DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 283 231 CS 505 640

AUTHOR Burns, Gary
TITLE Television Aesthetics as Aesthetics.
PUB DATE 26 Mar 87
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Combined Annual Meeting of the Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, March, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Aesthetic Values; *Film Study; Fine Arts; Mass Media Effects; *Popular Culture; *Television
IDENTIFIERS *Television Aesthetics

ABSTRACT

In opposition to popular disparaging of television as an artistic medium, television can be considered as having its own aesthetics and can be placed in the category of fine arts (as opposed to folk arts). Television art can and should be distinguished from video art and film art in the ways in which it imitates reality; program content and filming technique are two ways in which television art separates itself. Moreover, television has been criticized for the unreal way in which it presents the outside world. Related to this is the relationship between viewer and television, as opposed to the relationship between viewer and film. Television has been called an "intimate" medium because of the size of the screen, the type of shot used, and the fact that televisions can be placed in the home; whereas film overwhelms, making the viewer feel inferior to the screen, television elicits a feeling of superiority. Hence, the way in which television imitates the outside world differently than film demands that it should have its own theories of aesthetics. The development of such theories may allow television to be seriously studied as art, as well as admit examples of popular culture into the realm of aesthetics, both of which may improve the quality of television. (JC)

Television Aesthetics as Aesthetics

Gary Burns
Assistant Professor
Department of Speech
University of Missouri
St. Louis, MO 63135, USA
314-553-5485

American Culture Association
Montréal
26 March 1987

Television Aesthetics as Aesthetics

It has happened several times--I have told someone I'm working on a paper concerned with "television aesthetics," and received a reply something like this: "Television has no aesthetics." I understand that this response is meant partly, but not entirely, as a joke. The assumptions it contains are in any case widespread prejudices or misunderstandings which interfere with our understanding of television. The proposition that "television has no aesthetics" is actually an enthymeme of sorts, built on the faulty premises that (1) aesthetics is the study of "good art" (and nothing more than this), and (2) television is not (ever) "good art." My approach in this essay will be to contradict the first premise and ignore the second--for if aesthetics is concerned with art and the arts in general, TV is eligible for inclusion whether it is good or bad. I am of course making an assumption here myself--that the battle over whether TV is an art or a "mere transmission device" (for film, theatre, music, etc.) has been fought and won.[1] I am also, for the moment, setting aside an axe I have previously ground--that "television aesthetics" is a problematic label which should be replaced by "television theory." Since I'll be referring often to aesthetics proper, it seems logical to use "television aesthetics" to reinforce the linkage I will try to establish between TV and the other arts, and between TV aesthetics (as a body of writing which often goes by this name) and aesthetics in general.

To dispense with the notion of aesthetics as exclusively the study of "good art," let us first consider the following description by Richard Kostelanetz (who prefers the spelling "esthetics"):

> The questions of esthetics are unchanging--the definition of art (as distinct from non-art or sub-art), the function of art, the types of art, the genesis of art, the effects of art, the relation of art to society and history, the criteria of critical evaluation, the process of perception, and the generic characteristics of superior works. As esthetic thinking deals with properties common and yet peculiar to all things called "art," the philosophy of art, in contrast to "criticism," offers statements which are relevant to more than one art, if not fundamental to the arts in general. . . . Esthetics is, by definition, primarily concerned with "fine art," if not only with the very best art. . . . Concomitant esthetic concerns include the nature of badness and/or vulgarity in art, and the question of whether art is, or should be, primarily the imitation of nature, the expression of self, or wholly the creation of imagination . . .[2]

This passage leads directly to some thorny questions about television. First, is television "fine art"? Kostelanetz's book includes an essay on video art, but this art form is often distinguished from television, even though it uses television technology. The distinction Kostelanetz wishes to make in the passage above is probably between "fine art" and folk art or crafts. If TV fits anywhere in those three categories, it is under "fine art," however incongruous this may at first seem. The term "fine art" is too restrictive in an even more obvious sense in that, in many people's usage, it excludes the literary and performing arts--which certainly belong in the domain of aesthetics. And television, of course, has its literary and performative aspects.

In a related vein, is TV "non-art" or "sub-art"? By "non-art," Kostelanetz appears to mean hoax or anti-art.[3] These may be relevant categories in a discussion of video art or music video, but not of typical broadcast fare. "Sub-art" is kitsch, of which commercial TV is the example par excellence. Even if "non-art" and "sub-art" are valid categories to place in contrast to "art," the point to be made here is that TV must still be a concern of aesthetics, because by virtue of its partial or total exclusion, TV (as "non-art" or "sub-art") would contribute to the definition of "art." In addition, the study of TV might well help an elitist aesthetician deal with one of Kostelanetz's other questions, "the nature of badness and/or vulgarity in art"!

Regardless of how these niggling points might be resolved, Kostelanetz's remaining questions are certainly applicable to television and would therefore seem to be major issues in television aesthetics: "the function of [television], the types of [television], the genesis of [television], the effects of [television], the relation of [television] to society and history, the criteria of critical evaluation [of television], the process of perception [of television], and the generic characteristics of superior [television] works"; also "the question of whether [television art] is, or should be, [or can be] primarily the imitation of nature, the expression of self, or wholly the creation of imagination."[4] These are precisely the kinds of questions examined in much of the recent work in television studies and television criticism.[5]

To explore all these matters exhaustively, or even to summarize what others have done, would be a mammoth undertaking which is best left for another time. What I wish to do for the moment is examine, in a very preliminary way, Kostelanetz's primary question (as "edited for

television" in footnote 4): the definition of television. Definition is of course a major preoccupation of aesthetics--perhaps even moreso for TV theorists than for those writing about the other arts. As much as possible in this brief discussion, I wish to view the question in light of both television aesthetics and more traditional aesthetic theories. It will also be necessary to refer occasionally to film theory, which must be mentioned separately here because it does not yet seem to be encompassed by the phrase "aesthetic theory."

Imitation of Live

The first task in reaching an aesthetic understanding of television is defining the medium. This requires both an examination of its internal workings and a comparative analysis involving TV and other media, particularly film. To a great extent, these two modes of investigation are inseparable, because television, probably more than any other medium, is a "composite art."[6]

The necessity to define a medium is closely linked to the notion of imitation. The discourse on imitation begins with Plato, who attacked art as a pale imitation of actuality, which in turn is a flawed representation of essence or reality, or "the transcendental Forms that lie behind the actual."[7] In Aristotle, imitation takes on a more positive tone and becomes associated with catharsis, or the purging of the emotions. Jump cut to 1766, and Lessing publishes Laocoön, which categorizes the arts according to "the distinctiveness of the medium in each art, or, as he put it, the 'signs' (Zeichen) it uses for imitation. He did not question that the arts exist to imitate, but he asked, for the first time with such directness and explicitness, what a given art can imitate, and what it can imitate most successfully."[8]

These three moments in the history of "imitation" are relevant to television. Plato's attack translates, somewhat roughly, into numerous critiques of television--e.g. TV news is biased, TV drama presents inaccurate stereotypes, TV is more violent than the real world, all problems are resolved on TV in 60 minutes, TV commercials are fraudulent, etc. Most of these complaints have historical antecedents in radio, film, theatre, etc.

TV's policy of imitation is highly contested ground. Should TV adhere rigidly to a policy of "accurate" imitation of reality? Some say that makes dull drama. Whose reality should be imitated? If inaccurate negative stereotypes are bad, what about inaccurate positive stereotypes, as well as "prosocial" programming in general?

The aesthetic chestnut that art imitates human action, or Nature, or life, translates into the TV industry's standard apologia: TV is a mirror of society. Against this, critics echo Oscar Wilde's observation that "life imitates art." The entire debate about the effects of TV's violence, stereotyping, advertising, ideology, and mindlessness can be seen as something of a "footnote to Plato" and Aristotle. The modern-day "Aristotle" is Seymour Feshbach, who has been the principal advocate of the "catharsis theory" in the TV violence controversy.

If this invocation of the Greeks seems strained, that of Lessing is more comfortable, and more clearly relevant to what the average person understands as aesthetic concerns. Lessing's system impinges on us today in the form of several ideas: that each art, or medium as we might now say, imitates reality in its own way; that each medium has its own "language" and/or material; that each medium is unique in its technical capabilities and tendencies; that the proper artistic way to use a medium

is to exploit its uniqueness. These ideas have implications which extend far beyond an unadorned view of art-as-imitation.

Much of the aesthetic writing about television has been devoted to describing the unique features of the medium. There has been much writing about video art, and it too has been preoccupied with unique qualities--which, for the most part, are the same as those of television. The key to this paradox is video art's critique of television for abandoning the unique properties which are its birthright.

Before describing what these are, I want to refer briefly to the historical precedent of film. Film embodies Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's two principles of modern art: movement and arts-between-old-arts.[9] Of these, movement is crucial in the present discussion. Zettl identifies three types of movement in film and television: primary, in which the subject moves; secondary, in which the camera moves; and tertiary, which is editing.[10] Throughout the history of film theory, and film itself, a tension has existed between editing and the other two types of movement. It is a matter of some controversy which is more cinematic, i.e. more unique or organic to film. The Soviet director-theorists Kuleshov, Eisenstein, and Pudovkin framed the debate around the artistic material and method of composition of film. In their view, the shot or individual piece of film is the material, and editing the shots together in a certain order is the method of composition.[11] In opposition to this, "realist" film theory adheres to an aesthetic of mise-en-scène based on wide shots, deep focus cinematography, and long takes (all conducive to subject movement), and moving camera. For theorist André Bazin, the motivating force which led to the existence and advancement of cinema is "the myth of total cinema," or the desire for "a recreation of the world in its own image."[12]

Near the dawn of television aesthetics, the question of TV's relation to film immediately arose, and one of the most sophisticated early formulations was that of TV producer Richard Hubbell. Hubbell posed four questions aimed at discovering TV's uniqueness:

> (1) What is the primary tool of television--the camera, as in the cinema, or the actor as in the theatre, or the microphone as in aural radio? Or is it a combination of two or three? Does the answer to this question hold true at all times, or does it vary for different types of programs?
>
> (2) What is the primary process in television? Is it video cutting as in the cinema, or is it camera handling, or is it an equal measure of audio and video editing?
>
> (3) Is the single shot the basic unit of television as it is in motion pictures?
>
> (4) How should the video be used to develop a technique for television without flatly imitating motion pictures? How can we evolve an audio-visual technique as right for television as the Russian theory of montage is for motion pictures?[13]

As one might expect from the way these questions are posed, Hubbell's answers heavily stressed TV's similarity to film. The major difference Hubbell was forced to note was TV's slow cutting compared to film. This resulted from TV's general lack (in those days) of postproduction capability, which in turn is one dimension of TV's live-ness. To compensate for TV's difficulty in editing as compared to film, Hubbell recommends slower cutting, "more extensive use of dissolves and superimposures to provide speedier transitions and to enhance pictorial interest," and use of "highly mobile cameras which rove about the studio,

taking both objective and subjective approaches to a program."[14] Hubbell's moving-camera proposals have highly developed film precedents including Renoir, Murnau, Lang, Ophüls, and others. He seems to suggest, indirectly, that TV is more "realistic" (because less "montagist") than film.

The crucial factor in this and other early comparisons of TV and film is TV's liveness, also referred to as simultaneity, immediacy, and (with slightly different implications) spontaneity. If film's genesis resulted, as Bazin put it, from pioneers' visions of "a total and complete representation of reality" and "a perfect illusion of the outside world in sound, color, and relief,"[15] television took one further step toward "total cinema" by overcoming one of film's "imperfections"--the need to wait before being able to see and hear the representation. Years later, video artists and Marshall McLuhan would revive the celebration of liveness, long after broadcast TV had become not much more than a "transmission device" for film and videotape.

Two other major differences between TV and film, which therefore serve as part of the definition of TV, are image size and image quality. TV is usually considered inferior to film on both counts--image size in that the TV screen is small, image quality in that TV has lower resolution. But TV has a positive side in both these parameters. TV's small screen size allows it to be placed in every home in the land and therefore to be viewed at all times of day. TV's image quality is radiant, i.e. it works with emitted rather than reflected light. This, according to Emery and Emery, is one reason viewers are transfixed by TV.[16] And this is not even to mention the McLuhan/Tony Schwartz argument about TV's coolness and the brain's compulsion to fill in the blanks between the glowing phosphors on the picture screen.[17]

Let us briefly consider image size in more detail, since, unlike liveness, it has been a major aesthetic determinant of filmed and taped TV programming as well as the live variety. The main ideological line born from image size is that of "intimacy" (i.e. "TV is an intimate medium"). As I have elsewhere summarized this argument:

> The television receiver provides a fairly small image. The receiver and the image are just the right size for viewing in the home (one's most familiar environment) at rather close distance. Thus one is rather intimate with the set itself. Panoramic scenery and movement, suitable for film (especially widescreen), are unimpressive on television.[18] Television favours the close-up, an intimate shot which encourages psychological identification with a character.[19] [This is further enhanced by the fact that a close-up gives an approximately life-sized picture.] Film takes the viewer out into the world, whereas television brings the world to the viewer.[20] The film image is "heroic" in size,[21] while the television image is "diminutive."[22] The viewer feels "inferior" to the film image, "superior" to the television image[23]. . . . [As Zettl puts it,] "In effect, we look <u>at</u> the spectacle on the large movie screen but (when properly handled) <u>into</u> the event on television."[24] Because of its small image size, television favours scenes with few characters,[25] shot as tightly as possible. This discourages horizontal movement and encourages blocking along the depth axis,[26] which is the same axis as the viewer's gaze. Depth axis blocking and the ubiquitous zoom give television a depth axis orientation greater than film. This orientation to the line of viewer gaze accounts

for Zettl's "looking into" and for television's "subjectivity."[27] It encourages direct address to the camera by performers, a potential manifestation of intimacy.[28] Television newscasts seem to verify this line of reasoning (we "look into" the newsroom). [Music video now provides further substantiation.][29]

Thus TV's small screen encourages a particular style of production, heavily weighted in favor of close-ups, depth axis staging (e.g. the striking number of over-the-shoulder and "two-faces-east" shots in drama series such as Dallas), and, particularly since the advent of Hill St. Blues and St. Elsewhere, moving camera. Whether this all adds up to "intimacy" is debatable, but at least the formal and psychological mechanisms involved in audience identification with characters may provide part of the explanation for the structure of TV's star system and for why, in TV's maturity, serials, episodic series, mini-series, and "format" television (e.g. MTV) seem ascendant over anthologies and specials.

Conclusion

The unique features of a medium only provide a starting point for understanding it. To continue along the aesthetic lines suggested earlier, we might next consider certain questions pertaining to the artist and to the rules and conventions of television production. I emphasize these subjects because they are currently receiving a great deal of attention from television researchers, who could in some cases increase the value of their work by locating it more within the traditions of aesthetic theory.

For example, the television artist is currently under rather intense scrutiny. For awhile, researchers concentrated on directors, apparently taking their impetus from film studies. Now, TV is often referred to

as the "producer's medium" or the "hyphenate's medium." There seems to be something of a struggle to shape the course of an auteur theory for television--and in any case to establish one. This phenomenon needs to be examined in light of film's auteur theory and also with reference to Romantic notions about the artist, expression, and genius.

Similarly, the rules and conventions of TV are lately being exposed as the ideological constructs they always have been. Every teacher of TV production knows that the process is steeped in rules. Every viewer consciously or subconsciously recognizes TV's conventions. The acceptance of these rules and conventions as natural, rational, and/or empirically determined (to use the language of the Enlightenment) constricts any "genius" who may somehow find employment as a producer (or hyphenate). Thus Hill St. Blues and Cheers are hailed as innovative and a sign of progress and quality, when actually their use or avoidance of rules and conventions needs to be much more skeptically examined.

The two new lines of inquiry recommended here are of course related to each other, as well as to the labyrinth of definitional issues I have barely penetrated in this essay. By advocating an aesthetic approach, I hope not only to dispel some of the snobbery which excludes TV from many serious discussions, but also, inversely, to inject a bit of everyday life and cultural democracy into the rarefied discourse of aesthetics. At the same time, I make no apologies for commercial television, which has in large measure betrayed not only the public but also whatever Platonic Form may lurk behind the medium. Our objective must be to make TV better. That means many things. My purpose in aesthetically oriented investigation is to try to ensure that the humanistic dimension of TV is preserved and enhanced.

Notes

[1] This question dates from the first great wave of writing about television in the 1940s and '50s. Although it is posed as something of a technical question ("transmission device"), it is also a social one. TV shows shot on film (which include practically all action-adventure shows and numerous other series) are almost never screened as film (i.e. using a film projector to screen an image for a live audience). There is no technical reason why such a screening (which would make film a "transmission device" for TV, so to speak) could not occur. The reasons are almost entirely social (legal and proprietary restrictions, lack of audience interest, etc.). Furthermore, technical questions are themselves social to an extent (e.g. the fact that the TV screen is rectangular and in the same 3x4 aspect ratio as the standard film aspect ratio--this standard was decided, not discovered).

In more contemporary terms, the art vs. "transmission device" question could be applied to cable TV--is it a new art or merely a transmission device for broadcast TV? Of course the question is simplistic, but it hints at some interesting and complicated issues, particularly if one considers music video, Max Headroom, colorized movies, and other such phenomena as belonging specifically to cable.

[2] Richard Kostelanetz, "Contemporary American Esthetics" (1977), in Esthetics Contemporary, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1978), pp. 19-35, quote on pp. 19-20.

[3] Ibid., pp. 33, 35.

[4] To these we might append one additional mutation of Kostelanetz: "the definition of [television] (as distinct from non-[television] or sub-[television])." This would no doubt raise questions particularly

about commercials, news, talk shows, sports programs, etc. These, in turn, would inevitably and explicitly connect the aesthetic discourse back to "the relation of [television] to society and history [and political economy]."

[5] Not to belabor terminological matters, but "television aesthetics" is associated primarily with the work of Herbert Zettl (e.g. Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics [Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1973]). Zettl's primary concerns are the nature of television as a production medium, the formal elements and characteristics of television (light, sound, composition, etc.), and the relationship between TV and film. Zettl is not much concerned with most of Kostelanetz's questions, nor is Kostelanetz with the type of issues addressed by Zettl. Yet the two authors both deal in "(a)esthetics." Meanwhile, "television criticism" often remains at a theoretical level of discussion (frequently an aesthetic discussion!), without delivering any critical analysis of specific TV texts.

[6] This is a term applied by Jack Ellis to film. It is even more appropriate to television, since TV "includes" film. This reasoning has been applied to TV by Marshall McLuhan in Understanding Media, and Michael Shamberg in Guerrilla Television. The tendency of film to "swallow" other arts was noted by Susanne Langer in "A Note on the Film," an Appendix to Feeling and Form. An extended treatment of film's relation to the other arts is Charles Eidsvik's Cineliteracy. Ellis applies three other descriptors to film, all of which are also applicable to TV: "an industrial art," "a collectively created art," and "an ephemeral and inaccessible art." See Jack C. Ellis, A History of Film, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1985), pp. 2-7; Marshall

McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (1964; rpt. New York: New American Library, 1964); Michael Shamberg and Raindance Corporation, Guerrilla Television (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971); Susanne K. Langer, Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), pp. 411-415; and Charles Eidsvik, Cineliteracy: Film Among the Arts (New York: Random House, 1978).

[7] Monroe C. Beardsley, Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History (1966; rpt. University: University of Alabama Press, 1975), p. 39. My account of imitation as an aesthetic doctrine relies on Beardsley.

[8] Ibid., pp. 160-161, Beardsley's emphasis. Langer, in Feeling and Form, incorporates a similar notion into her aesthetics by identifying a "primary illusion" for each art, i.e. a tendency toward "semblance" of a certain sort and toward unique types of "virtual" appearance.

[9] See Kostelanetz, Esthetics Contemporary, p. 25.

[10] Zettl, Sight, Sound, Motion, p. 285.

[11] See V.I. Pudovkin, Film Technique, trans. Ivor Montagu (1929; rpt. in Film Theory and Film Acting, trans. and ed. Ivor Montagu [New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1976]).

[12] Andre Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," (1946) What Is Cinema?, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 17-22, quote on p. 21.

[13] Richard Hubbell, Television Programming & Production, 3rd ed., rev. and enl. (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 133-134.

[14] Ibid., pp. 143, 145. For a fuller discussion of Hubbell's work, see Gary Burns, "Film and Video Theory in Television Production Manuals,"

The SAFTTA Journal (South African Film and Television Technicians Association), 2, No. 2 (November 1982), 5-16. The editors of The SAFTTA Journal are anti-apartheid activist/scholars. The purpose of the Journal is to promote the use of film and television in the struggle against apartheid.

15 Bazin, "The Myth of Total Cinema," p. 20.

16 Merrelyn and Fred Emery, "The Vacuous Vision: The TV Medium," Journal of the University Film Association, 32, Nos. 1 and 2 (Winter-Spring 1980), 27-31.

17 McLuhan, Understanding Media; and Tony Schwartz, The Responsive Chord (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974).

18 Zettl, Sight, Sound, Motion, pp. 114-116.

19 Hubbell, Television Programming & Production, pp. 42-43.

20 Gerald Millerson, The Technique of Television Production, 9th rev. ed. (New York: Hastings House, 1972), p. 202.

21 Richard Lee Rider, "A Comparative Analysis of Directing Television and Film Drama," Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois (Urbana), 1958, p. 46.

22 Ibid., p. 73.

23 Millerson, The Technique of Television Production, p. 202.

24 Zettl, Sight, Sound, Motion, p. 113, Zettl's emphasis.

25 Albert William Bluem, "The Influence of Medium Upon Dramaturgical Method in Selected Television Plays," Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1959, p. 150.

26 Zettl, Sight, Sound, Motion, p. 214.

27 Hubbell, Television Programming & Production, p. 145.

28 Zettl, Sight, Sound, Motion, pp. 232-233.

29 Burns, "Film and Video Theory in Television Production Manuals," 13-14.