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## **Aesthetics within Media Inquiry**

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### **Abstract**

In this note of commentary, I want briefly to reflect on how questions concerning aesthetics variously figure, lie just below the surface or are simply ignored across the increasingly diverse academic approaches to investigating media. This is in a situation in which the array of activities and practices under the heading 'media' is undergoing steady expansion, as is the spectrum of ideas, approaches and objectives informing study. Better cross-connection, first of all between studies variously addressing aesthetic issues and then between these and the many approaches currently placing them as marginal could, it is argued, be a productive intellectual development, bringing increased understanding of the relations between media forms, social feeling and social imagination.

### **Keywords**

Aesthetics, media form, production, reception, media-social relations.

Across the highly differentiated spaces of media theory and research, the 'aesthetic' – broadly concerning the pleasures and satisfactions of artefactual form, connecting stylistic imagination through sensory experience to feeling – makes a variable showing.<sup>1</sup> When it appears, it may do so directly, perhaps with linkage to bodies of aesthetic theory, or indirectly, where the term itself might not be used but the analysis and discussion are essentially about aesthetic forms and processes. In Film Studies and Photography, for example, aesthetic questions are central to academic engagement and may be frequently so described in attempts at identifying formal properties and their effect. In studies of political communication, on the other hand, aesthetic issues may well be unrecognised or seen as marginal compared to questions of informational flow

and cognition bearing on consequences (classically, ‘influence’). One factor at work here is the difference between a broadly arts perspective on media processes and a broadly social analytic one, carrying differences of judgment which may be matters of degree but are often more categorical as to what is significant and what needs to be found out.<sup>2</sup> However, as audio-visual media continue to develop their scale of presence and intensity in everyday life, altering old forms and generating new ones, aesthetic questions have more relevance for ‘sociological’ frameworks of media analysis than perhaps they did when press and broadcast television, particularly news forms, were a core of attention, however placed for study. Examples to support this would include the expanded diversity and intensity of storytelling structures and modes of the ‘dramatic’ across work of all kinds on all platforms, including the extensive use of fictional templates in the crafting of ‘factual’ accounts; the profusion of images, both still and moving (increasingly constructed within versions of the ‘spectacular’ and the immersive); the strengthening of music for affective management across very different types of content and the further transformation of an aesthetics of voice, already reconfigured first by the gramophone and then by film and broadcasting, through the expanding use of speech forms on the web.

I want briefly to explore aspects of this situation, looking across the different investigative interests of media research and the location of points where greater sensitivity to the aesthetic dimension and analytic engagement with it could bring dividends. In many respects, my perspective connects with the comprehensive case for refreshing approaches to ‘imagination’ and ‘imaginative frameworks’ in media inquiry put forward in this journal by Young (2017). What I offer is a brief contribution to the continuing dialogue about perspectives and directions in media research (now too diverse to be viewed usefully as a single ‘field’ – see Corner, 2013) rather than a comprehensive survey or a developed scheme of inquiry and it is referenced with this status in mind.

The work of Lev Manovich offers a good opening. This, not only because of his own longstanding attempts to engage with the topic, including most recently as a key dimension of Artificial Intelligence, seen both as an opportunity for cultural enhancement and a source of new limitations (Manovich, 2018), but also because of

his strong criticism of a perceived neglect of aesthetic matters in mainstream media research, as below:

[T]he concepts of beauty and aesthetic pleasure have been almost completely neglected in theories of media. One regularly finds little to no analysis of media aesthetics in media studies textbooks, or in the works of major media theorists after the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as instead many media scholars in recent decades in English speaking countries have focused on the content of media and its social and political effects, and ignored the forms of media artifacts (Manovich, 2017: 9).

Although I want to suggest that aesthetic questions deserve attention more broadly in media research, this judgement of the existing literature is far too sweeping. If the full range of work on, for instance, fictional film and television, on documentary and news forms, on advertising and varieties of digital practice (including gaming) is taken into account, then aesthetic concerns show up more regularly, both in older and newer texts. Granted, some of the work on forms of fiction is oriented primarily to appreciation/evaluation ('criticism') rather than to the kinds of social analysis which are Manovich's primary concern, but by no means all of it. For instance, the legacy of Bourdieu on the sociology of taste, both in relation to theoretical and empirical inquiry, is still strongly active, as in Bennett et al (2009) and Hanquinet and Savage (2015). Also important is continuing attention to that influential idea of media as expansive of the senses celebrated in the work of McLuhan. This would include the counter-emphasis on the shaping materiality of communication technologies upon human perception and thought proposed by Kittler (as in Kittler, 2009). For a discussion of the 'decisive inversion' involved here, see Young (2017). More generally, challenging Manovich's comments about a deficit stretching from the 'middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century' is the steady shift in the balance of much international work on the media from a heavily quantitative media sociology and social psychology to a body of qualitative inquiry often influenced by the rise and development of Cultural Studies, within which questions of the relations between pleasure and knowledge in the representation of gender, race and class often have a central place.

At the level of a general theorisation of media-technology-society relations, aesthetic issues have been addressed within a wide variety of perspectives both on precisely *what*

requires attention and how to attend to it, particularly so around the new questions which digital forms have posed. Overall, however, the perspectival diversity has been such as to produce only very limited cross-referencing across specialist foci.

### **Media aesthetics: definitional and inter-disciplinary frames**

Many of those engaging with aesthetics in relation to media have done so primarily by reference to established writing on the traditional 'high arts' in an attempt to make connections with self-consciously 'artistic' production first of all in photography, film, television and video and now in digital modes. The 'art' focus, often presupposing considered encounters with discrete 'works', sometimes complicates any relationship to more mainstream, mundane and casual media flows even if it can also illuminate aspects of these. Given their primary focus, many studies often offer little connection to these flows or to the literature of mainstream media research. Jacques Rancière (for instance, Rancière, 2004) has influentially discussed the forms of inter-relation between politics and aesthetics in relation to the capacity of art to be 'critical', but his account has a primary basis in self-conscious artistic practice and in the changing conventions of aesthetic quality held by the art establishment. Working with a much broader version of the 'art' frame, Sean Cubitt offered an early and important exploration of digital art practices (Cubitt, 1998), examining how they measured up against earlier criteria both of construction and spectator experience, in relation to factors such as space, sound, temporality and kinds of 'realism' (see also his overview of the field, 2010). A variety of approaches is brought together in Liv Hausken (2013), in which the contributions, following a scene-setting foreword by W.J.T. Mitchell, once more emphasise the experimental and the aesthetically foregrounded but here span different art forms, variously involving the cinema, the gallery and the museum. A recent study in this journal pushed much further into technologically-transformed everyday aesthetic space by considering the dimensions of a work of 'ambient literature' designed for the specific modalities and affordances of the smartphone (Marcinkowski, 2019). More focused studies of particular components of the computer arts have also been undertaken, such as the ground-breaking work of Carolyn Kane on colour (Kane, 2014).

One recent example of an attempt to break out of an ‘art’ frame in specific consideration of the digital is Fazi (2019), who engages with the ‘abstractive capacities of computation’ (22) by critically examining what she sees as the impasse between the continuity of sensation and the discreteness of digital technology. Her argument here involves a radical departure from previous approaches to the idea of the aesthetic insofar as it involves:

[T]aking aesthetics beyond the traditional tenets of the discipline, such as beauty, taste and judgement, and also beyond traditional concerns with art (in general) or with art made with computers (in the specific) (Fazi, 2019: 4).

This is therefore a theoretical engagement concerning the ontology of the digital, made above the level of specific formal analysis. It can be contrasted both in level and intentions with the earlier work of Alex Zettl (see 1998), who also broke out of the ‘art’ frame, but in this case specifically to advance a closely analytic media literacy across the range. This was part of an attempt to construct a teaching curriculum which would provide critical awareness of:

How the basic image elements interact with one another in the construction and analysis of messages and how they contribute to our perception and interpretation of such messages (Zettl, 1998: 94).

Zettl’s pedagogic purposes and his emphasis on visuality do not align with my own interests here, but both his inclusive sense of ‘media’ to cover established, new and emerging forms and his focus on the importance of localized elements and combinations certainly do.

I want now to look at the distribution of aesthetic factors across key phases of mediation, which are also key phases of media research attention.

### **Three phases: production design, textual organisation, user experience**

- a) If Manovich is critical of the modest attention given to aesthetics in media inquiry, he does recognise and seek to develop the extent to which it is a key

and explicit ingredient of training in many forms of media production. Even if the word itself is sometimes not used, the options, resources and techniques for shaping an artefact pleasingly – be it a television narrative, news photograph, webpage or game – relate directly to self-conscious aesthetic recipes of craft-art competence, which at various levels of explicit codification seek to guide ways both of being conventional and of being original. As Manovich also notes, versions of some of these recipes are now widely used by ‘amateurs’ in their construction, enhancement, arrangement and online transmission of texts, sounds and images.

- b) The aesthetic, as a dimension of textual organisation, is also the main point of attention in much arts-critical engagement with the media, to some extent independent of any knowledge of *how* it is produced.<sup>3</sup> While appreciations of photography, for example, may support their descriptive and evaluative accounts by detailed reference to ‘technique’, in relation to television and even film, such accounts can be offered with little knowledge of production practice and no experience of it. As we move from arts-critical approaches, with their emphasis on the textual properties and qualities of specific artefacts and fictions, to the more social analytic approaches in which non-fictional work, its production contexts, terms of audience engagement and social consequences, has often predominated, the emphasis given to aesthetic factors is reduced as indicated earlier (both the expectation of aesthetic significance and the interest in exploring it are lower). For instance, even in work from a linguistic/semiotic perspective with a focused textual engagement, an emphasis on selected technicalities of signification can displace these factors. Moreover, in social analytic approaches, firm connections ‘backwards’ to the evaluative templates and localized practices of artefactual construction may not be significantly stronger than those found in arts-critical studies. Studies of journalism across all media show examples of this limitation. On its own, this by no means invalidates what such studies ‘find out’. However, its tendency is to over-simplify explanatory frames. It may do this, for instance, in relation to kinds of journalistic storytelling, which importantly involve aesthetic factors – specific kinds of imaginative stimulus and satisfaction – as well as informational ones. This tendency can compromise the value of any suggested

remedies for perceived ‘deficits’ because it may work with a reductive account of the range of determinants of production shaping the practices that produce the artefacts generating user experiences.

- c) In the third phase of my simple scheme, aesthetics is referenced, even if not always identified as such, in the varied responses of media audiences and users. First of all, it is a factor (relating to ‘taste’) in what they have decided to pay attention to from the media-cultural options available and then in the kinds of experience of it and judgement of it they make in conversation, on social media sites and, perhaps, in the answers they give to those conducting forms of audience research. In particular, fan sites, focusing on specific genres or even specific productions, often close in around the relation between formal construction and audience experience with a high degree of localized attention, often connecting with available producer accounts to thicken the engagement. Here, the realm of popular music discussion is perhaps distinctive in the directness of its aesthetic address, just as the study of popular music (often positioned outside the institutionalized range of ‘media research’ if nevertheless selectively in touch with it) has made aesthetic design and aesthetic experience one of its core concerns (see, for instance, Hesmondhalgh, 2013).

In everyday discussion of media flows, however, the vocabularies used to describe how an item ‘worked’ are generally likely to be looser than those of producers, professional critics and fans, with reasons of time and commitment significant here. Assessment might be firm or hesitant, variously aware of the gap between experience (‘I really enjoyed it’, ‘it didn’t really engage me’) and a judgment on the artefact itself (‘a fascinating programme’). More direct, detailed engagement with the specifics of aesthetic crafting (‘brilliantly edited’, ‘poorly scripted’) may quite often be a secondary matter unless specifically prompted (as by an interviewer-researcher), particularly in relation to non-fictional materials.

It is interesting to note that in the ‘higher’ forms of cultural criticism, the aesthetic inquiry conducted by critics themselves is given far more priority than anything coming from the experience of others. In literary criticism, including theatre criticism, and criticism of painting and music, for example, the exchange of ‘informed’ views is



considered sufficient to develop judgement.<sup>4</sup> This is so, even though a broader range of ‘public’ experiences (and therefore an indication of aesthetic encounters across the social range) is now becoming more visible through various types of web expression, including postings below professional critical accounts online. Critical evaluation of the more popular forms of cultural performance, including media forms, is necessarily more exposed to the spectrum of non-professional aesthetic judgement than assessment of ‘higher’ forms, but some retention of specialist critical authority remains, even if in less confident terms than in the past. For instance, within different national contexts, ‘film criticism’ varies greatly in its values and language across both kind of film and kind of critical outlet. Perhaps, though, the case of ‘television criticism’ (or, better, ‘television reviewing’), its variations of address to readers and its vocabulary, tone and styling across diverse mainstream and social media outlets, is most illustrative of what in some respects is an art/entertainment tension playing across specialist/ordinary judgements – see Rixon (2013).

However, for inquiry not interested primarily in critic-centric appraisal but in the social analysis of media and culture (work often positioned within the core ‘media studies’ frame) the order of priorities described above tends to be reversed. Specialist critical verdicts are of less interest than ‘ordinary’ accounts, since only through the mapping of how particular kinds of aesthetic practice are perceived (or not) and become active (or not) in the experience of different people can knowledge of the aesthetic as a dimension of the media’s contribution to cultural, social and political perception and feeling – a key resource for the construction of social and political imaginaries – be advanced. The emphasis is therefore not so much on specialist ‘critical’ sensitivity to a given aesthetic practice but on an essentially sociological engagement with patterns of correlation and variety across the experiences and evaluations generated in different ‘ordinary’ users/audiences, responding to artefacts designed according to various recipes for engagement, pleasure and impact.

A good example of the difference between ‘arts-critical’ and ‘sociological’ approaches together with the possible relations between them surrounds ‘reality TV’, one of the most widely studied topics in recent international media research. The arrival and rapid growth of these formats quite quickly complicated the existing divisions of academic perspective. Reality TV often worked with an aesthetics of fictional narrative and

characterisation as well as of factual portrayal (the ‘raw immediacy’ of the real). Its non-seriousness, its desire to ‘entertain’, irritated some academics who saw it as a subversion of true documentary values, a judgment sometimes strengthened rather than qualified by its becoming hugely popular (see accounts of its rise and early controversiality in Holmes and Jermyn, 2004). Many of those who thought it deserved further analytic inquiry attempted both to connect with issues of aesthetic design (what kinds of narrative organisation and depictive styling were involved, what pleasures of watching and hearing were generated?) and issues of circulated social meaning (what were the production perspectives? What sort of assumptions about public and private worlds were being traded on and encouraged and how successfully?). Not surprisingly, a lot of the most notable work on reality television has included extensive study of audience responses both to content and, importantly, to *style* (here, Annette Hill’s work has been outstanding; see most recently Hill, 2019), whereas studies of mainstream documentary have proceeded for several decades with little audience research at all (Austin, 2007, was something of a ‘pioneer’ study). In my own recent work, I have tried to look at the kinds of interpretative *difficulty* as well as *pleasure* that different viewers variously encounter in trying to follow formally ambitious documentary texts (Corner, 2018). This explores media-aesthetic experience beyond the limited terms of the critic-work relationship, connecting with the vectors of engagement, satisfaction, knowledge and feeling on a broader front.

## Summary

I have suggested that questions of the ‘aesthetic’ are variously placed or hidden across an expanded and diverse body of inquiries concerned with media; inquiries which are sometimes in dialogue with each other but are increasingly, and inevitably, following strongly independent theoretical and methodological routes.

Nevertheless, despite it being a dimension often below explicit recognition in many kinds of analysis, I have wanted to underline the ways in which the category of the aesthetic is a *necessary* one, identifying better than alternatives a range of practices, forms and kinds of experience which variously help constitute contemporary media flows and their consequences. Aesthetic work shapes our relation to what is portrayed beyond the terms of the frames simply of ‘knowledge’ or ‘information’ (or the negative

mode of these frames in forms of publicity and propaganda). It is a core dimension of media address and modes of symbolic interaction as these undergo further generic and cross-generic change. Among other things, aesthetic factors regulate our affective relationship to what is seen and heard in a way which carries deep implications for our imaginative engagement with structures of power and inequality (for a discussion of the ways in which ‘affect’ is bound up with dominant power systems as well as with forms of opposition, see Pedwell, 2014). Here, we need to take note of the fact that the media industries themselves have developed a strategic interest in micro-level audience response patterns for their own ends – the steady sophistication of media analytics for affective surveillance (see Kosterich and Napoli, 2015, for examples relating to TV).

Clearly, generic recipes such as those generated within the varieties of news, sports coverage, entertainment and drama often interconnect to produce what can be regarded as socio-aesthetic clusters. These are broad, affectively-charged templates, underpinning the representation – the terms of public and popular portrayal – both of political and social landscapes and the diverse actors, circumstances and events within them. While research has shown a recognition of this process, always subject to internal variation, adjustment and change, there is scope within the framework of different schemes of empirical inquiry for a more connected and deeper exploration of the style-sensory-feeling linkages at work. Such initiatives would benefit, both conceptually and methodologically, from that broader awareness, suggested above, of how aesthetic practices and processes are positioned in other, sometimes very different, lines of media inquiry.

The aim would not be some generalized transformation of the ‘media research agenda’ (as I have noted, a singularity undercut by radical diversities). It would, much more modestly, be to develop stronger two-way traffic between theory concerning media aesthetics and the pursuit of further knowledge about the specificities of its forms and processes as these are part of everyday life.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Clearly, just how 'aesthetics' is defined, as a dimension of cultural practice but also as a specialist subfield of academic inquiry, is subject to debate. On 'narrow' and 'broad' definitions, and their associated risks, see for instance Rose (2017). The issue of aesthetics as both 'discipline' and 'mode of inquiry' is taken up in relation to digital culture by Fazi (2019). In certain subfields, the term 'poetics' is sometimes used to indicate broadly the same range of issues. See, for instance, the image-oriented account of Frosh (2018).
- <sup>2</sup> Differences between arts and social studies frameworks for media inquiry (occasionally bridged but, within current academic contexts, often not), has sometimes worked to complicate debate, especially when not openly acknowledged. In part, this paper might be seen to be working with the perspective that while most arts approaches to media are likely to continue to feel little need to become more 'sociological', serious social analysis of the media – while continuing to engage with a broad range of empirical data – would benefit from stronger, selective connection with certain issues currently on the arts agenda.
- <sup>3</sup> What is meant by 'critical' shows variation of emphasis across media theory and media research, as points made in this commentary illustrate. It can be used to indicate a stance similar to that of 'critics' in the arts traditions of evaluative writing grounded in the personal experiencing/appreciation of a work (a stance widely taken up, for instance, in the 'readings' offered by many in film and television studies), or it can indicate the highlighting of social and political deficits in what is examined through the practice of *critique*. It can, of course, be both, but there is a tendency for the term to slide around in primary meaning in relation to any given usage (e.g. 'critical studies') unless explicit clarification is offered.
- <sup>4</sup> An illuminating indication of how questions of the 'aesthetic' are debated in the very different academic space of literary studies is to be found in a recent issue of the *New Left Review*. Here, Joseph North argues with Francis Mulhern about the possibilities of linking aesthetic analysis to material analysis within a 'criticism' that engages with the social and the political and refuses idealism (North, 2019). As noted earlier, a key difference between arts orientations and sociologically-oriented media analysis is that rather than engaging with aesthetic matters primarily if not exclusively through textual study, such analysis also seeks to engage with them through the terms of production, circulation and response, terms which are unavoidably grounded in specific social and political structures.

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