

Image Worshipping

The role of television as a subjugation mechanism.

Panos Papadimitropoulos

Different cultures view the world in different ways, especially if we take into consideration the large number and diversity of the means to engage in conversation beyond speech.

Just like language, each communication medium creates a unique way to converse, providing a new field of thought, expression and sensitivity. In our culture, each image type, whether as a photograph or in its television version, is a historically specific paradigm of creating a certain instance of what we call a worldview. What is not so easy, though, is to decode what it is the image proposes, that is what kind of worldview it creates.

In the places it emerged and spread, written language had an impact on spoken language, in a way that prioritized and promoted analytical thinking. In a culture dominated by print, public discourse was marked by cohesion and order regarding the organization of facts and ideas.

Spoken language was enhanced by perception oriented to print, by a way of thinking, a method of knowledge, and a method of formulation that favor the ability to think conceptually, deductively and coherently.

Since then, written language, which is based on the sequence of sentences, has been enhancing what we might call analytical management of knowledge.

Quite the opposite happened when still photography emerged at the end of the 19th century and, later on, when motion pictures and television became dominant. In contrast to words and sentences, photography does not present an idea or a concept about the world; it rather presents the world as an object.

Photography as an objective particle of space-time denotes that a certain person was at a certain place or that something happened. Its testimony is unshakable but it does not offer judgment, neither evaluative nor assumptive. Photography is mainly a world of facts, not a dispute on facts or on the inferences that may arise.

The preconception is, as Susan Sontag noted, that “photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it.” Photography doesn’t challenge you to disagree, it doesn’t provide extended and concrete comments. It does not offer assumptions susceptible to questioning, and is thus irrefutable.

The way in which photography records experience is also different from the way experience is imprinted upon spoken and written language. In language it only acquires meaning when presented as a sequence of sentences. The meaning is distorted when a word or a sentence is stripped of its context, when a listener or a speaker is cut off from what has been said before and after.

The goal of photography, on the other hand, is to isolate the images from their context, so that they can be visible in a different way. In a world of photographs there is no beginning, middle and end, because in photographs moments are uprooted from their context. The world is fragmented. There is no past, only present, which does not need to be part of a story in order to be narrated.

With the Graphic Revolution (photography, printing, posters, drawings, advertisements) the new way of reproducing images has not simply served as a complement to language, but as a substitute, as the main way of interpretation, understanding, and controlling reality. And in no other field has image been used so effectively as in television.

When facts, given in a fragmented way, are turned into a source of entertainment, the news resembles a trivia quiz, telling us everything and nothing about the world. In this sense, various experts on television find it hard to accept—even to acknowledge—that not all forms of speech can pass from one medium to the other, that is, they don't know that not everything is televisable.

That is precisely what Neil Postman, in his 1985 *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, points out—that television “brings personalities into our hearts, not abstractions into our heads.” So, what is it that television image offers us one could wonder. Since the most important thing someone learns is always relevant to the way in which they learn, television trains people by teaching them to do what is asked through watching television.

First, by eradicating the concept of sequence and continuity (since every television program must be an integrated independent package) television undermines the view that sequence and continuity are related to thinking itself.

Second, each piece of information, story or idea should be given in a way that renders it immediately accessible, since the prevailing principle is pleasure rather than self-improvement of the spectator. Therefore, all complexity in ideas presented is strictly forbidden.

Third, the televised picture is always in the form of a narrative, and, precisely because nothing is presented if it cannot become an image and be presented in a staged context, any attempt to seriously cite ideas is invalidated. This of course results in reducing the possibilities of having an educating process and in leaving space for the new supercategory of entertainment.

Understanding television simply as a technology, we overlook that—in modern Western cultures, at least—it has certain predetermined tendencies that eradicate any claim on its ideological neutrality. Namely, we overlook that it is transformed into a medium since it uses a predetermined code of symbols, it finds its place within a specific socially structured context, and it infiltrates political and financial affairs.

In particular, when it comes to informing on multiple levels, the television image can create emotional impressions but not opinions, as it claims. Misinformation then means misleading information, aimless, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial; information that creates the illusion we know something but is actually disorientating. At this point we do not say that we are deprived of authentic information, but that we lose the sense of what it means to be well informed.

When culture was based on spoken and printed language, information was important for, among other things, the possibilities it offered for action. But the possibilities to inform today make the relation between information and action abstract and remote.

For the first time, people in the so-called developed countries face a problem of information saturation, which also means they face a reduction of their ability to be social and political entities.

In this context, the problem with the television image is not that it projects incoherence and insignificance—besides, the phrase “serious television” is a contradiction in terms—nor is it that television speaks only in terms of entertainment.

The problem is that television tries to turn public discourse (and therefore parts of culture) into a vast arena of entertainment. It is of course highly probable that in the end this will be pleasant and that we will even like it. This is exactly what Aldous Huxley feared regarding our future when he wrote *Brave New World* in 1932.

In Huxley's world there are no guards or 1984-ish Ministries of Truth; since tyranny is imposed with a smile, there is no need for a structured ideology. The only thing needed for it to be established is a society which with reverence believes in the causality of progress.

In this case, culture is not turned into a prison—as in the Orwellian scenario—but into a parody. The truth is that culture is infinitely more complex and resistant, it has to do with the meanings we use in every social practice or relationship, and that is why it is so hard to afflict it with the power of image or undermine it through void public discourse.

We shouldn't forget, however, that in Huxley's fictional world, what tormented people was not that they would laugh instead of think, but that they didn't know why they were laughing and why they had stopped thinking.

Panos Papadimitropoulos is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of the Aegean in Greece.

fifth Estate

Panos Papadimitropoulos
Image Worshipping
The role of television as a subjugation mechanism.

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/395-winter-2016-50th-anniversary/image-worshipping
Fifth Estate #395, Winter 2016 — 50th Anniversary

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net