Christian Wessely

Methodological Challenges by (New) Media
An Essay on Perspectives and Possible Consequences

ABSTRACT

The classical concept of media analysis depends to a large extent on linearity, but modern interactive media are mostly non-linear. Roger Odin has suggested a method for working with such interactive media; however, the approach he suggests creates a new problem. What would be an appropriate way to deal with the dilemma of balancing sufficient intersubjectivity and concessions to non-linearity?

KEYWORDS

media analysis, communication spaces, media literacy, concept of meaning

BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1965, Christian Wessely attended a College for Agriculture before studying Catholic Theology at the University of Graz. His doctoral thesis discussed the utilization of mythological structures in the entertainment industry (*Von Star Wars, Ultima und Doom*, 1996) whereas his habilitation dealt with the position of the deacon within Catholic ecclesiology (*Gekommen, um zu dienen*, 2004). His main research areas are film, new media and computer games. He is currently chair of the Institute for Fundamental Theology at the University of Graz, Austria.

Prior to any possible definition of meaning there must be an experience that induces the impression of immediate meaning for the individual. Such an experience has the potential to shape or even completely change one's life and is usually denoted as "religious" or "spiritual". However, "meaning" is not something the individual defines all by itself. Every possible meaning of "meaning" is necessarily relational due to the fact that "meaning" always involves a certain objectivity. Claims to provide meaning involve not only personal purpose, but also a connection of this purpose to the environment the individual is embedded in. Therefore, if one experiences an "instance" that gives the *impression of meaning* to one's individual life, one is initially subject to a pre-lingual event, but one is bound to reflect on it in order to integrate it into one's

own life and to convey it to anyone else. Consequently, meaning is intrinsically tied to communication, hence to media.[1]

We are encountering a new situation in the age of digital media. First and foremost, mobile devices are more and more considered a natural extension of ourselves, which leads to immediate medialization. Everyone is – at least potentially – always not only consumer but also producer at the same time.[2] Secondly, new media are dynamic. Movies have alternative scenes and endings that can be chosen from the DVD; a contemporary computer game usually does not provide the exact same situation twice; a Facebook page or a blog evolves unpredictably. This is a challenge because our tried and tested tools for media analysis are strongly bound to a linear understanding of media products, while interactive media are non-linear by definition. Roger Odin has written a remarkable book on alternative methods of analysis[3] – but his approach raises some questions, too.

PERCEPTION MECHANISMS AND THE VISUAL IMAGE

The lifestyle dictated by Western European and North American mainstream culture depends on audio-visual impressions. All through the day the individual is embedded in a continuous stream of sounds and pictures, of video clips and songs, of billboards and newsflashes – forming a field of perception that has hardly anything to do with the biological reasons for which the sensory organs have developed.[4] Even at night, the sound of the TV from the adjacent flat or music from the street can be heard, and advertising illuminates our bedrooms, leaving an imprint on our subconscious that is inevitable.

Having evolved in a hostile environment and consequently adapted to survive, *our eyes and ears are instruments that we trust*.[5] We know of course that we are subject to misperception from time to time; however, audio-visual perception is something we take seriously and base our decisions on. Doubt, if any, arises in second place.[6]

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1   According to Harry Pross (1970), one has to distinguish between primary media that do not require any technical devices, secondary media that need such devices for transmission but not reception, and tertiary media that need such devices for transmitting and receiving a certain content. This essay is about the second and third types.

2   Yet, this promise, which makes what was considered as "Web 2.0" some years ago incredibly attractive, is by no means fulfilled. Most participants are consumers only and contribute solely very short messages and/or pictures. The overuse of "selfies" and pictures of one's food could be worth a master's thesis; even so, the upload/download ratio of a really important platform like YouTube or Facebook is around 1:10.

3   Odin 2011.

4   Lamb 2011, 64–69.

5   This goes, of course, for our complete sensorial apparatus; however, sight and hearing are more important for survival due to their ability to cover large distances, whereas touch, smell and taste only operate at the closest range. Hence, sight and sound have been more crucial for the larger part of humankind´s history.

6   Much has been written about this, but Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, especially the chapter *Truth and Convention* is probably among the best texts on this subject; Gombrich 2004, 55–78.

But the requirements for perception have changed, especially in the last century. The audio-visual impression is no longer restricted to what is part of our natural environment; in fact, this seems to be only a minor part nowadays. The urban citizen's environment is dominated by artificial sounds and images. And although in the vast majority of them are unimportant, they are perceived as essential because they trigger the primal mechanisms that have not changed over the last hundreds of thousands of years.

And one more important thing: For the first time in history, humans are able to see and hear the exact same pictures and sounds even though the individuals perceiving them may live in different places and at different times. It is possible to define the basis for the interpretation of the world in an almost normative way by supplying all audiences with the same pictures and sounds, which subsequently become part of their literacy: each picture is interpreted on the basis of pictures that have been seen before. Even though a text evokes pictures and other sensorial impressions too, these stay individual and, consequently, different. The text line "They soon found thirteen [barrels] with room enough for a dwarf in each"[7] and the movie sequence showing the dwarves climbing into thirteen barrels[8] both deal with the same part of Tolkien's opus; yet they are different. The former evokes an individual imagination; the latter presents an image with a normative claim. The viewer of the film sequence is suspended from making a creative contribution; instead a finished set demands to be accepted as reality, achieving an immediate effect: it shapes the reality of the viewer before any reflexive notion kicks in.[9]

A CONNECTION TO WHAT IS USUALLY CALLED "RELIGION"

It would obviously be inappropriate to summarise only the Western and Middle Eastern traditions of the monotheistic denominations as "religion" per se. Thus it is necessary to find a different, more abstract and more general definition. F. Heiler has suggested defining as a religion any notion that includes a personal experience of transcending one´s own contingency towards a different entity that is experienced as a non-me; that allows the individual to realise that others are sharing similar experiences and to find ways to express this experience collectively; that enables one to reflect about these experiences systematically and with regard to human existence generally, and that demands a set of behaviours that defines the framework for the actions of the individual based on these terms.[10] Basically, Heiler sketches the four cornerstones of any "relation to a transcendence" (be it personal or impersonal),

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7   Tolkien 2012, 203 (my translation).
8   THE HOBBIT. THE DESOLATION OF SMAUG (Peter Jackson, NZ/US 2013).
9   As James Monaco (2006, 160) wrote, "In this context, film does not suggest anything: It rather makes a declarative statement." (my translation).
10 Heiler 1961, 562–564.

rites, revelation, tradition, and ethics. Nowadays, it is often assumed that religion developed as a consequence of social interaction and cultural requirements. Religion would then be rated as a self-evolving regulatory mechanism that has its reason and meaning in the framework of a certain historical context, but will be overcome in the course of history.[11]

Yet religion has at least one root beyond such cultural and linguistic limitations. H. Verweyen pointed out the importance of the concept of the primal distinction between the self and the other.[12] Since the self is conscious of its own existence, as Descartes showed, and this constitution of the self is not directly connected to language in the first place,[13] we must consider the following: communication is subordinate to an act of self-awareness that is not subject to any linguistic influence; thus, communication is an act of transcending the self towards the other (be it human individual or "deity").[14] Consequently, every communication is the first *visible* trace of a religious act, and since humans cannot exist without communicating, these religious traces are deeply embedded in the nature of human beings themselves.

Now if one experiences something one finds deeply touching and capable of changing one's life, may not be communicating this may not be easy at all: due to the limits of our language and expression skills and due to the fact that this experience does not have any equivalent in the mind of the other individual, one has to resort to analogies, thus sketching a framework that is well known to the other and from which they can draw their own conclusions. In expressing these analogies by means of an audio-visual medium, the subject is able to present a very close approximation to their own framework, but the clearer and more well-defined the picture gets, the harder it will be for the receiver to close up since they have their own "pictorial literacy."[15]

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11 E.g. Dawkins 2007.

12 Verweyen 1991, 233ff.

13 I strongly object to the thesis that the ultimate core of our self is the result of a linguistic construction. Kick a doorframe – the "ouch" feeling does not need to be articulated in any way. The self feels that 'it hurts me to kick a solid object' initially and may (probably will) reflect on this feeling afterwards. The act of reflection is without any doubt inseparably intertwined with language, but the primary experience of the "suffering self" is not.

14 Usually, three types of "transcendence" are to be distinguished: a "minor" one that denotes my inner borders and the possibility to cross these, as e.g. in memorizing something and some place; a "medium" one that denotes the same for another individual, and a "major" one that denotes the relation of the self to the totally different other. Cf. Knoblauch 2009, 56–69; Luckmann 1991, 164–183; Schütz/Luckmann 1990 (1984), 39–177.

15 "Literacy" means the ability to comprehend texts and to be able to write texts oneself, which goes far beyond the sheer ability to know the "values" of letters, to have a defined pool of words and to know some basic grammar rules. "Pictorial literacy" would mean knowing and understanding the narrations that constitute contemporary society and its features, especially in their visual and auditive expressions. That means that art and art history would be absolutely crucial access points to any valid interpretation of the self and its standing in the world. Yet, since all human beings grow up in different environments with different access to and interest for art, this form of literacy is inseparably bound to a concept that encompasses the education of society, which played – in turn – a central role in the age of enlightenment. Cf. Lessing 1997.

CONSEQUENCES

It appears that our classic analytical approaches to media such as movies may still be useful in that context, but that a new, additional approach is needed to cope with the challenges of the dynamics of interactive media.

Roger Odin's concept of "individual" communication spaces that are defined separately for each individual and each product is intriguing, and probably the best choice if one wants to compare one's own results for different films or different interpretations over time. However, its limit is reached with the exchange of results between researchers. Each of them has the right to choose their own set of spaces and to choose the triad of *actant*, *operator* and *axis of Relevance*. Since there is no possibility of logically preferring one approach over another, what would common ground look like? Science's dependence on logical coherence, intersubjectivity and repeatability creates rather than solves the respective problems. Hence the need for a set of rules that would allow us to describe the aforementioned approach by way of a cogent conclusion, which would shift but not solve the general problem.

An important aspect of this issue was addressed by Nicole Mahne in 2007.[16] Mahne tried to apply the classic approach of narratology to what she calls 'Hyperfiction'[17] (i.e. interactive media) and stated that due to the inevitable use of metalepses, the user experienced an ontological change: the impression of integration of narration and life through interactivity. Thus, any reflexion process changes the reference frame of the "consumer" (be it researcher or private individual). Consequently, any analysis would have to fall back on the elementary categories any individual will always experience: time (although not in the form of a consistent continuum but merely in dissected separate nodes) and space (although not in the form of a consistent big picture but merely in sets of symbolic forms).

At the moment, I do not see any convincing solution for this problem. However, my first approach would be to demand *media literacy* as a subject in all educational facilities. Knowing that structures – especially mythological structures like Campbell's *Hero's Journey*[18] – are spellbinding, yet unable to encompass a majority of contemporary media, we must establish a common set of "pictures" (symbols) and "processes" (time nodes) that denote a mandatory set of values. Only if we learn about the correspondence of our inner reference to any other and learn to interpret the impressions we gain in the media universe within to this framework from early childhood, can we possibly achieve a consensus about various interpretations and various ways of integrating them into our lives. And that, I think, is what all media analysis is ultimately about.

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16   Mahne 2007.
17   Mahne 2007, 110–125.
18   Campbell 2009; cf. Wessely 1996.

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