27

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:
White Noise
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source:
Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 27 (2020)
URL:
https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/27-formatting-of-late-television/white-noise
doi:
https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2020.27.2229
publisher:
Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture
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keywords:

image theory; white noise; television; video

abstract:

The translation of Grzegorz Królikiewicz's article Biały szum. The article was first published in Polish 1981 in the monthly journal Kino [Cinema] (issue 1).

Grzegorz Królikiewicz - Polish film director, screenwriter, and pedagogue. Director of documentary and feature films: Through and Thorugh (1973), The Dancing Hawk (1977) and Case Pekosinski (1993) among others. Cooperated with Polish Television, taught at the Łódź Film School. Film theoretician and autohor of several analyses of movies. His films were awarded at Mannheim, Karlovy Vary and Gdańsk film festivals.

White Noise

Introduction

I would like to make a disclaimer which should protect me from the accusation that I absolutize the role of television. When I speak, in the context of television, of reality, I only mean certain, partial aspects of reality, not reality as a whole.

The metal and plastic components of a television set are structured in such a way that they can only receive what the television broadcasting station, also made of metal and plastic components, has previously been fed, and not all that in fact happens. Meanwhile, in space and time, there exist sounds as well as images which have not yet been heard or seen, since an entire range of high-frequency waves has not yet been studied or used for our communication.

The cosmos

I will now quote a fragment typical for the current paradigm in the exact sciences:

> It was the spring of 1965 when Arno A. Penzias and Robert W. Wilson first heard the echo of the creation of the Earth – although they did not yet know it. Penzias and Wilson were working on the construction of a special receiving antenna at a research facility of the famous Bell Telephone Company. Those were still the days of "Echo" satellites, giant balls made of paper-thin aluminum foil whose progress could be observed against the night sky with the naked eye, since their polished surfaces reflected sunlight like a mirror. "Echoes" were, true to their name, "passive" satellites. They made no measurements of their own, nor did they send any return messages to the Earth. They weighed no more than 60 kilograms and were launched, in the form of folded packets,

1,500 kilometers high, where gas contained in them inflated them into balls 30 meters in diameter.

These giant balls floating high in the Earth's atmosphere reflected not only sunlight. They were supposed to reflect, first and foremost, radio signals toward the surface of the Earth. These signals allowed for an accurate measurement of satellite trajectories, as well as their minor deviations from the norm due to resistance from the highest layers of the stratosphere occurring even at this height. According to this principle, from 1960 to 1966, the "Echo" model was used to study the conditions prevalent in the highest layers of the Earth's atmosphere.

Scientists constructed special antennas whose function was to capture the radio signals reflected by these balloon satellites. These antennas were able to receive even very weak signals, and were designed to eliminate, as much as was possible, all interference. The antenna built by Penzias and Wilson looked like a giant horn, over ten meters long: on one end was a sizable opening of six by eight meters, while its other end was shaped like a funnel leading to the actual measurement apparatus. The whole device slightly resembled the old-fashioned ear trumpets which used to serve the audibly impaired. Its function was, after all, principally the same.

What in the spring of 1965 drove Penzias and Wilson to near despair was *excess radio noise*, interference inside the receiver. Despite all efforts, the two experts were unable to locate the source of this noise. It should have come relatively easily to them since, for all they knew, the cause lay in the device itself. Whichever way they turned their mobile antenna, the noise remained the same. It simply did not seem plausible to them that the interference might be coming from outside, and yet they could not find any flaw in the receiving device.

By chance, the difficulty experienced by the two communications technicians came to the knowledge of physicist Robert H. Dicke. Dicke was affiliated with the renowned Princeton University, where he had been studying cosmological problems for years. For this reason, his lab had been equipped with state-of-the-art gear for the study and measurement of radio frequency cosmic radiation. Dicke was therefore familiar with the problems pursued at Bell Telephone's research facility. Moreover, the two institutions were located in close vicinity to each other, and one day the scientists met.

As soon as Dicke learned about the details of the "interfering noise," which had been wrecking Penzias and Wilson's nerves for months, he immediately alerted his colleagues and they visited Bell Telephone's research facility in Holmdel. What Dicke was told and what he saw there dispersed all his initial doubt: the mysterious noise which bugged his colleagues at Holmdel did come from the outside after all: it was a cosmic phenomenon which he had predicted years before based on theoretical considerations.

Dicke and others had been looking for detailed proof of the existence of this kind of cosmic radiation. Meanwhile, Penzias and Wilson accidentally stumbled upon the corresponding phenomenon and did not realize, until the Princeton team's arrival, what treasure they had found. What their equipment detected on wavelength 7.3 cm, the bizarre noise which seemed to be coming with equal strength from all directions, was not "interference." It was an electronic reflection of the mighty lightning, the Big Bang, which marked the beginning of the universe around thirteen billion years ago. The "interference" discovered by Penzias and Wilson was the first tangible point of support for the view that the universe is not infinite, either in space or in time. [...]

> The whole affair, however, was not as accidental as it may seem. The right message reached Dicke, who could shed light on the issue, by accident, but the very fact that the employees of Bell Telephone captured the remnants of Big Bang radiation with their equipment was not. After all, this remnant radiation is not that difficult to trace. We know now that it contributes to the "optical noise," the "snowfall" we see on the screen of a television set when, after a program is over, the set is still on and "idling." In this form, the echo of the creation of the world penetrates our homes until this day[1] – it does so as "white noise."

The quotation from Ditfurth's *In the Beginning There Was Hydrogen* does not yet seem to have changed anything in the hitherto held conception of television; however, one expects that it will. What is the nature of this expectation?

Ever since the discovery described by Ditfurth, it has been known that the human species is equipped with a device with which it can communicate with the liminal moment of not only its own history, or the history of life in general, but with the history of the universe. This device is television.

Does this altered perspective on the medium necessitate a rethinking of television, the invention of a new model?

One wing in this onslaught of thought could be reflection derived from cosmology. The frame of this wing now spreads from the universe's zero point, that is, from the mathematically and physically accessible past, to the diffuse plane of the present. However, if we venture to conjoin, in the imagination, the edges of this plane with that temporally distant zero point which marks the beginning of the universe, we will obtain a number of lines making up the dense web of the past. This geometric vision entails the following theoretical consequence: since we already have a device through which we can communicate with the zero point, which is the tip here, it must also be possible for us to

communicate with every point on every line linking the zero point with the present.

Of course, a qualification is called for in the context of the dream of emitting all of this on the television screen: at issue here are not points in the past but their projections onto the plane of the present. After all, what we see on the screen is not the Big Bang but its echo – that is, its projection onto the space-time of today. The same must hold for every event between now and the liminal point of the past, the zero point.

If this is theoretically possible, one needs only to wait for the following technical discovery: all that has happened can be repeated, like an echo. The point is not the sensational contents of this past but suitable reflection on the phenomenon of television functioning this way. The cosmological wing of this reflection is immediately obvious due to the scale at which the time axis itself is captured here: as much as half of what may be referred to as the cosmological model of the universe is now squeezed into the television screen.

The metaphor of the cosmos is therefore, on one wing, television, with its recently discovered (and as yet undiscovered but theoretically viable) possibilities.

The recipient of the television broadcast, anchored in content via information based on emotion and logic, must sense, in his deep and subconscious psychological structure, another hidden aspect of the broadcast: the mystery of white noise transfused from the past to the present. Our deepest intuition must therefore at least brush against the distant echo of the moment when the entirety of the universe's energy was packed into several quanta, or even one.

The subconscious has a kind of mysterious connection with that ur-quantum! With the primordial atom, whose story is told to the subconscious by white noise. At the end of this story the subconscious hits, as it were, a vertical, opaque wall at the edge of the past, where all axes and all senses end: if the subconscious

is already there, where the world began from a single quantum, concepts of space and time beyond that wall cannot make any sense.

If this hypothesis about the journey made by the subconscious, via television, into the depth of one of the world's axes is accurate, then does our intuition venture, by identifying itself with white noise on the television screen, to sneak behind that wall too, whence one could see that the beginning of the world occurred slightly before the beginning of space and time? This is a metaphysical question.

Television is not only a metaphor for the process spreading from the ur-beginning of the universe and through its expansion; it is also, indirectly, a fascinating witness to the past of the ur-atom before its Big Bang. With time, there begins an expansion whereby the radius of the universe grows exponentially until – in the future – plus infinity, the statistical model will dissolve into a void: the expansion of the universe will lead to a decrease in the density of matter, yielding density equal to zero, and the world will become empty. It is precisely this nothingness of the future that is unacceptable for the subconscious, as much as the nothingness of the past of the universe – before the universe – also is...

The obstruction of the subconscious would stem from the possibility on the part of the psyche, facilitated by television, of tracing these extreme cosmological results which paralyze it. The echoes of the beginning of the world in the form of white noise are mainly significant for us in psychological terms.

Accustomed to our own existence, embedded so seamlessly in the existence of the world, we become, by television's fault, anxious at the vision of an existence which is not yet there, and which is only beginning: we are hereby pushed back by thirteen billion years. We then sense that our existence and the existence of the world are an adventure and not something obvious – a question in need of justification and not a trivial proposition

about the best of worlds, the wealthiest civilization, or the most correct ideology.

The echo of the Big Bang is heard and seen by us in the moment of an idiotic zoning-out; when the television station ends its broadcast for the night, it shocks our indifference toward metaphysics.

There is, however, a more striking (because more concrete) pole to this metaphysical shock. This pole is a mere electronic installation, an elementary, primary installation almost imposed by television: camera – lamp – video cassette recorder – screen – lamp. It is a transfer from lamp to lamp.

The installation: a camera coupled with a VCR and a screen, a camera gazing right into the screen, without disclosing its frame. In professional jargon this is called "excitation." The generator of the present (the transfer from lamp to lamp) is reduced, even though it passes through time, to the point where lines running in or out of the ground converge – lines which do not imitate anything. This can be compared to a conch shell pressed against the ear, in which the principle of "standing sound" is born. Perhaps we are dealing here with a trace of some kind of *perpetuum mobile*... and an illustration of the fiction which the space of television is?

The generator of the real present time is simultaneously the generator of the overtly artificial image, which does not reproduce anything anymore. So, the spatial aspect of video is the manifestation of fiction.

We experience the unreality of the televisual space as a space generated and accounted for by means of electronic installation alone.

What is the meaning of this change of the real spatial character of our cognitive experience into an artificial space?

Hitherto, the great medium of experience has been the journey. The reality of space in this kind of cognition is best emphasized by the motif of the journey of initiation, present in all civilizations.

Here, human experience is gained stage by stage, in a qualitatively variable space which is gradually conquered – first new and foreign, and then, through frequently repeated activity, closer. This is the criterion of the reality of space. Such journeying in search of knowledge is fundamentally different from hearing and telling of the quest for knowledge – as different as experience is from mere imagination. The space of experience in physiological movement, the rhythm of a journey – this is the world before the era of television. In order to know anything about a place, one must be there in person.

The "space" shown thanks to television is a phantom of the universe, merely summoned, a universe about which one can know something without being in it physiologically, and thus without being in it really. The kind of cognition facilitated by television destines us to the absorption of unreal space. Might it be that television is the most digestible lesson organized for us, aimed at showing the fact that the world as such might be unrealistic – that it does not fit into the formula of realism devised by the empiricism of Western Europe?

The suspicious Eastern thought that the world is an illusion may one day gain everyday sanction here in the West too, perhaps in some future primer, once elementary education has been enhanced by the addition of relativistic data stemming from astronomy, cosmology, and some of their observations, like the one that the stars we see may not exist anymore, since they are so distant from us in light years that they shine even when they no longer are... They are mere echoes of their past existence, although they pretend still to be.

Television can thus be seen as a rehab treatment aimed at addressing habitual intoxication by the reality of the world – reality concocted, half and half, from rationalism and empiricism.

Hence, television, structurally and somehow naturally, by turning space felt as real into one felt as conventional, tames relativism for us on the largest scale: something seems still to exist, although it does so only due to the principle of inertia... Television brings about the philosophical and psychological effects of arriving at an artificial space. Here they are.

Ego

My identity has also found metaphorical expression in the form of an electronic installation based on the following positive feedback mechanism: I, the author, broadcast myself to a camera which transfers my image onto a screen, which I, the recipient, receive as myself.

Video thus appears as a miracle of the immediacy of all analysis. A miracle without precedent in history. Never before could man "immediately" induce an image which would play in front of his eyes constantly, with colossal speed. Colossal or not, it has a speed. It is therefore conceivable. And here we must venture to build a gloss for this entire principle of video identity. Is it really an identity?

In order to even begin to understand the sense of this question, one must first ask about the nature of the phenomenon called the "video mirror." Is it a faithful reflection, and therefore an identity, or is it a false self-image, and thus the region of an elusive error which can nonetheless dynamize self-knowledge?

What is a video mirror? It is not a spatial reflection, because it is not a reverse image: there is no spatial axis between the subject and his image; however, it is a reflection, but of what kind? Before we answer this question, we must realize that there is a gap between the "now" of the subject and the "now" of his image. This gap is where the axis of symmetry lays – a temporal, not a spatial one. The temporal axis of symmetry between the present time of the subject and the time of the recently passed present (that is, the time of the subject's image) runs tightly

through this gap between the present and the minimal, experimentally determinable distance from now to the past. This temporal axis is tangent to the "is" of the subject and the "is" of his image. The gap where the axis lies is an engram of the temporal differences between the subject and his image analyzed and uncovered here: the flow of time between the section of the subject's existence and a corresponding section of his image.

This model is strikingly similar to the Sartrean existential rupture – another gap. The smallest distance of time between the corresponding moments of the subject and the subject's image sets the smallest unit of human experiential time graspable in existential analysis. Moreover, it seems also to be a metaphor of the psychoanalytical relationship pertaining to the subject's primal self-recognition.

This metaphor becomes manifest once we realize more deeply that what we here call the temporal axis of symmetry is in fact an asymmetry, but mistaken for symmetry. The metaphor of error in this self-recognition stems from the very principle of the uncertainty of time equal to the engram by which the image of the subject is pushed back into the past, relative to the subject's present. Primal self-recognition was first construed as an error situated on the temporal axis of one's own biography by the psychoanalyst Lacan, who spoke of the mirror stage and who presented the order of the imagination as a psychoanalytical stage.

I would now like to explain the congruence of what I have revealed in the above analysis of symmetry – the asymmetry of the video mirror – with the sensational discovery made by Lacan. Lacan proposed consideration of a dramatic event taking place in a child at around 16–18 months of age as a form of primal identification with the region of the self. The child, under specific

experimental conditions, perceives itself as an embryo, in the mirror of time, and thus as a homogenous image of its own past.

As a consequence, the ego is formed as a falsely imagined entity – falsely because it is pushed back along the temporal axis. Such an imagining alienates the subject into his own image, for which, paradoxically, the subject would be an anticipation – an anticipation of the image of maturation.

The mirror identification with the image of one's self, via video, is of course quantitatively very different from the child's confrontation with its image as an embryo in the mirror of time.

The video confrontation between the ego and the alter ego, which only differ in time by the size of the engram revealed in my analysis, is thus always a **secondary identification** relative to the Lacanian **primal identification**, although it is a repetition of the primary false recognition he theorized – the video confrontation is qualitatively similar to the primal recognition in that it too is false.

Psychoanalytically speaking, video technology serves the purpose of affirming those layers of personality which form during the mirror stage. Yet the experience of **affirmation** oscillates with the sense that I am at the same time **crushed** by the temporal split in me which, as a Sartrean rupture, is slowly palpable, and which forces me to wait patiently, albeit in painfully increasing tension, for another round of waiting. I become my own anxiety image identical to the psychoanalytical archetype of my persecutor...

Video art thus appears to be both an object and a catalyst of fear – in which it is a presence within non-presence. It is a lack introduced into being.

The analysis carried out above implies that, when the world comes to us as an unreal image, and time is experienced as the present, it actually comes late, and everything is half-present and half-non-present, like a specter, and we too are then specter-like. This has consequences which become encoded in

the psyche: am I real as I continually strive to verify myself in my own image which is an erroneous recognition?

In these circumstances, the paradox is asserted that to study a video installation is really to study the world. Such study is also the method to once again locate in me (this time in the formula of an engram equal to the Sartrean rupture) the time of the world. Video is therefore, as shown in the analysis, a most complex machine: a time-image, since the video machine is itself the image of our consciousness. That is because we learn about our consciousness through video.

This means, among other things, that no general theory of civilization can be formulated without the change in consciousness delivered, as though in a vicious cycle, by the video image.

Civilization

In the universe, entropy is increasing, by which energy is degraded, structure disintegrated, and information diminished. Matter is headed toward a monstrous – one would like to say – self-oblivion. Meanwhile, what goes on in the world of man owing to tools such as television?

Pressure from a special kind of automatism is felt here: against universal disintegration, we are able, by means of electronic installations, to collect components, to build structures. We improve our cybernetic clocks. Television turns out to be irreplaceable as a means of strictly determining calendars for entire societies. But cybernetics, the explanatory function of these clocks, tells us something more: that every instance of information production is in fact a narrowing of information. Once "everything is permitted," information ceases to inform; once enslaved, information will enslave us. This is why man, the child of the universe, is as much a slave to the silt from which he

was formed as he is to the precisely formulated rules of collective life.

By civilization, I mean exactly the method of organizing collective life. This approach has nothing to do with the vulgar determination of civilization – opposed to culture – as the technical or material level of a given society.

There are several civilizations penetrated by television, and one must immediately ask why. Why is there not just one civilization for the entire human species?

The approach to civilization I introduced above has a normative and thus a functionally informational aspect. The sharp inter-civilizational distinction has a cybernetic justification: as a necessary informational narrowing which will give in effect the possibility of the maximal production and transfer of information within a range circumvented by the outer boundary of a given civilization. Hence, the medium, by itself, can only serve such a narrowed informational system, which it cannot expand; on the contrary, it narrows it since it operates on narrowed information. Therefore, in the civilizational context, television is, by virtue of its own structure, a device which merely exaggerates the informational differences between various civilizations. As much as an electronic installation cannot create a real past or an authentic, unmistakably human identity, it cannot generate any new proposal of civilizational synthesis either. Otherwise it would be a creative machine with regard to the human species, and this is not the case. We may therefore say that television reveals, with remarkable perspicuity, the status quo of the human species: the very civilizational differences.

I think that in creative work on electronic installations we encounter two truly great limitations. Firstly, the cosmic silt from which man and his spiritual inductions are built is something different than the metal and plastic parts of television equipment. The sieve of metal and plastic structures squanders a great deal of informational possibilities which could perhaps

blur out the differences between civilizations. One of these mythical possibilities is of course the broadcast of the future, which could radically reformulate the entire problem of civilizational difference. However, let us not demand mystical powers from a machine. Here, we, the artists, sense the edge of video's possibilities.

Secondly, television is the child of the scientific paradigm, and the most expansive advertisement of this paradigm – it is simply its multiplied identity. It is therefore the perfect expression of the current state (or maybe merely the "yesterday") of the pattern of the apprehension of reality.

Civilizational reality is a division stemming from the principle of the limitation of information for the sake of its intensification. Like a giant mirror, television is an image of such a reality. Just like video, it is an image of the ego.

Therefore, the contemporary utopias of one unitary television civilization cannot have originated from authentic reflection on the structure of the medium itself. These simulations were generated in old universities, which did not feed on the constructions of informational actualities but on utopias even older than themselves. In contemporary utopias one feels not so much finesse, or an intuition predisposed toward catching the televisual medium in new cognitive traps, as one does an obstinate continuation of the tradition of the old type of cognition: initiatory journeys to unknown worlds and their physical conquest as the only mode of civilizational integration.

In order for television not to serve as an inappropriate tool in this kind of crime – an annexation of one civilization by another – its instrumental limitations embedded in the metal and plastic components must be lifted, so that television may become a psionic machine, or alternatively, its governing scientific paradigm must be changed.[2] Then, it will cease to be this television. And that is the point. With these final conclusions,

we stand at the threshold of a new paradigm – the paradigm of the imagination.

1 Fragment quoted after the Polish translation of Hoimar von Ditfurth's *Im Anfang Was der Wasserstoff* [*In the Beginning There Was Hydrogen*]: Hoimar von Ditfurth, *Na początku był wodór*, trans. Anna D. Tauszyńska (Warsaw: PIW, 1978), 37–39, 71. The English rendition is mine [translator's note].

2 The psionic machine works in feedback with the mind of its human operator, capable of extrasensory perception. The operator adjusts his vibrations to those emanated from a material sample placed inside the device, and thereby affects the vibrations of the remainder of the matter represented by the sample, often located at a great distance from the device. The psionic machine functions as a transmitter or a receiver and does not need to draw energy from traditional sources; it is not based on the law of causality but probably on that of analogy – it is thus a structure which goes beyond the scientific paradigm. Cf. Joseph F. Goodavage, "The Incredible Hieronymus Machine," in: *Future Science: Life Energies and the Physics of Paranormal Phenomena*, eds. John White and Stanley Krippner (New York: Anchor Books, 1977), 386–403.