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Readings in Media and Communication Studies

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Problems of Aesthetics in Radio and Television Production: A Panacea

Patrick Udende

Objectives

At the end of this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Understand the concept of aesthetics.
2. Identify problems militating against radio and television production.
3. Identify possible solutions to the problems aesthetics in radio and television production.

Introduction

To say that the major goal of any communication activity is to influence the consciousness and behaviour of the message decoder to the extent that the decoder responds with feedback to the sender is just to say the obvious. What some people may not find very obvious is that special devices are employed in communication to stimulate imagination through the senses with the ultimate aim of attracting and sustaining attention to the message being conveyed. This is what is known in professional parlance as aesthetics. According to Paul (1994, p. 23) the hallmark of any aesthetic is to:

appeal to, or sensitize any or a combination of our senses. Every aesthetic work must cause people to feel and experience what the artiste has felt and or experienced. As soon as the listeners or viewers, or even spectators are affected by the same feelings which the artiste felt, experience has been clarified and intensified, thus aesthetic communication has been experienced.

This strengthens the reality that programmes are consciously packaged to serve a need, which is to appeal to the cognition of audience as desired by the artiste or producer. This can only be possible with appropriate application of the production elements to come up with an aesthetically appealing programme. As Bassey-Duke, Brown and Obong (2017) note,

in broadcasting, aesthetics is crucial in enhancing effective content delivery, comprehension and sustainability of the audience's attention.

Salient about radio and television production, therefore, is that credibility counts. This asset so much sought for can be achieved due to quality of programmes craftily packaged and pleasantly presented. Often audience members do not tune to some stations or channels not because of dearth of ideas, personnel or technical know-how. Lack of interest among audience members about certain programmes may be due to inability of such programmes to satisfy their thirst. In the wake of intense competition today, the audiences enjoy the luxury of switching to other stations (channels) or even tune-off the set as the case may be. Therefore, once a programme does not make meaning due to loss of aesthetic value, the media in question suffers listenership or viewership dearth. There are many elements that are employed to bring aesthetics in radio and television production but for our purpose here, the followings will suffice.

Radio production makes use of mood, human voice, time and sound effects, while the aspect of television production makes use of light, sound, time, motion and space. All these elements, if employed professionally will result into excellent end products which will attract marvels from even the most critical of listeners or viewers. In this chapter, we shall bring to perspective how these elements could constitute aesthetic problem and advance suggestions as remedial approach to the problems. Before that an insight into the meaning of the key concepts (aesthetics, radio and television production) that underscore the topic will enhance understanding of the discourse.

Conceptual Clarifications

Aesthetics: When mention is made of the concept 'aesthetics', what readily comes in mind is an appreciation of an object or experience as being pleasant to the eyes or ears. As a matter of fact, it creates imagery of beauty, brilliance, splendour and grandeur in the minds of audience. On the contrary, when description is made of something as lacking in aesthetics, conclusions are easily drawn on such thing as being an eyesore, which is, having a disgusting or unpleasant appearance that is uninspiring

(Bassey-Duke, Brown & Obong, 2017). The thing could also be displeasing when listened to since other things could not be seen but heard. By implication, these things (messages) should provide aural and visual appeal.

By definition, aesthetics, according to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, is concerned with beauty and art of things. Huron (2008) extends the definition of aesthetics to include the contrast of beauty which, according to him, is the study of beauty, and its opposite, ugliness. This way, the object or what is made reference to is beautiful enough to arouse a unique feeling or sense of love of beauty to the audience. In his conception, Zettl (2005) defines aesthetics as a study of certain sense perception and how this perception can be effectively clarified, intensified and interpreted through a medium such as radio or television, for a specific recipient or audience. Even as this definition conveys the idea that aesthetic is a study, it does not subdue the essence of value inextricably tied to the beauty of a thing.

In order to generate the desired feelings in the audience through radio or television programmes and presentation, aesthetics elements must be employed. In employing the elements, those considered to be less significant are expected to be weed off for the purpose of emphasising those elements which are considered significant and relevant. Inability to be selective on the attributes that create appeal to human feelings robs the programme of its aesthetic value. In our context, the beauty is not natural but man-made. Here creativity and professionalism must come to bear. Problem arises when certain elements, in the creative work are not carefully handled thus eroding the appeal that would have been created.

Radio and television production: Radio is an audio device while television is an audio-visual device. Both radio and television are channels of passing messages to a large and anonymous audience. They are core means of communication through music, spoken words and other communication signals. Simply put, radio and television production involves the process by which messages are sent to diverse and dispersed audience through electrical waves (Apuke, 2017). This entails the

collective efforts by production personnel all aimed at beaming a broadcast message.

Radio and television production involves personnel and equipment. The personnel or production team is divided into the production staff, consisting of the producer, the director, assistant director, lighting director, scenic designer and production assistants, while the production crew is made up of the technical director, audio mixer, and camera operator where applicable. The production crew makes use of the second component (equipment) namely; camera, lighting, microphones, audio mixer, console, among others. A blend of the personnel and equipment leads to output, which is acceptable programme quality. There are several programmes such as magazine programmes, drama programmes, talk shows, entertainment programmes, educational programmes, children programmes and commercial programmes. The complementary roles by the production personnel and production crew which lead to creation of a programme find expression in the words of Onabanjo (2004), who asserts that the transmission of information through radio waves from a radio or television station, to a heterogeneous and anonymous audience through their receivers, helps in decoding such information. These audience are dispersed and could be far and near.

Elements and Problems

Since the thrust of this work is on problems of aesthetics in radio and television programming and production, the next line to be devoted on is how one, or all of the earlier mentioned aesthetics elements in the introductory part of the work can reduce aesthetic value thereby, constituting a problem to an entire production beginning with the elements applicable to radio production.

Elements of radio production

Music: Music on radio is very essential as air is to human beings. Music forms a sizeable time on radio and other broadcast media because musical qualities are regarded as being capable of making people happy and they do produce feelings and sensations. No wonder, it is used extensively on

radio as station identification tunes, signature tunes for programmes, news belt, as programme, and as part of commercials. Shaibu (2006) reinstates that an effective signature tune is part of the creative use of music in programming. It is used to herald a programme or to sign off same. Therefore, effective signature tunes must be snappy and attention-catching.

Most often the music which could have added beauty to production is turned into nuisance. For a start, there are moods which a good presenter or producer can use to play music to rhyme with. When the moods are not taken into consideration, problems arise. For example, when an obituary announcement is being made on radio and the accompanying music is a hip-hop or rock and roll joyous music, instead of a slow sentimental or moody music, the beauty is lost. Another aesthetic problem with music is the continuous featuring of a particular number which leads to monotony. An instance is when a certain new release is played maybe for three or four times within an hour in one programme. In this case the listeners feel like moving in a small circle over and over.

There is supposed to be appropriateness of music with the programme. For example, Sports programmes, children programmes, and religious ones provide the appeal when suitable music is used. When a children programme is to be ran and the signature tune and interlude reflect nothing childish, it constitutes an aesthetic problem. It is against this background that Wurtzel and Ackel (1999) suggest that the music should be selected to catch the audience's attention, stimulate its curiosity and set the mood or tone for the show.

Time: How effective or otherwise time is used will call the beauty of a programme to question. Programme on radio and television are always supposed to run with time. Some news bulletins last for thirty minutes, others fifteen, while some are tit bits that go for just three minutes. When this time limit is surpassed, it is obvious that the entire programming will be interrupted. A word of caution is that presenters should make good use of studio clock to guide them on their rate of presentation not to be too slow to encroach into other programmes, or too fast to finish minutes ahead of schedule; a vacuum always filled by interlude.

Human Voice: This is another dominant element in aesthetics on radio. Giving perspective on human voice, Samuel (2010) is of the view that oral or speech communication is the use of spoken words to convey messages. It is part of verbal communication and its primary mode of communication and involves the vocalisation, or expression of thoughts, meanings, and messages in words with voice as its vehicle. The greatest problem that arises here is lack of training. Human voice as defined by Hasan (2014) deals with voice modulation which is the adjustment of the pitch or tone of voice to become enough to be clearly heard and understood by the audience. The idea rests on the fact that clarity is central in presentation and should not be compromised. Thus, the quality of being clearly heard and easily understood adds greatly to the aesthetic value of a programme.

In radio and television production, the competences and effectiveness of the voice-over artiste, for example, is measured by how effectual, attention calling and getting, the voice is able to arrest and sustain the attention and interest of the listener or viewer, and in some cases help to induce an action from the target prospect especially making buying decision on a product or service. The primary tool of the voice-over artiste is their voice. Through the use of the voice, a major part of human communication is achieved.

Today, most people that speak on radio either as presenters, announcers or newscasters are untrained personnel. Untrained as they are, they most often massacre some professionally-prepared scripts at the altar of poor grammar, wrong pronunciation, inappropriate intonation and artificial articulation. Even some announcers, who work hard and possess outstanding skills, nevertheless, pollute the air, chiefly on radio and television talk and interview shows (Hyde, 1998). It is common place to hear presenters on radio who unsuccessfully try to mimic intonations of white people while certain voices like in drama, where manly baritones are required, end up being chorused out inefficiently in tenor. This is why professional training of presenters or news casters is essential. As Hasan (2014) observes, a presenter or news caster may naturally have a sweet, melodious voice but still their voice needs to be trained enough to modulate so as to create the desired voice variation and able to perform

professionally for the required time. Aspiring artiste should therefore, train constantly so as to add value to their delivery.

Sound effect: Sound effect also constitutes in no small measure to the beautification of radio production. The light voices in the background, what Aina (2004) refers to as actualities; the light music in the background, the slight opening of a door to indicate entry or exit all add up to the believability of the spoken action. Sound effects in radio programme should be a replica of what pictures are in magazines. Consequently, Nwanwene (1995) emphasises that irrespective of the category, manual or recorded sound effect must be easily recognisable in the programme. Ganiyu (2004) also reiterates that even with radio, where it is impossible for the listeners to see the event, sounds from the event can be appropriately used for them to hear. However, when the sound is overused, the beauty is lost.

Sound effects can also constitute a problem when the voices which are supposed to indicate a market place in radio drama, for example, end up drowning what an artiste is expected to be saying to the hearing of the listeners or when the music at the background is too loud thereby, blurring the original discussion or intended message. Some radio programmes also churn out some effects that do not represent the intended action. Instances arise when listening to radio programmes and one discovers that an intended sober scene which require weeping actually sounds like robust laughter. Perhaps the greatest problem with sound effects as an element of aesthetics is when sound effects are completely left out where they could have better aided the effectiveness of the production.

Elements of television production

Light: In television production, the first element that comes to the fore when aesthetic is mentioned is light. Onabajo (2004) submits that lighting in television is meant to provide the television camera with adequate illumination for technically acceptable pictures. He notes further that light is divided into location lighting (which is portable), and studio lighting (which is near permanent). Studio lighting, for example, can be accomplished with a variety of spotlights and floodlights which are

designed to operate from the studio ceiling or from floor stand. What we see on our television screens is a recording of the cameras which is conveyed to our homes through the application of other transmission processes. Without efficient lighting, the pictures on our screens cannot be clear (Bruce, 1966).

Unfortunately, we often face unclear pictures, shadowy pictures as well as unintended silhouettes. When people appear with shadows or with several heads, it means that the three-point theory of lighting which ensures that studio cameras are positioned or focused professionally has been jettisoned. Another thing that is a problem with light is when changes with time are not expressed clearly. With little illumination, a day time may appear like a night occasion, while an over light night scene may not portray that period of time to the viewer.

Sound: It is the combination of sound and moving image that makes television the powerful medium of communication of all times. Without sound, an otherwise excellently presented picture will be muted and less aesthetically meaningful. One problem with aesthetic value of sound on television is when projected without uniformity of the action. This is where proper sound synchronisation comes into play. Bassey-Duke, Brown and Obong (2017) dwell on aesthetic problematic of uneven synergy between lip syncing on screen and voice-overs as well as unequal sound or sequence. When not taken care of the pictures tend to be saying a different thing from what the sound is saying. Series of instances abound on many television programmes, especially Nigeria Television Authority, where during network news, for instance, what we feel the caster, correspondent or guest is saying is in disharmony with the sound we hear.

Sound also poses a problem when projected too high or too low. This occurs principally if the sound mixers do not know their work well. The reason is that outside recordings are not done with the same sound volume. What camera one recorded for news at location one will be in a different sound volume with what another camera recorded at yet another news making event. When scenes of each event are to be inserted into one news programme, the mixer has to control the volume of the two events to be in tandem or an ugly aesthetic scene will present itself.

Since sounds fluctuates in loudness, such distribution can be balanced with the aid of attenuator and gain control, which Onabajo (2004) refers to as potentiometer or fader. These devices are handy volume control that guarantees a pleasing audio quality. Incessant experience of momentous fluctuations in sound is an indication that even the persons behind the console is negligent of their professional calling. This, probably, explains why Ennes (1979) cautions that the sound level should be dutifully watched with a view to manipulating the push-pull control voltages. As earlier discussed in the area of human voice on radio, so is it with television production as poor grammar, artificial voice quality and wrong pronunciation of words reduce the beauty of television production.

Television as a critical medium of communication possesses a vital visual component, yet the sound aspect of it is also crucial in getting messages across. Beyond the basic level of accurate reading and pronunciation, the presenter, announcer or newscaster can convey an appropriate emotion by providing variety and meaning to their listeners. Hence, Hyde (1998, p. 29) acknowledged that, "however beautiful your voice may be and however rapidly and unfalteringly you read copy, you're not truly a good announcer until you can communicate the ideas and values as the writer originally conceived them" (p.29).

Success is achieved in part by speech personality which is the way the artiste sounds, and what makes the artiste instantly recognisable when presenting. Speech personality, according to Hyde (1998), is made up of pitch or inflection, volume, tempo, vitality, voice quality, good pronunciation and articulation. It may suffice that a sensitive, top-quality microphone can enhance natural resonance. Nevertheless, the best equipment can only work with the input. Additionally, a voice that is thin or lacking in resonance can be significantly improved by its owner through good posture.

Time: The use of time here implies the manipulation of viewers' experience by the television artiste to suit their message. It can be objective time which is anytime dealt with or used by the artiste, and the subjective time which entails the general handling of speed by artistes. On this note, Zetl (2005) avers that people quite readily associate typical

sounds with morning, noon, evening, night, summer, or winter as conveyed on television.

Television aesthetics can be greatly reduced if what is meant to be shown to express a given period, and in fast motion is presented in a different period and in a *snail* motion. Some scenes are also meant to be shown briefly. If they are, however, shown longer than desirable, beauty is sacrificed. Television on the whole is supposed to be a word economic medium since the sound is complemented by pictures. When too much time is wasted on talking than necessary, it constitutes an aesthetic problem. Another aspect of time which can become an aesthetic problem is the inefficient control of programme duration or better expressed, the non-adherence to actual time scheduled for programme. The instance of some programmes encroaching into times scheduled for other programmes as expressed earlier under radio production worth mention here.

As a matter of necessity, when time is not adhered to, the vacuum requires ad-libing. Unfortunately, this formula for success is easy to state but difficult to achieve because some presenters lack the ingenuity to pleasantly ad-lib. This could partly be as a result of their inability to internalize, and immerse in, what they present. Presenters should, therefore, know what they are talking about. They should also be interested in what they are ad-libing as well as try to develop attractive personality.

Motion: This has to do with the ordered movement of subjects on the screen. Motion is divided into primary, secondary and tertiary levels and if improperly administered can shoot problems. Primary motion which represents the movement of events in front of the camera can render the whole production useless if the director is not experienced, or the cameras used are faulty, or the scene to be recorded is not well arranged. As for secondary motion which has to do with camera movements, a whole television production will lack beauty if the use of pan, truck, zoom and tilt are not done well. Added to this family are dolly and crane (Burrows, Woods & Gross, 1992).

As a rule of thumb for framing effective shots for television production, the cameraperson, who sees the television pictures before they are video-taped, should know how to compose effective shots. On this note Onabajo (2004) cautions that in framing camera shots the cameraperson must take cognisance of five compositional factors namely field of view; headroom; lead room; close-ups and background. We sometimes see people on the screen with heads cut off, which is an end product of wrong tilting or when action is tucked on one side of the screen showing wrong or improper panning and when objects are projected too far away or too close meaning inappropriate zooming. Instances when close-ups and extreme close-ups are desirable are exceptions.

Tertiary motion on its part yields changes in shots like the wipe, the fade, the split screen and other devices otherwise known as opticals. In as much as those opticals beautify television scenes, they can become real production problems if used inappropriately. Such instances like when a scene is wiped as quickly as it appears or the split screen device is used too frequently or supers are rather images of what they represent are markers for haphazard application of opticals.

Space: Space is seen as an aesthetic factor on television in that when light creates an image there must be a medium for the light to reflect on or register what it had seen. The medium on which the pictures produced are shown needs to conform to a certain proportion to suit the viewers' eyes. This proportion is called aspect ratio. The appropriate space or aspect ratio for television is 3:4. This aesthetic value in space is eroded when this ratio is not respected or adhered to.

Another aesthetic problem concerning space on television is when scenes are screened with no enough space upwards - the space referred to in professional circles as headroom. This is occasioned by poor tilting. On this note Burrows, Wood and Gross (1992) opine that proper composition involves a constant process of adjustment and an exercise of discretion in matters of balance and proportion.

Props and scenic design: Like other elements, props and scenic design are also crucial in television production. The person responsible for this is

the scenic designer, who is largely pre-occupied especially during the pre-production. The designer uses ingenuity to select suitable and aesthetically-acceptable materials for the production. These materials include tables, chairs, beds, electronics, and cooking utensils depending on the nature of the programme. In most productions in Nigeria, especially television drama, producers and directors appear not to anticipate the expectation of the viewer (Akpan, 2002). For example, one readily sees a news desk being used as a dining table in a sitting room setting of a drama production. This type of prop brought in by a set designer destroys the aesthetic of the sitting room environment. Apart from that, they appear unconcerned about the size of the prop whether too large or too small for the room.

Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from this chapter is that satisfaction of audience information, education and entertainment needs is central to radio and television production. Despite the rapid growth of radio and television, there has been a strong notion that programmes quality often fall short of expectation due to negligence of basic production elements.

Premised on the foregoing, this chapter interrogates some elements that bring about the aesthetic problems in radio and television production. What leads to the problem of aesthetics in radio and television production are lack of qualified personnel or lack of production equipment or both. It is exigent to note that the radio and television production team is divided into the production staff, made up of the producer, the director, assistant director, lighting director, scenic designer and production assistants as well as the production crew consisting of the technical director, audio mixer, vision mixer, camera operators, video technicians, floor manager among others. For proper production, a television house also ought to have a functional control room. If a production is manned by a good producer who assembles all that is needed and has a good director, who is knowledgeable about the capabilities and limitations of the production hardware (cameras, microphone, lights and so on), coupled with a production crew that has a great deal of creativity and ingenuity to help, the production will not run into any aesthetic problem. When anyone or all

of these are lacking, the radio and television production will be based on half measures, and half measures do not yield excellence.

Having examined the problems of aesthetics in radio and television production, the chapter advances the following recommendations with the hope that, if adhered to, will go a long way in solving the problems.

- (i) Regular training of staff should be the watch word so as to update their skills particularly at a time innovation in the technology of programme production springs up daily.
- (ii) Artists should be more creative about ideas that are translated into programmes meant to satisfy the thirst of audience. This should be complemented by appropriate application of elements during productions.
- (iii) Proper maintenance of production facilities and equipment like cameras, microphones, transmitters among others should also be accorded top priority so as to ensure high fidelity.
- (iv) Owners and management of media outfits should procure state-of-the-art facilities to meet the international standard. This is most required at a time the broadcast industry has gone digital.

Learning Outcomes

In this chapter, you would have learnt:

- 1. The meaning of aesthetics and radio and television production.
- 2. The elements involved in radio and television production.
- 3. How improper use of elements of radio and television production leads to aesthetic problem.
- 4. Ways of surmounting constraints to aesthetics in radio and television production.

Discussion Questions

- 1. Define the term 'aesthetics' as it relates to radio and television production.
- 2. What do you understand by radio/television production?

3. Identify and discuss various elements of radio and television production.
4. In what ways do each of the elements discussed in "c" above affect the aesthetics value of a programme?
5. Suggest various ways by which programme quality can be enhanced.

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