Television

Television is arguably one of the most powerful and significant contemporary media, deeply tied to the historical, cultural, political, economical and social formations of the twentieth century. Its importance, however, cannot be comprehended fully without examining its complex (inter-) relationship with the various factors of social reality that comprises everyday life – that is, the fact that television is everywhere. While it became commercially available in the 1920s, the ubiquity – or everyday-ness – of the televisual medium began in the 1950s, first in the United States and then throughout the globe. Television was by no means the first medium that organized our audio-visual experience; as we will see, it had predecessors. However, television was the first audio-visual medium that occupied the then unnoticed domestic environment. To this day, television remains the most dominant broadcasting apparatus, one that is schematically not so different from that over a half century ago.

**Remediation: Where Did It Come from?**

A number of media theorists have attempted to situate television within the larger history of media by comparing it to ‘old media’ such as cinema or to ‘new media’ such as computers, online culture, cellphones and beyond. However, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin remind us that illustrating the distinction between old and new media entails the issue of ‘remediation’, a concept that describes the relationship between the old and new as a form of continuity, with the new ‘re-mediating’ the old. Rather than the new causing a rupture through its unknown-ness, the old is first effectively incorporated into the new, smoothing the transition. At the same time, the relation between the old and new remains contentious, both seeking to establish their own medium specificities (technologically, empirically and commercially) in a rapidly changing media landscape. As a new audio-visual medium emerging after cinema and radio, television’s development primarily revolved around these two existing media: cinema as an audio-visual predecessor and radio as a broadcasting predecessor.

**Centralization: One-way Medium**

Television’s capacity, its commercial utility, and the stability of its system in large part depend on existing media. In many cases across the globe, television and its broadcast operations were established within a conceptual and industrial framework that had surfaced with radio. Susan Douglas traces the nonlinear evolution of radio broadcasting by focusing on the initial ‘divergence’ of its technical traits and deployments in the United States during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Not having antecedents, radio had embraced the interactive mode of private, individual and amateur medium engagements until the public, institutional and commercial ‘convergence’ of the broadcast form by state and corporate took over in the early 1920s. Television inherited this centrally controlled broadcasting and distribution system. Its mode of production as well as the concept of programming in the 1950s were little different from today’s norm of the medium. While the technological developments during the past fifty years – from tube to flat, from terrestrial to satellite, from wired to wireless, and in the broadest sense, from analogue to digital – mark drastic shifts, television’s cultural status and what television constitutes in everyday life have transformed little over the period: television is the institutionally standardized broadcast medium that engages in a one-way relationship with us.

**Interaction: Two-way Medium and Beyond**

Yet does television only promote passive submission, one inhibited by commercial or national constraints? Is the viewer homogeneous enough to maintain the medium’s stability? The term ‘tele-vision’ (‘distance-seeing’) indicates a desire to achieve extended vision, an active engagement to enhance human (visual) capacity. Some media theorists and historians have investigated television as an active and interactive two-way medium spanning distances. William Uricchio, among others, has attempted to unearth a televisual imagination in the late nineteenth century by resituating the then newly invented technologies such as the telephone and telegraph. These word-based communication technologies enabled people ‘at a distance’ to interact with each other ‘in real time.’ Visual media equivalents to the telephone or telegraph were already envisioned in science-fiction novels, illustrations and other cultural products during the period. This imagined two-way visual medium in part corresponded to the actual postwar configuration of television, whose ‘liveness’ overcame the ‘delay’ specific to cinema, given the time needed to develop the print. The influential French film critic and theorist André Bazin, in his writings in the 1950s, stressed the unprecedented potential of television, whose capacity to broadcast live would build an intimate sense of temporal co-presence between the image and the viewer. For him, the live image allows the viewer to participate in events, movements and transformations as they occur. Bazin did see the possibility of two-way medial experience in television.

However, as Bazin himself seemed to be aware, this participation might be more phenomenological than real; the liveness of the event that television transmits as they occur (just like a flow) is ultimately not real. The familiar and ‘everyday’ machine that is ubiquitous in the domestic sphere is simultaneously distant from the real world we live in. The potential of television as a thoroughly critical machine (through two-way interaction) is paradoxically undermined by the liveness and everyday-ness specific to television. In this sense, television embodies the oxymoronic status of ‘everyday modernism’ in the sense that the modernist status of the televisual medium (belief in the possibility of interacting with and critiquing the world by means of its newness – liveness) is constantly nullified by the banality of its everyday-ness. This paradox partly echoes the mediated relationship between the old and new and, at the same time resituates television vis-à-vis the characteristic culture of postmodernism, as it can also be seen to go beyond modernism through its endless repetition of signs without referents.

Reference and further reading

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Paratextual Material

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