

Chapter V

ART RECEPTION IN INTERACTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Bogusław Sułkowski*

SOCIAL RECEPTION OF TV-SHOWS
AN INTERACTIONAL APPROACH VS. SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

In "Mass Entertainment" Harold Mendelsohn wrote extensively on pleasures of parasocial interaction¹. Mendelsohn referred to the ideas of D. Horton and A. Strauss who had investigated this important and unique aspect of mass entertainment². According to these authors both television and radio afford simulate face-to-face, informal conversation with their unseen audiences. A TV-star tries to build up an illusion of intimacy between himself and his audience. He makes himself the butt of a joke and builds up a sphere of common experiences with his viewers. Sometimes over the months and years the same star reveals many facets of his personality, so that the spectator is prepared to play his receptive part spontaneously. The illusion of intimacy is sustained by the use of informal mannerisms, costuming as well as gestures, conversational language, mood and tone. The star makes efforts to maintain a home-like atmosphere throughout the show and the spectator comes to believe that he "knows" the star better than anyone else.

Yet parasocial interaction is distinguished from the real personal one in that, in the first instance, the viewer is free to engage in, or withdraw from the relationship. In parasocial interaction performer controls interaction from start to finish and the exchange of roles is not real.

* University of Łódź.

¹ H. Mendelsohn, Mass Entertainment, College and University Press, New Haven 1966, p. 128-133.

² D. Horton, A. Strauss, Interaction in Audience Participation Shows, "American Journal of Sociology" 1956/1957, vol. 62, p. 569-579; D. Horton, R. R. Wohl, Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction, "Psychiatry" 1956, vol. 19, p. 215-229.

According to Mendelsohn there are two main pleasures deriving from parasocial interaction. First, it allows the audience to try out a variety of roles which it cannot achieve in real life; the spectator can use his fantasy. Second, for people who are cut off from a possibility of deep, real social interaction parasocial interaction serves as a substitute for interpersonal participation.

It must be noted, however that Mendelsohn's presentation of the views of Horton and Strauss is one-sided. He contrasts parasocial interaction only with the real personal one. Nevertheless, besides the real personal and parasocial interaction in their analyses of TV productions both quoted authors have also referred to vicarious experience. It is obvious that a televiewer may, at the most, be a watcher of real personal interaction between people in the TV-studio. In reality only two possibilities compete with each other in the attitudes and experiences of spectator: the parasocial interaction - a simulated conversation of actors with viewers, and the vicarious experience - a reception of the show devoid of any simulation of two way contact between sender and receiver.

Vicarious experience appears when the televiewer receives productions of complete, closed dramaturgical structure. Such is the character of substitute contacts provided by all films, drama productions and by all performances based on fiction. In commenting this dichotomic typology of all TV-productions we could say mass entertainment originates from two sources only. One source is provided by the carnival tradition, social entertainment and all forms of games with personal participation. Another source is the tradition of art. It is a paradox that modern entertainment combines these two traditions. Art serves for entertainment while entertainment is esthetically stylized. Art and fabular fiction cater for the spectator in a way similar to that of a social gathering; at the same time in mass media presentations of social gatherings the atmosphere of spontaneity is replaced by artistic stylization.

We shall now return to the opposition: vicarious experience/parasocial interaction. In the first case the sender or the star are absent since the production does not have the character of personal encounter. Of crucial importance is here the experience of fabular fiction or of dramaturgically stylized reality. Protagonists in the show are fictitious; there is no illusion of role

exchange between sender and receiver. There are no elements of active play. The spectator builds up an aesthetic attitude in his mind by entering into the spirit of fictitious events and characters. His participation in this pretended encounter with someone who pretends to be visiting him is different from his watching of the vicissitudes of a screen character who does not notice his presence at all.

In the empirical study reported below reference was made not only to H. Mendelsohn's concept of parasocial interaction, but also to the opposition of parasocial interaction and vicarious experience.

Our analysis of the problem was made on the basis of 180 interviews with televiewers about entertainment programs and shows forming a part of a monthly Saturday-night block of programming known as "Studio 2". Its formula is very extensive and it includes popularscience thrillers, sports shows, gossip, appearances by amateur singers, the news, westerns, revue, literary cabarets, whodunits and so on.

Some discrepancy has been found between the size of the audience of some Studio 2 productions and its estimates by respondents. Films, sports, games had the largest audience. However, programs which had the strongest impact on the viewers' imagination and left the most vivid memories were all based on parasocial encounters with big celebrities or stars. The symbolic interaction theory, despite the intentions of its authors, does not explain all aspects of this phenomenon. We should therefore make yet another reference to the psycho-social, projection-identification theory formulated by Edgar Morin³.

Out of many programs shown one Saturday-night three exhibited formal similarities and they were the ones which left the clearest impression on the viewers' imagination. All three: a broadcast demonstration class for amateur singers taught by a well-known actor, an intimate interview (not a show) with a group of entertainers and a personal encounter with a famous woman-journalist left the audience with the personal impressions of the people presented. All three programs contained some personal elements. In this way they exemplified the parasocial formula of contact with the viewer more clearly than the rest of productions of the night.

³ E. M o r i n, *Kino i wyobraźnia*, PIW, Warszawa 1976.

The celebrities in studio did not address televiewers directly, they did not create an illusion of conversation with the watchers. Yet the improvised character of their speech and the subordination of the course of encounters to the temperament, mood and intelligence of the stars contributed to the impression of expertise, straightforwardness and intimacy of contact. The boldness of the stars in presenting their weak points and in revealing their intimate secrets served the same purpose.

The wide popularity of the broadcast demonstration class for singers was probably a result of something more than its formal stylization based on the principle of parasocial contact with the viewer. In our present investigation it is necessary to combine arguments from the field of interactional organization of TV-productions with references to psychological needs and motivations of viewers. A televiewer may have a predilection for certain formal tricks or forms stylized entertainment but a production must above all satisfy his overt or covert needs.

Identification with the amateur singers in studio gave the viewers an impression of personal superiority. Despite the benevolent and tactful manners of the presenter the quality of amateur productions was poor and the singers' behavior awkward. The tact and good-will of the teaching actor only partly successful in covering up the somewhat dishonest intentions of the viewers. Their hidden, semiconscious aggression could be sustained only under the cover of manifest loyalty towards performers who were taking the risk of a public production. Had the aggression dominated overtly their attitudes toward the performing amateurs one of the main mechanisms of reception i.e. interchangeability of projected dreams with ideational identifications would have been disturbed. Instead the viewers' attitudes exhibited a complex dialectics of joyful disdain and compassionate identification. Although many viewers were convinced of their identification with the star alone, their interview answers point to a greater complexity of their reception processes. The helpless, acrimoniously commented amateurs were, nevertheless, another source of identification for viewers. The actor's moralizing amplified in the viewers their projections of aspirations and their need of superiority while the awkwardness of amateurs triggered off compassionate identification. The oppositions professor volunteer manifested in the program gave rise to a curiously fluctuating synthesis in the viewer.

In the case discussed above two sides of the viewer's soul found two separate incarnations. It will be shown that more frequently spectators locate their projections and identifications in the same person or in the image of one character. The cultural audience is interested in strongly mythicized social protagonists but it also demands their presentation in usual human dimensions. Entertainers, these representatives of modern "high-life" are super-human through the roles they impersonate but at the same time human in their private lives. When a divinely talented star turns out to be a provident house-wife, a wife and a mother the myth gets supported by debunking. The viewer is then given a mental comfort which derives from his manipulation of dreams and identification.

Under such human conditions the parasocial interaction between screen characters and the viewer leaves a longer-lasting impression in his memory than productions of closed structure, especially those which fall short of artistic standards. Although the vicarious experience productions had prime-time audiences it was the intimate interviews which made the conversation on the following day. Psychological analyses reveal that parasocial interaction filled by projections (dreams) and identifications constitutes also a kind of substitute experience. The interactional discrepancy between parasocial interaction and vicarious experience is cancelled out by the psychological analysis. In both cases we deal with human needs and motivations. It remains to be determined which of the two approaches is more useful. Is it more important to point out the contradictions or the unity of human nature? It seems that a holistic image of the world requires "stereoscopic" vision. E. Cassirer said that we should study both the causes and the forms of things⁴. It follows that we should combine interactional approach with social psychology.

If we accept that a parasocial encounter is closer to the nature of face-to-face interaction than vicarious experience provided by a performance, then it is likely that the success of shows utilizing the former formula is expressive of the yearning of contemporary man for forms of direct participation. However, the retreat from a spectacle to a heartfelt encounter shows that the

⁴ E. C a s s i r e r, *Esaj o czlowieku*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1971.

contemporary audience of entertainment feels anxiety and disenchantment. The screen today separates actors and spectators much more than the footlights in the past. It was the footlights which first relieved some from responsibility for the course of play, and deprived others of the spontaneous joy of non-professional participation in it. The fragmentation of the carnival into systematically spaced-out Saturdays, and curbing of dissolute merry-making to the extent of imposing a superficial rationality on it, often leaves an aura of boredom over playtime. The sceptic who distrusts ritual and instead distractedly watches others at play, has no chance of cathartic experience. Having contributed no physical or spiritual effort to play-making he receives nothing but commonplace dreams and identifications which he ashamedly consigns to semi-oblivion.

This involvement in the semi-participant Tv play-making may mean that the contemporary viewer still does not know how to play in accordance with the spirit of the industrial mass culture. Only half-consciously perhaps he turns to the sources of play, wanting the electronic TV-show to provide an illusion of the old holiday.

Bogusław Sułkowski

SPOŁECZNA RECEPCJA WIDOWISK TELEWIZYJNYCH
PODEJŚCIE INTERAKCYJNE A PSYCHOLOGIA SPOŁECZNA

Autor posługując się danymi z własnych badań nad recepcją TV zastanawia się nad możliwością rozpatrywania kontaktów z mediami jako zastępczego źródła kontaktów społecznych.