INTRACULTURAL OR TRANSCULTURAL: WHAT IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MULTICULTURAL AESTHETICS IN MEDIA PRODUCTION?

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Introduction

Media Form, not Media Content

It is very unlikely that a media producer or director, assigned to create a product for an audience of a cultural background different from their own, will neglect do the necessary research and design adaptations to insure that the content of the media product will address the audience "on their terms". Language use, existing knowledge and beliefs, realistic behaviors, learning styles, and portrayals are among these considerations. Consultation with "cultural interpreters" is a requisite in writing and directing.

All of these content issues concern what is in front of the camera. Media production aesthetics, on the other hand, concerns what is behind the camera: camera and lens placement and movement, composition, editing, etc. Aesthetic choices are what make one production's **form** different from another's, even when both are created from the same script, objectives, and original treatment. Certainly, the personal aesthetic choices made by all creative participants in a production result in unique outcomes in form, but these personal choices are informed, proscribed, and constrained by the cultural backgrounds of the individual media makers.

Terms and Concepts for this discussion of Aesthetics

This paper is not about the cultural content of media but about the cultural form of media. Media form is generally understood to encompass such production values as camera composition and movement, editing, sound, and more abstract techniques such as music and graphic effects. These formal qualities are generally understood to be in the realm of aesthetics. However, the term "aesthetics" is also generally associated with qualitative values such as "beauty" and "emotion". For this analysis, it is best to both restrict and expand on this understanding of aesthetics.

A good approach to understanding aesthetics within this context is to consider its opposite, anesthetics. Anesthetics deaden sensation. There is no

qualitative value associated with anesthetics. It simply has the practical value of blocking sensation at opportune times. Aesthetics, then, are about sensation. The 1997 "Sensation" exhibit at London's Royal Academy was extremely provocative in that the works stimulated reactions of disgust, displeasure, and all other manner of negative aesthetic response:

> Take Damien Hirst's "A Thousand Years," in which a severed cow's head crawling with flies, maggots and reeking of decay is encased in a glass box. Another Hirst work displays a preserved pig sliced in half and rigged it to a mechanical soundtrack: "This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home." …People are apparently eager to be shocked, offended or inspired by the "Sensation" exhibit; 3,000 visitors a day have attended the show, which features pieces from the Charles Saatchi collection. (Bowker)

So media aesthetics are about the sensations that can be stimulated by media form (and content) and how effective and appropriate those sensations are in effecting intended communication. Aesthetics is about sense.

Being Sensible and making Sense

Yet another common understanding needs to be reexamined. "Being sensible" is most often considered synonymous with being reasonable. However, the primary definition of sensible is "from Latin *sensibilis*, from *sensus*, past participle of *sentire* to feel 1 : of a kind to be felt or perceived: as perceptible to the senses." (Webster's) Before an act of communication can be made sense of, understood, and learned from, it must be presented in a form that can be sensed effectively and "be sensible". Otherwise, the communication is nonsense. A primary requirement of media aesthetics, then, is to be sensible. This is where the significance of multicultural aesthetics, involving differing cultural sensory response and sensory balance, becomes apparent.

Of the senses, Marshall McLuhan said :"common sense was for many centuries held to be the peculiar human power of translating one kind of experience of one sense into all the senses, and presenting the result continuously as a unified image to the mind. In fact, this image of a unified ratio among the senses was long held to be the mark of our *ratio*nality…"

Media Aesthetics: Sensible or Reflexive

An important distinction should be made between media aesthetics that are "common sensible" and those that are reflexive. Reflexive aesthetics are about media production techniques and elements that call attention to themselves. An example would be "speed ramping", where the motion within one shot is unnaturally varied between slow motion and fast motion. Replaying motion at other than normal rates has been around since the earliest days of cinema when cameras were cranked by hand. Great skill was required to hand crank a camera so that its frame rate would match that of the motor-driver projector used for presentation. It became very common practise to intentionally undercrank or overcrank the camera to create a less "sensible" but more evocative fast motion or slow motion result.

Reflexive techniques always call attention to themselves. They are about the nature of the medium, and foreground to the audience's attention the mediating processing of the recorded reality. In contrast, techniques which escape the audience's attention still have a liminal effect, feeding the senses of the audience with stimulation and information. An effective music soundtrack affects mood but is not consciously noticed. Effective camerawork provides the audience with the visual access they can unconsciously make sense of. When the camera indulges in "stunt shots" and grandiose moves, grabbing the attention of the viewer, attention has also been grabbed away from the story and message. Reflexive aesthetics compete with content, obscuring it. Sensible aesthetics convey content.

Reflexive media aesthetics tend to derive from two general sources: the technology of media and the sensible aesthetics of other cultures. Speed ramping, elaborate trucking shots, and pans around within freeze frames are examples of reflexive aesthetics that come to be because of hardware and software evolution. Other reflexive techniques, such as shakeycam, can have legitimate sensible aesthetic origins, but become overused and misused as a reflexive affect. (Gutenko)

Sensible aesthetics from other cultures have frequently been adopted by both experimental filmmakers and commercial producers in the Western world. But within Western media culture, these aesthetics are perceived as exotic and eccentric. Transposed from one culture to another, sensible media forms become reflexive.

Intracultural Media Aesthetics

It is not uncommon to find courses that explore multicultural aesthetics in the physical arts, specifically in media that are pre-electronic. Sculpture, painting, weaving, music, theater, and other expressive communication forms that have evolved over centuries within largely isolated cultures exhibit obvious formal and sensory distinctions. However, the development of electronic media (including film since this medium is dependent on electricity for filmstrip transport) coincided with the global breakdown of cultural isolation by international trade and commerce, mass communication, and the industrial revolution.

The electronic media of the Western world are highly stylized and culturally specific products. Structural approaches to these media are ethnocentrically assumed to be "correct", because dominant Western European social groups have been the principal originators, developers and users of these media technologies.

Certainly it is now recognized that all acts of communication are "value-laden", and it can be expected that film and television content originating in America, Sweden, or Russia will be imbued with their respective values (Katz & Wedell, 1977, p. 193). It is not so evident that all forms of communication are also structure-laden. Just as different languages function on the bases of their unique grammatical structures, so too does message-making in film and video rely on a particular inductively understood organization of a medium's elements. The cultural origins of content and symbols in these electronic media and the perceptual conventions derived from Renaissance representation are examples of structural rules. To this can be added the formal constructions of shot/scene editing, spatial and temporal displacement/expansion/ contraction, and other mannered and obvious techniques that can be loosely defined as "style".

Why the video screen should be round!

There is no natural reason why the video screen should be rectangular. By their nature, all lenses project into the camera images that are round; the rectangular frame is extracted from within the spherical image, discarding almost half of the original image, which then bounces around within lens and camera as flare. Telescopes, binoculars, and microscopes have the full image field captured by the lens.

The human visual field is also spherical (Callenbach, 1961), with some occlusions due to the nose and brows. The field of view here is approximately 140 to 160 degrees in width (Costello, 1995).

Lastly, for decades the only shape the flat image face of the cathode ray picture tube for the television set could be manufactured into was round, and the image target surface of the pickup tubes in video cameras were also round. Even the rectangular scanned raster was more complex in its synchronizing signals than a circular raster would be, resulting in greater difficulties in maintaining picture geometry. So why wasn't television allowed to "think outside the box"?

Culturally, of course, television was made to mimic the film's rectangular screen. But even the film screen was conformed to fit a preceding media shape, that of the painting hung on the wall, which in turn presented a bounded view akin to a window, which took its shape as a result of the structural materials utilized as found in the European environment. Early filmmakers were much more disposed than those of today towards working with circular, vignetted images. As we have seen, however, the cultural convention of the box as the "normal" bounded form of the image dominates. Round television screens seem to appear most commonly aboard alien spacecraft!

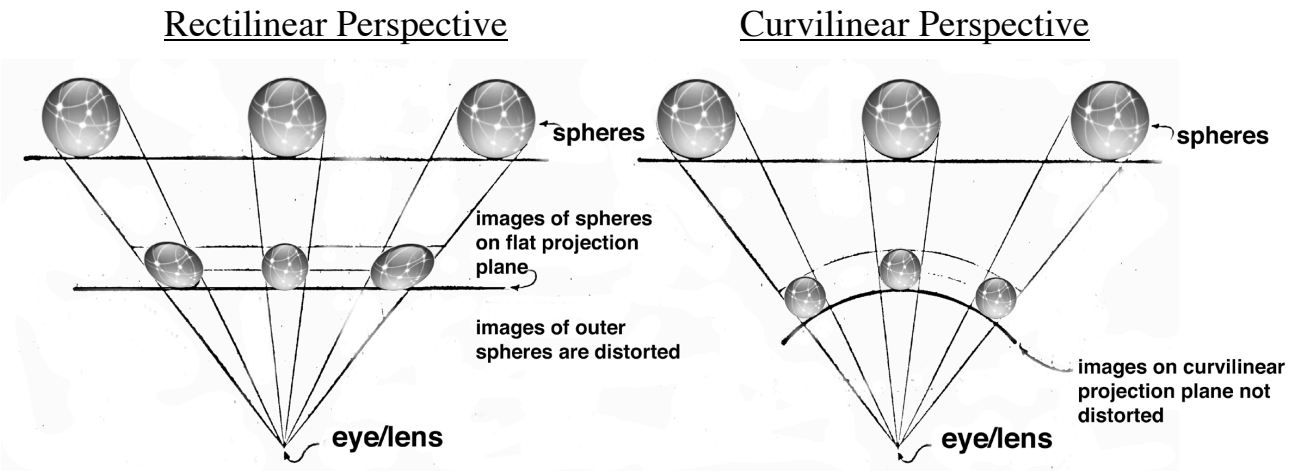
Why the screen should be a sphere!

The near total coverage of an audience's field of vision is the special contribution towards a culturally unconstrained media aesthetic enabled by Imax film projection. The screen size eliminates visual references to the theater, and situates the image directly before the observer. Omnimax (now known as Imax Dome) is a modified format of Imax that provides an even closer representation of natural vision, utilizing fisheye optics on both camera and projector. This procedure creates a distorted image on the film, which is corrected by projection onto the spherical surface of a planetarium dome. The dome curvature yields a linearly corrected image covering 180 degrees, reproducing the full maximum angle of view of the eye ("Shooting 'World Coaster'", 1981). Another distinctive attribute of the Omnimax projection is that it is a curved rather than a flat image, and essentially circular, which also conforms to the actual shape of the human field of vision (Callenbach, 1961).

This particular form of optical representation is based on curvilinear perspective, as originally suggested and schematized by Leonardo da Vinci. "Classical" or rectilinear perspective is the representational method devised

during the same Renaissance period to allow the depiction of reality on a flat plane, the plane of a painting, or the plane of film stock and a projection screen. The rectilinear perspective process subsumes a fixed monocular viewing position and a distinct frame of representation in space.

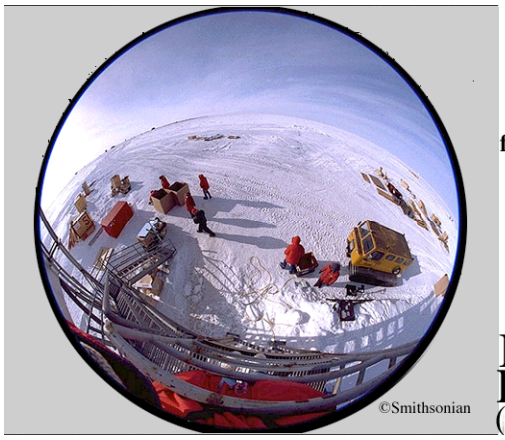
Diagrams showing comparison between rectilinear (flat) perspective and Curvilinear (spherical) perspective. Drawings derived from the daVinci Notebooks.

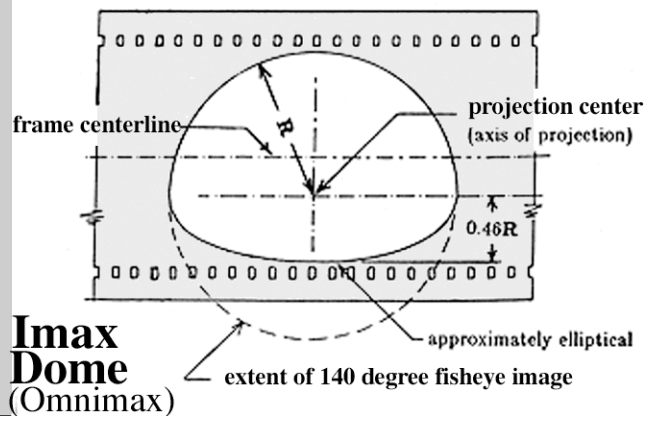


Rectilinear perspective used to show "distance" in time.
The Flight into Egypt/Christ Among the Scholars (Luca Signorelli, c. 1520)

Curvilinear perspective, if used to produce a representation on a flat plane, exhibits distortions characteristic of the fisheye lens. Curvilinear perspective treats reality as a curved space to be reproduced onto a curved plane, without distortion ("Notes on the Curved Image", 1973).

Curvilinear perspective image recorded on a flat plane





This projection process then encloses the audience <u>within</u> space. The horizon is not a straight line but a semi-circle, and objects that were above the camera are above the audience, and those that were to the side of the camera are to the side of the audience. Omnimax reproduces not only the image resolution of reality but also its three-dimensional spatial relationships to the camera/observer as well; the Omnimax 140 degree image is the least formalist frame in film history. As Roman Kroitor, producer/director and original co-developer of Imax states:

> There is a fairly substantial difference between Imax and ordinary film in the sense that Imax is much more like actually being in the situation. There is of course always a lot of control by the director and the cameraman of what it is the audience in seeing, how the thing is put together, but even taking that into account it's much more like being in the real situation (1984).

Allowing for the "truth" of ambiguity can be a prime cultural aesthetic objective. Rather than direct the audience *en masse* to the one "truth" as presumed and designed by a film director, the goal could be to provide an abundance of detail combined with a lack of overt direction so that each viewer, on their own, can find their own truth out of the matter. This would be less dependent on culturally explicit Western media conventions and be instead patterned after presumably more neutral visual/aural sense perception, and such an emphasis on viewer-discerned truths would appear to be more in harmony with traditional storytelling methods of communication (Tafoya, 1982).

The practicality of using the highly complex and expensive Imax format for an educational product is extremely problematic. However, the conventional television format of NTSC video, also referred to as SDTV (Standard Definition Television), is now being replaced by HDTV (High Definition Television) at a slow but sure pace. The affordable HDV consumer camcorder HDTV format has been introduced and HDV post-production is on the cusp. With six times the image resolution of SDTV, video will no longer be just "a close-up medium" and the range of aesthetic options for HDTV are far greater. HDTV may not be Imax, but it will no longer be plain old TV, and this will make video potentially much more adaptable to cultural aesthetic diversity.

The confounding thing about considering alternative media aesthetics is how this disturbs the foundational "rules of aesthetics" ingrained in all media makers. To accept the round image alone jettisons well-known compositional guidelines such as "the rules of thirds" and "magnetism of the frame". A curved screen discards "use of leading lines" because that rule emerges from and can only exist within rectilinear perspective.

The Structural Constraints of Form

The formal rules of film and video aesthetic applications are often referred to as a language. It is the structure of spoken language that determines the realms of conceptualization that can be defined and conveyed. That is what determines a language's capacity, or lack of capacity, to distinguish and convey experience and value. The revolutionary power of electronic media, especially since the advent of the Internet, lies in their pervasive and instantaneous delivery of particularly structured images and sound. The frequently overlooked inadequacy of these media lies in their extremely limited capacity to define experiences and values outside their formal aesthetic conventions. It is this structural inadequacy that is likely to leave the complex realities of the world's diverse cultures and perspectives beyond the grasp of even a sympathetic transposition into the electronic media.

Perceiving the structural influences of culture on media form is not necessarily easy to do. Not only do the beliefs, logical forms, and myths of a culture constrain perception, but the autonomic processing of sensation is also an intervening variable. Anthropologists have suggested that different cultural world views are mediated by cognitive maps that have in turn been influenced by different sense perceptions of reality (Kearney, 1984, p. 45). The experience of what "time" itself is varies between cultures, depending

on its perception as being linear, as in an industrially based society, or oscillating, as in an ecologically based society. Different concepts of time will affect the perception of its rate and depth, and the significance of the immediate moment as opposed to the past or future (Kearney, 1984, pp. 99-102). Cultural differences in the conception and perception of time may account for formal diversities in the structure of calendars and the temporal pacing of media productions. The concepts of space and of human orientation within space are also culturally relative (Kearney, 1984, pp. 141-161). These differences in world views are rooted in the sensory processes and the percepts that are admitted to the mind.

Culture and cognition, then, are interdependent with the senses. As Wober observes, different styles of communication are related to different modes of sensory elaboration (1974, p. 127), in much the same way that McLuhan recognized that different styles of communication are related to different communication technologies. Members of different cultures have been defined by Wober as *sensotypes*, by which is meant a cultural group with a specific pattern of relative importance of the difference senses. The *sensotype* description defines both the balance and the acuity of the senses. Berry (1974, p. 130) has described relationships between visual discrimination and artistic design and execution in subsistence level cultures, and Doob (1974, p. 199) has found that there are both race and environmental variables that account for differences in the recall and visual persistence of eidetic images (after-images).

With fundamental perceptions of time, space, and images being often highly disparate between cultures, the ethnocentrism of film and television is noticeably narrow and one-dimensional. Not only can the conventions of film and television form--the coding of space and time--appear nonsensical or awkward to those unaware of the codes, the limited significations and rules of film and television form are unable to convey the perceptions of other *sensotypes*; not their images, dreams, or their privileged understandings of reality.

Potential Aesthetic Variables in Media Form

The work of John Worth and Sol Adair, recounted in their book *Through Navajo Eyes*, revealed several formal dimensions that could be examined in the exploration of a culturally specific media aesthetic. Their 1966 communications project involved providing seven Pine Springs, Arizona, Navajos, who had either very limited or no contact with film or television, with film equipment and only operational training. Worth and Adair withheld all indications or guidance as to how

films should be shot or edited. Except through implications inherent in the simple fact that a camera had a variety of lenses, or that an editing bench could cut film apart and reassemble it in a new order or length, there were no models for the Navajos to refer to in creating their cinematic structure. Although there were some similarities between the films produced by the Navajos and novice counterparts in the Western film schools in the United States which Worth and Adair used for comparisons, there were several specific formal features in both the Navajo's films and in their logic of filming that revealed a uniquely Navajo visual perception and cognition of reality.

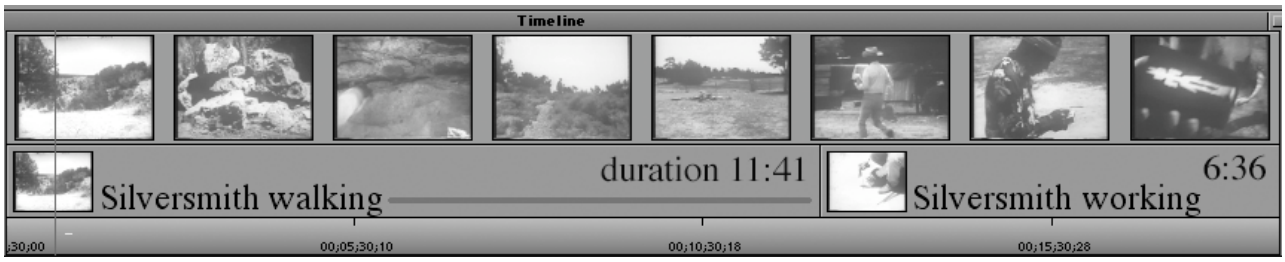
Among the many visual differences Worth and Adair noticed was an extremely heightened awareness of motion patterns, with a corresponding penchant for camera movements and experimentation with motion manipulation in editing. Worth and Adair were surprised by the Navajo's capacity for pre-visualization and retention of image details, which displayed itself prominently in their rapid and accurate editing, and they believed cultural attributes were evident in the emergent Navajo structural (shot, editing, sequencing) rules. A very strong orientation towards processes was evident, typified by the act of walking as an essential aspect of other activities (a reflection of the mythic stature of walking, and the entity-in-action). An avoidance of facial close-ups and other territorial observances were also noted.

Worth and Adair's preliminary reactions to the filmmaking activities of their Navajo students were that the Indians were making technique and content choices that were often bizarre and incomprehensible. Visiting anthropologist Edward Hall, seeing their difficulties in rationalizing these aberrant behaviors, stated, "if it is so clear to you that they are doing it all wrong, it must be because they are breaking a set of rules which you have and which they don't. Your job will be to make explicit the different rules you and they are operating under (Worth and Adair, 1972, p. 110).

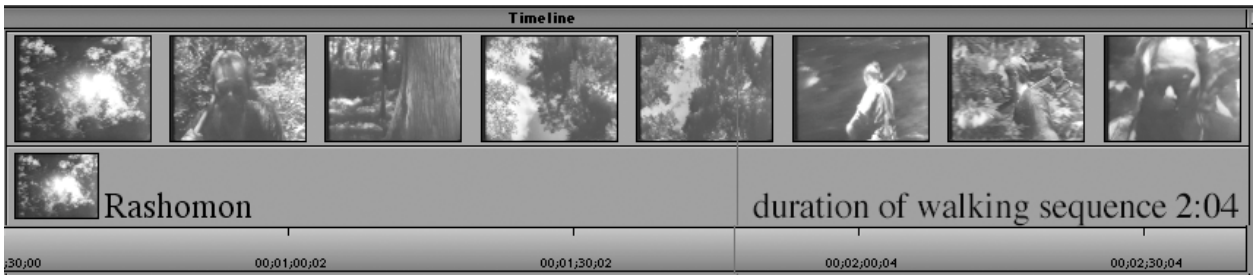
<u>The Journey or the Destination: screentime emphasis on "getting there".</u>

One of the more perplexing, for Worth and Adair, shooting and editing choices made by the Navajos in documenting weaving and silversmithing activities was the amount of screentime devoted to “getting ready” to create as opposed to the actual process of creation. Much time was spent showing the artists searching for raw materials and preparing working areas and less time was spent on the actual physical art making. During post-production screenings, the Navajos explained their aesthetic choices, which were based not only on their high regard for the spiritual stature of walking, but also on the importance of demonstrating to buyers (the typical white tourist) how much care and reflection went into the creation of Navajo blankets and silverwork. The Navajo created these particular films as product

infomercials with specific marketing objectives. But regarding the latter media application, it could be argued that the Navajos failed to take into account the more goal-oriented, “cut to the chase” film aesthetic expectations of their target audience.



Another example is found in a particular sequence comparison between Akira Kurosawa’s film *Rashomon* with the later US remake *The Outrage*. Kurosawa has often been regarded as having a very “American” film aesthetic for a Japanese director, but even so there are significant differences between his original films and their adaptations. A major distinction occurs early in *Rashomon* where a woodcutter, one of several witnesses to a crime, relates his version of the events. The flashback of his experience begins with an extended "just walking" sequence through deepening woods prior to arriving at the crime scene, a sequence that is not replicated in the remake. This suggests significance in the Japanese aesthetic of the “mythic stature of walking, and the entity-in-action”.



The dominant popularity of Japanese films among students at the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, seems to indicate a particular affinity between the Japanese film and Native American cognition (Worth & Adair, 1972, p. 60). Inversely, Japanese director Susumi Hani remarked of Al Clah's film *Intrepid Shadows*,

> ...that Navajo film was the most beautiful film I've ever seen in America. It's too bad that you Americans cannot understand it--but the Navajo must be like the Japanese since I can understand it (Worth & Adair, 1972, p. 61).

The Gaze (POV)

The POV (character's point-of-view) shot is occasionally used in film and video productions. Rarely employed for any great portion of a program (*Lady in the Lake* is a rare and awkward exception), the appropriateness of its use will reflect the acceptability of direct gaze within a culture.

Eye-to-eye contact may be sensed as honest and direct, or confrontational and disrespectful. When the camera is an eye, how should it regard and gaze upon people within its frame? Should subjects be asked to address the lens, be permitted to look downward at all times when speaking on camera, or speak with their back to the camera? Knowing how gaze is privileged in a particular environment when there is no camera present might be a good guide as to how the camera should witness this environment when it arrives on production day.

Continuity of Time or Ellipses of Time?

One perplexing aggravation for Worth and Adair was the editing tendencies of several Navajo filmmakers to break the continuity of motion within a shot sequence. Editing "reality" necessitates the selection of bits of time and motion to discard and to include. In highly linear Western film technique it is considered good practise to maintain the illusion of continuous and unbroken time within a scene. The perception of time as being linear is at the root of this. If a culture understands time, and therefore motion, to be oscillating or cyclical, then the sensibility of representing all moments of clock time as being of equal significance is diminished. Excising motion to create "ellipses of time" is becoming a more acceptable editing approach in Western media (e.g. *The Usual Suspects*), but this is still responded to by Western audiences as "style", in other words a reflexive gimmick, and not liminally sensed as a natural sensation or replication of how time and motion really are.

Angle of view and Angle of visual discrimination

While the full visual field encompasses about a 150 to 1660 degree angle of view (Costella), it is clear that the vast majority of that vision is peripheral for those living in the Western world. The angle of most detailed discrimination—of *foveal view*-- is much narrower, depending on how one has been sense "trained". When looking fixedly at the first word in a paragraph on this page, it is a challenge to perceive what the word four lines below is. Yet this narrow angle of discrimination is variable, does vary depending on the practical need for visual discrimination, narrow or wide, that is required to successfully negotiate a particular natural environment, and can be "retrained" over time. Vision is constructed in the brain, not the eye, and the brain is extremely elastic in how it constructs representations of the external world through the processing of sensation.

Even without sensation, the visual cortex constructs spatial models. Experiments with blindfolded subjects and subjects with image inverting goggles have shown that after several days of disorientation the visual cortex, in the former study, constructs a spatial model from other senses and, in the latter, inverts the inverted vision. Sensation and sense ratios are attuned to and modified by the physical environments that host a culture.

Nature or Nurture? Hardware or Software?

Evidence of the adaptability and elasticity of the brain continues to accumulate. Recent brain scanning studies of London taxi drivers have found that those areas of drivers' brains that process spatial modeling, to accommodate "the knowledge" of London's complex labyrinth of streets, is significantly more extensive than is typical. The same has been found of professional musicians and the areas of the brain associated with musical perception and performance.

It is often observed that students learning media production first need to be taught how to listen to sound and how to see film and video images. Their sensory apparatuses do not need to change, but how their brains attend to sensation does. Children less than a year old will respond to any speech sound from any language; once they begin learning and using their "own" language, they no longer can discern the more unfamiliar vocalizations. Their ears do not change, their brains do.

If the brain is selective of sensation, attuned to what is found to be relevant to environmental fit and oblivious to what is not, and the brain can change its patterns of selectivity and development, our definitions of any

particular *sensotype* or intracultural aesthetic will be unstable. There may be no certainty of an inheritable *sensotype*. The brain may be hardwired regarding which stimuli are processed where, but it is not hardwired as to how sensations are selectively processed to manifest sensibility and the interpreted experience of reality. Aesthetics is essentially software.

Global and Transcultural?

When Marshall McLuhan broached the consideration that "the medium is the message" media makers were challenged to recognize that the modality and form of mediated communication could be as significant as the content in creating or limiting meaning. The differing forms of media are cognitively specialized. Media translate experience and information, altering their reception through the use of distinctive sensory modes.

While McLuhan often discussed different cultures' uses and responses to various media, especially when the media were newly encountered, he saw the effects of media mediation as being transcultural, and fostering a "global village" of electronically networked human pseudo-consciousness. While McLuhan's arguments were often misunderstood to be favorably inclined towards an inevitable evolution of mediated human communication, he was in truth disquieted at these prospects. The global village (not a global metropolis or global cosmopolis) would have the parochial aesthetics of a small town!

Of greater influence than a misread McLuhan on the acceptance of a transcultural media aesthetic has been the Hollywood film and television industry and its globally nurtured "mass" audience. Western media are highly stylized and culturally specific products. Conventional structural approaches to these media are ethnocentrically assumed to be "correct", because dominant Western European social groups have been the principal developers and users of these technologies. The design and documentation of mass media tools and devices imply how they are expected to be used, and how the products of these tools are to be visualized and assembled.

Existing production curricula in secondary and post-secondary institutions in the United States foster and maintain a culturally biased approach to media, either by directing students into an unquestioning imitation of TV program formats (Robinson, 1985), or by consciously encouraging conformity to industry practises with ultimate career assimilation in mind (Hamilton, 1984). Even in elementary classrooms, when student creativity and imagination is encouraged through play and experimentation with videotaping, the media acculturalization process is at

work, as children learn the "proper" way to bound their reality within an image frame (Kaplan, 1986). By the time students reach the middle school levels, they have learned compliance with the shape of the media around them (Greene, 1984). In non-production courses that focus on critical and analytical skills, film and television are analyzed principally on the basis of messages, persuasive intent and methods, psychological implications, and veracity (Lieberman, 1980).

And so the **structural** bias and ethnocentrism of media remain largely unrecognized. A globally dispersed common media aesthetic is the norm; "the medium is the message."

Conclusion

In light of the pervasive conventions of Westernized media aesthetics, is there a practical need or justification for considering culturally specific alternatives? Is this an “academic” issue? It can be argued that all minority cultures are by necessity bi-cultural, and therefore will be adept at understanding the media forms of the dominant culture. Even if an intraculturally specific media aesthetic is identified for a target audience, is that audience living and sensing within the environment that “naturalized” the aesthetic, or has it adapted its senses and cognitions and so is functioning effectively within a Westernized environment?

Is adaptation of production design as significant as adaptation of content and representation in instructional design? Or is there but one "best" universal visual and temporal aesthetic for electronic media, the media of the global village?

McLuhan saw the disintegration of cultural and cognitive diversity by media usage as an inevitable consequence of technological progress. It was his hope, however, that awareness of media’s subterranean effects on human consciousness would reveal choices to us that we didn’t know were there. The practical significance of cultural aesthetics in media production may be questionable, but it can be of value to know that there are choices.

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