

Review

Information Technology as Basis for the Changes in the Social Role of Film

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Summary

Digital technologies are changing the way we see film as a mass medium turning it into one of the most important media of today, and, judging by the current trends, of tomorrow as well. Mostly made with digital equipment, the largest number of films that appear today are short, often non-narrative, even more often amateur. Paradoxically, it seems that the proclaimed 'death of film tape' could mark a new, more active 'life' for the film.

Key words: social role of film, film as mass media, digital technology

Introduction

Digital technologies are changing the way we see film as a mass medium. According to some theoreticians, with the invention of radio, and television especially, the film has lost its function of a medium of mass communication. But is it really the case? Can we now, in the era of massive use of digital technologies and the expansion of new media declare the film to be forever lost to the mass media? We will try to prove the opposite: that the new technologies have turned the film into one of the most important media of today, and, judging by the current trends, of tomorrow as well. We will try to prove that film is one of the means of mass communication, and if the existing trends of increasing dominance of audio-visual content continue to develop, the film, or "cinematic way of seeing the world" could take more and more important role in the future. We will try to prove that, along the lines of changing technology, the social role of individual media is also changing, and the theory of mass communication should constantly review the new circumstances. Our aim is to investigate the reasons film is such an interesting medium today.

Changes in the social role of film

"Times have changed, but in a world that has become *hypermediatized* the social role of film, contrary to what is sometimes claimed, is not by any chance on a descending path. Nowadays we actually turn to film when we are trying to awaken the conscience and to measure big institutions. In this way the film helps international organizations, as is the case with the International Human

Rights Film Festival, which was explicitly organized in response to the ineffectiveness of the Council of the United Nations in that domain."¹ Although it was created a little more than 100 years ago and has been continually evolving to this day (silent, sound, color, 3D), the social role of film has already transformed considerably, to the extent that some theoreticians believe that we can no longer perceive film as a medium of mass communication, but only as a work of art.²

Given the speed of its development, it took quite some time for film to become accepted as an art. In words of Rudolf Arnheim, film was animated image, somewhere between theatre and still photography.³ Domenico Tumiati⁴ argued that the future of film would not be artistic, because art is individuality, and film is a machine. At first, the film was perceived solely as entertainment for the (ignorant) masses, then it became important means of delivering information – not just about the world news, different countries and cultures, but also about the lifestyle and social values of other nations, easily accessible and understandable to everyone, only to emerge at last as an important art. The term "the seventh art" was coined in the year 1911 by one of the first film theoreticians and critics, Ricciotto Canudo, who put film on equal footing with the other arts – poetry, architecture, music, dance, painting and sculpture.⁵

There are film theoreticians who claim that social role of film has changed and that it ceased to be a medium of mass communication, and Hrvoje Turković is among them. "Although there are people old enough to remember it, it is quite difficult to grasp that film once performed almost all programming functions of television. The reason is the slow but inevitable evolution of film, turning into a media system identical to other 'art' systems (literature, visual art, music and theatre). What has quietly but thoroughly changed was the change of the civilizing role of film considered in its totality. What was the system the film abandoned? It was the system of the so called media of mass communication (also called the mass media –today paradigmatically represented by television, radio and newspapers),"⁶ says Turković and recalls that film formed as a mass medium at the time of cheap cinema, when the picture show consisted of program of short films, which usually contained current information (newsreels, reports), as well as commercials, advertisement and educational films. "During this period, the audience developed that habitually, regularly (daily, weekly) went to the cinema, following the key changes of programmes (sequels, new editions of

¹ Lipovetsky, Gilles, Serroy, Jean, *Globalni ekran*, Novi Sad, Akademska knjiga, 2013., 333.

² Turković Hrvoje, *Narav televizije, ogledi*, Meandar, Zagreb, 2008.

³ Arnheim, Rudolf, *Film i stvarnost*, Dušan, Stojanović ed., *Teorija filma*, Beograd, Nolit, 1978., 111.

⁴ Stojanović, Dušan ur, *Teorija filma*, Beograd, Nolit, 1978., 13

⁵ Ricciotto, Canudo, *Estetika filma*, Dušan Stojanović ed, *Teorija filma*, Beograd, Nolit, 1978., 54.

⁶ Turković, Hrvoje, *Narav televizije, ogledi*, Zagreb, Meandar, 2008., 175.

journals, various 'innovations' in feature films etc.). In short, film had the exact same function that television and radio have today and the newspapers have had from the beginning. And why has film lost that function? There are many reasons, but two are, it seems, the most prominent. The first reason is the time which elapses from recording to screening, and the other is that showing and viewing the film was an inconvenient act" states Turković⁷, adding that the film of the 'non mass' period has not ceased to be massively popular, but only ceased to be a means of mass communication as it was at the beginning.⁸ "Let me repeat: it is now marked by fragmentation and individuality (disciplinary, authorial, stylistic), reduced relevance and permanent availability (movies are watched again after being shown in the cinema, on television, video, for teaching purposes, for the purpose of theoretical analysis) and is characterized by certain optional nature, selective reception (we go to the cinema and watch movies occasionally, not because we have an inherent social obligation to do so). The social role of the film has changed," Turković says.⁹ But after the change diagnosed by Turković in the early 90s,¹⁰ today in the time of expansion of digital technologies and the impact of new media, which leads to the formation of hybrid media, the social role of film is changing all over again.

Film as a medium of mass communication

According to the definition from the Film Lexicon, the film is, among other things, "a comprehensive and socio-experiential product".¹¹ From the point of view of theory of mass communication, the above-mentioned social function of the film is particularly important. In fact, some film theories¹² and many theories of mass communication¹³ recognize communication as one of the functions of film. "...film screening, like every other screening as a social phenomenon, belongs to a special category of social phenomena – the phenomenon of communication".¹⁴

Mass communication is one type of communication (in the most common divisions the remaining types are interpersonal communication and intrapersonal

⁷ Ibid, 177.

⁸ Ibid, 181.

⁹ Ibid, 182.

¹⁰ Although the book *Narav televizije* (Turković Hrvoje, Zagreb, Meandar) was published in 2008. the text was written in 1992.

¹¹ *Filmski leksikon*, Leksikografski zavod Miroslav Krleža, Zagreb, 2003., 177.

¹² Turković Hrvoje, *Teorija filma*, Meandar, Zagreb, 1994.

¹³ McQuail Denis, *Mass Communication Theory*, 6th edition, Sage, 2010. and Dominick Joseph R. *The Dynamics Of Mass Communication*, 2nd edition, Random House, 1987.

¹⁴ Turković, Hrvoje, *Teorija filma*, Zagreb, Meandar, 1994.,59.

communication¹⁵) and it is defined as "the process by which a complex organization with the aid of one or more machines produces and transmits public messages directed toward large, heterogeneous, and scattered audiences".¹⁶ The mass media are indispensable as a channel that transmits messages in the system of mass communication. In addition, film has all the properties of a "mass communicator": mass communication is produced by a complex and formal organization, there is a number of "gatekeepers" (a person or group of people responsible for the selection of content that will reach the audience), it needs significant financial support to function, it exists in order to generate profit and it is competitive.¹⁷ One does not necessarily have to agree with the last statement, because there are mass media the purpose of which is not to make profit. "The media can be local, national and international, private, public, governmental or community, i.e. associative or third sector media as well as mainstream and alternative".¹⁸ The film meets this definition as well, since numerous works of film art, experimental film especially, are made without any ambition to be profitable. In fact, almost every film, some rare exceptions excluded, is produced by a production company or, in Hollywood, by an influential film studio owned by a multinational corporation (complex and formal organization), the "gatekeepers" are film agents, producers and directors who, based on various criteria, select the projects to be implemented, and even the cheapest films are relatively expensive (among the cheapest is the Croatian film *Show Must Go On* by a young director Nevio Marasović produced with a modest amount of about 200,000 kuna¹⁹). Production companies are usually privately owned companies and their primary (though not necessarily the only) interest is profit-making, and it is especially evident as far as competitiveness is concerned, not only in the struggle for audiences in theatres, but in the fight for public funds that are financing film projects (in Croatia, this fund is Croatian Audiovisual Center). To sum up, from the theoretical point of view, film can be viewed as a medium of mass communication.

Information technology and film

Even if we agree with the statement that film has lost its role as a mass medium due to its time delay and the impracticality of the act of screening (going to the

¹⁵ Brittner John R., *Mass Communication An Introduction*, 5th edition, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1989., 10.

¹⁶ Dominick Joseph R., *The Dynamics Of Mass Communication*, 2nd edition, Random House, 1987., 16.

¹⁷ Ibid, 20.

¹⁸ Preuško, Zrinjka, ed., *Uvod u medije*, Zagreb, Jesenski i Turk, 2011, 15.

¹⁹ Saračević, Igor, *Pulu otvara potpuno drugačiji hrvatski film*, Tportal.hr, 7th, July, 2010. <http://www.tportal.hr/showtime/film/75787/Pulu-otvara-potpuno-drugaciji-hrvatski-film.html> (10th July 2013.)

cinema), it should be noted that Turković published this in 1992, the same year in which Croatia became a part of the global computer network, the Internet, when international communication connection which connected CARNet Internet exchange point in Zagreb to Austria was established.²⁰ So the statement might have been correct at the time – new digital technologies and, above all, massive use of the Internet has changed the role of film once again. "The tradition of the printed word, initially prevalent in the language of cultural interfaces²¹ is becoming less important, while the part played by cinematic elements is progressively getting stronger. This is consistent with a general trend in modern society towards presenting more and more information in the form of time-based audio-visual moving image sequences, rather than in textual form," states Manovich²², noting that it is thanks to computer that film became a visual Esperanto.

Manovich takes one step further, noting that the film aesthetic strategies have become fundamental principles of computer software, while Gilles and Jean Lipovetsky Serroy note that in an era of omnipresent global screens – screens in shops, on airports, in restaurants, coffee shops, cars, airplanes; all screen sizes, mobile screen; the screen on you, the screen with you; a screen for all purposes, the screen to see everything, video screen, miniature screen, graphical screen, mobile screen, touchscreen²³ – "the man of hypermodern society sees the world as a film; to him, the film provides glasses which he unconsciously uses to look at reality in which he lives. The film has become the thing that shapes the global view of various spheres of contemporary life".²⁴

The appearance of digital technology, computers, other screens, and, even more importantly, the Internet, has transformed the existing mass media and opened up space for emergence of hybrids and new media (web portals). As Roger Fidler writes, thanks to the technology, first and foremost, "mediamorphosis" happens – "transformation of communication media usually occurs due to complex interweaving of the expressed needs, competitive and political pressures and social and technological innovations".²⁵ Convergence and multimediality have paved the way for audio-visual information, business and leisure activities on the new platform, the Internet, which has become available to a substantial part of the world's population, not only on computers but also on mobile phones

²⁰ http://www.carnet.hr/o_carnetu/o_nama/povijest_carneta (1st July, 2013.)

²¹ According to Manovich cultural interfaces are ways in which computers present cultural data and enable interaction with it. Manovich, Lev, *Language of New Media*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2001., 70.)

²² Manovich, Lev, *Language of New Media*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2001., 78.

²³ Lipovetsky, Gilles, Serroy, Jean, *Globalni ekran*, Novi Sad, Akademska knjiga, 2013., 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁵ Fidler, Roger, *Mediamorphosis*, Beograd, Clio, 2004., 41.

and tablet devices. We are connected through the Internet constantly, at any place and any time, and the content consumed online, especially social networks and web portals, are increasingly focused on short audio-visual forms – segments of TV shows, music videos, commercials, advertising films, short video clips recorded either by professional directors, cameramen, journalists or by amateurs, readers who send their work to the newsroom or upload it themselves to social networks and video-sharing websites. It is mostly short and informative, entertaining or advertising film material, essentially very similar to materials shown in theatres in the early days of film. Oftentimes it is a short recording of "real life", which basically does not differ much from the first movies made by Lumiere brothers, for example. "Members of the Lumiere family patented portable, we would say – compatible portable camera – already in the year 1895, as amateur photographers/cameramen, recording all that was happening in the private and public life, and they also 'provoked' portraits of close friends and relatives. They reproduced life..."²⁶ However, what "Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory " once was, today is a funny amateur footage of children playing, such as "Charlie bit my finger again"²⁷ – one of the most popular video clips on YouTube with more than half a million views²⁸, which in aesthetic terms has much in common with the early film recordings – static camera, short form, the entire film consisting of one take and documenting a piece of "reality". Thanks to the sites like YouTube and Vimeo (which are not necessarily considered to be mass media because the materials published there mostly belong to private persons, not "complex organizations", as required by the mass media definition), whose video materials are integrated into portals, web editions of daily newspapers, magazines and television programs, the private, amateur footage became a part of the "official" media. In short, through their integration into "classical" mass media, the video clips from social networks have become institutionalized. Editors of mass media are selecting and integrating them into their web portals and magazines, eliminating a possible dispute over whether such audio-visual material could be considered a part of the media of mass communication. It certainly could, but this phenomenon has a dark side. "With its vanity and absurdity, the YouTube content has managed to overshadow even blogs. Nothing is too prosaic or narcissistic for those monkey-videographers. The site is an infinite gallery of amateur films that present the poor fools dancing, singing, eating, washing up, buying, driving, cleaning, sleeping or just staring at their computers,"²⁹ remarked Andrew Keen, highlighting, among other things, the problem of relationship between professionalism and amateurism that will prove to be the key to understanding the development of the media.

²⁶ Miltojević, Branislav, *Podeljen ekran*, Beograd, Filmski centar Srbije, 2011., 52.

²⁷ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_OBlgSz8sSM (1st July, 2013.)

²⁸ http://www.youtube.com/charts/videos_views?gl=US&t=a (1st July, 2013.)

²⁹ Keen, Andrew, *Kult amatera*, Zaprešić, Fraktura, 2010., 21.

While the average quality of works is up for discussion, the hyper production has had at least one positive effect: it has contributed to the return of the film as one of the most important media of today. "*Omniscreen* is not the films' tomb: more than ever, the film proves its imagination, diversity, vitality".³⁰ On YouTube, 10 million videos are viewed daily and 65,000 new ones are added, "never so many recorded sequences have been produced and displayed, never so many artistic and authorial videos have been made, never the audience have become global so fast".³¹ The short cinematic form that has had a special significance in the formation of new role of the film as one of the dominant media is certainly the music video. Lev Manovich notes the emergence of new forms of film that developed in the 80s: they are non- narrative, shown on television or computer screen rather than in a movie theatre, and at the same time they are denying the film realism.³² He mainly has music videos in mind, because they have "since the eighties brought a new way of looking at things to film, a new and completely different way of showing and narrating".³³ As far as music videos are concerned, a stylistic turning point was the music video for Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, directed by John Landis in 1983. With its enormous half a million dollar budget and integral 14-minute-long version *Thriller* "opened a new chapter in the history of music industry, establishing the concept of music videos shot in the form of short film".³⁴ Meanwhile, video clips have moved online in significant numbers, to YouTube, Vevo and other video-sharing websites which have, with their accessibility on multiple platforms, substituted the already weakened role of music television. Even the popular MTV stopped using the slogan "Music Television" in 2010. At the same time, the clips watched on YouTube most are music videos; nine out of ten most popular videos are music clips,³⁵ which is the content lacking on Croatian national TV stations (CMC excluded). The majority of the music videos today are produced almost exclusively for the Internet broadcast and they, are typical hybrid media somewhere between television, film, music and the Internet. "Art (computer art), music (music video), game (videogame), commercials, chat, photos, knowledge – nothing can escape digitalized networks of the new *screenocracy*. Out entire lives, all our relations with the world and with others are more and more mediated by numerous interconnections through which screens never stop to converge, interact and link mutually".³⁶

³⁰ Lipovetsky, Gilles, Serroy, Jean, *Globalni ekran*, Novi Sad, Akademska knjiga, 2013., 26.

³¹ *Ibid*, 32.

³² Manovich, Lev, *Language of New Media*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2001., 310.

³³ Lipovetsky, Gilles, Serroy, Jean, *Globalni ekran*, Novi Sad, Akademska knjiga, 2013., 306.

³⁴ Miltojević, Branislav, *Podeljen ekran*, Beograd, Filmski centar Srbije, 2011., 99.

³⁵ http://www.youtube.com/charts/videos_views?gl=US&t=a (1st July, 2013.)

³⁶ Lipovetsky, Gilles, Serroy, Jean, *Globalni ekran*, Novi Sad, Akademska knjiga, 2013., 36.

Today, at times of constant exposure to various and omnipresent screens and constant online availability, only expected to further increase in the future, there are no more obstacles to practicality of watching a movie: it can now be watched anytime and anywhere, alone or in the company. Online, downloaded, streamed, and at all screens available: in theatres, on television, computer, tablet, mobile phone. "The smaller the audience visiting darkened auditoriums, the greater is the desire to record, there is more cinematic narcissism, but also the greater are the expectations of the visual, of hypervisualisation of the world and of oneself. We are not satisfied with watching the "big" movies any more, but we want to watch movies about the moments of our lives and what is happening right now. It is not a denial of film, but the expansion of the film spirit in the globalized *film-vision*. Omniscreen is not degrading the film, on the contrary: it contributes to the expansion of the film perspective, doubling the life of the moving image, creating a general and widespread *film-mania*".³⁷

Amateurism vs. professionalism

One of the most important phenomena of strengthening the new media and digital technology proved to be the so-called democratization of the media and the strengthening of amateurism in various fields: in journalism,³⁸ film, music, software production. Andrew Keen warns that any phenomenon in which the audience has the final word is a very dangerous and harmful one,³⁹ and the victims are not only professionals, because amateurs "diminish the value and take away their jobs", but all users of this "'free' content constantly reaching for our attention".⁴⁰ He argues that information produced by amateurs is unreliable, unverified and that the democratized media are eventually forcing us to become critics and amateur editors, and regard everything we read with a dose of scepticism; we pay for "free" information with our most valuable resource – our time, Keen argues.⁴¹ His opinion is supported by Nicholas Carr, who explains the genesis of the "cult of the amateur" as a result of the combination of cheap and easy-to-operate digital equipment and infinite storage capacity of data in digital form. "The major constraints in supply of creative works – high costs and narrow distribution channels – are disappearing. Because the most common cultural goods consist of words, images or sounds, all of which can be expressed in digital form, they are becoming as cheap to reproduce and distribute as any other in-

³⁷ Ibid, 39.

³⁸ Amateurism is very important in film criticism. Today 'collective grade' on Internet Movie Database is more important than opinion of professional film critic. "Millions of ordinary people are the new creators of taste" wrote Chris Anderson (Anderson, Chris, Dugi rep, Zagreb, Jesenski i Turk, 2008., 120.)

³⁹ Keen, Andrew, Kult amatera, Zaprešić, Fraktura, 2010., 39.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 61.

⁴¹ Ibid

formation product. Many of them are also becoming easier to create, thanks to the software and online data storages and inexpensive production tools such as camcorders, microphones, digital cameras and scanners. Tasks that once required a lot of money and training, from film developing through video editing and graphic design to sound mixing can now be performed by amateurs in their dens, offices and schoolrooms. The proliferation of blogs, podcasts, video clips and mp3 files testifies to the new economics of cultural creation. And all the new digital products, whether fashioned by professionals or amateurs, can find their place in the online store. The virtual shelves of the Internet can expand to accommodate just about anything".⁴²

Understanding the new relationship between the amateurism and professionalism could be the key to understanding the future transformation of the mass media because, as explained by Gilles Lipovetsky and Jean Serroy, proliferation of media offers and expansion of computerized communication change the fact that more individuals have access to the media in hyperindividualistic way following their desires, moods and their individual schedules.⁴³ "Global screen is perceived as an instrument adapted to the special needs of each individual: communication one-to-everyone is followed by all-to-all, mass-media is followed by *self-media*".⁴⁴ We should not be surprised, says Chris Anderson, if some of the most creative and influential works in the next few decades emerge from inspired hobbyists, rather than from traditional commercial sources.⁴⁵

There is no single answer to whether democratization of media does more good or harm, but it is certainly changing the paradigm. Perhaps the time has come to accept the changes and modify the definition of mass media.

Conclusion

Digital technology and the Internet have brought about yet another change in the way we understand film. The existing tendency of visual (over)saturation leads us to conclusion that film is an omnipresent medium, and therefore, due to its persuasiveness, perhaps the most influential. In times when the interest in print media is declining, the radio has lost its influence and the television, while still very relevant, is undergoing an advanced stage of digital convergence, and the same goes for printed media, publishing, music and news agencies, the Internet has, as we have already stated, played a crucial role in the affirmation of film as one of the dominant mass medium of today. It was the Internet, combined with digitalization, that has enabled the omnipresence of film content.

⁴² Carr Nicholas, *The Big Switch: Rewiring the World, from Edison to Google*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2009. str. 150.

⁴³ Lipovetsky, Gilles, Serroy, Jean, *Globalni ekran*, Novi Sad, Akademska knjiga, 2013., 287.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁴⁵ Anderson, Chris, *Dugi rep*, Zagreb, Jesenski i Turk, 2008., 76.

It is important to point out that what we consider to be a film is, in fact, a "total and interconnected combination of characteristics of all film works, film foot-ages and film images of the whole so-called film corpus", states one of the definitions in the Film Lexicon. Most of the films today are made with digital equipment, so it should be kept in mind that perhaps the largest number of films that appear today are short, often non-narrative, even more often amateur... Paradoxically, it seems that the proclaimed 'death of film tape' could mark a new, more active 'life' for the film.

Based on everything stated, film can be considered a mass medium. Perhaps a part of its power lies in the fact that since the very beginning the film has never discriminated against amateurism, while cinema clubs have played an important role in spreading the popularity of film and the preservation of film art. Thanks to accessible and cheap digital equipment films are recorded easily and quickly with cameras or mobile phones, edited on computers, distributed online, and since there is no discrimination of professionals against amateurs, everyone feels invited to participate in the production. There is no doubt that development of new technologies is what the future holds, together with improvement of the existing ones. The aim is, at least when film is in question, to achieve even more realistic representation (perhaps even without the mediation of the screen) and to come up with new profit-making models.

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