

Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without the knowledge of the way media reshape our environment. We are more and more used to wars that are initiated in primetime, to presidents who visit the troops for Thanksgiving with fake Turkeys, to football players who are more glamorous and photogenic than good players, to armies which use inflatable tanks to give a powerful impression, to know all the details of the sexual affair of a president or to people who agrees in being operated in front of the cameras...

*“We have gone from the public space to the public image. The traditional city is organised around a public place, agora, forum or square. Starting with the 20th century, this space has been occupied by meeting rooms. Just think of the role of cinema in society over the last 40 years or of television nowadays. The primary city is a city in which what predominates is the public space, it is topical, whereas in the 20th century the city is no longer so bound up with this. We go from the theatre-city to the cinema-city and then to the tele-city. From a topical space to a teletopical space, in which the real time of the broadcasting of an event is imposed on the real space of the event itself. Tiananmen Square in 1989 was an extraordinary revelation. Here we had a teletopical event of the mass communications media as important as the landing on the moon twenty years before, in 1969.”*¹ With this declaration, Paul Virilio sketches a perfect portrait of what we might define today as the global public sphere, determined by the leading role of electronic technologies of communication and information, which redraw the system of relations that connects the history of private life to a dynamic system of global information, and which reduces factors such as location to secondary status.

Actually, up to the time of the pinnacle of heavy industry as the leading economic factor, information or knowledge had been clearly located on specific places, administrated and communicated by specific people. With the rise global media, networks and communication, those places had become more abstract and the administration of these resources had become more anonymous. Likewise, chronological time – by nature extended – has been transformed into an intensive time of instantaneous novelties in which the individual, momentary gaze is more important than memory.

The global public sphere and the role played by the media in the (re)creation and (re)definition of reality have a great impact on the present. All the media reshape us completely. They are so persuasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences, that they leave no part of us untouched or unaffected.

¹ VIRILIO, Paul. “Dromología: la lógica de la carrera. Una conversación con Giacío Daghini”, in *Media Culture*. Claudia Giannetti (ed.). L’Angelot, Barcelona, 1995 (p. 78)

We live in a processed world. Mediatisation could be identified in many respects metaphorically with the concept of projection. In this sense, in both something is processed (information shaped as images and texts) to a point that the degree of visibility is directly proportional to the distance. Information moves instantaneously and globally. But this availability makes information also more vulnerable. To stay in the metaphor: Projections have their optimum of readability if they are projected onto flat surfaces. As soon as they hit a real spatial reality, projections reveal their potential of distortion and manipulation, which in fact is the other side, their real nature. This is known since the virtual space (the seemingly space of paintings and screens) has been described in the early Renaissance with the geometry of linear perspective. The form in which appeared this knowledge is called “anamorphosis”, and is based on an extreme use of this geometry. A famous example is the mural of a cupola in the church of St. Ignatius in Rom, done by Andrea Pozzo. Only from a specific point of view, which is marked on the ground of the church, the painted architecture is present as a perfect illusion. From any other point of view the painted form decline in more or less readable relics of perception. The geometry of lineal perspective (and with it the one of the “Anamorphosis”) has determined the most significant part of the picture production in western civilization during the last 500 years –and it still does in the mass media.

“*The medium is the message*” of Marshall McLuhan is now truer than he could ever imagine. Through media such as the telephone, television, the personal computer and the Internet, we are increasingly linked together across the globe. We can now hear and see events taking place very far away in a matter of seconds, often quicker than we hear of events in our own neighbourhood. This is exactly what Marshall McLuhan predicted: “*“Time” has ceased, ‘space’ has vanished. We now live in a global village... a simultaneous happening.*”² The broadcast images of the I Gulf War are a good example of McLuhan’s vision, and go even further. Watching the missiles approaching their target from the point of view of the pilot or the rocket, we do not experience the events solely through our own ears and eyes. Through technology we bring the action closer to us, so the pilot can get a better shot, but this also enables us to stay at a safe physical distance. The TV screen has transformed into a computer game with invisible victims.

Media and victims, media and war have been always together... “*There is no war without photography*” said Ernst Jünger in 1930. In the recent Iraq Attacks (and let’s not forget the media name of the operation, “Enduring Freedom”) war reporters who accompanied soldiers, filmed and recorded the comments of the soldiers on shots, and their impressions after having hit their targets. In contrast to this depiction the victims were treated as collateral damage and broadcasted as humans of real flesh and blood. In the war against “the enemies of America” there are still different rules concerning what can be or can’t be shown: the images of the corpses of the sons of Saddam can be shown all over the world, but not the coffins of the American soldiers; Saddam in the moment of the capture, but not the American prisoners. But also, the preservation of these rules has interstices in between, and forbidden images or information are filtrated: the bloodcurdling images of the tortures to Iraquian prisoners in the jail of Abu Ghraib...

² McLUHAN, Marshall. *Understanding Media: the extensions of man*. McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964 (p. 63)

Paradoxically enough, we live in a time of “transparency” and “lightness”: the glass is dominating in architecture (with the glass cupola of the Reichstag in Berlin as an paradigm of the transparency of the political class), and even, the former Inner Minister Angel Acebes was insisting in “transparency” as a value when he was communicating news (100% manipulated) during the eve of the Spanish Elections last March.

We may like it or dislike it, but television plays a central role in configuring the way society thinks. As Barbara Nierhoff points out: “*The mirror of the media age is the television screen.*”³ Television transforms events into ideas in the social imagination (It is not a coincidence that the main character of the film *Good bye Lenin* recreates the reality of the former DDR, specially TV news, to avoid her mother the shock of waking up from a coma and witness that all her values and understanding of life have fallen apart). What does not appear on TV does not exist socially and, in this sense, live broadcasting is a conceptual revolution, which allows us to be at a distance and at the same time in the place where things are happening. The spectator is physically distant but emotionally close, participating in the broadcast event. Watching becomes more important than living⁴. The ritual assembly in front of the TV for a live transmission is a way of identifying, of sharing the same sensibility, with other anonymous – and this is new – spectators. The events, which are broadcast live are related to universal arguments: the conquest (the landing of a man on the moon), rites of passage (coronations, royal weddings or funerals), the reward (the Oscar awards)⁵, etc. Broadcasting live follows a strict script in which everything is planned until the latest detail. That’s why the live event is only 100% live when the script is disrupted and the camera movements appear nervous and imprecise. One of the first examples of this was in 1969 on a local TV station in Dallas, when a banal conversation between two ladies was interrupted by a nervous journalist announcing Kennedy’s murder.

The efficiency of the attacks of September 11th was carefully planned not only as regards their physical, political, economic and sociologic consequences, but also their media impact. With almost perfect timing, the 15 minutes which separated the impact of the first plane on the North Tower and the shock to the South Tower allowed all the TV channels in the world to connect up and witness the second impact and subsequent collapse live. After the initial confusion, the images of the impacts were repeated again and again, and, after a while, they returned to the script: to the individual stories of the victims.

In the politics of the age before TV, charisma was the most important element of leadership, it being that rare ability of leaders to inspire loyalty and faith in the legitimacy of their autonomy. In the age of TV, political charisma as an intrinsic characteristic of personality has been

³ NIERHOFF, Barbara. “What form divinely fair within this magic mirror is revealed!” in *Bjørn Melhus* (catalogue) Kunsthalle Bremen / Hauschild Bremen, 2002 (p. 37)

⁴ Although this experience is not really new: During the historical period called “Rococo” especially the ladies of the high society loved to drink tea at vantage points while they were watching through their operaglasses battles which happened in a secure distance.

⁵ AAVV, *Món TV. La cultura de la televisió* (catalogue). Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB), Barcelona 19999

substituted by charm, a value susceptible of being designed, implanted and retouched. Political images, polls and voter preferences are extremely sensitive to charm. Each time a politician makes a public speech, there is a meticulous art direction work, which defines if the politician has to wear formal or casual clothes, or even military uniform, and also there is a strict casting of the people who appear next to him. But from time to time, this rigid scenario is broken and makes evident all these mechanisms, as it happened during a speech of George Bush in Orange County (Florida) when a 12 year old boy, situated in the stage close to the president, couldn't stop yawning during the 15 minutes of Bush' speech for desperation of the other extras in the scene, not to talk about the president's image advisers.

“We live in a time of fictive election results, which decide a fictive president, who send us to a war for fictive reasons”. This is the way the filmmaker Michael Moore referred to our present during the Oscar ceremony award in March 2003. Politicians do not rule the world anymore, the world is now ruled by commercial interest and lobbies, which have more power than the political debates. Recently, the magazine *Forbes* published a survey of the 50 more powerful people in the world. There was not a single politician in this survey, but directors of multinationals or economical empires.

In these days of the end of ideologies and mass-unemployment, as a result of globalisation and technisation of work, entertainment becomes the super-ideology of TV discourse, not only through TV series, sitcoms and soap operas but also through a new concept, *infotainment* (information and entertainment) now derived into *wartainment*⁶ (war and entertainment), according to which wars are initiated in primetime and the countdown of the 48 previous hours becomes a TV show. The massive cult of serials reached one of its apexes during the war in Croatia, whose intensity decreased whenever Croatian TV was broadcasting a new episode of the soap opera *Santa Barbara*. For an hour the audience could forget the cruelties of war to identify collectively with the problems, setbacks, love affairs and revelations of family secrets of the characters in this fiction.

Television is a way to escape from reality but also bring us to an imperious need to get closer to reality by way of its most morbid aspects. A good indicator of this phenomenon is the success of television shows such as *Big Brother* (and all its followers), of Web cameras that show people's daily lives in the most literal detail, or of reality shows that offer their participants those Warholian 15 minutes of fame in exchange for publicly confessing their most secret desires, which are compulsively consumed by an audience eager for hard-hitting experiences. This is the society of the spectacle announced by Guy Debord, in which spectacle is not an ensemble of images, but a social relation among people mediated by images. As Mònica Terribas has analysed: “*the gradual loss of importance of thought through a light form of abandonment of intellectual discourse or the lack of will by the media to incorporate it for fear of losing the receivers' interest, has led the mass media to make use of the private domain as a priority source of production of its messages and as the beginning and end of its aims. And so*

⁶ RÖTZER, Florian. „Wartainment. Der Krieg als Medienspektakel“. KUNSTFORUM, num. 165. Ruppichteroth, June-july 2003 (pp 39-63)

*in many television formats, the private domain is not only used as an essential element; it is structured and produced as a show in itself, subject to a process of theatricalisation which wipes out any possibility of a real reading of everyday experience. The theatricalisation of the private domain through those formats requires everyday life to be transformed, adapted, subjected to the dynamic needed to make it an entertainment product”.*⁷

Privacy is becoming a trademark of identity. But once the simplistic ideas of identity are surpassed, we realize that authenticity might be equally menaced, from the moment when individuality becomes a mass phenomenon and identity is identified with images and products. Publicity doesn't sell products but life styles. It is not only that we buy Calvin Klein or Donna Karan perfumes because of their fragrance, but also because of the image they communicate. Reality goes further and it is not only that we name Kleenex, Tempo or Tampax to refer to handkerchiefs or tampons, but now Chanel, Armani, Timberland or Canon are names chosen by some parents for their children. If in the past, names were taken from nature or saints, now is obvious that the models or ideals of our global world are the brands, the cosmology of the brands. Harvard, Louvre, New York, Naomi Campbell or David Beckham are much more than a university, a museum, a city, a top model or a football player, they are brands. According to Vicente Verdú, we are living the age of the capitalism of fiction. If in the capitalism of production (from the end of XVIII century until the II World War) the importance was given to goods, the capitalism of consumption (from II World War to the fall of Berlin wall) was focused on the signs, the signification of the products. In the present capitalism of fiction, the main aspect is to produce sensations. In other words, if the first and second formulations of capitalism provided reality with consumer goods, the third one improves reality by creating a new one.

During the capitalism of consumption - still under the impression of the Second World War - ethical standards, personal integrity and attitude have been norms. In our today reality of global societies and the „capitalism of fiction“, the invasion of the economic imperative in almost all parts of our life, availability and the skills, where and how to get knowledge have become the compensations for those norms. This does not necessary lead to the loss of memory, cultural identity, history, ethical standards and values etc. But they have become norms on demand: memory is “on” or “off”; ethical values are “on” or “off”; cultural identity is “on” or “off”– “on” or “off” seems to be no longer a question of principle, but of occasion. But this compensation jeopardize the substance of our common cultural identity with all related values, for which humans in the western hemisphere have fought for since the bill of rights. One day someone might raise in public the fatal question: „Can we still afford human rights?“

These are some of the reflections, which mark the starting point of the project *Paisatges Mediàtics*, an exhibition, which sets out to explore the impact of the media in the definition of our present. The title of our article *mediascapes (media landscapes)* is a term used by

⁷ TERRIBAS, Mònica. „The theatricalisation of the private domain and the hybridisation of television genres“ in *Revolving Doors* (catalogue). Fundación Telefónica, Madrid, 2004 (p. 26)

anthropologist Arjun Appadurai⁸ to rethink the distinctions between cultural undergoing globalization. He uses the suffix “-scapes” (derived from the geographical metaphor of landscapes, to provide a framework for thinking about particular sorts of global flows. For him, the term “mediascapes” refers to the movement of media and cultural products throughout the world. Artists like Muntadas have analyzed extensively in his works the landscape of the media, that is, the creation (or mediatization) of the contemporary conscience, which includes all aspects of our lives, from how economic and cultural values are determined to the progressive disappearance of public space.

Not by coincidence, the works of many contemporary artists use and refer to the media and their strategies to raise questions about our present, including the appropriation, infiltration or redefinition of TV formats, cinematic references, advertising and corporate codes. And also, not by coincidence the artists (as well as the curators) participating in the exhibition *Paisatges Mediàtics* belong to different contexts but to the same generation: the generation that has grown up with TV. Their proposals amplify the views on the impact of the media in our present, in other words, they present different approaches to different types of mediatization or construction of reality: the mass media, represented by television (Bjørn Melhus, Christian Jankowski, Barbara Visser and Matthieu Laurette), collective memory through printed media (Zbigniew Libera), marketing strategies and their power structures (Claude Closky, Swetlana Heger, Joan Morey, Ester Partegàs, Daniel Garcia Andújar and Minerva Cuevas) and codes of representation (Pierre Bismuth and Stefanie Klingemann). With their proposals –ironical, critical, engaged, mimetic or distant – artists make things visible, evidence mechanisms and dynamics, show contradictions and, in the end, raise – or invite us to raise- questions about our present and our relation to it.

© *Montse Badia and Andreas M. Kaufmann (curators of the exhibition), May 2004*

⁸ APPADURAI, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996