

Book Review

TELEVISION AND NEW MEDIA AESTHETICS*

Aesthetics is a special branch of philosophy and it is primarily defined as a study of the sensory or sensory-emotional experience. It has gradually developed from traditional concepts and principles to the challenging transformations of its own connotations and the new tendencies brought about by the encounter with mass media in the 20th century. In order to define what art is, aesthetics used two methods: inspection of objects that are assumed to be works of art, and introspection which leads to the specifically human activity that gives birth to art, namely, imagination. According to certain authors, aesthetics attends to not only the domain of art, but also symbolic creativity, and natural phenomena. With the expansion of the mass media, the domain of aesthetics expanded as well. The challenges faced by traditionally defined aesthetics when confronting the new electronic and digital media (the radio, television, internet, interactive television), are carefully laid out and explained in the study "Television and New Media Aesthetics" by Stanko Crnobrnja¹.

The main incentive for the author to engage himself in analytical examination of what place television and new media have in the domain of artistic creativity is the lack of a clear codification of radio-television aesthetics. The 20th century revolution in the field of technology and communication is reflected in new conceptual and technological solutions, as well as in the continual increase of the influence which mass media, primarily television, has on social, political, economic and ideological matters. Because of the constant interest of marketing and propaganda experts to discover and explore the needs of the audience, analyses of the aesthetic consequences of television, however important for human life, are unjustifiably neglected. In his study, Crnobrnja compares aesthetic theories with the media and mass communication theories that have significantly contributed to the theory of television. According to him, a synthetic approach to the research of these subjects can serve both as a theoretical basis and a model for production on television.

This paper is structurally divided into two parts, with the first tackling a theoretical analysis of television and its aesthetics from the perspective of philosophy, aesthetics, media theory, and communication sciences, while the second part is dedicated to the empirical analysis and the development of television practices. That study is further structured into seven chapters: 1. Introduction to the Aesthetic Codification of Television, 2. Aesthetics in the Traditional Key and Television, 3. Aesthetics after the Second World War, 4. Theories by Significant Scholars in the Field of Television, 5. Aesthetics of Digital Television, 6. Multimedia, 7. Television and New Media Aesthetics. The glossary with 105 expressions the author lays out in the end of the paper so as to enable a greater number of readers to familiarize themselves with the basic and useful terms is considered especially important. The merit of this study and its glossary lies in the fact that it gradually introduces its readers

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to the complex world of television and makes it easier to understand the television-aesthetics-culture relation.

In the chapter entitled "Introduction to the Aesthetic Codification of Television", the author discusses different approaches to the study of the television media. Starting with semiotics which reflects meanings, the symbolism of the television language, and the way pleasure is induced in the viewers this theory has been continually developing and giving new perspectives on how to watch and understand television reality. While structuralism reveals the effects of the social structure and culture on the individual who has been exposed to the systematic construction of meanings since birth, post-structuralism challenges the structuralists' belief that meanings are fixed, unchangeable and stable. Crnobrnja evokes Jacques Derrida who pointed out that the meaning the author has in mind does not have to coincide with the one viewers recognize on television. Thus, a new sphere for reading and understanding the television text is opened, and thus such text becomes more like a mosaic. The general theory of communication points out the concept of discourse which represents not only the process of the construction of meaning, but also a manifestation of a specific ideology and a belief system that permeate reality. The author explains that the rules of composition and production manage the image on television which seems genuine even though it is an active construction of signs based upon a selection of information. Crnobrnja next presents Umberto Eco's viewpoint on the aesthetic value of commercial television. Umberto Eco, detecting the serial production in mass media, explains why the products of commercial television are excluded from the domain of artistic creation, and, thus, from aesthetic analysis as well (p.36). Furthermore, the functioning of commercial television is a strictly controlled process where the coding of messages is in the hands of the elite, and the decoding is a massive, yet unidirectional process of conditioning. Also, the image on television does not represent a sheer reflection of reality, but a carefully shaped construction. Within commercial networks, the search for 'desirable' aesthetic content is motivated by the goal to attract the greatest number of viewers. Clichés, the lack of originality and schematic production of commercial programs, speak about the so-called formula of social success which is strictly and indisputably followed in order to maintain satisfactory ratings.

In the chapter "Aesthetics in the Traditional Key and Television", the author discusses the fundamentals of aesthetics evoking Kant's principles on aesthetics and judgment of taste; and then he defines art, aesthetics, and develops aesthetic thought. New electronic media posed a significant challenge to traditional aesthetics which was not capable of providing wholesome responses in the new, technologically advanced and altered environment. In this chapter, a classification of the social forms of art is offered: fine art, folk ('naïve') and popular (pop) art. With the appearance of mass media the latter expands its boundaries since television is the most popular and most powerful medium of popular art. In the age of electronic media, a transformation in aesthetics and a modernization in art occur, stimulating artists to explore and generalize the uniform perceptions of both the artistic, and the so-called social truth (p.84). Here the author gives the three basic directions of research in aesthetics in the first half of the 20th century. The first is related to the study of the constant characteristics of already existing works of art, the second is directed at the nature of the subjective processes in artistic creativity, whereas the third underlines the social importance of art and the experience of the audience. In the end of this chapter, the author explains how mass production and the dictates of the market have affected culture. The schematic, repetitive, standardized in contrast to the authentic, unique, and original is what distinguishes between mass culture on one side, and art on the other. He concludes the chapter with an insight into two different schools of thought

regarding new media as art: the former say that they have no artistic value and significance (e.g. Rudolf Arnheim), and the latter, on the other hand, consider that new media have authentic artistic potential and aesthetic value (e.g. Handrith Mates).

The chapter 'Aesthetics after the Second World War' gives an overview of theories created by theoreticians who have significantly contributed to the understanding of the aesthetics of media communication. Both Susan Langer and Thomas Munro pointed out the importance of symbols in art, as well as in everyday life. In the second half of the 20th century it became clear that the new art genres demanded different aesthetic interpretations; while simultaneously, new media became almost indispensable in aesthetic discussions. Moholj-Nadj, explaining how new technologies generated and made new materials available to creative artists, also recognized a potential for social changes in the technological movement. In this chapter, the author names the transformations brought about by modernism and capitalism – namely, mercantile exchange is what increasingly defines human interaction and relations. The clear difference between the subject and the object is forever cancelled by postmodernism, the realistic image of the world and life is brought into question, and the human strongly influenced by the mass media remains in the world of delusions. Circumstances being such, art joins forces with economy and, using popular culture as the basis, it creates commercialized works-commodities which could easily be sold. Semiotic value, a hyperrealist world, simulations, the vague boundary between the real and the imaginary are the main characteristics of the postmodern condition, according to Bodriar. Theoreticians from the Frankfurt School, like Adorno and Horkheimer, see mass media as a means of propagating the ideologies of the ruling party. The so-called 'cultural industry' is becoming omnipresent and it reflects the monopolistic capitalism and the aspirations of multinational corporations to dominate peoples' lives. Marshal McLuhan initiated the use of new media in theoretical and empirical studies. Being a liberal, McLuhan considers art to be a domain free of traditional norms of aesthetic judgment. Due to the interactive nature of experience, the focus of study is progressively shifting to the triad creator-content-audience. All of which has caused considerable changes in television aesthetics. Crnobrnja gives Umberto Eco an especially important place in the theory of mass media, television and culture. Eco names live broadcasting (programs that are broadcast live) as an important characteristic of television aesthetics (p.143), which represents a direct 'interpretation' of events made possible by: the positioning of the camera, immediate choice of details, immediate editing and commentaries. Toma Djordjević, agreeing with Umberto Eco, also adds that a television spectacle combining both factual as well as complex structures provides not only an informative but also an aesthetic dimension.

The forth chapter is dedicated to 'The Theories of Remarkable Scholars in the Field of Television'-including Harold Innis, Marshal McLuhan, David Antin, Gene Youngblood, and Lev Manovič. Harold Innis pointed out the role the mass media have in controlling space and time, and made a distinction between media which are 'space-binding' and those that are 'time-binding'. According to him, electronic technologies do not lead to democratization and decentralization, but empower the monopoly and cause cultural invasion. He introduced the concept 'monopolies of knowledge' which refers to the clash of cultures and the fact that certain privileged institutions and media of communication constantly aspire to dominate. Marshal McLuhan is considered a theoretician who has specifically emphasized the positive aspects of electronic technologies and electronic media-naming the fact that they are unconstricted and thus assist freedom in communication. His theory on the 'hot' and 'cool media' makes an important contribution to the understanding of the media, while 'global

village' and 'the medium is the message' are widely accepted slogans in much broader circles of the scientific community. McLuhan perceives the role of art and science as 'the systems for early detection and warning' (p.177). As the environment changes, the old one, according to him, is noticed for the first time, and it becomes a work of art. David Antin, analyzing the aesthetics of American commercial television, notices how the so-called 'money metric' defines and directs the most important aesthetic and production parameters of this television. The image of sophistication which implies the producer's being competent to control the event, the accuracy of the television broadcast through the illusion of immediacy and standardized timeframes are at the core of the aesthetic, conceptual and financial structures in commercial television. Gene Youngblood radically criticizes television and the entire entertainment industry perceiving the latter as the main tool for manipulation of the audience and exploitation of estrangement and boredom. "Conditioned response to the familiar formula" (the plot, the narrative) (p.191) in commercial media maintain the society's status quo, while art inspires to movement and social changes. Visual media (film, television, and video) are characterized by the capacity to "capture and preserve the motion picture of time but also to style natural reality" (p.210), which Youngblood sees as the main aesthetic potential of the media in question. For a postmodern theoretician, Lev Manovič, the cause of a conceptual crisis in the media and in the theory of art lies in the divergent artistic genres of the 60s, the combining of different artistic materials, the introduction of new media into the domain of new art and the transition from the analog to digital technology. Due to the vagueness of boundaries between the artistic media and the traditional aesthetics' inadequate responses to the newly created situation, Manovič offers a new, so-called post-media aesthetics (p.210).

In the chapter 'Aesthetics of Digital Television', the reader is presented with the changes caused by the transition from the analog to digital transmission of television programs. As Crnobrnja points out, it is technology that sets the boundaries for the development of the media and the understanding of the aesthetic limits and potentials any particular media has. Technology, in short, sets both aesthetic and creative limits. The author's positive attitude towards the new digitalized world of media is clearly manifested here. He points out the advantages such as the interactivity and flexibility of the system, the possibility of creative engagement by the user (viewer), better picture resolution and better sound, faster content and the like. The user chooses a program but can also adjust, postpone, or combine it with others and thus creates personal programming. All of that has enhanced the possibility of demonstrating the creative potentials of a vast number of people, as well as the possibilities of production which, in a digitally interactive environment, is no longer the privilege of the small cultural and professional elite. Thus, not only the ability to communicate but also artistic creativity is liberated and no longer under the influence of the limitations of traditional aesthetics. The difference between the old and digital media is based on the fact that storage spaces are drastically enhanced, in contrast to the linear documentation of reality restricted in time.

In the chapter "Multimedia", the author reveals the role of public television, its relation to commercial television, and the place it occupies in the new information and communications systems. This chapter also deals with the problem of how to regulate new technologies. Control over the 'media' market with the goal of maintaining competition only leaves monopoly over the media in the hands of the private owner who replaces the old, equally dangerous one, namely, the state. Simultaneously, there is the apprehension that the predominating commercial content may destroy all diversity by addressing the broadest range of viewers in an identical manner. The author points out, as socially vital, that a greater

number of independent media offering non-commercial services to all citizens should exist. Public television, structured in a certain manner and serving particular tasks, can serve either as “a testing ground for the concepts of elite and popular art or an area where radicalism is to be confronted with realism, or a region where commercial metric of money together with its aesthetics are questioned and overthrown” (p.272).

Although from the standpoint of aesthetics, documentary realism dominates the programs of public television, and action-oriented/dramatic realism dominates the commercial ones, the distinction is in fact illusory. Both types serve predominant social ideologies. Instead of artistic creativity rooted in fantasy, the artist in a digital environment represents a technological genius selecting readymade, prefabricated elements (finished pictographic, musical, tridimensional programs).

In the final chapter, the author, taking into consideration everything presented in his study, draws the conclusion that television is an independent art form which lacks unique television aesthetics. New media lead to a new and different art, one that uses new tools of production and distribution. A new format in communication and dialogues, the transformation in the aesthetic theory and practice is a reality of the new interactive digital universe. The author here discusses a simulation of reality and a construction of new identities as the basic creative account in the virtual digital reality, only to point out later the fact that an individual is objectified and turned into a commodity with a specific market value (depending on his belonging to the virtual community, contacts, relations, internet connections etc.). Due to the abundance in creative, expressive and service potentials, new media represent a great progress in comparison to the traditional ones, with advantages like variety, personalization and closeness with the user being especially underlined. In the age dominated by New media the viewer becomes a viewser. Namely, this is a new term which in the best possible manner reflects the changes in the relation user – media in the era of interactive television, and is made by blending two words together – viewer and user.

This book is relevant for students of journalism and communication, researchers in the field of social and humanist sciences, as well as for anybody showing interest in the aesthetics of television and new media. Besides its being beneficiary for teaching, it can also be understood by a broader milieu of readers due to the style in which it is written, and the gradual transition from one topic onto the next. It is necessary to find one’s path in the digital world and to comprehend both the advantages and the consequences it may have for our society. And that is the task for the entire social community. Hence, this study is a good starting point and a guide through the vast sea of digital, interactive impulses.

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