

HANNA WESOŁOWSKA-STARZEC

ART AS A MEDIUM:  
STRÓŻEWSKI AND McLUHAN ON THE MESSAGE  
AND MEDIATING NATURE OF A WORK OF ART

**Abstract.** The aim of this article is to analytically compare two academic perspectives – the philosophical and the media-theoretical – specifically the aesthetics of Władysław Stróżewski and Marshall McLuhan's concept of art. Stróżewski emphasizes the mediating function of the artwork as a carrier of values and meanings, while McLuhan sees works of art as specific forms of communicative media. Do these thinkers, rooted in different academic traditions, define the concept of art as a medium in a similar way? How does art as a medium affect the individual and culture? The methodology employed in this article is a comparative analysis of available literary sources. Despite their differing sources of inspiration, both scholars regard the artwork as a medium not only of meanings, but also of values and cultural messages. They also highlight the communicative, interactive, and transcendent character of art. A comparison of both approaches reveals a complementarity between their seemingly distant conceptions of art as a bearer of meaning and a medium of culture.

**Keywords:** medium; carrier of meaning; message; culture, art; work of art; values; aesthetics; media studies

INTRODUCTION

For centuries, works of art have served as creative testimonies to human rationality, but also to emotionality, spirituality, and corporeality, inscribed within the fundamental structures of culture. Art, recognized as an inseparable element of culture, is also a form of communication, interpretation, creation, and transformation of reality. As a phenomenon difficult to define, it constitutes a source of inspiration for research not only in the discipline of philosophy but increasingly also in the field of media and communication studies. For

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the purposes of this analysis, one may adopt Clifford Geertz's definition of culture as a system for transmitting meanings, where art, like language or ritual, serves as a significant testimony and carrier, enabling not only the articulation of individual experiences but also their embedding in collective consciousness (Geertz, 1973). Two academic disciplines open up a valuable and profound perspective for research on art. Philosophy, as a discipline exploring the structure of being and meaning, and media and communication studies, as a reflection on the processes of meaning transmission, enter into a cognitive dialogue that allows for a deeper understanding of the role of art in contemporary media culture. There is no doubt that the combination of philosophical depth and communicative pragmatism enables a comprehensive view of art as an essential channel for cultural expression and meaning transmission. Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980) and Władysław Stróżewski (born 1933) are thinkers who lived at a similar time, they did not know each other, nevertheless their concepts turn out to be complementary (Stróżewski's first important publications appear in the 1970s, and McLuhan publishes his most important works in the 1960s), and their reflections on art form an intriguing field of inquiry. McLuhan, a Canadian professor of literature and communication theorist, is considered one of the most important media thinkers of the 20th century. Known for coining the terms *the medium is the message* and *global village*, he analyzed the influence of media on culture, perception, and society. In his media-theoretical perspective, McLuhan believed that art functions as a form of communication, a medium that not only conveys content but is itself a message (McLuhan, 1994). Stróżewski, on the other hand, is an outstanding Polish philosopher and a continuator of the phenomenological tradition. His philosophical work encompasses three main areas: metaphysics, axiology, and anthropology, in which he poses central questions of classical European philosophy and offers original responses. A significant part of his work is devoted to the history of philosophy and aesthetics, including treatises on the theory of the work of art, creativity, aesthetic experience, and its dimensions. From the perspective of phenomenological philosophy, art is interpreted not merely as a sensually accessible form, but as a bearer of meaning, a specific being, a medium that generates significance and value. The phenomenological approach enables the analysis of a work of art not as a physical object, but as an experience in which the essence of things is revealed to the viewer, influencing their perception, reasoning, and actions (Stróżewski, 2002). A comparison of these two perspectives, concerning the message of the artwork as a medium of culture, and the identification of common ground is the aim of the present analysis. This article also serves as an introduction (a framework) for future,

in-depth comparative studies of the concept of art as it appears in two distinct academic disciplines, one of the oldest, philosophy, and one of the youngest, media and communication studies.

### 1. ART – ETERNAL QUESTIONS

The linguistic category of fine arts and the first theory of art appeared only in the 18th century, when Charles Batteux wrote about the scope of art, distinguishing painting, sculpture, music, poetry and dance, but also architecture and speech. This thinker assigns art the role of reproducing reality (Batteux, 2015, p. 85), close to Platonic theory. However, over time, as Tatarkiewicz writes, the definition of art in the 18th and 19th centuries became increasingly insufficient, inadequate in the face of development, technological and social changes that accompanied subsequent eras. The concept of beauty, so characteristic of the ancient world or the Renaissance, became a somewhat redundant concept, and the definition of art began a long path of its complex varieties and interpretations. Disputes also began to concern film, photography, and posters, which revealed the need to change the perspective and analysis of the phenomenon of human creativity. The concepts of sublimity, knowing another being than real being, purification, experiencing horror, expression, purposelessness, pure form, and finally communication, including media, became, as it were, postulates of new art (often referring to the past), its new understanding, and an attempt at defining it (Tatarkiewicz, 1976). In the face of increasing complexities, the concept of art has come to be regarded as an open concept (Wittgenstein, 1958), which did not lend themselves to simple definition. The concepts of aesthetic value and beauty also found themselves in this group, and philosophical considerations on language and meaning had a significant influence on contemporary aesthetics and art theory. Nevertheless, after the aforementioned critique of Wittgenstein and anti-essentialist theories (Stolnitz, 1961, Beardsley, 1981) claiming the falsity of any theory of art, the rank of aesthetics began to grow thanks to philosophers such as Adorno (1984), Dewey (1934), Gadamer (1989), Danto (1981), Habermas (1987), Ingarden (1958; 1970), Stróżewski (1983) and others. Questions arise not so much about the definition of art, but about its value, meaning and significance, how to capture the values that are essential and constitutive for art, what characterizes the experience of these values, what is aesthetic experience, what can such an experience lead to, what is the role of the artist, the creator, is his work an independent entity that affects, influences the

recipient, is the work a message of values, or is it the artist who communicates them? In the area of social communication, these questions also gain importance, especially those concerning the message, values, reading the message and the role of art in the broadly understood culture. The results of the analysis are interesting, although it should be mentioned that aesthetics for a philosopher is one of the most interesting and extensive areas of interest, and for McLuhan, it is only a part of the media theory.

## 2. ART – A COGNITIVE MEDIUM, A CARRIER OF MEANING, A FORM OF COMMUNICATION

A medium is understood as a transmitter, a carrier, something that mediates the message between the sender and the recipient, between meaning and its expression (Eco, 1972). In McLuhan's understanding we find the statement that the medium is an extension of the human being. It is not only a technical tool (e.g. printing, television, the Internet), but also the way in which we define, communicate, perceive and create or change reality. It can be also art or architecture, which communicate and themselves become a message, shaping consciousness and culture. A medium is any form that extends the capacities of human action, for example, language as an extension of thought and speech, clothing as an extension of skin, art as an extension of sensitivity and cognition:

Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society (McLuhan, 1994, p. 125).

The media scholar emphasizes that it is not only the content of the message, but the form of the medium itself that deeply influences the way we shape our understanding of reality: “all media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 69). Art thus becomes a translation of culture, where the form of the medium affects us the most, deeply transforming our lives and way of being in the world. When considering the concept of art in Stróżewski's writings, we also encounter the notion of medium, although the philosopher more often uses the term of carrier. For Stróżewski, art is a carrier of meaning, a certain form that carries meaning, a tool of expression, and also a space between the creator and the recipient. In other words, art is

a specific medium, a corporeal form of an idea that transmits meaning and sense, and at the same time builds this meaning and relationship with the recipient (Stróżewski, 2002). His phenomenological concept of art definitely fits into the understanding of art as a transmitter of meanings and a form of communication – that is, what McLuhan refers to as a medium. Stróżewski, referring to the Platonic and also Aristotelian tradition of thinking about art, perceives it as an entity, a reality capable of transcending its material form by offering the recipient a metaphysical and axiological dimension (Stróżewski, 2002). Thus, a work of art not only represents certain content, but also constitutes and makes it available in a direct, although not always literal, way. It is the form that becomes the source of meaning that exceeds and transcends the materiality of the object. It means that a work of art not only represents reality but also participates in the creation of meaning. A work of art is an entity that indicates its metaphysical message (Stróżewski, 2002). McLuhan emphasized that it is not the content of the message that is most important, but the form in which the message is transmitted and its new meaning. The medium, becoming a message, a separate entity, determines the way people think, feel and organize reality – it gives meaning. For Stróżewski, art also becomes a message that begins to act independently in relation to the recipient, influencing their understanding and functioning. For both thinkers, the work of art begins to live, as it were, through form, but also in the recipient's experience. The foundation of Stróżewski's aesthetics is the encounter with art, during which the actual work of art emerges, as well as the creative artist and the appropriately sensitive recipient of the artwork become manifest (Stróżewski, 2000). For the philosopher, a work of art is an intentional object that originates in the intentional acts of the artist, having its existential foundation in an appropriately selected physical material. Such a work is never fully defined, but can be subjected to an attempt at further definition only in acts of so-called aesthetic concretization during aesthetic experience, i.e. in the recipient (Ingarden, 1958). A literary work or a painting as an aesthetic object and as a work of art is constituted in the acts of consciousness of individual people. The beginning of the aesthetic experience is an initial emotion similar to the feeling of being moved that arises upon seeing an object. This emotion appears thanks to the value contained in a given work, e.g. a painting, which only in the act of this first emotion appears to the recipient as a new, aesthetic object, torn out of the surrounding reality. This new object becomes an aesthetic concretization of a work, completed by the recipient's acts of consciousness (Stróżewski, 2000). Analyses and theories of the experience of a work of art are at the center of interest of the discipline of aesthetics, not media sciences,

but a similar understanding of the experience of art, which exceeds the boundaries of form, is visible and interesting. Nevertheless, in both cases, art becomes cognitively valuable, forces reflection on what is important, social, cultural. Stróżewski explains his concept by means of an analysis of a work of art and its three dimensions. He does not talk about the constitutive features of each work of art, but about its three dimensions. The proposed dimensions are: ontological, semiological and axiological. The ontological aspect indicates both the issues of the genesis of the work and its structure, its form. Semiology concerns the nature of the work of art understood as the subject of meaning, which means what the artwork conveys and the fact that it is itself a message, information to be read. The axiological aspect indicates that the work of art should be the subject of value. Following Ingarden, Stróżewski calls them artistic and aesthetic values. The first are those that depend on the direct result of the artist's action or, in other words, these are values that belong to the work understood as a specific intentional object, derived from the artist's creative acts, having its existential foundation (Stróżewski, 2002). Thanks to them, art can function as an autonomous field of broadly understood culture, in which there is evaluation, criticism and acceptance, or lack thereof, in the environment related to art. On the other hand, aesthetic values require active cooperation of the recipient with the work for their appearance. They arise in the aesthetic concretization of the artwork, which is co-constructed by the viewer as the subject of the aesthetic experience. Both types of values are closely related to each other. The former are the foundation for the appearance and reading of the latter. Interestingly, Stróżewski distinguishes another category of values- supra-aesthetic values, which may, but do not have to, be given through the aesthetic object. He lists several of them: the values of existence, truth, moral, and at the top of them he places the value of the sacrum. In his considerations, Stróżewski emphasizes the acceptance of axiological objectivity, where the value of a work cannot be reduced to the projection of the recipient's experiences, but it should be recognized that they are a property of the work, which provokes a response from the recipient. Can we see this approach reflected in McLuhan's reflections, for whom the medium is the message itself, independent of the creator and influencing the recipient? Let's go further. Stróżewski's theory can be simplified somewhat: understanding the content, message, symbols and signs, as well as artistic, aesthetic values (of a painting, a piece of music, a poem, a sculpture, a film, a poster, a spectacle) affect a person in such a way that they enable the recipient to enter into a creative dialogue with the work of art. These three conditions or aspects, which the philosopher writes about, lead to participation in the metaphysics of the work,

its value and message, which transcend the artwork. The metaphysical nature of art means that the artwork – its creation and its form – becomes a medium of transcendence, an exhibition of the world, as Heidegger might say, the work simply establishes the world (Heidegger, 1992). Art as a medium operates on a psychophysical level, deeply influencing our bodies and emotions, often beyond consciousness. When experiencing art (music, painting, architecture, literature, theatre, etc.), people also use a number of senses, such as sight, hearing, touch, and even smell, which determine the perception and reception of a given work. McLuhan's famous statement that media are an extension of human senses gains light in this perspective. Art, as understood by the philosopher and media scholar, affects the expansion of our abilities, exceeds them. According to McLuhan, media, including art, influence and transform our senses, simultaneously changing the balance between them. Art somehow restores a certain type of sensory balance, where the senses function more holistically. A similar process occurs in the experience of the artwork as described by Strózewski, where an aesthetic concretization takes place. Thus, the message – the communicative act – becomes crucial, as it is capable of influencing the emotions, actions, thinking, and understanding of its audience. For example, the communicativeness of architecture, which was discussed by Jencks, among others, influences human behavior, even forcing people to certain behaviors, not always consciously (Jencks, 1987). McLuhan, although he does not use the concept of transcendence in a philosophical sense, also attributes to art the function of revealing hidden structures and transcending existing forms of perception. The artist has the ability to see what society does not yet recognize, to predict technological and social changes, to reveal tensions hidden in the media and culture (McLuhan, 1994).

### 3. ART AS A MEDIUM, CULTURAL RADAR, SPACE OF MEANING AND VALUES

The medium becomes a culture-forming factor, it shapes and interprets the conditions under which content is received and understood:

A work of art has no existence or function apart from its effects on human observers. And art, like games or popular arts, and like media of communication, has the power to impose its own assumptions by setting the human community into new relationships and postures. Art, like games, is a translator of experience. What we have already felt or seen in one situation we are kind of suddenly given in a new of material. Games, likewise, shift familiar experience into new forms, giving the bleak and the bleak side of things (McLuhan, 1994, p. 267).

In this sense, art as one of the forms of communication is a medium par excellence: it transforms perception, teaches new ways of seeing, builds emotional and cognitive relationships with reality, and also initiates cultural changes. McLuhan also wrote many times about artists as radars of society, that is, people who sense and reveal cultural changes caused by technologies, including new media. McLuhan does not treat art as an aesthetic field, but as a cognitive tool that allows us to understand the changing communication environment. Art is an environmental radar that performs the function of subliminally adapting us to the technological environment in which we must function: "The artist picks up the message of cultural and technological challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs. He, then, builds models or Noah's arks for facing the change that is at hand" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 77). The artist responds to changes in communication, creates forms that give meaning to cultural phenomena in advance, and these act as a medium of meaning. In this approach, art – a medium is a form that carries meaning, can carry other media and forms of meaning. McLuhan also indicates that art is a way of expressing complex reality, which acts as a filter, creating new meanings before they are realized by society. In the media expert's considerations, it is very clear that art does not reproduce culture, but transforms and analyzes it. Art reflects man, his environment, and also predicts and mediates in man's self-knowledge. Thus, art transforms social relations, creates new frames of meaning and gives new meaning to reality, and also becomes a space for interpretation, not only expression. It is clear how McLuhan's considerations differ from the original definitions of art proposed by Tatarkiewicz, which Stróżewski verified, pointing out their insufficiency, and at the same time opening up reflections on theories of co-creation of the message, meaning by the artist and the recipient of the work. For McLuhan, art/medium shapes the way we understand, experience and give meaning to the world. His position is clear: art is a medium that expands the senses, perception and creates an environment of meanings that carry meaning, reveal structures and changes in communication. And the artist himself is a mediator who predicts changes, interprets them and gives them to the recipients. The medium not only transmits content, but also creates new ways of experiencing reality. Artists are ahead of society, they recognize the changes caused by technology, they reveal invisible forces, they discover hidden cultural content. In this sense, art is a tool for creating new cultural and cognitive meanings. Here we can notice the axiological function: art allows us to see what is important and valuable (the analysis of the ethical dimension of McLuhan's theory was undertaken by some researchers, including Peter Zhang (2012) and Thomas Cooper (2002)).



McLuhan draws attention to the preventive function of art against the effects of media and technology, which can be read as a practical dimension of axiology in his considerations. The media scholar understands art not as an aesthetic decoration of the world, but as a cultural radar, as a means of consciously understanding the impact of media and technology on culture: "Today we have begun to sense that art may be able to provide such immunity. The artist can correct the sense ratios before the blow of new technology has numbed conscious procedures. He can correct them before numbness and subliminal groping and reaction begin." (McLuhan, 1994, pp. 77-78) In McLuhan's theory, art is a medium that actually neutralizes the effects of other media. Thanks to this function, art not only reflects culture, but also participates in its creation and transformation – constituting one of the key mechanisms of recognizing and interpreting reality. In the aesthetics of Władysław Stróżewski, art is also not only a manifestation of human creativity, but above all the creation of meaning, which is deeply rooted in the structure of culture. Art, having a mediating character, mediates between being and consciousness, between the experience of the recipient and the universal idea, meaning, which lead to what exceeds what is directly given: to values, ideas, the spiritual and mental dimension of human existence. Stróżewski, moving within the realm of phenomenological philosophy and axiology, presents art as a space in which the structure of values is revealed. Through a work of art, a person communicates with what is important to them – beauty, goodness, truth – and passes it on further. In this sense, art becomes the language of culture, not only expressing values, but also shaping, defining, and commemorating them. Art is not only an aesthetic phenomenon, it is a way of participating in culture as a space of meaning. The act of creation combines the spiritual dimension of culture with its material forms. The artist not only presents reality, but constructs it: symbolically and axiologically. The work of art thus becomes the place where culture manifests its meaning, spirituality, and identity. The philosopher is interested in what art is in essence, what values it operates with and how it reveals being. Art is a form of presence of meaning, value and beauty – a medium that participates in spiritual reality. This concept of art as the existence of meaning is not so far from McLuhan's idea of art as a medium and radar. The media scholar focuses on analyzing the consequences of technological development for society and the role of art in defining and exposing them. McLuhan was convinced that the role and significance of art, as well as artists, can be defined and appreciated when we look at the role it plays in the historical transformation of societies and cultures. According to McLuhan, society has no direct influence

on the form that communication or art takes, but is itself shaped by their mutual relations (Kukielko-Rogozińska, 2014). Paraphrasing McLuhan, art is a graphic translation of culture, and the human world is shaped by the dominant methods of communication at a given time (McLuhan, 1994). These modes of communication (media, including art) do not influence culture directly and overtly, but do so by transforming the psychological structure of individuals. McLuhan saw works of art as tools that expand human senses, capable of modeling perception and social relations. In his view, art is not only an effect of culture, but its active factor, changing the way people think, feel and communicate with the world. The media expert looked at art through the prism of communication technologies, examining not so much what a work says, but how (through what medium) it says it and how it affects the perception of the recipient and society. For him, art is an anticipator of media changes, a medium transforming consciousness.

## CONCLUSIONS

Stróżewski (in the field of phenomenology and metaphysics) and McLuhan (within the field of media studies) are rooted in different disciplines that, at first glance, approach the concept of art in divergent ways. Stróżewski describes what art is (ontologically), and McLuhan describes what art does (functionally, culturally), nevertheless the theories and reflections of both thinkers analyzed in parallel constitute an extremely interesting, in-depth area of analysis of the role of art today, in a world of changes and the increasing pace of development of new media. Their reflections on art as a means of conveying meaning and a specific form of presence in the world lead to several points of convergence, and above all, they share a common idea: art is more than just an aesthetic object; it is a mediator of meaning in culture, creating and defining it. Stróżewski perceives culture as a spiritual and axiological space. Art is its indispensable component, because it stores and transmits absolute values (beauty, goodness, truth), and also provides access to the dimension of transcendence. McLuhan defines culture through the modes of communication and changes brought about by new media. Art is a medium of culture because it predicts and reveals the impact of technology on social cognitive and sensory structures. However, he does not focus on axiology in the classical sense, but rather on perception, transformations of consciousness. The writings of the Canadian scholar, despite the passage of time, are current and deeply permeated with concern for culture,

man and society. McLuhan was a cultural diagnostician who saw in the media not only tools, but also forces shaping the human condition and spirituality. He wrote prophetically not only about what was happening, but what it resulted from for culture and interpersonal relations. He expressed himself like a philosopher, which is clearly visible in his writings, full of references to philosophers, experts in literature and culture. This philosophical approach, visible in McLuhan's writings, adds depth to media theories, leads to a holistic understanding of communication, which can be understood not only as a transfer of content, but also as a cultural, ethical, and even spiritual act. Thanks to philosophical analyses (especially phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ontology), it is possible to deepen reflection on the concept of medium, which allows us to go beyond the technical understanding of this concept as a tool. Thanks to such analysis, art can be considered as a meaning-creating entity (Stróżewski, 1983), as an extension of existence (McLuhan, 1962), as a form of presence (Gadamer, 1989). We thus gain an image of art as a phenomenon that not only represents, but also acts, communicates, and changes the social and cultural reality of an individual. Philosophical axiology and aesthetics help to analyze what the media transmit in addition to information – e.g. what axiology they promote, what values they support. Art as a message in the media space can be analyzed both as a visual message and an ethical statement. Art is not only a representation or an aesthetic product, but a communication process in which the creator, medium, context and recipient participate, embedded in a given time and space. By combining philosophical reflection and analysis of media and communication channels, we are also able to understand new forms of expression, e.g. interactivity, augmented reality, immersion or art in social networks (Wilkożewska, 2007; Zawojski, 2010). In this sense, art as a cultural medium transmits what is important, perpetuates and enables society to interpret and experience universal values. Despite different sources of inspiration, both scholars treat the work of art as a carrier, a medium, not only of meanings, but also of values and cultural messages. They also point to the communicative, interactive, and transcendent nature of art. The above outline of both positions indicates the complementarity of the seemingly distant concepts of understanding art as a carrier of meaning, a medium of culture, worthy of development and broader analysis. The area for research and analysis will primarily be the comparison of the media studies voice on art. In the longer term, it is also worth attempting to develop a common language for describing aesthetic phenomena at the interface of philosophy, communication theory, and media studies (for many other media researchers, also philosophers (e.g. Ong (1982), Flusser (2000), Baudrillard (1994), Manovich

(2002), Mirzoeff (1999), Wilkoszewska (2007), Zawojski (2010; 2016), Zeidler-Janiszewska (2020)), art, its mediation, and communicativeness were areas of research interest). Such integration of approaches can contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of art in the processes of cultural transmission and symbolic shaping of reality.

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#### SZTUKA JAKO MEDIUM: STRÓŻEWSKI I McLUHAN O PRZEKAZIE I MEDIACYJNYM CHARAKTERZE DZIEŁA

##### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest badawcze zestawienie dwóch naukowych perspektyw – filozoficznej i mediodoznawczej – estetyki Władysława Stróżewskiego oraz koncepcji sztuki Marshalla McLuhana. Stróżewski zakłada mediacyjną funkcję dzieła jako nośnika wartości i sensów. McLuhan traktuje dzieła sztuki jako swoiste media komunikacyjne. Czy myśliciele, zakorzenieni w odmiennych obszarach nauki, definiują pojęcie sztuki jako medium w sposób podobny? W jaki sposób sztuka jako medium wpływa na człowieka i kulturę? Metodologia zastosowana w artykule to analiza porównawcza dostępnych źródeł literaturowych. Mimo odmiennych źródeł inspiracji, obydwaj naukowcy traktują dzieło sztuki jako nośnik, medium, nie tylko znaczeń, lecz także wartości i komunikatów kulturowych. Wskazują również na komunikacyjny, interakcyjny i transcendentny charakter sztuki. Porównanie obydwu stanowisk wskazuje na komplementarność, na pozór odległych, koncepcji rozumienia sztuki jako nośnika sensu, medium kultury.

**Słowa kluczowe:** medium; nośnik sensu; komunikat; kultura; sztuka; dzieło sztuki; wartości; estetyka; mediodoznawstwo