

NIHILISM OF POSTMODERNIST CONSCIOUSNESS AND ENTERTAINING TELEVISION

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Abstract. The relevance of the research problem is conditioned by the dominance of entertainment information in Russian television media. Wide dissemination of entertainment content leads to uniform television discourse, reduced quality of the broadcast products, and diminished socio-political importance of television. Objective of this paper is to identify the reasons for the popularity of entertainment content among television companies - the subjects of the information market and the audience - consumers of mass media products. The research is interdisciplinary; the authors rely on a number of concepts in the field of journalistic, sociologic, philosophic and media research. The paper considers two groups of reasons - socioeconomic and sociocultural, which promote the distribution of entertainment content on television. Among the socio-economic reasons that determine the relevance of entertainment formats among the subjects of the information market (television companies), we emphasize the commercial feasibility of entertainment programs, their political neutrality (which reduces the risks of economic activity of media enterprises), and congruence of entertainment content to the capitalist economic system. Among the sociocultural reasons that increase the popularity of TV entertainment among the audience, we identified nihilism and virtualization (simulacration) of reality inherent in postmodern culture. We believe that these phenomena cause a sense of anxiety at the personal level and are compensated by the cultural practice of entertaining television. The results of the research can serve as a basis for formulating hypotheses of empirical research aimed at studying the entertaining nature of modern mass media.

Keywords: entertaining television, nihilism, postmodernism, mass media.

1 Introduction

Modern television can be described as entertaining: contests and shows, humor and popular music, feature films and television series are the most popular television content. Even such a traditionally serious type of journalism as news journalism has been transformed into an infotainment - a mixture of information and entertainment (Jebril et al, 2013, p. 105).

We will outline the situation with entertainment formats on the main Russian channels. According to the branch report of the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications "Television in Russia. The state, trends and development prospects" (prepared in 2016 following the results of 2015), the majority of Russians (70%) watch TV every day, on average about six hours - 5 hours 49 minutes (Television in Russia 2016., p. 33). Despite the process of fragmentation of the audience (its fragmentation across various media platforms and channels) and the variety of tastes of auditor groups, entertainment content remains the most in demand among viewers. The TV shows of the largest Russian channels (First Channel, Russia 1, NTV, TNT, STS, Fifth Channel, REN TV, TV3, Domashnii, Peretz, Pyatnitsa, Kanal Yu, "2x2") are of three dominant genres: television series (21%), music and entertainment shows (21%), as well as feature films (15%) (Television in Russia, 2016, p. 44). Thus, entertaining TV formats account for 57% of the content of the air channels, another 15% is occupied by advertising and commercials.

2 Methodological Framework

The basis for the research is the concepts from the theory of journalism, sociology, philosophy, and the media research. When identifying the reasons for the production of entertainment content by the editorial / television companies, we relied on the theory of the press by Fred Siebert, Theodor Peterson and Wilburgh Schramm; the concept of the cultural industries by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno; and the theory of social space by Pierre Bourdieu. Linking the interest of the mass audience to entertaining content with the current situation of

nihilism, we, in considering the latter, turned to the works by Friedrich Nietzsche, the ideas of existentialism (Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas) and phenomenology (Martin Heidegger). Since we considered the phenomenon of nihilism in the context of postmodernism, we relied on the concept of postmodernism by Frederick Jameson. Also, following the media ecologists, we considered entertaining television as a specific intermediary, affirming certain patterns of perception and understanding of reality. In particular, we used the Neil Postman's concept of media metaphor.

3 Results

There is a number of reasons why the media publish entertainment information. First, entertainment content brings profit to editors / TV and radio companies, because it is in demand among the mass audience and requires neither high costs nor a high level of journalistic skills in the preparation of materials. The history of the development of the press has shown the stability of information and entertainment formats (mass publications, "yellow" press, all sorts of tabloids, "gloss", entertainment radio stations and TV shows) in a market economy. The commercial logic of the information market forces broadcasters to rely on ratings: it is the high-rating telecasts that get into the broadcast network of the media, which allows them to attract advertisers.

The second reason the media willingly work with entertainment content is its political neutrality. Media studies (in the framework of sociology, political science, theory of journalism, etc.) showed that the ruling elites try to control the activities of the media, especially its political aspect. Therefore, the production of socio-political content, alternative entertainment, increases non-economic risks and significantly complicates the activities of editorial / television companies (requires building relationships with representatives of government and government bodies, the stable economic situation of the enterprise, etc.). As Pierre Bourdieu shows (Bourdieu, 2002), symbolic power today is concentrated in the hands of economic and political elites, which establish control over media corporations, acquiring them into ownership. Entertaining, politically neutral content in this case becomes an effective symbolic strategy to maintain the existing order of things.

Another significant reason for the presence of entertaining content in the media is its congruence to the capitalist system. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (Horkheimer, 1997) showed, the cultural industry reproduces the totality of capitalism, spreading the values of consumption and shaping the consumer. Mass culture is an effective form of ideology: people seek entertainment, unlimitedly consuming it; plus, at the level of individual consciousness it is difficult to label entertaining content as ideological one. Such ideological effectiveness of entertaining mass media products causes their structural expediency for the capitalist system and the reproduction of this practice in the framework of its self-organization.

Identifying the main reasons for the interest of editorial offices / TV and radio companies to entertaining information will help us to understand why the audience needs it. Indeed, recent mediometric studies of the audience (Reports to the Federal Agency for press and mass communication, 2016) show a steady interest in entertainment formats. Why does a society ask for entertainment information and what is the nature of this need?

A significant socio-cultural reason for this, in our view, is the nihilism of modern consciousness. Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the first to recognize nihilism: "Nihilism stands at the gate: where did this most terrible of all the guests come from?" (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 29), he asks. It's not that Nietzsche exaggerates - nihilism for him, indeed, became an eerie guest having accompanied him to madness and death.

"What is nihilism? - Nietzsche asks - This is when higher values lose their value (Nietzsche). There is no goal. There is no answer to the question "why?" (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 31). A corroding emptiness of senselessness deprives the life-fulness and authenticity of religious postulates, moral imperatives, crucial meanings of everyday life, the grandeur of art or the pacifying materiality of material values – everything becomes insignificant and dilapidated in the cold depreciating light of nihilism. More intelligibly and provocatively Nietzsche describes the situation of nihilism with the aphorism "God is dead" (Nietzsche, 2015, p. 108). "God is dead," and being is deprived of its truth, metaphysical perspective and authenticity. The only reality that a person can count on is the reality of the physical world, no longer sanctified by the Absolute - the "World of Ideas", God, Mind, etc. The being collapsed, lost its role as the supernatural, and a man has trapped in the physical world: "this world, which is no longer denied, becomes unbearable..." (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 34).

Martin Heidegger in "European Nihilism" explains Nietzsche's thesis "God is dead," reflecting the essence of nihilism: "... the "Christian God" has lost his power over the being and the destiny of man. The "Christian God" here simultaneously serves as a leading representation for the "supersensual" in general and its various interpretations, for "ideals" and "norms", for "principles" and "rules", for "goals" and "values" that state "above" the essence in order to set a goal, an order and, as they say briefly, to give "meaning" to the essence as a whole. "Nihilism is a historical process in the course of which the "supersensory" in its dominant sense becomes shaky and insignificant, so that the very essence loses its value and meaning" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 64).

Nihilism manifests itself both on a personal and a social level. In fact, it is possible only as *personal nihilism*, but the paradox of nihilism is that it, in fact, has the form of social nihilism. Nihilism indeed requires a *personal understanding* of the possibility of the "death of God" (although Nietzsche tries to *inform* others about this): without this understanding, nihilism is impossible; a man acts in a value context – against certain values, rejecting, neglecting or ignoring them. Moreover, nihilism implies a *personal reaction* on the part of a person to the situation of the "death of God", since this situation determines its fate: who am I and what can I hope for? In any case, the situation of nihilism requires *personal permission*, since staying in it is destructive, as Nietzsche's case shows.

The personal form of nihilism (conscious nihilism) described by us is extremely rare, because of its destructive nature – it is fraught with mental disorders, degradation, addictions or ends with a constructive overcoming. Think, for example, of existentialism, a kind of philosophical reaction to the situation of nihilism in the early XX century. Existentialism chews on the "nausea" of the new situation: "All essence is born without cause, continues in weakness and dies accidentally... Our birth and death are meaningless" (Sartre, Jean-Paul, 2016). But it chews constructively: it clarifies the "abandonment" of a man, suggests treating his life as a "project", establishes his connection with the Other, thereby overcoming the situation of nihilism. Thus, despite the fact that nihilism is a personal position, it does not take root at the personal level. From our point of view, nihilism is reproduced at the social level. Let us explain our idea.

The phrase "social nihilism" undoubtedly sounds somewhat strange, since communities and societies always insist on certain material and/or spiritual values. If we take a hypothetical situation when nihilism becomes the defining worldview of the community (for example, in William Golding's novel "The Lord of the Flies"), then this situation, in the strict sense, transforms from the nihilistic to the ideological - postulating, prescribing certain norms, meanings and values. Then how is social nihilism possible?

In our opinion, social nihilism finds expression in postmodernism – the cultural paradigm of modernity. Using the

Marxist approach to understanding culture, we note that culture forms the semantic space of human activity, incorporating people into the existing social order. Postmodernism offers spiritual crutches for the adaptation of a modern man to post-metaphysical reality. It becomes a kind of cultural reaction of capitalist society to the state of alienation, nihilism, the crisis of rationality, actualized by the twentieth century. At the same time, nihilism manifests itself in postmodernism less as at the level of content (through the declaration of certain meanings and ideas - which contradicts the very nature of nihilism), than as at the level of form: the *formal features of the culture of postmodernism*, as Fredrick Jameson calls them (Jameson, 2000). These formal features level the situation of nihilism in the mind of the individual, eliminating possible negative personal effects. At the same time, the very situation of nihilism is reproduced on a social level.

So, what formal features of postmodernism does Fredrick Jameson say? In his work "Postmodernism or the cultural logic of late capitalism" (1991) Frederick Jameson speaks of two fundamental mutations of the present: the mutation of the objective world and the mutation of the subject's configuration (Jameson, 1991, p. 8-9). The subject world becomes a collection of texts or simulacra, a technological hyper-reality of image culture. As a result, the traditional perception of reality, as a deeply true being, having transcendent grounds, is replaced by a sense of a simulated reality. This effect is achieved through such formal features of postmodernism as lack of depth ("surface effect"), intertextuality, rejection of historicity, fragmentation, and a cult of consumption of (pseudo)events and "spectacles" (6, p. 5-54). Postmodernism mutation of the subject consists in the disappearance of the bourgeois (classical) subject - its decentration and collapse. The rational, self-acting, active subject is replaced by a split, hedonistic, schizophrenic individual with a new, impersonal sensitivity (Jameson, 1991, p. 13-25). "I" ceases to be the center of self-consciousness and the organization of feelings, the guarantor of wholeness of perception and the basis of self-expression. Such subjectivity is produced by such formal features of postmodernism as "death of a subject", extinction of affect, impersonal "intensity", weakening of historicity, pastish, and citationality. Thus, postmodernism offers its own schemes of cultural production, which, in our opinion, contribute to the social reproduction of nihilism. Any of these techniques indeed eliminates both the meaning itself and the possible subject of meaning, forms the general feeling of a fragmentary, random, heterogeneous, one-stage, simulacrazed present. Nihilism in this situation manifests itself not as a rejection of values (or meanings), but as an alternative practice of consuming images outside the semantic context, a sort of non-subjective slip that occurs in the perception-consumption register (a rapid perception of information without its comprehension).

The fact that entertainment is an excellent way to relieve the mortal despondence (despondence for own mortality) - a common personal effect of the situation of nihilism - Blaise Pascal stated. In French, "entertainment" is one of the possible meanings of the word "distraction," which Blaise Pascal plays in his "Thoughts": "People do not have the power to destroy death, grief, complete ignorance, so they try not to think about it... Distraction is the only our joy in grief and at the same time the greatest sorrow: preventing us from thinking about our destiny, it imperceptibly leads us to destruction. If we had no entertainment, we would have felt such longing anguish that we tried to cure it by means not so ephemeral. But entertainment amuses us, and we, without noticing this, hurry to death" (8, p. 113). The demand for entertaining television arises from the Russian audience, among other things, as a way to overcome the mortal despondence in the situation of nihilism.

American media ecologist Neil Postman, in his work on television with a characteristic name in the spirit of Blaise Pascal ("Entertaining to Death," 1985), suggests understanding any media (including television) as a metaphor (Postman, 2005, p. 10). Thus, he argues with Marshall McLuhan and his famous

expression "a means is a message" (McLuhan, 2007, p. 10), pointing out that the media do not say anything about the world at the content level, but, like a metaphor, at the level of the form "... develop an unobtrusive but powerful subtext that provides a certain understanding of reality" (Postman, 2005, p. 10). Media metaphors by controlling our perception, organizing and controlling the mind systematize the world for us, frame it, reduce it to certain grounds, color and inspire some idea of the world (Postman, 2005, p. 10-11).

What image of the world does television form as an intermediary? According to Neil Postman, first of all, television consolidates entertainment as the basic and natural form of social and interpersonal communication. Thanks to this, a modern man perceives the world as a source of entertainment, excluding serious attitude to anything.

Neil Postman states that entertainment on television is inseparable from the spectacles. The very visual practice of looking at the screen indeed can be an entertainment – a person is fascinated by the infinite change of colors, shapes, sounds, lines, movements: "American television is really a beautiful spectacle, visual pleasure, pouring out thousands of images on any given day. The average length of the video frame is only 3.5 seconds, so that the eye never rests, always has the opportunity to see something new." (Postman, 2005, p. 86-87). Since television requires minimal skills to perceive visual images, everyone can be its spectator. This TV as a media significantly differs from the book, and the mass screen culture – from the elite book culture. As media ecologists show, the practice of reading affirms the value of meaning, understanding; while the practice of televiewing facilitates the simple absorption of impressive amounts of information.

A-semantic mode of life activity, formed by postmodernism culture, is characterized by social aggregation, inertia, stereotyped thinking, consumer orientation of the behavior of individuals. Being a consequence of the modernism project, it acts as a mechanism for the reproduction of the exaggerated rationality of the system and is supported, as Neil Postman says, by the metaphorical nature of electronic media. Neil Postman points to such elements of the cultural code of postmodernism broadcasted by entertainment television as fragmentary, instantaneous, ahistorical and therapeutic. As a result, electronic media as a metaphor offer a fragmentary, senseless, ahistoric and objectless image of the world, corresponding in general to a postmodernism culture and having a nihilistic character. In this case, the practice of entertainment television fascinates the individual with entertainment, immerses him in a simple perception (non-thought) mode, gives him the joy of consumption and comfort.

4 Conclusion

We can identify two groups of reasons for the popularity of entertainment content on modern television:

- socio-economic reasons (reasons caused by the activity of TV companies as enterprises on the information market);
- socio-cultural reasons (the spread of nihilism due to the emergence of post-metaphysical thinking).

Among the reasons of the first group, we point out that entertainment television formats are commercially viable due to being both in great demand from a wide audience and cheaper in production. In addition, entertainment content contains fewer risks for media companies due to their political neutrality. The congruence of entertainment programs to the capitalist system only enhances the need for entertainment content in the context of the consumer society.

Speaking about sociocultural reasons, we postulate that postmodernism, as a cultural paradigm of modernity, is a peculiar reaction of society to the situation of nihilism arose to humanity in the late XIX - early XX century. Postmodernism adapts the individual to the situation of nihilism on a personal level, smoothing out its destructive effects, and translates nihilism on a social level, offering an alternative to classical rationality a-

semantic mode of information absorption. Entertainment TV in this perspective is one of the instruments of cultural adaptation, a specific mediator, affirming the postmodern worldview through formal features of information transmission.

5 Discussion

The phenomenon of entertaining television in social and humanitarian disciplines, as a rule, has been considered as a successful information product (Fred Siebert, Wilburg Schramm, Theodor Peterson); instrument of ideology (Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse), a special cultural practice (Neil Postman), which forms certain patterns of perception and understanding of reality at the level of the individual. It was assumed that the practice of watching TV is based on a natural recreational need of a person. We decided that such naturalness can be questioned and find the sociocultural reasons that form this need. Thus, we have attributed the nihilism of modern consciousness and the virtualization of reality to such reasons.

We also found that the concepts of postmodernism and nihilism are heuristically complementary and explain the relationship between classical and postclassical rationality.

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