

DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.3846/cpc.2015.222>

FILM AS MODERN MEDIUM AND ONTOLOGY

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Received 27 June 2015; accepted 9 July 2015

The interest in television programming, its content, even its semiotics and at times the various levels of rhetoric, economic context and controlling interests, have been thoroughly analyzed. This is even the case with the analyses of the phenomenon of reruns, although one could surmise that the analyses are somewhat artificial. What has been left out of these important contributions are some of the most fundamental compositions of media in general and television in particular. These compositions will be called ontological, i.e. explicating the presumed nature of media, all the way to its very substance. The latter can only be intimated, since the more comprehensible aspects will be offered first.

Keywords: eye, media, ontology, screen, television medium.

Introduction

This section does not follow any pregiven method or theory due to the exclusion of any metaphysics, whether empiricist or even quantitative rationalist, as a basis of analyses. Rather, it is hoped that the phenomena analyzed are intelligible and need not be overly psychologized, economized, socialized, politicized, and thus obfuscated. This, in turn, is to admit, that I do not claim to know why people watch television – unless of course I was to presume that they are of extremely low intelligence. But this is equally uncertain, although more tenable. I come to television medium as an outsider, and there is, in all scientific literature a specific call:

one must deal with phenomena from a standpoint that has not been influenced by the given phenomena. The analyses I read came from joyful watchers and their equally joyful critics or detractors.

The shift

Discussions concerning media technology assume obviously the daily presence of an institutionalized use of television. Some are euphoric about progress, some are critical and fearful for the demise of culture, and both paint sceneries of a new age of telecommunication. New horizons seem to open in human-technology

relationships by way of increased consumption of programs through cables, satellites and enhanced by computerized redesigning of the programs themselves. The public regards this as a daily occurrence that is of little interest. The vast transformations in media are daily habits and are regarded as obvious. Television is, by now, nothing spectacular, dramatic, and indeed most boring presence. Just like an electric stove, it is simply used.

The obviousness is there because this medium is an integral aspect of our world – not just our society – and we do not even notice its function. This is to say, we have forgotten the vast transformation in social awareness required to finally treat this medium as a daily banality. Thus, we no longer notice the dissonance between natural and technically alien perception. To the contrary, there seems to be a consonance in the coupling of these two distinct processes. The sedimented watcher points to a “harmony” between them and seems to cover this coupling between the cognitive powers of the human and television. Yet the watcher could also be used as a tandem for an analysis of this phenomenon and perhaps for some ontological suggestions. In fact, Paul Virilio argues quite persuasively that at least in the twentieth century one can no longer think of technically unmediated perception of objects (Virilio 1984). One could extend this argument and suggest that there is no longer a way back for the sedimented watcher to perception without television. Crucial domains of social cognition are, in fact, television mediated and thus as phenomena, constituted. In brief, one can no longer bracket the sedimented watcher. Yet it is possible to note the transformative process when the new mode of communication appeared on the scene.

What is notable is the appearance of metaphors that regarded television as coextensive with the senses and with the immediacy of all spatial events. This is to say, there occurs an explosion of the senses such that the directly perceived world is extended beyond one’s

horizon of sensibility. This means that perception is detached from direct bodily functions, and correlatively, that the technical means have to be regarded anthropomorphically. This coupling of organic with the technical is mediated by the very possibility of regarding the techniques as organic extensions. In this sense television is seen as an EYE capable of transmitting undistorted reality. Anthropomorphic descriptions relativize not only the artificiality of a technology, but also skim over the difference between seeing and tele-seeing. Television camera took over the function to roam the world and to see the world for the individual; hence the screen is a window to the world, world in your home. The screen was not regarded as a boundary that had to be overcome, and the social construction of reality can now occur without one’s sensory participation (Berger, Luckmann 1969). There were other media that marked the boundaries between social construction of reality and aesthetic domain, e.g. theatre. There were prescribed places for such domain. With television this difference vanishes.

Television medium undercuts such boundaries. The screen does not present itself as a boundary between various socially constituted realities, but merely as a surface in this reality. This is to say, the boundary between one’s socially constituted daily reality and medially accepted reality of the world vanishes. Television generates a synthesis among diverse realities, and thus becomes a reality of a new kind. The watcher is now regarded as a possessor of senses that are extended everywhere and function in selective ways as do our senses. Of course one still notices dissonances in such statements as “a direct access through technical means”, yet the prevalent trend is that television comprises experience in the context of daily life, and hence is coextensive with normal vision. Just like the eye, the television is no longer visible. This anonymization leads to dissolution of the materiality of the technical apparatus. Here one shifts to “being there” not as if, but as partaker

of world events. The mediated being there, the ability to be everywhere soon lost its medial character and assumed the status of being there perceptually.

Thus there is initially a tension between awareness that there are important events, unreachable to direct perception, and the recognition that daily interaction is too limited to access these far off domains. Moreover, there is also the correlative loss of daily interaction, i.e. the loss of reality in modern age that at once was filled by television. As Helmut Schelsky points out, the vacuum of social irreality was seen by television programmers as something to be filled (Schelsky 1965). One even argued that the disintegration through an increased privatization and isolation of the family, leads to the decreased and impoverished information access of the family. Moreover, the information that is significant has become so vast and incomprehensible that it can be accessed only through technical means. Television, therefore, has appeared just at the proper moment. Obviously one must realize that impoverishment on information has been judged on the basis of already taken for granted need and availability of information. This is to say, the assumption is that one must have eyes everywhere and must access all domains. In fact, there were claims made that television is *sine-quo-non* of democracy. One presses a button, and one is in the midst of world history.

The increasing loss of contact with the social world becomes compensated by mass media, i.e. the shrinking world of sensibly experienced environment of daily life is coupled on an increasing world reality; the daily world and the universal, significant events become intertwined. By melting the daily with the cosmic television created a new presence of the world without distances, available for immediate perception and sensory impact. Because of such an immediacy, some suggest, the traditional differentiation between factuality and construction, between documentation

and fiction, truth and inscenation will become redundant (Lüscher 1983). Speaking ontologically, this disappearance is enhanced by the disposition to discard the unity of physical place and body in favor of the social presence of disembodied communication. This disposition points to a fundamental presupposition: the dualization between body and psyche. This dichotomization is so prevalent that one hardly notices it. In addition, this disposition contains another qualitative change: the opening by television of the possibility and ability to develop similar interactive relationships among persons, solely mediated by the media.

The metaphor of a "guest in the house" is, in this context, revealing. The television personality does not only demand one's time and place, but also constitutes emotional binding without distance. Thus the television personalities constitute individual presences, and make the viewer into an individual, isolated and hence calling for companionship. One is a guest in the homes of millions, yet each among the millions stays at home in isolation. The latter, thus calls for the "humanization" of television as a new family member with more extensive vision. It is going to be a new partner of conversation, will take our time, and will in fact, introduce new guests to us. In turn, the viewer couples to a new family of his own – a family that extends into the episodes of the programs. Here one has to expect a restructuration both of the individual and social consciousness. One is released from situational boundaries, such as one's own family and the family in the program. As Joshua Meyrowitz suggests, there is a change not only in social activities, but also perception of social reality. If the boundaries among types of programs begin to dissolve, then situations begin to blend. What emerges is not just a combination but a third, synthetic situation with entirely new interactive system wherein the differences between directly interactive and mediately given situations disappear (Meyrowitz 1987).

Social communication

Various processes crisscross the medium called television. If we regard it at the level of ontological materiality, then it constitutes a relationship between receptive awareness and medium and thus structures self-reflexive process of communication: the unity and differentiation between information, transmission and understanding. In this sense communication is located or becomes coextensive with a social system that is distinct from, although accessible to awareness. In this sense communication turns out to be an essential operation of coupling two systems that rework and transmit information: the social and the psychological, leading to another differentiation. Apart from its self-referring process, systems of communication have differentiated themselves socially in correlation to the complexities of social life, leading to a function of self-observation of functionally differentiated social fabric at an entirely novel level of complexity.

Television is the most recent function among mass media. Of course, mass media fulfills an unavoidable function in a complex society to the extent that they coordinate the psychic systems participating in the social fabric by structuring perceptions, selection of relevant themes, and temporal sequences (Luhmann 1981). Moreover, modern society regards itself as open to the entire world and hence does not wish to communicate only about, but above all, with the world. The media coordinations, then, presume a social cosmos of the communicators, i.e. participants in observation of the given events. We are, after all, a culture of empirically, and above all, visually, oriented peoples. Television is one of the major expressions of this presumed communicability that demands presence, verification, seeing with our own eyes, the eyes of television. This is to say, we are functioning under the metaphysics of light and all of its metaphors. Of course, such a communicative presumption is anonymous, in the background, and thus most effective.

There is a notable difference between interactive, dialogical communication, and mass media; the latter depends on selectivity, speed of distribution and coordination of themes in a kind of a collective shortening of memory. While print media carried the selectivity from the centers of communication, the television is a synchronous medium due to a direct coupling of communication and awareness. One might say that at this level there is a shift in quality of communication. This is to say, such an expansion of possible experience of others, expansion of the horizon of awareness, includes essentially a temporal component, leading to an unavoidable management of complexity and thus to an increasing selectivity of topics. In addition, the extension, coupled with the fascination of “being there” with the events, constitutes the fundamental fascination with this medium. It is not what is shown that fascinates but the very presence of the medium that sees, that lays the world at my feet. The coupling of the psychological system onto a medium as the very presence of reality requiring no participation, no commitment, is what attracts. How else could one imagine millions gaping at the screen when the first steps were taken on the moon. Informationally such steps were quite insignificant, and this insignificance was apparent with a rapid drop in interest on this topic.

It is not the transmission of a content, of some information that legitimates mass communication, but its very presence, and the social relevance “to be there”. Coupling and coordination of communication, of presence, express the structures of relevance of modern communicational society and not its quality of content. They present perceptions that transcend individual participation and build an organizational network of a secret panopticon. In contrast to other differentiated functional systems of a society, mass media could not develop its own codes that would constitute its principle of selectivity among other functional systems. The latter have their own coded sensibilities capable of selecting what is relevant to

their own system. But mass media is compelled to operate with such selective strategies as “the latest”, the immediate, the prognostic, or it tends to legitimate its selectivity by such difused tandems as social, political, or even economic interest as themes. Thus it is a small wonder that various functional systems of selectivity of relevance regard the television medium as highly dissatisfactory.

Before we could even consider an adequate approximation of functional systems of an entire complex society in communicative media, we must take a look at the impact of the selection of themes on the collective truncation of memory and communicative reproduction of society. This point should be regarded apart from any informational content; it touches the question what is given in the communicative horizon. First, one can claim that media can transmit an awareness of one's belonging to a society but not being a part of political, juridical and economic activity. And second, one's focus may be globally difused by non-localizable multitude of *focii*. This is to say, while everything is present, the presence is right there, without location. China, after all, is on television.

There is, of course, the phenomenon of self-efacing where the self-reference of the medium becomes anonymous. Thus when one watches a scene on television where two persons are shaking hands one regards all this as a natural, unmediated vision. This is not as simple, since one not only perceives, but watches in terms of stereotypical codes, e.g. political ritual. In brief, the content itself, the perceptual presence is also semantisized in various modes: commentators, moderators, interviewers, and interviewees. There is, thus, a transformation of audio-visual perception into another medium that runs parallel to the first layer phenomena. The perceptual contingencies, the audio-visual residua seem to disappear behind the semantisized codes. The latter are almost inescapable.

It is extremely difficult to articulate one's own vision, and visual reflexivity of the observer, specifically since vision is preeminently

an experience of an object; it has no substance and is a process of structuration that is geared to the observed. Yet the specific component that is important lies in the basis of vision: movement, and thus involvement of the entire body. Such involvement creates dispositional-ity for action. This is to say, the attunement to television is not psychological but kinaesthetic and dynamic. The tracing of the sceneries, their kinaesthetic connections, their motile overlapping of reflexivities, comprise an underlying system that is a combination of body action and the panoramic morphologies on the screen – whatever they may be. The coupling of the viewer to this mass medium plays itself out at the primary level of kinaesthetic constitution of awareness. Does this coupling make the viewer a consumer of the social environment, i.e. passive receptor, or a minimal participant? In other words, is it possible to regard the viewer as a reaction to stimuli, or an interaction with the program. The way to answer this question may depend on the hinge point at which kinaesthetic awareness that traces and intertwines with the panorama, shifts to selectivity, connections, and enactments. The shift is from viewer to attendant, from watcher to observer. Both, of course, require kinaesthetic flow, but the latter assumes a qualitative difference. It constitutes vertical reflexivity and not merely horizontal reiteration of the same. The “same” does not mean the constancy of the programs, but a process that constantly shifts without depth, constantly presents “novelties” that have become reiterations as novelties. This reiteration constitutes itself at the level of lateral kinaesthetic reflexivity, where one depicted event, program, comprises precise periodicity at which to expect “novelties” and hence repetition. This is equally a facet of the dualization of presence, i.e. a givenness that does not have any other participatory “vertical” depth.

Why, then, television took root amidst all the other mass media technology, from movies to radio? Movies have a specific space, a delimited domain to which one must go and seek

some sort of aesthetic entertainment. Television is the seemingly immediate mediation of the world, of seeing far, of transcending the bodily situation, and of course being extremely semanticized. If we have journalistic and radio mass media, as semiotic systems, purely verbal presence, television reinforces the semiotic by the direct imagery that subtend, and yet are overlayed by linguisticity. Moreover, the possible synchronization of imagery, the recorded presence as if everything is most current, lends television its import. This is to say, it is a way of extending and compacting time, and thus making room for increased programing, saturation with more “novelties”.

Such saturation is what turns the television medium away from being communicative, coordinator of perceptions, toward the opposite: disruption, disconnection, and trivialization. The more one extends the televisual mass media, the easier it is to make the shows, the more relevant becomes the question of selectivity. The more one is released from full participation, the more one’s kinaesthetic reflexivity is overburdened and hence difuses the recollective associations, the greater appears the problem of selectivity. What would constitute the motives of selectivity in a complex and functionally differentiated society to communicate one over another functional system or its activities as relevant can hardly be answered. The problem is not that we no longer read all journals, newspapers, see all films and watch all programs. The necessity to reduce communicative complexity is potentially offered by the very proliferation of media technology, but the strategies to solve the problem of selectivity do not rest on the same plane. The selectivity of themes is difficult, since the very question of relevance is not only topical but also temporal and may be discordant with other claims at the same time to relevance.

One could even argue that the extension of the mass media, its increased proliferation of varieties, constitutes a basis for the dissolution of criteria of relevance. It would be a view

that anything goes, a sort of posthistorically perceiving society (Gumbrecht 1985). In this sense communication obtains another dimension: it releases the viewer from the difficult questions of relevance, and opens awareness to operate with any content that excludes any vertical signification, calling for action. One can continuously float among channels wherein everything and nothing possess signification. At the same time, the very suggestivity of audio-visual phenomena that are proliferated horizontally comprise an increasingly semanticized universe. It is no wonder that with the appearance of technical mass media, there appeared a correlative awareness of signs. If one does not recognize this presence of signs, one remains submerged in them and thus begins to imagine that the mediated awareness possesses a representative function. Obviously, the thesis that emerges from these deliberations must be articulated across the other social domains of communication in order to show the arbitrariness and vacuity of mass media. It is equally obvious that our discussion would be restricted to an aspect of television programming: more informational and less entertaining. The latter also involves the kinaesthetic awareness and comprises, at the pure media level, a constant proliferation of novelties and thus functions to mark the permanence of boredom and marked continuity.

Ideology

The background selectivity could be deciphered at another level, if we are to avoid the charge of complete arbitrariness on the part of programmers. This selectivity may be constituted by ideological commitments. The latter must be deciphered in a very different way than has been done by traditional scholarship. It will have to be seen as “reflexive” processes that are part of social institutions. To grasp this conception it is essential to note that modern complex societies consist of a multiplicity of semi-autonomous

systems, each possessing its own formal rules and each having its own reflexive processes that coordinate a system from another vantage point. Money is a reflexive process capable of coordinating commodities and labor; juridical norms comprise reflexive processes concerning behavior, such as appropriate or inappropriate. In brief, reflexive processes comprise principles of selectivity of relevance. Not everything is relevant for all other systems, and hence the reflexive processes differentiate factors, functions, and accessed nature in terms of their own requirements.

Ideologies comprise such a reflexive process at a basic level. Each political system, irrespective of its composition claims one or more ideologies, and each ideology is a way of managing the entire complex set of the semi-autonomous systems in a society. Thus conservative ideology will select functions and actions that will enhance militarism, abolishment of individual rights, will select budgetary allocations for certain programs and exclude funds from others. In this sense, political systems and organizations are ideologically laden, and their selection of programs reflects the ideological principles of a given political organization or institution. Hence, communication is possible since ideologies can be regarded as obvious tandems of inclusion and exclusion, i.e. as codes. Moreover, they equally perform an integrative function to the extent that they organize the social fabric along predeterminate lines. No doubt, some ideologies will hold only for a while, since they may exclude change by repeating the already used modes of organizing. Such revived modes might seem to be dynamic and novel – so obvious in the conservative and fundamentalist movements around the globe – yet they cannot manage the complexity of social, semi-autonomous subsystems. By subjecting them to one mould, such ideologies squelch creativity and thus destroy the very credibility of their reflexive process. Resultantly, instead of functioning as integration, such ideology leads to disintegration.

Instead of conclusions

Given these considerations, it has been assumed that mass media, such as television, may take over a communicative function in a society that would act as a reflexive process articulating and structuring other processes, inclusive of various political ideologies as reflexive processes in their own right, i.e. being able of reflecting upon other reflexive processes and instituting codes of selectivity for awareness. Yet, as mentioned above, the mass media reflexivity becomes a floating process without a hold; it offers any tandem for immediate consumption that may either reiterate its novelties and thus mark continuous boredom, or offer news that are without memory, without sequel, dispersed across a synchronic field incapable of integration.

No doubt, some television mass media are ideologically laden and admit their “biases” but such a procedure reduces them to the level of political reflexivity and not to a communicative process having its own reflexivity. Given this context, then, the viewer is active kinaesthetically by the very dialogue with a medium, but such an action is empty, is abstract from a situation wherein an action might count.

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FILMAS KAIP MODERNUS MEDIUMAS IR ONTOLOGIJA

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Dažnai nuodugniai nagrinėjamas dėmesys, skiriamas televizijos programoms, jų turinys, semiotika, skirtingi retorikos, ekonominio konteksto ir kontrolės lygmenys. Drauge tyrinėjamas programų kartojimų fenomenas, nepaisant įtarimų, kad tokia analizė yra dirbtinė. Tačiau lieka neišanalizuoti kai kurie pamatiniai sandai, kalbant apie medijas apskritai ir apie televiziją konkrečiai. Šie sandai straipsnyje vadinami ontologiniais, t. y. nurodančiais numanomą medijų prigimtį, jų esmės reiškimosi būdus. Apie esmę tegalima užsiminti pirmiausia nagrinėjant kur kas suprantamesnius medijų aspektus.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: akis, medijos, ontologija, ekranas, televizijos mediumas.