

The World is Watching

Video as Multinational Aesthetics 1968-1995

By Dennis Redmond

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Dedicated to the memory of Katharine Gelles

Introduction

It's one of the great paradoxes of culture studies nowadays that despite the ever-increasing integration of the media culture into classrooms and seminars, and despite an impressive body of critical work on film, some of the most significant works of video culture remain untheorized, underappreciated or simply ignored by media critics and cultural theorists. Strangely enough, this is not because the works in question suffer from artistic obscurity or commercial failure; the paucity of critical literature dealing with Patrick McGoochan's masterpiece *The Prisoner* (1967), Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Decalogue* (1988), Hideaki Anno's epochal anime *Evangelion* (1995), and the 3D videogames such as Quake and Half Life currently revolutionizing the Web culture stands in marked contrast to the extraordinary enthusiasm of audiences, artists and culture-workers themselves for all these things. This enthusiasm is by no means the product of some dubious marketing blitz, but testifies to one of the most intriguing aspects of video culture, namely its bedrock plebianism. As we shall see, the greatest video works combine the aesthetic power and complexity of the 20th century modernisms with the popular appeal and revolutionary panache of the great 18th and 19th century realisms.

Much of the difficulty, to be sure, lies in the quicksilver nature of video as a field. Spawned in the late 1960s out of the meteorite impact of the counter-culture – or what in retrospect could be defined as the unexpected collision of auteur cinema, late modernist theater and television broadcasting – video has migrated from the film screen and TV set to the personal computer and the Web at a dizzying rate. The speed of video's

evolutionary clock is matched perhaps only by the rapidity of its internal metabolism, which teleports endless quantities of images, sound-tracks and scripts across a wider and wider range of technological platforms. All this creates a number of unique hurdles for would-be critics. For one thing, theorists have to be familiar with a far broader array of cultural technologies than the concert, record and film audiences of yore ever had to cope with. For another, video culture is really and truly multinational, both in terms of its canon of aesthetic forms as well as its specific visual, acoustic and scripted content. Whereas the most characteristic aesthetic form of the epoch of monopoly capitalism, namely the national cinema, was dominated by a relatively narrow range of American and Western European studios, advertisers, broadcasters and stars, and an equally limited range of cultural forms (the symbolic landscapes of the Western, the national character-systems of the war movie, the monopoly-era gender codes of the private eye and detective thriller, the scriptwriting innovations of the screwball comedy, etc.), video culture draws on a much larger library of mediatic narratives, which circulate across the length and breadth of the world-system. To read video works means to read multinationally, or more precisely, to read the patterns of multinational history encoded in the work of art. This is not a license, to be sure, to write off or ignore the levels of the regional, national or international; rather, to paraphrase Sartre, the multinational is our untranscendable horizon of horizons, which qualifies all these other levels as the local manifestations of some larger phenomenon.

If this is true, then why, one might well ask, wasn't multinational culture on anyone's critical agenda during most of the 1990s? An intriguing shift in critical discourse over the past two decades yields a significant clue. The leitmotif of theory in

the 1980s was unquestionably *postmodernism*, a term which, whether you celebrated or deplored the thing, emphasized a certain historical link to whatever modernism was (or wasn't) supposed to be. But the central buzzword of the 1990s, the term which could function as adjective, noun, verb and epithet all at once, and instantly spark theory-brawls worthy of an online 3D death-match, was *globalization*.¹ More is at stake here than the upstaging of a primarily cultural concept by a crassly economic one. Postmodernism was invented in the specialized realm of literary theory, and only gradually conquered the sociological, political and journalistic realms; globalization, on the other hand, required no such dissemination, for the simple reason that the thing seemed to arrive everywhere, at all points of the compass, all at once.

This suggests that the real weakness of cultural theory in the 1980s was not its inability to diagnose the dominant economic, political or cultural logics of the era, a.k.a. monetarism, Thatcherism and postmodernism. Rather, it lacked a comparative metric capable of triangulating between all these things – that is to say, a genuine concept of multinational capitalism. Nor, in fairness to the critics, was creating such a metric a simple task in the era of the Cold War. Probably the only thinker of note to take the notion of multinational capitalism seriously was Theodor Adorno, whose very complicated concept of the “total system” was largely ignored by the postmodernists, with the signal exception of Fredric Jameson, who hit the nail on the head by famously proclaiming Adorno to be the “thinker of the Nineties” in *Late Marxism*.

One of the main subtexts of this book will be that Adorno is indispensable to contemporary culture theory, only not in the way this is usually thought of, i.e. in terms of the Frankfurt School's denunciation of the culture-industry and commitment to early

20th century Central European modernisms (the span from Kafka and Klee to the music of the Second Viennese School). One of Adorno's most telling points was that the Eastern and Western blocs had long ago become two sides of the same coin, and that the job of intellectuals was not to make false choices about which set of power-elites to swear fealty to, but to resist Cold War tyranny on both sides of the Berlin Wall: to try, in short, to create truly democratic and humane alternatives on a global scale. Probably his greatest contribution to this project was the 1966 *Negative Dialectics*, an epochal intellectual bequest to the critics of the future. The central achievement of this text was to create the world's first concept of multinational form, or what Adorno called the constellation; these were a kind of trail or legible script created by the historical process. The job of theory was therefore to map out, interpret or otherwise decode these scripts, thereby opening up a space for new types of praxis and new types of theory alike.

To see how this works in practice, consider the striking fact that even the most compelling media critiques of the late 20th century – e.g. Fredric Jameson's *Signatures of the Visible* and Laura Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures* – are limited to a very narrowly defined constellation. Specifically, they define video in terms of a neo-national set of media tropes, micropolitical issues or interpretive viewing-positions, linked to various international networks of dissemination (CNN or MTV, the feminist music video, the Fourth World documentary and so forth). The upshot is Jameson's famous definition of video as the depthless, hallucinatory rush of images, shorn of their national and international significations. This is a fine exegesis of that early 1980s sci-fi cinema typified by Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, but tells us very little about the achievements of a William Gibson or Hideaki Anno.

That said, the conclusion of Jameson's 1991 *Postmodernism* offers an indispensable set of guidelines for a future theory of video. The depressing and demoralizing reality of multinational capital, Jameson tells us, is both true and untrue, both ruthless demystification and rampant ideology. As demystification, it is socially necessary appearance, the mere reiteration of our individual helplessness in the face of the vast, almost incomprehensible networks of global capital. Yet as ideology, it is an equally necessary resistance, and ultimately the remobilizing injunction to create a new kind of cognitive mapping or subjective consciousness of the world-system. This cognitive mapping can be thought of as the ideological equivalent of open source software, a set of theoretical models capable not only of hacking into the total system which surrounds us, but also generating new forms of collective consciousness and multinational solidarity. It goes without saying that such models are neither prefabricated interpretations handed down by self-appointed central committees, nor the spam-infested blurbs of marketing bureaus, but are simply tools which each local user must reappropriate, rethink and redeploy in their own unique way. Above all, Jameson takes a page from Adorno by insisting that we can only think *against* the total system to the extent we are willing to think *through* it. The mote in our own eye, wrote Adorno in *Minima Moralia*, is the best magnifying glass;² as we shall see, the greatest works of video are very much the mediatic mote in the basilisk eye of the Information Age.

Footnotes to Introduction

1. For those unfamiliar with the term, death-matching refers to online videogames such as Quake, Half Life and Unreal, played via modem by individuals or teams. They combine eye-popping graphics with visceral gameplay and pulse-pounding excitement.

2. Theodor Adorno. *Minima Moralia*. Ges. Schr. 4. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1951 (55).