

META-REFERENTIAL REALITY IN THE ABYSS OF MEDIA IMAGES AND THEORIES²

Abstract: McLuhan's statement "the medium is the message", made at the time of the expansion of television in the 1960s, was confirmed by the advent of the Internet, social media platforms and the digital transformation of modern society. The media form encircles the recipients, becoming an environment more real than reality, much like Baudrillard's simulacrum. "Immersed" in a media kaleidoscope in which "pictures within a picture" are endlessly multiplied, users find it increasingly difficult to distinguish facts from interpretations, facts from factoids, lost like "Alice in Wonderland" in the virtual space of never-ending stories. Technological progress has preserved all the old media, while producing new ones, in a way similar to the Russian "matryoshka dolls", but has pushed the truth and moral dilemmas into the background. Entertainment has become the main media content, information is delivered in the "infotainment" form, with the rapid succession of images as a popularized "montage of attractions". Marx's fascination with machines and productive forces as grounds of a "social existence that determines men's consciousness" has undergone an unusual inversion: the media production represents and creates a worldview in a much more sophisticated way than heavy industry, which as a relic of the past becomes an ecological threat to humanity and the planet. "Reality", the one word that, at the insistence of writer Nabokov, should always appear in quotation marks, is an astonishing artifact of the media and their powerful masters, and the Earth itself has been utilized as Duchamp's "readymade", thus becoming an artwork subjected to relentless exploitation for profit. Mastering Manovich's "language of new media" is necessary for understanding modern information and visual culture, in order to make communication between people possible at all, because the contemporary culture is meta-referential and self-centered. A critical understanding of the world, which requires media literacy and continuous media education, is the only way to avoid complicity in the collapse of reality under the weight of media images that erase the boundaries between reality and fiction, facts and theoretical interpretations.

Key words: meta-referential reality, media, message, media image, theory

1. Introduction

In the mid-1960s, Canadian media theorist with a PhD degree in medieval literature Marshall McLuhan, in his book "Understanding Media: The Extensions of

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Man”³, boldly argued that the development of society is much more influenced by technological development of means of communication than means of production, as Karl Marx wrote. “At a very inconvenient time, Marx based his analysis on a machine, at the very moment when the telegraph and other implosive forms began to reverse mechanical dynamics” (McLuhan 1971: 76). This thought has remained in the shadow of the much more famous McLuhan’s motto “the medium is the message” and the image of the “world as a global village”, although it is completely in line with them. Not mentioning Marx, McLuhan’s thesis is indirectly confirmed by Roger Fiedler by introducing the notion of “mediamorphosis” as a transformation of communication media that changes the human world. The first mediamorphosis was marked by the appearance of speech, the second by writing, and the third by the transmission of information and communication by means of electricity. “This phase of the third great mediamorphosis has obviously contributed to the ever-greater growth of expectations of constant entertainment and emotional stimulation, as well as the increasing human ability to process multiple media inputs simultaneously. [...] One of the consequences of these changes is a significant social shift away from literacy and mediated content towards images and interaction” (Fidler 2004: 184).

We have to accept McLuhan’s thesis with reservations, because the media are also the means of producing information of different types and purposes, processed and adapted to the forms of a specific medium that addresses the audience. As for Fiedler, we dare to see a change that we might consider revolutionary in technological expansion of the late twentieth century and innovation in data transmission over the World Wide Web, which would permit us to declare it a new, digital mediamorphosis.

It could be said that the fourth mediamorphosis began with the advent of the Internet, although in 1997, when he published the book “Mediamorphosis”, Fiedler did not recognize it as fundamentally different from the third, primarily due to the use of electricity. However, Stanford University in the United States was already experimenting with computer’s work and data transmission only by light, which McLuhan considered a pure medium, a form without any content that changes the world and lives of people, by illuminating the planet and turning night into day. “The example of electric light can, in this regard, prove instructive. Electric light is pure information. It is, so to speak, media without a message, unless it is used to print an ad or a name. [...] It doesn’t matter if the light is used for brain surgery or night baseball matches. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the ‘content’ of electric light, because they could not exist without it” (McLuhan, 1971: 42).

What is new in the understanding of light is the idea that, thanks to its dual nature, wave and corpuscular, photons could transmit information, which would

³ This book was first published in Yugoslavia in 1971. by Belgrade's “Prosveta”, and translator Slobodan Djordjevic, hesitating between the English term “media” and “means of public information” established in the socialist state, created the neologism “opštita” (communicators) which was not well accepted either in Serbia or in Croatia, or in the entire area of the common Serbo-Croatian / Croato-Serbian language of the period. “Poznavanje opštita” has remained a rare book without new editions with that title. In brief, “communicators” were excommunicated, while the book, paradoxically, was still read, since for a long time there was no other translation into our common language.

simplify and speed up communication to unimaginable proportions, both on our planet and in cosmic relations.

Truth be told, at the end of the twentieth century, Fiedler noted that there was optimism in scientific circles about the development of a technology of light wave communication: “Although scientists have long assumed that visible light can serve for more efficient communication, until almost the end of the 1960s, they failed to demonstrate its astonishing ability to transmit and store digital data” (Fidler 2004: 252-253). To this day, the two most important inventions in this field are laser and fiber optic cables –the “glass wires” or optical fibers that replaced much thicker copper cables: “The most difficult problem that has yet to be overcome is, apparently, the development of faster and more intelligent optical switches in order to direct the ‘packaging’ of information that travels at the speed of light” (Fidler 2004: 254).

The development of technology leads to further research of the cosmos and the microworld, revealing their interconnectedness and interdependence. In this task, humans will be helped by their “extensions” such as artificial intelligence, as was discussed in mid-November 2021 by Jelena Vučković, a professor of electrical engineering at Stanford University, at the lecture “Inverse designed photonics: Are computers better than humans in designing photonics?” Photonics is the science of guiding and manipulating light that has found most use in many applications such as optical interconnections, optical computer platforms for artificial intelligence or quantum computing, augmented reality glasses, biosensors, medical imaging systems and sensors in autonomous vehicles. The main mission for researchers now is to reduce the dimensions of compact accelerators by as much as 10,000 times from traditional accelerators (going from miles to inches in size) (<https://news.mit.edu/2021/jelena-vuckovic-2021-dresselhaus-lecture-inverse-designed-photonics-1206>).

In the near future, this could lead to commercial applications that would make even personal computers super powerful machines, accessible to a wide audience of users, as well as creators of new content and forms, transmedia narratives applicable in scientific, artistic and everyday communication. The development of technology is likely to lead to multiplication of messages, stories and images that an individual cannot adequately process without critical selection. As a result, media education is gaining importance and becoming a necessity for all ages and categories of the population, regardless of their occupations.

While waiting for future discoveries and new mediamorphoses, we have long noticed that the media do not represent the world as it objectively is, but create representations of it. Quite in the spirit of Immanuel Kant and the subjectivity of each of our judgments, not only about the beautiful and pleasant, but about everything we observe and think of: “The judgment of taste is by no means a judgment of knowledge, therefore is not logical but aesthetic, by which we mean the judgment whose determining reason cannot be other than subjective. But any relation of notions, even a relation of emotions, can be objective (and then it means the reality of an empirical notion); only the relation with the feeling of pleasure or displeasure cannot be objective, as it does not mean absolutely anything in the object, but in which the

subject feels oneself the way the notion affects him” (Kant 1975: 93). Contaminated by personal and group interests, in the absence or abundance of information that is difficult to verify, recipients watch informative and entertaining programs with equal passion, which leads to the neglect of logic and dominance of emotional probability in inference. A convincing story illustrated with video recordings will usually prevail in a duel with dull facts presented without a narrator.

Not only is McLuhan’s claim “the medium is the message” confirmed in our digital age, but the media have contributed to the creation of the world as the Baudrillard’s simulacrum (1991), and the insistence of writer Vladimir Nabokov that the word “reality” should always be written in quotation marks (Genette 2004: 93) is no longer eccentricity, but necessity. We are all “immersed” in the virtual world of the media, a kaleidoscope of endless images that do not cease multiplying, so it is increasingly difficult to distinguish facts from interpretations, truth from lies, facts from factoids. The term “factoid” was coined by the American writer Norman Mailer (1973) to denote information that is accepted as fact even though it is not true. It is often trivial or completely fabricated, but it gains credibility through publication in the press or electronic media that give it “legitimacy”. This is also how it is defined in Webster’s dictionary, as “an invented fact believed to be true because it appears in print” and “a briefly stated and usually trivial fact” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/factoid>).

The problem of superficiality and the aspiration for entertainment to dominate in all spheres goes far beyond the media because education tries to imitate the dynamics of media images, without a deeper understanding, thinks linguist Noam Chomsky: “For example, if you look at ‘Science magazine’, editor-in-chief Bruce Alberts has a series of editorials condemning the way science is taught in America. In federally funded schools and universities, people are taught factoids; they make them remember the periodic table and not understand what it is about. Alberts says that this creates a completely wrong image of the nature of science in people, and that it distances children from science. If what he describes overwhelms the education system, it will probably lead to a decline in scientific expertise and capacity” (<https://pescanik.net/intervju-sa-noamom-comskim/>).

Throughout the history of civilization, information has been important for the survival of human communities. The development of the mass media has led to the present condition in which we need protection from enormous amounts of information. A picture speaks more than a thousand words, but thousands of pictures are fighting for our attention at every moment. The contemporary culture is reminiscent of a media supermarket in which we buy what we don’t need, while missing the necessities, such as spiritual food.

2. Meta-referential turn of the media towards their own “reality”

Contemporary man is lost in the abyss of media images (*mise en abyme*⁴), much like “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland” (Carroll 1865), experiencing an even deeper fall into the world, as in “Through the Looking-Glass” (Carroll 1871). On the other side of reality, those mirrors are crooked and give a distorted image of both the world and the people themselves. The media-fueled image has eaten the identity just like “sheep ate men” in the time of Thomas More (1516) because arable land was turned into pasture: “They who are so mild and who eat so little have now, as I hear, begun to be so voracious and wild that they devour people, strip fields, devastate houses and settlements” (More 2002: 55-56).

The laws of the market impose on the media the struggle for profit as the only way of survival. Under the influence of tabloids and reality shows, the audience expects a spectacle in the prime time and amusement in the entire program. Being famous becomes an imperative devoid of Warholian irony, and the screens show perpetual parade of “celebrities and celestoids” (Vukadinović 2013: 62-63). In such a constellation of powers, deontological principles of responsibility for the written and publicly spoken word are neglected, because in a consumer society, buying any product that can be associated with glamorous stars is a substitute for prayer, and the shopping center becomes a surrogate temple. Everyday life of viewers is greatly influenced by celebrities, and the media encourages such idolatry since it increases their viewership. Reality without the influence of media is archaic and uninteresting, and as a final consequence of the mediatization of reality, the media are increasingly dealing with what they alone have produced: their heroes from the media Olympus created in the studio, with the wholehearted support of grateful audiences, in front of the screens or in that same studio. In our times, media fame has become a substitute for immortality.

This metamedia preoccupation with themselves produces a narcissistically oriented media culture. At the same time, many of the media often use the same narrative that is transmedially reshaped, and is based on the process of “metaization”, the result of which is marked by the transmedia term “metareference”: “A connotational difference may (but need not) be created by tendentially employing ‘metaization’ when referring to a process and ‘metareference’ whenever the result is in focus” (Wolf 2009: 12-13).

At the end of the twentieth century, it took on such proportions, primarily in Western culture, that in the theory of narratology, this phenomenon was marked as a “meta-referential turn”. However, due to the fashionability of the term “turn”, from “linguistic turn” (1950) to “reflective turn” (2006) – which culminated in the ironic “turnological turn” (Kaube 2006: 199), debates began over whether “there is a metareferential turn and if so, how can it be explained?” (Wolf 2011: 1). The

⁴ In Western art history *mise en abyme* is a formal technique of placing a copy of an image within itself, often in a way that suggests an infinitely recurring sequence. In film theory and literary theory, it refers to the technique of inserting a story within a story. The term is derived from heraldry literally means “placed into abyss”. It was first appropriated for modern criticism by the French author Andre Gide.

arguments of the opponents of this term are based on the fact that metaphenomena have always existed in art and the media, which could mean that the increase in metareferentiality is only an illusion encouraged by enormously increased production. It was also pointed out that the introduction of the new term leads to increased sensitivity of media researchers, which makes them more aware of the metareferential process, so that they are now noticing it everywhere. The disputes also included linking metareference to postmodernism, which is prone to fragmentation, as well as referring to Dan Sperber's anthropological characterization of man as what one might term a "metareferential animal"⁵ (Sperber 2000: 117-137).

Taking all the remarks into account, German narratologist and media theorist Werner Wolf points out that the media dealing with itself – metaization, has disproportionately increased and, more importantly, reached a new quality in contemporary art and media: "According to my hypothesis, the metareferential turn is thus not merely the effect of a shift in scholarly perspective but like, for example, the 'visual turn' belongs to the class of 'turns' which denote a change in the objects under discussion as well as in scholarly perspective" (Wolf 2011: 7). In other words, not only has the researcher's view of media and artistic content changed, but the reality itself occurs "immersed" in virtual worlds and its comprehension is mediated by them as another of the possible storyworlds.

However, while narratologists shifted the focus from narrative to narrativity as a process and studied the transposition of the story from one medium to another, a shift occurred in transfictionality as a key concept of transmedial narratology. In addition to meta-media in the technological sense of uniting the old and the new, an approach to the production of media content as also become meta-medial: some watch and listen to others and react to it, from influencers, bloggers and vloggers, to public media services and private companies. The democratization of social media has enabled each user to become an actor, participant and protagonist of the simulated world. However, despite the great opportunity for everyone to become a co-author of a work in the digital world, which has led to "the myth of interactivity" (Manovich 2015: 97), life in a virtual community is basically reduced to clicks and superficial communication without sincere human contact.

Different concepts in the theory of narratology and media theory are not insurmountable obstacles to understanding: what modern narratologists like Wolf call "metareference" is close to the concept of "metonymy" as understood by Lev Manovich in the language of digital media. The first significant step was taken by Roman Jakobson, one of the most important linguists of the twentieth century, who applied computer binary logic in the analysis of rhetorical turns and reduced them all to two basic concepts: metaphor and metonymy. In our time, Manovich noticed a tendency of reducing turns to only one figure: "Finally, during the 1990s, the hyperlinks of the world wide web gave priority to metonymy at the expense of all

⁵ Dan Sperber attributes to humans a "metarepresentational capacity" that is "no less fundamental than the faculty for language", and he claims that "[u]nderstanding the character and the role of this [...] capacity might change our view of what it is to be human" (2000a: 6f.)

others. The hypertext of the world wide web leads the reader from one text to another ad infinitum. Contrary to the popular image of a computer medium that compresses all knowledge of the world into a single library (which would imply the existence of a particular classification system), or a giant book (which would imply narrative order), perhaps it is better to imagine the culture of new media as an infinite flat surface on which individual texts are arranged without any special order and system, similarly to a web page” (Manovich 2015: 119-120).

Metonymy, a stylistic figure to which all other figures can be reduced in the digital age, enables any recipient, with a real name and surname, to acquire a fluid identity in the virtual world. This is applicable not only to the way he presents himself, but also to any interaction with everyone else he enters into communication. Thus, the definition of transfictionality (transmediality) as a “movement of fictional entities through different texts/media” (Ryan 2013: 365) expands its meaning and includes the movement of real people as avatars through the virtual space. This unites the real world with all other worlds into a common “reality”, confirming the vision of the writer Vladimir Nabokov of a personal understanding of reality.

The philosophical question, whether a person remains the same by moving through media stories and images like an actor of art, imposes an additional dilemma: does the world he returns to from those travels remain intact or is it absorbed by the media into cyberspace? Cognitive narratology views narrativity as the recipient’s mental activity, which would mean that if it is absent, then there is no experience of moving through virtual worlds, similar to the inability to perceive metareference connections because stimuli are too weak to evoke higher levels of consciousness. This does not mean, however, that storyworlds exist independently of each other, but that the core of the story has different media manifestations in different forms, times and contexts. Modern man, a user of various media, from traditional to digital, functions meta-medially from his reality in many virtual spaces. There are three possibilities: “1. A one-text / one-world relation; 2. A one-text / many-worlds relation; 3. A one-world / many-texts relation” (Ryan 2013: 365). The term “text” should be understood here in a broader sense as any possible medium of communication.

Is metareference a sign of the decadence of contemporary culture in which the media meditate, continuously “navel gazing”, instead of dealing with more serious issues outside the domain of their own? It is certain that art and the media have other tasks besides self-reflection, but their self-reflection would be pointless if modern societies did not function as media communities. Today’s public virtually does not exist outside the media, because even significant deeds remain marginalized out of reach of the cameras of our technologically advanced visual civilization. In the light of that self-preoccupation of the media, the modern world is reminiscent of a goose that laid a golden egg and then, being so amazed by the event, died of starvation waiting to see if it would happen again. Advocating the evaluation of cultural manifestations in practice, Werner Wolf concludes the foreword to “The Metareferential Turn in Contemporary Arts and Media - Forms, Functions, Attempts at Explanation” (2011) with the poem “Ars Poetica” written by X.J. Kennedy in the

1960s as a warning to himself and others who created meta-poetry and meta-art, neglecting everything but self-reflection:

“The goose that laid the golden egg
Died looking up its crotch
To find out how its sphincter worked.
Would you lay well? Don’t watch.”
(Wolf 2009: 38-39).

Werner Wolf, a German theorist of narratology, calls this self-absorption of the media a “meta-referential turn” that completely changes contemporary culture, and hesitates between assessing it as increasingly sophisticated and requiring the recipient to possess ever more knowledge to understand it, and quite the opposite estimate that it represents the decadence and giving in of most recipients to media “images inside images” and “stories inside stories” that lead to habituation and consent to manipulation. This position is close to Gramsci’s stance on hegemony and the spontaneous consent of the subordinate class to be ruled over, as in the days of Ancient Rome and the saying *panem et circenses*, which perfectly corresponds to the media circus in which the modern man is immersed.

Louis Althusser’s notion of “consent” is close to this understanding of the functioning of the society of liberal capitalism, while the most direct connection between the media and government is seen by Stuart Hall, who claims in McLuhan’s footsteps: “The mass media is the most important apparatus of modern capitalism” (Hall according to McQueen 2000: 307).

Metalepsis as a permutation of reality and fiction, so that “the picture has to go outside the frame”, which was the advice given to Velázquez by his teacher Pacheco (Genette 2006: 64), is only a partial definition of this stylistic figure, which is very familiar to contemporary art and media audiences accustomed to the reverse procedure: one’s own entry into the picture frame, changeable frames that, like mirrors, show the one who wants to be reflected in them. The closeness of metalepsis to metaphor and metonymy makes it a meta-reference phenomenon, but we can indulge or resist its seductiveness: “An aesthetic illusion does not function today in a completely different way than in the past; it always contains a part of distancing of the media consciousness or the awareness of fictionality – that is what distinguishes it from deception. [...] The change that has taken place is a change in degree, it has broadened the margins of tolerance within which metaization can coexist with immersion” (Wolf 2011: 28-29).

Etymology gives the answer to the objections that narratology is just another theory: the Greek word *theoria* comes from the verb *theorein* which means “to look at something, to observe, to spectate”. Although the ancient Greeks have also associated theory with intellect, the root of the word stems from the visual aspect. That brings theory closer to practice and presents the knowledge which explains a world made up of media images and an image of a naturally created world.

The reality of the modern man is largely intertwined with the media messages in which the image dominates, while sound, speech and text interpret and reinforce the meaning. The media tools are powerful means of presenting events and creating

narratives. However, in spite of the possibilities for manipulation, the audience is not passive. The individual chooses whether to accept the message without questioning its ideological code or to actively seek answers that he considers more true. A huge number of media and the metamedia culture flood us with a “blizzard” of information, but at the same time enable critical reading of dominant narratives and search for alternative solutions. Knowledge of theories and media practice gives the recipients the power to preserve freedom of opinion and not lose themselves in the abyss of media images and their imposed interpretation. A proactive approach is the best way to boldly step through the media maze and find a way out of “the garden of forking paths” at all times.

3. Conclusion

The media are a special sphere of artistic expression, but most of their program content is directed towards the commercial and ideological effect. Each medium requires a specific approach to decoding its messages, and new media always contain all the previous ones, as McLuhan presented in detail: “The effect of the media becomes strong and deep precisely because it is given another medium as ‘content’. The contents of a film are a novel, a play or an opera. [...] The ‘content’ of written or printed text is speech, but the reader is almost completely unaware of either print or speech” (McLuhan 1971: 53).

Dedicating himself to the analysis of television, John Fisk expresses admiration for its possibilities: “Television is, by all accounts, the most important creative medium, not only in the 20th century, but probably in the entire history of mankind” (Fisk 1978: 31). Less than two decades later, the focus shifted to the Internet, but the convergence of the press, radio, television and new digital media has led to the creation of an even more powerful meta-medium. Reality has not disappeared, but its cognition has become multimedial in most parts of the planet.

Contemporary narratology is focused on the functioning of the same narratives in different media in order to determine distinctions and notice a new quality in the transmedia transformation of a message and the capabilities of the audience to process it. Narrativity is not objectively present in the text, but depends on the cognitive frame of the observer, which encompasses all their knowledge and experience. Therefore, any media and artistic adaptation of a story can be considered a new work. Knowledge of the original text is not obligatory, however, to understand and experience the metatext in the spectrum of metareferential meanings, it is good to know the prototext. For example, the ballet “Who’s Singin’ Over There?” (Serbian: “Ko to tamo peva?”) (2004) will be received differently by the audience who watched the film of the same name (1980) than by those who do not even know the film was made. The main reason for this is that each medium has its own language of expression.

Reality has always been mediated by language, but in the 21st century it is the language of the meta-medial digital computer: “I study the language of the new

media by placing it within the history of modern medial and visual cultures. How do the new media connect with older cultural forms and languages, and how do they break with them? What is new in the way in which the new media create the illusion of reality, address the viewer and represent space and time?" (Manovich 2015: 49).

Meta-medial language implies a boundless context and a new discourse for which transmediality is essential. The written and spoken word and the picture shown are necessary to tell a story, but they are only signs of, not references to the real world. The sign groups are very similar so that they can be replaced by each other within a narrative, which "converts" a "syntagm as a linear sequence into a paradigm with countless possibilities to present a story in the media" (Crnobrnja 2010: 38).

Under the influence of television in the 20th century and the Internet in the 21st century, fundamental changes emerged in the formation of narration in all areas of life. The media adapted to the demands of a diverse audience and managed to offer a replacement for folkloric culture, but also a high-value content that attracted elitist groups from various fields, from art to science and politics. Thus, both "low" and "high" culture were successfully commercialized and put in a position to communicate with each other through the media. The result, notes the French semiologist Roland Barthes, is that "the notion of reality" has been replaced by the notion of "reality created by culture" and that we are left with "reconciliation of realities and people, descriptions and explanations, objects and knowledge" (Barthes 1957: 234).

One could discuss whether there is an "innocent" view of the world at all, beyond any, even the most rudimentary, culture of the "noble savage" praised by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in "Emile, or On Education" (1762). However, it is certain that in our time the word culture can be replaced by the word media or even better: media culture. Today, it is the dominant form of culture, essential for understanding social trends, because "media culture is the scene of a battle for supremacy between key social groups and opposing political ideologies" (Kellner 2004: 7).

This entails the acknowledgment that "original reality" is incomprehensible, and might even not exist, except in the form of a TV scene or an Internet sequence. Serbian film theorist Vladimir Petrić, the first doctor of film studies in the USA and a professor at Harvard University, believes that the boundaries between factual and fictional have already disappeared: "Television is destined to erase the line between 'artistic reality' and 'real reality', because it is television that proves that it is possible to discover the basic aesthetic qualities in the direct registration of real facts, and therefore in real life" (Crnobrnja 2010: 71).

The opposite case is also possible, and "real life" can be found in art and media. One of the most interesting historical examples is given by Gerard Genette (2006: 42), explaining metalepsis as a figure of crossing the line between reality and fiction: in the play "The Impromptu of Versailles" by Moliere, he also acts, and improvising on stage he took on the role of the Brecourt-knight to explain to the Brecourt-actor how to act. Moliere then stepped out of the role and uttered a line of the Marquis, then again, a line of the knight, and thus acted the whole scene himself, turning the

other actors into an audience, which thrilled those present and became an integral part of subsequent performances, including the one before King Louis XIV. Such virtuosity in the intertwining of narrative and reality is possible only if the writer, actor and director are the same person, and the audience is well informed.

This may also be a recipe for modern recipients of media content so that they do not feel lost in the abyss of media images, but that requires a more creative approach of both audiences and media productions. The development of technology will surely enable every user to participate in content that surpasses video games, and the imagination of the creator can make use of the most ordinary things to make magic. A striking example is Marcel Duchamp, a contemporary of Albert Einstein, who dared to relativize the aesthetic rules of his era and turn the urinal into an object of art. At the exhibition of the “Society of Independent Artists” in 1917, he presented it under the pseudonym R. Matt with the name “Fountain”, and this action had something of Moliere’s spirit, because Duchamp was also a member of the jury. By this ironic approach he disturbed the public, and his artistic procedure was called “readymade”, because he claimed that every object could be treated as artistic if chosen by the artist.

The life of a modern man flows simultaneously in two worlds, one that he considers reality and the other created by the media. Technological advances have made media images very reminiscent of a life course that is not a static but a dynamic process, the River of Heraclitus in which it is impossible to step twice. This similarity relativizes the boundaries between the real and all the possible worlds, considering that the media create a “reality of a higher level”. It allows the user to become acquainted with the planet and different cultures while never leaving their room, be informed about real events and immersed in fictional stories from movies and TV shows. Therefore, our digital age is often metaphorically presented as “The Matrix” (1999), a film inspired by Baudrillard’s book “Simulacra and Simulation” (1981). Hence the view of the man of our time as a hero who has to choose between the blue pill of oblivion and the red one that leads to the dangers of freedom to reveal the truth, which is in fact the old dilemma of choosing between bread and liberty. Under the threatening shadow of nuclear Armageddon, one is trying to find a way out of the abyss of ideological doctrines supported by the military, economic power and the power of the media to manipulate the public. The modern age of relentless exploitation of all resources has made planet Earth similar to Duchamp’s readymade artifact.

Humanity is always left with hope, at the bottom of Pandora’s meta-media box, that the world will not collapse under the weight of media images or dissipate due to their unreality. If that does happen, it is comforting that the most perfect cameras will continue to record everything, and if the newest technology works only by light, even without human influence. Pure form, pure media, but left without a story that only one being can tell: *homo narrans*. That is true whether he lives in the real world or the simulacrum, because the story is the foundation of every reality.

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METAREFERENTNA STVARNOST U AMBISU MEDIJSKIH SLIKA I TEORIJA

Apstrakt. Makluanova tvrdnja „mediji su poruka“ izrečena u doba ekspanzije televizije šezdesetih godina XX veka, potvrđena je pojavom interneta, društvenih mreža i digitalnom transformacijom savremenog društva. Medijska forma obuhvata recipijente postajući sredina stvarnija od realnosti poput Bodrijarovog simulakruma. „Uronjeni“ u medijski kaleidoskop u kome se „slike u slici“ vrtoglavo umnožavaju, korisnici sve teže razlikuju činjenice od interpretacija, fakta od faktoida, izgubljeni u virtuelnom prostoru beskrajnih priča kao „Alisa u zemlji čuda“. Tehnološki napredak, proizvođači nove, sačuvao je sve stare medije, poput ruskih „matrjoški“, ali je potisnuo istinu i moralne dileme u drugi plan. Zabava je postala glavni medijski sadržaj, informacije se plasiraju kroz infotainment formu, uz brzo smenjivanje slika kao popularizovana „montaža atrakcija“. Marksova fasciniranost mašinama i proizvodnim snagama kao „društvenim bićem koje određuje svest ljudi“ doživela je neobičnu inverziju: medijska produkcija mnogo sofisticiranije reprezentuje i kreira pogled na svet od teške industrije koja kao relikv prošlosti postaje ekološka pretnja opstanku čovečanstva i planete. „Stvarnost“, reč koju na insistiranje književnika Nabokova uvek treba pisati pod navodnicima, predstavlja zadivljujući artefakt medija i njihovih moćnih gospodara, a planeta Zemlja upotrebljena je kao Dišanov „ready made“, postajući tako medijsko i umetničko delo podvrgnuto besomučnoj eksploataciji radi profita. Ovladavanje Manovičevim „jezikom novih medija“ neophodno je za razumevanje savremene informacione i vizuelne kulture kako bi komunikacija među ljudima uopšte bila moguća, jer je savremena kultura metareferentna, zagledana u samu sebe. Kritičko razumevanje sveta, za šta je neophodna medijska pismenost i kontinuirano medijsko obrazovanje, jedini je način da se ne bude saučesnik u urušavanju realnosti pod težinom medijskih slika koje brišu okvir između realnosti i fikcije, činjenica i teorijskih interpretacija.

Ključne reči: metareferentna stvarnost, mediji, poruka, medijska slika, teorija