

TELEVISION AND THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

UDC 654.197:111.852

Ivana Stojanović Prelević

University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Communication Sciences and Journalism, Niš, Serbia

Abstract. *The author reopens the old problem of the aesthetics of television, that is whether television is an art or not. There are aestheticians who find the field for their investigation only in art, and, on the other hand, there are those who go beyond art. Similarly, there are theorists who conceive television as a medium for content reproduction, while there are also those who attribute artistic quality to certain television creativity. Aestheticians use genre analysis as a way to explain the aesthetics of television. In this paper, we investigate the validity of this analysis and its relation with discourse analysis. The results show that both methods are valid, yet discourse analysis could be more adequate in certain cases.*

Key words: *the aesthetics of television, aesthetic experience, genre analysis, discourse analysis*

INTRODUCTION

“When art, philosophy and television merge, something very interesting occurs. None of them are really themselves any more. Somehow art on television is neither quite television, nor is it quite art; a hybrid or an assemblage results from their interaction. Once it is mediated, a strange aesthetics and form of perception occur that forces artists to self-reflexively investigate every element of their practice” (Anderson 2013, 1).

From the very beginning, media have had a tendency to create a new reality. Creating an art film is creating a new view of reality or life experience. The same holds true for photography, multimedia exhibitions and so on. Contemporary theorists have a tendency to call this experience ‘aesthetic experience’. Television creates new aesthetic experiences, too.

Received November 2018 / December 2018

Corresponding author: Ivana Stojanović Prelević

University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Communication Sciences and Journalism

E-mail: ivana.stojanovic.prelevic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

The first problem which arises in the aesthetics of television is the technical aspects of the media. Still, this is not essential to aesthetics. For example, we do not stop appreciating writers simply because they type on a keyboard or art photographers because they click on a camera (Grejam, 2001). However, the technical aspects of the media may lead us to think about the nature of aesthetics that is present in the media. The other problem can be described as a variety of television content. To understand this content better, theorists use the principle of genres. The importance of the context also generates a new approach to the aesthetics of television, discourse analysis. The aim of this paper is to show some main features and shortcomings of those approaches in the aesthetics of television.

1. AESTHETICS AND THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

It is well known that different definitions of aesthetics have been proposed. Two of them are widespread: aesthetics is the science, that is, the study of beauty, and, the second one, aesthetics is the ontology of art. If we agree that some other domains, outside of art, can be a subject matter for aesthetics, the second definition is not a good one. Yet, the definition of aesthetics as the science of beauty seems problematic too; there are artworks which are not beautiful, just as there is immoral literature, and so on.

Since the 18th century, aesthetics has been mediated by perception and estimation of sensual objects or by perceptual objects made by people or nature (Kon 2001, 13). Kant makes the difference between pure taste, which is present in perceiving nature, and intellectual taste, which is present in perceiving artworks. This reduction of aesthetics to beauty in nature is criticized by Gadamer (1978). He distinguishes aesthetic experience from the experience that is formed by habits and by using a language.

According to Kohn, if we want to understand aesthetic experience as an experience in relation not only to artwork, but outside of it, it is of crucial importance to try to understand a sense of interpersonal relations that are involved in these domains (Kon 2001, 7). This is probably the mainstream view on the aesthetics of communication.

When we speak about the aesthetic experience it is unavoidable to mention the German term '*Erlebnis*'. This term is derived from the word '*erlebnes*', which means 'to be still alive when something happens'. There are two meanings of the word '*Erleben*': the immediacy of experience and the lasting yield of experience (Agarwala 2007, 23). „The words *Erlebnis* and *Erleben*, due to their association with life, also played an important role in the protest against the modern bourgeoisie industrial technological society at the beginning of our century. Yet, the life philosophy of our own day, by rejecting the mechanization of life in contemporary society, puts such an obvious emphasis on the word *Erlebnis* that its conceptual implications remain totally hidden to us” (2007, 24). *Erlebnis* is related to things that we experience and not to what we think we know. Gadamer says that something becomes an experience not only if it is just experienced, but if the way it is experienced leaves a special impression which would give a lasting importance to that experience (Gadamer 1978, 101). Experience presents the last unit of consciousness, not of sensation. The term '*Erlebnis*' is also a cognitive, theoretical term. Gadamer thinks that aesthetic experience is not just one kind of experience among others, but it represents the very essence of experience itself. Artwork is generally a world in, by, and for itself. In a similar way something that is experienced as aesthetic is far from any connection with reality. The power of artwork pulls out the

one who experiences it from the context of his life; and, at the same moment ties him with total life (Gadamer 1978, 111).

However, today we are inclined to think that everything in our life that has an impact on our visual sense and emotions could create aesthetic experiences. Artworks create pleasure but that is a characteristic of commercial programs, too. We can experience something new by watching a new painting or a sculpture or by watching television series. Art affects human imagination, commercial programs do the same. Aristotle's concept of catharsis applies to the two of them and we can experience different emotions by looking at both, artworks and soaps. We can experience an artwork as real life, like it is the case with performances; similarly we can experience commercial programs, for example a reality show; artworks create realities artificially, while the media create simulacrum. Nevertheless it is possible to find originality in advertisements and videos of mass media products but it often happens that there is a repetition of earlier and already known formulas similar to each other.

2. TELEVISION AESTHETICS

Television is a multi-layered media that includes writing and speech, languages, gestures, music, graphics, film, videos and therefore it is an interesting field of investigation for various sorts of researches, such as the proponents of narrative theory, ideological analysis and for contemporary aestheticians. The impact that television has on the audience is probably the main reason why many theorists are interested in media aesthetics. Cardwell says that some writers are in agreement that television is worthy of sustained scrutiny and critique for its aesthetics (Cardwell 2001, 76). She explains that television has been analyzed in terms of its communicative functions rather than in terms of artistic functions. Jacobs (2001) describes television as 'a medium for artistic expression'.

It is possible to make a clear cut distinction between traditional and contemporary approaches to this problem. From a chronological point of view, attitudes toward this problem have become more liberal. Novaković notices a deficiency in the television language. Film has its own language which is artistic but the language of television does not have any metaphorical structure or character (Novaković 1998). According to him, it is the art of filmmaking that creates the authors. Yet he allows for exceptions in such domains as music videos and some other genres. He also notices the transition from the culture of the letter to the culture of the screen. Another theorist, Đorđević, emphasizes the advantages of live programs. Television makes a spectacle and it has an aesthetic dimension (Đorđević 1989).

Anderson (2013) finds that there are a couple of categories for approaching television aesthetically: aesthetics as quality narratives, aesthetics as semiotic approach and aesthetics as formalist and compositional aspects.

Cultural studies and the notion of aesthetics explain the way of seeing things aesthetically. On the other hand, genres analysis says little about the medium itself.

In the 21st century, Thorburn (2004) sees in the understanding of television ideological and political perspectives more than an aesthetic perspective. He says: "On this emerging view, the commercial and ideological forces that shape popular entertainment are acknowledged as central but are no longer thought to exclude aesthetic questions. This return to the aesthetics has great importance for the nascent scholarship

on television, which was born in the era of high theory, of deconstruction and materialist forms of cultural studies“ (Thorburn 2004, 1).

2.1. Genre of formulae

Some theorists think that genre, which is also known as formula, is very important for media aesthetics. Sarah Cardwell (2001) says that genre transforms reality by establishing important values in our lives. Television became popular because it has been accommodated smoothly by different audiences. For example, it can enter into our home, relationships, and subcultures, by using certain formulae. Surfing on TV or the internet makes experience unique and it reminds of a 'truly postmodern collage'. Television text becomes in this way an open producer's text. On the other side, this personal experience ensures a big popularity of television (Crnobrnja 2010).

“Every aspects of television exhibits a reliance on genre” thinks Mittel (2001, 3).

There are theorists who think differently like Jane Feuer (1992) who thinks that genres do not work as a paradigm for television, but for film or literature.

Here we are confronted with traditional and contemporary views on a relevant paradigm of the aesthetics of television. Traditionalists think that genre is that paradigm.

“Media scholars have traditionally looked at genre as a component of the text, using a variety of guiding questions and theoretical paradigms... Another approach, probably the most common in media studies, raises questions of interpretation by exploring the textual meanings of genres and situating them with in larger social contexts... A third (and less developed) form of genre analysis poses questions of history to emphasize the evolutionary dynamics of genres” (Mittel 2001, 5).

When television genres are discussed, it is necessary to make a difference between television and journalistic genres. Television genres are specific in their drama like ways of presentations and purposes (Radović Jovanović, 2010). Traditionally, there are the following genres: informative, documentary, feature program, entertainment, music, educational, science, sports and economy-propaganda genres. Forms of journalistic expression include news, reportage, interview and comment (Ilić 2003, 27).

Most genre analyses consider genre as textual category. Mittel (2001) thinks that we must distinguish between conceiving a genre as a textual category and treating it as a component of a text.

Genre is not constituted as a category in itself by a member of some category. It emerges only from the inter-textual relation between multiple texts. According to Mittel, this text goes through cultural practice, such as production and reception (Mittel 2001, 6). If genre depends on inter-textuality, then it is not just a textual component. The appearance of new genres does not depend on their text, but on industry and audience. Practice produces new genres.

Agger and Jensen say: “Genre and medium are connected on so many levels, that the genres can be considered as an actualization of the opportunities of the medium when it functions well, and vice versa, when it functions badly. In such cases it is often a question of the genre and the medium opposing each other or failing to relate to each other” (2001, 13). This means that we can speak about good and bad TV programs (for example, good documentaries and bad series). These authors distinguish between a vertical and horizontal analysis of genres. A vertical, or historical, analysis is adapted for television. The technological development of the media needs a historical approach. A horizontal, or

geo-sociological, analysis is the awareness of the opportunities of individual genres, the ability to define these and their level at a given time (Agger and Jensen 2001, 14). To illustrate this, Agger and Jensen notice that broadcasting in USA and India contain a very small percentage of foreign programs, and in this way they impose their own standards. Favorable ratings are usually achieved by broadcasting popular genres. In contrast to this, smaller TV productions are usually oriented internationally. According to Agger and Jensen, aesthetic elements are related to the theory of fiction, while dramaturgy is related to news broadcasting and documentary programs. They also think that researchers are today more and more inclined to connect aesthetics with fact-oriented genres and entertainments.

2.2. Discourse approach

The new view on genre which uses practice is a discursive approach. Michael Foucault explains discourse as a historically specific system of thought. A discursive approach uses context as an important criterion for determining genre. In the discursive approach of television, we use text and context.

“Television programs explicitly cite generic categories, and advertising, promotions, parodies, and inter-textual references within shows are all vital sites of generic discursive practice. In de-centering text from genre analysis, we cannot jettison the text as a site of discursive generic operation; rather we should simply acknowledge that an isolated text does not define a genre on its own“ (Mittel 2001, 9).

In the era of media, which is the hallmark of contemporary society, recipients are probably essential in establishing the meanings of artworks. Because of this, individualism, which is imposed as a norm in contemporary culture, is too demanding for creators themselves especially when creating commercial programs whose aim is to produce profit and, moreover, whose role is to persuade the audience. On the one hand, ambiguity makes culture quite colorful, like a mosaic, while, on the other, it creates problems in communication. Given that meaning is determined by discourse, it should be decoded and, above all, understood as a result of using a language and a specific ideology or a system of beliefs. In the world of media, there is a striving for the institutionalization of discourse in a way that we can speak about the discourse of advertisements, the discourse of sports programs and so on (O’ Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Fiske 1987, 203). In the same way in which the meaning of a work of art depends on its recipients and not completely on the artist who creates it, television viewers also contribute with their beliefs to programs they are watching, and they could not be restricted by the creator’s own discourse. This poses a problem more to the creators of commercial programs rather than to the artists making artistic films. One might think that a television viewer does not experience a television picture as a production of signs but simply receives it as clear and direct information. Yet, semiotics reminds us that in a television program we deal with signs and not with references (Crnobrnja 2010, 32). We can say we deal with representations. They refer to the use of language and images and create new meanings. In the social constructionist approach we make meaning of the world through the cultural context. Hence, the material world can only be seen by us through representations. Over time representations are used to create new meanings, not to reflect existing reality, explain Sturken and Catwright (2001).

Semiotics shows that television is not a disordered system without rules. Quite on the contrary, commercial television is a closed system in which certain principles of coding and decoding hold. Here the 'principle of formula' or genre is especially important.

Now, let us draw some distinctions and classifications concerning traditional and contemporary analysis of creativity.

Table 1 Traditional and contemporary analysis of creativity¹

Traditional access	Contemporary access
a) artworks autonomy	a) interrelations between different artworks
b) artist in the focus	b) emphasizes the context and forces which supply production
c) meaning as a property of an artwork	c) meaning as a consequence of the attention which is affected by text or artwork in the audience or a group of individuals
d) dividing literature from non-literature and creating a hierarchy of grandiosity among artworks	d) explores criterion of literature and spreads the extent of literary investigation and critical book reviews

CONCLUSION

We have made the point in this paper that artworks create pleasure and the same we can say for commercial programs too; we can experience something new by watching a new painting or a sculpture or by watching television series; art affects human imagination, commercial programs do the same; Aristotle's conception of catharsis applies to both. We can experience different emotions by looking at artworks and soaps; we can experience an artwork as a real life, like it is the case with performances. Similarly we can experience commercial programs, for example a reality show. Artworks create realities artificially, while media create simulacrum although it is possible to find originality in advertisements and videos of mass media products. Yet they often just repeat earlier and already known formulas, and are similar to each other.

Genre analysis helps aestheticians to make segments of television content, and to make a difference among them. To pertain to a special genre means to have specific characteristics, as comedy has, for example. Its role is to make situations or people farcical. Genre analysis can use context in its analysis. On the other hand, discourse analysis includes context in the aesthetic analysis and can realize a more complete picture than genre analysis in that sense that it finds ideological elements in television text and helps recipients to see "below the surface".

¹ Crnobrnja, 2010, 54.

REFERENCES

- Agger, G., Jensen F. J. (2001). Foreword: The Aesthetics of Television. In: G. Agger, J. F. Jensen (eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies 2*, Denmark: Aalborg University Press, 11–25.
- Agarwala, B. K. (2007). Hermeneutic Experience and the Law of Karma. In: M. Ghosh, R. Ghosh (eds.), *Language and Interpretation: Hermeneutics from East-West perspective*, New Delhi: N. B. U. Studies in Philosophy, University of North Bengal, 17–56.
- Anderson, L. (2013). *Television Aesthetics Reconsidered: What Can Art Teach Us about Medium?* http://english.unak.is/static/files/Andersson_Linus.pdf, 1–18.
- Cardwell, S. (2001). Television Aesthetics. *Critical Studies in Television*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 72–80.
- Crnobrnja, S. (2010). *Estetika televizije i novih medija*. Beograd: Clio
- Đorđević, T. (1989). *Teorija masovnih komunikacija*. Beograd: SIT
- Feuer, J. (1992). Genre study and television. In: R. C. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse: reassembled: television and contemporary criticism*, Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 138–160.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1978). *Istina i metoda*. Sarajevo: IP Veselin Masleša
- Grejam, G. (2001). *Filozofija umetnosti. Uvod u estetiku*. Beograd: Clio
- Jacobs, J. (2001). Issues of Judgment and Value in Television studies. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 4, 427–447.
- Ilić, M. (2003). *Televizijsko novinarstvo*. Beograd: RTS Izdavačka delatnost
- Kon, Ž. (2001). *Estetika komunikacija*. Beograd: Clio
- Mittel, J. (2001). A Cultural Approach to Genre Theory. *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 3–24.
- Novaković, S. (1998). Govor TV medija. *Televizija-sadašnjost-budućnost – godišnjak RTS*, Beograd.
- O'Sullivan T., Hartley J., Saunders, D., Fiske J. (1987). *Key Concepts in Communication*. Toronto: Methuen.
- Radović Jovanović, J. (2010). Osvrt na dosadašnja istraživanja žanrova u TV programima. *Komunikacija i kultura online*, god. 1, br. 1, 294–305.
- Sturken, M., Catwright, L. (2001). *Practices of Looking. An Introduction to Visual Culture*. New York: Oxford. Oxford University Press
- Thorburn, D. (2004). *Television Aesthetics*. <http://web.mit.edu/211.432/www/readings/ThorburnTelevisionAesthetics.pdf>

TELEVIZIJA I ESTETSKO ISKUSTVO

U radu se razmatra dobro poznato pitanje vezano za estetiku televizije: da li o televizijskom stvaralaštvu možemo govoriti kao o umetnosti ili ne? Pojedini estetičari svoje polje istraživanja nalaze samo u umetnosti, a ima i onih koji izlaze van njega. Slično ovome, pojedini teoretičari u televiziji vide samo medij za reprodukciju sadržaja, dok drugi određenom televizijskom stvaralaštvu pripisuju umetničke kvalitete. Autor ispituje kakvo estetsko iskustvo nam televizija pruža. Estetičari koriste analizu žanra kao način objašnjenja estetike televizije. U radu se ispituje koliko je ovaj način estetičke analize validan i u kakvom je odnosu sa analizom diskursa. Rezultat je da su oba metoda dobra, s tim što analiza diskursa može dati potpunije objašnjenje.

Ključne reči: *estetika televizije, estetsko iskustvo, analiza žanra, analiza diskursa*