

Editorial introduction: Vernacular aesthetics

Celia Lam,

University of Nottingham Ningbo, China & Joint Editor, *Participations*

This thirty-sixth issue of *Participations* boasts a wide range of essays reflecting on the processes of audience-ship, fandom and reception on a variety of platforms (from live theatre to television to podcasts and social networking sites). A conventional overview of essays does not sufficiently capture the diverse approaches, mediums and forms of engagement explored, especially as the introductions to the three special sections provide superb contextualisation and theorisation to these discussions. Rather than embarking on a redundant exercise, allow me to take some time to reflect on an aspect of reception that is implicated but not necessarily foregrounded in studies of cultural and media audiences.

I refer here to aesthetics, not in the philosophical sense of beauty and artistic taste, but in its more practical sense of stylistic choices. More directly expressed, I am concerned with what media scholars define as the ‘codes and conventions’ of media texts; the visual and auditory cues that communicate to audiences a texts’ relationship to contexts such as film and television genres, and to reality (often in mediated form). Think for instance of how the codes and conventions of documentary, and the genre’s presentation of ‘the real’, are central to the parody and satire of mockumentaries.

The aesthetics of media forms – these codes and conventions – relies on audience recognition to effectively indicate its engagement with generic forms of expression, especially if those genres are invoked in reflective ways. Audiences viewing a mockumentary are expected to recognise the playful use of documentary aesthetics and reflect upon its critique of the genre. This mode of engagement appears to be second-nature, yet what is implicated is a sophisticated cycle of production/reception, wherein producers call upon the (assumed) media literacy skills of audiences to comprehend the application of audio-visual modes of presentation, and audiences generate new modes of audio-visual presentation that are then integrated back into media productions.

By way of illustration, consider the recent slate of screen-based thriller films such as Aneesh Chaganty’s *Searching* (2018); a film set and presented entirely through computer screens and smartphones. Not only did the practice of video-conferencing, live streaming and documentation of everyday life via social media become integrated into the plot, the interfaces of contemporary telecommunications technologies were replicated, as an aesthetic choice, on screen. Increasingly, everyday uses of media and social media are

adopted as stylistic blue-prints for the representation of 'everydayness'. Jean Burgess defines creation emerging from the everyday as 'vernacular creativity' (2006). I suggest that the presentation of this vernacular creativity comes replete with its own set of aesthetics: a vernacular aesthetics, if you will.

As the aesthetics of film and television indicates generic differences, vernacular aesthetics suggests modes of expression associated with everyday expression in online platforms. Vlogs on YouTube have developed a 'look' and 'feel' that is different to the 15 second TikTok video. Although more commoditised in nature, the live streaming sessions of Key Opinion Leaders (KOL) are streamed in vertical format, replicating the consumption of content on smartphones. This aesthetics recalls the codes and conventions of legacy media, but reflect (and invoke) the grassroots use of media in everyday contexts. In the process, they intimate a connection to lived reality that is absent from most modes of film and television, even documentary, presentation. Audience engagements with these modes of presentation are likely to implicate developments in telecommunications technologies, local and global online cultures, shifts in vernacular creativity, and responses to the mediation of reality.

While I do not profess to foresee the direction of research in our field, I would be excited to see further reflections of the formation, expression, and audience negotiation of the codes and conventions of mediated everyday life.

References:

- Jean Burgess (2006) 'Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling', *Continuum*, 20:2, 201-214.
- Aneesh Chaganty (2018) *Searching*. USA: Sony Pictures.