Phenomenon of Media Culture as a System of Signs

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Abstract: This article explores the theoretical foundations of media culture as a system of signs in the context of its historical evolution. The language of the media as a sum of different sign systems (texts) has evolved from the "object writing" to written language, from reproducing texts (book printing) to electronic media culture - visual, audial and audiovisual. Contemporary media culture is first of all linked to the development of audiovisual (audio and visual) mass media (D-cinema, satellite TV, multimedia, mobile communications, computer channels, Internet, etc.), which provide a person an opportunity of individual interactive communication with the screen to realize their creative ideas, taking advantage of a "virtual world" and to cognize "another world." Media culture, reproducing reality using the screen is connected with the aesthetics of the frame as a new way of creative thinking, which has become the basis of the latest media systems (Internet computer technologies, online TV, media art, etc.). It is in screen culture where there is the process of integration and synthesis of all previous systems of signs, conditioned by the fact that the new media are the result of the technological progress. The study of the language of different media, its history and transformation, the impact on the process of personality socialization is one of the main challenges of modern cultural studies and media pedagogic. This article explores the theoretical foundations of media culture as a system of signs in the context of its historical evolution. The language of the media as a sum of different sign systems (texts) has evolved from the "object writing" to written language, from reproducing texts (book printing) to electronic media culture – visual, audial, audiovisual. Contemporary media culture reproducing reality with a screen is linked to the aesthetics of the frame. It is precisely in the screening culture that we can witness the process of integration, synthesis of all the previous sign systems that is explained by the fact that the new media are a final outcome of the technical progress.

Key words: Media · Media culture · Media pedagogy · Screening culture · Media text · Semiotics · Sign · Code · Word · Frame · Language of the media

INTRODUCTION

We live in the era determined by researchers in different ways. For some of them it is time of "post-industrial development", for others - "information era," and some scientists define the boundary of XX-XXI centuries as a period of "post-modernization revolution" or "globalization."

One thing is clear: we live in the world of media – the expanding system of mass communications and "information explosion" [1]. Scientific and technological progress, caused by the created global information and communication environment based on the latest digital technology, has an impact on all spheres of human activity.

According to the American sociologist Douglas Rashkoff "the continuously expanding media have become a real habitat, the same real space that is apparently unlocked as the globe was five years ago. This new media reality is called infosphere" [2].

All of the above allows concluding that the phenomenon of information age is the culture of media (media - the plural of the Latin medium - a means, the mediator). Media culture (media culture) can be defined as "a set of information and communication tools, material and intellectual values produced by humanity in the cultural and historical development, contributing to the formation of public consciousness and socialization. Media culture includes both the culture of information production and communication and the culture of its

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perception; it can act both as an indicator of the level of development of the personality capable to read, analyze the media text, engage in media arts and to learn new knowledge through the media, etc." [3].

The modern media culture is, first of all, bound with the intensive development of audiovisual (audio and visual) mass communication media (digital movies, satellite TV, multimedia, mobile communication, computer channels, Internet, etc.), which provide individuals with an opportunity of interactive communication with the screen both to realize the purpose of their creative ideas by taking advantage of a "virtual world" and to cognize the "other."

Media culture has unique role in society - "to be an intermediary between the person and society, government and society, between countries and continents, performing a number of social functions: information, communication, regulatory, ideological, relaxation, aesthetic, integration and creative, etc." [4]. In modern Russia, where more than a quarter of a century, there has been a process of social modernization, the questions of media-institutes formation and the impact of media culture on the public mind are paramount [5].

Studying the system of media culture functioning and the specificity of its impact, we cannot ignore such field of investigation as *semiotics* (from the Greek semeiotike - a sign) - the science on language, which has become one of the most important discoveries of the XX-th century. The subject of semiotics is any object that can be considered a language. "Language - is a sign system, by means of which the human interaction is performed at various levels, including thinking, storage and transmission of information, etc." - that is the interpretation of modern social philosophy [6].

At the root of semiotics there are works of philosophers of the early XX century Charles Peirce [7] and Ferdinand de Saussure [8], the first who explored the nature of language that has resulted in a new scientific discipline studying all sign systems. As an independent science, semiotics emerged in the mid XX century at the intersection of structural linguistics, cybernetics and information theory: it was a period when the means of mass communication, particularly the press, radio, cinema and television intensely developed.

A great contribution to the development of the sign systems of culture has been made by many foreign and Russian researchers: R. Arnheim, A. Bazin, Roland Barthes, M. Bakhtin, V. Bibler, Jean Baudrillard, L. Vygotsky, Claude Levi-Strauss, Yu. Lotman, J. Kristeva, Yu. Tynyanov, Umberto Eco, R. Jacobson, M. Yampolsky, *et al*.

From the information and semiotic point of view media culture has three main aspects: as a system of artifacts (from the Latin arte - artificial and factus - done), as a system of symbols and signs. And "any system that served the purpose of communication, - stated Yu. Lotman - can be defined as language." Applying the methods of linguistics in the study of the language of art, Lotman, as it is known, has proved that "any cultural phenomena should be seen as *texts*, containing information and meaning" [9].

Since Lotman's "text" is the polysemantic notion, from the point of view of modern media culture we mean not only the written report (book, newspaper or journal article), but also any information carrier: film, television or a movie, TV show or music video, web site, etc.

Mediatext had its way of evolution as the whole system of mass communications. So, G.M. McLuhan, one of the pioneers of mediatheory in the history of human civilization and therefore in the history of media culture distinguishes four epochs: 1) preliterate era of barbarism and 2) millennium of phonetic writing and 3) "Gutenberg galaxy" - five hundred years of printing technology and 4) "Marconi Galaxy" - modern electronic civilization [10]. The fifth item in the list is to add a "Galaxy Online" (the definition of the American sociologist M. Castells) [11].

Looking back, we can assume that the new media emerged each time as a way to implement two important human needs: they promised greater freedom of choice and freedom of interaction in the human world.

That is, the media were invented and improved to deliver more diverse information to mass, spatially disperse audience, therefore their products is seen as a phenomenon of mass culture, "amusement" (a term of S. Eisenstein), or "mass pleasure" [12]. The need for mass translation of emotional meanings to life has enlivened them and this task is now carried out effectively by them.

Thus, the specificity of media culture is signs and aggregates of signs ("texts"), in which the social information, i.e. content, meaning and sense, "is encrypted". Therefore, to understand one or another cultural phenomenon means to "read" its invisible subjective meaning. Only the meaningful text becomes a fact of culture [13].

According to the study of Bakhtin, the text may be ideological, but only when it has a basis: the "unity of consciousness" and the unity of "speaking I", which guarantee the truth of one or another ideology. Thus, according to Bakhtin's follower in linguistics and semiotics Yu. Kristeva, "Bakhtin outlines the *crucial line between ideology and text*." However, in her own opinion, "the text (polyphonic) has no proper ideology,

because it does not have a subject (ideological). This is a special system, a platform, where different ideologies come to exsanguinate each other in confrontation" [14].

To correlate text and reality Kristeva offers such an imperative The "expressed and communicated meaning of the text (called "structured phenotext") pronounces and represents a revolutionary action, which is produced by "signification", provided its equivalent at the stage of social reality." Hence there is the conclusion: "Therefore the text takes on a dual place in the reality that generates it - in a matter of language and social history... " [15].

In general, the works by Yu. Kristeva on semanalysis became a sensation some time ago because she introduced the term "intertextuality" in semiotics that was the key to post-modern aesthetics, meaning special dialogic and even polylogical relationship of texts that are constructed as a mosaic of citates.

In other words, the texts of media culture "codifying reality" conserve social memory. At that each group of media types has its own system of signs [16].

To start, let's define a "sign." Modern social philosophy interprets it as follows. "*Sign* is a object that serves for replacement and presentation of another object (property or relation) and used for storing, processing and transmitting the message. *Sign* is an inter-subjective intermediary, the structure-mediator in society" [17]. But for a sign system to function, you need a *code* - "designation of set of rules or constraints providing the activity. The code should be clear to all participants of the communication process and therefore it has a conventional character."

There is a definite difference between the *written, auditory, visually and audio-visual sign systems*.

The fundamental principle here is writing, the system for recording the signs of natural language, spoken language. The invention of iconic systems of recording is one of the greatest achievements of human thought. A particularly important role in the history of culture was played by the emergence and development of *written language*. This fact has given humanity the opportunity to come out of the primitive state, having paved the way for further development of science, technology, the arts, law, etc.

In ancient times the writing seemed a gift to people of higher celestial powers, the first brick, bedrock, "... In the beginning there was the Word and the Word belonged to the God and the Word was God...," this is how the Gospel of John begins.

The origin of writing was the so-called "subject letter" that appeared already in a primitive society using objects to pass messages (for example, an olive branch as

a sign of peace.) Such methods of communication were sometimes used later as well. However, this is only the pre-history of writing. The first stage of its history was pictography (recording by pictorial symbols). The next stage was ideographic script, in which the pictures become more and more simplified and schematic in character (characters). And finally, the third stage is alphabetic coding, which uses a relatively small set of graphic signs, meaning not words, but the sounds of speech that constitute these words. Music recording - musical notation developed analogously.

The emergence and development of writing creates fundamentally new possibilities for cultural progress. In a narrow classical sense writing involves breaking up the flow of speech into words, sounds and letters. Moreover, the letter is a basic sign of writing. Recording provides the ability to continuously increase the vocabulary of a language. Qualitatively new ways of processing, perception and communication become possible.

The creation and consolidation of language norms slows the pace of historical change of language that expands its communicative possibilities.

The amount of information circulating in the society increases immeasurably. Unwritten languages could only provide a transfer of the amount of knowledge that has been stored in folklore - myths, oral epics and proverbs. This volume was limited by the abilities of memory of an individual acting as a priest or a storyteller. Writing allows the society to broadcast information, the amount of which is much greater than the amount of an individual's memory. There are libraries that act as a repository of knowledge and make it available for future generations. The time and spatial boundaries of communication are removed: communication between people who live at great distances from each other and in different historical times become possible. This allowed learning a lot about the life of peoples who disappeared long ago - the ancient Egyptians, Hittites, the Incas, to restore the Roman system of law a few centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire and to form the basis of European jurisprudence.

Due to the writing the quality of information stored in the society changes. The writing enables capturing and storing it. This opens up opportunities for the development of creativity, specialization of intellectual efforts of its members in the directions that go beyond the generally accepted views and interests.

Writing opened the way for the replication of texts - typography and it in turn became the condition for the preservation of linguistic traditions and continuity of culture.

In the history of philosophy, however, there are different points of view on the writing and character. The ancient Greek philosophers, such as Plato, Aristotle underestimated the function of writing, interpreting it as a service component of language. Saussure excluded writing from the scope of linguistics as a phenomenon of external representation.

According to the concept of French philosopher Jacques Derrida, "the said words are the symbols of mental experience, while the written symbols are only the symbols of spoken words" [18]. Generally in the postmodern maxima of J. Derrida expressed in his "Positions" and other works, a letter, sensual inscription has always been considered by the Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, breath, verb and logos. The essence of Derrida's concept is as follows. Between the man and the truth there is a very significant series of intermediaries mainly in the sphere of language. And hence the great sign (oral and written) is "the sign of language", "a track of a track", "intermediary link" in the endless chain of references. And again: "The era of the sign in essence is *theological* and therefore it may never end" [19].

In the study of communication it is necessary to make a distinction between homogenous messages based on the combination of different sign systems. *Writing* is an important way to transpose the speech in a different environment. The text in linguistics acts as a sequence of word characters that form the message. As it is known in the artistic text according to Yu. Lotman, there are five functions: 1) a message from the information carrier to the subject, 2) a collective memory capable of continuous replenishment and 3) communication of the reader with himself thereby the text actualizes some personal aspects and 4) the text becomes an interlocutor, 5) communication between the text and cultural context [20].

Written language has a trend to develop its own structural properties. This allowed Yu. Kristeva to look "beyond the language," to identify the "preverbal" level of existence of the subject, where the unconscious is dominating undividedly and to go to the destruction of the monolithic institutes of sign, displacing their own interests from linguistics and semiotics to "semanalysis." According to Kristeva, the text needs to be "dynamised" and differentiated and the border between "genotext" and "phenotext" that relate to each other as the surface and depth, as the symbolism and the formula should be indicated. In other words, the "*genotext* is the process of signification, structuring, etc. and *phenotext* is a structure that obeys the rules of communication and presupposes both a subject of enunciation and its destination" [21].

Various types of relations between the signifier (perceived) and the signified (implied) remain the obligatory starting point of any classification of iconic structures.

There is a dramatic difference between the auditory (hearing) and visual (visual) media. In the first systems, including radio, record player, tape recorder, CD-Roms, etc., as the structural factors sound, speech, music, vocals are brought to the foreground; here an important factor is the time acting in two dimensions - consistency and simultaneity. Structuring of the second systems (visual) is associated with the space. *At that in the traditional visual arts (painting, drawing, poster) the iconic sign systems dominate.*

Screen (audiovisual) media culture reproducing reality is associated with "photogeny" (a term of the French explorer Louis Delluc) and with the aesthetics of the frame. This is the feature not only of the photography, but also of the most effective means of audiovisual communication (film, TV, video, animation, computer graphics, Internet, etc.).

"There is a process of integration, synthesis and all the preceding sign systems, conditioned also by the fact that the new forms of media culture are the product of technological progress. Their sign system is influenced by the general laws of development of technical culture associated with technique of reality shooting. On this basis the "second vision – the new type of creative thinking that integrates voice and visual form is formed" [22].

While in the written culture the basis of the sign system is the *letter and word*, in audiovisual culture "the first brick" is the *frame*.

Depending on how the "inclusion" in a "stream of events" is performed by the photographic method of reproduction you can distinguish between the photographic, cinematic and television forms of the culture of a frame.

Photographic Culture of the Frame is associated with the photo frame (still picture), transmitting the immediate impression from the actual event.

The Cinematographic Culture of the Frame uses the frame as a "cell of montage" (S. Eisenstein), which not only gives immediate impression from the event, but also discovers its meaning.

The Television Culture of the Frame is associated with the use of the frame when the viewer is directly included in the "stream of events "and sees it from "inside" [23].

Understanding of the potential of imaginative film frame was associated primarily with the understanding of the frame not as an element of montage, but its cell. Eventually this led to the formation of a new way of creative thinking that was the most adequate to the new vision of reality, propagated through the use of aesthetics of instant photo frame. Not accidentally S. Eisenstein and V. Pudovkin saw that technical "primary phenomenon" in the photographic method of reality reproduction on which basis the poetics of cinema appeared and turned to the face of time and history capable to help viewers to learn how to "think dialectically" [24], that is to analyze "the recorded time" [25].

There is no need to say that the use of a picturesque potential of a film frame and the development of ideas about the montage as a way of thinking of the film artists has revolutionized the entire poetics of cinematograph. This is well known. For us it is important to emphasize that all this led to the discovery of the fundamental laws of cinematographic creation, that allowed us not only to deeply understand the nature of this new art, but also its inextricable link with the traditions of the world classics that found its concrete expression in the brilliant characterization of montage by S. Eisenstein: "... the exact split of excited emotional speech" [26].

As for television, along with the active use of specific picturesque television frame it becomes increasingly clear that the reporting, which for a long time was considered only as a particular method of photography (i.e., purely technologically), or as a genre, that has become widespread in journalism, photography and cinematographic journalism and occupies some interim position between the realms of fiction and non-fiction - and at the same time a special form of aesthetic speech and "reporting" is a specific form of tele-language. It is in the reporting as an "effect of being" where the peculiarity of photo-vision and montage thinking of television is realized.

So on the basis of screen technologies (snapshots, montage, reporting, effect of being) a new aesthetics of photography, film-and television creativity appears and the new form of media culture - the "culture of frame", which has become the foundation of the newest mediasystems: computer technologies and advanced media systems: computer technology, online TV, media art, etc.

As for the analysis of the language of the new screen culture, its characteristics are given in many of the works of R. Arnheim, A. Bazin, W. Benjamin H. Krakauer, G.M. McLuhan, J. Derrida, J. Deleuze, E. Weitzman, N. Kirillova, G. Pondopulo, K. Razlogova, M. Yampolsky, as well as classics of filmmaking both Russian (S. Eisenstein, V. Pudovkin, A. Tarkovsky) and foreign (M. Antonioni, I. Bergman, F. Fellini, etc.).

The essence of many thoughts is as follows.

Since aesthetics of screen media is developing on a unified framework, which is the culture of frame, just similarly the language of photography, film and television (with all the formal difference between each of the three forms) has common features. Unlike those linguistic forms that are used in the classical art (they do not have a common ground, they are local), the language is universal frame. Frame not only can be photographic, film or television, but at the same time can serve as an iconic, symbolic and verbal sign, without being identical to any of them. As it is the frame is formal, i.e. it does not have any specific image content, which enables using the language of the frame, not only in art but also in science, media-pedagogy and other disciplines [27].

Of course, the sign universality of the frame is widely used in photography, film and television work, where it is imparted with features of the artistic image, the dramatic scenes, figurative element of the story and yet, for all these transformations, it keeps the moment, which is absent and cannot be "an artistic picture" created by the language of traditional arts. This is what is called event, visuality, "the rehabilitation of the physical reality" [28] and what distinguishes the screen media culture that is based on a synthesis of technique and creative work, from the classical culture.

That's why learning a language of different media, its history and transformation, the impact on the process of socialization of personality is one of the main challenges of modern cultural studies and media pedagogics.

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