

Art's entry into the TV medium

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The theme of this paper will be Art's entry into the TV medium. My main focus will be on TV's potential as an arena for contemporary art, and I will exemplify this with a case study, the Danish TV show, *Den 11. Time // The 11th hour*.

TV as public space and as a new arena

The purpose of this paper is to explore how contemporary Avant-Garde movements operate in the TV medium. When regarded as a semi-public space, TV turns out to be a new arena for the display of relational art (a partly virtual, partly physical arena). TV has become an arena that displays other features of art and offers another frame and setting than the physical, public space. It does so through the different levels that it works and operates on. The spaces constituted by media facilitate other forms of communication. Art which intervenes in this multi-medial and virtual public space must necessarily deal with the media based everyday life and reality. When looking at the history of Danish TV, there are only few examples of art that uses the TV medium as an arena to perform and intervene within. Examples include TV-plays like "Hasstræet" ("the Hashish Tree") and a play with the self referential title "Tv-stykket", ("The TV play") – both plays from the 1970's and directed by Klaus Hoffmeyer. Both of them bear resemblance to surrealism and the Absurd Theater tradition, because of their self-referentiality and ambiguity. When the show was first broadcasted, it elicited very strong reactions from the viewers, who were unsettled by the unexpected content.

Facts

Fast forward to today to a much broader and complex broadcasting surface, where TV shows don't bring about strong reactions: The show *The 11th Hour*, is an intervention-like act performed in the settings of the traditional, Danish broadcasting system on the channel DR2. It was broadcasted at 11 PM 3 days a week through 3 seasons, and the duration of each show was approx. 30 minutes.

Almost all the episodes were broadcasted live (except the ones that needed to be subtitled). The two hosts Mikael Bertelsen and Mads Brügger took turns hosting the show and once in a while worked together.

I will not refer to one specific episode, but highlight parts from different episodes, in order to characterize the overall Avant-Garde features of the show.

Transient description – a hybrid cultural phenomenon

When trying to describe or categorize the 11th hour we encounter several obstacles. In an attempt to define the show anyway, let's start with how the show presents and describes itself:

Its an “...open program format(...) hard to predict how the show is going to entertain you this time.(...) Maybe with a discovery or an original angle on the story that the viewers are fed up with from other media during the day or the week. The show is initially conceived as a process that should be allowed to develop freely in the course of 126 broadcasts. The format can very well end up with another look or content in episode 99 than when the show started. (...) Each episode will find its own unique balance of cultural journalism and experimental TV.”ⁱ (My translation)

So what kind of show do these features outlined in the quote translate into? Most TV shows contain an aspect of unpredictability, which usually contributes to create suspense. But the open format and developing nature of *the 11th Hour* – the emphasis on process turns on the form of the show and not the content. That the format of the show allows the concept to develop differentiates the show from almost everything else broadcasted on Danish TV and TV in general.

In an attempt to define the nature of the show, we may look at the different genres it occupies: The show is: late night talk show without audience; satire without scripted laughter; and cultural news programs with untraditional questions and a leaning towards experimental twists. Clearly the genres are in other words insufficient in categorizing this show. I regard the show as a ‘hybrid cultural phenomenon’, and it utilizes an aesthetic-semantic strategy, which operates by confusing and disturbing the viewer's usual TV watching mode.

The presence of unexpected and genre-breaking elements registers as an interruption in the flow of the show. This interruption, which permeates *the 11th Hour*, is a known aesthetic strategy, and a variant of the avant-gardistic use of the shock, defined in the following way by Peter Bürger:

“The avant-gardist work neither creates a total impression that would permit an Interpretation of its meaning, nor can whatever impression that may be created be accounted for by recourse to the individual parts, for they are no longer subordinated to a pervasive intent. This refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient”ⁱⁱⁱ

Avant-gardistic features

The show’s indefinable nature leaves us confused as viewers. I will deal with four properties of the show that contribute to the confusion. These are all properties that link the show to the Avant-Garde movements through common, partly modern and avant-gardistic tacticsⁱⁱⁱ. The 4 tactics are:

I) The self-referential aspects of the show, II) Verfremdungseffekt, III) the change in fictional levels and finally IV) The hybrid and polysemantics.

I) Self-referentiality

The self-referential and media-referential aspects of the show emerge recurrently. In one episode Bertelsen, the host, is dissatisfied with his effort in interviewing the artist Olafur Eliasson. He therefore decides to invite him again to make a better and more profound interview in a subsequent episode. In doing so, Bertelsen draws the viewer’s attention to the nature of the typical media interview. A situation, in which the interviewer will typically try to extract information on sensational or private issues. An example of this kind of interview is the show “Godmorgen Danmark”, in which the hosts have to get a certain amount of information out of a person in least possible time. An interview format that Bertelsen here dissociates from.

The “new” interview form put into practice in *the 11th hour* thereby works as a rupture with the popular and populist interview genre and emphasizes a profound interview format, that leaves time to explore a subject uncovering knowledge that can be categorized as general education. By redoing the interview the host values/estimates one interview format, the profound one, as better than another, the populist sensation-focused one.

Furthermore this remaking draws attention to the making of TV in general, and in particular, the important role of the journalist as creator of discourse, and particularly

one of TV's main features, the illusion of real life presence (the essence of TV), in spite of the actual difference between recorded time and broadcasted time.

The liveness^{iv} aspect of TV, which usually dissolves the mediated distance between the acts in the TV studio and the viewer, is instead foregrounded in *the 11th hour*. Viewers are, in other words, reminded that the 'liveness' is a construct, as it is taking place. Simultaneously, the show manages to create an extremely intimate atmosphere through the hosts' frequent improvisations, which are often interactive in the sense that they include the viewers through phone calls, interviews and the like. Breaking with and deconstructing illusion at the same time as maintaining it, is an achievement performed by the hosts. The intimacy that arises in *The 11th Hour* may be as illusive as the one created in any other TV program, yet this will not be dealt with in this paper, but is for the viewers to judge.

II) V-effect

The second tactic is the concept of the *Verfremdungs-effekt*, which originates in Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre. It is an effect (technique?) that can be seen as a variant of self-referentiality, because it too causes the viewers awareness as to the shows constructive nature.

In the light of Brecht's concept, *The 11th Hour* deliberately alienates the viewer, forcing the viewer to adopt a critical attitude to the shows' content. This happens for instance when Bertelsen calls in the technical assistant Daniel, from behind the scenes, (who is of mixed race). Now two things happen: First, Bertelsen asks him about his opinion on the content of a future episode, and they discuss different ideas. Secondly, Bertelsen proceeds to interview Daniel in order to make clear (to the viewer) that Daniel has made a career on the show. In this way it becomes known that Daniel started as a volunteer, and ended up being the production manager. In this situation Bertelsen says: "You are our Obama". Performing a pastiche over the media world's excitement of Obama's rise from an average mixed race boy to President, if anything.

There are in other words two things at stake. 1) The sudden interest in a production manager, as Bertelsen makes him the guest, and 2) showing the process of preparing a show. Both things work as a *Verfremdungs*-effect. It makes the viewers think about the making and construction of the show. Furthermore it emphasizes the extent of the shows production time.

This episode reminds the viewer that there is more than what you see: the inclusion of a back stage employee leads the attention to the action “behind the scenes”—the off-screen content. As viewers, we realize that the actual show (the broadcasted edited episode) is only a very small part of the whole production. By introducing off-screen content and back stage process, *the 11th hour* dissolves the idea of ‘the actual show.’ Instead it foregrounds the research, ideas, technical support, meetings etc., that feed into and precondition the making of the show — what’s visible on screen.

Through an improvised, casual interview, Daniel goes from being a mere behind-the-scene facilitator to being a subject of interest, worthy of an on-screen interview. In doing so the hosts point to the power they (TV producers, back stage operators) have deeming things and people worthwhile interesting, by making them visible in the on-screen arena.

III) Blurring Fictional levels

Furthermore, *The 11th Hour* blurs different levels of fiction. It is constantly unclear where fiction ends and reality starts due to the ambiguous and uncertain behavior of the two hosts. The acts of the show take place in the fictional space of TV (in the studio, where guests are invited), and sometimes the two hosts intervene in “real” spaces outside the frames of the TV universe, where they perform the roles of the naive hosts.

At a conference here at the University (Department of film and media studies, Copenhagen University) that I took part in, the two hosts acted as if they were still hosts of the show: they asked questioned instead of answering them, they maintained the twisted, naïve angle on all the subjects they commented on. This resistance to a meta-level of their own journalistic methods and performances left an impression of them as someone playing a role, performing. The two hosts surf between the different fictional levels, but they never de-mask a core of truth underneath. This muddiness, as to the nature of the show and its operating space, is another feature, rooted in the avant-garde movements.

IV) Hybrid and polysemantics

As stated earlier The Hybrid element of the show creates a polysemantic framework of meaning, in a landscape of unequivocal communicating programs.

In one episode Bertelsen refers to an ongoing cultural struggle, in particular unfolding in

the newspaper Politiken. Right wing MP, Pia Kjaersgaard, criticizes the experimental, nonsensical performing arts in a sarcastic way, when saying that she least of all, likes art with "two naked men running around stage going Pling!".

It is Bertelsen's serious and naive approach to the topic that opens it up, and makes him wonder out loud, whether Kjærsgård is expressing an original idea for an artwork? He has been doing some research, he tells, and all his research has shown that no such artwork already exists (in which "two naked men running around randomly on stage going 'Pling'").

The next thing that happens is that the work "Pling" is presented and that Kjærsgård's image of the worst possible performance is carried out live in the studio: two naked men running across the stage in the studio saying 'Pling'.

Kjærsgård's critic of the experimental performance art is disarmed and twisted, when Bertelsen takes her statements literally, and transforms her caricature of experimental performing arts to a realized work: And the fact that he makes her co-ordinator of this work as he adds "inspired by Kjaersgaard". The naive and controversial communicative approach (the open form) works in this situation as a very subtle tactic that utilizes the ambiguity of language. If the critique is in fact as effective as it at first seems can be discussed. The critique speaks to an intelligent audience, who presumably is already convinced of Kjaersgaard's uncomprehending approach to experimental performing arts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the confusion *the 11th hour* creates, which derives from the genre hybrid, and the mixed fictional levels it operates on, and the polysemantics of the show is potentially productive. The interruptive confusion stands in sharp contrast to the predictable and clear communication of traditional TV shows, and their aim to provide easily digestible entertainment. Furthermore this tactic of confusion facilitates various interpretations of the program's intentions and messages, and engenders the establishing of multiple 'realities'. It is as producer of alternative and differing realities, that I regard *The 11th Hour* as relational art.

The four tactics linked to the contemporary and previous Avant-Garde movements create this confusion and I claim this confusion to be kind of shock, which Bürger states is the trickier that (potentially) "...initiates a change in the recipient's life praxis."

The program focuses on the media's special influential position as the power agency that mediates reality. The image of reality outlined by the media is crucial for the way we perceive reality and the world that surround us. Through their alternative journalistic practice, the hosts challenge and question the institution of media, i.e. the norms and practices that underpin them. Using aesthetic tactics, the hosts perform a critique from inside the institution of the medium itself (TV), through alternative angles, formats and stories that work as Bourriaudian Micro-utopias. *The 11th Hour* hereby creates an alternative experience of the TV medium and the realities it can create.

The constructiveness of this relational approach is obvious, but it entails weaknesses as well. A critical remark could imply that relational art might be too pragmatic and too constructive. What are the consequences of being so?

There is a risk that the creation of micro-utopias causes 'frictionless-ness' (a certain lack of frictions), and according to Bürger the role of Art is on the contrary to create friction through the aesthetics of chock or provocation. When art is harmless, it might loose one of its main characteristics: its political and critical potential. *The 11th hour* performs in a niche of the broadcasting platform and mostly for the sympathetic viewer who already share its open mind towards alternative expressions of the medium. This raises the question if the methods of Avant-Garde movements have to be revolutionary, shocking or subversive? And what is *The 11th Hour*'s potential to change the media world?

Bibliography

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Caldwell, John: *Televisualitet*, 1994

Jerslev, Anne: *Vi ses på tv: medier og intimitet*, Gyldendal, 2004

i From *The 11th Hour*'s website www.dr.dk/dr2/den11time, my underlining

ii Bürger, 2002, p.80

iii I am using the tactical methods as outlined by theorist Michel De Certeau.

iv The term is used here as mentioned by performance theorist Philip Auslander, later applied in the media theory by John Caldwell. It refers to an aesthetic of live, a visual effect.