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Project #1

MATX 601

Lights, Camera, Aesthetics!

What do *Oprah*, *CSI*, *Jerry Springer*, *Without a Trace*, and all other television shows have in common? Aesthetics, or more precisely, applied media aesthetics. And what is applied media aesthetics? According to Herbert Zettl, (1) “applied media aesthetics is the branch of aesthetics that deals with sense perception and how to influence them through fundamental image elements, such as light, space, time/motion, and sound, which focuses on television, film, and other electronic audiovisual media.” These essential image elements are the backbone in creating award-winning television shows, as well as compelling commercials, and PSA’s

According to Zettl, applied media aesthetics considers art and life as mutually dependent and essentially interconnected. He also states, “applied media aesthetics is not an abstract concept, but a process in which we examine a number of media elements, such as lighting and picture composition, how they interact, and perceptual reactions to them.” This does not mean all, everyday life experiences are considered to be art, but it has the potential to be. Zettl states, the deciding factor in what elevates an ordinary life experience into the realm of art is the artist, or group of artist, such as a television or film crew.

Philosopher Irwin Edwin’s (3) new aesthetic concept stresses the close connection between art and life. He wrote: “So far from having to do

merely the statues, pictures, symphonies, art is the name for that whole process of intelligence by which life, understanding its own conditions, turns these into the most interesting or exquisite accounts. ” Zettl states “This process presupposes that life is given “line and composition” and that the experience is clarified, intensified, and interpreted.”

The process of clarification, intensification, and interpretation is woven throughout the aesthetics of applied media. In the area of television, each time a production is planned, this process is implemented. From pre-production, to production, to post production, this process enables the audience to interpret what they are hearing, seeing and understanding.

Contextualistic Aesthetics Defined

Contextualistic Aesthetics or contextualism is the evaluating of art according to what the artist felt while creating it. In the world of television production, this also holds true. What the producer and videographer sees through her/his lens is an interpretation of the actual event, thus creating art.

Three Key Elements

- a) What and how we perceive an event is greatly influenced buy its context;
- b) The interconnection of the major aesthetic fields of applied aesthetics: light, space, time/motion and sound;
- c) Helps to organize the discussion of the great variety of aesthetic elements in each field and the influence and dependence on one another.

Program Content

The content of a program is most essential. The idea of any program must be created for the medium it is to be shown on (i.e.: television, movie screen, computer). According to Zettl, “A good idea does not necessarily make for effective mass communication.” He also states, “ You must learn to mold an idea so it fits the medium’s technical as well as aesthetic production and reception requirements.

The Medium is the Message

Each time a person conveys a message to someone, that person becomes the communication medium. It is very important to be aware of how a person’s

behavior can influence how a specific message is received.

Marshall McLuhan, (4) states “the medium is the message.” What he means is the medium has an important role not only of the distribution of the message, but also in the shaping of the message the viewer receives. Some classic communication models never take in consideration the importance the medium plays in shaping the message. Most often the importance is given to the interpretation of the literal message, opposed to the message the medium is conveying to the audience.

Responsibility

The art of creating a television program, commercial or PSA is a multifaceted experience. From a television viewer's perspective, they often fail to grasp the true meaning of the images in a program.

As previously stated the purpose of applied media aesthetics is to clarify, intensify, and interpret the message to an audience. These three elements also shape and sometimes manipulate the viewer's perception. It is important the mass communicator and the viewer is aware of this manipulation and seek to learn more about the effects of applied media aesthetics.

Application

Over the past 8 years as a television production professor, I have instructed students in the production of news reports, talk shows, soap operas, commercials, and PSA's. Media aesthetics has been a critical part of the creation of these productions.

The following is the analysis of two public service announcements instructed by me and produced by television production students at Langston University in Langston, Oklahoma.

(Play Tape)

Aids Awareness PSA (30 sec.)

This PSA's target audience is African Americans. Mainly high school and college age. But now exclusively.

In the preproduction phase I suggested to the students, they had 30 seconds to grab the viewer's attention to convey a serious message. And if

they did not grab their attention in the first 2 seconds they would lose their audience.

The opening head shots and sharp cuts of people, was designed to give the viewer a sense of randomness. That Aids can strike anyone. The brick wall conveyed the message that having aids does place you back against a brick wall.

The graphics within the PSA, are actually an Aids awareness tee shirt designed by a student. Because students on campus frequently wore this tee shirt and the PSA was aired on the campus television station, this gave instant recognition to the viewers, thus creating a sense of connection to the PSA.

As well as the design of the tee shirt is also a play off the infamous “Got Milk “ slogan, which has been so recognizable in the past few years.

The scene of the couple in the bedroom is one that happens frequently on college campuses. The angle of the shot starts with a medium close-up, and slowly zooms out as the door closes. The angle of the shot first appears to be just a straight on shot, but as it zooms out the audience is given the feel they are standing above the scene looking down. Based on the viewer, this may be interpreted in a number of ways. From a higher being watching over the couple, to viewer voyeurism.

The voiceover was straightforward with facts and statistics on Aids among African Americans. The students created the music sound track, Which sets the tone of seriousness to future convey the message.

(Play Tape)

Domestic Violence PSA (30 Sec.)

The aesthetics of this PSA relied mainly on the use of a powerful sound track and the dramatic actions of the actors. There is no voice over. There is ambient sound that brings the viewer in to the action.

The extreme close up of the young lady brings the audience into her daydream. The cut to the actual violent scenes conveyed the sense of being in her shoes, because we have actually entered into her memory.

The scene of the slap and her fall to the floor, as a double take was done to create a more dramatic sense of the severity of domestic violence. The students decided this was a creative way to convey this message. Also since this was a view of her memory, it conveyed the way the mind works and its ability to replay experiences over and over, which continues to be as debilitating as the actual event.

The cut to the couple at the table, and the actions of the man towards her for having the daydream further reiterates the severity of domestic violence.

The closing graphic is an actual National Domestic Violence Hotline.

As with the Aids Awareness PSA, I suggested to the students for this PSA, they had only 30 seconds to convey their message, and about 2 seconds to capture their audience. And they were successful in creating a compelling PSA.

1. Herbert Zettl, *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics* (Calif.:Thompson, Wadsworth, 2005) p.3
2. Erwin Edman, *Art and the Man* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967) p.12
3. Edwin, *Arts and the Man*, p.12
4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964)