



The Aesthetics of Audiovisual Stories

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This paper questions audiovisual culture of postmodernity, starting from the structural point occupied by stories in our secular societies. Questions about the role of aesthetics within the family, holiday-oriented fiction surrounding us today (at the edges, really). The paper argues that the spectator's consciousness in a world full of screens and dematerialized formats and maintains the defense of critical gestures and pragmatic activity for texts, images, and dogmas.

1. We might say that this text is the result of a series of dissatisfactions with theory (no offense intended). On the one hand there is the black hole of modern visibility. One has the impression that, even if the entire social body is affected, the images of our surroundings--whether permanent or mobile, analogic or digital--do not seem to need to be viewed from a distance. They transmit an immediate push-button charge for the eyes or for the fingers, but they demand nothing more than themselves (beyond an excess of rhetoric, subliminal excesses, the only narrative "gestures" of advertising that might well be considered a real "passe-par-tout" of post-modern iconism). In fact, images are assigned the value they simply exhibit, and objects are assigned that of proliferating without problems in all senses and on all screens they exclude the weight of ideas. (1) In addition, the audiovisual proposals of the media are controlled and interpreted in function of three types of utterances, dealing with information, fiction, and entertainment. The force of their availability seems to conjure up something unknown, with the exception of a light or ironic judgement about it itself. It is a sample of the "spontaneous" information about consumption-consumation, perhaps, of television in the pages of newspapers: a bright, colorful mosaic of insignificant incidents, opinions of programmers, amounts of audience, figures and idolatries camouflaged in which the television always has the privilege of having the final word. In sum, there is no possible appeal before a world full of screens and dematerialized formats, to the extent that any dissonance with that electrified, virtual reality becomes a lack of confidence towards the technological perfectionism that makes them possible. An amusement park where everything is clear, no poetic or expressive commitment besides the evidence of the outcome. At the last moments of the century, the technical transfiguration of the world belies all disbelief and encourages any type of lack of integral enthusiasms.

Obviously, no one has the rock of philosophy in this scene of images and viewing machines. This text cannot attempt to provide a complete diagnosis of a topic that

requires much, much thought. The view presented here is necessarily compressed, even though it attempts to plant the seeds for a wide-open field for research, and will concentrate on the concepts that would shape the working utterance. And it does so

delicately, although we are aware that certain interpretive parameters revolving around images that were formally beyond discussion are shown to be near expiration in relation to the virtuality of today's imagination. Speculative relativism does not cancel perplexity. Like Benjamin's angel who wants to distance himself from something

we live in a world somewhere between fascination and the distance in today's technocultural scene. And in this flux there are a series of obstinate questions related to a technological universe that is much used, but whose anthropological and cultural value remains to be seen.

2. The first question that needs to be discussed is the concept of audiovisual itself, the obligatory "locus" of much of the ritual mediations surrounding us. Of course, here we are not going to refer to genealogical accuracy on the combinations of image-sound, sight-hearing in our culture, but rather a visual geography in which various types of scenery co-exist and sometimes confront one another. Few concepts turn out to be as mistaken and unsubstantiated in their communicative power as this own, in which both a series of media products that are both widely available and consumed. If indetermination and dispersion are the only cards of post-modern imagination, the same must be said of this supermarket of screens we call the audiovisual industry. The contamination of the media and turbulence of its exchanges--photography, movies, television, videos, computers, makes it difficult to identify its own specific fields, products, and properties. Not only can everything be generated, added or deleted, but it can also change places, like a film that is shown in theaters, on video cassettees, on home television screens or individual metamedia computers. This situation of changing status, "transmediability," questions the theory based on formats, based on the direction of technical progress, to benefit a register on the devices of production and reproduction of images and stories, as well as the surface-screen where they are found and administered to.

Two assumptions defining audiovisual communication can be deduced from the above: a) the constantly hybrid nature of all categories of images and figurative logic (from the analogical image to its numerical conversion), and b) the reversibility of spaces, in which the format loses its ability to model structures of vision to become a court in which image and stories bounce around independently of their function. Both aspects, visual contingency and change of formats, become important in the perception of cultural products and their economy of use. Beyond that, the audiovisual industry is the sum of undifferentiated audiovisual works and the synergy of the media to not give shape to any in particular. (2) In addition to being a technological menagerie on both the industrial and personal scales, with the screen becoming an image itself, in the only learnable reality with which the user maintains absolute credibility in the face of disbelief in the analogical or digital images included. (3)

3. No less symptomatic of the profound technocultural changes of our time is the luck of the tale, of this 'art of fiction' as Henry James said in one of his detailed essays. I am not aiming at dragging out the historical vicissitudes of narrative from Aristotelean *mythos* to today to investigate audiovisual stories (even though it would be extraordinarily helpful in order to understand our current situation, as demonstrated by the very rigorous studies by Frank Kermode, Seymour Chatman, Peter Brooks or Paul Ricoeur, among others (4)). Rather, I will only hold on to a paradox that seems to unify all these works, i.e. the undoubtable decadence of the art of narration, at least in relation to ancient tradition, conflicts with the constant need for narration in order to face the lack of order in the world. In other words, the desire for fiction is not only still here but rather is growing, but it does so proportionately in relation to the erosion of the narrative paradigm.

Half a century earlier, the philosopher Walter Benjamin discussed the prolonged crisis of narrative from positions that are rather far from the post-Nietzsche vindication of the cited authors' fiction but still relevant to the analysis of the present. In several places in his work, and particularly in the central argument of his essay *Der Erzähler* ("The Narrator") (5), Benjamin related the crisis of the narrative to the loss of the word, the decline in experience and the strong increase in information. In the opinion of the German essayist, the perception of what is real, product of broad, plausible information, does not ensure it will be processed. As long as information is compensated for in the impenetrable progress of the world, fiction suffers. To paraphrase him, an ability that seemed inalienable, the surest of the sure, the ability to exchange experiences, is being removed (Benjamin 1991:112). At the core of Benjamin's view is the decline in cognitive experience and confrontation with stories that enrich our experience with symbols.

There is little doubt about the weakening of the narrative paradigm in recent times governed by pragmatic order and the ecstatic horizon of simulation. It is true that the perennial nature of fiction seems ensured because it and its not always positive metamorphoses imply the survival of culture, as noted by Paul Ricoeur, not without fear of Benjamin's opinion (Ricoeur, 1987: 57-58). But it is no less true that once the industry of culture has become an appendix to entertainment that it becomes so prodigious in fictional offerings as it is relative in its representations. (6) In any event, it is important to consider how the view of the disintegration of fiction as proposed goes beyond audiovisual media and the level of miniatures they expand on. (7) This appears to be clear in that well-oiled machine we call television, the basis of contemporary knowledge, but which we can extend to the prevalent production in current film-making, which falls within the same domestic projection. And, naturally, it becomes even clearer when we approach the world of videos, the shining multimedia technology and numerical-virtual navigation, devices in which representations never seem to become representations because of the outflow of the image and the bric-o-brac of decompositions presided over by a weak generaic automatism and a superior ability to delete. (8)

In this introductory text I shall not discuss television in either its national or international mutations. But it would seem to be useless from the point in which we refer to audiovisual narratives and the industrial manufacture of stories, precisely because television has become a formidable narrative machine the occupies our daily universe in the same way that land is occupied, as you would stand guard, not so much to transmit a message as to prevent another message from being transmitted; it's more like obstruction as opposed to communication (Daney, 1986:24). (9) Television cannot be ignored because it is the means by which stories are most often disseminated and most deactivated, where democracy reigns with convivialities and the limits between private and public lives have been erased in order to enter into a chain of restrictions on its fictional modes. This is where the idea of event takes on a specific direction and narrative structures come apart into all spheres: news, games, fictional stories themselves, to preserve the spectacle of entertainment and futility. All in all, exactly where Benjamin's prognosis on the hypertrophy of information fed by an indeterminate flow of data and news, popular devotion and piecemeal production of minute fictional events that are immediately forgotten. To paraphrase him, narrating stories has always been the art of telling stories and this art is being lost if there no longer is a way to keep them (Benjamin, 1991:118).

We only need to glance at that screen that is so close and familiar, in which everything, absolutely everything, nondiscriminately and simultaneously takes place to see that narration is always between the lines (Bellour, 1990:247). Whether it be a territory full of minuscule stories that are hardly stories, between channels and stime slots that only highlight their artificiality and filler function, serials that intersect with one another, disappear only to reappear as an example of the Same Thing. I try to see the differences between "the television of spectacles" and "the television of services," between trash television and psych-television with its popular therapies, confessions and police stories, revelations on domestic behavior and marital crises, question-answer formats pitting popular therapy against academic knowledge, etc. I am aware of the mutations of this formidable mass-media machine, of designer television and grotesque zapping, of the giant leap forwards from the programmed device with all the cards marked "quick services" and the television view converted into a screenager with his or her own curiosities and concerns. But in this sum of conveniently manufactured proposals for an "addicted" public and an absent viewer (it is well-known that audiences and shares are the successful idiocies of programmers and advertisers; television has no viewers or, if you like, television does not involve a viewing function (10)), I am unable to find any distinctive resources. In the set of household anecdotes that attack me from the small screen it is difficult for me to find any of the secret demands of the "rhizome", whereas I do see a pile of nervous fibers proclaiming the methathesis of the story in every direction. (11)

Viewer and fictional plot are also questioned in many recent films. The ancient art of telling stories no longer holds its own place in a space full of fast-paced stories and self-service consumption. With advertising as our only reference, it being considered the absolute triumph of entropy in Baudrillard's scheme, (12) dissolved in the standards of television (with a paradigmatic figure, the made-for-TV movie, the true ectoplasm of

the mixture), covered with a panoply of animation techniques, synthetic models and special effects of all sorts, current film spectacle has become a mere denaturalized fairground attraction.

4. This situation, which might seem reasonable, leads us to the final utterance in a text, the aesthetic project. Some precisions are necessary under the cover of traditional hermeneutical models. A return to aesthetics as an activity and analytical horizon in all spheres of culture seems clear. What is curious about this return of aesthetics, after the sum of formal, ideological suspicions of previous years, is that it occurs in recent decades, coinciding with the catechesis of audiovisual production, as if it were to validate something that is progressively disappearing from the horizon. In fact, the idea of aesthetics seems to refer to a plural entity, although it remains unclear if that refers to various possible aesthetics or to different ways of approaching the topic of aesthetics within a sociology of ideas. (13)

Several paths coincide when we talk about aesthetics: there is beauty, an idea that has been a part of the oldest documents since Plato (what is beautiful defines art but not as an exclusive or presupposed ideal); there is pleasure (an area which is difficult to abstract in, and as Barthes aptly said, can only be defined from experiences when confronting the text and not in function of the text); and finally, there is taste, that personal, indescribable intuition analyzed by Kant and later judged by Pierre Bordieu in the field of cultural spheres.

Without going into ontological considerations, it is clear that all approaches to the aesthetics of audiovisual works are tied to their purpose and their form of existence. Far from being an elitist bunker, the appearance of aesthetics runs through many cultural products, even when it is just to announce their management, promotion, and immediate use. Even with the collapse of representation, the entertainment industry needs aesthetic packaging with no frontiers for its market protocols for the public at large.

It is true that in our secular society there is a populist aesthetics that pressures and governs the entire artistic horizon through its projection in the media. And it suggests a sphere of immediate legibility and production in which gawdy, banal items are favored. An aesthetics of ugliness that has nothing to do with what existed at the end of the 19th century, against the official art market and the confiscation of aesthetic criteria on the part of the Academy. Rather, this is a mass market even and a pompous simulation of a crisis of the time. Without appealing to tension or aesthetic commitment (the minimum that is essential for art and culture as social products), there is only a banal aesthetics, with no consequences, carried out as a reflex of production, as pure determination for consumerism (Brea, 1996:28). Hardly something new under the sun. Between the world wars, Sigfried Krecauer wrote an extraordinary essay, "The ornament of the masses," in which he referred to these cultural phenomena as a part of entertainment as an empty form, but promoted as empathetic devices for popular consumption. It is true that in the 1920s-1930s television did not exist, but we can all agree that Krecauer's comments on the culture of the masses have turned out to be a

prognosis, and between crises--both his time and our are two moments of major tensions--they have changed reflector's lights.

In this transfiguration of what is trite or banal, if we follow Arthur Danto, (14) television has the dominant role, although that does not imply that other media such as the film industry have to occupy a secondary position. It is tiresome to repeat that television is *notre écran quotidien* (15) and in this all-powerful domestic showcase many of the imaginary representations are set forth. From this perspective it is important to question the nature of audiovisual products he suggests, their intentional processes and their social functions. Nevertheless, this discussion either from the standpoint of the analysis of specific segments of television or from the specific nature of its discourse would warrant a detailed analysis that I cannot go into here, and thus these comments must be understood as an overview.

When we speak of generalist television we always refer to a continuously flowing syntagmatic structure in which hybrids dominate. (16) In this spectacular mosaic of neo-populist proposals designed to mobilize direct, primitive reactions in viewers, all singularity seems lost. The issue of authorship, an issue central to any debate on aesthetics, imposes itself through its absence by means of two closely tied aspects: on the one hand, if the television viewer needs and constructs an author in the products he or she views, and on the other, what kinds of aesthetic expectations are placed in them. The time when television viewers, converted into a temporary epiphenomenon within the masses, (17) searches for the author of the text being watched is odd. Viewers are caught in a maze of mini-stories and are faced with audiovisual images they simply intake (Jost, 1992:66). In the final analysis, to find the stamp of the author they only need to turn to the channel showing the program, the only device they need to trust in. (18) In this way the intentional act of televised fiction appears to be preformulated from the medium itself and in the body of the text. In other words, the speaker knows that his or her product (made-for-television film, soap opera, situation comedy or serial) will be enclosed in a grid with no autonomy or reference, and with the obligation to appeal to phatic functionalism to single out attention. And, if this were not enough, it will be subjected to a series of interruptions that can be diachronic (with the introduction of advertising, inserts from other programs or promotional spots on the same channel) or synchronic (with the viewer integrated into a constant coming and going between domestic tasks and instantaneous circulation of programs and channels). With the knowledge of this contemplation, of the power of flow as opposed to the opus, the issuer/speaker empties the product of all references and symbols, organizes the material so that nothing is improvised and all information gaps are immediately satisfied. The only semblance of truth these discourse structures have is that they are close to the universe of the television viewer, who is looking for phatic recognition, although it is necessary to navigate between what is artificial and what is not believable. From the dining room of the "Golden Girls" to the courtroom of "L.A. Law", from Bill Cosby's kitchen to a Bob Newhart's inn, everything becomes a "déjà vu" with two formulae supporting their economy of survival: absolute accessibility and receptive consensus. There can hardly be an evaluation of aesthetics in the presence of a stereotyped, familiar product that is subjected to the overall flow of a fragmented

programming. And there can hardly be negotiation between the public (beyond the gossip of recognizing a "familiar sound" to all stories), considered as an interpretive community, which in my opinion is more imagined than real, by Anglo-Saxon cultural studies. (19) The opposite position to these studies, in watching television there is usually domestic solidarity (due to consent or exclusion of someone) without roles or specific obligations.

By marginating the artistic nature of the work and excluding interpretations other than surveys, for, as we know, the public is the judge because of ratings, and once surveyed, the art disappears and there can hardly be any aesthetic function. Since television products arrive without request and do not imply any challenge, nor is there any need to judge them (in Kant's sense: an individual reflection on one's own judgement, balancing spontaneity and intelligence); their existence becomes reduced to their immanence. Thus, there is Sorlin's idea that television does not allow any interpretation at all, since it only carries traces of combinations and conflicts (Sorlin 1992:12).

But this situation leads us to another conclusion, that of considering all audiovisual experiences as "post-aesthetic," an ambiguous label that can define both the situation of reversibility of products and the interpretative disinterest towards any narrative identity. In reference to the first question, it is not difficult to establish similar indexes for television fiction and movie fiction. We might think there are no conclusive distinctions between movie fiction and television fiction today. In addition to the fact that both come from the same source (although in the case of television it is through epigonal and mixed formulae), and to the fact that both are framed in a similar contextual organization in terms of genre and serial products, they preserve their nature as a mixed spectacle. Like televised fiction, commercial movies thrive on clones, artificial synonymic proposals, on an enormous amount of reversible products that seem to exhibit and explain themselves completely by themselves, with no other measure than their quality as socially programmed merchandise. An industrial production with no creator, one that is not supported by any author precisely because singularity is unknown and, as a result, does not have to answer to itself before aesthetic proposals (if aesthetics is taken as simple ostentation in its asymbolic condition) that are anonymous and removed from all consumers. In the end, a film exhibit filling all space, from the room to the television, from the television to the VCR and the laser-disk and not necessarily in this order for a minority viewer, owner of all ghostly traces and with no territory of his or her own. (20)

But even with this relationship, and the resulting fictional discredit on planning movies like high-budgeted television, (21) there are still risky author projects in contemporary film that need an imaginative aesthetic subject. No matter how much current film production may follow television (its economic power and its esperanto-ish language), it is impossible to draw the line between the two in terms of their intentions. As Deleuze states in the prologue to Daney's book, television never looked for its specificity in the aesthetic function but rather in its social, controlling and power function (consensus par excellence), whereas film has always kept its aesthetic, even

fragile function, particularly when it acted as a common language and creed for all ideological-industrial propaganda, or like today, gripped by audiovisual catechesis. Although historically it has been denied artistic legitimacy, what is certain is that film has been able to embody many issues in practice, and the aesthetic reflection of the twentieth century, in its operation, has dealt with two points: symbolic processes and social processes.

Aesthetics and communication are two functions that are left to film to distinguish it from audiovisual magma in which it seems to be irremediably thrown. Aesthetics as a differential value forces us to confront the representations of the world and the storytelling function of knowledge, suggests simultaneous awareness of emotion and aesthetic pleasure and forces viewers to establish a relationship. It is not the seriousness of the theoretical analysis, but rather the extension of contact with the story and the fact it is subjected to questions about its internal structure. In addition, it is a way to make us face a certain idea of truth and with our enigmas that are the true symbolic structure of knowledge, thanks to which we can recover our condition of viewers and aesthetic subjects, as opposed to being a statistic destined to withstand programmed audiovisual fantasy.

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Notes:

(1) The relationship between images and ideas has been considered all eidetic opinions in the West since Plato (St. Augustine and Descartes, Kant and Nietzsche, Benjamin and Blanchot, etc.). One of the most recent essays on the paradoxical mechanisms of images is by Marie-Claire Ropars- Wuilleumier, "L'Idée d'image", PUV Paris, 1995.

(2) A book like *Les industries de l'imaginaire* by Patrice Flichy is a good guide to the worldwide audiovisual industry with its multiform concentrations, technological progress and uses, strategies of certain brands and major multimedia trusts (numerical and virtual concentration and influential industrial interests force the author to update.

(3) The rhetorical vocabulary of those who, from the post-modern perspective, argue for 'cultural anthropology of surfaces' is nonetheless curious; c.f. the text "Videoculturals de fin de siglo" by Alain Renaud, Madrid, Cátedra, 1990.

(4) Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Endina*. Studies in the Theory of Fiction. London: Oxford University Press, 1967; Seymour Chatman, 1990, *Historia y discurso: estructura narrativa en la novela y en el cine*; Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*.

Design and Intention in Narrative. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992; Paul Ricoeur, *Tiempo y narración I, II, III: Configuración del tiempo en el relato histórico, en el relato de ficción, en la narración*. Libros Europa Ediciones Cristiandad 1987-1997.

(5) Walter Benjamin, *Discursos interrumpidos*. Madrid, Taurus Ediciones, 1973; *Imaginación y sociedad*, Madrid, Taurus Ediciones, 1980; *Para una crítica de la violencia y otros ensayos*. Iluminaciones IV, Madrid, Taurus Ediciones, 1991.

(6) José Luis Brea has analyzed this tension of the time that displaces culture towards the life of immediate service and is satisfied with its own inactivity; cf. "Un ruido secreto, el arte en la era póstuma de la cultura." Murcia: Ed. Palabras de arte, nº 2, Mestizo AC, 1996.

(7) Vicente Sánchez Biosca and Rafael R. Tranche discuss the precarious nature of the fictional model in the introduction to the heteroclite group of texts on 'destinies of the story at the end of the millenium,' in the journal *Archivos de la Filmoteca* no. 21 of October 1995, Filmoteca de la Generalitat Valenciana, Spain.

(8) Fiction ends up becoming the great unconscious figure in video installations which, in their use of the new parameters of time and space, are presented as fictional events (cf. the "works" by Hill, Viola, Graham, Kuntzel, Muntadas, etc., not to mention video-games that are always governed by a narrative pattern and are self-regulated by the virtual images of the computer screen.

(9) There is a positive sense of censure here: the all-terrain occupation characteristic of television, for which it is never criticized. Even with passionate discourse, the intellectual condescending view of television as a megastory that engulfs all other audiovisual narratives and turns them into its consenting hostages.

(10) "Los receptores televisivos son los más activos consumidores de simulacros y los más ortodoxos practicantes de una mística de la renuncia a la relación con las cosas y la búsqueda de un contacto con las apariencias". Gianfranco Bettetini: "Cauto elogio della ripetizione". Text included in "VV.AA. L'Immagine al plurale", Venice, Marsilio Editori, 1984.

(11) As a subterranean stem, rhizomes are antegenological. They derive from the variation, expansion, and capture, as opposed to roots and fibers that reproduce constantly. Cf. Gilles Deleuze /Felix Guattari: "Rizoma", Valencia, Ediciones Pretextos, 1977.

(12) "Triumph of superficial forms, lowest common denominator of all meanings, no amount of sense...All forms of current activity tend towards advertising and on the whole get lost in it. Not necessarily in nominal advertising, which occurs as such, but rather in the advertising form, that of a simplified way of operating, one that is slightly

seductive, slightly consensual (all types become mixed up, but in a diminished, weakened way..." (translated by J.D.) Jean Baudrillard, "Publicidad absoluta, publicidad cero," *Revista de Occidente* 92 (Madrid, 1989).

(13) Cf. Pierre Sorlin, 1992, *Esthétiques de l'audiovisuel*, Paris, Nathan. The author, together with Marie Claire Ropars and Michele Lagny, is the editor of an excellent collection of individual and collaborative essays on aesthetics published by the Presses Universitaires de Vincennes.

(14) Danto, Arthur, 1981, *La transfiguration du banal*. Paris, Editions Seuil.

(15) Cf. Guy Lochard & Henri Boyer, 1995, *Notre écran quotidien: une radiographie du télévisuel*. Paris, Dunod.

(16) The signs of identity of neo-television have been established for the ideas of contamination and syncretism since the 1980s. See work by Umberto Eco, 1985, *La guerre du faux*, Paris, Grasset; Jesús González Requena, 1988, *El discurso televisivo: espectáculo de la posmodernidad*, Madrid, Cátedra, and Francesco Casetti and Roger Odin, 1990, "De la paléo à la neo-television," *Communications* 51 (Paris, Seuil).

(17) It is useless to ignore the production and programming of the public within the strategies of cultural industries. Work by John Fiske, Eric Macé, and Daniel Dayan, among others, discuss the process of social and industrial construction of television's viewing public.

(18) The only "implied author" (particularly for critics and commentators) is the producer-programmer, e.g. Steven Bochco. Clear proof of the pass in television from producer to director, from the work to the product, from single texts to designing series.

(19) Cf. works in American sociology (Aske, Lull, Curran, etc.) and the Birmingham school (Stuart Hall, David Morley), among others.

(20) Although it seems obvious, the process of viewing movies is very closely tied to texts, to its historical context and to the location of the places where viewed. Cf. Manuel Palacio, 1995, "La Noción de espectador en el cine contemporáneo," in *Historia general del cine*, Vol. XII, Madrid, Cátedra.

(21) Cf. Serge Daney, 1986, "Comme tous les vieux couples, cinéma et télévision ont fini par se ressembler," Paris, Edit. Cahiers de Cinema.

