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THEORETICAL INTEGRATION ESSAY

Aesthetics and Emotion in Entertainment Media

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The different perspectives in psychological aesthetics contribute to media psychology in complementary ways. A behavioral perspective stresses pleasure and challenge as motives for exploring both proximal (e.g., painting) and distal (e.g., television) media, and maintains that people prefer moderate levels of stimulation. The constructivist viewpoint emphasizes the multilayered and open-ended nature of aesthetic artifacts and holds that pleasure emerges from the coherent interpretation of a work that may be personally meaningful. Emotion theories either focus on action or experience in everyday life and in the narrative structure of proximal and distal media. The action orientation is tied to a behavioral–cognitive perspective and the idea that recipients can selectively engage artifacts that modulate pleasure and arousal. The experience orientation is linked with the psychodynamic/phenomenological viewpoint and the projection of personal meaning in the interpretation of multilayered artifacts. New interactive media forms provide an occasion for sensory modulation of experience and for the experience of agency through the manipulation of possible story outcomes. The active participation of audience members is governed by their ability to master the distal interface of the interactive console in much the same way that artists must master proximal techniques of manipulating a medium, such as paint.

In what ways can the disciplines of psychological aesthetics and emotion contribute to a better understanding of media creation and reception? A first step in applying psychological aesthetics to media studies can benefit from a distinction between proximal and distal media. In a proximal sense, a medium is akin to what the *Heritage Illustrated Dictionary* (Morris, 1969) refers to as "a

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specific type of artistic technique or means of expression as determined by the materials used or the creative method involved" (p. 815). The product of the creative endeavor is something concrete that in and of itself can be directly experienced by the recipient. A distal medium is "a means of mass communication such as newspapers, magazines, or television" (p. 815). In this instance, the message is widely distributed from a central point via a channel of communication that includes both substantive images or information typical of that medium, generally sandwiched between sales messages. A theory that integrates psychological aesthetics with media psychology should apply equally to distal and proximal messages. In both cases, the interaction between a recipient and the message occurs at many levels simultaneously, including the sensory, cognitive, and affective.

AESTHETIC THEORY

People can approach media, proximal or distal, in at least two contrasting ways that reflect different motivations. Extrinsic or goal-oriented motivation characterizes exploratory behavior in everyday life. Messages are examined epistemically for useful information, while background information is disregarded as a distractor. This search for monovalent or unambiguous information (Schmidt, 1982) terminates once the relevant information is extracted from the message. Aesthetic behavior, on the other hand, is intrinsically motivated (Berlyne, 1971), engaged in for its own sake. When people explore aesthetic materials, their diversive or stimulation orientation (Berlyne, 1971) is directed toward the dual experiences of interest (or challenge) and pleasure (Berlyne, 1971; Winston & Cupchik, 1992). Aesthetic messages are polyvalent (Schmidt, 1982), multilayered (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972), indeterminate (Iser, 1971), and open ended (Eco, 1962/1989) and are exhaustively explored. Whereas everyday or specific exploration can "relieve an aversive condition of curiosity," diversive exploration "will presumably have more to do with reward through moderate arousal increment" (Berlyne, 1971, p. 100).

The idea that aesthetic works, both proximal and distal, are multilayered has important psychological implications. A formalist approach to aesthetic knowledge, typical of the New Criticism school (e.g., T. S. Eliot, 1932/1975) of the first half of the 20th century, assumed that it was possible to uncover the correct meaning of a literary work. This would give literary criticism an objective standing comparable to that of positivist science. Similarly, the Russian Formalists (Shklovsky, 1917/1988) argued early in the last century that perception in everyday life becomes automatic and habitual. The goal of

aesthetic devices is to defamiliarize perception, to reawaken it through novelty, and the mechanisms underlying this process can be specified. Reader-response (Fish, 1980; Holland, 1975) and constructivist (Schmidt, 1982) scholars in the latter half of the 20th century stressed the idea that "true meaning" was inaccessible. They acknowledged aesthetic conventions related to literary effects but focused on the subjective and interpretive roles of individuals and communities. It is precisely the open-ended and multileveled nature of art and literary works that invites deeper intellectual and emotional examination.

At its simplest level of analysis, the multilayering concept in visual aesthetics has been analyzed in terms of figure and ground. The figural part of a work, its subject matter, conveys semantic information, whereas the ground of the work encompasses its style and transmits syntactic information (Berlyne, 1971, 1974; Moles, 1958/1968). According to the information theoretic viewpoint, subject matter and style emerge from the same basic material elements (e.g., dabs of color) organized in different ways. A constructivist approach to the idea of layers leads to greater subtlety of analysis and is consistent with the perspective of the creative person. The layers represent each domain of the message that creators manipulate to produce "effects" that recipients can notice and appreciate. In the context of proximal stimuli like paintings, the layers include composition, hue, tone, texture, shape, and so on.

On each interpretive pass of a scene the artist can parse it in very different ways that contribute to its overall organization. One interpretive pass might pertain to the way that light falls on the various objects and casts shadows. Another pass concerns relations among the hues that create visual effects, such as a sense of space, quite apart from the denotative value of individual colors (i.e., red in a red apple). Still another pass might survey the overall texture in the scene on the rough–smooth dimension. By noticing the overall distributional redundancy (Garner, 1962) of these diverse qualities, the artist develops a sense for how each domain or layer of information is present in the scene and the emerging work. Two points are crucial here. Not only is the artist aware of these qualities, but the artist senses the range of hue, tone, texture, and so on, and feels it as a kind of tension between the greatest contrasts in the scene (e.g., smooth vs. rough or light vs. dark). By transforming or modulating these relational qualities (Cupchik, 1994), the artist can embody feeling in the work. It is the plasticity of relational qualities and the feelings attached to them that provide a basis for the expression of emotion in a work of art.

The same analysis can be applied to distal media such as film or television. However in this case, the different layers are contributed by a working team, with each member (or subgroup) responsible for a different facet of the unfolding

product. Thus, one member is responsible for the script, another for the cinematography, still another for the music, and so on, until all the different layers or facets of the work are specified. There is room for development within each domain, and yet a successful work requires harmony among them so that a coherent image emerges. To the extent that a coherent vision resides in the director, one that is shared by team members, the opportunity for exploration within each domain is harmonized with all the others. A successful work is one in which unity among the team members encompasses diversity among the individual explorations.

Thus, what began as figure–ground relations in static images ends up as relations between parts and wholes. A theoretical underpinning for this analysis emerged from a debate between Arnheim (1986) and Hochberg (1986). Hochberg, working within the cognitive framework established by Helmholtz, stressed the value of isolated parts and local information in determining visual effects in artworks. Arnheim applied Gestalt laws to deal with the structural unity of visual shapes so that "every Gestalt is generated by a two-way process operating downward from the comprehensive structure of the whole and at the same time upward from the structures of the constituent subwholes" (Arnheim, 1986, p. 283). These "subwholes" or "isolable sections of contexts … while clearly influenced by the context, retain considerable independence and by their conspicuous presence enrich the structural interaction of which the perceiver becomes aware" (p. 283).

This leads to a notion of "stepwise dependencies" among segments that produce a meaningful hierarchy. In sum, a "part is a Gestalt embedded in a larger context. A whole, more often than not, is also a part of a larger context, which, however, is being ignored, with or without justification" (Arnheim, 1986, p. 284).

Approaching levels of organization in media messages from Arnheim's viewpoint, we can move through them either in a top–down or a bottom–up perspective. Moving up the hierarchical structure leads in the direction of ideas, whereas moving down the structure leads toward sensations, feelings, and experiences. The more multidimensional the media offering, the more diversified the sensory experience and, therefore, the more bottom–up the effects. The two directions merge in a unifying metaphor that incorporates both meaning and feeling at the same moment. In this way, the effort after meaning in any media offering works according to the classical principle of "uniformity amidst variety" (Hutcheson, 1725) or unity-in-diversity; all the layers of a successful work should fit together in a coherent manner. Training will determine the success with which people can make subtle distinctions in each domain, or at each level of a work, and then fit them together.

The constructivist approach also assumes that personal experience will contribute to the interpretive process. This is consistent with the psychological principle that people are generally driven to impose structure and meaning on their world and on ambiguous messages in particular (Frank, 1939). Gombrich (1960) argued that suggestion meets projection when viewers spontaneously perceive meaning in the incomplete (i.e., sketchy) images of artists. Iser (1978) has applied a gestalt analysis to account for the ways that people respond to the suggestions of literary works and fill in the gaps in the search for coherence. The literary work therefore provides an interpretive screen upon which personal meanings can be projected in accordance with individual past experience with relevant subject matter (Larsen & Laszlo, 1990).

The construction of meaning is a bidirectional process in which media works suggest collective interpretations the details of which are filled in with personal experiences (Cupchik & Laszlo, 1994; Cupchik, Oatley, & Vorderer, 1998; Cupchik & Shereck, 1998). We have here the formula for a successful encounter between a media offering and a recipient. The result of a successful search for meaning should be a match between the metaphors that unify the work and those that reflect the person's life experiences. When viewers freely chose paintings to discuss in a museum setting, their later recollections of the works were more differentiated and revealed autobiographical elaborations (Medved & Cupchik, 2000). This has led to the conclusion that absorption in any kind of aesthetic event in whatever medium follows this formula:

Absorption = Suggestion + Connection (Braun & Cupchik, in press).

Psychological aesthetics also provides an orienting frame of reference for dealing with the pleasurable experiences that media can provide. Berlyne's (1971, 1974) psychobiology offered a 20th century treatment of Fechner's (1876/1978) ideas pertaining to preference and beauty. Arnheim (1985) translated Fechner's (1876/1978) classic "principle of the aesthetic middle" in the following way: People "tolerate most often and for the longest time a certain medium degree of arousal, which makes them feel neither overstimulated nor dissatisfied by a lack of sufficient occupation" (p. 862). Berlyne's (1971) inverted u-shaped curve incorporated both Fechner's "principle of the aesthetic middle" and his "principle of unitary connection of the manifold," which is another way of saying unity-in-diversity. According to Berlyne, people prefer moderate levels of complexity because unity without variety would be boring, whereas variety without unity might produce unpleasant feelings of distraction and fragmentation. From a behavioral perspective, respondents prefer moderate

levels of arousal because excessive uncertainty produces too much arousal and they would want to avoid the aversive stimulus.

An alternative viewpoint on the same phenomenon is offered by constructivists, who propose that because aesthetic stimuli are polyvalent (Schmidt, 1982) or multilayered (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972), they are open to diverse interpretation. The process of building a coherent interpretation that will unify the various levels of the hierarchical structure is rewarding in and of itself. Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi (1976) demonstrated that active exploration while formulating an artistic problem fostered creativity. Bruner's (1961) "discovery learning" approach similarly favored actively generated knowledge over that which is passively received. We can therefore speak about aesthetic effectance, the success with which works are understood and interpretations are generated (Cupchik & Gebotys, 1990). This would include personal meanings that are projected onto a work as a bridge is built between it and the viewer.

Thus, total meaning includes (a) an appreciation of the formal structure of a work according to the principles of the art or media form, and (b) personal meanings that are incorporated into an understanding of the piece. Successful engagement with a work in any medium will lead to moderate levels of complexity, as unity resolves diversity and creates a smoothly flowing structural hierarchy. In this sense, the behavioral and constructivist or phenomenological approaches offer complementary analyses of the way aesthetic pleasure is achieved; the former focuses on the psychobiological underpinnings, whereas the latter emphasizes the role of personally generated meaning.

EMOTION THEORY

There have been many theories vying for supremacy in the field of emotion since the time of Aristotle. But, rather than seeing them in conflict, my goal is to find commonalities among them and look for complementary relations to address their differences. Two broad theoretical streams can be differentiated along action-oriented and experience-oriented motifs. Clearly the action-versus-experience distinction applies to aesthetic reception, because works with a strong narrative element can load one way or the other (Cupchik & Laszlo, 1994). Literary passages that stress action evoke feelings of suspense and a desire to find out how the action plot resolves, whereas emotionally powerful and experientially oriented works can evoke a search for deeper meaning (Cupchik & Laszlo, 1994) as well as personal memories (Cupchik, Oatley, & Vorderer, 1998). The same principles should apply to other media forms that combine word, image, and music.

Action-Oriented Theories

The action-oriented collection of emotion theories comprises functionalism, centralism, behaviorism, and cognitivism. A sequence of significant scholars includes Darwin, Cannon, Duffy, Bull, Arnold, Pribram, Frijda, Schachter, Mandler, and Oatley. Functionalism reflects the Darwinian idea that emotions exist because they have survival value. Centralism stresses the controlling role of the brain to facilitate or inhibit the experience and expression of emotion. Behaviorism treats emotion as a generalized state of arousal that can facilitate attention at moderate levels or disrupt it when arousal gets too intense. Finally, cognitivism stresses the appraisal of stimulus situations as a precursor to emotion and coping responses.

For all these theories, emotional activity is goal oriented, founded on biological needs or states that motivate behavior. The person is seen as searching the environment for stimuli with goal-relevant features. A narrowed focus of attention helps the person choose objects that resolve the basic needs and so the action sequence terminates when there is a match between stimulus features and the person's goals. This is essentially a homeostatic model because, by satiating the need, the arousal that prompted the stimulus search is reduced, and the effort comes to an end. At the same time, the various mechanisms described by behavioral theory also apply here. As with the principle of stimulus generalization, a person might settle for a goal object that is close in its qualities to the original stimulus. According to the principle of habituation, a stimulus loses its power to elicit an emotional response with repeated exposure.

Researchers like Duffy (1941) argued that in fact there is nothing special about emotion, because it is simply a heightened state of arousal that can potentially interfere with attention and behavior if it becomes too intense. Her formula, Emotion = Direction + Intensity, was subsequently replaced by Schachter's (1966) Emotion = Cognition + Arousal. The crucial idea here is that when a person experiences a state of autonomic arousal, he or she will search for information that accounts for its origin. Mandler (1975) acknowledged the role of arousal in the generation and experience of emotion but focused more on cognitive interpretation. For him, the interruption of ongoing plans and action caused sympathetic nervous system arousal and drew the person's attention to changes in the environment that could affect adaptation.

The action-oriented behavioral-cognitive approach has already been incorporated into media psychology. Zillmann's (1983) excitation-transfer model of music and video appreciation is fully consistent with a behavioral approach, favoring the use of terms such as *stimulus generalization.* His analysis of the

empathy concept (Zillmann, 1995) encompassed the facilitative effects of motor mimicry, empathic reactions learned through stimulus sensation linkages, and deliberate empathy in the form of perspective taking mediated by focussed cognitive efforts. A central part of his thesis concerns positive affective dispositions toward characters that foster empathic reactions, and negative dispositions that inhibit them.

There is yet another way to incorporate the action-oriented theories into media psychology, and this involves reconsidering the independent roles of arousal and cognition. Schachter's (1966) classic formula can be restated as follows:

(I) Cognition Because of Arousal, and
(II) Arousal Because of Cognition

In the first instance, when a bodily state becomes sufficiently intense to draw the person's internal attention, this prompts an effort to figure out what the arousal is and what is causing it. Arousal initiates cognitive activity in much the same way that ambiguous external stimuli stimulate an effort after meaning. In the second instance, involvement in analytic cognition can in and of itself foster a state of arousal. The central point here is that cognition and bodily states such as arousal (or pleasure) are independent but interacting systems.

How can this model be meaningfully applied to proximal and distal media? The application can take place at two levels: concrete and abstract. At a concrete level, a reactive model describes what happens when a person purposefully selects a stimulus based on critical features because it will modulate bodily states such as arousal or pleasure (Cupchik, 1995; Cupchik & Kemp, 2000). For example, someone who is bored might rent a suspense film for a jolt of stimulation. Another person who wants to experience nostalgic pleasure might choose to read a romance novel.

At a more abstract level, the person might monitor relational properties that are experienced in terms of tension and balance. The perception of these relational properties reflects a sophisticated parsing of the event or scene in question. Visually, this would be in terms of the most general properties that constitute the scene: tone, color, texture, and shape. Thus, a skilled artist can attend to and parse these individual qualities in isolation from each other and feel the presence of harmony or tension. In this sense, cognitive analysis is tied to feeling. By monitoring modulations of feeling produced by changes in relational properties of the artwork, the artist can fine-tune the expressive quality of visual effects that he or she wishes to produce. In a similar manner, authors can monitor

the feelings produced by structural qualities of the narratives, such as the occurrence of unexpected events, and maintain a degree of harmony in the unfolding story.

The tendency of cognitive dimensions of response to be accompanied by affective qualities or markers, such as pleasure or tension, has appeared in several of our data sets. For example, in response to a series of sculptures depicting social interactions, one of the two factors had loadings on dimensions including dislike–like, memorable, banal–original, and successful (Cupchik & Shereck, 1998). In a second study on responses to rock music videos of a light or serious nature, one of the two factors had loadings on the following: interesting, exciting, memorable, fit of lyrics and melody, and fit of video image and music (Cupchik & Saltzman, 1999). In both studies, cognitive assessments of the diverse stimuli were combined with affective markers.

Experience-Oriented Theories

The second theoretical stream includes peripheralism, psychoanalysis, and existential phenomenology. Peripheralism, generally associated with the James-Lange theory of emotion (James, 1884), holds that feedback from the viscera gives basic emotions their distinctive color. Psychoanalysis is relevant here because emotional experiences occur for individuals in particular situations involving encounters with significant others, parents, children, lovers, and so on. Subsequent experiences of emotion reflect the impact of early encounters and similar situations or individuals can evoke powerful reactions. Existential phenomenology (Straus, 1958) addresses, on the one hand, basic life themes shared by all, such as anxiety or uncertainty about the future, and on the other hand, fundamental qualities of experience related to temporality, spatiality, materiality, causality, and social connectedness. For the phenomenologist, emotional experiences begin with meaningful situations. In this sense phenomenology and psychoanalysis share a common view, but phenomenology is much broader, focusing on the structure of experience in relation to its symbolic content.

Together, these are reaction-oriented theories that operate within the framework of immediate and spontaneous experience. They are also backward-looking in the sense that emotions are responses to events seen in a personal historical context. The episodes represent a configuration of meanings that echo previous experiences in the lived world. Processing of these episodes is exhaustive in that all possible details of the events are assimilated in the search for meaning. Emotional responses to situational meanings possess a distinctive

coherent quality to the extent that there is a match between the person's experience and the structure of the situation. The coherent experience of emotion is reflected in distinctive qualities of the sense of time, space, causality, materiality, and connectedness. Cognition therefore resides in the personal meaning and experience of the situation that initiates the emotion.

In concrete terms, a particular thematic situation, involving attachment for example, might lead to the spontaneous feeling of sadness. Scheff (1979) wrote about aesthetic distance in these terms. When an aesthetic event, a drama for example, touches upon themes that are very close to the individual, the person can experience a powerful emotional response. If the experienced emotion is very negative, then the person might turn away from the work because it induces too much anxiety. If subject matter stimulates negative feelings because it touches a raw nerve, the viewer's attention might be redistributed away from the aversive theme and toward innocuous stylistic elements (e.g., the color or composition). This defensive shift of attention, a kind of intellectualization, was found in a study comparing the reactions of lonely and gregarious students to paintings of solitary figures (Cupchik & Wroblewski-Raya, 1998). Lonely students generally preferred stylistic qualities over the narrative theme of social isolation alluded to by the solitary figures in the artwork, a theme that echoed their personal sense of isolation.

From a more abstract perspective, in the complex textures of the lived world, themes become interwoven, with the result that the complexity and subtlety of emotion is enhanced. A reflection upon these themes raises our awareness about eternal verities and existential dilemmas in life (Averill, in press). Reflection is the process whereby we adduce the appropriate context that enables us to be clear about the meaning of the event and our own relevant experiences. It is this imaginative reconstruction (Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972) that incorporates both personal experience and an appreciation of the lives of others.

APPLICATION

The theoretical analysis described two ways of relating emotion and aesthetic processes to media involvement. If modulating affective states of pleasure and boredom are of primary interest, then stimulus opportunities are monitored in a very selective manner for those qualities that will alleviate the person's needs. If a person chooses to have unique experiences, then the work will have to be addressed in and of itself to appreciate its distinctive meaning. This implies discovering an interpretive framework that will integrate the different layers of the aesthetic message. One aspect of integration has to do with applying

knowledge about how works of this kind are constructed stylistically. But the greater challenge lies in developing a coherent understanding of the piece that accommodates narrative elements of the work. This entails an imaginative reconstruction in which suggested elements of the piece connect with personal meanings in the recipient. These two processes are in fact complementary because both processes—modulating affect states and the processing effort after meaning—go on simultaneously. They simply accentuate different facets of one unitary process, engagement in lived culture.

High and Popular Culture

This lived culture has taken two forms commonly referred to as high and popular (or low) culture. High culture artifacts possess both an "authenticity" and an "aura" of originality (Benjamin, 1967) that led the critic Clement Greenberg (1947/1957) to associate it with the avant-garde. Fornas (1995) proposed that "high" culture emerged when "the priestly, aristocratic and bourgeois elites withdrew from the formerly communal folk culture typified by the carnival. Then the bourgeois public sphere was dichotomized in entertainment versus serious arts...." (p. 145). Fishwick (1974) maintained that "high" or "elite" culture is "produced by talented individuals who follow rules … which both they and their audience know and respect. This work is 'private' in that it implies a one-to-one relationship" (p. 2).

The conservative side of high culture was acknowledged by Van Peer (1997) who, citing the anthropologist Gellner, focused on literacy (i.e., reading and writing) and the importance of mental and physical (i.e., postural) self-discipline. Writing contributes to the codification of ideas and values that establish standards of behavior (Goody, 1986). Stability in the social system involves "rules for raising children ... for law-abiding conduct and work ethos, for service in the community and for not meddling with others' freedom" (Van Peer, 1997, p. 34).

Popular or "low" culture has been seen as part of a reaction against the demands of "civilized" society and is associated with the poorer or "lower classes." The emergence of popular culture has been traced by Lowenthal (1957) to Montaigne, who maintained in the 16th century that the post-feudal world would have an alienating quality, particularly for people without religious faith. To redress this loneliness, he advocated diversion including "escape, distraction, entertainment, and, last but not least, vicarious living" (Lowenthal, 1957, p. 48). Van Peer (1997) placed a positive spin on this development, arguing that "what we call low culture takes its place within the diversity of such pleasurable

activities, forming an antidote against the strains of our responsibilities. It is a reservoir of revitalization, and a rescue strategy for regaining a balance" (Van Peer, 1997, p. 34).

In a sense, class conflict would appear to underlie the contrast drawn between the intellectual challenge of "high" culture and the self-indulgent pleasure of "low" culture. Conservative academics like Greenberg (1946/1957) argued that Popular culture was "a product of the industrial revolution which urbanized the masses of western Europe and America and established what is called universal literacy" (p. 102). He reduced "popular, commercial art and literature with their chromeotypes, magazine covers, illustrations, ads, slick and pulp fiction, comics, Tin Pan Alley music, tap dancing, Hollywood movies, etc., etc." to *kitsch* (p. 102). Even the *New Yorker* magazine was characterized as "fundamentally high-class kitsch for the luxury trade" (p. 103).

Lowenthal (1957) conflated "popular" culture with "mass" culture of the fascist era in Europe, stating that "in all its media popular culture proves to have its own genuine characteristics: standardization, stereotypy, conservatism, mendacity, manipulated consumer goods" (p. 55). He juxtaposed the "differences between popular culture and art, between spurious gratification and a genuine experience as a step to greater individual fulfilment" (p. 51) and described popular culture as "nothing but a manipulated reproduction of reality as it is; and in so doing, popular culture sanctions and glorifies whatever it finds worth echoing" (p. 49).

In contrast, popular culture has been approached with "an appreciative non-judgmental attitude to ordinary tastes and pleasures" (McGuigan, 1992, p. 4) by scholars in the British tradition of cultural studies. This perspective places less emphasis on formal codes underlying cultural messages and a greater stress on the "inherited oral wisdom" of folk cultures passed on in tales, songs, dances, games, and manners (Fishwick, 1974). Popular culture is seen as "*practice* and *event*-oriented—it leans ... towards percept, not concept" (Fishwick 1974, p. 6). The diversity of material encompasses comic books, advertisements, joke cycles, fads, radio and television programs, films, fashion, popular fiction, and so on; what Malinowski termed the *imponderabilia* of everyday life (Berger, 1980, p. 16). Popular culture therefore echoes Modernism with its faith in progress, technology, and features of the urban world.

The distinction between high and low culture can be profitably reconsidered to reveal complementary processes of reception without recourse to social class analysis and the negative connotations implied by it. It is inappropriate to associate high and popular culture with particular cultural forms or genres. A supposedly high culture opera can have a kitschy or romanticized quality,

whereas a “low” culture rock music video can reflect on fundamental social ills. Rather than speaking in terms of high culture, it would be more productive to ask about the extent to which a work of art, literature, film, music, and so on, is original, extending or transforming a style that came before it. To the extent a work does this, then it breaks new ground in either subject matter or style, and its original quality can be formally defined as a kind of transformation. Further, originality is not restricted to a single piece but may be inferred from the shared qualities underlying a set of works by a single artist (author) or by a group. It is the development of a new code that is crucial, and this should not be confused with literacy per se (in the sense of reading skills), as high culture critics have done in the past. Developments in traditionally high culture domains are associated with challenge and fit with the account offered here of reflection as a mode for engaging aesthetic events.

Popular cultural artifacts, on the other hand, can be related to a need for pleasure. Responses are to individual works that evoke emotional associations and reactions and extend beyond the work to intensely personal contexts. The pleasurable experience of individual works is historically situated and shared by cohorts. The attaching of affective markers to cultural events and products is not restricted to particular social classes. Thus, focussing on the underlying processes involved in appreciating and responding to cultural artifacts frees us from class-biased and genre-biased analyses.

NEW MEDIA AND INTERACTIVITY

Vorderer (2000) discussed some problems regarding involvement in interactive media. On one hand, passive surrender to what happens in a film involving a sympathetic character seems to encourage emotional participation. On the other hand, the kind of active participation required in interactive media does not necessarily foster involvement. Although the more complex structure of interactive media provides the person with an opportunity to affect outcomes, actually manipulating the interface can sometimes get in the way. As might be expected, experience with computer devices facilitates the interactive process, because the person does not trip over the interface on route to aesthetic engagement.

Ideas derived from psychological aesthetics and an integrated view of emotion can be applied to the study of interactivity and new media. A specific reference point is Spiegel’s (2000) keynote address on “Interactivity and Involvement in Large Format Digital Cinema” at IGEL2000, the VIIth congress of the International Society for the Empirical Study of Literature (and Media),

which was held in Toronto. The abstract for his lecture provides a sense for this kind of media offering.

> This presentation will explore the interface between traditional story narrative in cinema and contemporary video game technology. Immersion Studios has developed a digital technology solution for the interaction of large format visuals and the participating audience. The involvement of the audience in an unfolding story has its roots in various forms of theatrical presentation such as *laterna magika* in Prague (first seen in Canada at Expo'67). From a visual perspective, *cinerama* and *circle vision* extended the movie around the audience. In the next generation of cinematic involvement, IMAX passed the audience through the *window* into the centre of the action. Each step in the evolution of engaged-cinema enhanced the experience of virtual presence in the scene.
>
> Over the last twenty years, computer technology has opened a new avenue in entertainment. Electronic games are rapidly outpacing Hollywood cinema in capturing the attention of contemporary youth culture. These games provide a sensory-rich environment accompanied by the experience of control over outcomes. Participants can also identify with characters while *constructing* the story line of the developing game. This sense of agency and experience of involvement can make simulated games more appealing than watching "real" sports events over which viewers have no control.

Immersion Studios combines the large format IMAX-style experience (on a 24' x 72'screen) with the interactive potential of computer games in a group setting. Using the latest in digital technology, individual audience members can affect and control aspects of the story and its direction. There are three forms of interactive participation: personal, interactive, and competitive. Each show integrates these forms of interactivity in different combinations to heighten involvement and the entertainment experience.

An overarching framework within which to appreciate new media offerings, such as the one described by Stacey Spiegel, should address how the sensory potency (of a giant screen and acoustic surround-sound input) encounters the intellectual and emotional judgment of recipients mediated by the manipulation of a computer interface with on-line group-based outcomes. Although this sounds like a mouthful, it can be parsed in an orderly manner. First, the salience of a gigantic visual and acoustic sensory experience is comparable to the ancient Roman and Greek traditions of colossus statuary. Recall seeing the Eiffel tower, the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, or the Egyptian Sphinx for the first time. The overwhelming size of the image fills and dominates the visual

field. This “makes strange” or deautomatizes perception and leads the recipient away from cognition (and the identification of useful objects) and toward the actual experience of sensory stimulation. Thus, the sensory experience is overpowering and complete. Adding to this the kind of proprioceptive (i.e., bodily movement feedback) synchrony typical of the latest amusement park rides at Disneyworld or Paramount Studios in Orlando, Florida, provides a postural analog to complete the simulation and maximize perceptual-motor engagement. The recipient has a virtual experience in a simulated world. What could be more perceptually absorbing at this stage of our culture?

But real involvement in the narrative is quite another thing. It is a mainstream idea in media psychology that involvement with favorably depicted characters will ensure absorption in an unfolding story line (Zillmann, 1996). But what is the dynamic underlying this involvement? Is it based on empathy and, in fact, what is empathy? Tan (1995) treated each spectator as an “invisible witness” who “experiences the view of any scene offered by the camera as his or her own” (p. 17). This “witness” stance is determined by the control of the camera over “gaze,” an inability to materially act, and the simple fact that no one appeals to the audience in traditional cinema for help or advice. The spectator’s essential helplessness in the cinema leads to “virtual action tendencies,” a kind of vicarious preparedness to act. At the same time, knowledge that “this is a film after all” enables spectators to adopt the “imaginary witness” perspective.

The Immersion Studios task does offer an opportunity “to materially act” in cooperation with other theater participants. If participants who engage the modules feel that their responses mean something in conjunction with those of others, then their interest in the outcome of the joint challenge will be heightened. But how easy is it to produce these responses? It is essential that the rules of the game and the technique for manipulating the communication console be simple so that they can be acquired with minimal practice. One would expect that prior experience with platform games or other forms of interactivity, including exploration of the internet and related computer skills, would make participation easier. The participant working at a console has the same authorial possibilities as any artist. Therefore, like an artist the skills required to manipulate the medium must be overlearned and automatic. To the extent that difficulty executing the task draws attention away from the unfolding perceptual experience, overall involvement should diminish. Ultimately, if perceiving oneself as manipulating the story line combines with a feeling of excitement, then the game has successfully modulated the person’s state of arousal, and liking for it will be reinforced.

Can the same paradigm be adapted for use where having an experience was more important than acting in consort to achieve a goal, however virtuous it may be? Laterna Magika from Prague managed to achieve this in their multidimensional stage presentations. But interaction between the players and the audience can be more easily achieved in the live theater than in the movie theater to create the experience of a "happening." Although the computer can make more options available, experiencing coherence between one's own reaction and the response of the changing stimulus is not easily achieved without immediate feedback. It represents an ideal in the multilayered encounter between high definition, large format images, with surround sound, some kind of bodily motion feedback, and a narrative that engrosses one with its reference to people, things, and experiences that one values. According to the analysis of aesthetic and emotion presented earlier, absorption will be greatest when there is a match between the sophisticated suggestions of the stimulus and projections of personal meaning by audience members.

CONCLUSIONS

Aesthetic theory has developed the notion of unity-in-diversity to account for the evocative potency of artistic images and literary works. Psychologists have helped to formally define the roots of diversity and to account for efforts to achieve unity. Aesthetic images are distinctive from those in everyday life because figure–ground relations are significant, whereas background is discarded in the pragmatics of everyday perception. Psychologists committed to the information theory metaphor distinguished semantic (i.e., subject matter) and syntactic (i.e., stylistic) information. This was expanded upon by constructivist scholars who emphasized the multilayered nature of aesthetic artifacts and the challenge faced by recipients who must find coherence in an open-ended work. This provides an opportunity for personal experiences to participate in the imaginative reconstruction of a coherent interpretation of a work.

Emotion theory can also play a role here to the extent that action-oriented and experience-oriented theories offer complementary accounts of the search for meaning. People can approach the world in order to resolve needs and achieve goals or they encounter events to have unique experiences. Whereas the first approach is analytical and selective, the latter is holistic and receptive. The action- and experience-oriented modes of engaging daily life translate readily into aesthetic behavior. An action orientation will be revealed in the careful selection of proximal (e.g., artworks, novels) and distal (e.g., television) works that modulate mood states related to pleasure and excitement. An experience

orientation involves the selection of multilayered works that provide a challenge and an opportunity for projecting personal experiences in the act of interpretation.

These principles apply equally to the study of proximal and distal media artifacts. The development of new media primarily impacts on the complex sensory experience of the recipient. Innovations that promote sensory awakening because of their uniqueness and salience provide a rich source of stimulation, particularly when bodily feedback is provided. Engagement can be achieved by involving the recipient in action-oriented narratives, ideally in a group setting so that contagion-type processes will be engaged. It is here that a combination of arousal and narrative direction will shape involvement. However, absorption will be greatest when suggestion meets connection and there is a resonance between the situated characters in the narrative and personal experiences of the recipient. Although an attractive character may foster identification in an action-oriented story, consonance between situated characters and the recipient will increase depth in experience-oriented engagement. Interactive media face the dilemma that offering choices regarding narrative outcome cannot interfere with the process of projection lest the coherence of the aesthetic experience break down.

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