

Beyond the Road Commercials

Aleksandar Bogdanic

"How long do you plan to stay here?" the immigration officer asked in a very official tone.

"Three years," I answered hesitantly, not really knowing where I was, why I came, let alone how long I would stay. America, I thought, you were going to America to study, don't you remember? At the moment it was not very easy to remember. Soon I was pretty sure that I was somewhere far away, with everything strange and new around me and within me. I was in a huge car, on a huge road, listening to some unfamiliar messages from the radio.

The trip was excellent, I was telling my host, although my thoughts were not easy to grasp. What I could grasp were the blatant, colorful billboards, bathing in the light of the setting sun. And the unreachable vastness of the country behind them. Yet, it was the sight beyond these road commercials that made me feel more comfortable, if not knowledgeable. My longest summer day had a great *finis*, with the sun almost sunk, the pink sky made a halosome reflection on the surrounding trees, hilly fields and a number of distant, undiscernable objects. The last thing I heard from my host was that we were heading up to Michigan.

I fell asleep, the visions of a strange, different world still lingering in my dream. Was it a dream at all? I would hear, from time to time, "Fifty minutes of music, and a whole lot more." I thought that somebody was telling me what was there behind the road commercials. And I could not understand it. Suddenly I woke up and saw the sign saying, "Yes Michigan." O.K., I said to myself, *Yes, Michigan*. Now I thought I'd become aware, and that life and my studies would go on normally. But it was just the beginning. There were so many things hiding behind the road sign which was so kind as to tell me where I really was.

The first thing I learned during the international student orientation week was how ignorant I was about life in America. All the books I had read and the films I had seen about this country did not tell me all the things I had to be aware of. The

orientation week seemed to me both helpful and absurd. I learned all the necessary information on social security numbers, postal services, legal responsibilities and a number of other really indispensable things. I also learned that some Americans thought that *they* had invented the idea that "the whole body, especially under the arms, should be washed with soap and water." In addition, I was told what soap, deodorants and toothpaste were and how they functioned and how one should use them and quite a number of other useful tips. For instance, that most clothing is washable, though some fabrics must be dry-cleaned. It was the first week, however, that made me think of a couple of serious questions. Did these people around here really need everything explained, or think that we aliens needed a thorough explanation for every little thing? Be it as it may, I have learned, as the time has gone by, that I have to explain everything if I want to be understood at all. Back home I did not have to do that. But I spoke *my* language there.

I have also noticed that some Americans are not very informed about my country, or any other faraway human habitat; and that initiates a lot of respective explanation. That is probably why I was told what a coat was, and I, quite often, have to tell people what Yugoslavia is. On one occasion, having answered the question of where I was from, I received a somewhat reasonable response: "Jeezz, it cracks me up! That must have been a hell of a drive!"

Thus I learned how to explain to my acquaintances where I was from in a step-by-step way. And this procedure reminds me of "*Zapis o zemlji*" ("A Record on the Country") by the Yugoslav poet Mak Dizdar. Actually, I am very thankful to him for providing me with a nice pattern for paraphrase, which makes my communication around here easier. "And who is this, what is this, forgive me for asking, where is this, whence is this, where, in fact, is this, should I say, Yugoslavia?" is a usual question. My answer varies, but this may be a good example: "Yugoslavia, forgive me for saying so, is a country. It is in a continent called Europe. And they both have been there for a while." Of course, I do not need this pattern to communicate with all Americans. The others are, to be sure, those who make my life here meaningful and

beautiful .

Being in Michigan , one cannot but adore everything that stretches beyond the road commercials . Nature has been very bounteous in these parts . This autumn I went up North to visit Hemingway's country . The blue of the numberless lakes , reflecting the dazzling images of the seasonal colors , with squirrels and deer freely playing about , made me happy and content without any explanation .

Still , it seems that the saying "wonders never cease" could express my thoughts and feelings about everything around me . Whenever I go to a grocery store I wonder why so many products have *Real* inscribed on their package . Real cheese is a real novelty for me . Probably because , where I come from , unreal cheese is not yet known .

Accelerated mass production may be to blame for that . But the accused is not working only in grocery stores . The mass media , and even every day communication , are full of unreal cheese . They all have perfect packages , which are often more important than their contents; and this also may have negative effects in terms of communication and understanding .

With relationships built on social necessity rather than on genuine human need , it is no wonder that people tend to communicate in terms of unreal cheese . My first encounter with a car dealer might be a good example . Michael seemed to be very open-hearted and friendly , and we found so many common areas of interest . But our friendship lasted for only a couple of days . After I bought his car our common areas somehow disappeared , and our relationship ended . Now I would have to go over to his place and buy a car every week or so , lest I be sad or disenchanted . And the same thing happened with me with several people I met at the university . After we had made a deal , we did not seem to be very interested in one another anymore . Our communication now consists of a couple worn-out phrases . In the Chomskyan sense , language reflects such a philosophy . An alien can be puzzled , having heard phrases such as , "the *spirit* of buying more , the *joy* of spending less ." or , "good for you ." and "it has been nice talking to you ." One eventually always has to meet somebody else and talk nice again .

Another thing I noticed about life in America is that people

move a lot. Consequently, one cannot have strong ties with the places where one lives and even with the people one lives with. Thus, there is not much genuine feeling of belonging to a place, and one has to take more care to have a lasting bank account or a lasting car than a lasting relationship. Now, however important the market philosophy may be for the progress of society, and the lasting bank account for one's living, the feelings of belonging and true human communication and understanding are just as important for the future of humankind and one's own happiness. There are places in the world where some still have very strong ties with their homes and the people around them. And they do not ask how much it costs. It is making them meaningful and happy; they feel it in times of distress and misfortune, too.

Well, some societies have many signs and elements from past generations to remind them not to confuse the means with the ends, or the form with its contents. However, even there, not every individual is able to decipher and understand those signs. People have to find a way to understanding.

Although relatively new, I think American culture is capable of finding a way to avoid shallowness in human communication and understanding. Besides other things, I would suggest going beyond the road and other commercials whenever possible. Also, when traveling, one should not forget to come back home. It helps.