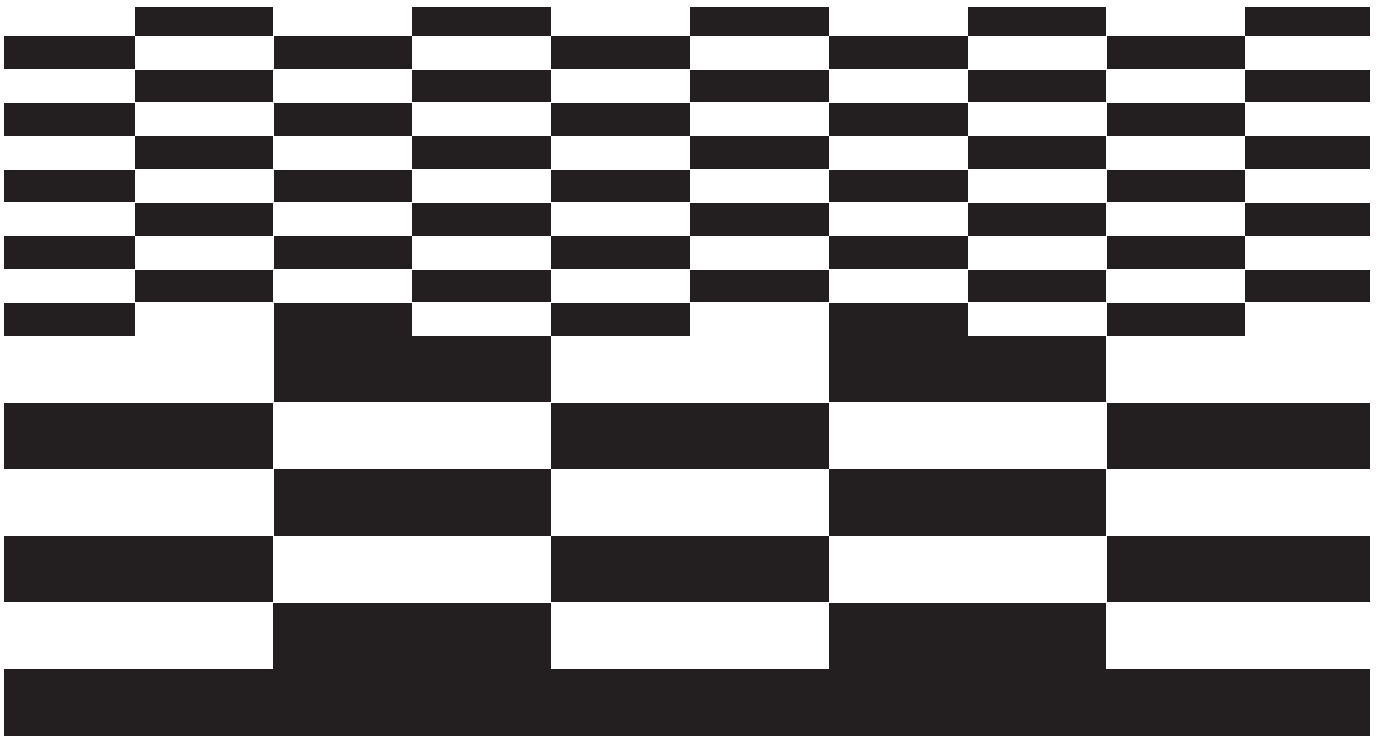


Are you Ready for TV?



ARE YOU READY FOR TV?



MACBA, 2010–2011.
Photography: Gunnar Knechtel

This digital publication gathers various essays to complement the project *Are you Ready for TV?* organised by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and coproduced with the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea (CGAC).

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Television Atmosphere

Chus Martínez

The project *Are you Ready for TV?* constitutes an unusual analysis of the relationship between the television medium, on the one hand, and art and thought, on the other. The exhibition is structured around ten sections in which it is possible to view, on a large television set created especially for the occasion (Gran TV), programmes broadcast mostly from the 1960s to the present. The exhibition also includes fourteen episodes of a television miniseries, inspired by *The Names of Christ* by Fray Luis de León (1572-1585), parts of which were filmed in MACBA by the filmmaker Albert Serra, as well as a radio programme produced by the North American poet Kenneth Goldsmith that deals with the interest several artists have taken in television audio. An exhibition guide provides details on the project as a whole.

A digital publication featuring ten essays by artists and historians provides further reflection; each essay is connected to a particular element of the overall scope of the project, and responds to a specific question. A website (twm.macba.cat) provides a day-by-day account of the project as well as some subtitled versions of the programme, interviews and other information on related activities. With all of this, we have attempted to create a different dimension for the television medium, that is, to distance ourselves from television as we know it. This distance

generates awareness of the conventions of the medium, of its specific space and time as keys to understanding the form adopted by its programmes and the role of the image on the screen. The exhibition focuses on the strategies used by artists and thinkers to go beyond the medium and the forms of control that characterise it. Often, these tactics are more efficacious than a blanket criticism of television that fails to recognise its nuances.

Television emulates commonsense; it naturalises everything it shows so that reality becomes meaningful. It also establishes a coherent connection with the 'outside world' through simple ways of telling what is happening. Television is an orderly medium, an institution always aware of formulas and the correct organization of ideas, images and their repetition. The success of a broadcast does not lie in its technique, but in its eloquence, which is what allows the viewers to reproduce part of the message and to share with others what they have seen. The power of television is tied to its ability to generate confusion between description and prescription, and that is why it is so influential when it comes to interpreting the world. Television does not describe realities, but rather prescribes them: it tacitly shows us what we should be. We know that objective description is unsustainable, and we know that writers, painters and filmmakers strive to capture reality, moral judgment and emotion.

Television's power lies in the constant extension of description and the ability to turn it into desire: the world exactly as it is, exactly as it could be, exactly as it should be, exactly as we would like it to be. Television is inevitably normative. This is the human factor, the political factor, the social factor and, as this exhibition evidences, it can also be the creative factor.

The television medium attempts to produce meaning. And that is why art and philosophy take such interest in television. Seemingly transparent, it is skilled at bringing distant reality to the viewer. It is, today, a perfect example in analysing not only narrative forms, but also politics based on the relationship between representation, image and transparency.

The mechanisms of public opinion in the West and the democratic parliamentary system have placed blind faith in making visible the processes by which a decision is made. The importance of the concept of 'process' in art is directly related to the functioning of the parliamentary system.

Television is historically linked to the creation of public opinion; hence the interest in its ability to 'distort' the system, a central theme in this project. Television, like the museum, is an institution and, like the white cube, a convention, a medium. Both have a direct relationship with what has come to be called 'cultural production.' *Are you Ready for TV?* questions that terminology: the function of the museum is not to produce culture or knowledge – assuming that these terms could be considered synonymous –, but rather to bind arguments in a discourse.

The museum is a medium, a space to establish relationships between systems that affect both meaning and ideas. The museum and television share the ability to synchronise thought and experience: both can be perverse, and that explains the extremely important function of artists and thinkers when it comes to inventing other logics, transforming processes and placing us in a public space in the making that paradoxically entails both transparency and opacity. This semi-transparency helps to create private spaces within public space. The success of the debate depends on an efficacious combination of what

we see and what we don't see. No one negotiates a truce in the public eye.

Art in television strives to elude the notion of commonsense that characterizes the medium. Artists can mimic the language of television perfectly; they learn to be television in order to then tell a different story. While pretending to be television is a perfect strategy to undermine the medium, it can also give rise to new resources. For instance, the absurd, which is born from the disjuncture between what one expects to see and hear and what actually happens, forces us to pay attention.

This exhibition is conceived to create dark areas, productive absurdities in which artists and thinkers demonstrate that it is possible to conceive of other systems for relating to the medium, other readings that remove us from the commonplace and go beyond worn-out forms of telling us who we are and where we are, and what our future holds.

The notion of unlearning what has been learned is one of the premises of this project. That affirmation is by no means an appeal to the virtues of ignorance or the choreographic skills of populism. It is born, rather, of the need to go beyond the limits of institutional criticism, whether the institution in question is television or the museum.

It is easy and opportunistic to attack the vulnerable. It is perhaps more urgent, however, to attempt to see how we can distance ourselves from the 'spirit of our times' in order to create another time and space at the core of those times. In the question-and-answer period at the end of a class given in Traunsee, Austria in the summer of 2010 on the topic 'Was ist Quantum Zeit?' (What is quantum time?), Hans Magnus Enzensberger – author of one of the texts in this digital publication – said: "The

problem of the always pertinent German concept of *Zeitgeist* is that it entails the worst sort of trap: *weder Zeit noch Geist*. That is, it neither names any particular time nor is it, in itself, spirit.' With that statement, Enzensberger attempted to evidence the 'aberration' of being perfectly in keeping with 'our' time.

Aberration? The only way we can catch a glimpse of the possibility of the future is by means of the asynchronous, that which we have yet to name or, more importantly, judge or develop an opinion about. It is in this space of strange freedom that the possible surfaces. The transmissions shown in *Are You Ready for TV?* strive to produce that strangeness. The aim is to create an ungraspable space, one difficult to categorize and immune to cynicism, a space that goes beyond prejudice.

The exhibition follows the logic of television programming: one show follows another, and each of the ten sections can be understood as a segment, a fraction of a whole. And, just as it is impossible to see everything aired on a television channel, the viewers of this exhibition would have to spend many more hours than is normally required to visit a museum if they were to see all the material presented. By no means negative, this is a defining trait of television, one that cannot be ignored. Nonetheless, the selection for each of the sections attempts to offer a plausible visit by means of a large TV (Gran TV), which features programming that lasts no more than one and a half hours.

In attempting to present television, there is no museological strategy or convention to look to. Almost all the programmes we are showing have actually been aired. We could have created a correspondence between units and paired a programme with a monitor. Many artists have made work for the television format with the intention of exhibiting it on a single monitor, as an

individual piece. That reflects the need to clearly separate the work from the medium, to visualise its autonomy. But, in the truth of television, no one chooses different monitors to see different programmes. Art and non-art are literally ‘spliced together’ in the broadcast system. Television programmes, that is, it arranges its contents in segments that reflect the logic of working hours, the presence of certain viewers and not others. Programming is a difficult task, not only since the appearance of the remote control, as Johan Grimonprez describes in this publication, but also since it has been possible to watch television contents on a computer screen. That turns all of us into programmers, that is, the ones who decide the order of the programmes we want to see and when we want to see them, regardless of the broadcast, one of the main sources of meaning in television and a principle which, like the 4/3 system, has been left behind.

The digital publication presents a non-categorical vision of the television medium. The result is a kaleidoscopic image composed of different ways of studying, addressing and opposing television. Television does not exist. According to the Romantic writer Heinrich von Kleist: ‘No one knows the future of thought; our task’ – and this is what is truly political today – ‘is to prepare a space so that that future can take place, to strive to foresee that which does not yet have a name and is still to come.’

BIOGRAPHY

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Absolute Emptiness. The Null-Medium, or Why all Complaints about Television are Irrelevant

Hans Magnus Enzensberger

Television drains your brain: virtually every accepted media theory boils down to this unadorned thesis, regardless of whether it comes fine-spun or coarsely knit. Nine times out of ten, the findings are brought forward with a sorrowful undertone. Four principal theories are distinguishable.

The manipulation thesis aims at the ideological dimension ascribed to the media. Springing from days of old, when it looks at the media it primarily sees instruments of political dominance. Originally with deep roots in the traditions of the left, but also adopted with relish by the right when necessary, it zeroes in entirely on the contents that allegedly define the agenda of big media.

Notions of propaganda and agitation, as handed down from the past, form the foundation of its critique. The medium is understood as an indifferent vessel that pours opinions into an audience deemed passive. Depending on the standpoint of the critic, these opinions are viewed as wrong; to be sure, they spawn an inevitably false consciousness according to a suchlike model of force.

Sophisticated methods employed by the critique of ideology expand this 'razzle-dazzle relation' by equipping the enemy with ever more subtle and insidious intentions. Enigmatic temptation takes the place of direct agitation; the unsuspecting consumer is coaxed by the mastermind before he knows what hit him.

In contrast, the mimicry thesis argues moralistically. In its eyes media consumption carries primarily ethical dangers. He who exposes himself to it becomes accustomed to libertinage, irresponsibility, crime and violence. The subjective results are stupefied, callous and pigheaded individuals; the objective results, the loss of social virtues and the decay of morals across the board.

This form of media critique feeds, as is visible at first glance, on bourgeois resources. Its recurrent motifs can already be documented during the eighteenth century, in the futile warnings, sounded by early cultural criticism, of the dangers posed by reading novels.

A more recent thesis is one of simulation, which is inspired with a cognitive-theoretical suspicion. It is more modern insofar as it shows an interest in the technical evolution of the media, thus also taking the existence of television seriously, which is more than one can say for its predecessors. According to the simulation thesis, the viewer's faculty for distinguishing between reality and fiction is disabled by the medium. The primary reality is therefore blurred or replaced by a second, delusional one.

An advanced version of this thesis, which occasionally even emerges as affirmative, reverses this relation and claims that the differentiation between reality and simulation has, under existing societal circumstances, become meaningless.

All aforementioned theses converge in the fourth, the brain-drain thesis, which condenses into an anthropological proposition.

The media, if one follows this proposition, attacks not only the capacity for critique and differentiation, not only the moral and political substance of its users, but also their capacity for perception; yes, even their mental and spiritual identity. Hence the media produces, if one allows them, a new human being whom one could imagine, at whim, as a zombie or mutant.

All of these theories are merely skin and bones. Evidence is unnecessary as far as their creators are concerned. Not a moment's sleep is lost over criteria as minimal as plausibility. Hence nobody, to name just one example, has succeeded in exhibiting, outside of the psychiatric clinic, just one 'television subscriber' who has been disabled in his capacity to differentiate between a marital quarrel in the current series, on the one side, and his breakfast table on the other. This seems not to bother any of the advocates of the simulation theory.

Just as curious, but perhaps more momentous, is another common trait among the theories in question. In them the media user appears, fundamentally, as a defenceless victim, and the programmer, on the other hand, as a cunning perpetrator. The opposition is held on to with sincere sternness and formidable thoroughness: manipulators and manipulated, doer and imitator, simulator and simulated, brain-drainer and brain-drained all stand face to face in beautiful symmetry. It is imperative here that the question be left open: on which side could the respective theorist himself be located? If he makes absolutely no use of the media, then he has no idea what he is talking about. Alternatively, he exposes himself to it, then the question arises, by what miracle did he manage to escape its force? For, as antithesis to all others, morally he remains fully intact; he can sovereignly differentiate between smoke and mirrors, on the one hand, and

reality on the other. He enjoys complete immunity to the idiocy that he despairingly detects in all of *them*. Or might his theories – a fatal way out of the dilemma – be, in their own right, symptoms of a universal brain-draining?

Be that as it may, no one can say that they were ineffectual. Admittedly, their influence on what gets broadcast is held in check, which, depending on one's mood, can be deemed grim or thankfully made note of, though hardly controverted; whereas the makers of so-called media policy have decided to lend an ear. And this comes as no surprise, because every career politician possesses a set of basic psychic tools of the trade; and his conviction that he is dealing, 'outside in the land', with millions of idiots is part and parcel to those tools.

The converse impression is consolidated when one follows how the veterans of the field wrestle with each other and with media functionaries for every minute when it comes to their limousines, their historic appearance before honorary company, their coiffure behind the flower vase and, above all, the showing off of their organ of speech.

What a stirring zealotry in the racking up of broadcast minutes, camera angles, degrees of devotion on the part of the reporter, the sound level of the booming cheers! They have really taken a shine to the good old manipulation thesis. That explains the tenacious discord among the 'boards', the never-slackening patronage of the ministries, and the burning desire to secure control over the entire operation once and for all.

The industry shares neither this passionate desire nor any of those arid theories. Its deliberations are those of ascetic sobriety. On the one hand they revolve around frequencies, channels, codes, cables, signal lobes, parabolic antennas; on the other,

around investments, holdings, distribution coefficients, costs, estimates, advertisement revenue. From this perspective, it appears that the truly new feature of the new media is the fact that none of its programmers has ever wasted a single moment's thought on any sort of content.

Each economic, technical, legal and administrative aspect of its procedure gets analysed exhaustively and is bitterly competitive. Only one factor fails to play a role in the thoughts and wishes of the industry: the programme. It is debatable who pays and who cashes in, when, where, how, from whom, but never ever what gets broadcast. Such a mindset would never have been thinkable with any earlier medium.

It may seem peculiar, even foolhardy, the millions in expenditures dedicated to shooting satellites into outer space and blanketing all of Middle Europe with a cable network; an unprecedented proliferation of 'means of communication' is taking place, without so much as an inkling as to what should actually be conveyed.

The solution to the riddle is, however, obvious. The industry itself is in accord with the crucial societal figure inside of their game: the 'television subscriber'. He, without any degree of willlessness, energetically pilots a condition that one could define as programme-lessness. In order to come closer to this goal, he virtuosically utilises all available buttons on his remote control.

There is no medicine in existence against this cosy alliance between customer and provider. The embittered minority of critics has difficulty explaining such an immense accord because it contradicts their self-image.

How would it be if the majority had their reasons, reasons that might not be so readily traceable to the stupidity that is ascribed

them. How would it be if programmes indeed were dispensable and if the concept of the medium itself proved inept, a mere mystification? Perhaps it is well worth pursuing such hunches for a moment. The concept of the medium is old; what is meant here, for starters, is simply something medial, mediating; a medium in the sense of an instrument; in Greek grammar, a distinct kind of utterance that lends itself to emphasising ‘the interest of an active subject, or his being impacted through an action’; additionally, ‘in the spiritistic world view, someone who mediates communication with the spirit world’ (!); finally, in a physical sense, a carrier, such as air, in which waves of light and sound can travel; accordingly applied to societal communication, that communication’s technical medium, the letterpress for example.

The concept of the programme also orients itself toward the written word. Indeed, this word originally indicated nothing other than a stipulation, that which is *de rigueur*, prewritten; ‘actual public written proclamation, public notice; now (1985) especially a letter of announcement or invitation issued by universities and other institutions of higher education. In public life, it means the agenda of a party, of a periodical, of an association formed for a particular purpose, also of a government, if the guidelines of the intended actions are announced in advance in more or less binding form.’

What the leading television programmers announce in advance, however, sounds like this: ‘Hoedown. Mini-ZIB. Hei Elei, Kuck Elei. You Again (8). Evening Dreams of the Moorlands. Almerish Singalong. World Cup Men’s Super-G. Helmi. X-Large. Golden Number One. Bonbons at Bedtime. Until the Trap is Sprung. Simply Animals. Let’s Make a Bet. Long Live Love. Mimi Never Says Beddy-Bye Without Her Murder Mystery. Just

Another Pretty Face. Tintifax and Max. I Want You to Love Me. Whateverrrrrr. Hulk (31). Musy and Metty. Today With Us. Hard as in Diamond. Am, Dam, Des. Barapapa. Texas Jack (12). Watch and Win. Super Flip. She – He – It. Love International. Hard with Heart. 1-2-X. Bigger Bids.’*

No further comments are necessary, in all likelihood, to show that these kinds of phenomena are no longer to be grasped by anachronistic terms like ‘medium’ or ‘programme’. The new in new media lies in the fact that they have ceased to be reliant on the programme. They can only measure up to their true purpose by approaching the status of the null-medium.

Even the old media, as some retrospection shows, were no strangers to this tendency. The letterpress too didn’t spare any attempts at shedding ever-increasingly burdensome contents. The first pioneering achievements on this hard road came to fruition in the trashy novel. Other milestones have been set by the popular press, supermarket checkout literature and magazines. A triumphant record, which to this day has remained unbroken within the printing industry, is held, with the near transcendence of illiteracy’s wildest dreams, by Germany’s *Bild-Zeitung*.

For all that, the most significant advances have been brought about by electronic media. As it turned out, insurmountable obstacles stood in the way of attempts at creating a printed null-medium. Those who wish to free the written word from

* In the original German text the examples are the following: ‘Budenzauber. Mini-ZiB. Ei elei, Kuck elei. Du schon wieder. Wenn abends die Heide träumt. Almerisch g’sunga und g’schpuit. Weltcup-Super G der Herren. Helmi. X-Large. Die Goldene Eins. Betthupferl. Bis die Falle zuschnappt. Einfach tierisch. Wetten, daß ...? Es lebe die Liebe. Ohne Krimi geht die Mimi nie ins Bett. Just another pretty face. Tintifax und Max. Ich will, daß du mich liebst. Also ääährlich. Hulk Musi mit Metty. Heute mit uns. Hart wie Diamant. Am, dam, des. Barapapa. Texas Jack, Schau hin und gewinn. Superflip. Sie - er - es. Liebe international. Hart aber herzlich. 1-2-X. Wer bietet mehr?’

any and all meaning must go to extremes. The heroic proposals of the avant-garde (Dada, Lettrism, visual poetry) fell on dead ears within the industry. This is due, presumably, to the self-contradictory nature of a null-reading. The reader, every reader, has the fatal inclination for producing coherency, picking through even the most murky of alphabet soups in search of some semblance of sense. From a younger medium, such as radio, one could allowably expect even less, which means, in this context, more. At any rate, the emancipation from the written word established new perspectives. In practice it was shown, nonetheless, that radio broadcasts quite often involved the reciting of texts. Yet even there, where free speech was breaking ground in addresses and discussions, and, yes, even in sheer drivel, time and again the words activated something akin to meaning.

Producing absolute nonsense-sentences that go on and on, that are resistant to injection with any howsoever-natured meaning, is widely recognised as being really hard, requiring practice and concentration. It is language itself that here produces something like a minimal programme. In order to get rid of this interference factor, the up-and-comers, at work in broadcasting for quite some time now, have systematically reduced word-related broadcasts. A certain blather-remainder is, however, left over; at least the appellations of idols and other brand-name items have to be exclaimed, for economic reasons, at regular intervals.

Only the visual technologies, with television leading the way, are in any position to throw the ballast of language overboard and to take everything that was once called programme, meaning, 'content', and liquidate it. The evidence of the unfathomable possibilities of the null-medium is adduced by a simple experiment.

Put a six-month-old child in front of a video player. The infant is, for neurophysiological reasons, incapable of resolving and decoding the images, with the result that the question of whether they 'mean' anything cannot be asked in the first place.

Nevertheless, the colourful, flickering, luminous patches unfailingly and unceasingly elicit, with no regard whatsoever to what appears on the screen, an intimate, or as one may wish to say, a voluptuous interest. The perceptual apparatus of the child is wonderfully occupied. The effect is hypnotic. It is impossible to say what goes on inside; or perhaps not, because the television, reflected in the infant's eyes, lends those eyes an enraptured, absent-minded expression, to the extent that we are tempted to eulogise it happily.

It will cost the friend of humanity little effort to condemn such an experimental procedure as a barbaric outrage. Before he submits to this temptation, he should bear in mind not only that this experiment is an instalment in daily routines a million times over; he would be better off asking himself to what extent his condemnation simultaneously implicates a culture that he perhaps treasures. For, without the pioneering achievements of modern art, the null-medium would be unimaginable.

It is no accident that the coloured patches and configurations that our six-month-old test subject delights in are reminiscent of abstract painting. From Kandinsky to Action Painting, from Constructivism to the degradations of Op art and computer graphics, artists have done what they could to cleanse their works of 'meaning'. Insofar as they succeeded in this minimalisation, they can by all means be regarded as trailblazers of the null-medium. This role becomes immediately comprehensible in video art, where, in more advanced productions, it is practically impossible to discern anything.

The originators and apologists of these arts are, of course, far from seeing themselves as the ones who lay the groundwork for the industry. In order to assert their status and presumably also their prices, they have developed their own 'philosophy', which is backed up more by shamanistic conspiracies than by arguments, and which they themselves presumably believe in. This delayed avant-garde wrongly imagines itself as an obstinate minority, disavowing that they, in the shape of the null-medium, have long ago conquered a mass audience. Admittedly, any movement towards absoluteness, towards perfection, is always a tedious, drawn-out process. That goes for television too. As an added impediment, the null-medium has to stand up to small yet influential minorities who are anxious to defend either historical leftovers or happy hopes for the future.

On the one side, those with partisan interests, as well as media functionaries, hold on tenaciously to the belief that television can be roped into stabilising their power positions; on the other side, there is no shortage of pedagogues and critical theorists who can still sniff out productive forces in electronic media, the unleashing of which is valid only in order to set unforeseen learning processes in motion (a cheery message, composed of various pickings collected from old sets of media construction sets).

In the course of time, a most peculiar coalition of adversarial brothers has formed around such ideas, and they have only one thing in common: one could call it the programme-illusion. In the Federal Republic of Germany this illusion even has legal force; it is anchored in treaties, agreements, broadcasting laws, statutes and guidelines and is, to all appearances absurd, caressed by all the people in charge.

Television programmes, as one here reads, ‘must be conveyed with a democratic spirit and a fidelity to the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany... with an awareness of cultural responsibility and a will to objectivity. They should work for freedom, justice and truth’, ‘enjoin to freedom and to social justice’, ‘conduce both the reunification of Germany in peace and freedom, and communication and understanding among the people.’

It would make anyone shake their head in disbelief. The producers of shows and shockers, clips and commercials, should deliver not only ‘education, information and entertainment’, but also ‘humaneness’ and ‘objectivity’, ‘diversity of information’, ‘comprehensive and unbiased news coverage’ and of course, time and again, a wide ‘range of culture’.

These phantasmagoric decrees issued by legislators are associated with the history of the founding of the broadcasting institutions. They were born at a time devoid of the faculty for anticipating what a fully developed null-medium is capable of. The ‘programme designers’, who adhere with as much powerlessness as stubbornness to the ‘binding mandate’ that they inherited from their fathers, cast us a melancholic glance. The permanent post is their doomed position from which they struggle for a television as pedagogical province, as moralistic establishment.

The programme-illusion has not only juridical and institutional bases to thank; it emanates directly from the phylogenesis of the media. Throughout its evolution one can apply the theorem that every new medium initially orients itself by an older one, before it discovers its own possibilities and to some extent comes into its own.

This heteronomy is also observable in television. Such being the case, the idea that it was designed to transport forms and

contents, ergo 'programmes', as yielded by earlier media, is difficult to exterminate. Technically this is by no means out of the question. Surely it is no impossible task to excavate a pit with a teaspoon or to transmit the bible by telex; only the teaspoon or the telex was not designed for such undertakings. The evolutionary eggshells that still stick to television are especially conspicuous on particular species that stand their ground in its broadcasting schedule like fossils. Hence the null-medium is haunted by alienated forms like the sermon, the opera, the chamber concert, the comedy of manners and the editorial, all of which have no business being there. There is also the conservation of types of radio, like the news bulletin, the discussion and the radio play, where the presence of the camera appears to be a superfluous luxury.

Many a television veteran who has not recognised the sign of the times suffers also from the notion that their subject matter might run out. The *idée fixe* that something rather than nothing should be broadcast misleads them into cannibalising the old media. This leads above all to the cannibalistic salvaging of a medium that one likes to regard as a relative of television, namely the film.

Naturally, it soon turned out that a mix-up was at hand. The aesthetic fascination of cinema is not repeatable on a television screen; it is destroyed by the laughable dimensions, the interruption by advertisements and the indifferent, ceaseless dubbing. The secret weapon of the viewer, the dreaded action of flipping, takes care of the rest.

Yes, what about the viewer? He knows exactly what he is up to. He is invulnerable to every programme-illusion. Faced with his praxis, the guidelines of legislators go up in smoke. Far from giving himself over to manipulation (upbringing,

getting informed, education, enlightenment, instruction), he manipulates the medium in order to achieve his wishes. He who does not submit to his wishes will be punished with a withdrawal of affection at the push of a button; he who fulfils them will be rewarded with magnificent ratings.

The viewer makes no bones about having in front of him not a means of communication, but a means of denial of communication, and he is not to be shaken in this belief. In his eyes, precisely the thing that he is accused of is what constitutes the charm of the null-medium.

This also explains a feature of television that would be puzzling according to every other premise: its transcultural reach. The very same series, the very same video clip, the very same show unfurls, independent of any and all societal conditions, the same power of attraction in Lüdenscheid, Hong Kong and Mogadishu. No content can be as independent of every context, as irresistible, as universal. The null position represents not the weakness of television, but rather its strength. It constitutes its utility value. We turn the device on in order to turn off. (The things that politicians regard as politics are, for this reason, absolutely fit for television. While the pathetic minister fancies he has influence on the opinions and actions of the viewer, he only satisfies, with the viscous emptiness of his comments, the viewer's need to be spared from meaning.)

On the other hand, something like interference or break-up occurs the moment the broadcast flow is interrupted by content, some real news or even an argument that is reminiscent of the outside world. We tense, rub our eyes, become disgruntled and reach for the remote control.

This extremely purposeful utilisation deserves, at last, to be taken seriously. The television is predominantly deployed

as a well-defined method for enjoyment-filled brainwashing; it conduces individual hygiene, autogenous meditation. The null-medium is the only universal and mass-distributed form of psychoanalysis.

In this respect it would be absurd to call its societal necessity into question. Whoever would like to do away with it should take a look at the available alternatives. In the first instance, drug use comes to mind, from sleeping pills to cocaine, from alcohol to beta blockers, from tranquilisers to heroin. Television, as opposed to chemicals, is surely the more elegant solution. When one thinks of the social costs and the so-called side effects, it must be acknowledged that the user of the null-medium has chosen wisely – to say nothing of falling into road rage, violent criminality, psychosis, shooting rampages, suicide.

There is help for whoever finds this *ex negativo* argument too dismal. We need only detach our gaze from the unpleasant facts, shift it towards higher spheres and consult the now (and once again) oh-so-popular and oldest of humanity's proverbs. When our concentration reaches its maximum – and this is stated impeccably in esoteric paperbacks – it is indistinguishable from the absence of mind, from a blackout, and vice versa: extreme diversion switches over to hypnotic immersion. In this respect, having cotton balls over one's eyes is quite close to transcendental meditation. The quasi-religious reverence enjoyed by the null-medium can, too, be given the following unconventional explanation: the null-medium marks the technical approximation of nirvana. The television is the Buddhistic machine.

Not to deny: the thing at stake here is a utopian project, which, like all utopias, can hardly be realised without a leftover drop of mortality. What is granted the infant, the state of complete

absent-mindedness, is difficult for the adult to reach. We have lost this ability to occupy our perceptive apparatus without interpreting what we see. Whether we want to or not, we tend, even here, to produce some semblance of sense where there is none whatsoever to be found.

This involuntary focusing has a consistent disruptive impact on the use of the null-medium. In case there is any doubt, I can invariably affirm that I, after all, am no zombie, and wherever I gaze there still is at least something to be seen, this or that particularity, something like a smouldering remainder of content. Hence it is inevitable that even the expert television watcher will succumb every once in a while to such a mystification.

So the ideal situation is unattainable. One can only approach absolute emptiness, like the absolute zero-point, asymptotically. Every mystic is familiar with this difficulty: the meditation does not lead to nirvana, immersion is managed sporadically at most, but not permanently; the little death is not the big one. A minimal signal is always modulating. The static of reality. The 'experience of pure groundlessness' (Kasimir Malewich).

Nevertheless – the accomplishments of recent centuries are and remain memorable, even though the television screen will never catch up with its biggest paragon, that *Black Square* from the year 1915, which, strictly speaking, makes every broadcast of the null-medium redundant.

BIOGRAPHY

Hans Magnus Enzensberger is a German thinker and writer who has worked extensively on the role of the media and how to make them intelligible. His text 'Die vollkommene Leere. Das Nullmedium oder: Warum alle Klagen über das Fernsehen gegenstandslos sind' (Absolute Emptiness. The Null-Medium, or Why all Complaints about Television are Irrelevant) was published in German in *Mittelmass und Wahn* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988).

Absurdity in Prime Time

Dora García

Pushed in a baby carriage by one of the beautiful stewardesses with big hairdo and white boots, the star of the programme, his eyes partly closed and a cigarette dangling from his lips, begins to sing: *Every time it rains, it rains... bourbon from heaven.*

'The other night, I was arrested for driving under the influence,' continues Martin. 'The policeman asked me if I could walk a straight line and I said, "No, not unless you put a net underneath."' "

Suddenly, the star stops and stares straight at the camera, his gaze perfectly aligned with that of the audience staring at the screen, as if he were drunk, perhaps in a semi-intentional parody designed to reflect the audience's astonishment, as if he had just realised, to his own embarrassment, that he was on television. Trying to regain his composure, he asks, 'How long have I been on the air?'

—Dan Graham¹

Dan Graham is probably one of the most complex and difficult to classify artists who arose in the United States during the irreverent 1970s. He has always admitted his fascination with pop culture, rock and, particularly, television. In an article in the *New York Times* on 25 June 2009, journalist Randy Kennedy begins with the following question: 'Here's a good art-world quiz question: what do Sol LeWitt, Sonic Youth, Dean Martin and Mel Brooks... have in common?' The answer is Dan Graham.

1. Dan Graham, 'Dean Martin: entertainment as theater' in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists*, vol. 2. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1967.

A few lines later, in the same article, he clarifies: ‘Though many critics through the years have complained that Mr. Graham’s work can be hard to love and too dryly pedagogical, he said he sees himself as a Jewish comedian working firmly in the tradition of Jewish comedy greats like Mel Brooks and Andy Kaufman.’

Dan Graham emphasised the Brechtian component of the *Dean Martin Show*, that is, the way the character created by Dean Martin – a funny, friendly drunk who courts women with ease – fits into Brecht’s concept of *Verfremdung* (estrangement), revealing the hidden mechanisms of television.

When asked to do his successful television programme (*The Dean Martin Show*, 1965–74), Dean Martin set several conditions: no memorising lines, no rehearsals and only being on the set when the programme was actually being taped. He made his entrance sliding down a firemen’s pole and was clearly reading his lines off the large cue cards flashed at him from behind the camera. In fact, he would occasionally lean his head to one side or squint to read them better. If he got confused when reading his lines, he would simply tell the audience, ‘I’m sorry, I must have misread the cue card on that line.’

The finale of Dean Martin’s TV career is equally revealing: during a crowded show in which he appeared with Frank Sinatra, Martin turned to him in the middle of a carefully delivered dialogue and muttered, ‘Frank, what the hell are we doing up here?’

However, if there has ever been a master at disconcerting the public and making them feel bad, at turning a mishap into a true work of art, it was the conceptual artist Andy Kaufman (as Dan Graham has said).

No one knows what kind of person Andy Kaufman was or what he really thought. Many doubt that he is really dead, as they consider his early disappearance (at the age of 35, from lung cancer) just another one of his rude dismissals of the audience.

Few books have been written about Andy. One of the least trivial is by Julia Hecht, *Was This Man a Genius? Talks with Andy Kaufman*, in which the methodical journalist tries to have a one-hour conversation with Andy Kaufman to write an article for *Harper's Magazine*. Instead, she ended up spending a full year pursuing a lunatic. Hecht does manage to have dinner with Andy's parents, but she never gets more than ten minutes of incoherent dialogue with him, as well as a few marriage proposals. In fact, the book is really a portrayal of the journalist's own torment.

YouTube offers a wide selection of Andy Kaufman moments. In one of these videos, a fairly old one judging from the low quality of the sound and the black-and-white image, Kaufman comes on stage in a tailcoat. He puts on a record, takes it off, and then addresses the audience in a British accent (one of the many accents he could do without ever letting on how he really spoke).

Kaufman always acted as if his appearance on stage were a semi-clandestine affair, a gig that, despite his awful reputation among audiences and TV producers, he had almost miraculously managed to get as long as he behaved and didn't make too much trouble. After explaining to the audience the exceptional circumstances under which the programme producers had agreed to give him twenty minutes, he proposes the following: reading them one of the great American novels, *The Great Gatsby*. Soon after he starts reading with an exaggerated British accent, the audience begins to boo. After several backs-and-forths, and the

inevitable appearance of a member of the production crew begging him to get off stage (such appearances happened in almost all of his performances, though it was impossible to know whether they were staged or not), he proposes putting the record back on. The audience agrees enthusiastically. Kaufman puts on the record... And we hear his voice again, reading from *The Great Gatsby* just where he had left off.

‘I’m not trying to be funny, I just want to play with their heads,’ is one of Kaufman’s most well-known phrases; it inevitably reminds us of Lenny Bruce’s most famous quip:² ‘I’m sorry if I wasn’t very funny tonight... I’m not a comedian. I’m Lenny Bruce.’ Dadaist humour, anti-humour.

Andy Kaufman, very much the Conceptual artist (let me repeat: Dan Graham said it), undoes the conventions of television and the audience’s expectations time and again. At the end of his programme *Andy’s funhouse* when the programme credits were running and he was still on the air, he began insulting the audience: ‘Goodbye, goodbye everybody, I love you, goodbye, boy, what a bunch of sheep, the people out there in the public are just a bunch of sheep, they’ll listen to anything I say, boy, the power of the media, I’ll tell ya... I could say anything and they’d do it. What a bunch of idiots! They just sit in front of their television sets like idiots. Sheep! They follow along and they gotta find a leader, huh? Boy! And they bought that crap I said about being vegetarian. Ha ha ha! I don’t believe it that they bought that I am a vegetarian and that I won’t

2. At the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, a new generation of American comedians began exploring political issues, race relations and sexual humour. Live comedy had gone from quick jokes and one-liners to monologues, many of which involved black humour or biting satire. Lenny Bruce became particularly well known for going beyond the limits of what was considered acceptable as mass entertainment.

be aggressive anymore. Boy! Talk about stupidity and ignorance. OK. OK. Hey, come on, are we off the air yet? I gotta get out of here, I got a hot date. I gotta go home, OK? Come on, let's get out of here already, OK! Let's end the show finally, OK? I don't want to stay here all day! OK? Come on, let's go! OK, are we off the air? Are we off the air yet? 'OK, OK... shut up! Where's my hamburger? Thank you, thank you, OK, get out of here! Who wants to wrestle?'

Absurdity in prime time: without a doubt, Andy Kaufman was a successful comedian, though the public never really knew what to think and never felt totally comfortable with him. In fact, in a vote that he himself proposed, he was voted off the programme *Saturday Night Live*... and he left.

Soon thereafter, he made several appearances on the *David Letterman Show*.³ In one of them, he played the ruined, tearful, dirty and disoriented comedian who ends up begging the audience for some spare change before being discretely asked to leave the set by a member of the production team.

Another time on the same programme, he appears recovered and happy – though still unemployed – to announce to David Letterman and the audience that he has just adopted three children. Kaufman's new sons turn out to be threatening looking African American adults. 'Come on, dad!' they yell when Kaufman agrees to do his Elvis Presley impersonation.

Andy Kaufman not only played with television conventions and the public's expectations, but also with the idea of success and what it meant to be a TV star.

3. David Michael Letterman (1947) is a US television comedian, a late-night TV host and producer. His first TV hit came in 1982 with the NBC programme *Late Night with David Letterman*, a programme that has aired on CBS since 1993.

On his own programme, in the segment entitled *The going too-far corner*, the host invites a wrestler to show his abilities to the audience: he moves two raw eggs from a cup to his mouth and back again. In the next shot, we see an elderly couple sitting in front of the television in a middleclass living room. Shaking their heads, the two say: ‘That’s disgusting. He’s gone too far.’ Then we see Andy before the judge, who bans him from ever appearing on television again. The screen goes black (which the programme producers didn’t like, since they feared that the audience would change the channel, thinking that the programme had come to an end) and then, in a delicious example of ‘concrete television’, we see Andy tiptoeing across the screen. It’s useless, though: thanks to the shouts of his next guest, ‘the James Brown of the eighties’, they find him out. Andy Kaufman is arrested by the police and put on a desert island. He then asks the audience to draw a ship on their television screen and this ship takes him off the island. We are back in the middleclass living room, and the man asks his wife, ‘What’s he doing now?’ She responds, ‘You know, he’s playing with the medium.’



Dame la manita Pepe Lui by Tip & Coll, CBS, 1974

Coll: What is television?

Tip: According to the French, television was invented by Monsieur Televisuá.

Coll: Otherwise known as Mrs Braulia Montpellier.

Tip: But what is television? What is it for? Who is to blame for it?

Coll: We are. As the men of tomorrow, we're to blame.

Tip: By the way, it's Monday, remember.

Coll: We've reached the conclusion that television is the mirror of the soul.

'Next week, we'll talk about the government,' was the innocent threat with which Tip and Coll ended their programmes. They knew what they were talking about: their dialogues were often censored, more because of the *nonsense*⁴ that they brought to an insipid, feeble national television than because of any explicit or concealed political critique. Tip and Coll, 'the most illustrious minds in the country', often ended the comic scenes off-camera, with a weighty, 'Boy, that was stupid.'

Interestingly, *nonsense* is much more subversive than open opposition to power. Tip and Coll were masters of the most literary sort of *nonsense*. Their formal pronunciation and exaggerated pedagogical tone (remember their 'Ladies, gentlemen' or 'Please allow me to speak', as well as their penchant for taking cover behind pulpits and confessionals, dressed as gravediggers)

4. Nonsense attempts to create word plays that undermine standard syntax and semantics, generating strange, humorous and absurd puns. One of the most striking texts along these lines appears in Chapter 68 of Julio Cortázar's novel *Hopscotch*. Here is an excerpt: 'As soon as he began to amalate the noeme, the clemise began to smother her and they fell into hydromuries, into savage ambonies, into exasperating sustales. Each time that he tried to relamate the hairincops, he became entangled in a whining grimate and had to face up to envulsioning the novalisk, feeling how little by little the arnees would spejune, were becoming peltronated, redoblated, until they were stretched out like the ergomanine trimalciate which drops a few filures of cariaconce'. Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1966, p. 373.

are offset by absurdity in large doses. Their techniques are easy to recognise: the non-sequitur (where cause and effect are wholly unrelated), puns, neologisms, turning things on their head, imprecise usages, simultaneousness, incongruent images and texts, arbitrariness, endless repetition, negativity, tautologies, redundancies and maniacal clarifications. The fabric of textual *nonsense* is always rational and the illogical explodes on this rational fabric, attacking it from within. In other words, *nonsense* is not a direct attack on the institution: it is an infiltrator, something like a suicide bomber. Its target is the core of the institution: meaning.

What upsets power more than anything else? Not explicit, noisy dissidence – which is often encouraged by power itself in order to neutralise other more dangerous kinds of dissidence – but a fundamental, vital dissidence, where everything used to justify power (order, meaning, economy, security, religion...) is ‘formally’ attacked while uncontrollable laughter explodes. Dissidence shatters: it is everywhere, spread amidst the laughter, in a guerrilla war that, as everyone knows at this point, is impossible to win.

Tip (*as the audience laughs*):

Quiet, man!

Coll: Instructions to fill a glass of water. Let's begin.

Empecemos, principiemos.

Tip: Begin, empezons, principions.

Coll: To fill a glass of water...

Tip: Pour llener un vaso de l'eau...

Coll: It is important for the glass to be empty...

Tip: Que le vase est vasuá.

Coll: Because if it is full...

Tip: Parce que si c'est plein...

Coll: ... it's impossible to fill.

Tip: Ce n'est pas posssssssiiiiible!!!

The gag continues as the two explain to the audience that it is essential for a glass to be empty in order to fill it. The glass must also be held vertically with the open end facing up (*arrrrrrrrrrrive!*); the pitcher of water must have water in it and both objects must be aligned, because otherwise it would be impossible (Coll starts making circular movements in which the glass and pitcher never line up, and Tip translates: ‘regardez la gilipolluá’ [‘What a load of bollocks!]) In addition, the pitcher must be higher than the glass. Thus, with the empty glass whose open end is facing up, and a full pitcher higher than the glass but aligned vertically, we tip and... fill the glass! (‘et voilààààààààààà!’ yells Tip).

‘To climb a staircase one begins by lifting that part of the body located below and to the right, usually encased in leather or deerskin, and which, with a few exceptions, fits exactly on the stair. Said part set down on the first step (to abbreviate we shall call it “the foot”), one draws up the equivalent part on the left side (also called “the foot” but not to be confused with “the foot” cited above), and lifting this other part to the level of “the foot”, makes it continue along until it is set in place on the second step, at which point the foot will rest, and “the foot” will rest on the first. (The first steps are always the most difficult, until you acquire the necessary coordination. The coincidence of names between the foot and “the foot” makes the explanation more difficult. Be especially careful not to raise, at the same time, the foot and “the foot”.)’

— Julio Cortázar⁵

⁵ ‘Instructions on how to climb a staircase’, *Cronopios and Famas*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1969.



An Evening with Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Mercury Records, 1960.
Photography: Richard Avedon

I will wrap up this brief review of absurdity in prime time with an homage to another biting pair of comics whose humour – in the true Jewish tradition – enjoyed unprecedented success on US television during the fifties and sixties. I am talking about Mike Nichols and Elaine May. One of their most surrealistic and cruel gags is the following: an office worker (Mike Nichols) returns to his home in the suburbs after a long day's work. As he changes, he asks his wife to make him a dry martini. She responds from the kitchen, asking whether he wants it on the rocks or straight up. In a few minutes, they both walk into the living room – the man wearing a bathrobe, the woman holding a dry martini – only to discover that he has entered the wrong house and is standing before his neighbour's wife. He wasn't her husband and she wasn't his wife!

A critic for the *New York Morning Telegraph*, Whitney Bolton, summarised the effect that this gag had on her: 'Nichols and May murder everything sacred, respected and loved in our society, and they make you laugh at this murder.'

Lenny Bruce said: ‘The only honest art form is laughter, comedy. You can’t fake it... try to fake three laughs in an hour – ha ha ha ha ha – they’ll take you away, man. You can’t. Because comedy is based on irreverence, and there is a revolution in every joke. Comedy never lies; it always tells the truth. It always tells us the way things really are, not the way we want them to be.’

BIOGRAPHY

Dora García is an artist from Valladolid (Spain) who has produced studies and works on the relationship between performance and stand-up comedy. She worked on the script for the project *Are you Ready for TV?* at MACBA.

Remote Control: on Zapping, Close Encounters and the Commercial Break¹

Johan Grimonprez

On Halloween 1938, channel zapping was partially responsible for inducing mass hysteria throughout the United States. Millions of Americans who had been listening to NBC's *Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy* scanned channels at the commercial break and unwittingly tuned into Orson Welles' CBS radiocast *War of the Worlds*.² In doing so, they missed the crucial disclaimer introducing the program as a fake. The zappers were caught up in a public hysteria as Martians were reported to be landing.³ At its climax, the broadcast described a 9-11esque New York being taken down by extra-terrestrials: "poison smoke drifting over the city, people running and diving into the East River like rats, others falling like flies." The *New York Times*' headline the next morning ran: "Radio listeners in panic taking war drama as fact!"⁴

Channel changing away from the ad break was not solely responsible for the hysteria. *War of the Worlds* also deliberately ran without commercial interruptions. This led credence to the show and compelled listeners to stay tuned. In their study of the remote control device, Robert Bellamy and James Walker identify zapping as a way to avoid advertising and other undesirable content therefore better gratifying the viewer.⁵ In 1953 a precursor of

the present-day television remote, appropriately called the “Blab-Off,” was marketed as a way to shut commercials up. This hand-held device featured a 20-foot cord that was attached to the television loudspeaker. One click of the switch turned the sound off but left the picture on. Its inventor, an advertising executive, noted that the \$2.98 Blab-Off allowed “the TV fan to get away from the commercials he dislikes.”⁶

In 1955 the [Zenith](#)[•] company, after research into push-button technology, introduced “Lazy Bones,” a primitive television remote designed to eliminate commercials and promote the cable industry. Other manufacturers conceived rival remotes with promising names such as “Remot-O-Matic” or “Tun-O-Matic.” At this point they were all still attached to the TV with a bulky cable stretching across the living-room floor, leading to consumer complaints of frequent tripping. Furthermore, a high level of skill was required to keep from overshooting the desired channel.⁷ Later that year Zenith created the “Flash-matic”: the world’s first “wireless remote.” A flashlight activated photocells positioned at the four corners of the TV screen. However, the ‘Flash-matic’ worked all too well on sunny days, causing sunlight to randomly flip channels. The next model worked with radio waves, but never made it onto the market as it was all too possible to change the neighbors’ channels as well. Zenith continued with its research to improve its wireless devices and in June 1956 they introduced the “Space Command Television.” This wireless remote used high-frequency sound, and functioned on a four-button operation: on/off, channel up, channel down, and a mute.

• Advertisement for new seven-function remote control for colour TV (produced by the Jam Handy Organization for RCA Victor), 1959, 5 min 47 sec, USA Courtesy of Prelinger Archives (www.prelinger.com)

“Space Command Television” was advertised with the slogan: “Just a touch of the button to shut off the sound of long annoying commercials.”⁸

By the 1950s television had begun to replace radio as the dominant mass-communication medium. “Are *you* Ready for Television?” asked an early Dumont TV ad. Not quite. At first the new family member was not that welcome. With its signals beamed in from the skies, it was regarded as a somewhat alien presence in the home, and so the television was often hidden away or disguised within its furniture. The Hillsborough, with its new “[Hideaway](#)• Styling,” allowed the TV to be flipped back into a regular salon table, acting as if the new medium did not yet exist.⁹ Even, or perhaps especially, in Hollywood, the television was considered a hostile prop on film sets. Warner Brothers frowned upon the appearance of a TV in the living rooms of its feature films, and would promptly order to have it removed. “The assumption,” Erik Barnouw writes, “seemed to be that if television could be banned from feature films, it could not survive.”¹⁰ But not for long: Warner signed a contract to produce westerns for ABC Television and by 1958 there were thirty western series programmed for prime-time TV. Soon the telly would re-imagine what the living room was all about.

Leaving Hollywood for New York’s growing television bustle, Lucille Ball became the first film star to attain more fame as a TV sitcom-actress. [I Love Lucy](#)•• portrayed her as a woman permanently on the verge of escaping the family trap but failing delightfully – until the following week’s episode that was!

- Advertisement for Zenith remote-control activated Space Screen, 1984, 30 sec, USA
- “Lucy and Superman”, Episode 166 of *I Love Lucy*, first broadcast by CBS on January 14, 1957

In a January 1957 episode, on the occasion of her son's birthday, she makes an attempt to conquer the domestic space recently lost to the telly. She dons a Superman costume and makes her entrance through the third floor living-room window. Alas, 'super-mom' gets caught on the drain pipe, and the "real" Superman, played by George Reeves, has to make a special guest appearance to save Lucy from domestic disaster. Heroes of the small screen were here to stay.¹¹

The tube did not only zap superheroes into the home, the very first television signals beamed into the ether also attracted "foreign attention." In January 1953 the media reported that two mysterious "Men in Black," who were not from Earth, had landed with a saucer in the Mojave Desert, 200 miles east of Los Angeles. They claimed to have learned English by listening to TV broadcasts.¹² Already in 1947, civilian pilot Kenneth Arnold had observed nine elliptical, disc-shaped vehicles traveling in formation over Mount Adams at extraordinary speed. He described the objects as resembling "a saucer skipping across the water." Newspapers baptized the unknown crafts after the household object, turning America's gaze skyward. Something was definitely out there...

Cold War nerves had caused paranoia in the ranks of America's Secret Services, always in fear of a commie Soviet plot. UFO contactee George Adamski fuelled their fears with his comment that the superior space people had "a communist-type government!"¹³ The CIA set up a panel of top scientists, headed by Dr. H. P. Robertson. The panel concluded that it would be strategically wise to debunk UFO reports, out of fear that the Soviet Union might use them to induce public hysteria in the US. Even "The Wonderful World of Disney" got involved in the disinformation

campaign over the television. UFO groups were monitored for subversive activities and contactees were branded as Soviet spies.¹⁴

In the mean time, Sputnik launched the Space Age. The very first satellite shot into orbit by the Soviets in October 1957 struck a serious blow to America's self-esteem, causing a major media crisis. TV networks were flabbergasted that instead of staying glued to the tube, their usual captive audiences ran into backyards hoping to catch a glimpse of Sputnik beaming across the night sky. The press likened the launch of Sputnik to the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. "Somehow, in some new way, the sky seemed almost alien," wrote Senate majority leader L. B. Johnson, the soon-to-be president.¹⁵

In response, the US attempted to blast off with the *Vanguard I* rocket, but the "Flopnik" or "Kaputnik," as it was baptized, hardly lifted four feet off the ground before an enormous explosion sent it crashing back down in front of a worldwide television audience. When the Soviets sent their dog into orbit, paranoia peaked within US ranks. After all "Pupnik" Laika could potentially be carrying a hydrogen bomb! To America, the Soviet dog was a harbinger of war being waged from space. "What's at stake is nothing less than our survival," warned Senator Mike Mansfield, and Edward Teller, father of the hydrogen bomb, went on television to suggest that the future now belonged to the Russians.¹⁶ In the wake of Sputnik a renewed saucer craze hit the American public. Newsrooms became overwhelmed with reports of sightings. "Total terror from outer space!" ran one caption in the trailer of the 1957 Hollywood production *Earth versus the Flying Saucers*.

During the Cold War television was eagerly exploited to perpetuate a culture of fear for political gain. Live broadcasts in particular became ideal to shape political rhetoric, as was

evident in the very first live televised summit that developed into a Cold War stand-off between Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev and US Vice-President Richard Nixon. Notoriously dubbed the “Kitchen Debate,” the newly invented Ampex color videotape recorded the historical event in a model kitchen at the 1959 American fair in Moscow. During the statesmen’s rough-and-tumble debate ranging from dish-washers, to politics, to the role of women, Nixon boasted that the wonder of television gave America the technological edge over the USSR. With flamboyant disdain showman Khrushchev declared that the Soviet space endeavors were far superior. While Nixon bragged about 50 million TV-sets for 46 million families in the US, the more feisty Khrushchev outsmarted Nixon with a quick retort, ironically displaying a true mastery of live television.

In June of 1961 the Soviets successfully sent cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin into orbit, officially the first man in space. As the US space program lingered behind, its media machine played on the communist scare of “The Red Planet Mars” attacking America.¹⁷ By now the world’s stockpile of nuclear weapons created a doomsday context that brought humanity to the brink of annihilation. The politically repressed subconscious haunted America in the form of an invisible power from a hostile universe invading the home. Superheroes and creatures from outer space colonized primetime TV. Sci-fi programs such as [*The Outer Limits*](#)[•] and *The Twilight Zone* took control of transmission: “There Is Nothing Wrong With Your Television Set. Repeat: There Is Nothing Wrong With Your Television Set. You have crossed into the Twilight Zone!” Then, in September of that same year, the first alien abduction

• Introduction to *The Outer Limits*, series broadcast by ABC from 1961 to 1965, 45 sec

case was reported in the US: whilst driving through New Hampshire from a short vacation in Canada, Barney Hill and his wife Betty, a mixed-race couple, were abducted by a flying saucer, apparently dropping in from the Zeta Reticuli star system, that was hovering above.¹⁸

In the early sixties another Cold War was in full swing: that of television threatening to liquidate its older sibling. Cinema was losing out to the small screen as many local filmhouses were forced to close their doors. While Hollywood struggled to redefine itself against the encroaching presence of the new medium, Alfred Hitchcock, as cinema's delegate, took on the ambivalent challenge of working with the TV format. A displaced Englishman in Hollywood, Hitchcock readily donned the role of a double agent sneaking into the American living room, both as a master of prime, while simultaneously deriding it. His wry introductions to his TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* were peppered with domestic paranoia, mirroring a catastrophic culture in the making. The heightened tension of the US-USSR relationship and its induced fear of nuclear terror forever loomed on the horizon. When the master of the macabre, as Hitchcock came to be known, chose to cross over into television, he took every opportunity to mock this evil twin of cinema that had turned into a "propaganda-box": "Television is like the American toaster," he quipped. "You push the button, and the same thing pops up every time."

Hitchcock's real obsession lay with commercials that had infected the format of storytelling. After all: "the story may be unhip, but those crazy commercials are pure poetry," he joked, "to keep you from getting too engrossed in the story." Much to the horror of his sponsors, Hitchcock loftily denounced the accursed

ads, and with sardonic mischief he urged the early TV-viewer to zap away from “these deadly boring commercials: I don’t mind you leaving the room during the commercial, but I expect you to be in your seats for my parts of the program!”¹⁹

Media and Marketing Decisions magazine pointed out that the habit of physical zapping, running off to the toilet, or grabbing a beer from the refrigerator during a commercial break, was practiced by 30–40% of television viewers.²⁰ At one point Hitchcock had jokingly appealed for longer commercials: “they are so short that one must be very agile to get to the kitchen and back!” But a handy solution was already in the making: adeptly tuned into the growing TV-society, Swanson and Sons advertised their first TV Dinner in 1954.²¹ The story goes that executive Gerald Thomas didn’t know what to do with 270 tons of left over Thanksgiving turkey. Inspired by the aluminum food trays used in the airline industry, he picked up on the idea of filling the trays with turkey and marketing them as a TV-dinner for 98 cents apiece. And so another new cultural icon zapped itself into the living room, transforming the eating habits of millions of Americans.²² With the convenience of a food tray one could easily stay parked in front of the tube, and thus the art of dinner conversation was rapidly replaced with ‘sappy sitcoms’ sprinkled with commercial interruptions.²³

An extra to the pre-packaged TV-meals, was the marvel of “canned laughter.” Live audiences did not always laugh at the right moment, or laughed either too long or too loudly. So the “Laff Box,” a backstage device with a variety of push-button laughs, was brought in as a substitute for live audiences to “sweeten” shows with pre-recorded laughter.²⁴ All the while the advertising

industry had its hands full pre-packaging its new image of the happy consumer to an emerging TV-society.

The remote control, though, didn't gain any real ground until the 1980s, as previously channel hopping was limited to just a few networks. By the mid-eighties however, the vast cable industry and the video-recorder had made the remote control a necessity. Being used to target their television audiences, the advertising industry became alarmed by the zap-behavior of TV viewers who were inaugurating a radically different pattern of television usage. Viewers, traditionally sold by the media industry as only statistics for ad revenues, were now suddenly taking control by flipping away from commercials.²⁵

At this point the habit of zapping commercials was at epidemic levels, practiced by 80% of television viewers. The threat of commercial devastation alarmed the advertising industry.²⁶ The trade press claimed that "advertising as a profession is very much in crisis."²⁷ In panic, the industry called for "zap-proof" commercials to dampen the power of the serial clickers in avoiding their product.²⁸ Ad agencies clamored for new research angles to give them a quick handle on the ad-avoiding epidemic.²⁹ Stay-tuned strategies emerged to eliminate channel flipping and hook viewers to the TV set in order to carry them through a commercial break. Ad spots were reduced from 30 to 15 seconds. Time crunching led to "hot switching" to reduce program breaks, which were moved from program end to mid-program. Opening themes were reduced or simply eliminated. Superstars like Michael Jackson and Madonna were recruited for crossover appearances in ads. Spots masqueraded as regular programming and product placement was integrated into actual programs. No need to zap anymore; the network did it for us.³⁰ Dense editing

à la MTV, with strong lead-ins and closing cliffhangers, made sure eyeballs kept glued to the screen. Comedy Central's *Short Attention Span Theater* tacitly encouraged viewers to flip over to other channels, knowing they could rejoin the program without losing the thread of the show.³¹ MTV tailored the new viewing habits into an animated series featuring two slackers, Beavis and Butthead, who were addicted to their zapper. Obsessively on the hunt for videos that didn't suck, they satirized the very act of flipping channels. Critics claimed it was "Sesame Street for psychopaths," but the program did succeed in making MTV less prone to zapping and kept viewers glued to the "idiot box" (as it came to be called).³² Ever savvy about influencing our perception of reality, the political arena followed suit. Case in point was the US invasion of Panama in December of 1989, which was carefully planned to occur during The Super Bowl, a "low-zapping event," assuring that the war would be consumed without much public outcry.

Incongruously, reality itself was about to turn into a zapping zone. Viewers' zapping behavior also forced the TV-industry to refashion newscasts into accelerated MTV-style info-bits. News broadcasts got structured along the lines of the Home Shopping Channel, with one video programmed after another in a constant rotating flow. CNN adopted similar strategies by repeating newsworthy morsels of infotainment 24/7, so viewers wouldn't miss anything on their channel hopping tour. The "drop-in" style allowed zappers to grab a beer from the fridge anytime for a double dose of instant gratification.³³ Moreover, network executives began to substitute dramas for reality shows, reality for entertainment, and ultimately the viewer for the protagonist, beer still in hand. Whereas the media networks hijacked reality for entertainment,

the global political game engendered entertainment for reality. On September 21, 1987, in a speech before the United Nations General Assembly, former Hollywood actor turned US president, [Ronald Reagan](#)[•], hinted at the possibilities of a hostile extra-terrestrial threat to Earth: “Perhaps we need some outside universal threat. Our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world. And yet, I ask you: is not an alien force already among us?” He had used the same analogy as a rationale for governments to put aside their differences at the summit meeting with Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985 in Geneva. Gorbachev’s aspiration was to quit the nuclear poker game, one that already had 1.5 million Hiroshima sized chips on the table. However, when he suggested the unprecedented move to liquidate all nuclear arsenals worldwide, Ronald Reagan bluntly counter-proposed with his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). “Star Wars” as it was dubbed by the media, was publicized as a “planetary defense shield” against incoming Soviet ballistic missiles, but many UFO researchers claimed it was in fact a public cover for its real mission: attacking “hostile” starships.

Crushing military expenditures had brought the crumbling Soviet superpower to the brink of bankruptcy. In similar fashion the militarization of the American economy, that nearly doubled under the Reagan administration, had left the US with “ram-shackle cities, broken bridges, failing schools, entrenched poverty, impeded life expectancy, and a menacing and secretive national-security state that held the entire human world hostage.”³⁴ Symptomatic of this context was the waning US space program:

• Speech of U.S. President Ronald Reagan before the United Nations General Assembly, September 21, 1987.

NASA's space shuttle fleet remained grounded in the wake of the January 1986 Challenger disaster. Instead of exploring outer space, outer space was now colonizing us.³⁵ Steven Spielberg's ET had already nestled himself comfortably in an American suburb, getting drunk and zapping UFO flicks on the telly. Meanwhile waves of alien abductions invaded the American bedroom. Contactees now became abductees who were zapped into UFOs, the intimacy of their bodies breached. Fascinated with the human reproductive system, the ETs had their hands full harvesting ova and sperm to create a hybrid race in space.³⁶ In May 1987, a couple of months before Reagan's infamous speech at the UN, the alien investigation *Communion: A True Story* by alien abductee experiencer and author Whitley Strieber reached number one on the *New York Times* best-seller list.³⁷ The cover with the image of a bug-eyed "Gray" alien was now suddenly catapulted into the mainstream. "Abductees evoke a nostalgia for a future we seem to have abandoned," writes Jodi Dean, "As the return of the repressed dimensions of astronaut heroics. Outer space was now alien space."³⁸ The abductee narratives mirrored the alienation to an ever-increasing complex and uncertain reality of a corporate techno-culture taking over the globe.

Geller and Williams concluded that by the 1990s there were more American homes with a TV than homes with a refrigerator.³⁹ Subsequently some people missed out on the act of grabbing a beer from the fridge during commercial break. But no urgent need for "physical zapping," the remote control was by now largely sold as a standard feature with every TV-set. Zapping devices became so omnipresent that households confused their video remote for the stereo remote, and the stereo remote for the television remote. Next usability became unwieldy: the lack of

accepted interface guidelines guaranteed that the amount of buttons kept multiplying. Remote control anarchy reigned.⁴⁰

TV Guide noted that the zapper had also entered couch potato politics as “the most avidly used and fought over device in the electronic cottage.”⁴¹ Howard Markman, head of the University of Denver’s Center for Marital Studies, identified channel-surfing as, “one of two major marital issues of the ‘90s,’ the other being the scarcity of time together.”⁴²

As the nineties powered-on, the global village became ever more privatized. Although the world grew into a smaller place, it became more gullible as a media society. News corporations grabbed control with ever-bigger hands that were now capable of selling global audiences to their advertisers. Worldwide players like Rupert Murdoch, owner of News Corporation and 20th Century Fox, who controlled thousands of publishing houses and radio stations worldwide, came to embody the global power of the media, but also the danger of manipulating politics, and the public’s perception of history and reality alike. War was staged as a reality TV show when the bombing of Baghdad hit CNN live in January 1991. Special effects were no longer the monopoly of Hollywood, and videogaming turned real as smart missiles zoomed in on their targets. Join-the-Navy advertisements were cancelled as the news itself provided a 24-hour commercial for the armed forces. “Surgical war” seemed almost prepackaged by the news as a commodity hyped around smart-missile technology. Spectacle replaced critical distance and obscured the reality of the war being waged in the Gulf. News networks were implicated as tools of combat, disseminating strategic disinformation. Suddenly the news industry had transformed itself into a surreal shopping zone: apart from television’s claim to reality, what the media was

selling was history itself. Soon reality would be mistaken for a commercial break.

The introduction of MTV in the early nineties on Moscow network slots was hailed as the greatest event in Russia since the 1917 October Revolution. Vertov and Eisenstein, forefathers of documentary theory and the revolutionary potential of montage, were now being reconsidered as Muscovites studied the addictive zapping behavior and farting contests of MTV buddies Beavis and Butthead. In 1993, CNN went global, broadcasting live to 200 countries. CNN's most watched chat show *Larry King Live*, was hosting presidents and alien abductees alike. One episode invited David Jacobs, an alien abductee researcher, Whitley Strieber, author of *Communion*, and an incognito alien abductee to discuss the phenomenon. Larry King provoked: "Why don't they come here right now [on CNN?]; my God, what a move that would be!"⁴³

As George Bush Senior's ratings fell after the first Gulf War, he decided to appear on *Larry King Live* in order to boost his up-coming presidential campaign against Bill Clinton. By now the public's trust in the powers-that-be had drastically waned. Apparently more people believed in aliens than in the president: an early nineties' Gallup poll performed by the *Center for UFO Studies Journal* found that UFO believers outnumbered the voters who placed Reagan, Bush Senior, and Clinton in office.⁴⁴ Politics seemed suddenly to be been taken over by aliens as suggested by the cover story that ran in the tabloid *Weekly World News* of June 7, 1994: "12 U.S. senators are space aliens!"⁴⁵ A month later the Hollywood blockbuster *Independence Day* zapped The White House to smithereens.⁴⁶

Re-runs of *The Twilight Zone* sci-fi classics were competing

for airtime with the monster-hit *The X-Files*,⁴⁷ which rapidly began an appetite for conspiracy theory within the mainstream. Conspiracy culture blossomed-across the political spectrum, disrupting the official narratives of truth, authority, and reality. UFO communities were now convinced that the powers-that-be were covering up all evidence of aliens.⁴⁸ And worse still, the government was actually in league with the alien powers, so could not be trusted to protect its citizens from being space-napped right out of their bedrooms. A Roper poll claimed that at least one in fifty Americans, whether conscious of it or not, had been abducted by aliens.⁴⁹

As the Cold War gave way to the Gulf War and the New World Order, America found itself refashioning its imaginary “other.” With the collapse of the Soviet Union, America’s war industry was running out of villains⁵⁰ and had to look elsewhere to cast a next fear factor. The political unknown and the insecurities around big-brother technology and the imaginary other had yielded aliens and infowar.⁵¹ No longer was it the James Bond-versus-Russia scenario: dysfunctional families and alien abductees came out of the closet to populate small-screen talk shows. The Simpsons family-paradigm reigned. The metatextual gags of the TV-series zapped across the entire media landscape. In “The Springfield Files,”⁵² *X-Files* agents Scully and Mulder pull up in Springfield to investigate Homer Simpson’s UFO encounter and find him jogging on a treadmill in his underwear. Another script saw coach-potato Homer, avid addict of the television remote, beer in hand, calling NASA to complain about the boring space coverage on television. NASA, frustrated over its drop in TV-ratings, invites him to join the next mission, which turns into a Nielsen rating hit⁵³. But during

‘[Deep Space Homer](#)’⁵⁴ our accidental hero loses control of his potato chips and crash-lands to earth – boldly going where everybody had been before: Springfield, the one and only town exempt from dystopian anxiety.⁵⁵ The real NASA actually loved the episode, and astronaut Edward Lu asked for a DVD-copy to be sent on a supply ship to the Inter-national Space Station, where astronauts were now enjoying Homer’s calamities.⁵⁶

Homer Simpson was not the only zapping calamity. In 1997 wrestling control over the zapper started getting really out of hand: in downstate Illinois a 13-year-old honor student plunged a butcher knife into her 52-year-old step-grandfather’s chest after he switched channels. In October, a woman in Florida shot her husband when he switched channels to watch The Eagles versus The Cowboys. She wanted to watch the news. A seven-year-old boy watching *Robocop* shot and killed the family maid when she switched channels in order to watch *Young Love, Sweet Love*. In November, an off-duty Detroit officer shot and killed a 21-year-old mental patient whom he thought had pointed a gun at him. It was a remote for the video recorder.⁵⁷

Then ET returned with a new face. If anything, on that fateful morning of September 11th, Hollywood’s imagination came back to haunt America’s political unconscious, and symptom (flying saucers beaming out of nowhere) met reality (the dark underside of repressed world politics striking back at the symbolic center of its economic power). But this time there was no Hollywood redemption. Even zapping became useless, as all channels were beaming the very same images of the collapsing “*Towering Infernos*.” Navigating the Net has not only redefined, but also magnified

● “Deep Space Homer”, 15th episode of the 5th season of *The Simpsons*, first broadcast by FOX network on February 24, 1994 (Matt Groening & James L. Brooks)

our addiction to channel surfing. With [YouTube](#)[•] and Google we now surf a reality zone defined in ‘buffering-time’ and where images of Abu Grahib, 9-11, or the swine flu compose the new contemporary sublime. Meanwhile the political debate has shrunk into mere fear management. No longer happy innocent consumers of a bygone TV-era, we are now avid consumers of fear. Paranoia suddenly seems the normal condition of being in this world. It’s easier to ponder the end of the world, than to imagine political alternatives. Finally, *we* had become the “alien.”

• *Evolution of TV*, 2007, 1 min. Courtesy of Telenor.

1. Part 1 of this essay is an elaboration of an initial research on the history of the remote control device carried out at the Edith Russ Site for New Media Residency (Edith-Russ-Haus für Medienkunst) in Oldenburg, Germany. The result was a web-based project viewable at www.zapomatic.com, and first shown September 14 through to October 20, 2002 at the Edith Russ Site.
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3. Cited in: R. V. Bellamy and J. R. Walker, *Television and the Remote Control: Grazing on a Vast Wasteland*. New York/London: The Guilford Press, 1996, p. 16. See also: H. Cantril, *The Invasion of Mars. A Study in the Psychology of Panic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947.
4. "Radio Listeners in Panic Taking War Drama as Fact," *New York Times*, October 31, 1938. See also: Richard J. Hand, *Terror on the Air!: Horror Radio in America, 1931-1952*. Jefferson, North Carolina: Macfarland & Company, 2006.
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6. Louise Benjamin, "At the Touch of a Button: A Brief History of Remote Control Devices." Ibid. Bellamy and Walker, pp. 1-22. See also: "Kill that commercial!" *Newsweek*, November 20, 1950, pp. 95-96; and C. L. Walker, "How to Stop Objectionable TV Commercials," *Reader's Digest*, November 1953, p. 72.
7. "Remote Controls for Radio and TV," *Consumer Reports*, March 1956, pp. 165-66.
8. S. Johnson, "Zap!" *Chicago Tribune*, August 27, 1986 (Tempo Section), pp. 1,7.
9. See: www.zapomatic.com: *Hillsborough with New Hideaway Styling*, Jam Handy Organization for RCA Victor, 1959, 2 min 30 sec, USA. Courtesy: Prelinger Archives; www.prelinger.com.
10. Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty, The Evolution of American Television*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
11. "Lucy and Superman," episode 166 of *I Love Lucy*, first broadcast January 14, 1957, USA. See also: Patricia Mellencamp, *High Anxiety. Catastrophe, Scandal, Age & Comedy*. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1990.
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14. Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1998, pp. 190-91. See also: Gerald K. Haines, *CIA's Role in the Study of UFOs, 1947-90; A Die-Hard Issue* (<https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/97unclass/ufo.html>).
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16. Eduard Teller's comments and similar commentary from US Senators and Journalists may be heard in the film *Sputnik* (2007) by David Hoffman, as well as in the film *Double Take* (2009) by Johan Grimonprez. See also: Paul Dickson, *ibid.*, pp. 117-28.
17. L. Spigel, "From Domestic Space to Outer Space: The 1960s Fantastic Family Sit-Com," and Vivian Sobchack, "Child/Alien/Father: Patriarchal Crisis and Generic Exchange," in Constance P. Penley, E. Lyon, L. Spigel, and J. Bergstrom (eds.), *Close Encounters. Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.
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 45. Ibid.
 46. In *The Simpsons* episode "Radio Bart" during a broadcast to the Springfield locales, Bart pretends to be the leader of a Martian invasion who has eaten the US president. Obviously a spoof on Orson Welles's famous broadcast, *War of the Worlds*, it causes his dad to burst into a panic attack (Matt Groening and James L. Brooks).
 47. *The X-Files*: a science fiction series running on FOX network from September 10, 1993 to May 19, 2002.
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 52. "The Springfield Files," 8th episode of *The Simpsons* 8th season, originally aired on FOX networks, January 12, 1997 (Matt Groening and James L. Brooks).
 53. Nielsen ratings are audience measurement tools developed by Nielsen Media Research in the US.
 54. "Deep Space Homer" is the 15th episode of *The Simpsons* 5th season and first aired on February 24, 1994 on FOX networks (Matt Groening and James L. Brooks).
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BIOGRAPHY

Johan Grimonprez is a filmmaker and scholar of Belgium television; his research has revolved around the relationship between television and the contemporary history of Western democracy.

Radical Software and the Noosphere

Ina Blom

Television is the software of the earth. The videosphere is the noosphere – global organized intelligence – transformed into a perceivable state.

—Gene Youngblood¹

In retrospect it is perhaps not surprising that the first issue of *Radical Software* – the journal and ideological stronghold of the early video movement – should bring out the thoughts of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin already in its opening pages. From the media-ecological perspective developed within the cybernetic, psychedelic and psychological techno-discourse of the sixties, video and televisual technology could not be thought in any kind of restrictive or reductive terms. To understand it as a simply a new form of image production and transmission was a reduction and sidestepping of its real potentials. And so was the tendency to see it as a new communications medium or a new data storage and retrieval system. To promote video as a new art medium did not really convince either, unless it implied a total rehabilitation of one's concept of what art is and what art can do. As it happened, only the grandest and most expansive definition would suffice – one that would encompass the very structure of contemporary

1. Gene Youngblood, "The Videosphere," *Radical Software*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1970), p. 1.

life itself. The concept of the *noosphere* seemed to fit the bill. First launched by the Russian scientist Vladimir Vernadsky and developed by de Chardin in the thirties, it evoked a broad evolutionary narrative that made it possible to see current media technologies an integral part of the material history of planet earth. In this narrative, the information age may be understood as the last stage in the development of increasingly complex forms of consciousness, from the extremely limited consciousness of inert matter to the highly developed forms of self-consciousness produced by the human brain. As matter organizes itself in ever more complex groupings, forms of consciousness necessarily emerge. Thus, the minerals and gases of the geosphere had been transformed into a biosphere, a sphere of living beings that respond and react to their environment, and that create a diversity of milieus as a result of these reactions. But with the evolution of human intelligence, a new sphere was emerging, one whose specificity and independence seemed to encompass or touch upon all other phenomena: notably the sphere of human consciousness. Intelligence, thought, emotions and communications constitute a web of mutually reinforcing responses that is at once global in its grasp and recursive in its manner of operation. The noosphere is simply the constant creation of new connections and pathways based on the self-conscious reviewing of intelligence by intelligence.

To speak of the noosphere is then in some ways to transfer the terms of second-order cybernetics and its emphasis on emergence or autopoiesis in plant life (described in the seventies by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela) to the communications of social systems (as in Niklas Luhmann's take on systems theory) – with the proviso that the emphasis here is above all on the specific features of a self-reflexive mode of thinking operating beyond

the limits of any individual consciousnesses. If in 1970 video was seen as the paradigmatic technology of the noosphere, it was for the simple reason that it seemed to replicate human thinking in its manner of operation. As a radically temporalizing medium, video quite simply challenged the standard definition of images as *representations*: its constant, real-time flux of live and endlessly manipulable signals seemed closer to Henri Bergson's non-psychological account of human thinking as a sort of ontological or virtual memory where the past and the future coexist in the duration of the living present.²

However, the last part of the quote indicates exactly where video inserts itself in relation to the noosphere. The videosphere is the noosphere *transformed into a perceivable state*. It is a position at once exceptional and entirely commonplace. On the one hand video, as a form of thinking, participates in and contributes to the noosphere as one more reflection or moment of reflexivity among many. On the other hand – and this shows the ambition of the *Radical Software* claim – it is a technology that somehow posits itself as a consciousness *of* the noosphere itself, in the sense that it makes its mode of operation *perceivable*, as such. Video does not just contribute to the ongoing thinking

2. To the extent that video could be said to produce images, such images do not analogically “contain” or fixate a spatial continuity: spatial information is, in contrast, translated into points and lines that have no spatial extension, only temporal existence. If “image” is the appropriate word for such signaletic streams it is perhaps best understood in terms of a Bergsonian ontology where image is just another word for matter and where matter is understood as streams of light – asignifying forces that act on other forces. Images are then not phenomena that spring out of subjective imagination or even out of human activity: they exist outside and beyond such activity, as autonomous material instances. Human perception only enters the story as it creates its own cuts or intersections in matter, establishing a relation between meaningful visual durations and random streams of light. This is why the constantly “live” organization of the flow of signals in video images is better understood in analogy with perceptual operations, rather than in terms of their ability to represent reality. “Video” is quite literally the “I see” indicated by the Latin name of this technology. (Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*. New York: Zone Books, 1991).

about thinking. It offers a perception of the very processes of interconnected, self-reflexive thinking – *i.e.*, a *sensory, embodied experience of the ecological system of human intelligence*.

This, one could claim, is simply the point of view of just one among the many writers who contributed to the eleven issues of *Radical Software* that were published between 1970 and 1974. It was, to be precise, the point of view of Gene Youngblood, who published his book *Expanded Cinema* that same year and who became famous precisely for his ability to look beyond the immediate technical confines of specific media and media apparatuses (the perspective of so much “new media” theorizing) and to see them in terms of larger life-systems or ecologies. But the perspectives outlined by Youngblood resonated with general tendencies in the output of the publication. That is, the notion of cognitive reflexivity inherent in the notion of the noosphere is expressed through two interrelated but somewhat different tendencies.

One tendency is marked by the pragmatic concerns of politically oriented media activists: in order to both challenge and deconstruct the mechanisms of the state and capital monopolies that shape of public opinion, an alternative television needs to deploy every technical potential for a radical redistribution and reconfiguration of broadcasting capacity. Here, the specific interaction between Cable TV and Portapak technology comes into play: Cable TV would open for the possibility of truly local programming, not just because of its local network, but also because it could transmit the more accessible half-inch video format of handheld cameras, a format that was too low-quality for broadcasting purposes and that was therefore mainly being used for art projects. A genuine people’s TV, made for and by

those involved and reflecting current events at the moment and place of their unfolding, seemed within reach: With such technical distribution and empowerment, an ongoing reflection on the mediation of political processes would become an integral part of democratic politics itself. And large parts of the early issues of *Radical Software* are devoted to the effort of bringing together as much information as possible about cable and video communities and technologies, as well as the ins and outs of the legal and political system surrounding such ventures.

The other tendency is marked by the effort to think the social specificity of video technology in more philosophical, psychological or starkly utopian terms. From this thinking emerges a form of reflection that we may, provisionally, name videosociality and that departs precisely from the way in which video makes perceptible the collective and recursive dimensions of thinking. What video makes perceptible is not just the fleeting and unstable character of light that subtends whatever it presents as “images” – more precisely it opens onto a new, more complex and more nuanced conception of time that, in turn, affects the very concept of human interaction. In issue number two (volume one) electronics expert Eric Segal focuses on the fact that while the temporality of video may be described in precise quantitative terms such as milliseconds or a million images per hour, such measures and quantities exceed the normal limits of (conscious) human perception. Video opens onto temporally complex experiences that distinguish it from theatre, cinema, journalism and radio (the older communicational forms that are remediated in standard television).³ In a similar vein (and in the same issue) Vic Gioscia describes

3. Jud Yalkut, “Interview with Eric Siegel,” *Radical Software*, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 21.

video as a way of working with “chronetics”, or a “comprehension of the time laws of any process” – a fact that underscores Alfred North Whitehead’s critique of the philosophical notion that you can simply *locate* anything anywhere. There is no universe anywhere at any instant because there is no instant.⁴ *There* isn’t, only time is – and so any comparison of video images to a standard conception of images as analogous representations of spatial continuities is misplaced. However, *Radical Software* seems above all to explore the *social* implications of such insights as a number of writers discuss what happens when collective situations of various kinds are aligned with such radically temporalized mediation, through (for instance) closed-circuit television. What happens to a group of people that can both observe and interact with their own behavioral patterns almost at the moment they present themselves? And what does such instant feedback – a heightened sensorial perception of the dynamics of social reflexivity – entail for the very image we have of social “groups” and “patterns” of behavior? One conclusion that may be drawn from the pages of *Radical Software* is that video challenges not just the standard conception of (representational) images, but, even more pertinently, the *representation* of the social that informs standard sociology from Durkheim to Bourdieu. The notion of the social link often hinges on the related notion of social or collective memory – usually defined in terms of the very stability of institutions, customs, languages and behavioral patterns that are observed as if from the outside. In contrast, video – a force that, like human memory, records or preserves the past only through a constantly differing “signaletic” present – alerts you to

4. Vic Gioscia, “Frequency and Form,” *ibid.*, p. 7.

the radical temporalization that necessarily underpins the very working of languages, institutions and behavioral patterns, so that their stability is no longer a foundational premise for a definition of “the social.”⁵ From such a perspective, feedback situations – a mainstay of the sixties radical culture – are not exceptional therapeutic measures designed to transform what are essentially stable or rigid social patterns. Within the context of early video-thinking, they are, more precisely, sensorial techniques that alert us to the dynamic character of a sociality that is no longer defined in terms of object-like “formations,” but in terms of memory-like forces and their differentiating and virtual dimensions. This is, ultimately, what it means to see video as the very perception of the noosphere itself.

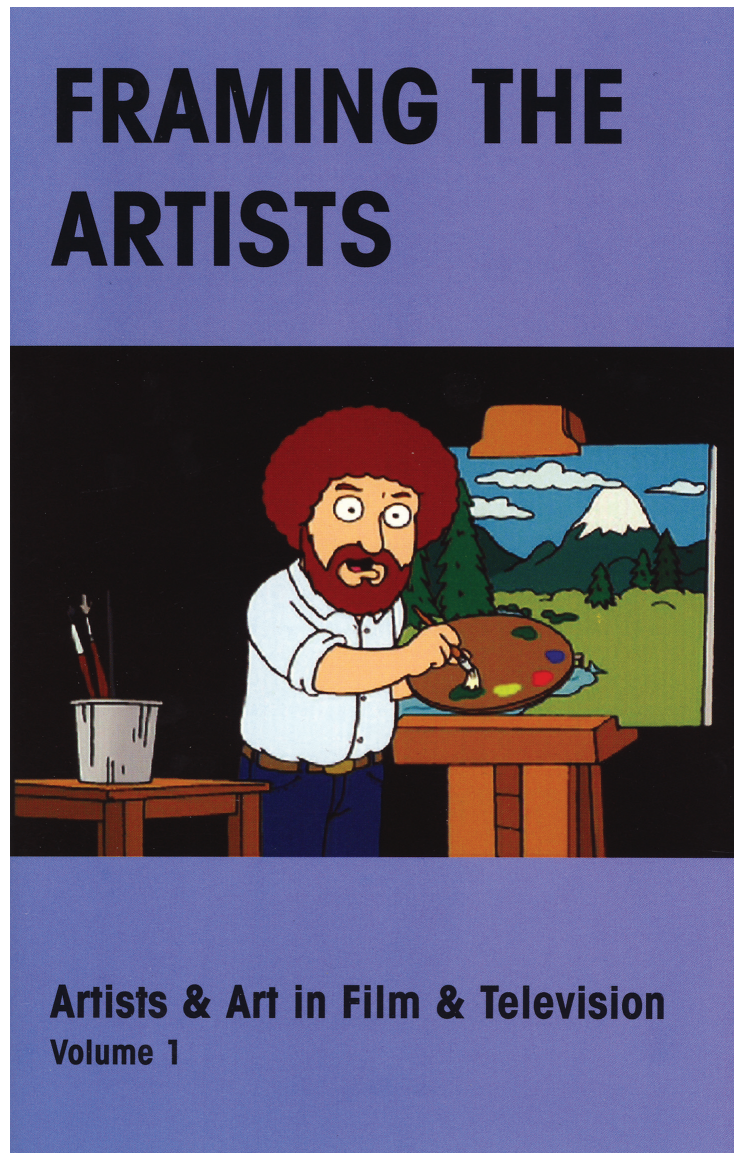
5. A critique of the standard accounts of social memory (Durkheim and Halbwachs) is launched in Maurizio Lazzarato, *Puissances de l'invention. La Psychologie économique de Gabriel Tarde contre l'économie politique*. Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2002, pp. 211-47.

BIOGRAPHY

Ina Blom is a Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas at the University of Oslo. Her fields of research and teaching are modernism/avant-garde studies and contemporary art and aesthetics, with a particular focus on media art practices and media aesthetics.

Framing the Artists: Art and Artists on Television¹

Temporary Services



Framing the Artists - Artists & Art in Film & Television, Volume 1, April 2005.
Front cover image: A cartoon version of the American television painting instructor Bob Ross from an episode of *The Family Guy*. Courtesy of Temporary Services

1. The first installment of *Framing the Artists* is available for free download at: www.temporarieservices.org/Framing_the_artists.pdf. Printed copies are available at: www.halfletterpress.com.

Many people only engage in the lives and works of artists by seeing media representations on TV and in films. These often focus on artists' personalities and stereotypes associated with art. This myopic presentation dissuades non-artists from attempting direct contact: engaging in discussion with artists, visiting studios, attending exhibitions in a variety of venues, or looking at and thinking about artworks in person. When you can't see a real person involved in the challenges, rewards or tedium of the daily life of making art, caricatures will replace complexity.

News programs, advertisements, and television shows mimic, distort, and exaggerate artists' real lives and creative processes. Common depictions of artists include the hysteric raging lunatic who throws paint and temper tantrums, the effete detached snob who makes impenetrable, oblique works, and the heroic misunderstood genius who struggles and overcomes barriers to become wildly financially (and sometimes socially) successful. In some portrayals artists are a combination of all of these extremes.

Investing in Creativity: A Study of the Support Structure for US Artists was a 2003 survey conducted by the Washington, D.C. based Urban Institute, a nonpartisan economic and social research organization. Findings from the survey included this terrible (but perhaps predictable) percentage: 96% of Americans surveyed value art in their communities and lives, but only 27% of those surveyed valued having artists in their communities and lives.

There is an alarming disconnect between these numbers. We firmly believe that media representations, even if they aren't a direct cause of this, are certainly exacerbating the notion that artists exist outside of the daily struggles of other people and are unimportant members of society.

We are not sociologists, so we can't quantitatively measure the effect of these media representations. As working artists, however, we are constantly forced to work against these limited notions of what art can be and how an artist might behave in our interactions with others outside of our field. We know that these attitudes are widespread and common, and are the filter through which many make sense of our work. We encounter these ideas frequently across age, race, and class differences.

We imagine doctors or persons in law enforcement may feel similarly about how their professions are portrayed on screen. There are so many shows about doctors and cops, however, that if one show doesn't conform to your lived experience, you could just pick another show and find something closer to your perceived sense of how things really are. In the 1990s, some felt that the show *NYPD Blue* bore the mark of "reality." The more recent show *The Wire* updates our sense of authenticity and the feeling that a TV show can tell it like it is. We have yet to come across a syndicated fictional television series that is about artists. Artists don't appear that often and when they do, they are rarely presented as an average person, as someone whose daily trials and tribulations are worth recounting.

We have written about media that is primarily made for Anglophones. In the course of doing research for our first publication, we received many terrific suggestions of shows and films in other countries. We decided to stick with our original approach as it might give you access to things you are not familiar with. We encourage you to do your own analysis of shows, ads, and films where you live, and to publish the results.

The reviews that follow represent recent analysis of both current and older television programs:

***Justified* (originally aired April 20, 2010)
Season 1, Episode 6: “The Collection”**

The dashing Raylan Givens (Timothy Olyphant) is a US Marshal (a federal law enforcement agent) in Lexington, Kentucky. In this episode, he investigates the murder of a wealthy man who collects paintings made by Hitler. These are mediocre landscapes and collectible only because of the painter’s notoriety. The dead collector turns out to have been murdered by his wife, who hatches an elaborate scheme to blame the murder on one of the art dealers who sold the collector several paintings. The wife pays an art expert to say that the paintings are fakes, and the blame gets shifted to the original dealer. The expert on “Hitler paintings” later reveals that the paintings are real and that he wanted them for himself. He invites Raylan to his gallery to see his wares. In a final twist, we find out that the Hitler expert is Jewish and bought the paintings to destroy them. Once each painting is destroyed, it is stored in its own jar. All of the jars are displayed in a bizarre installation in a private room in the back of the gallery.

***Taxi* (114 episodes total; aired 1978–83)**

Taxi was an American comedy that followed the work and personal lives of a group of cab drivers working in New York City. Most of the drivers used cab driving as a “day job” while focusing most of their thoughts and aspirations on their true callings. Elaine Nardo (Marilu Henner) is the only female driver in this crew and a character with a complicated and delightful story.

She's a painter, works as a receptionist in a prestigious art gallery (given the time period, the writers of *Taxi* were most likely evoking the Madison Avenue district of blueblood art collectors and their scions), and is a divorced mom with two kids. Elaine's connections to the New York art world and her longing to be known for her creativity and support herself solely through working in art are continual themes in her character's plot lines throughout the series.

We are introduced to the ongoing problems that Elaine has in reconciling her "gruff, less-cultured" taxi-driving friends with her art world colleagues in the fifth episode of the first season, "Come As You Aren't." Elaine's ex takes the kids for the weekend, and Elaine decides to throw a party at her house for her colleagues at the gallery and art world cronies. She enlists the help of Alex (Judd Hirsch), a trusted confidante to many at the cab company, to help her seem smarter and more in charge at her own party. Elaine is afraid that her employers at the gallery and the "famous critic" that she has invited won't take her seriously as a painter if they know that she's also working as a cab driver.

Other episodes worth watching for the portrayal of "regular people" interacting with the late 1970s/early 1980s New York art world include "Elegant Iggy" (season 4, episode 84), featuring the amazing character Reverend Jim (Christopher Lloyd). Jim and Elaine run into an important collector while at a concert. The woman invites them both to a party, although Elaine is worried that Jim will embarrass her in front of many people who may be important to her career. See also "Art Work" (season 2, episode 22): Elaine convinces her fellow cabbies to pool their money and try to buy a painting (made by a dying artist) at auction. Elaine is sure their investment will triple after the artist dies. The cabbies end up losing the auction, but all of them decide to buy work in

the gallery anyway with their money, which results in a mini-art show over the end credits, including the bossy, always crude Louie De Palma (Danny DeVito) carting in a huge, velvet painting of a nude woman.

Work of Art: The Next Great Artist (aired 2010) **Season 1**

Work of Art: The Next Great Artist is described on Bravotv.com as a “creative competition series among contemporary artists.” The reality show/competition pits 14 artists against each other in challenges, with the promise of a large cash prize and a solo show at the Brooklyn Museum for the winner.

Applications from throughout the United States were reviewed and contestants were brought to New York City to compete in a new creative challenge each week. At the end of each critique, the loser, as determined by a panel of judges connected to the field of art, is dismissed with the send off, “[Y]our work of art doesn’t work for us.”

An unusually large number of the contestants are painters, though the creative challenges sometimes force them to work outside of their usual medium. The focus is on ways of working in a studio that are photogenic. The artists are regularly forced to solve creative problems in a short time frame.

Corporate sponsorship has an obvious role in the show’s presentation, as it does in much of how art appears in contemporary culture. Prismacolor, an art materials company, is the sponsor of a \$100,000 prize for the winner. A Diet Coke commercial with muralists working is used endlessly during commercial breaks and a Diet Coke can appears on a pedestal during behind-the-scenes

commentaries, alongside the host, as though it too is a work of art. When one artist's competition-winning work is awarded the cover of a book published by Penguin, the resulting design is used with Bravo's logo and the show's name prominently displayed.

Two assignments require the artists to collaborate, however when their work is critiqued the judges insist on determining which individual artist should be blamed for a piece's shortcomings.

Work of Art reflects the commercial art world more accurately than most shows. How one reacts to this as an artist will be determined by whether one desires to be part of that world. A representative from an auction house is a mentor to the artists. The jurors are a curator, a commercial gallerist, a mainstream critic, and various young artists that have "made it." The contestants gush at the art stars that appear at openings before their work is juried, and that participate as guest jurors when they are critiqued. Notions like making "masterpieces" and the desire to create "a true work of art" are tossed around liberally. The show exposes the hierarchies of power and authority in the commercial art world. The artists here are well practiced at kissing ass and playing to the judges. Looking young and beautiful, knowing how to dress and carry yourself, and being acutely aware of what to say and who to say it to are as important as anything that happens in the studio.

Season one of *Work of Art* struck close to home for us. Multiple artists were selected from Chicago, where our group has largely based its activities for the past twelve years. A member of our group visited the studio of one contestant when we gave a talk at a local grad school. Another artist is a longtime acquaintance. These artists are friends of friends or could easily be our former students. The show was often a train wreck of narcissism and

poorly conceived art produced under extreme pressure and unrealistic expectations. At times one can sympathize with the contestants for having to rush through assignments handed to them by non-artists, but ultimately they volunteered themselves for this public scrutiny. If you don't want to be humiliated in a televised contest, don't play the game.

***Yo Gabba Gabba* (originally aired October 13, 2009)
Season 2, episode 33: "Art"**

Yo Gabba Gabba is an energetic and fanciful show geared to pre-schoolers that features brightly costumed performers that resemble characters from the 1960s show, *The Banana Splits*. The characters, (Foofa, Toodee, Munno, Brobee, and Plex) live in Gabba Land and are helped by the human adult DJ Lance Rock (played by musician Lance Robertson). DJ Lance opens each show by removing doll versions of each of the characters from his magic boom box suitcase, and shouting "Yo, Gabba Gabba!" while sprinkling magic dust on the dolls. The dolls then come to life and start the day's adventures in Gabba Land.

Each episode features several vignettes with the characters, interspersed with cartoons, the Super Music Friends Show (which features actual musical guests like Cornelius and The Roots), and an art segment where Devo's Mark Mothersbaugh shows the audience how to draw something (using a marker on a dry-erase board surrounded by a fancy frame). Mothersbaugh often wears a beret and smock during this segment.

The "Art" episode shows the characters getting ready for an art exhibition in Gabba Land where they will each show their art to each other. Each character exhibits a different technique:

Muno makes sculpture; Brobee makes a collage. Toodee's piece is a mess of different materials piled together – the other characters are stunned when they see it but still sing: “Good job Toodee! It's original! You tried really hard!” This is one of the most positive portrayals of artists critiquing fellow artists that we have seen on a television show, and we'll take the advice of the song “Don't Say Mean Things To Friends” when attending upcoming exhibitions.

The Bob Ross effect

Bob Ross (1942–1995) was not a fictional character, but he might as well have been, given the otherworldly manner in which he calmly executed slapdash landscape paintings for his television audience. Each episode of his 30-minute TV show, *The Joy of Painting*, was devoted to the production of a single work. Ross had many short cuts for painting everything from mountains and prairies to ponds and cabins. He would demonstrate his techniques, explaining his intentions at every turn, and paint “happy little clouds” with a stroke or two of the brush. Ross spoke in a soft voice and his show had a cult following among people who would smoke pot and watch it to relax on weekend mornings. Ross gained an international following through this program, which appeared on public television stations in the US from 1983 until 1994. He created his own internationally distributed painting products and lesson books that inspired generations of artists to adopt his style.

There have been many parodies of Ross on television via animations and comedies. He is an easy target given his jovial quirkiness and the vapid paintings he generated. Ross even parodied himself in an MTV network promo commercial in

the late 1980s and early 1990s, spoofing his *Joy of Painting* role. The variety of comic situations and shows that have used a “Bob Ross” character speaks to the amazing reach of Ross’s simple shows. Seeing one kind of painter making these kinds of paintings over and over again through the magic of television has likely created a tremendous impact on the ways in which non-artist viewers think that all artists work. We are fairly certain that Ross’s technique can be blamed for the super-sales of “fine art prints and paintings” that one may find in the banquet halls of chain hotels across the United States.

***Creature Comforts USA* (by Aardman Animations) “Art” episode**

These hilarious claymation shorts depict animals talking with a variety of American accents. For this episode, the producers of the show interviewed members of the public about art and recorded their answers. The recordings provide an audio track for the claymations. The show is edited to poke fun at stereotypes of artists (e.g., that they paint nude women or walk around naked with paint on themselves as performance art) while also displaying a positive, open, and tolerant set of responses to what art is. One segment shows a gorilla painting in his cage. He complains about an elephant that paints, but lauds a monkey that throws his feces around and expresses himself. The gorilla talks about having private time in the studio to create. He holds a brush in one hand and uses the same hand to raise his thumb between himself and the canvas, eyeballing his next brush stroke. He promptly fills his mouth with paint and then spits it all over the canvas. We see the gorilla again in a later segment

putting straw on his head to simulate Bob Ross's bushy hair. He then begins to talk in the unmistakable calm manner for which Ross became known.

Saturday Night Live (Originally aired live April 10, 2010) Season 35, episode 18 with Justin Bieber guest hosting

Tina Fey portrays the American politician Sarah Palin (Republican Vice-Presidential candidate in 2008) in a skit about the fictitious new "Sarah Palin Network." One of the fake shows for the network is called "Painting for Patriots with Ned Redstone." After the show is introduced, we see a man dressed like Bob Ross with big bushy hair. He stands in front of a generic landscape with a single mountain and a single cloud. He is holding a pallet and a paintbrush as he stands in front of the painting on an easel in a darkened studio that simulates the feel of Ross's show. He says calmly, "If you want to make your cloud a 'Socialist cloud' all you have to do is give it a Hitler mustache."

BIOGRAPHY

Temporary Services is an artistic and activist group formed in Illinois in 1998 by Brett Bloom, Salem Collo-Julien and Marc Fischer. It represents the voice of many artists and groups that have strived to understand how the television medium contributes actively – for better or worse – to the cultural construction of the United States.

Media and Me

Judith Barry

The author wishes to clarify that the works illustrated here arise from her earlier research and have not been revised or updated, despite the evolution of her strategies in subsequent years.

Hovering over my relation to television¹ are two specters: Walter Benjamin and Roland Barthes. Through their work, each reminds me in different ways – in particular Benjamin’s “The Artist as Producer”² and Barthes’ “The Death of the Author”³ – that when I think of television I must always ask, “What could television be if it wasn’t in the service of commercial interests?” And further, “How can media defined as ‘not television,’ as in ‘opposition to television,’ but still engaged with questions of media (this is crucial), produce other possibilities for action and for new cultural forms of engagement both within media, however that is defined, and within a broader cultural and social context?”⁴

To produce programming in most media (radio, television, film, new media, video games) connotes an audience, even if it is initially only the crew and actors, and this implies a public. This situation is markedly different from that of the lone studio artist working with no thought for the reception of the work; or so the myth goes. Even as the production process in both commercial new media, television and films and most experimental films, videos or new media is not democratic or utopian, it is collaborative by necessity (as well as hierarchical) and there is a strong impetus toward interactivity, if not collaboration, among the

crew, actors, producers and sponsors, which, at the very least, presupposes, if not implies, a dialogue. This is true even if there is never any engagement with the public. Following a similar logic, I would argue that media works are also by definition performative.⁵

As an artist I have a wide-ranging practice where both the form and the content of my work emerge from research on specific issues. However, as someone who is interested in questions of representation, “media” in various forms often figures in my work. Below is a brief discussion of some of the ways that, in my work, I have thought through the two questions raised above in relation to television.

Cinema would have remained a curiosity had it not attached itself to older forms of specular, theatrical entertainment, specifically melodrama. It is the development of cinematic language over time, through the shot structure, coupled with montage, to visually represent a story AND produce “believable, inhabitable space,” which the viewer can enter in what Christian Metz describes as a “wide awake dream state” – thereby accessing multiple points of view, while knowingly watching the film, in the dark, surrounded by strangers – that invested the invention of the “moving image” with its power as a medium.

Television was well established by the late seventies. It had appropriated the dominant forms of cinema by using many of its tropes while changing cinema’s narrative structure (beginning, middle, end) to a “flow.” TV is episodic. It attenuates across time in soap operas, serials, news, and variety programs. This episodic structure, coupled with my understanding of how it is that cinema, first, and later television, create an architecture of inhabitable psychic space, has directly influenced how I create

my work, no matter what form it takes – sculpture, photography, graphic design, film and video, installation and new media. My relationship to these issues is most discernible in my installations – whether they are using media, directly or not; whether they are exhibition designs, or not.

I construct what I call “subject positions,” a form of address that the viewer/user can discover within my installations, by applying montage techniques as a way to spatialize physically and make inhabitable the issues each project is addressing. In this way viewers can construct a variety of meanings about the work as they move through the space.⁶ I also use the notion of “subject positions” in single channel videos such as *Casual Shopper* (1981) where, when the flâneuse “looks” or moves, the architecture, in this case a mall, comes to life. This understanding of how the spaces that media can potentially produce within physical space was the beginning of my investigation of the two questions raised at the beginning of this article. Simultaneously, I am also interested in how media – television, film, sound, computer, new media, and video games – might also similarly be made spatial within public and private space. Often I configure these “subject positions” alongside an examination of how a particular media AND a particular set of ideas might be rendered inhabitable. All of this fuels the logic of the inquiries that I perform within my work.⁷

In the exhibition and installation projects such as *Coca-Cola: Building Conventions* (1980) and *Display: Museum of Signs* (1985), I “détourned” media (to borrow a term from the Situationists)⁸ as a “raw material” and transformed it into another form. Electronic signage above a red carpet directed revelers to consume not only the food of various cultures, but also those



Casual Shopper

Single channel video. RT-3 versions (3 min, 6 min, 28 min),
1980/81. Premiered Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, California, 1981

Casual Shopper is about people who shop casually, those who go to the mall just to browse, at their leisure, when there is nothing better to do. This is a love story that never advances beyond that which can be imagined, which is never consummated, but which returns to a prosaic scene where demands are exchanged and desire circulates endlessly.

Judith Barry, "Casual Imagination," in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Blasted Allegories*.
Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987



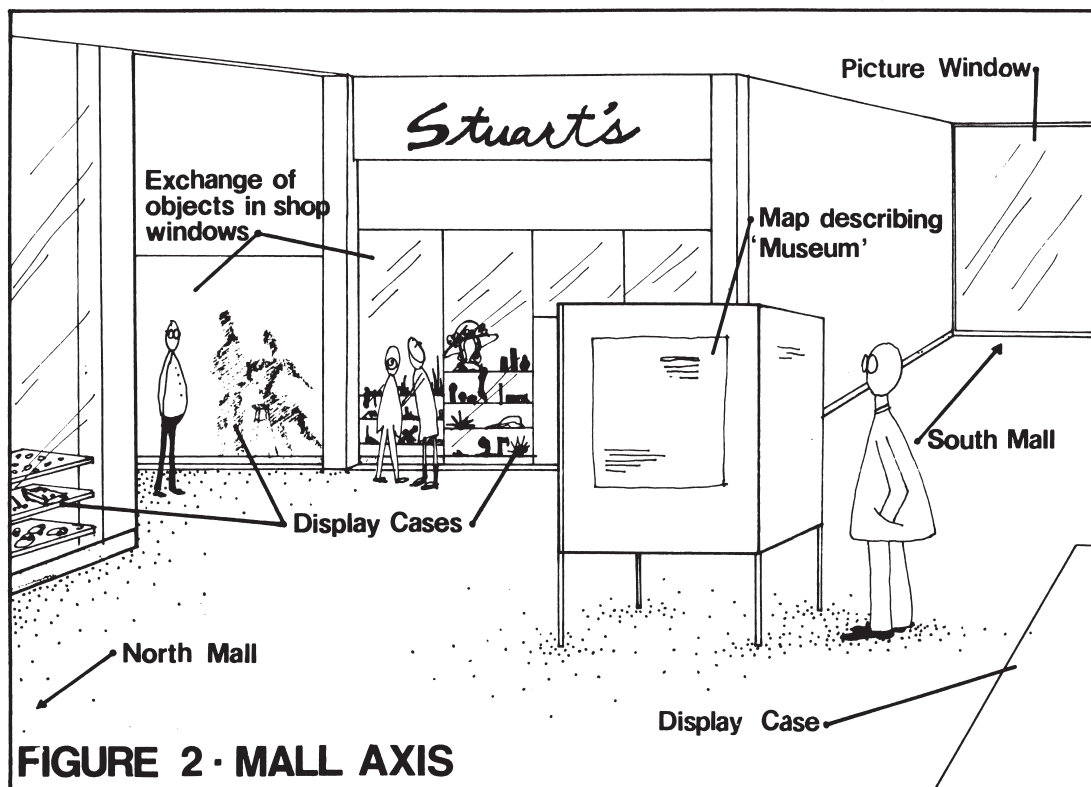
Coca-Cola: Building Conventions

Exhibition design. San Francisco Pier, 1980

For a party for Coca-Cola vendors I transformed the Pier to the street shown here. Rather than asking the revelers to eat their way through the ethnic history of San Francisco, I proposed that the food displays be based on historical research: that moment when Coca-Cola gained hegemony worldwide.

Judith Barry, "Building Conventions," *Real Life Magazine*, New York, Summer 1981.

moments when Coke gained worldwide hegemony. *Display: Museum of Signs*, uses old media – sixteenth-century mnemonic devices – to map a shopping mall as an endlessly unfolding mise-en-abyme where desire circulates endlessly as consumer objects are perpetually displaced. *For In the shadow of the city... vamp r y* (1985), the viewer produces the work's meaning by attempting to construct narrative closure from the filmic fragments that continuously dissolve on the double-sided screen. In different ways these works rely on the knowledge that viewers will unconsciously invoke the codes of narrative media when they engage with the work.



Display: Museum of Signs

Installation proposal. Shopping Mall, Palo Alto, California, 1980.

First exhibited in White Columns, New York, 1985

Mnemonic devices were used to transform a working-class shopping mall into a memory palace. The use of contemporary display techniques produces numerous desire(s) that the activity of shopping unleashes but which the object alone cannot fulfill. This leads to new forms of subjectivity such as a female flâneuse (after Walter Benjamin's nineteenth-century male flâneur). The drawings show initial preparatory sketches that chart how fetishization, mapping, the memory theater, and "deconstruction" might shape this reconfigured space.

Another strategy I use to address “what media can be” is to explore the interstitial differences among forms of representation – film, television, graphics, new media, photography – within “the space that art makes.”⁹ For example, *Blew* and other short videos use the notion of the shot as the smallest unit of meaning to see how brief a film or video can be and still produce meaning.¹⁰ In *They Agape* (1982), *Kaleidoscope* (1978) and *Space Invaders* (1982), I interrogate narrative tropes from soap operas and other television conventions in relation to the construction of gender, subjectivity, and the short-film/video form. *Space Invaders* explores the role of the ‘evil’ woman in soap opera, a character with whom many women can identify precisely because she transgresses and is not ‘punished’ by the narrative,¹¹ alongside new forms of spatiality/subjectivity produced by video games.¹² Both *They Agape* and *Kaleidoscope* use the structure of episodic television, each in different ways, to query notions about “love” and “relationships” in the wake of second-wave feminisms.

Along the border between San Diego and Tijuana, I invoked the notion of the Situationist “derive” in a series of stories, identity graphics and other artists’ projects from an international exhibition, InSite-05, which unfolded across four windows in downtown San Diego. Initially proposed as a pop-up installation, the project, *Border Stories, Working Title, From One Place to Another* (2000) functions as a “narrowcast” network. Its episodic flow overtly raises the question for a variety of publics of “what might media be?” Each day pedestrians encounter different sequences of the stories, provoking responses such as “what is this?” “a film?” “an ad?” “what are you selling?” “what is InSite?” and so on. Banal as this seems, a great deal of public dialogue

was created. Later, as the installation became “naturalized,” reactions to the work evolved into nuanced experiences with the individual stories and characters and led to discussions about the increasing blur between the two cities of Tijuana and San Diego.¹³



Border Stories, Working Title, From One Place to Another

4 channel video sound installation. Dimensions and configurations variable. Also, a single channel video, 2006. First exhibited at inSITE 2000, San Diego/Tijuana 2000

“There is nothing so _____ as that border in the mind.”

This project, an “ambient network” of short stories, identity graphics and artists’ projects about life along the border between San Diego and Tijuana, raises questions about what media might be other than television or advertising when it appears unbidden within a cityscape. Designed to function somewhat like the Situationists’ notion of a *détournement*, it was situated across several consecutive windows as an invisible border between the new sanitized tourist-friendly downtown and the old seedy port city of San Diego.

I have also thought about the space that television makes. Television's relation to the home is one of mimesis. It enters the home as "radio with pictures," furniture, an appliance; gradually it takes on other guises, becoming part of daily life: as viewers "we become what we behold." *For the exhibition From Receiver to Remote Control: the television set* (1990), Ken Saylor and I, as exhibition designers, charted the history of this transformation through more than twenty period rooms with appropriate TV programming, mapping the transformation of the US home from a site of production to a site of consumption and revealing how deeply television has affected every aspect of daily and cultural life.¹⁴ Viewing conventions evolved and TV has become a constant in every room. Television has the status of a legally protected necessity.¹⁵ Another project, *(Home)icide* (1993), also with Ken Saylor, deviated from the architectural trope, "The House of the Future," to look specifically at how we live today.

Our House of the Present asks the question, "Do our living environments adequately reflect the ways we live, particularly in terms of the discourses that shape the fabric of our daily lives?" We retro-fitted one of Le Corbusier's Unite apartments, "a machine for living," into a site that reflected the many ways contemporary discourses, including all kinds of media, circulate and transform daily life; revolutionizing our experience of "what is home?" One of the main elements of the installation is a "fly-thru" computer-animated model with various kinds of television, film et al. displayed within the home. As the viewer navigates the space, the form of the home "morphs" continuously in relation to the various types of information that now circulate and affect the concept of "home."¹⁶



From Receiver to Remote Control: the television set
Exhibition design. Collaboration with Ken Saylor. Curator: Mathew Geller.
The New Museum, New York, 1990

In a series of 20 period rooms with period TV programming, this exhibition traced how television transformed the home from a site of production into one of consumption: the fifties' notions of "home theater"; the "easy living" implied by labor saving appliances; the sixties as the only moment when television was overtly political from Civil Rights activism to the Vietnam War; the seventies and the proliferation of technologies with portable color TV and cable; the eighties and the potential for a return to production in the form of the home computer.



From Receiver to Remote... Channeling Spain 2010
Judith Barry / Ken Saylor / Project Projects, Installation with Spain/US timeline and TV programming, 91 photographs, 10 flat screens, sound, dimensions variable.
TV/ARTS/TV, Arts Santa Mònica, Barcelona (from October 15 until December 5, 2010)
The installation charts the development of politics in Spain and the US between the sixties and nineties in relation to the television histories of both countries and the advent of "narrowcasting" programming.

From the late seventies until the mid-nineties, I found the divide separating “high art” from “popular culture” to be another productive, interstitial site to examine. While there is a long history of a rich dialogue between art and popular culture – MTV, music videos, punk rock, no-wave/new-wave filmmaking, appropriation art and project specific work – now that division has all but vanished.¹⁷ Television has mutated into “narrowcast” networks. Meanwhile the Internet and social media sites are creating new ways for media to be much more interactive than television currently is. Popular culture, including all media, has become a raw material that artists can use to produce their work.¹⁸

So, to briefly return to the two questions raised at the beginning of this text, one way those issues are now being addressed is through social media and these new forms produce newer kinds of subjectivity than those constructed by television and cinema. As artists, how will we make use of these new forms of subjectivity? How will the older types of media be affected? While the dominance of US media/multinational conglomerates is still strong, media has and is evolving differently in other countries. As the world becomes more connected and, hopefully, more transparent, I am curious to see what we can learn from understanding our differences through media.¹⁹

1. Judith Barry, "Public Fantasy" in Iwona Blaszwick (ed.): *An Anthology of Critical Essays, Fictions and Project Descriptions by Judith Barry*. London: ICA, 1991.
2. Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*. London: New Left Books, 1973.
3. Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.
4. As the legacy of these authors and articles is well known I will not retrace their arguments specifically here. But I do want to mention the seventies adage: "Television programming is just the filler between television commercials" as this attitude, a legacy of Frankfurt sociology as it was understood in the US, characterized the intense distrust of television and all popular culture within the art world. Hence, a discussion about the two questions posed above was all but impossible until the late seventies and early eighties when many artists begin to make use of dominant media forms. These artists include Jack Goldstein, Sherry Levine, John Sanborn and Kit Fitzgerald, Barbara Kruger, Sarah Charlesworth, Cindy Sherman, myself, and many, many others. See for example, *The Pictures Show*, Artists Space, New York, curated by Douglas Crimp in 1977 and restaged by the Douglas Eklund at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, 2009. See Lucinda C. Furlong, "Getting High Tech: The New Television," in *The Independent*, New York, March 1985, which presents the uneasy relation between art and television, ca. 1985.

Furthermore, the question about television and interactivity has always been a bit of a red herring as it has always been clear from its inception that most people were not interested in interactive television. You can easily see that if you trace the history of the failure of that "invention" from the forties with DIY television to the attempt in the early 2000s to merge television and the computer into one machine. It is the computer's "personal-ness" that has altered viewing conventions by providing connection in seemingly "real time" that has driven the desire for interactivity in "real time."

5. This drive toward both dialogue and performance might be seen as one among many reasons for the rise of Reality TV. Bravo's summer series, *Work of Art: The Next Great Artist*, with 14 artists surviving the challenges from a group of judges (none with an advanced art degree) might have been an opportunity to elevate the public discourse about art. However, the conceit of the series was to choose artists who can perform as naïfs within a decidedly pre-"post studio" milieu. Many have little formal art training. To date, the two best-known artists, those with name recognition/career success, have been eliminated. Or, consider James Franco, a semi-well-known actor, (*Pineapple Express*), currently attending several US MFA art programs and intervening as an actor/artist, within the structure of television soap opera, playing a character called James Franco who is an actor/artist attending several US MFA art programs intervening into a soap opera.
6. Judith Barry, "The Space that Art Makes," in *A Dynamic Equilibrium: in pursuit of Public Terrain*, (Sally Yard, ed.). San Diego: Installation Gallery, 2007.
7. Judith Barry, "Casual Imagination," in *Discourse* no. 4, Berkeley, 1980-81. Reprinted in *Blasted Allegories*, MIT press, 1987, among other places.
8. Judith Barry/Ken Saylor, "Design Notations," *a/drift*, curated by Joshua Decter, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, 1996.
9. Judith Barry, "The Space that Art Makes," in *A Dynamic Equilibrium: in pursuit of Public Terrain*, (Sally Yard, ed.). San Diego: Installation Gallery, 2007.
10. Christian Metz's *The Imaginary Signifier*, (Eng. trans. 1982), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, and Bertrand Augst's work on filmic structure (sadly for the most part unpublished) and the short form of television – the commercial, were the genesis for these works that I began making in 1980 and first screened in alternative spaces in 80 Langton Street, San Francisco, 1982. Bertrand Augst is the professor at UC, Berkeley, who began bringing film theory/film studies to Berkeley as part of the Rhetoric Department. He translated much of Metz's work and invited many other scholars and filmmakers to UC, Berkeley, to teach, including Raymond Bellour, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and many others. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been his student during the late seventies and into the early eighties.
11. Tania Modeleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*. Connecticut: Archon books, 1982.
12. Judith Barry, "Space Invaders," ICC, Antwerp, Belgium (catalogue essay) for a solo

- exhibition in Antwerp, Belgium, 1982. Reprinted in *Un/Necessary Image*, MIT Press, 1983. See also: Peter Lehman, "Video Art, Video Games, interview with J. Barry," *Wide Angle*, no. 6, March 1984.
13. Public conversations in San Diego during the exhibition, 2001. *InSite* an international exhibition that occurs along the border between San Diego, Ca., and Tijuana, Mexico. Further information about *InSite* can be found at <inSite_05>. For information about my project see *Fugitive Sites, New Contemporary Art Projects for San Diego / Tijuana*, Installation Gallery, San Diego, 2002.
 14. The exhibition took place at The New Museum, New York, 1990, curated by Matthew Geller. The exhibition TV/ARTS/TV at Arts Santa Monica, Barcelona (October 15 – December 5, 2010) was an updated version of this project now called: *From Receiver to Remote... Channeling Spain*, 2010. For this installation, Ken Saylor, Project Projects and I compared the relationship between television and democracy in the US and Spain between the sixties and the nineties.
 15. The right to own a television is protected under most US bankruptcy laws as is the right to own a car. Both are considered necessities and cannot be "given up" to the courts during bankruptcy proceedings.
 16. Judith Barry/Ken Saylor, "House of the Present: (Home)icide," for the *Project Unité*, [exh. cat] curated by Yves Aupetitallot, Firminy, France, 1993.
 17. I have written about this in many articles beginning with Judith Barry/Sandy Flitterman, "Textual Strategies: The Politics of Art Making," *Screen*, volume 21, no. 2, 1980, and in many articles in the book *Public Fantasy*, op. cit., and in "Space Invaders," op. cit.
 18. See Judith Barry, "This is not a Paradox," in *Illuminating Video*, Aperture/BAVC, New York, 1989, a discussion of Peter Wollen's essay, "The Two Avant-gardes," *Studio International*, no. 190, November/December 1973, in relation to MTV and artist television as two kinds of networks; "Design Notations," op. cit., where it became clear to us that indeed the divide between popular culture and the art world had dissolved and that in many ways this exhibition marked the end of that divide; see also Judith Barry, "An Uneven Parallel Construction," in *Die Medien Der Kunst / Die Kunst Der Medien*, Benteli/ZKM, Bern/Karlsruhe, 2004, an article about my work and others that discusses the question of how media has transformed artists' relationships to producing their art works.
 19. What I do find interesting about television are two things for which the art world doesn't seem to have much time: one is the long form of television and the other is the opportunities opened up, particularly for news, as television becomes much more about "narrowcasting" than about the national networks slowly dying in the US. Arguably one reason the art world can't be very interested in the long form is because of the viewing conventions/delivery system within the art world for media-derived work. For example, video wasn't accepted until institutions allowed artists to screen their single channel videos in film-like conditions – in a black box with seating with a large projected image and immersive sound.

The Wire is a good example of the long form of television. Its 60 hours, perhaps the first US produced social analysis of a failed city, was created by a former journalist, David Simon, who covered the city desk at the Baltimore Sun Newspaper. It is the delivery system of television as DVD – as hackable in its DVD form – that makes the success of this long form possible. Further, the form of "narrowcasting" itself presents many possibilities – for instance as print newspapers downsize and as television networks seek substantive content, mergers between the two are certainly plausible.

BIOGRAPHY

Judith Barry is a North American artist whose work revolves around performance, video, installation and photography. She is particularly interested in new technologies and feminist questions.

Why all Those Colours Are Making me Blind

Mario García Torres



Still by Mario García Torres from *All Those Colours are Making me Blind* (*the Beginning of the End of Videoart*), 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

It had rained that day. There were puddles on the streets, and a light, damp breeze in the air. At what appeared to be a 15-degree angle, the sun's rays were just visible from the bridge over the Los Angeles River. It was there I saw for the last time the protagonist of this story; a story that I am telling from memory.

He was not fat, but he wore shirts one size too big. He almost always wore the same clothes, or at least every time I saw him; he looked like a worker, with denim shirt and jeans. He had a slight limp.

With his beat-up, metal sunglasses and hands flayed from so much work with copper wire, the bearded man walked up and down the street at least four times a day, rain or shine. That was what he told me, but I could see for myself on occasions. He always left the small television studio on Lacy Street, walked down desolate Humboldt Street and then turned onto San Fernando Road. Some afternoons he would stop at the Society of St Vincent before taking the bridge on Spring Street to 18th Avenue, where he lived in a rented room in a rundown mansion.

The Society is a strange place, a complex of more-or-less interconnected warehouses occupying about one-fourth of a city block. Inside, a large variety of secondhand objects are bought and sold. They are displayed by type: books, couches, tables, cars, motor boats, glass windows, electric appliances, paintings and photographs, albums and jewellery. In the passageways, one finds unusual characters aside from the regulars: the curious and people known to the employees, browsing for antiques.

The day I met him at the Society, he was sitting in front of an old piano, gazing out of a window as shiny as the television sets in the back of the store. I just happened to stop in the section where the daily news was showing on a number of sets when he stood up to tell me why there were so many TVs for sale. He thought it was because of the new hi-tech LCD screens that were hitting the market.

‘They’re worthless,’ I remember him saying. ‘The image may look more real, but they won’t last long. It is not television. It’s just a fad, and when it’s over we will go back to cathode-ray tubes,’ he told me confidently.

At that time, three or four cathode-ray sets were delivered to the Society every day. Nothing could be done to stop them.

At first, they were displayed in a sort of stairway, and little by little they were piled one behind the other, giving shape to a truly unique sight. They were almost all on and tuned to the same channel.

Months later, I learned that at that time our friend was already in danger of being fired. Though he did some small repair jobs at the studio on Lacy Street, the bulk of his work consisted of connecting and disconnecting cables.

I don't know why I let that man vent his frustrations. It was one of those situations I normally wouldn't have got involved in, but this time the whole thing rang a bell. Nor do I remember how he started talking to me about the year 1989, but when he did my interest in this character became strangely heightened.

His memory didn't let him down; he was even able to recall the colours of television from those years. Indeed, he described them startlingly well, with a long list of adjectives that conjured before my eyes that particular aesthetic. He spoke in detail of the broadcasts of the Lakers games that year, when they made it to the semi-finals, and the news of Tiananmen Square, with the iconic image of the young man standing before an oncoming tank.

I mentioned the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Libya incident in the Gulf of Sidra.

'But the most important television event that year was Captain Midnight. Do you remember?'

At that point, I must have shrugged or done something to indicate I had no idea what he was talking about.

'That year, from Florida, a certain Captain Midnight intervened on HBO's satellite signal. It was soon all over the news programmes,' he continued enthusiastically. 'In the small hours of 27 April, while they were showing a movie with the young

Sean Penn, the signal was interrupted for four minutes, and colour bars bearing a strange message appeared on millions of TV screens across the country. The message said something like “Good evening from Captain Midnight. 12.95 dollars? No way!” And then he made further threats to HBO and Showtime. I was very fortunate to have seen it,’ he said.

They soon found Captain Midnight, who turned out to be a certain John R. MacDougall, a worker in installations at Central Florida Teleport whose rates for satellite television had recently been increased. The event became known as ‘The Captain Midnight Incident’.

‘Now that was art,’ he said as he offered a precise description of the colour and shape of the simple image. ‘As far as I know, it’s still the most interesting intervention on a television channel ever.’

One of Captain Midnight’s most outstanding achievements was having produced a simple and personal act of anarchy. But mostly (and I remember that he emphasised this), Captain Midnight had had the chance to enjoy the sweet taste of being seen by the masses.

The man’s words held my attention for a while, but that was it. Surprisingly, though, a few weeks later, the conversation came back to me, and I found myself looking up the most important events of 1989. It had been a relatively tumultuous year in terms of politics and news. Headlines included: ‘The Soviets withdraw from Afghanistan,’ ‘The Ayatollah Khomeini dies in Iran,’ ‘Hurricane Hugo strikes the Caribbean,’ ‘Dictators Nicolas Ceausescu [in Romania] and Manuel Noriega [in Panama] are ousted’ and, here in Los Angeles, ‘The Menéndez brothers murder their parents’.

In my mind’s eye, I saw a procession of the televised images of many of those events. One by one, quite blurry. I well remember

the image of the bodies of Ceausescu and his wife lying in the snow on Christmas Day, the image of the Vatican See in Panama where Noriega was hiding from the United States military forces and the images of the Russian tanks leaving Afghanistan in the middle of a harsh winter.

Though it is not relevant to this story, in the months that followed I saw the man walking leisurely down Humboldt Street on a few other occasions. We exchanged hasty greetings. It was on the second occasion I saw him at the Society that I brought up the topic that had sporadically occupied my mind some months earlier.

Why would a man be so obsessed with a specific year? Why did he return time and again to 1989? Something must have happened in his private life that year, though I was in no position to interrogate him on the matter.

In one of our conversations, he took an interest in me and asked what I did for a living, as I wandered around taking another look at the mountain of television sets. I admitted that I worked in the art world, making audiovisual installations, some of which were exhibited in galleries and museums.

‘Videos?’ he asked, disconcerted.

‘Not necessarily,’ I replied.

I briefly described my interests and my relationship with television, narrative structures and the experiences all that implied. It was then I realised that my interlocutor seemed to have an intention, as well as an opinion, about my arguments, though he didn’t seem able to verbalise it. When I finished talking, he seemed to be gazing into space, his eyes climbing the blank walls; there was a certain nostalgia in his features, while the camera slowly moved in on his face, leaving the rest outside the shot.

‘I don’t know if I was ever any good,’ he said, taking off his glasses, as if he wasn’t sure how to show it. ‘But at one point I thought of myself as an artist. I made recordings on tape and mixed them with other material, layer by layer, saturating the colours and then carefully editing. At that time, it was called “video art”. But that’s all over now,’ he said, raising his voice.

‘In 1989, it all came to an end with the closure of a television station in Boston and another one here in Los Angeles.’ (He mentioned the acronyms of the names of both, but unfortunately I didn’t write them down.) ‘They were the last to allow artists to broadcast artworks; they even paid for their work. Not all of us had the possibility of communicating what we were doing, but the closure of those networks brought to an end the possibility of broadcasting work and using the stations’ sophisticated equipment. All of a sudden the only thing you could see was the grey cloud of the monitor. Video was a new technique, a new medium that some of us used to make art for a mass audience.’ He went on to say that, due to its non-commercial nature, video had been excluded from the canons of art and could not exist in the museum context.

Speaking more quietly now, he came closer to me and said, ‘On 31 August 1989 I decided to stop calling myself an artist.’

The place was nearly empty. People were silently looking at the objects, and the midday heat didn’t seem to bother anyone. The televisions on display continued with the coverage of the floods caused by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, but the volume was off. Meanwhile, I couldn’t believe what a surreal statement I had just heard. Our protagonist had not only totally closed himself off, suddenly, for twenty years, to any information about art, but also radically changed his life overnight.

‘I was offered a job at the station and I took it. I forgot about this whole fantasy that I had created and I never again mentioned my past to anyone.’

Next to where this conversation was taking place, an amateur pianist played a few notes on the only grand piano in the place. All appeared quiet except for the notes played by this man, to whom no one seemed to be listening; it was as if the music were alerting them that the credits of a television programme were about to appear.

‘Once video art was declared dead, I thought it was pointless to keep working. I wanted life to be more real, more like my life now.’

Whenever he lapsed into silence, our man moved in a strange way, as if at any moment he might slip out of the frame; he moved slowly. When I tried to remember what had been said and take notes in order to write this text, it occurred to me that this might have been the effect of the multiple screens in the background.

‘When I started working at the station, they were replacing the old equipment with more modern units,’ he continued. ‘I was hired to clean up and classify all the material that was considered obsolete. That left its mark on me, and my interest in moving images translated into an interest in the endless varieties of cables and adapters (...) I still work at the cable storeroom. Just counting the cables, there must be forty square meters of material, all well organised and classified.’

A few months later, I saw this for myself when I visited the storeroom of the Lacy Street studio on my own.

‘It’s as if everything that had been aired during the twenty-five years before I started working at the station was stored there. As if those images weren’t necessary. But all of these useless items are in fact the remains of something seen by many people

in many homes; they have an intimate relationship with millions of television viewers...’

Our man had a touch of eccentricity or even madness that I was forced to accept.

‘But what is your relationship to the station’s programming?’ I remember asking.

‘I watch television at the station, because I haven’t had a TV set at home for the past 19 years. Still, I only watch from time to time, because I can see and hear the news live in the recording studio while it’s being taped in the studio, and sometimes I watch the commercials at the editing table. I am interested in that space – the place in between the unfiltered images of events, with no screens or effects, and the multiplicity of those images on blurry monitors of different sizes. I have grown used to watching television this way. (...) I find it boring to watch a single station for several minutes,’ I remember him saying several times. ‘In the afternoon, sometimes I stop in here; I like to watch the evening news again on these televisions, in silence.’

More than a conversation, I remember this as a long, spontaneous monologue, though my occasional interjections might have allowed him to continue his confession.

‘Generally I work late and sometimes I go to the editing room at night. Since our station is so small, it is controlled by just one operator at night. In the editing room they let me use, I play around with the day’s recordings a bit. I turn on all the monitors and watch the news again, the morning programmes and maybe one or two other recordings I happen to find. I play a tape and start turning on the monitors one by one... The same image looks a bit different on each one. I can spend hours watching all the different stations, though not without altering them a bit;

I remove the colour, add interference, then I rewind and fast-forward them quickly until they form a sort of mosaic that is more about movement than clarity. (...) Sometimes I fantasise that what I am watching is on the air, but then I realise that it's just that, a passing fiction that I have created for myself.'

When I asked him to describe some of the videos he made back in his days as an artist, he told me about his final project.

'It had to do with documenting my resignation from art. A year after I stopped making art, I thought of recording the moment when I threw my television set into the ocean; it would be the final act. So I asked a cameraman who was a friend of mine to record it.'

'You threw a television set into the ocean?' I asked incredulously.

'Yes, the night before I had seen something on television, a guy who claimed to be an artist, and it was in such bad taste, so unreal, that I realised I could no longer be any part of all that; so early the next morning I called this colleague of mine and he came right over carrying a professional camera. I remember that my television set was on channel 40. We had a cup of coffee, and then he turned on the camera. He asked me a few questions about what we were going to do on camera, and then he panned in on my hand as I unplugged the television.'

31 August 1989 was a Thursday; it was cloudy, which is unusual for Los Angeles, and he thought that would give the material a certain air of melancholy. The newspaper headlines that day were all about Mayor Tom Bradley, who had been summoned to appear in a Los Angeles court. There was a partial solar eclipse that day, though it was barely visible at that latitude. That night, there would be a new moon.

'I remember that we took a few shots on my street while I carried the set to the car, which was parked a few blocks away. At that

hour, there were already people on the streets. Several of them stopped to look at me carrying the television on my shoulder,' I seem to remember him saying.

'It didn't take more than a few hours,' said the cameraman, whom I managed to speak with a few months later. 'Actually, we had to be in the studio right after lunch. I think the hardest part was finding the right spot in San Pedro port, which is where we went to dump the set.'

'I know for sure that the material we taped does exist, and it must be somewhere in his house,' his colleague said outside the Lacy Street studio.

'The place was some kind of dock,' I heard him say several times during the recording of the short interview. 'If I remember correctly, I recorded everything from the car; he walked away and, at one point, threw the set into the water. I turned off the camera and walked to the end of the dock, where we watched for a few minutes in silence as the waves covered and uncovered the television set. He never really told me why he had done it.'

'We went right back to Lincoln Heights,' said the protagonist of this story. 'I felt like a new man. It was over. I was no longer one of the artists who used television to do interventions or who played with the technical features of video, of transmission. Those days were over; they no longer mattered. Now I was just a worker at a TV station,' he told me as we left the Society, before continuing to make his way along San Fernando Road.

I ran into him a few more times, but our conversations were not relevant to this story. He never failed to tell me about how disturbed he was by the fact that Andy Warhol had been on *The Love Boat*, or how Chris Burden bought commercial airtime on another local station, though he seemed less upset about that when I next saw

him. I don't think he talked to anyone else about these things.

Months later, I tried several times to find him. I wanted to know more about his art, about others doing similar work during that period. But I soon became convinced that the story, born of chance, had come to an end: at the television studio I was told that he had been fired, and no one at the Society ever saw him again.

When the material that documented his last artistic act finally surfaced in an archive at the Lacy Street studio, we realised that those tapes had probably never been played before. One night a couple of years ago, I sat down with a few of his colleagues to watch the recording on the multiple monitors at the editing table. It was all just as he had described it, in a style reminiscent of television twenty years ago. However, beyond the subtle feeling of watching something strangely familiar, what really struck me was that the only voice in the entire recording, the voice of the protagonist of this story, was saying, 'All those colours are making me blind.'

BIOGRAPHY

Mario García Torres is a Mexican artist. His work, *All Those Colours are Making me Blind (the Beginning of the End of Videoart)*, 2008, takes the form of a video presented on nine monitors, addressing the implication of visual artists in transmissions for the small screen and the practical impossibility of considering video as an artistic medium beyond the television signal. The work has been thought out, developed and constructed as if it had been written in 1989. The essay post-dates the work.

Philosophy on Television: Impossible Dream?

Tamara Chaplin

[Vladimir Jankelevitch](#):• “When philosophy is suspect in society we should be anxious, because it shows that society has less interest in truth.”

French television has broadcast more than 3,500 programs featuring philosophers and their work between 1951 – the year when Jean-Paul Sartre first appeared on the television news – and the end of the twentieth century.¹ Given the apparently antithetical nature of these two entities, one a popular visual technology reliant on the image, the other an abstract intellectual discipline founded on the word, the mere existence of these programs is remarkable. It challenges fundamental prejudices about the incompatibility of mass media and high culture, and belies the argument that television is necessarily anti-intellectual, a threat to democracy, cultural and moral values, and the inevitable arch-enemy of the book. And while this phenomenon could perhaps first be understood as a result of the French state taking the educational mission of public service programming to heart,

¹ For my argument on how the history of the televising of philosophy is inextricable from the development of French national identity in the post Second World War era and for a broader treatment of the themes addressed here, see: Tamara Chaplin, *Turning On the Mind: French Philosophers on Television*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

• Vladimir Jankelevitch, «A quoi servent les philosophes?», *Apostrophes*. François Chatel, director, and Bernard Pivot, producer and host. Antenne 2 (January 18, 1980), INA (1h 14 min 6 s)

it is astonishing to note that even after privatization (in 1984), such broadcasts not only survived, they actually thrived. Indeed, despite the inherent difficulty of the exercise, by regularly inviting philosophers to the small screen, for over half a century French television has forced a confrontation between philosophers, their ideas and the broader public. Leaving aside for the moment historical interpretations concerning *why* such a wealth of “philosophical television” exists in France, this modern marriage of seemingly incongruent mediums underscores a significant question: What is the nature of this presence? Put otherwise, is it really possible to *do* philosophy on television? Can complex ideas be transmitted on the small screen?

Socrates Would Have Detested Television

According to some, it is impossible. Television’s temporal and structural constraints are opposed to the communication of complex thought. *On Le Cercle de Minuit*’s December 6, 1994 broadcast “Spécial: Philosophie,” one guest fumed, “Socrates would have subscribed to the idea that television constitutes a grave menace to the city.” Why? Because, “the power of a spirit like Socrates requires time for expression.” Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu agreed. “Is it possible to think fast,” he asked in *On Television*, without thinking “in clichés?”² Hasty and superficial by definition, so the argument goes, television fosters urgency, craves “cultural fast food” and necessarily stifles thoughtful discussion. The conclusion is that television forces philosophers to reinvent themselves either as propagandists, who summarize

2 Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*. New York: The New Press, 1999, p. 28.

their oeuvre in formulaic sound-bites and vulgarizing slogans, or as crass peddlers, hawking their books in order to increase sales. Such criticisms raise legitimate fears. They also hinge on three disciplinary assumptions: the first is that “doing philosophy” takes time; the second is that, since philosophy is fundamentally verbal and abstract, there is nothing to show; and the third is that philosophy should be, like intellectual production at large, divorced from material concerns. The first two of these stances see the relationship between television, time, and the image as completely structural. In this way, they oversimplify the effects of historical change. The latter stance betrays a naive view of the way that intellectual capital functions. Collectively, these positions presume that since early public television (from the fifties, sixties and seventies) privileged longer, uninterrupted broadcasts and largely eschewed advertizing, it must have supported the televising of philosophy more readily than the post-privatization, market-driven environment (of the eighties, nineties, and the twenty-first century). Let’s take up each of these objections in turn.

Too Little Time and Nothing to Show

Does the televising of philosophy require time? There is no doubt that the lengthy formats and deliberate pacing of early public programming were indeed amenable to the kind of sustained dialogue that supports philosophical exchange. And it is undeniable that the introduction of advertizing (in 1968), the emphasis on entertainment and the turn to flashy graphics and rapid-fire edits that followed privatization in the 1980s posed challenges for intellectual broadcasts. However, it suffices to plunge into the archives of France’s *Institut National de l’audiovisuel* (INA) to

complicate a thesis of cultural decline.³ Interestingly, numerous examples, from Michel Foucault's fifteen minute discussion of *Les mots et les choses* (*The Order of Things*) on *Lectures pour tous* (June 15, 1966) to Jean-François Lyotard's equally brief interrogation of the role of the intellectual in the media on *Tribune Libre* (March 27, 1978), illustrate that even in the era of public television, substantive philosophical exchange did take place on the small screen in limited periods of time.

In *Tribune Libre's* fifteen-minute sequence on Jean-François Lyotard, innovative camera-work proves integral to the program's philosophical argument about the relationship between power, representation and truth. While rare, such examples illustrate how television's visual dimension can serve philosophical exchange – even within the framework of a temporally limited broadcast.

Jean-Claude Cordy (producer. FR3, March 27, 1978) INA.

And even in a commercial landscape, where the short format reigns (as epitomized by the ironically titled four-minute philosophy clip *Pas si vite!* (Not So Fast!), which aired from 1995–99 on the cable network Canal Plus), a wealth of full-length broadcasts on philosophy (like the 1994 program noted above) continued to be produced. Thus, both the temporal requirements of philosophical television and the effects of historical change are often overestimated.

But does philosophy have a visual dimension? In interviews that I conducted, several philosophers responded to this query. “No!” philosopher Luc Ferry told me emphatically – despite his regular appearances on the small screen.

³ Many of the broadcasts referred to here can be viewed at the website of the Institut national de l'audiovisuel (INA, the French national television archive), at <http://www.ina.fr>.

Television does not allow the communication of concepts – only of convictions.

Luc Ferry, “Pourquoi la philosophie est-elle si populaire?”
Bouillon de culture. Bernard Pivot, producer. France 2,
(December 20, 1996) INA

Both Yves Jaigu, former president of France-Culture (1975–84) and Jean-Noël Jeanneney, former president of Radio France (1982–86) share this opinion and insist that, given philosophy’s reliance on the word, radio is a superior means of philosophical transmission. From this perspective, the visual serves merely to distract.

Renowned French philosopher Alain Badiou, however, argues that philosophy exists as both discourse and corporeal practice. For Badiou, philosophy is a profoundly embodied activity, and as such, visual. He informed me, “we can say what we like, but philosophy, singularly because it is *not* uniquely *un savoir* (a body of knowledge), needs a figure of transmission that is not simply a book and is not merely abstract speech... Socrates was corporeally present.” Pierre Dumayet, one of the premier journalists of early French TV (and the first to interview Michel Foucault on the small screen, in 1966) agrees. Dumayet also insists that while we may not be able to learn philosophy from television, it is nevertheless capable of demonstrating “philosophy in action.” As he told me, “What we can do is give demonstrations of this way of thinking... Foucault is an excellent example. We watch him speak for ten minutes, we understand, we easily see that he doesn’t speak like anyone else at all and that he has great form – like an athlete running.” He continued softly, his voice lost in memory, “Foucault’s conceptual form was superb.”

Nevertheless, Dumayet concluded, “We cannot learn to do philosophy in fifty-two minutes or even in twice that. What we can do is touch people, if you will, or something akin to that. We can get you *interested* in philosophy.”

[Michel Foucault](#): • “I ask myself, are we completely unable to recognize that thought might have something else entirely to do beyond just prescribing to men how they should act?”

Television’s explicitly visual dimension rendered it a surprisingly useful technology both for demonstrating philosophy as process and for attracting new audiences to the discipline. It also promoted the production of powerful new forms of philosophical iconography. In 1961, for example, French audiences were enchanted by footage of the eminent philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard, who – with his aged face, tufted white beard, broad forehead, mischievous eyes, and aura of wisdom (all suggestive of the classical Greek image of the philosopher) –visually symbolized the sages of old.

Jean-Claude Bringuier: “People who don’t do philosophy commonly think that philosophy doesn’t really serve any use.”

[Gaston Bachelard](#): •• “Yes, well, in my opinion, it is useful to think with. Of course, if you don’t mind depriving yourself of any original thoughts, you can skip philosophy.”

The clip, which appeared on the celebrated news magazine, *Cinq colonnes à la une*, captured 83% of the viewing audience and

- Michel Foucault, *Lectures pour tous*. Jean Bertho, director, Pierre Dumayet and Pierre Desgraupes, producers. Canal 1 (June 15, 1966), ORTF, INA (14 min 35 s)
- Gaston Bachelard, “Portrait d’un philosophe”, *Cinq colonnes à la une*. Hubert Knapp, director, Jean-Claude Bringuier, journalist. Canal 1 (December 1, 1961), ORTF, INA (9 min 35 s)

became a television classic; by the end of the century it had been rebroadcast more than twenty times. Such successes indicate that due to the theatrical nature of the discipline, which is founded on the Socratic dialogue and rooted in an embodied oral practice, philosophy has clearly profited from its relationship with the small screen. But do philosophers sincerely envision TV simply as an opportunity to “incarnate” their work, or are they actually motivated by more prosaic desires?

Social Sage or Market Whore?

It is well known that in the intellectual milieu, money and marketing are taboo. Everyone feigns disinterest. And yet, as the influence of TV spread, its commercial impact multiplied exponentially. For philosophers, the results could be astonishing. Thus, during the weeks following Vladimir Jankelevitch’s January 18, 1980 television appearance on the literary show *Apostrophes*, the seventy-six year old French philosopher sold thirty thousand books – more than he had over the course of his entire career. Despite the evident marketing advantages, however, few philosophers have been prepared to admit that they assiduously court media exposure. After all, media mastery threatens the sacred myth of intellectual objectivity. The real sin, of course, lies not in attracting media coverage (no philosopher has received more TV airtime in France than Sartre who was discussed or appeared on the air more than 610 times between 1951 and 1999), but rather in appearing to orchestrate that coverage on one’s own behalf. Thus, media-savvy Bernard-Henri Lévy – known as BHL – finds his work lampooned as often as his poetic good looks, shock of black hair, and unbuttoned white shirts. Suddenly, debates about whethertelevision can transmit philosophy

spill over into arguments about disciplinary boundaries and the dangers of promotional tools. Does the modern French philosopher (as Jean Baudrillard once maintained) occupy not the public space, but the publicity space?

François Aubral: “Bravo Bernard-Henri Lévy, you are a publicity genius, three times over!”

[Bernard-Henri Lévy](#): • “Well, if publicity is about getting my ideas to the maximum number of readers possible, I’m all for it!”

Control over the attribution and diffusion of intellectual power has shifted since the end of the nineteenth century from the universities to the publishing houses to the modern mass media – and in particular, to television. Television hosts (as the career of *Apostrophes*’s host Bernard Pivot made blisteringly apparent) have become important cultural mediators. They now exercise unprecedented influence over the intellectual field. It is hardly surprising that some philosophers view this development – which has dispossessed them of considerable authority and prestige – with some misgivings. Television not only hi-jacked traditional systems for assessing intellectual value, it also aggravated long-standing proscriptions against scholarly self-promotion while raising ominous predictions about the death of intellectual culture per se. In an article titled, “Le philosophe masqué” (published in *Le Monde* in April of 1980), Michel Foucault refers to the “deep-seated anxiety” and the “sense of impotence” that the mass media, “who direct the world of books and create or destroy

- Bernard-Henri Lévy, «Les nouveaux philosophes sont-ils de droite ou de gauche?», *Apostrophes*. François Chatel, director, Bernard Pivot, producer and host. Antenne 2 (May 27, 1977), INA (1 h 16 min 10 s)

reputations at will” provoke amongst the intellectual elite. Many philosophers – even those frequently seen on TV – invariably express reticence (if not outright hostility) vis-à-vis the medium. However, as Foucault continues, “I shall never be convinced that a book is bad because its author has been seen on television. But of course, it isn’t good for that reason alone either.”

Why France? Philosophical Television and French National Identity

Philosophy seeks a portal into the fundamental nature of human existence. By providing a framework for interrogating the nature of being-in-the-world, ethics, aesthetics, logic, and epistemology, it promises the kind of conceptual emancipation that goes hand in hand with political democracy. But as cultural signifier, as political tool, as celebrity iconography, and as demonstrative lure, in the second half of the twentieth century philosophy has also functioned as part of a conservative project that seeks to consolidate and protect a specific version of national identity – understood as white, Western and patriarchal – through the construction of a common cultural imaginary and an epistemological frame.

Since at least the eighteenth century, France has presented philosophers and philosophy as the apogee of its rich, culturally sophisticated patrimony. To this day, the discipline signifies a set of attributes –intelligence, sophistication, gravity, wisdom, depth, and tradition – that have been culturally coded to capture and convey a certain idea of what it means to be French. Television has promoted this status, while creating new forms of philosophical identity and new branches of philosophical production. It has also cultivated a broad public, one taught to

associate knowledge of philosophy with national literacy. The discipline's unique status in the French school system – France is among the very few countries where philosophy at the *lycée* level is required, taught by specially trained professors and evaluated by national, compulsory exams – is inextricable from the ways in which French television has publicized philosophy as a national right, a cultural asset, and a moral guide. Is all that passes for philosophy on French TV good? Of course not. Has it gotten more difficult, especially in the era of privatization, to control the conditions that support quality productions? Definitely. But can we “do” philosophy on television? Even a cursory glance at the archival evidence demonstrates that the only accurate response is a positive one.

Whether we admire the results or not, the history of the televising of philosophy demands that we jettison presumptions about the fundamentally anti-intellectual nature of the visual field and raises critical questions about the role of education in democratic societies, the relationship between high and popular culture, the public function of intellectuals, and the very survival of national identities in a globalizing world. Finally, it encourages us to rethink philosophy itself – asserting that the content of the discipline is indivisible from the new media forms in which it finds expression.

[Jean-Paul Sartre](#): • “Fifty years ago, people and intellectuals were separate, but now that should no longer be the case. Not so that intellectuals can give counsel to the people, but to the contrary, so that the masses can take on a new form... and that is why I tell you that we shall surely see one another again.”

- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre par lui-même*, part 2. Alexandre Astruc, Michel Contat, directors (1972). First broadcast on TF1 (April 22, 1980), INA (1 h 37 min 30 s)

BIOGRAPHY

Tamara Chaplin is a historian of ideas. Her book on philosophy on television (*Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2007) constitutes a major contribution to understanding the role of the philosopher on the screen and the studio as a potential classroom.

Just Words

Albert Serra

–What does it mean to work on the basis of a classic text?

As a filmmaker, for me a classic text is simply a name or a group of names condensed into a formula that, though formed by common nouns, is in structure identical to a proper noun. This formula, this concealed proper noun, is the title of the book, the title of the classic text before me. It could be said that this very particular ‘proper name’ is actually a complex, voluminous sign that cannot be reduced to a single use.

Such a title is always polysemic; it is charged with a diverse array of meanings that become a part of the title itself. These meanings come from different realms: from the individual sphere – the reader – or from the collective sphere, with all the visions – which are not necessarily *readings* – that have taken notice of the title. The origins of these meanings vary as well (they come from memory, use, culture), and, insofar as it is a legitimate proper name, the title is bound by no restrictions (as opposed to a common noun, which is inevitably forced to refer to an *essence*); the title is wholly indifferent to ‘the syntagma in which it is located’, that is, the context in which the name is said or even thought. Indeed, though it has most of the characteristics of a common noun, a title can act as a proper noun in any type

of syntagma. And therein lies its magic, and what makes the title *adaptable*. Thus, it becomes a vast receptacle that can host multiple semes, which come and go like guests.

I am indebted to Roland Barthes for the word *semes*, which – as the minimal unit of lexicological or grammatical meaning – provided me with a free yet fatal way of tackling the adaptation of literary texts. These ‘semes’ or ‘figures’ (a word easier to grasp) are often ‘images’. Despite their imaginary nature, they are endowed with a perfect semantic validity that is only arbitrary on a superficial level. The referent of this proper name, of the title, is the textual corpus of the book. That is not, however, the same as its meaning, which only we can create. Indeed, the meaning can seem contrary to or very removed from the textual reality of the book when we read it in depth. Likewise, this textual reality is not the *truth* of the book... It differs from the truth of the meaning of the book to the same extent that this truth differs from the meaning that we have imagined.

Only a classic text, then, can act as a proper noun, as a true sign with the unfathomable richness that this entails. Unknown texts, texts yet to be discovered or lacking universality, do not engage in this process of catalysing meaning; they are left in the realm of common nouns. *Inadaptable*, they are nothing but a bunch of commonplaces, incapable of setting off inside of us the process of spiritual *translation* (adaptation) that the mere title of a classic text produces spontaneously. ‘Reading is on the threshold of spiritual life; it can introduce us to it: it does not constitute it,’ wrote Proust. To adapt a non-canonical text is to read, to entertain ourselves; to adapt a classic text is to write (live).

I believe that this parallel serves to establish another basic characteristic of authentic adaptation (necessarily of a classic

text). Any written text has a semantic, paraphrasable and propositional content. A text may be banal, absurd, irrelevant and full of falsehoods, but it always has a content. There is no escaping that. Although it may be possible to make sentences that don't look beyond themselves, it is very hard not to say anything when using written sentences in any language with a consolidated grammatical formulation; some avant-garde poets have tried to. For me, though, adapting for film means precisely destroying any trace of meaning that has been previously established by a written, textual referent. Due to their purity, images do not have meanings; they are not paraphrasable or propositional. The authentic creator bravely faces this abyss, this helplessness. The spiritual effort involved in seeking the non-propositional meaning of a written text must take place deep within us (with a tool, proper nouns or, in this case, its equivalent, the title). It must necessarily make use of a non-propositional formulation, that is, a visual and therefore lyrical formulation (one untranslatable, whose beauty is such that it consumes itself and contributes nothing, *says* nothing). Hence the fatalism that all sincere adaptation entails: it cannot cease to be what it is because it cannot be anything else; it can be neither faithful nor unfaithful to the text that it adapts: what true artist can fool him/herself? In fact, I am speaking not only of true artists, and therein lies the power of artistic truth (which is greater than philosophical or speculative truth): false artists cannot help but see their falseness in their own works, which not only give them away, but denounce them.

My entire method has always been based on an understanding of this fatal fact. And each decision I have made, no matter how small, has been an attempt to find the most 'honourable' way of confronting it, as one confronts the inevitability of death: I have

rejected experimentalism and the cowardliness that it entails; my shoots have never been longer than a few days; I have never worked with professionals; I have always adjusted my work to the available budget, and – the supreme and first fatality, one full of mysterious and impossible resonances – I have only filmed that which I have loved.

–What does television mean today to a filmmaker like you?

Nothing, because television has ceased to be a powerful tool of communication. It is no longer useful, nor is it understood as a support that might serve to reinforce the communicational side of certain images, even film images; taken for granted, television can neither create nor communicate any imaginary. All of the images that we see today on television are wrapped in an aura of powerlessness; they are depressive, sick, in a strictly clinical sense. But not on an organic level: these are the same images that were once healthy (there are old images on television that were created in other supports, times, formats and conditions); they are, rather, psychologically sick. They have undergone mental, not physical, deterioration in two opposing yet complementary senses: in the mind of all current television viewers and, strange though it may seem, retrospectively, in the mind of the creators. This even applies to the creators of old images who are still alive and, from a distance, capable of influencing or, indeed, ‘infecting’ the images created in the past with this current mental illness.

This is a process of mentally formatting images to make them fit for broadcasting, a process that initially had quite ingenuous visual consequences, like the eagerness of *communications* magnates to colour classic black-and-white films. That is no longer

necessary: the authors of the past, with their current *lifestyles*, are the ones who format these images from their own offices. (Obviously, current authors and images are exempt from this analysis.) Thus, remarkably, current television programmers are not resistant to programming old images, which might seem logical, but to programming images by dead authors. After all, psychiatrists and mental health professionals, even psychoanalysts without medical degrees, need to be invested with some sort of authority... Today, the author plays that role.

Interestingly, this powerlessness has not affected film or art images (the latter having another problem). Though film cannot create any powerful imaginary, its images are still powerful, though perhaps artificially, and without the ability to crystallise (embody) an imaginary. They are, nonetheless, intense and surprising. And the proof of this lies in the fact that, unlike television, film, if incapable of creating an imaginary, does not need to *recreate* one (which is what television, like all depressives, does incessantly, in an absurd and vast self-referential spiral). To a certain extent, the importance of the imaginary to film is a matter of happenstance. Despite its popular and spontaneous origin, which is linked to photography (the origin of film is different from the origin of television, which is linked to spectacle), the creation of an imaginary is not its purpose. Film is, even today, the space of lyricism, which is intolerable in television: it is a narrative (and, hence, epic) space and a space of aesthetic redemption in relation to its historical errors, but it is mostly lyrical. Film renders lyrical (joyful) images that the medium of television renders depressive (passive). It also *narrates* them, as opposed to simply showing them. This combination makes film fascinating. I don't think this is the place to talk about the subversive

aspect of television, or its political immediacy, or its utopian power to effect social transformation. Television was the first tool of communication with power, the first language whose core superbly, lightly and elegantly included its own critique (this would later affect all languages and forms of communication, from scientific language to political speeches). Indeed, it assimilated this critique so well that, from the very beginning, it formed an essential part of all television images. Thus, we can affirm with absolute confidence that all the imaginaries that television has created are, by definition, aesthetically corrupt; they are also morally despicable, but that doesn't matter as much.

I would like to find something positive to say about television. I try hard to think of something. It would be more original, and even useful. But I can't come up with anything. I don't think there is anything good to say about it.

In his final years, Jean Baudrillard stated that, in the face of the confusion and sterile play that reigned in the art world (play reduced to an extremely small sphere), and, therefore, the impossibility of passing any sort of aesthetic (or moral) judgment on the objects that circulated in that world (they had become mere fetishes), all he could do was discover if, behind the images that he saw, there lay an 'illusion'. (In both senses of the word, I would add: illusion as an enthusiastic hope and as a quixotic error of the senses in which a mere appearance is mistaken for reality.) The most visible and maddening symptom of depressive people is that they don't have 'illusions'. Modestly, I believe that there is a great *illusion* behind everything I have done, in the romantic sense of the word, that is, 'the error of the senses': an error, ultimately,

that arises from fanaticism and from a passionate commitment to the first meaning of the word *illusion*, that is, to an ingenuous and always renewed enthusiasm.

BIOGRAPHY

Albert Serra is a Catalan film director and producer who has created for the exhibition *Are you Ready for TV?* the mini-series *The Names of Christ* based on *De los nombres de Cristo* by Fray Luis de León, where he addresses the importance of the act of meaning and the difficulty of assigning images to concepts as abstract as Christ.

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