

Facts of Aesthetics and Fictions of Journalism

The Logic of the Media in the Age of Globalization

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In this essay I wish to address a problem that has received little attention in mass media research to date. It has to do with the relationship between journalism and art, literature and film, or, in a broader sense, the relation of journalism and aesthetics. I should like to start with two examples.

“Why all these full-page spreads from Sydney?” The question was raised by veteran newspaper correspondent Sven Öste in a column in *Dagens Nyheter* (Stockholm) in the early 1990s. Öste was one of the generation of foreign correspondents who in the 1950s and 1960s brought the world beyond Europe within sight for Swedish readers. The object of his question was the tremendous energy and resources West-European media spent covering brushfires in New South Wales. The fires had claimed four lives and destroyed 191 homes. During the same period, the rest of the world was not exactly serene, Öste noted: “A gas explosion in China killed 70 workers. It got ten lines. Floods rendered 150,000 people in Sri Lanka homeless. Eight lines.” When an earthquake in Maharashtra killed roughly 10,000 Indians, the media lost interest after a day or two.¹

Why are brushfires that kill four Australians in suburban Sydney accorded greater news value than an earthquake in India that kills thousands? It is fairly clear that Western news reporting values a white Australian who sees his home go up in flames much higher than a poor Indian who dies in an earthquake. The difference in news value reflects a difference in the value ascribed to the two persons as human beings. And this difference is so obvious and self-evident that we don’t even reflect on it, Öste wrote.

There would be no cause for concern if our news institutions had no greater pretensions than to promote our sense of community and to confirm our own culturally bound worldview. It is hardly surprising if people in Stockholm find it easier to identify with people whose lives and lifestyle resemble their own than to relate to peasants in rural India. To bemoan that would be as silly as to criticize a local newspaper for carrying local news.

But, in an age in which media are becoming ever more globalized, Öste’s question becomes urgent. With global concentration of the media, the global media conglomerates of the West make a claim, whether explicitly or implicitly, to *universal* validity. We are presented with a situation in which a given cultural community, with its parochial concept of newsworthiness, is convinced that its values apply universally to Humankind. As a culturally bounded definition of newsworthiness – along with the relative valuation

of human beings in different parts of the world that the definition reflects – is adopted as a world standard, other culturally bounded ideas about what is important and who is important will be marginalized. The result is the kind of bias that Sven Öste criticized: the globalized media system codes a resident of suburban Sydney and a resident of the Maharashtra hinterland in such a way that readers and viewers will identify with the fate of the former, whereas the latter remains out of view. The result is paradoxical, for are we not often told that globalization is broadening our horizons?

Now, to my second example. Some years ago I saw an exhibit of the work of the Chilean artist, Alfredo Jaar.² Instead of the customary brochure or catalogue, visitors to the exhibit were furnished with a passport and what appeared to be a map. Unfolding the map, I found instead a collection of large poster-size photographs of people in Nigeria, Brazil and a refugee camp outside Hong Kong. I seemed to hear a whisper: “Look closely! This is what we look like, the people on the other side of the border!”

Then their Faces Vanished.

Inscribed on Jaar’s map was a single sentence: “Geography above all serves the purpose of war”.

For Alfredo Jaar, every frontier – geographical, political, economic, or cultural — represents a crime against humanity. In 1986, he rented the advertising space at the Spring Street subway station on Manhattan. Spring Street is the stop where Wall Street’s stock brokers end and start their daily commute. Gold up \$1.80! Jaar’s ads declared. Alongside this encouraging piece of news Jaar displayed photos of the gold-diggers, or *garimpeiros*, of Serra Pelada, the largest open-pit mine in Brazil. At the time Jaar took his photos, more than 40,000 migrant laborers were working the mine, each digging his own shaft toward the center of the Earth. In the photos, the mine looks like a giant’s footprint in an anthill. Tiny creatures covered with mud are scrambling over each other. With their one hand on the ladder and the other on their sack of up to one hundred pounds of gold-bearing mud, they climb toward daylight.

In Jaar’s images, the wretched workers of Serra Pelada haunt us like figures in a geopolitical nightmare. Jaar shows us the faces and bodies of people whose existence is denied in price quotations, the media, or economic development programs.

Jaar’s art is political, even didactic. It gives faces to the faceless ones. But the real point of his work is a different one. With minimalistic precision, he frames his photos in such a way that the depicted persons always appear to be fading away or falling outside the visual plane. Sometimes, he veils his subjects’ faces or dilutes and distorts them by letting them appear as reflections in water or ingeniously placed mirrors. Or he hangs his pictures face-to-wall, so that the spectator can only guess the motif on the basis of the caption.

Furthest in, in a sort of sanctum sanctorum in the exhibition hall, Jaar confronted the visitor with a broad image, illuminated from behind, showing seven men in Lagos, Nigeria. They are standing next to or leaning against a stack of rusty barrels of toxic waste, imports from Europe. This picture was followed by four similarly illuminated close-up portraits of *garimpeiros* encrusted in mud; the figures were tightly cropped, with their point of gravity just outside the frame.

The passport had no spaces for entry and exit stamps. Instead, each page showed a picture of a frontier marked by barbed wire and illuminated by glaring searchlights. And across each page a phrase, in flaming red letters, was repeated in several languages: “Abriendo nuevas puertas”, “Es öffnen sich neue Tore”, “Opening new doors”.

Such is the ultimate interpretation of Jaar’s work: it opens doors to the worlds that have been marginalized in Western media. But his work also has another effect. It makes

the spectator aware of the political barriers and mental inhibitions that prevent us from seeing the world's lower classes. The Damned of the Earth always await us just beyond the pale of our perception. Jaar lets the viewer *see* that he or she does *not see* the Other.

On the basis of these two examples I should like to formulate an hypothesis. The first example speaks of the increasing conformism of global mass media. An ever greater share of the media worldwide are governed by a norm that dictates what is worth knowing and looking at, what to enjoy and what to mourn, what counts as happiness, justice, goodness and love. The norm is confining in that it suppresses other, alternative ideas about these values.

The second example speaks of the increasing politicization of art. By politicization I mean the process that brings what we might call "the political" – as opposed to "politics" – to light.³ The political signifies the fundamentals and underlying principles of politics, namely, people's ability to represent themselves and their interests in the public sphere – a public sphere, moreover, that has become global. Alfredo Jaar calls attention to the political in the sense that his art evokes the mechanisms that exclude some of humanity from the public sphere, thereby denying them political representation.

My hypothesis concerns the links between these two processes. I propose that the conformism of media journalism and the politicization of art are communicating vessels, that is, the processes interact. Indeed, I would venture even further and posit that the conformism of journalism and the politicization of art are two facets of the same historical process, which we might term the globalization of culture.

To put it a bit drastically: On the one hand we have a trend toward uniformity; the world-view represented in journalism increasingly coincides with a perspective that is characteristic of a specific subject position: white, male, Western and of the owning classes. This subject position constitutes the implicit narrator as well as the implicit listener of the mass media that today address a global audience.⁴ In most media narratives, this subject functions a general model of the human. Those who take interest in these narratives are urged to emulate this model, which for the majority of the world's population means that they must renounce those culturally specific identities that does not conform with the model. The result of this process is a divide that is by now well known in contemporary cultural analysis. A conflict arises between a Western dominant that claims to represent the general interest – which may be coded in cultural terms (enlightenment, secularization, traditional humanist education), in political terms (democracy, parliamentarism, etc.) and/or economic terms (market economy, free trade, capitalism) – and a series of subordinate tendencies that are assumed to represent various minority interests and are often coded in ethnic, religious, cultural or national terms.

On the other hand we see a number of politicizing currents in contemporary literature, film, art and music. They call attention to experiences, histories, bodies, and identities that have long been homeless in the Western public sector, and they do so with an energy and innovative creativity that has put them at the center of the aesthetic discussion in the West. The work of Alfredo Jaar is an example of this tendency which, broadly speaking, might be labelled "postcolonial". The "Documenta 11" exhibition in Kassel in 2002 presented a comprehensive inventory of this movement within the visual arts. Contemporary literature presents a good number of other examples, and here it suffices to list some of the recent Nobel laureates, such as Derek Walcott, V S Naipaul, Nadine Gordimer, Wole Soyinka, Toni Morrison and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. They differ greatly, to be sure. Yet, what they have in common is a desire to express stories and existential experience from the dark and repressed side of Western civilization.

It would appear, then, that the course of developments in journalism and aesthetic genres are tending in opposite directions. One might even say that the Arts are compensating for the “blind spots” of journalism.

How might we characterize the relationship between these two trends? The question is theoretical: what interpretive models help us understand the relation of journalism to aesthetics? The question is also practical and methodological: by comparing these simultaneous but contrary processes in the arts and journalism, respectively, we may further our understanding of both.

The interplay between different levels in the cultural superstructure is a central theme in classical Marxist theory. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Karl Kautsky and Franz Mehring both showed how literature and the arts in certain historical periods are politicized, in the sense that it becomes one of their main functions to channel information, ideas and experiences that are otherwise excluded from public cultural and political debate.⁵ For instance, there are societies in which direct or indirect censorship has prevented the media from carrying an open discussion and publishing opinions that are critical of the existing power. Such was the case in the Soviet Union (as in Russia under the czars), in France under absolutist rule, in Germany under the rule of despotic princes, but also under absolutist rule in Sweden around 1800. In these societies, prohibited opinions and knowledge were rechanneled to literature and the arts. The aesthetic form allowed the communication and discussion of banned themes and ideas in encrypted form. As a consequence, social-political discourse moved to the theater stage, to novels, and to the visual arts, in short, to aesthetic genres that could speak at once multivocally and equivocally, thereby evading – for the most part – the censors.

One should be cautious about drawing parallels between today’s conformism in journalism and the kind of thought control exercised in societies under totalitarian and absolutist rule. Yet, in much of contemporary journalism the forms of presentation, the modes of public address, and the verbal and narrative registers have become so constrained that they effectively prevent the expression of certain kinds of knowledge and experience. Most extreme in this regard is television journalism, where strict formats and limited air time often rule out background analysis and the exposition of causal explanation altogether. Such elements flee to public media that are at once more narrow and more generous: book-length reportage, journal essays, installation art, the novel, and documentary film — genres that traditionally have presupposed a will to aesthetic form and a mode of address or perspective that is subjective and personal.

The above-mentioned “Documenta 11” offered a veritable catalogue of such expressions. Chantal Akerman’s film and video installation, “From the Other Side”, treated the plight of migrants crossing the border between Mexico and the U.S. Fareed Armary invited visitors to draw their own mental maps of Palestine. For the purposes of the exhibition Maria Eichhorn founded a public company, the sole purpose of which was to preserve the company’s equity without accumulating profit or interest; her “venture” demonstrated the nature of capitalism and the art market more poignantly than most business journalists are able to do. With his suite of documentary photos of commercial shipping Allan Sekula showed the infrastructure of the global market, the flows of goods from one part of the world to another. The Italian artists’ collective Multiplicity presented the results of investigative journalism in its best sense through a dramatization of an event that both media and authorities had suppressed. The day after Christmas 1996 a fishing boat sank between Malta and Sicily. All on board – 283 Pakistanis, Indians and Lankese – drowned, without anyone being held responsible, and even without any investigation of the disaster.⁶

The themes these artists elaborate are roughly the same as the ones we encounter daily in our news media. They all have something to do with the globalization process and the conflicts and confusion that arise in its wake, particularly the mass migrations of people from poorer to wealthier regions of the world. What distinguishes artistic approaches to these themes from journalistic approaches is not mainly their subjective commitment, nor their eagerness to experiment with visual, cinematographic and verbal forms; above all, it is their sensitivity to suppressed aspects of ongoing political and cultural processes. The arts often render events, problems, and structures that cast Western society in a critical light, or even hold Western society responsible for preserving the privileges it enjoys, at the cost of the rest of the world.

Artist Felix Gonzales-Torres once derided heavy-handed politicizing tendencies of art. Slightly travestied, he phrased his question as follows: Do we really need an art gallery to find out what we can read in the paper or watch on CNN?⁷ The point of the art that I am discussing here, however, is that it gives us a sense of aspects of the political that we *cannot* read about in the news paper or watch on the CNN.

It is not a given, that art should tackle such subjects, much less that it should constitute itself as a political or ethical tribunal. On the contrary, this is the role that traditionally has been assumed by journalism. That the arts increasingly tend to assume this role with both a sense of urgency and commitment and, what is more, with the kind of creativity that is strikingly absent in contemporary journalism testifies to the kind of role-switching that I am talking about. It is a shift within the ideological superstructure much like those Mehring and Kautsky analyzed in their time. In a situation where the forms and content of journalism have become standardized to the point of censorship, it has fallen upon the arts to inspire discussions of the future of society. This is why it is increasingly the task of the arts to give expression to “the political”, that is to say, the implicit preconditions and consequences of the political and economic policies that dominate in the world, whereas mainstream journalism increasingly serves “politics”; it is content to mirror the rituals of institutionalized power and to convey the various opinions that bear the “stamp of approval” of the dominating authorities. When journalism is reduced to little more than a mirror for princes, the arts assume the role of journalism in its original sense: a running chronicle that elucidates social events.

I suggested earlier that these shifts represent two sides of the globalization of culture. In the age of globalization we can identify three distinct tendencies in the cultural sector. First, American mass culture continue its triumphal tour across the globe – under the banners of Nike, McDonald’s, Walt Disney and Coca-Cola. Second, the “high culture” of the West is becoming part of elite lifestyles not only in Paris and Washington, but in Beijing and Buenos Aires, as well. From each and every metropole in the world there now emanates a sponsored noise of Pavarotti, Bach and Eric Satie, and in just about whatever city you visit you will find a major exhibit of Hieronymus Bosch, Russian icons, van Gogh or Andy Warhol. A growing number of artists and writers consciously cater to the tastes of the world’s upper classes. There is a journalistic equivalent of this kind of globalized culture in the press, most clearly articulated in papers like *USA Today* and *International Herald Tribune* – the former for the middle classes, the latter for the upper classes, but both tailored to suit all in their target group and not to furrow any brows.

Dominating these two tendencies are a handful of gigantic media groups: Disney, Time Warner, Viacom, Sony, Seagram, Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, AT&T, General Electric and Bertelsmann.⁸ The tendencies lead us to the motor behind the globalization of culture: the establishment of universal equivalents, or “value-forms,” which make it

possible to judge and rank the “value” of different news stories, cultural products, works of art, knowledge, events, ethical behavior, and political systems, regardless of their cultural origin and contexts.

Let me explain this in more detail. Political values, ethical values, existential values, news values, aesthetic values, and human values were long culture-specific, bound to cultural origins and local traditions. They could not be measured on the yardsticks supplied by other cultures. Traditionally, the only value that could be exchanged without difficulty across cultural boundaries internationally was monetary value. Today, however, everything is subject to measure and judgment according to yardsticks that are alleged to have universal validity. This is not to say that the phenomena measured are reduced to monetary value, only that they are subjected to the same kind of logic that applies to the exchange of monetary values: immaterial fruits of human endeavor – education, news reporting, goodness, poetry, patriotic feeling, or anything else – are now increasingly valued in relation to a universal equivalent. The standardizations of all kinds of value effected by such universal equivalents is, in my view, the most appropriate analytical definition of cultural globalization.

Consider, for example, motion pictures, where the so-called Hollywood narrative has superseded alternative modes of cinematographic story-telling. A film is hardly recognized as a film (but is automatically smacked with an “art film” label) unless it follows the conventions of Hollywood. Or, consider news reporting, where over the past decade CNN has become a mirror and measure for news values worldwide. An event cannot become a “story” unless it conforms to the CNN mold. In the world of digital communication the Windows operating systems represent another strong factor of global equivalence. Nothing has emotive, aesthetic, cognitive, political or communicative value, nothing is good or bad, beautiful or ugly, good or evil, real or unreal until it has been processed by television or Microsoft systems. These are the value forms that delimit our world-view, that present selected portions of the world to us to us, in ready-made frames. Yet another of these universal equating mechanisms is the English language, which has spread to the point that we now have a global lingua franca that artists, entertainers, politicians and scientists *must* have a command of if they and their work are to be taken seriously by the dominant institutions in their respective fields.

Out of the reactions to this standardization of elite and popular culture, a third tendency has emerged. It consists of all the local, ethnic or national movements having the aim to resist the globalization of culture. Every now and then, someone out in the periphery vandalizes a McDonald’s. French culturati express their outrage when the USA tries to force European governments to cease supporting European film production on the grounds that it gives European film-makers’ an unfair competitive advantage on the world market. In the USA, Latino and Asian students demand that curricula include their peoples’ history and traditions alongside those of Anglos, Blacks and Native Americans. The president of Malaysia accuses the USA of propagating an individualistic ideology with respect to human rights as a means of securing international dominance. I have yet to mention terrorism, the most desperate response of the periphery to the processes of centralization and globalization.

Face to face with the new, global norms, people – be they Persian or Québécois – are “discovering” that they have a cultural identity and that it is under threat and needs to be defended. They are returning to their cultural roots, ethnic origins, confessional values or blood kin, maintaining that their values cannot be uprooted from their cultural context and equalized according to some universal standard.

All artistic, intellectual and journalistic work today is carried out in a field of tension between these three tendencies – standardized elite culture, commercialized mass culture, and local traditions of stubborn resistance. But most important is that all three are interwoven and simultaneously present in every country, every locality, every work of art, indeed, in every life. Yesterday, culture could be located on the map and defined as “domestic” or “foreign”, according to national frontiers. That is no longer possible. Anyone who tries to identify and define, say, Swedish or American culture has either to invoke some supposed national character – thereby verging on cultural racism – or else admit that every culture is subject to the forces of globalization, tugging at once in several different directions.

Therefore, I should like to postulate a *fourth* tendency, one that specifically deals with the conflicts and power relationships between the three poles in contemporary cultural life: global mass culture, the elite’s “culture of cultural events”, and miscellaneous, more or less nationalistic cultural projects. The most striking manifestation of this fourth tendency to date was, precisely, the “Documenta” exhibit in Kassel, which gathered a good number of intellectuals, writers, artists and institutions, all of whom operate in the interface between “domestic” and “foreign” and strive to express and give form to “the political”, that is to say, the very preconditions for and limits to participation in contemporary public spheres of politics and culture.

Many attempts have been made to define this zone, where cultural influences mix, giving rise to new cultural identities. Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha calls it “the third space”; Mexican anthropologist García Canclini speaks of “hybrid culture,” and artist Guillermo Gómez Peña of “border culture.”⁹ Other terms in currency are geoculture, transculture, postcolonial culture, interculture, multicultural and world culture. This zone is already present in most places. One might call it “the public sphere of in-betweenness,” a place where the contradictions and potentialities of globalization, the never-ending struggle over who should be included and who left out of “the international community,” are debated.

It should be noted that the culture of in-betweenness is no new phenomenon; it has always been there, although it has been described in many different terms. In 1907, for example, Otto Bauer, Marxist theorist and chairman of the Socialist Party in Austria, described what happens when an individual straddles different national cultures: “For the individual who is affected by the culture of two or more nations, whose character becomes equally strongly influenced by different cultures, does not simply unite the character traits of two nations but possesses a wholly new character. [The] mixture of cultural elements creates a new character.”¹⁰ That is why the child of many cultures is often greeted with mistrust, in times of strife even as a traitor, Bauer adds. Bauer himself lived through the last years of the Habsburg Empire, which encompassed numerous minority cultures without any dominating majority, and in which it was necessary to invent a model of humanness and citizenship that rose above the nationalist conflicts – “a wholly new character.”

The point of the notion of a “public sphere of in-betweenness” is that it rejects the distinction between center and periphery and all the polarities – culture and barbarism, “us” and “them”, civilization and svagery – that can be derived from it. What might be called a monotopic interpretation of the world is here replaced by a pluritopic interpretation, or what Edward Said referred to as a “contrapuntal interpretation,” that is sensitive to actions and texts that have broken away from, or been devastated by the dominant tradition.¹¹ The pluritopic interpretation is rooted in thinking that does not refer to a

certain ground or a given tradition, but rather moves between different cultural horizons. Thus, it resists every attempt to assign any given tradition, event or place to any *single* truth, identity, origin, spirit or character. A pluritopic interpretation instead posits that every history and geographic place is a kaleidoscopic collection of interacting identities.¹² It has no place for majorities or minorities, for Norwegian, Swedish, Nordic or foreign. All such categories are undone once we realize that every cultural identity is shot through by strands from numberless other places on the planet.

The fourth tendency arising out of the globalization of culture is apparent in the realm of aesthetics and in contemporary cultural theory. But not in journalism. Mainstream journalism and news reporting remain dependent on a worldview of the kind Sven Öste criticized. Events and people are measured and valued in relation to a presumed center, national or global, an allegedly objective vantage point, from which an allegedly impartial observer surveys and catalogues the course of humanity and the changes of the world.

Perhaps the demonstrated weakness of journalism when it comes to documenting the political processes of globalization is due to the fact that it is still bound to such an objectivist and positivist epistemology. Perhaps the key to the greater achievements of the arts in this regard is that their vantage point lies precisely in the intersection of the contradictory processes of globalization. Let me offer another example and make a new distinction that clarifies the difference.

The example is the so-called war on terrorism, more precisely its initial phase, the attack on the Taliban in Afghanistan. Most opinion leaders in Europe and North America started with the assumption that the war was a both justified and appropriate response. Mainstream Western journalism cast the war in a narrative reminiscent of a battle of Light versus Darkness. Intellectuals having roots in the Muslim world – like Naguib Mahfouz, Tahar Ben Jelloun, Abdelrahman Munif, Tariq Ali, Edward Said, Sherif Hetata and Khalid Duran – were, by contrast, convinced that the war would only worsen existing problems and create new ones.¹³

How are we to explain the diametrical difference between the respective views of Western intellectuals and their Arab-Muslim colleagues? Before the war, both groups belonged to the same international league of secularized intellectuals who adhered to the same ideals of democracy, human rights and enlightenment values. After the war, both profess the same values. And yet they have been divided along precisely the cultural lines that both groups claim to have risen above.

It may be that the two groups read and interpreted the war in two distinctly different contexts. For the war on terrorism can be understood and explained against the background of several different narratives. One explanatory narrative is about the efforts of democracy and open societies to defend themselves against enemies that are not above murdering innocent people en masse. Another is about the most recent phase in the USAs buttressing of the country's imperial hegemony. A third concerns the ultimate consequences of globalization, and a fourth the dialectic between religious faith and secularization in the Muslim world. This multiplicity of perspectives is cause for thought. Which of the narratives that influences one's interpretation of the war obviously has to do with one's position in the field of tension of world politics. Whether one is Arab or European, for example.

Still, dominant opinion leaders and mainstream media in the West believe, and would have us believe, that their particular interpretation is the only one possible. When they ignore all the other possible contexts in which the war may be understood, they are turning a blind eye to the world around them. Literature historian Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht

sees this blindness as a case of “complexity reduction”. He considers the Western reaction – and, by extension, Western media coverage – typical of a modernity that has embraced what he calls a “subject culture”, *Subjekts-Kultur*, that is, an attitude to the world in which the observer of world events is taken to be placeless, disembodied, omniscient, and impartial. “The world” is something the observer approaches with conceptual tools, not a place he or she lives in and is formed by. A precondition for this attitude or position is that the individual in question has attained a measure of wealth and security that shelters him or her from the material pressures of history; he or she is no longer immediately involved in history, but can view it *von oben*. This attitude is so deeply imbued in the culture of modernity that even Western concepts of knowledge and morals are predicated on it; the world is here seen as an image, separate from the observer, or as a “world picture,” as Heidegger puts it.¹⁵ Western journalists, reporters and opinion leaders tend to assume this position of withdrawn superiority; indeed, the position is a prerequisite to being able to *say* anything about the world or the war on terrorism.

The elevation of this position to an absolute, Gumbrecht argues, is the reason why Western journalists and intellectuals are badly equipped to understand that less privileged places are still characterized not only by the “subject culture” of modernity, but also by what he calls a “culture of presence” (*Präsenz-Kultur*), a state in which the individual conceives of himself as being bound to a specific body and a specific place – a presence. To such an individual, history is more than a twine of meanings or a flow of information. It is a physical force that intrudes upon the body and transforms one’s space of existence. To take an example: Gumbrecht notes that Muslims take offense to the stationing of American fighter planes near Mecca; their presence provokes frustration and rage. Meanwhile, leaders and spokespersons in the West seem altogether to lack the sensorium needed to comprehend how such geopolitical measures can be perceived as a humiliating act of encroachment.

Media coverage of world politics suffers from the same handicap. History is observed from the comfort of loge seats. The arts, however, inevitably relate to concrete human experience. Even Hegel noted that art is inalienable from sensory experience, to the representation of how life and society look, sound, feel, taste – even how they smell. Here we have yet another reason why art today is able to give us some idea of the political repercussions of globalization, far closer to reality than the general overviews provided by journalists and statisticians.

The contrast I am describing here could be summed up as the difference between experience and overview, where the arts remain true to their mission of representing concrete human experience – here, the experience of living in the “battle zones” of globalization – whereas journalism and the media provide “structure” and overview. The contrast between the two would appear to have been driven to an extreme these days. Cultural theorist Fredric Jameson has given the classical formulation of this problem, or double-bind: We have today, he writes, “a situation in which we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true, then it escapes individual experience”.¹⁶

By extension, Jameson’s reasoning would imply that artistic attempts to express authentic experiences of contemporary political events can never claim to be true, whereas journalistic attempts to tell the truth about reality seldom or never say anything about the authentic experiences which, ultimately, steer the course of history.

The dichotomy is drastic. As we all know, a good share of contemporary art and literature claim to reveal truths about hidden political and historical structures; at the same

time, the best journalism leans toward concrete human experience. Thus, the best work of both strive to achieve what Jameson calls a “cognitive mapping” of the world as totality: to make global processes accessible to our senses and our experience.¹⁷

Both make the effort, but it seems that the aesthetic genres are always one step ahead of the renditions of reality presented in mass media. Why is this? One might put it this way: Art, literature and film invent the forms of representation that are subsequently institutionalized and applied in journalism and the media. There are numerous interesting examples of how journalistic genres have borrowed from literature, art and film: nineteenth-century realism and naturalism in literature presage documentary reportage in the daily press; *avant garde* film developed editing techniques that subsequently became the norm in television; dialogic patterns developed in drama and philosophical novels have enriched the journalistic interview; photo journalism has borrowed from the iconography of painting; investigative reporting in both print and broadcast media applies the fluid narrative perspective developed in modernist novels.

The historiography of documentary film offers another illustrative example. American film historian Bill Nichols has recently published what many might call a “revisionist” history of the genre.¹⁸ His analysis is of general applicability to the question of the relationship between journalism and aesthetics. Film historians have long maintained that documentarism represents the essence of cinematography. Ever since 1895, when the Lumière brothers arranged the first public screening of moving pictures and an astounded audience could see moving pictures of workers leaving their factory and a train pulling into a station, film has been assumed to be directly related to authentic reality. All film is – by birth and definition – documentary, a kind of journalism. When in the 1920s “documentary film” was introduced as a concept, it was – as accepted historiography would have it – nothing new, but only a new name for what moving pictures always had been: documentations of reality. Thus, historians have invented a mythical ancestry for the documentary, Nichols comments. The documentary film is portrayed as a necessary consequence of the realism of film as a medium: it offers us a window on reality and the naked truth. In short, the documentary would appear to demonstrate the very essence of the reality-revealing function of journalism.

Nichols rejects this reasoning out of hand. The first films, he argues, were not at all received as documented reality, but as magical spectacles. And, if all film is essentially documentary, why did the genre not appear until 1928? If the accepted history holds, the genre should have appeared much earlier, Nichols reasons. Furthermore, documentary film is much more than a matter of recording reality. In addition to cinematographic techniques there are three additional elements: a particular narrative style, developed in early films of the genre; a social mission, a desire to inform and arouse the public that appeared first in the of the interwar period; and, finally, the montage techniques by which *avant garde* films of the 1920s achieved both defamiliarization and revelation of reality. Nichols is particularly interested in this third aspect and demonstrates how the documentary and, for that matter, all journalistic use of moving pictures are indebted to the film experiments of Walter Ruttmann, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, Man Ray and Luis Buñuel, that is to say the modernist *avant garde*.

So reasons Nichols, and I think the point is clear: A documentary genre that strives to fulfill all the journalistic criteria of truth and factuality has its origins in *avant garde* film-makers’ free experimentation with images and narratives. Why is this legacy so seldom acknowledged? Nichols’ answer is that documentary film would risk losing its credibility, were its true parentage to be known. One would then have to admit that the

way to true depictions of reality leads through aesthetic fiction, that documentary and journalistic truth is in large part a construction.

All journalism – like any representative genre or medium that makes claim to verifiable truth – tends to succumb to an ideological sclerosis. It turns into an instrument, the purpose of which is to confirm a given “world picture. Journalism can only avoid such a fate by learning from the arts, with their demonstrated ability to penetrate beyond stereotypes, hackneyed jargon and worn-out codes. In this way artistic experimentation with images and narrative structures inspires and refreshes journalistic representation of reality. Aesthetics would seem to be a vaccine that protects journalism from conformity and keeps it from degenerating into shallow, if perhaps entertaining, reproduction of the gestures of power.

We are currently in the midst of this vaccination program. Art, literature and film are increasingly politicized; they direct our attention to new zones of conflict and techniques of representation that no doubt will characterize the journalism of tomorrow. The process is necessary, not for the sake of the Arts or of journalism, but for the sake of society: democracy presumes the existence of media that represent reality impartially and in a credible fashion.

And, inasmuch as we are in the midst of the process, we should not be surprised if a good share of contemporary art seems to coincide with reportage and the documentary, while a good share of contemporary journalism seems to coincide with soaps, crime drama, action film or, as Timothy Garton Ash put it recently, “sheer fiction”.¹⁹

Notes

1. Sven Öste, Varför alla dessa helsidor från Sydney? [Why all these full-page spreads from Sydney], *Dagens Nyheter*, January 14, 1994.
2. Alfredo Jaar, *Two or Three Things I Imagine About Them*, Kunstnerernes hus, Oslo, 1990. I discuss Jaar’s work in more depth in *Världens centrum: en essä om globalisering* Stockholm: Norstedts, 2001), pages 125-127.
3. The distinction is based on a discussion among French political theorists of the relationship between “le politique” (politics) and “la politique” (the political). See Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1985); Claude Lefort, “La question de la démocratie” in *Le Retrait du politique: Travaux du Centre de Recherches Philosophiques sur le Politique* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1983), pages 71-88.
4. See *News in a Globalized Society*, Stig Hjarvard, ed. (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2002); Edward S Herman and Robert W McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism* (London and Washington: Cassell, 1997); and *Journalism and the New World Order: Gulf War, National News Discourses and Globalization*, Stig Arne Nohrstedt and Rune Ottosen, eds. (Göteborg: Nordicom, 2000).
5. Karl Kautsky, *Die Klassengegensätze von 1789* (Stuttgart, NN, 1889); Franz Mehring, *Die Lessing-Legende* (1894; Berlin: Dietz, 1967).
6. The project is described briefly in the exhibition catalogue, *Documenta 11 — Platform 5: Exhibition* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002).
7. Anthony Downey comments on Gonzales Torres’ critique in “The Spectacular Difference of Documenta XI,” *Third Text* 62 17:1 (March 2003):91.
8. Robert W McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).
9. Homi Babha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pages 35-39; Néstor García Canclini, “Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity”, translated by Christopher L Chiappari and Silvia L López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), pages 1-11, 206-263; Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Warrior for Gringostroika: Essays, Performance Texts and Poetry* (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1993) pages 43-44.
10. Otto Bauer, “The Nation” in *Mapping the Nation*, Gopal Balakrishnan, ed. (London: Verso, 1996), pages 54f; *Die Nationalitätenfrage und die Sozialdemokratie*, rev. ed. 1924 (Glashütten im Taunus:

- Detlev Auvermann, 1971), page 117. For a more extensive discussion of Bauer's standpoint in relation to the views of his time with regard to the culture of in-betweenness see Stefan Jonsson, *Subject Without Nation: Robert Musil and the History of Modern Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pages 263-270.
11. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1993), pages 32, 50-72.
 12. Walter D Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), pages 11-25.
 13. This, of course, is a generalization. As media researcher Elisabeth Eide, who has extensive knowledge of Afghanistan, has pointed out, a number of Western media, particularly in Norway and the rest of Scandinavia, have made great efforts to publish views on the war from the Muslim world. But these, I would say, are only the exceptions that prove the rule. That some media consider it important to include commentary and analysis from Afghans and others in the Muslim world is a welcome deviation from the norm, a norm that presumes that Western media can, on their own, give their readers and viewers an adequate and impartial interpretation of the world. But that these more progressive media have to make such efforts to include others' voices demonstrates just how strong the norm is.
 14. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, "In eine Zukunft gestoßen; Nach dem 11. September 2001", *Merkur* 55 (November 2001):1048-1054.
 15. Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pages 115-154.
 16. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), page 411.
 17. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pages 51-54.
 18. Bill Nichols, "Documentary Film and the Modernist Avant-Garde", *Critical Inquiry* 27 (2001):4:580-610.
 19. I am referring to the article by Timothy Garton Ash, "Välkommen till Matrix!" that appeared in Swedish translation in *Dagens Nyheter*, June 17, 2003.

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