# entanglements

## experiments in multimodal ethnography

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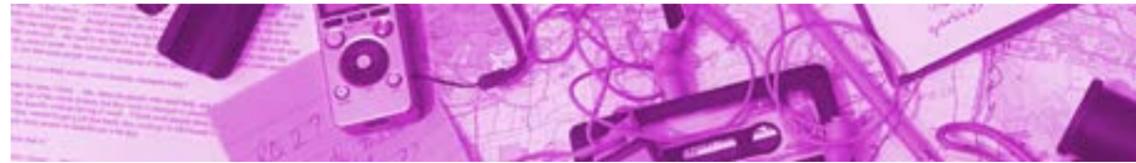
Thomas Wochnik

# Columbo's heirs – footnotes to the television era

## Thomas Wochnik

### I

My great-grandparents were young once. Back then electricity, photography, radio had not yet arrived anywhere near their everyday lives. Indeed, they were not even on their way yet. Not that none of it existed yet. Just, what would these provincial communities do with such means anyway? The industries of modernity would hardly target the rural areas. Thus, what would become of them, other than conservative, reactionary communities? It was believed that these people tended to refuse progress. But really, isn't it progress, that refused them in the first place? Back then one would have to leave the house to get water, cross a field, and approach a well with a heavy wooden bin. Like wood, water had to be gathered. Heat, alike, had to be made as it equaled actual fire - from beforehand gathered wood. And day and night were directly related to the sun's path. I was able to catch a glimpse of these conditions in the eighties still, when spending the first eight years of my childhood right there, in the polish country site. Some of it remains unchanged until this day.

In the sixties they experienced a miracle though. After the instalment of electricity somebody went, like they used to, and gathered a Television set. From then on things began coming to them. There was but one channel, monochromatic, no perpetual program. Like theatre, TV was an event, not a stream yet. The people had heard of the existence of theatres and even motion picture. Being knowledgeable about these things was something entirely different still. No references were to be found in the bible. None to how these things worked, none to how one was to deal with them.
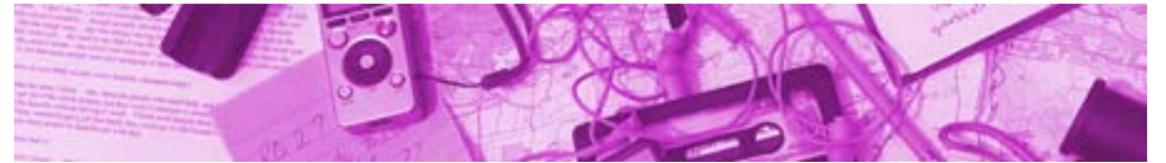
Nothing to prepare oneself with. Now the motion picture theatre had come to them, in a box, that someone had gathered, with a convex glass window and miniature-people inside whose day and night times were not at all following the logic of the sun's path. It was but one TV box in the village, located in a specifically overhauled barn of one farmer, meant to be used by the entire village. Not one TV set, the TV set it was. TV listings were to be gathered by someone on a weekly basis. What to watch and what not was decided collectively by the villagers. Appointments were made to meet in the TV barn, which was equipped with thick curtains, to block out the light, as well as numeral seating arrangements, all with the aim of an uninhibited view of the screen. During a show one was not to talk, to eat nor to drink. People dressed in only the finest of clothes, such that were otherwise reserved for weddings, burials or other clerical events. The effort was not so much due to devotion towards the wonder, nor to intnsify the experience by ritualising the procedure, even if such side-effects may have occurred. It was rather due to an uncertainty regarding the ability of the miniature monochromatic people to look back the other way, into that barn, where they were not supposed to find a bunch of uncivilised rural barbarians. It was shame indeed.

Of course, with time it became clear that the miniature monochromatic people could not look back since nothing that happened on the barn side of the screen would ever have consequences in the tube. Not even direct insults of characters on screen, swear words or worse sins. Yet, precisely when the austerity of the procedure began to loosen up, stories began to circulate such as: the police have taken Mr. Tadeusz in for questioning recently. Why would they take in him, who lives a humble life, talks only to exchange his bee's honey for some milk or meat? But didn't he criticise the Red Army's actions in Prague recently in the barn? Didn't he mock Brezhnev the other day with the TV on?

### II

My grandparent's relationship to TV and media in general is not as well known to me. Aside from this: for my grandfather TV was a means of power and part of the propaganda apparatus. What it conveyed was to be doubted at all times. There was a TV set in his and my grandmother's house, but it was hardly meant for entertainment or information in a common sense. It was rather either off, which it was mostly, or on for the purpose of watching them manipulating us. The idea was to observe their lies in order to deduce the truth behind them. For him the invention of television was not a meant to help us gather knowledge about the world. Instead it was meant to infiltrate our lives and minds to make us think and act as they needed us to. Only after his wife passed away in the early nineties may he have used TV to mask the silence in his apartment. That the political system had changed played a minor role. Why would the new system come with more truth? Regardless, he did somewhat open up to entertainment. Maybe at some point his eyesight had decreased too much for the usual newspaper font-sizes. Or maybe at his older age he willingly allowed himself to be get carried off into interstellar phenomena and underwater worlds.

## III

My parents with my sister and me managed to flee to West Berlin in January 1988. I remember how in these latest of eighties and early nineties I was sometimes allowed to stay up longer to watch a good movie. A good movie was i.e. some episode of Columbo or something featuring Marlon Brando. Sometimes something with Robert De Niro, because he was a good actor, too. In any case, a good movie was likely to be one that would have been forbidden in the old system. Being allowed and able to watch Columbo was a hard-earned achievement. I was allowed to watch these movies in my mother's presence who had reserved the right to interfere with my degree of immersion at any time and especially during acts of violence by ordering me to close-my-eyes-without-peeking, by switching the channel, by making a pedagogically informed comment and/or raising a critical question. I remember her sometimes commenting on scenes without any immediate reason as well, such as uttering a suspicion regarding an unsolved crime or the continuation of a movie. "I don't trust this guy" or "that marriage won't last," that kind of remark, inviting me to actively think, which I rarely welcomed. One time we watched a movie featuring William Shatner playing the good guy. It was clear that he was the good guy, nothing in that movie was suggesting otherwise. Still, I heard my mother say "I don't trust this guy". She kept up her mistrust until the end of the movie. The teenager, that I was, wondered about it and realised, that just a few evenings before we had watched an episode of Columbo in which the same William Shatner impersonated a sleazy, wealthy and powerful, murderous snob, one very archetype of the bad guy, attempting to get away with that one perfect murder that inspector Columbo would never solve. Openly patronising and condescending towards humble inspector Columbo's lack of status symbols, the script made it easy for the viewer to never sympathise with Shatner's character. "I don't trust this guy," my mother said upon Shatner's appearance in Columbo, and, in repeating that very remark during a different movie featuring Shatner, it seems, first impressions really do matter.

## IV

One day my daughter told us, her parents, that she really preferred adult horror movies over any child friendly shows she was officially allowed to watch. She was four years old then. Both, her mother and I did not really take her serious – how on earth was she supposed to know anything about adult horror movies after all? Provoked by our disbelief, she began telling a story about her staying over at her grandmother's house recently, watching some children's program on TV until her grandmother, presumably bored by the children's program, fell asleep. The young girl did purportedly not mind and simply continued watching TV until late into the night. In the particular scene that piqued her interest there was a man running down a dark alley at night. The music was tense and so was he – turning around sometimes with a desperate expression, he was obviously running from someone or something. He turned around again, gazing at the alley behind him, but there was nothing there. Until he turned back forward, when all of a sudden he found himself facing and running into another man with an axe in his hand. That man must have taken a shortcut to appear ahead surprisingly and while our

man was attempting to slow down and turn around, it was obviously too late as the axed hand was already accelerating towards his head. Which it hit and split and made the screen turn red and then the blood with pieces of his head ran down the street with the rain, she said.

So, she had indeed seen some adult horror. She added that she wondered, who on earth would come up with such a scene. To my surprise, she was stunningly certain about the scene being made for the screen, not existing outside of it, not having come from elsewhere, not having been gathered, and not relating to her actual life at all. What else had she seen on TV, I inquired, that she did not believe. Among the "un-realistic" scenes she saw, she described one with aeroplanes crashing into skyscrapers. It must have been really complicated to make that look real, she reckoned, but of course, given the unlikelihood of these planes to accidentally – yes, she took the scene for an accident – hit exactly these two towers, she knew it must have been fake.

## V

I do not remember when exactly me and my peers developed doubt in the authenticity of images, especially news images, but it was certainly about a decade later than the age of four. It happened in our teenage years for sure. When the doubt arose, likely in the aftermath of the first gulf war's image-heavy TV coverage, it did not cause the same degree of critique for everyone of my age, so I came to regard my own generation as split between two very different approaches to the mediated world. One half, probably the bigger half, took photographs of things rather than made photographs as things. For them, given a good enough motive would constitute an equivalently good picture, while the other half would compose a photograph based on properties of a good image like proportion, colour, light, with the content being secondary. I feel reminded of the former perspective when I see the immeasurable number of selfies that can be found on social media today. The object in such pictures is styled and designed through and through according to various fashionable codices, while the conditions of the photograph like lighting, composition of the image, proportions, background, etc., are apparently left to chance. The image per se expresses naivety regarding the medium. Instead, it focuses solely on the content. The photographing subject is tracelessly erased and seemingly replaced with a totalised object – both being the same self in a selfie initially. Erasure of the medium, of the process of making, of traces of intention appeared to me as counter-emancipatory in my teenage years and still trigger the very same critical intuition today.

I developed an ideal then: good images for me – movies, music, literature alike – were such that would help deconstruct themselves as made objects, rather then representations of things outside of themselves. While bad images would aim to appear as pure representations of reality, good images by my definition, would stage their artificiality. This, based on the then newly acquired a priori assumption that no
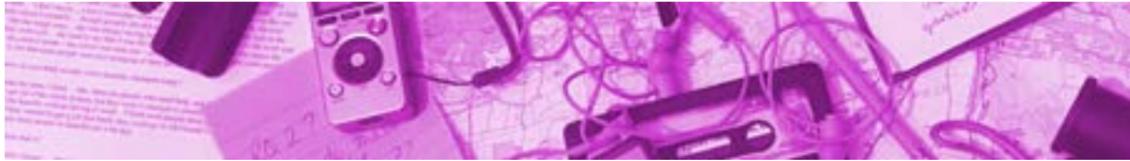
real representation of any reality was possible at all via images. To illustrate that: around the age of eighteen I took issue with a review I read of a Bob Dylan concert. Bob Dylan, the reviewer believed, generated a sense of intimacy and authenticity, of close proximity with his audience. Indeed, the reviewer went as far as to neglect Dylan's performance as such – Dylan did not perform, he just was himself, he claimed. In my objection, that I turned into an enthusiastic school homework, believing that I was on to something, I claimed that it was impossible for Dylan not to perform. Thus, he must have performed in a way that made the performance itself impalpable to the audience. And therefore, in a way, he was lying. Similarly to how my grandfather had perceived television as a manipulative means, Dylan, in my eyes, had lured his audience into his aura of authenticity, which was precisely the opposite of authentic: it was designed to appear authentic. Ziggy Stardust, on the other hand, I mentioned as an example of a trustworthy pop icon, because Ziggy was explicitly fake, never pretending purity. Bowie exposed the artificiality, the madeness of his role, deconstructing Ziggy. David Bowie and I, I felt, stood on the same side of an emancipatory project that may very well change the world for the better. Dylan was counter-emancipatory. (Little did I know about his poetry then, basing my thoughts solely on the aforementioned review).

That very same critical instinct I find triggered when encountering many of the contemporary selfies: they could be naive, of course, in which case that emancipatory project would have simply failed altogether and that would be too sad to believe. Instead, I tend to believe that they are not naive but only staged as such. But if so, then they are part of a counter-emancipatory movement. Designed to appear authentic, their setting incidental, apparently unintentional. Again, luring their viewers into believing whatever messages the images transport. The calculus being: who appears authentic, appears trustworthy. I imagine the generation of my daughter to move backwards towards the original state that my great-grandparents were in when encountering television for the first time – and it is here, where I realise that such regress would not be possible. It is one thing to find a lack of media-literacy in imagery from the 1970s and another to find it in images by teenagers from 2018 – even if the images may look almost identical. In the former case it is a safe assumption that the worlds of producers of images and that of consumers were rather distinct. Not so in 2018. Having been born into a world of mobile phone-cameras with powerful apps for image processing and video editing, today's teenagers may very well have developed an intuition for the madeness of images from their earliest days on, which goes so far that no photographed motive can be taken for real until otherwise vindicated. They know, because they learned to make these realities themselves. They appear naive when they copy settings that I believed were overcome - but for the most part they aren't naive. Yes, there is an underlying intention of conveying theimpression of authenticity to viewers and followers – what triggers my critical intuition is indeed given.
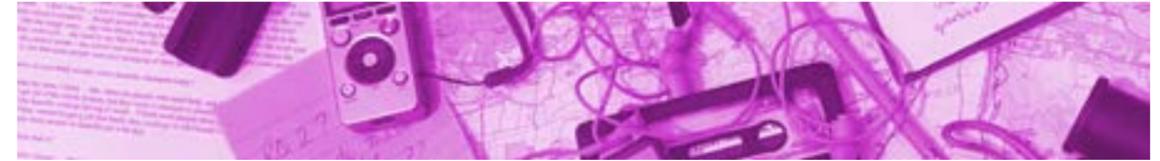
However, what my postmodern mind initially perceives as a flaw in their aware-ness and a step back in the history of mind, I find very likely to be a projection of my generational issues with the media onto theirs. The one aspect that requires the highest imagination is for any older generation to understand that the descendants know all that the elders know without having to go through the same experience. Instead, they grow up with the meta-reflection thereof. And it is precisely that, which they can be expected to emancipate themselves from. So when they present themselves under explicitly undesigned conditions, it is not so much to lure anyone – their addressees are their peers, who are expected to regard images alike, from a maker's perspective, to know about the techniques behind a convincingly authentic video clip, rendering the need for explicit deconstruction thereof redundant. What is left from our emancipatory project is but an aesthetic ideal of media-illiteracy and authenticity, itself enlisted for the opposition to an omnipresent fake-world-photoshop-culture with outrageous post-production capacities and perfect images everywhere. They can switch between the perception of the actor and the role and comprehend my mother's confusion. They understand the scepticism of my grandparents. And they most certainly know the sensation of uncertainty about being observed by whoever is on the other side of the webcam next to the screen, just like my great-grandparents.

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