

Iconography of TV and the screen geometry of visual poetics

byTatiana Goryucheva

While passing by from room to room and from screen to screen, you get steadily dragged into a close to meditative slow-motion pace of surfing through kaleidoscopic augmented media-spaces and their disturbed images. At first glance disassembled and condensed, recaptured and reframed into layered puzzled visual articulations, the found tv footage of the **eurovision**, **entanglements** and **LivingTomorrow** video installations exhaustively confront you anew with the ubiquitous uniformity of visual streams delivered to us by the global mass media industry, starting with the news army of talking heads and ending with both never ending troubles and beauties of soap operas. (Probably even transnational supermarkets offer now a bigger variety of local specialties than a home tv screen...) Using patterns from the world of tv imagery, both as raw material and object of her art, Linda builds up her own deconstructivist geometry of the screen targeted at the core matrix of media narratology. She develops peculiar extension strategies for non-linear paths of inter-frame inter-communicative meta-narratives by de- and re-structuring the mass-media imagery flows, as if she is attempting to compose authentic visual poetics out of the vocabulary of the common daily image routine. Her works are indeed very similar to the poetry where sense is born inbetween words and lines and where all phenomenology of reality is shifted, relations are disrupted, destabilised and reinvented.

TV vision is always an epic story, or myth in the sense which Barthes gave to this word: a message whose meaning is impoverished by its very form. Or better to say, hypertextual multi-myth, which is interlinked with other stories of the hybrid mass media mythological reality. It is never linear and never time-based unlike a live event, even unlike tv's older brother medium film, which can be characterised as an event because it still happens as a unique clash of circumstances and intentions in its own temporality. TV is not an event, it is coverage of life and its events, it is the world picture. It has its own time, grid-time, where cover stories are configured and fitted into the program schedules subordinated to the "iron logic" of marketing efficiency. It has its own space, a sort of heterotopian space as Foucault describes isolated from the daily normal spaces of both social exclusion and exclusivity. TV space has its own strange psycho-geography whose world atlas is a collection of labelled view-cards with the canonic déjà-vu iconography, and whose cosmology portrays mythological disembodied hell and heaven as the third world's outskirts and the first world's headquarters. The heroes pantheon of this tv world has its own hierarchical order established by news sequences and talk-shows' prime-times. Stories of their earth beings are sold by tv producers and editors in the same way as medieval exempla's by missionaries, which aimed to be a guidelines for the lost ships - public. You are getting slowly immersed into a paranoia that the world order is getting more and more subordinated to the tv frame, producing such a hallucinatory fantasies as Victor Pelevin's book "Generation P", a Russian best-seller, where tv is turned into new apocalypses now.

The altar-like composition of the installation **entanglements** by Linda Wallace reveals a peculiar reverberation of an archaic portrait theme with multiplied newsreal-martyrdoms and talking-heads-icons. This installation somehow leaves a very distinctive feeling of controversy. It starts already at the formal level: disrupted tv stories which are at the

same time visually meticulously put in a strict geometrical, even symmetrical, order. Incorporation into this matter of a terror motive as a leading theme is crucial focal point. Its culmination - teleportraits of dead female terrorists from the Moscow the theater hostage drama, which look as if they have just fallen asleep, extrapolated from their context. It brings a feeling of discontinuity and at the same time a disturbing tension between detached uniformed icons of news anchors, and noisy ambiguous images of "black widows". The unexpected confrontation gives rise to a controversial sentimental sense of the tragic which is strongly enforced by black silky pillows with the same portraits of dead terrorists printed on them, which frame the composition of the installation. It almost takes you into the atmosphere of the silent grief of a funeral. Although something in the far corner of your mind tries to resist this strong, probably a bit exaggerated association and tries to neutralise this excessive sentimental feeling of ambiguity of the image, which is itself victimised here. It is not the represented persons and story that concern you, but the image which builds up the story and which is distorted and derailed.

The **eurovision** project can be characterised as a mosaic visionary mapping of a European Idea. Its developing structure is reminiscent of zapping through tv and cinematic images multiplied in asymmetrical order on the screen, evoking a momentary experience of sliding through historical slices of European televised psycho-geographical map. It is charged with spontaneous but not very distinctive emotions which throw you into different cultural locations, and at the same time force you to go for schizoanalytic procedures of decoding the imagery and narrative cross-words. Named after an international singing competition the **eurovision** video goes back again and again to fragments of performances by pop-singers from different countries. Visual familiarity of the shots positioned as a point of departure automatically triggers your tele-literacy, trained by conventional cinematic language, to drive your expectations toward an associative narrative, which would deliver a series of international stereotypes representing a particular nation. But it is again disturbed by poetic dislocation: Bergman's critical history, swing-style female portraits of French new wave, retro-pictures of the "soviet achievements" in space, the central railway station in Brussels... meticulously selected gaze destinations, or just stops for a change in a guided tour through a European cultural database...

LivingTomorrow is the three-screen video installation representing endless rotation of repeating scenes cut out from a popular soap opera, desynchronised, distorted, with a psychopathic subtitles which look like a delirium mixture of dialogues of actors from soap opera and nightmares of a victim of the terrorist political saga. These non-escape *deja vu* visual cycles are like the production of a malfunctioning machine left behind and working on its own, receiving endless waves of the same short video signals and slowly degrading together with them.

Its kaleidoscopic ornamentality is hypnotising in its tyrannical infinity of neurotic repetitiveness. It is indeed generated by a machine, a computer program which chooses and plays pre-edited video pieces from a specially designed database according to specially developed algorithms. The absurd poetics of the installation captures your mind as an endless dream which lasts without either beginning or end each night. It pushes the suffocative claustrophobia the a soap opera to its limits .

Tatiana Goryucheva, historian and curator of media art

LivingTomorrow: the clue lies inside the glowing screens.

by Nancy Mauro-Flude

</SCENE>

Domestic exile, the television glares, people staring into the box.

</END SCENE>

A common tableau you might encounter if you peek a view into a window in suburbia. Defining a social landscape, commercial television actively maintains rigid categories around identity, politics and gender. In **LivingTomorrow**, three large screens juxtapose selected moments of a TV soap "The Bold and The Beautiful" and scenes from the urban environment in Holland. Actors attempt to communicate in common soap dialogue around issues of love, deception and adultery. However, we read another script *via* embedded subtitles. In this new dialogue Linda Wallace asks the viewer to consider the telling detail in a scene that might otherwise be consumed in a momentary glance. Wallace critical of the mannerism of the times turns to the signifying radicality of the marionette. Stuck in a cyclic world of repetition, we see these characters as marionettes, victims of a great television producer.

I sit amongst the screens mesmerised, staring at these banal human characters I catch myself inventing my own subtext to the dramatic action, "I've been so manipulated, I can't see straight, I'm on anti-depressants, I've got so much money, I don't know who to trust". Are these all my projections? Equally in this impression, the look and the perception are a tricky act which has to do with the process of seeing and being held prisoner by one's own perspective. Therefore the marionette is, in a way the bearer of a pure sign simply because it does not manage its own weight. In this case, their expressivity belongs with Wallace who creates the impulse, the psychic apparatus within the text. By disassociating these two levels of expression: delivering a text, while the movement of the characters is unrelated, it bears a signifying charge opposed to what is being said.

Regular watchers of television are absorbed in an immanent electronic sea of nationalistic participation, for the unprepared, wrote Timothy Leary in his psychedelic version of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, 'the discovery of the wave-nature of all structure, the Maya revelation, is a disastrous web of uncertainty'. In **LivingTomorrow** the world around is also exposed as a facade, a stage set and we feel ultimately tricked. A helpless marionette, a plastic doll in a plastic world. Wallace's installation allows us to view the subjects staggering around, as if they were almost grasping at electron-patterns of the broken transmissions, until they are edited back into the familiar robot forms. Meanwhile loops of cosmic, dark ambient sound encompass us as we witness this image database at play, whilst recognising mainstream broadcast media strategies and perceptions that trap our desire.

</SCENE>

A Set formula

Flashes in grainy remembrance, an everyday scene, the (over) exposed trophy wife in her docile setting, a veiled woman.

Neon vacancy.

To wish oneself into the lamp

To die with the TV on.

</END SCENE>

Nancy Mauro-Flude is an Amsterdam-based media artist <http://sistero.sysx.org>

Living tomorrow (or yesterday?)

by Marina Turco

Television is bad. Intellectuals sustain this theory since the TV set first made its appearance in our living rooms. But is it really possible to live without it? Does the denial of TV really protect us from the bad sides of mass communication (increasing commodification of every aspect and moment of our lives) and allows us to act as responsible citizens?

The Italian director Nanni Moretti does not have a clear-cut answer to these questions, but he suggests that the denial of TV is far from being the solution for all our problems. On the contrary, it could be a dangerous boomerang for the whole 'intellectual class'.

In Moretti's film *Caro Diario* (Dear Diary, 1993), the James Joyce expert Gerardo lived an isolated life for 20 years on a small island near Sicily. In all those years he has not watched television, following the advice of the German philosopher Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who condemned TV as an 'non-cultural' medium. Nanni, the main character in the film, visits his friend Gerardo and decides to go with him to another island, Salina. On the boat, Gerardo finally has the opportunity to watch TV, while the soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* is broadcasted. From that first moment, he becomes addicted to the soap, and desperately seeks for TV sets on every island they go to (the trip is paradoxically aimed to find some quiet in the crowded Sicilian summer!). On the top of the volcano of Stromboli, Gerardo runs after some American tourists, asking them what happens next in the series. He is impressed by the high emotional and involving character of TV, and tries to demonstrate, through intellectual arguments, the 'goodness' of television.

Apart from the quite obvious moral of the story (against 'radical' positions in cultural matters), what strikes me most is the choice of the program made by the director (*The Bold and the Beautiful*) and the fact that Moretti stresses the aspect of time in TV fiction.

The choice of the soap is in fact very appropriate, since this program synthesizes the two more important aspects of TV as a medium: the 'virtual world' it creates, which literally goes parallel to our lives (moreover, this soap is maybe the longer lasting program on television, and it 'accompanied' the lives of more than one generation world wide) and involves the audience on a very deep 'psychological' level; the fact that because we know the series has a different development in different countries, while watching TV we have the impression of living in a kind of 'stretched present' or 'cyclical present' (is the story in America the future, or is the story in Italy the past? They are both in the present, anyway) in a global dimension.

These aspects of mass communication are important issues in Linda Wallace's work, that could be described as a 'psychological representation of mass media'. And it is not a coincidence that she chooses the same soap series in her last work, *Living Tomorrow*, to represent the 'television flow'.

LivingTomorrow is maybe Wallace's most complete and 'absolute' work. The 'confused', disturbed flow from the media (images from *The Bold and the Beautiful* recorded in Australia) is mixed with its counterpart, peaceful, almost utopian images of natural landscapes. The characters in the soap are the subconscious image of ourselves, of our eternal fights and loves, and they speak and mix all the stories of all times. Actually, as TV does, they tell 'local stories' in a 'global' format. Being the work presented in Holland, thus, the characters (the global soap) talk about public and private events in the Dutch media, which are again a melting pot of local and global news. And because the series is more 'advanced' in Australia, the 'bolds and the beautifuls' are future creatures fallen into the present, where they assume a kind of vague prophetic aura.

Hypnotizing and upsetting at the same time, the installation brings us in the time of our conscience. I am not sure that this time is the future.

Marina Turco is a curator and media theorist based in Netherlands