

Electric eel culture. The mediatized cultural experience in the realm of the interactive media

KEY WORDS

audience, reception, interactivity, mobility, velocity, convergence

ABSTRACT

The large area of the communicative experiences of the nowadays 'media audiences consists of the quick, powerful sensual and emotional stimulation, with the minimal intellectual input. Their prevalence can lead to the changes within the processes of the social agenda setting, and the shifts in the organization of the knowledge construction and exchange. This essay is devoted to the definition and characteristics of such experiences, and to their inter-relationships with the media, the communication technologies, and the context that is the post-modern consumption culture.

Miguel Wattson is an electric eel. He comes from the Amazon and lives in Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga. At the end of 2014 Wattson launched his own Twitter account¹. New posts appear online when Miguel emits a series of electrical pulses² – mostly on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, because then the fish is fed. The number of people following his account in July 2018 amounted to more than 30 thousand. What may the electric eel have to say to the world? We do not know, as *tweets* are posted by Zoo employees on behalf of Wattson³. Those include jokes, sometimes information about the biology of the underwater world, the most common onomatopoeias like *zzzzing*, *zonk* and *ka-boom*. The fact that there are a number of people interested in the news from the fish that emits electrical

¹ <https://twitter.com/eelectricmiguel> [access: 1.07.2018].

² *Meet the Tennessee aquarium's Tweeting electric eel*, http://www.tnaqua.org/newsroom/entry/meet-the-tennessee-aquariums-tweeting-electric-eel?utm_content=bufferc4afe&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer [access: 1.07.2018].

³ C. Philips, *Snap, crackle, tweet: Tennessee Tech helps aquarium's electric eel make splash on social media* [in:] "Timesfreepress", 16.01.2015, <http://www.timesfreepress.com/news/life/entertainment/story/2015/jan/16/snap-crackle-tweet-tennessee-tech-helps-aquarium-eel/282710/> [access: 1.07.2018].

impulses says something about our culture. This essay is an attempt to concisely analyse this type of communication experiences of the modern media user, which can be compared to a meeting with an electric eel: short, intense, stimulating senses, evoking emotions, while deprived of significant intellectual content. I attempt to analyse the thesis that today's mediated culture is the culture of electric eels (although I am not saying that this is the only kind of cultural experience that is available to us). I wonder to what extent our navigation in the swarms of electric eels results from the specifics of mobile interactive technologies, and to what extent from the hedonistic values of consumer culture, and from the nature of social communication processes.

From a metaphor to a model

Using the metaphor of electric eels to determine a kind of cultural/communicative experience, I am aware of the limitations and dangers of the misuse of metaphors in the scientific description of social phenomena. I choose a metaphorical approach, drawn by the cognitive potential of metaphors (specialists speak of its nominative, heuristic and creative function), their pragmatic utility, and – *last but not least* – the aesthetic dimension⁴. “Electric eel ”is Max Black’s⁵ resonance metaphor, whose operation consists in projecting a kind of “associative implications ”on the subject⁶ it describes, evoking the “insight into how things are”⁷ impossible to obtain with a simple description. This is an important property of the metaphor⁸ that is interactively understood, especially when it serves to evoke phenomena that are largely of a non-understandable, sensual character. In addition, the use of metaphors

⁴ See S. Gajda, *Metafora w dyskursie naukowym* [Metaphor in scientific discourse] [in:] *Metafory w dyskursie humanistycznym, w mówieniu publicznym i w mowie potocznej* [Metaphors in humanistic discourse, in public speaking and in common speech], ed. J. Sujecka, Warszawa 2008, pp. 29–42.

⁵ M. Black, *Jeszcze o metaforze* [A word about metaphor], “Pamiętnik Literacki ”1983, vol. 74/2, p. 264, [http://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1983-t74-n2-s255-281/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1983-t74-n2-s255-281.pdf](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1983-t74-n2/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1983-t74-n2-s255-281/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1983-t74-n2-s255-281.pdf) [access: 1.07.2018].

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

⁸ As in: M. Black, *Metafora* [Metaphor], „Pamiętnik Literacki ”1971, vol. 62/3, pp. 217–234, [http://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1971-t62-n3-s217-234/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1971-t62-n3-s217-234.pdf](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1971-t62-n3/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1971-t62-n3-s217-234/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1971-t62-n3-s217-234.pdf) [access: 1.07.2018].

allows us to speak succinctly and avoid excessive descriptiveness, while allowing intellectual and imaginative access to the phenomenon in question.

Literal paraphrase always says too much – and with badly distributed accents (...). losses in our case concern cognitive content; the basic weakness of literal paraphrase is not that it can be exhaustingly long-drawn or boring (with stylistic shortcomings); being a translation, it fails because it cannot give the insight that the metaphor gives⁹.

However, I treat the use of metaphors – this one and some others – as an introduction to building a model. It will only succeed if the initial metaphor proves to be sufficiently strong and useful.

(...) a scientist – especially in the initial stage, when dealing with a new field of investigation – can be easily led by analogies. These analogies play primarily a heuristic role – they serve as inventive tools that provide the researcher with hypotheses that will direct his search. It is important, above all, that these are fertile, open new research perspectives: they should eventually be eliminated, because the collected results must be formulated in a technical language whose terms are drawn from theories related to the studied field. (...) In science, analogy cannot have the last word¹⁰.

The metaphorical approach to the problem at least at the beginning allows us to choose the form of the essay; empirical confirmation of further theses and interpretations will probably require systematic analysis of existing data and further empirical research. This will entail a more disciplined form of article or research report, as well as a different language, devoid of subjectivism and rhetoric. However, the advantage of the essay, when cognitive concepts are just emerging, is the opportunity to try different approaches and ways of thinking. The essayist's luxury is the right to make mistakes, meet blind alleys and inconsistencies necessary at this stage.

Point of view of a semiologist/media expert

At the same time, I try to assume two interpenetrating theoretical perspectives: media studies and semiological, while not rejecting the findings of sociologists or cultural scientists. My methodological identity of a media expert-semiologist is not devoid of internal tensions and

⁹ Ibid, p. 233.

¹⁰ Ch. Perelman, *Analogia i metafora w nauce, poezji i filozofii* [Analogy and metaphor in science, poetry and philosophy], "Pamiętnik Literacki" 1971, vol. 62/3, pp. 247–257, http://bazhum.muzhp.pl/media/files/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1971-t62-n3/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1971-t62-n3-s247-257/Pamietnik_Literacki_czasopismo_kwartalne_poswiecone_historii_i_krytyce_literatury_polskiej-r1971-t62-n3-s247-257.pdf [access: 1.07.2018].

inconsistencies. When we try to describe the complex, redundant and internally contradictory area of the mediatized culture, the desire for logical clarity and the basing of findings on hard empirical data clashes with a sense of frustration. Both media studies and semiological tools and theories that we have at our disposal generate knowledge but leave us unsatisfied. Applied in a disciplined structural paradigm, they describe the most obvious areas and mechanisms of the media semiosphere, but they lose sight of its unpredictability and dynamism, and especially do not give access to the real experience of participation in semiosis. If we use them in the post-structural way to look for discontinuities, cracks, margins, unique and specific areas, the findings are easily transformed into a description of individual sensations or defending own interpretations. The excess of material additionally means that almost always before commencing the analysis, one must determine whether his readers know the analysed text or whether they have experience of participating in the same communication process. Otherwise, it is necessary to direct readers to sources, they must first read the analysed material. Meanwhile, the amount of material grows constantly, the texts change their place or disappear, so after a short time it may not be possible.

Therefore, accepting in this essay the research identity of a semiologist-mediologist, I try not to lose criticism. If sometimes I rhetorically distance myself from the tools I use, I do it consciously and deliberately. Essays are not written to provide readers with hard, empirical data, but to propose a way of thinking, interpretation, and unobvious combination of phenomena. This should result in conversation. I think that the discussion about the experiential, emotional way of receiving the media and its real-life consequences is necessary.

Three models of participation in culture

The outstanding Polish sociologist Andrzej Ziemilski at the beginning of the interactive era classified the models of participation in culture¹¹. He wrote, first of all, about the elite experience of constantly visualizing culture, assessed and interpreted on the basis of high artistic criteria. This way of participating in culture requires preparation. It hierarchizes cultural experience, granting a higher rank to the elite and appreciating the competent reception, knowledge-based and intellectual overworking of the work. It recognises literature as a model of a legitimate cultural text, a kind of pattern for other works, which, however, the farther away from literature, the less prestigious they are.

¹¹ A. Ziemilski *Trzy modele doświadczenia kulturalnego (szkic problemowy)* [Three models of cultural experience (problem sketch)], "Kultura i Społeczeństwo" 1984, vol. 28/3, pp. 103–112.

The *praxis*-dominated reception model is based on irregular, idiosyncratic consumption of various cultural texts, dictated by circumstances, current needs or fashion. Such a pragmatic model of cultural experience includes participation in culture in the scheme of everyday experiences, making it a usable part of free time. Therefore, it does not involve strong emotions and requires no special competence. It also cannot take much time or money. We quickly forget about pragmatic cultural experiences because we do not expect them to provide strong impressions, no special cognitive value, or outstanding artistic quality. This does not mean that beauty or emotions are not important here; however, they are rather a bonus, they occur in connection with the consumption of many cultural products, during which the recipients expect primarily rest and pleasure.

Finally – media-mediated participation. This is not a model of engagement but of “knowledge about ”and short-term contact with the text of culture. It is about this type of drawing from the excess of cultural production, which consists in knowing what is currently fashionable, controversial, or interesting for many people. Ziemilski wrote his article in the 80s of the previous century, in Poland, in a place and time where culture had a fundamental meaning for identity, and his diagnoses referred mainly to reading and cultural press. Today, when interactive media combines the pragmatic and mediated use of cultural texts, the Internet allows large numbers of people around the globe to “orientate”. It provides knowledge about what is pleasing to other people and what must be seen, and gives an insight into culture through clippings, shreds, short flashes: social media posts, *trailers* and mini-reviews on YouTube, *gifs*, photos, interviews, *news*. The most attention from the audience can be expected from the texts that engage attention and emotions particularly strongly and that appeal to many different recipients (that is, they are fashionable). This kind of use of culture satisfies the need for emotions, uniqueness, admiration, escapism, immersion and compassion with other seekers, while allowing us to orientate ourselves in new products and enjoy them in the conditions of enormous excess of texts and limited time for their consumption. Sociologists could barely notice this way of participation in culture in the 1980s in Poland, but even then it was widely disseminated in countries with developed cultural industries and high level of mediatization of various areas of individual and collective life.

Mediatized collective experience

Mediatization of culture here means a situation in which the vast majority of cultural experiences of people take place with the participation or with the use of technological tools, and the main source of these experiences are the means of mass communication. Cultural

texts are designed to be received through media, or at least with a view to the possibility of distribution through media of recorded material (this is the case, e.g. with concerts, sports games, political events). At the same time, I accept a broad, communicative understanding of culture, present everywhere where people in communication with other people and in auto-communication use the material world and virtual reality to perform non-trivial activities: to produce meanings and statements about themselves, other people, the real world and imagined world. Defining culture in this way, we also assume that all non-trivial use of media is a cultural experience.

It is not a coincidence that I am talking about communication and cultural experience. We use various expressions to describe the contact with a cultural product in everyday life. Depending on practical needs and ideological assumptions, we are talking about reading, receiving or using. Usually, we include only one aspect of the phenomenon in this way. When I talk about receiving experience, I mean the whole complex of phenomena – simultaneous and delayed, internal and in interaction with others – which are related to a person's contact with the work/product/media text. It seems that this approach allows us to describe the contact with the text in its various dimensions. For the needs of these considerations, let us assume that the cultural experience consists of: (1) personal contact with the text – narration, image, event, phenomenon, (2) conscious reception/reading, (3) understanding and (4) interpretation, (5) auto-communication, (6) communication with others, evaluation, emotions, memory and associations related to text, (7) memory about experience leading to further possible use of the text and its further intellectual and emotional processing, possibly also to (8) own creativity. Thus, the mediated cultural experience consists of what we do with the text, as well as what the text does to us – towards what feelings, attitudes and actions it directs us. In varying proportions, depending on the situation, this experience will require more or less understanding and will push us towards a more or less complicated interpretation effort. It will have more auto-communication participation or will primarily cause intense communication with others. It will lead us to our own creativity or discourage it. It will be quickly forgotten or it will leave long-lasting memories, and becoming a reference framework for further experience, it will be incorporated into our permanent reference resource. Individual cultural experience may consist of the above components in various proportions and may be implemented primarily as an intellectual task, as a complex of sensory experiences or as a fulfilment of emotional needs. In fact, it usually contains all three aspects, but which one turns out to be the most important and determines the whole character of the experience depends on the nature of the text itself, the attitudes with which we read and the

needs that we pursue on this occasion; as well as our state of knowledge, cognitive abilities, reference resources, habitus and cultural capital, the level of cultural and media competence.

Experiential media reception

So what is the experiential cultural/media experience, here compared with encountering the electric eel?

It usually arises as a result of (1) contact with the text (image, narrative, event, phenomenon) of an excess, hyperbolic character: spectacular, loud and intense one. These types of texts are usually highly multimodal, they engage the senses and evoke emotions through the use of strong means taken from various semiotic resources – sound, image, light, writing, speech, music, tactile sensations. They are sometimes even aimed at triggering synaesthetic sensations and/or physical shock related to the *qualia*¹² of the used signs. In the visual layer of this type, the text is usually colourful, bright, expressive, with easily recognisable, idiomatic style. The main mode is most often (but not always) rapidly changing moving image with high dynamics. It uses light as a separate, specific modus – texts of this type shine, flicker, flash with explosions, tempt with lights at the ends of tunnels and bloody sunsets of stars and entire galaxies. They employ easily memorized, emotional music, often in romantic stylistics or referring to the noisiest forms of contemporary rock music. They operate with sound that is “too loud”, used in contrast, filled with the imitation of natural sounds and human voices used as an audial ornament. They are full of dramatic and tender whispers, shouts, groans, howls and sobs; explosions, shots, sounds of industrial equipment and vehicles, sound of raging elements or the sounds of idyllic, paradise nature. Human figures in this environment are subjected to aesthetic procedures towards maximum beautification or extreme ugliness. The aesthetization involves sexualization of protagonists; their exceptional physical perfection is supposed to lead the viewer to a sensual pleasure close to the erotic experience, not only of the voyeuristic nature, but also the one related to (mediated) contact with a beautiful, vital, youthful, perfectly functional body.

Reception (2) of this type of texts is therefore to shock, ravish, cause dizziness and goose bumps, stun and dazzle and give the experience of maximum physical absorption. Game theorists sometimes call it immersion, diving into the text, and sometimes they call it

¹² Chumley L., *Qualia and ontology: language, semiotics, and materiality; an introduction*, “Signs and Society ” 2017, 5/1/, pp. 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1086/690190> [access: 1.07. 2018].

even more adequate: *enthrallment*¹³. It cannot be said that the recipient of such a text does not have to understand it; however (3) understanding in the intellectual sense is not the most important aspect here. The user is to be focused more on the physical pleasure of contact with the text rather than on his intellectual dimension. Thus, texts of this type use signs with strong, unambiguous semantics, relatively universally recognisable symbols, commonly known figures, places, landscapes, represented with simple and understandable indexing metonymies and conventionalised representation codes. They tell stories with a simple narrative structure, unambiguous axiology, with unambiguous – if not simplified – protagonists with clear psychological characteristics and relations to others. Here, topics and threads are repetitive, solutions and terminations are predictable, their attractiveness is expressed in the possibility of quickly and efficiently bringing the recipient to a pleasant unequivocal axiological recognition and pleasure with the satisfying emotions that the story evokes. They do not have to be only positive emotions, because satisfaction comes from emotional stimulation in general. Films about superheroes and TV singing contests are pleasant not only because they play and provide the basis for para-social relations with the characters of the *show*, but also because they allow for controlled experiencing of fear, irritation or anger without long-term consequences.

Nintendo syndrome

It is impossible to maintain the same intensity of such an experience for a long time. Meetings with electric eels are therefore short, composed of rapidly consecutive or simultaneous impulses. If they are entered – as in films or concerts – into larger texts, they appear repeatedly, as part of the waving of a narrative composed of “stronger ”and “weaker ” moments. Interpretation (4) of such texts is primarily about emotions. The recipient is very often inattentive or lazy, jaded or bored, using the media in conditions of numerous distractions. Attacked by fast, strong stimuli, a person usually has no time or free cognitive resources to think about the deeper interpretation of the text. Within this context, we can speak of the so-called *nintendo syndrome*: a situation in which the physical and emotional reaction to the text precedes its (3) understanding, which consists primarily in distinguishing and giving meaning to the most distinctive, easily recognisable, understandable and unambiguous elements.

¹³ P.G. Stromberg, *The "I" of Enthrallment* [in:] “Ethos. The Pragmatic Turn in Psychological Anthropology ” 1999, 27/4, pp. 490–504.

Technological dimension of experience

“Meeting with electric eel ”is organically combined with the use of communication technologies. Thanks to them it is possible to create experiences with sensory intensity higher (more colourful, louder, brighter) than in normal life, providing them to the recipient in great amounts and wrapping them in technological solutions that enhance the immersion in very strong stimuli. To illustrate the importance of technology for the quality of cultural experience and to explain to what extent it shapes our contacts with electric eels, it would be useful to mention the difference in watching the same film in a black and white TV and then in colour on a large LCD screen. A film from the MCU, episode of *X Factor* or a spectacular commercial spot watched on an old TV, with a hazy image and sound, would be unable to shock, because their intellectual content, devoid of effects designed for big screens and sound immersion of the audience, is negligible. Without spectacular visual content, immersive sound and supra-realistic details, they turn out to be completely unattractive.

The market offers numerous technological improvements, increasing the sense of admiration and immersion – starting with excellent, huge TV screens with powerful resolution and home theatre systems, through computers with great computing power, equipped with excellent monitors allowing for a satisfying immersion in the interactive game world, to 3D cinema and 4D technology that (apparently) raises the realism of three-dimensional films. Technology is not only a necessary logistic security here. It is also a factor that causes the sensations, strengthening them and enabling their recording and redistribution as well as it is the sensational element itself.

Screen and converged experiences

Due to convergence, experiential cultural sensations are transmedial in nature: one can participate in them through various means of communication, either single or combined, which further enhances sensual pleasure and absorption. The most important and ubiquitous source of sensations is, however, a multimodal medium equipped with a screen displaying moving images arranged in narrative sequences. We can call this medium a television, but only in a very broad sense of the word. Modern screens left the *living room*, which a few years ago was considered a natural television context, shaping the nature of *televsual apparatus*¹⁴. They do not need darkened rooms, necessary for cinema experience. Today,

¹⁴ See E.A. Kaplan, *Rocking around the clock. Music television, postmodernism, and consumer culture*, New York 1987.

screens with moving images, music and natural sounds fill the public and private spaces - they are in shops, public transport vehicles, conference rooms and in our pocket. They perform various functions: informative, promotional, educational, entertaining and aesthetic. They come in different sizes and connect the television to the computer, tablet, phone. All of them encourage us to meet electric eels. They reinforce the experience, but also situate it in a stream of other strong sensory experiences characteristic for life in the urban consumer culture, associated with shopping, street traffic, entertainment, participation in collective events.

Different places, situations, conventions

The described set of narrative means and solutions is probably reminiscent of any film from the superhero universe of Warner Bros., Marvel, *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*, with their simplified narratives, breath-taking visuals, excess of visual and sound effects, and narrative strategies that maximally involve fans without overburdening their intellect. We can today observe the trend to generate such sensations in the most diverse areas of the multi-mediated culture. In the film, we find this trend in the huge popularity of action films, as well as in the development of spectacular *thrillers*, horrors and *fantasy* films abounding with surrealistic and refined aesthetic images and sounds. It is confirmed by the popularity of film musicals with not very original but effective and catchy, richly instrumented music, and extremely decorative dance arrangements, costumes, stage design. Described strategies for constructing text/receiving experience can also be found in television programs. Today they are produced for owners of large LCD screens, which brings the television experience closer to the cinema. Hence – for example – the unprecedented spectacular nature of immersive TV contests, tournaments and *talent shows*. Scenario differences between them are small, the nature of television entertainment does not encourage solving complicated problems of humanity. Television programmes, however, compete with each other using the richness and the spectacularity of the studio, light, sound and musical setting, they attract the viewer with the impressively framed, simple, emotional stories of the protagonists. As a result, the viewer, for a small intellectual complication of this type of *show* receives a strong visual and emotional stimulation, but it does not leave any lasting memories. The richness of these shows brings them closer to the big competition galas, festivals and games planned today with a view to a similar sender-receiver relationship. Therefore, it is a paradox that while in a paleo-

television¹⁵ great events like a festival or an international sporting spectacle were long-awaited rarities, nowadays spectacles of similar scale are a constant element of the daily schedule. Such spectacular shows are divided by advertising blocks, which for several decades have been trying to apply a similar strategy of short-term maximum involvement of the viewer's emotions. TV shows and commercials today compete for this involvement using similar measures.

Experiential reception model is not just about entertainment. Modern media can effectively fulfil informative or educational goals only when the recipient wants to pick out more serious content from the stream of entertaining materials. Therefore, one of the most evident examples of a text set to the experiential reception is the television information service. It is usually built of short, emotion-packed segments with highly focused content, rapidly following each other, often divided by similarly fast and sensual advertising messages. It presents images that evoke terror, laughter, indignation, surprise, and controversy. It is broadcasted from a spectacular studio, full of simple but strong symbols and metonymy of speed, modernity, knowledge and power. Graphic and musical effects increase the viewer's sense of participation in something that is up-to-date, extremely important and extremely moving.

Many other television formats and genres today use similar logic. The reader can easily locate such strategies of generating receiving experiences on the Internet, in the world of interactive games (most of which provoke the player's absorption combined with strong sensory stimulation) or even in the illustrated press (operating with dynamic typographic systems, saturated colours, spectacular photography and short, more and more fragmentary written texts). It is worth noting, however, that the logic of experiential participation is also present in the less-mediatised areas of participation in culture. For example, it is expressed in the practice of organising ever larger immersive public spectacles – festivals, and even great theatre performances drawing the viewer with the scale, size and beauty of the set design, coordination of large bands, and the ingenious use of technology. It can also be observed in the organisation of great music concerts, where the volume of music itself has grown – thanks to technology – to incomparable sizes. Moreover, they show dramaturgy is based on strong

¹⁵ As in: F. Casetti, R. Odin, *Od paleo- do neotelewizji. W perspektywie semiopragmatyki* [From paleo- to neotelevision. In the perspective of semi-pragmatics] [in:] *Po kinie? Audiowizualność w epoce przekaźników elektronicznych* [Cinema is dead? Audio-visibility in the era of electronic transmitters], ed. A Gwóźdź, Kraków 2004, pp. 117–136.

emotional effects lined with visual effects – this includes large figures, fireworks, laser projections, giant screens in hyperbolic form transmitting pictures of performers and visual settings. The music is accompanied by spectacular use of light and sound as well as numerous tricks to stimulate the audience to sing together, to move or coordinate their own actions to increase the spectacularity of the experience (such as joint fire burning or collective use of glowing phone screens).

It is also important to note that one-off experiences requiring personal participation, such as visiting a museum exhibition, are also composed of material elements, strong sensory stimuli and virtual sensations. Currently, exhibition art is looking for ways to reach the viewer with the help of technology, attacking his senses at the same time with image, sound, light, making it possible to receive through all the senses, do something with one's own hands and experience the exhibition as a great collective experience. This sometimes happens despite the cognitive needs of the viewer, which should be satisfied by the intellectual processing of the presented knowledge, or against the aesthetic needs, which would require a smaller number of carefully selected exhibits.

Unique/repeatable dialectics

The culture of sensations creates a kind of regime of forgetfulness. The technology not only allows for an intimate, yet shockingly strong experience of meeting an electric eel, but also provides the possibility of repeated (5) experiencing of this sensation and the search for similar ones. Today we receive each mediatized cultural text knowing that we will be able to see it or hear it again for any number of times, in whole or just most satisfying fragments. And if it does not turn out to be possible, we will still be able to find other texts of similar nature. Therefore, there is no need for long-term memorization – besides, how does one memorize a sensory experience? At the same time, search engines and content aggregators help us chase a specific type of beneficial experience, suggesting dozens of propositions of “just the same” products that triggered more interest, or those liked by people with similar preferences. Due to the convergence and interconnectivity of communication tools, a single experience is surrounded by various extensions, *spin-offs*, additions, and the promotion encourages us to seek an extension of pleasant experiences in them.

There is an internal contradiction in the reception of this type of texts. We are to treat our experiences from the meetings with electric eel as “unique ”and “perception changing”. Films, computer games and music are developed and promoted in such a way that the recipient recognises them as unique and one-of-a-kind. At the same time, we live in a culture

managed by technologies of recording and transmission of text, image and other types of stimuli, so – at least in theory – any such experience should be able to be repeated. Many such texts are designed in advance to be repeatedly received, and yet they are still promoted as something that “only happens once”. There are also paradoxical phenomena: broadcasts of one-off spectacles, political events, sport games – for *live* reception or after a certain time. Registrations of one-time cultural experiences are thus transformed into a technological product intended for multiple consumption. For example, nowadays, we observe increasingly popular registrations of major rock concerts or theatre performances designed for the cinema. Technological mediation deprives these events of the tension resulting from the live character and uniqueness, but at the same time can significantly increase the possibility of attack on the viewer's senses by enlarging the image, increasing the number of observable details, allowing observation from many points of view and raising the sound level - while isolating from external interference (as these transmissions are intended for viewing in a darkened cinema room).

The one-offness of the personal experience of participating in a cultural event is now ambiguous. How to explain hundreds of mobile phones directed towards the stage at the concert or the amazing number of people who photograph the exhibits seen in the museum? People try to use available technologies to (5) at least partially repeat a pleasant experience and to (6) share it with others. This possibility, however, often remains unused: no one watches the films or photos taken at the concert, because they quickly become less important than new sensations. At the same time, it creates a kind of paradox: the uniqueness and intensity of experience – and the possibility of a very thorough, detailed observation of the work, penetrating into the secrets of production, lighting and recording. It also allows detaching its various details from the context, as well as transferring it to a different context; replacing a longer text with a larger number of micro-fragments, whose main feature is that they themselves provide strong, pleasant sensations and emotions. In this way, longer texts, requiring theoretical reflection and memorization, can be free of “boring ”fragments and turned into a school of electric eels.

Bottom-up creativity and culture of sensations

This is easily noticed by anyone who watches fan films, *vids* or *fanart* in aggregators of bottom-up creativity. Fans select their favourite fragments of texts and create condensed materials composed only of high-intensity elements. This is not surprising, in the end the media industry is also doing this, creating film *trailers*, advertising spots, music videos

designed according to similar strategies. Fandom artists only take over the strategy, which - as they already learned – brings them pleasure, and they share this kind of pleasure with others.

We live in a world where *user-generated content* is not a rare exception, but a more and more legitimate receiving practice. The reception of practically every media text in a mediatized culture is determined (among others) by what the recipient, using the communication tools available to him, can do with this experience (7): with whom and to what extent to share it, whether to evaluate it or discredit it, to create own text on its basis - make it an element of media practices related to creativity, knowledge and power. Almost everyone remembers from school years how much it could spoil or change the reception of a film or spectacle when we had to write a review or paper at home, explaining “what was the author’s intention behind this”. Today's media reception, paradoxically, can be such a reception with a view to further tasks, activities that will be allowed by available technology, as well as a *modus operandi* built on the epistemological basis of culture of participation. However, the observation of fans ’creativity leads to the conclusion that the experiential model of cultural reception often produces experiential-oriented bottom-up creativity. People in their own work recreate the kind of pleasures they learned to seek thanks to the culture of electric eels.

The mentioned *gifs, fanvids, trailers, mashups*, memes – at the same time eternal (just like anything posted on the internet), incidental, superficial, detached from the context – are an illustration of the contradictions towards which technological mediation pushes us. This contradiction in the more general dimension consists in the simultaneous permanence and incidentality of the cultural experience. And also – perhaps even more striking – in the coexistence and mutual reinforcement of telepresence and immersion. The mediatized cultural experience, on the one hand, consists of direct, strong sensory experiences, leading to the state of absorption, fascination, transfer into another reality; the more perfect the technology, the more it is able to generate such sensations, but it also increasingly generates their anticipation in the recipient. On the other hand, it does not take place directly, but through the use of technological tools that allow the generation of strong sensory stimuli and provide the recipients with a sense of immersion in the received text.

Production of sensations – constructing the recipient

Is the described model of culture experiencing something new, original, specific for our place, time, commitment to relations with technology? Undoubtedly, we can look for the beginnings of participation in great collective emotions in the ancient Greeks or Romans. Historians'

works tell about clever mobilization of great emotions through technical solutions in modern Europe and in pre-Columbian civilizations. The fireworks show on the Sun King's birthday and the Aztec rituals were the ancestors of today's great games, and the spectacular, illusionist Baroque architecture and 19th-century panoramas of great historical events could evoke a similar sense of immersion and sensual perdition like today's 3D cinema or multimedia museum exhibition. The difference is that this type of experience is now produced industrially. Sensations and our reactions to them are constructed with the participation of psychological research, diagnostic and prognostic analysis of tastes and behaviours of large reception groups as well as professional knowledge about their long-term planning. We are dealing with a kind of sensations production industry, and constant contacts with such formatted cultural products produce a specific type of recipient/user: seeking strong stimuli, impatient and quickly forgetful, emotion-oriented, not prone to intellectual reflections; sensational collector, expressing himself with emoticons, emotional *tweet* or *selfie*, while also seeking a kind of syntony with the crowd, neo-tribe, peer group, audience. In the face of the abundance of electric eels and their skillfull design by the entertainment industry, this experience is easy to achieve, and at the same time extremely pleasant. No wonder that for many users it may turn out to be the only or favourite way to participate in culture.

Electric eel and epistemology

It would be a major simplification to say that dependence between the experiential use of culture and technology is only about speed, pleasure and omnipresence of screens. It is about something more: long-term use of culture in an experiential and immersive way changes the regimes of looking and listening. It teaches to pay attention to other elements, pay attention to different aspects of experience, perceive its meaning and value differently than in the case of practices based on reading and writing, slow visual contemplation or regular physical movement. Repeated satisfying meetings with electric eels lead to the appreciation of such texts that most effectively stimulate the senses and evoke the strongest emotions. They teach the recipient to look for quick, strong sensations, while avoiding or omitting intellectual effort. They accustom the recipient to such material selection, where the elements that attract attention and introduce emotional and physical vibrations are chosen first of all. They remove long-term memorization. So they teach not so much to prioritize experiences, but to perceive them as a stream from which only the most jumpy or the most shiny fish are worth catching.

If we would, therefore, agree to raise children only in the culture of sensations, we would get people that explore the world primarily through senses and, to a lesser extent,

through intellect. They would be focused on the logic of the concrete, but few would be able to abstract. Their view of the world would be fragmented, chaotic, devoid of clear logical relations. Objectively verifiable truth would be irrelevant to them, or at least less important than attractiveness, emotions and pleasure. Therefore, they would not seek or appreciate ordered erudition in any field, because they would mainly value efficiency in integrating various sensory experiences and their conversion into a pleasant experience. In the sphere of aesthetics, they would choose the most spectacular, vivid solutions that immediately affect the senses and emotions. Unable to be patient and to analyse, they would also be less inclined to remember anything for a longer time.

It is worth considering how the constant presence of paradoxical, experiential cultural experiences shapes the impact of the media on people. For if a single user perceives them as one-of-a-kind, they translate into collective media use processes by large audiences, and in the longer term they shape the conditions for reaching the truth, informing and using knowledge in a mediatized society.

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