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POTENTIALITIES OF TELEVISION  
AS AN ART FORM AND AS A MEDIUM OF EXPRESSION

by

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### Similarities and differences

Television as a mass medium which is both novel and fast-developing is a new attraction for nearly all of us. Wherever they live - in Great Britain, France, Sweden, United States of America, or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, in Egypt or Nigeria - people are looking at the small screens. The viewers may be sitting in their homes while watching TV programmes, or in clubs, but they may also be standing in the street - caught under the spell of moving pictures. For many people from many countries - adults as well as children and adolescents - the power of television programmes is so great that they gaze at the screen for long periods without exercising in the least their critical faculties. Yet the television studios can produce good programmes as well as very bad ones. They can serve educational ends or they may exploit violence and crime.

Many people from many countries are trying to understand the rôle that TV is really playing in our lives, what it is bringing to us and to our children, what is the real impact of this new medium. The problems caused by TV programmes, their subject matter, and their artistic level are discussed now by many teachers, TV producers and youth leaders. The other aspect much discussed is the so-called "language of television". To many persons it seems that between the language of television and that of film there is no special difference. They maintain that so far as the viewers are concerned, film and television are much the same. If you have a small screen at home, it is much the same as having a small cinema theatre (they say), and nobody is going to be much interested in any special problems of television as such. What it means, according to this viewpoint, is that for many people there is no difference between home-viewing and seeing programmes produced in a studio and then projected in a theatre.

Our contemporary discussions about TV problems are very reminiscent of those discussions which took place about film when this mass medium was born. It is easy to recall and mention the names of many well-known writers, artists and teachers who said things about film which were unkind and even devastating. Anatole France has written that the film is obviously symbolic of the end of European civilization. Karl Lange, a great German esthetician, has written that film is not an art and never can be an art because it only amounts to a "technical investigation".

The same point of view was put forward by many teachers. They saw the film as a great danger for their pupils and as nothing more than a danger. One Polish teacher, Ludwik Skoczylas, said in a book written in 1918, that "this dreadful monster - film - is killing the whole innocence of pupils' souls and must be rejected by law".

Yet, with the development of film as an art, our viewpoints have changed too. Few persons would like to maintain nowadays that the film is not capable of being an art in its own right. There are a great many very bad films, but film art does exist.

Our writers and teachers encounter the same kind of trouble nowadays with television. Is television a new kind of art or is it not? Can it, or can it not, validly lay claim to its own set of rules and its own language? It must be frankly admitted that there are many people who insist that, in fact, film and television are similar forms of communication, and that TV uses the same sort of

language as film does. There are many works in which we can read that television and film resemble each other, as a picture drawn by an artist may closely resemble a picture painted by him.

There are indeed many similarities between film and television as mass media, but there are also many differences. First, let us look at these problems from the viewpoint of semantics. What does the word "film" mean? It means a moving picture of something, which may be photographed or drawn on celluloid. This picture, or collection of pictures, is prepared before it can be seen on the screen in the cinemas. It cannot be changed from one projection to another.

### Reality and actuality

The word "television" means that we are seeing something that happens far from our television set, far from us. We may sometimes see a movie film projected on our small screen, but films are not the main material of television shows. On television the viewers are seeing something which happens far from their TV sets, but which happens at the same moment as they are looking at the screen. The consciousness that we are watching something which is actually happening at that very moment creates a great difference between our attitude to film shows and to television shows. When we are watching a car accident in a feature film, we may be a little troubled and momentarily anxious, but it is obvious that the accident is not a real one and that our impressions have been mainly created by skilful photography and editing. When we see a car accident in a newsreel, we know that it happened in reality, and this creates another kind of feeling. But if we observe an accident which happens during a television transmission, from an auto racetrack, the meaning of it is again quite different for us, because we are witnesses of somebody's unhappiness or death. We cannot calmly drink our coffee and talk with our friends while seeing on the small screen that something dreadful has just happened to a real person.

During a feature film in the cinema we may, perhaps, see a scene depicting somebody's execution, but everybody knows that in reality nothing happened to the film star and that what is portrayed is only a fictional re-creation. In a documentary film, however, such a situation could be a means of giving considerable shock to a viewer. In Poland, the scenes of the death penalty being carried out on Nazi leaders were cut from the American news film of the Nuremburg trials. Between the act of justice and the act of revenge there are, as we know, very subtle differences. We cannot imagine that television would transmit the scene of Eichmann's death by execution as it was occurring, but we can see it shown by the newsreel in the cinema.

I have mentioned these few examples in an effort to emphasize that from a psychological point of view, there is a great difference in our attitude towards subject matter when we are watching a television programme or looking at a movie film. The impact of television, as a result of its possibilities of showing real situations and real events as they happen, is stronger than the impact of film, so from the psychological viewpoint, these two mass media are not the same for the viewer.

### The language of television

I shall try now to advance another reason for regarding film and television as different mass media. Television belongs to the group of pictorial arts which includes film and drama. This does not mean to suggest that every television programme is a work of art - but then, neither is every movie an expression of film art. If television belongs to the same group of pictorial arts as film and drama, we must not overlook the connexions which exist between television and drama and not merely remember those which exist between television and film. Are there some important differences between the so-called "language of television" and of film? This problem could be discussed from two points of view, the objective and the subjective. From the objective viewpoint, one can discuss the esthetic structure of both languages. One can compare the structure - that is the composition - of the film and of the television show.

At first it may seem that television's language is rather similar to film language. In both cases it consists of a movement of pictures, of close-ups and of shots amalgamated together in one whole structure. The well-known esthetician, Dr. Boleslaw Lewicki, has written about the main laws governing both film art and the television show. He mentions the "law of frame", the motion of pictures, changing perspective, the important rôle of light and the composition of pictures and sound. In both film and television the image is enclosed by a frame, the form of which may vary. The film can be projected on many kinds of screens - standard size as well as the large ones, called "cinerama", "cyclorama", etc. As a result of the competition which exists between film and television, film technicians and film producers are trying to introduce as many kinds of large screens as possible. The film can even be projected on several screens at once, as it is in the Czechoslovak system called "polyvision".

The screen of the television set is always much smaller than the screen for cinema. Also, the sound reproduction of film can be stereophonic, whereas the sound reproduced by the television set is not. We can, of course, imagine the TV set of the future, with a big screen and all the installations necessary for stereophonic sound. This is rather unrealistic, for there is no doubt that the screen of the television set will always remain relatively a small one, much smaller than the cinema screen. That this is so is not due to a technical problem demanding investigation and solution, but arises from the fact that people live in flats or houses, not in big cinema halls. It can well be argued that because of the world's economic and social problems, the average dwelling is likely to become smaller and smaller, not bigger than now. It is also a characteristic of contemporary human beings that, in general, they feel happier - more at home, so to speak - when living in conditions which bring them close together - that is, in conditions of intimacy rather than in huge monumental buildings. Furthermore, people from many countries are choosing television sets with middle-sized screens, not those with screens of the biggest size. The reason is that, according to the laws of optics and perception, we are likely to become very tired and nervous if we have to look at a big television screen while sitting in a small room. There should be 3 - 5 meters of space between the TV set and ourselves. If the screen is very big, the viewer should have many meters of space between the screen and himself. Since nobody lives in a cinema hall, the television screen must remain a small one.

Impact of the close-up

The considerable variation in size between the screen of the cinema and that of the television set is obviously a key to the several differences which have developed in the construction of the language of film and the language of television. The first of these differences to be remarked on is the very frequent use of large close-ups. The average television show is composed mainly of close shots and big close-ups. This is because the main target aimed at in a television show is usually a human being and his or her emotions, as shown by facial expressions. Only in close-ups is it possible to show human faces, eyes, hands, smiles, and so on, in detail. Sometimes a big close-up of trembling hands or of tears in the eyes will convey much more to the viewer than a whole scene. General (or long) shots are rather rare in television shows and are used only when absolutely necessary. The duration of close-ups on the small screen can be very long because this is television's main form of language. On the other hand, not only are general shots rarely used, but also their duration on the small screen is never long.

In film editing, however, we can observe the reverse process in operation in regard to the use of close-ups and long or general shots. A film comprised of close-ups is only very rarely encountered, and such a composition must have a special dramatic purpose. This kind of composition was used in Carl Dreyer's "Jeanne d'Arc". The main intention of this particular film was to present a psychological study of fear and suffering, so the use and arrangement of close-ups had real meaning. The same kind of composition is sometimes found in other good films which try to say something of importance about feelings and emotions in particular, and about human psychology in general. Also in films made specially for children there should always be a large number of close-ups, because children's perception and identification of persons and objects shown on the screen is slow.

To put it another way, close-ups are used in film only in those cases in which human expressions play a truly important part. We can observe a great number of close-ups in, for example, two such films as "Marty" and "Twelve Angry Men". "Marty" was originally written as a play for television before it was expanded into a cinema scenario, but since the main preoccupation of both films just mentioned is with the personal problems of human beings, both have achieved a considerable success on the larger cinema screen. If, on the other hand, a film made specially for the cinema is composed of a great number of close-ups without there being any particular artistic or dramatic reason for this type of pictorial treatment, the average adult viewer is likely to lose interest in what is taking place on the screen. (Another use of close-ups is found in instructional films. There the close-up may be extensively employed because pupils must notice in detail what is shown. However, this is another question.)

Films produced for cinemascope, cinerama and for other versions of the wide screen confront film directors with several limitations on the use of the close-up. As is well known, when we are looking at the wide screen our field of perception, especially perception of movement, is restricted. There are likely to be many subjects on the large screen at the same time, and so the duration of shots must be much longer on the large screen than on the small one. However, we are also likely to react rather unfavourably when confronted with an image in close-up on the large screen. For the human face when seen in enormous proportions becomes both unexpressive and oppressive, as a giant's face might seem if seen by a dwarf.

Indeed, viewers seeing such a face have the feeling of being dwarfs in a country of giants. This limitation on the use of the human face on the large screen forces film directors to direct attention to objects and events of another kind which can be shown more successfully. As a result, instead of intimacy and human feelings we can see presented on the large screen crowds of people, moving cars and airplanes, landscapes, and so on. Fast action replaces individuals and their emotions. However, in many American films made for the big screen we can observe the obvious influence of television's language. This is mainly, of course, because people are looking at the small television screen every day and are becoming accustomed to its language. In such films as "A Hole in the Head" and "Oceans Eleven" the impact of television's language was very obvious, and even the tempo of the action had been slowed down as a result.

Thus, there is a cross-competition between these two mass media to be similar to one another and yet to be as different as possible. Film-makers especially, seeing great dangers for them in the development of television, are trying to make films which contain attractions similar to those of television, but which offer more than TV can: big screens, stereophonic sound and colour. Herein may lie the main possibility for the future development of the film. It seems likely that, in future, the cinema viewer will be nearly surrounded physically by the screen. The film will give him the illusion of being encircled by the people and events that are portrayed and even perhaps of personally participating in them.

The possibilities of television's development will lie in another direction. The main responsibility of presenting human individuals and their emotions may in the future belong especially to television.

#### The duration of shots

As previously mentioned, both film and television have to ensure that there is a "minimum of perception" when close-ups and general shots are presented. In film editing the duration of general shots on the screen is usually twice as long as that for big close-ups. The psychological justification for this proportion is to be found in our everyday experience. Looking on the things which are far from us, we must have time enough to identify people and things, to recognize what is important and unimportant. When general shots are shown on the small TV screen, these shots are usually performing the function of summarizing pictures which have been shown before in some detail. For this reason they are seldom projected for a long period of time. We need simply a brief moment of "recall" of pictures or objects which we have seen before in close-up. Now the development of a good cinema film often proceeds in the other direction: that is, from synthesis to analysis. A television show, on the contrary, shows details, analyses a situation and afterwards makes a synthesis of the whole picture. We need enough time for identifying and understanding the synthesis shown by film, but we are not under such a necessity when looking at the synthesis which is shown in the television feature, because we already know every element of it. Thus it will be agreed that in this respect, film and television use different forms of composition and presentation.

Television and stage drama

Let us next examine the connexion which exists between a television programme and a dramatic play performed on the stage in a theatre. Television has taken from the theatre many conventions: decorations; costumes; the style of acting, and so on. Actors play their rôles before the television camera in the same way as they act before the spectators in a theatre. Not so long ago, I had an opportunity to discuss the question of the influence of film composition on the performance of drama. In the past, the spectators saw the whole theatre stage at once, and they were obliged to choose an actor on whom to concentrate their attention. Today, stage lighting to some extent performs the selective function carried out by the film director, and in television plays we may now observe the development of the use of theatrical conventions which are also realized through the film directing method.

In the theatre we cannot observe during the performance the facial expressions of the actors. We can really only watch their behaviour as a whole. As André Malraux has written in an interesting book, the face of the actor in the theatre is so small to the spectator that it is not the most important feature of his personality. Rather, the most important rôle in presenting the drama is played by the actor's voice.

Whereas television has borrowed from the theatre many of its forms, including the important part of dialogue, the manner in which the actor's performance is presented is taken largely from the art of film, where facial expressions make such a vital contribution. Television also has its own code of meaning when using close-ups and general shots - and these are sometimes symbolic meanings. During a television presentation, the camera moves from one person to another, showing faces and hands. Sometimes one big close-up assumes special symbolic significance. For instance, a trembling hand in large close-up may give the viewer much insight into the secret emotions of the character.

It is rare to encounter a panoramic picture of the whole stage-set on the television screen. To take an example: in one of the best television shows in Warsaw - the "Euridica" of Anouilh - the settings were built on a very small space, much smaller than in a theatre. It was not at all difficult to show the whole set at once. Yet, in fact, a shot of the whole stage was shown only a very few times during this performance. The kind of shots chosen in this programme were designed to have a special dramatic and symbolic function. The first visit of Thanatos in the first part was shown in one general shot; the characters discussing life and death were shown in a second general shot; the dialogue between the dead Euridica and Orpheus, at the moment when Orpheus has decided to die, in a third one. General shots were used only at these particular moments - and it should be noted that this was when Thanatos, the god of death, was trying to influence living people. Thus the power of death was deliberately represented by means of general shots, in order to suggest its cold, impersonal, distant outlook on human desires and emotions. The symbolic use of general shots in this programme was done with good sense, for it was, as a result, much easier to understand the real meaning of this French drama, that real love is not possible in everyday life and that strong, pure emotions can find a place only in our minds.

Similar use of general shots and close-ups can be observed in many television shows. Only in a very bad show is the composition of close-ups and general shots accidental and not conscious.

Television is sometimes able to use this type of "avant-garde" presentation for the general public, whereas on the stage it could be found only in experimental theatres. For instance, in the performance of Thornton Wilder's version of "Julius Caesar" on Warsaw TV, every actor was dressed in ordinary modern clothes and the stage was wholly without scenery. The main task was to present portraits of the characters. They were not moving, not acting, but merely reciting the dialogue. For Poland, anyway, this was something really very new, something that seems to belong especially to the language of television, to its expressive means. This form of presentation is used quite often in television shows when words and dialogue are important. It is a new way of presenting literary works, very difficult for many viewers to comprehend. This form is borrowed by television from the rhapsodic theatre, but the use of portraits is taken from film art. Yet a performance of this kind is not just a conglomeration of many elements taken from several existing arts; it has a new quality of its own, it starts to be a new art of television. Television is taking many different elements of many visual and non-visual arts, such as theatre, film, rhapsodic theatre, recitation, music, literature, etc., and the end result of this process may be the development of a new artistic quality, the emergence of a special synthesis of several arts, which is different and new. As once many years ago film made a synthesis of a few older arts, so nowadays television is making its own kind of synthesis and is developing as a new pictorial art. It is easy enough to foresee that this new art will in the future more and more develop its own modes of expression, its own language, but it will remain the art which, above all else, shows human individuals and their emotions - and the beauty of language - of dialogue and of monologue.

#### Understanding by children

Is it easy, is it even possible for a child to understand this language of television which has been created as a synthesis of many older arts?

The process of understanding any pictorial art is a complicated one for a child, and the peculiar structure of both film and television programmes and the fact that their message is transmitted by moving pictures in a fragmentary way adds to the difficulty. The fragments of an action presented on the screen must create in the spectator's mind a whole composition with the help of his own imagination. The editing of the work must also facilitate the flow of ideas and associations. The viewer himself must, of course, be at an adequate level of understanding in order to fit the diverse elements into the correct pattern. Too quick or too abrupt editing of incidents, and having too many characters on the screen at once provide two good reasons why many children of 7-9 years of age are unable to understand a great number of films. As against this, the average television programme does not use the technique of rapid cutting from scene to scene, nor are large numbers of people shown together on the small screen. Is television therefore easier than film for children to understand? The answer is that, on the contrary, in many cases television programmes are much more difficult for them, for children are unable to appreciate the unusual values of - for instance - static portraits, of symbolic expression, of literary texts, of poetic recitation. An easy text with static representation is likely to bore them. In a case of this kind which I know about, they wrote in their homework books that the show was "terrible", "without any sense", "very bad". In this case the children could not appreciate the facial expressions of characters shown during long periods of time in close-up; nor do children like those shows in which the plot can be followed too easily, and the same must be said about words and phrases which are



too difficult to recognize and understand. Many children in Poland did not enjoy such shows as "The Sonnets of Dante" or Homer's "Odyssey" because the characters were shown in close-up and a commentator read the texts from the book. They were not able to perceive the merits of the work, and all the poetry and metaphors were wasted on them. The outward action was regarded as too simple, as "very poor and badly done".

There are two main reasons for errors made by children in their comprehension of television programmes. These reasons apply to both form and content. One is the use of some special form of programme structure which is too difficult for a child to understand. The other is the use of some special types of script and dramaturgy which are too difficult to comprehend or which are a contradiction of what the child would wish them to be. So it can be said that a number of cases of faulty understanding of films and television programmes originate in inadequate scripts or treatments that do not suit a young audience's mentality.

It has to be noted that the associations in children's minds suggested by editing are supplemented or even replaced by associations arising from their own experiences, and from habits created under the influence of their teachers. The associations of younger children may thus be presented, as it were, in the form of two tracks closely interwoven - i.e. associations suggested by the action of the film or TV programme, and personal associations aroused by some particular situations and scenes in the film. The younger the child, the stronger are its personal associations provoked by the show. These associations may cause gaps in the perceptions of scenes, especially when there are too many unimportant episodes. The non-chronological arrangement of events presented in a television programme or in a film can cause another difficulty and can be a source of mistakes. The younger children cannot understand - or will misinterpret - action that is presented in retrospect.

When children are watching a scene in which there is some element that is accentuated much more strongly than the others, they do not take into consideration the other elements because they have gained an impression that they are irrelevant. This means that the children's opinions will be influenced by the element which is most accentuated in any particular scene.

It not infrequently happens that younger children are unable to grasp that all characters in the film or television show are not equally important. They themselves do not make any selection, and treat all characters as having the same value. The ability to select comes with intellectual development, and therefore where this development is lacking, some element in the structure of the show must fill up the gap for the child.

When an important event is first shown in a fragmentary way in parallel editing, and when it is not presented later in one general shot, it may happen that even older children will misunderstand the scene.

Faulty recognition is very likely to occur when some animal or object unknown to the children is presented in an animated film on the TV screen, especially in a cartoon - e.g. stylized fish or animals, or children wearing exotic dress. The child then concentrates on recognizing this new element, whether it is an important or merely a casual item, and does not perceive basic aspects of the show.

Showing a part of something in the film first, and the whole thing only later, also results in faulty recognition among children.

There is another fault of understanding which is an intentional one created by the child in his own mind. The child wants the story to work out differently or he wants to have some character presented in a certain way, and this desire deforms the character or situation actually presented on the screen so far as the child is concerned.

It is clear then that the languages of both film and television are fairly complicated for children and that they do not naturally find them easy to understand. This is the moment to begin the teaching of television's language in the same way as we are teaching our pupils to understand and appreciate the language of literature and films. Without the help of teachers in developing the esthetic and critical taste of children in the field of television, the medium will remain for many of them a cheap, unimportant diversion, absorbing too much of their time and interest. Yet if teachers could successfully draw the attention of their pupils to the true esthetic values of this youngest of the arts, it could be for them not merely a means of healthy entertainment, but also a source of inspiration in the whole field of modern art.

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