this essay reviewed some aspects of Julius Fast's book Body Language (kinesics in popular form) and discussed Dr. Edward Hall's theory of "proxemics" with its four zones of distance that people take up in relating to each other.

A careful observer will find no difficulty in realizing that one of the most dynamic characteristics of TV, one of the elements which strengthen and enrich its impact and degree of effectiveness is body language, so abundantly used in TV programming. It has been observed that what in most cases constitutes TV's impact and capturing magnetism is not what is said by its "talking heads", by interviewers, reporters, guests, and so forth. It is rather what is not said, what is hinted at, what is being supplemented or suggested by the voiceless body signals, by the non-verbal communication codes which so often contradict and unmask their twin-brother. The closeness of the lens does not give to persons involved in any TV show great margins for cheating and masking. You either have the charisma or you don't. You either persuade with your verbal and non-verbal communication systems functioning in unison, or you are dead and buried. A great secret eventually learned by all appearing on TV screens is the imperative need to "Be Themselves" as in the mystic Delphic axiom; no more, no less.
This, in my opinion, is a social moral, great in its subtlety. It is taught by a medium so frequently accused of being a vehicle of amorality.

TV literally feeds on body language even though most of its producers and directors do it intuitively. Documentaries, newscasts, candid camera shows, ad lib coverage of various events as well as pre-planned staged productions are full of examples. I will mention just one: a few instructions taken at random from the TV script for the play A TRIP TO CZARDIS by Edwin Granberry: "Daniel blinks his eyes... His body shivers... He still looks sleepy and confused... His eyes brightens a little... Close up on his eyes... Camera closes on Daniel, exploring his frail features and expressions..."

In numerous ways ads also explore, should I say exploit, body language techniques: a man's face is wrinkled with pain, he swallows a magic pill. The metamorphosis is there! Pain disappears and an expression of happiness and euphoria covers his features and the screen.

Silent, suggestive postures by actors, commentators, interviewers, politicians and other guests are an everyday phenomenon on our TV screens. The efficiency in isolating a single gesture, a facial expression, an eye revealing a deep sentiment or thought, areas or movements of the human body loaded with sexual overtones - as in the Turtle chocolate ad - the utilization of mimicking and photographic techniques - in motion or in frozen frames - have reached their apotheosis in TV. If we turn off the sound of our set and watch closely the moving icons coming and going, we can find it very didactic for studying kinesics and proxemics in full action. Sculpture chiselled on electronic waves silent and suggestive.
But TV has another great advantage over other media as far as body language is concerned. By using slow or quick motion techniques, superimposition and split screen, it can illustrate body and face from different angles, perspectives and distances simultaneously. No cubist painter has ever achieved such a synthesis of aspects and angles in a single picture. This inherent possibility enables TV producers, if they so wish, to underline with close-ups or extreme close-ups and to comment on body language signals. They can also use them to unmask and reveal the real feelings and thoughts of their guests. An example can illustrate this possibility: the face of a guest is dominating on the screen; he talks or listens; he looks self-confident. On one of the preview monitors the director of the show notices that his guest's hands are nervously playing with his handkerchief, or that his feet, underneath the table, are shuffling. He tilts the camera down, or cuts, or superimposes the hands or the feet. And suddenly the "idol" of the self-confident man is smashed. This of course is an extreme example and does not do justice to TV which can portray more refined shades of contradiction between verbal and non-verbal communication.

TV's effectiveness in projecting body language so explicitly and polyedrally enhances its role as a medium contributing to man's "retribalization" a role rightly attributed to TV by Marshall McLuhan. The agonies of people in Vietnam, Biafra, or Cyprus, cannot come through as vividly and as dramatically from any other medium. Words and literary descriptions fail far behind in this respect compared to TV. A body in pain and agony and fear, singled out by a camera, can convey a reality untold by other media; it can bring a suffering or a dying or a rejoicing human body into our livingroom; it can force us to participate, or identify, or revolt. What print media and radio failed to do, i.e. to make
people feel guilty for other people's suffering, to fully identify and rejoice with other people's triumph, TV can do in the most effective and simple way: by being there and by taking us there symbolically with sight and sound. Thus man's atoneness with other human beings is dramatically underlined even if he doesn't speak the language of the people invading his privacy, even if he doesn't share their political beliefs and philosophy. The "cool" electronic eye wipes out differences and stresses the importance of all common elements and denominators: common origin, pain, joy, death. At any rate, on the screen, in our warm livingroom, a suffering Indian or African is a suffering man brought into our house; a triumphant athlete or astronaut is not a Russian or American, he is just a man who enacts a great drama under our roof. TV becomes an endless parade of electronic idols and images which talk and inspire and influence each other in an ancient universal language labeled quite recently *kinesics* and *proxemics*.

Here is a humble example taken from my personal experience. My son, who is only three, some days ago watched on TV an announcement by a philanthropic organization inviting people to offer help to refugee children. A film showed a child who was African or Indian - I cannot say for sure as hunger and pain had deformed his body, but a silent, degraded, lonely child of the world.

Hours later, when we gathered for supper, my boy turned to me and asked: "Dad, won't we give some food to that boy? Won't we give Haris a toy and a blanket?" Haris is my son's name. The boy or girl on the screen had suddenly acquired a name and an identity, maybe thousands of names and identities. His body language had performed a miracle through television.