

Pages 307–312 — TV as Object, Not Just Screen

Summary

- McCarthy introduces the concept of “**TV settings**”: multimedia arrangements people create around TV sets—especially **outside the home**, in **immigrant-run urban retail spaces** like restaurants, delis, and snack bars.
 - These TV settings are framed as **expressive installations**, combining religious icons, family photos, commercial posters, souvenirs, and the screen itself.
 - The TV is analyzed not just as a **medium of transmission** (images), but as a **material object**—a surface, a shrine, a shelf, a part of the architecture.
 - Drawing from thinkers like Bill Brown (misuse value) and Michel de Certeau (everyday creativity), McCarthy shows how users **repurpose TV sets** in “unreasonable” ways—blending **pragmatic placement** with **personal, symbolic, and cultural meaning**.
 - A key example is Bella Italia’s pizzeria, where the TV is surrounded by a visual collage of trophies, peppers, sacred images, surveillance cameras, and license certificates—becoming a site of **transnational cultural expression**.
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Course Theme Connections

Theme	Explanation
Fantasy vs. Reality	The fantasy of media’s power is grounded by its physical presence . The sacred and the mundane coexist on and around the TV, collapsing boundaries between divine, nostalgic, and technological symbols.
Image/Screen/Interface Function	The TV is not just a “screen,” but an interface in space —a point of connection between images, objects, rituals, and users. It becomes an interactive cultural display , much like a decorated digital home screen or desktop.

Space and Time Alteration

TV settings produce what McCarthy calls **space-binding effects**—collapsing “there” and “here,” memory and present, via objects and images. The souvenir plate and the live soccer broadcast both create senses of **elsewhereness**, but in different temporalities.

Q1. How does the concept of “TV settings” challenge traditional ideas of what a screen or interface is?

Answer:

TV settings show that the screen is not an isolated frame—it is part of a **wider interface system** made up of surrounding objects, signs, and user practices. This echoes how **digital interfaces today also include the environment** (wallpapers, browser tabs, open windows). They become curated spaces of identity and belonging.

Q2. What is the significance of McCarthy's use of Bill Brown's “misuse value” in the context of immigrant-run retail spaces?

Answer:

Brown's idea of **misuse value** refers to using objects in unorthodox, creative ways. In McCarthy's context, immigrant communities repurpose the TV as a **site of memory, cultural assertion, and economic necessity**—transforming its meaning beyond commercial entertainment into a **transnational storytelling surface**.

Q4. How might this analysis complicate ideas that media only “displace” people from the real world?

Answer:

Rather than detaching viewers from reality, these TV settings **embed media into lived, social environments**. They show that media is **material, aesthetic, and relational**—a way of **reclaiming space** rather than escaping it.

Q1. How do TV settings challenge traditional media studies' focus on screens as passive interfaces?

Answer:

Materiality over Virtuality: TVs are not just screens but physical nodes in cultural networks (e.g., adorned with holy icons, used as shelves).

Actor-Network Theory (Latour): TVs act as mediators, shaping social practices (e.g., surveillance cameras on TVs enforce worker-customer dynamics).

Misuse Value (Brown): Repurposing TVs as shrines or decor rejects their commercial function, asserting diasporic identity.

Q2. Why are immigrant-owned spaces particularly rich sites for analyzing “misuse value”?

Answer:

Diasporic Tactics (de Certeau): Immigrants navigate marginalization by creatively repurposing objects (e.g., turning TVs into transnational shrines).

Hybrid Aesthetics: Clashing symbols (e.g., Sicilian peppers + NYC licenses) reflect Bhabha’s “third space”, where cultural identity is negotiated.

Economic Pragmatism: Surveillance cameras on TVs blend security needs with cultural expression (e.g., sacred images as “protection”).

Q3. How do TV settings complicate the idea of “authentic” cultural representation?

Answer:

Anti-Essentialism: Eclectic objects (e.g., Patti LaBelle photos + Italian flags) reject monolithic notions of “Italianness” or “Americanness.”

Walter Benjamin’s “Aura”: The TV loses its mass-media aura but gains new authenticity through ritualized decoration (e.g., folk symbols).

Glocalization: Live satellite broadcasts (global) are filtered through local material practices (e.g., souvenir plates from Carini).

Batch 2 (Pages 7–12)

✓ Summary

McCarthy shifts focus to **TV placement on refrigerators** in small urban businesses (e.g., delis, snack bars). These settings blend:

- **Spatial constraints:** TVs are placed on fridges due to limited space, merging utilitarian appliances with media displays.
- **Commercial ephemera:** Promotional stickers, food posters (e.g., smoked fish ads), and tourist souvenirs create a cluttered aesthetic.

- **Transnational affect:** Russian variety shows on TV, Slavic decor (e.g., Fila brand stickers), and culinary imagery evoke diasporic nostalgia.

Key examples:

- A Russian delicatessen in San Francisco uses TV screens playing taped satellite broadcasts alongside briny food posters to create a “festive Slavic atmosphere.”
- A NYC deli’s fridge/TV combo juxtaposes raw ingredients (lettuces in a fridge) with artificial flowers and surveillance equipment.

Key Argument: These “fridge/TV” hybrids reflect **misuse value**—repurposing TVs and fridges as sites of both capitalist functionality (e.g., advertising) and cultural expression (e.g., nostalgic decor).

Course Theme Connections

Theme	Explanation	Examples & Theorists
Reality/Fantasy	The fridge’s raw ingredients (reality) clash with TV’s festive broadcasts (fantasy), creating a sensory paradox.	Example: “Watching TV here must also involve looking at the raw materials from which one’s meal is assembled” (p. 11). Theorist: Jean Baudrillard (hyperreality of media vs. material labor).
Function of Images/Screens	The TV becomes a collage surface —ads, magnets, and religious icons compete with the screen’s images, decentralizing the screen’s authority.	Example: Promotional magnets “hold posters to the fridge and... create a distinct visual pattern” (p. 13). Theorist: Lev Manovich (spatial montage in digital interfaces).
Space/Time	Live satellite TV (real-time) contrasts with fixed, “past-tense” food posters, layering temporalities of migration (nostalgia) and assimilation (present labor).	Example: Taped Russian variety shows evoke Soviet-era media, while smoked fish ads reference timeless folk cuisine. Theorist: Andreas Huyssen (twilight memories).

Q1. How does the fridge/TV combo exemplify the tension between capitalism and cultural identity?

- **Answer:**

- **Capitalist Logic:** Fridges store commodities; TVs display ads (e.g., food posters as free marketing for suppliers).
- **Cultural Resistance:** Immigrant workers subvert this by adding folk symbols (e.g., Slavic decor) to create a “**counter-space**” (Michel de Certeau).
- Example: The Fila logo sticker in the Russian deli—a U.S. brand—becomes a diasporic artifact, reflecting both assimilation and nostalgia.

Q2. Why might McCarthy describe these settings as “illegible” to outsiders?

- **Answer:**
 - **Cultural Codification:** Only insiders decode the mix of Soviet-era media, folk symbols, and immigrant pragmatism (e.g., surveillance cameras + holy images).
 - **Tactical Opacity:** Immigrant communities use “**object codes**” (Grey Gundaker) to assert belonging while resisting mainstream legibility.

Q3. How do commercial ephemera (e.g., stickers, magnets) redefine the TV’s role in public space?

- **Answer:**
 - **From Screen to Archive:** TVs become curatorial surfaces, accumulating layers of migrant memory (e.g., souvenir plates) and capitalist debris (e.g., promotional giveaways).
 - **Misuse Value (Bill Brown):** Magnets meant for ads instead hold personal/religious items, repurposing corporate materials for cultural storytelling.

The information in the comment above analysed by DeepSeek : —

Absolutely! Your observation astutely bridges McCarthy’s analysis of TV settings with broader sociological and philosophical ideas about media’s role in shaping perception and identity. Let’s unpack this connection:

1. TV as a Tool for Opinion Transformation

McCarthy’s TV settings reveal how screens are not neutral interfaces but **active agents** in shaping collective consciousness:

- **Cultural Reinforcement:** TVs in immigrant spaces curate diasporic narratives (e.g., Sicilian soccer matches, Soviet-era broadcasts) that reinforce communal identity and nostalgia, subtly resisting assimilationist pressures.

- **Commercial Persuasion:** Promotional stickers/magnets on TVs blend advertising with cultural symbols (e.g., smoked fish posters in Russian delis), naturalizing consumerism within transnational belonging.
- **Surveillance & Discipline:** Surveillance cameras mounted near TVs enforce worker/customer behavior, reflecting Foucault's **panopticon**—media as a tool of social control.

Example: A pizzeria's TV, flanked by Italian flags and Padre Pio icons, transforms patrons' perceptions of "authentic" Italy, merging commercial spectacle (souvenir plates) with diasporic memory.

2. Fantasization of TV: Baudelaire's *Flâneur* & Commercial Spectacle

The comparison to Baudelaire's *flâneur* (the detached urban observer) is brilliant. Here's how TV settings extend this concept:

- **TV as *Flâneur*:** Like the *flâneur*, the TV "observes" the space (via surveillance feeds) while being observed, creating a reflexive gaze. It mediates between the real (raw ingredients in fridges) and the fantastical (live satellite broadcasts).
- **Commercialized Fantasy:** In immigrant-owned shops, TVs are **curated spectacles**—hybrids of sacred icons, folk symbols, and ads—that commodify cultural identity. This mirrors Baudelaire's Parisian arcades, where capitalism and desire intersect.
- **Detached Engagement:** Patrons experience TV settings as *flâneurs*—absorbing the collage of images/objects without full immersion, akin to browsing a digital interface.

Example: The Russian deli's TV, surrounded by briny food posters and Soviet-era variety shows, creates a "festive Slavic atmosphere" that invites customers to consume nostalgia as a product.

3. Philosophical Implications: Hyperreality & the Myth of Authenticity

- **Baudrillard's Hyperreality:** TV settings generate a simulated "Italy" or "Russia" through souvenirs and live feeds, where mediated fantasy (e.g., Carini-themed plates) replaces the "real" homeland.
 - **Benjamin's Aura:** The TV loses its mass-media anonymity and regains "aura" through ritualized decoration (e.g., holy images), transforming it into a sacred-profane object.
 - **Debord's Society of the Spectacle:** Immigrant-owned spaces commodify cultural identity, turning TV settings into **spectacles** that sell belonging (e.g., "authentic" ethnic experiences for tourists).
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Key Takeaway

McCarthy's TV settings are **both mirrors and engines** of social reality:

- They reflect the tension between diasporic identity and capitalist imperatives.
- They actively construct fantasies (nostalgic, commercial) that reshape how communities see themselves and are seen by others.

This aligns with your insight—TVs are not just screens but **cultural handles** that twist perceptions, much like the *flâneur* navigates the city's contradictions. Would you like to dive deeper into how this connects to specific theorists (e.g., Baudrillard, Foucault) or examples from the text? 🔍

Batch 3 (Pages 13–18)

✓ Summary

McCarthy examines **textual signs attached to TV sets** in public spaces, such as bilingual ads in Chinatown video stores and warnings in delis. These signs highlight TV's role as a **local communication tool** and a **transnational interface**. Key elements:

- **Bilingual Ads:** A Chinatown video store uses a TV screen to display bilingual promotions (e.g., “buy three, get one free” in English/Chinese), blending capitalist appeals with cultural specificity.
- **Direct Address:** Signs like “DO NOT TOUCH THE TV” (in three-colored ink) mimic TV's “buttonholing” direct address, merging institutional speech (e.g., management rules) with media's conversational tone.
- **Hybrid Temporalities:** Ads for discounted bus passes (local pragmatism) coexist with Jet Li movie promos (transnational media), layering bureaucratic, economic, and affective dimensions of immigrant life.

Key Argument: TV settings act as **vernacular interfaces**—sites where global media, local labor, and diasporic identity collide, creating a “tactile aesthetics” of transnationalism.

🧠 Course Theme Connections

Theme	Explanation	Examples & Theorists
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Reality/Fantasy	Bilingual signs merge capitalist fantasy (“buy 100 tapes for \$100”) with immigrant reality (discounted bus passes).	Example: The Chinese sign adds a Taiwanese festival reference, blending commercial and cultural nostalgia. Theorist: Baudrillard (simulacra of “transnational China”).
Function of Images/Screens	The TV becomes a prosthetic storefront —a hybrid of screen, ad space, and bureaucratic noticeboard.	Example: A basement video store uses the TV as a “window” to bypass physical obscurity. Theorist: McLuhan (“medium as extension”).
Space/Time	TV settings collapse the “here” (NYC transit passes) and “there” (Jet Li’s Hong Kong films), reflecting the nonlinear time of diaspora .	Example: The vertical Chinese sign addresses struggles of “being a stranger” in urban life. Theorist: Paul Ricoeur (narrative time).

Critical Questions + Theorized Answers

Q1. How do bilingual signs on TVs complicate the idea of a “unified” media audience?

- **Answer:**
 - **Segmented Address:** English/Chinese signs target different audiences—tourists vs. diasporic communities—reflecting **Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding** theory.
 - **Tactical Opacity:** Untranslated Chinese text (e.g., bus pass ads) asserts cultural insiderness, resisting assimilation into dominant linguistic norms (**Homi Bhabha**).

Q2. Why does McCarthy emphasize the “tactility” of signs glued to TVs?

- **Answer:**
 - **Material Resistance:** Gluing signs to TVs literalizes de Certeau’s “tactics”—immigrant workers reclaim screens as **tactile surfaces** for grassroots communication.
 - **Interface as Contact Zone:** Touch (e.g., affixing stickers) transforms TVs into sites of embodied cultural labor, contrasting with digital screens’ “cold” interactivity (**Laura Marks**).

Q3. How do TV settings in Chinatown critique neoliberal “cosmopolitanism”?

- **Answer:**
 - **Localized Cosmopolitanism:** Jet Li promos + bus pass ads reject elite cosmopolitanism, instead asserting a **working-class transnationalism** (Aihwa Ong).
 - **Subaltern Publics:** TVs become platforms for “non-spectacular” capitalist practices (e.g., bulk tape sales), challenging mall/store aesthetics (**Daniel Miller**).
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Key Takeaway

McCarthy’s analysis reveals TV settings as **diasporic palimpsests**—layered, tactile interfaces where:

- Capitalist pragmatism (ads, surveillance) and cultural longing (folk symbols, bilingualism) coexist.
- Screens are **reclaimed** as sites of vernacular design, resisting both mass-media homogenization and state assimilation.

Batch 4 (Pages 19–24)

✓ Summary

McCarthy concludes by framing TV settings as “**transformative objects**” that mediate transnational experience through **misuse value** and **vernacular creativity**. Key points:

- **Misuse Value:** TVs are repurposed as platforms for diasporic storytelling, blending capitalist debris (ads, fridge magnets) with cultural memory (family photos, holy icons).
- **Human Labor:** Anonymous workers (e.g., deli clerks, video store owners) curate TV settings through **tactical acts**—gluing signs, arranging ephemera—that defy corporate or state-sanctioned aesthetics.
- **Critique of “No Sense of Place”:** McCarthy rejects theories that media erode locality (e.g., Meyrowitz), arguing instead that TV settings **reclaim space** by embedding global media into hyper-local, material practices.

Final Example: A Chinatown video store’s TV, adorned with Jet Li promos and untranslated Chinese bus-pass ads, becomes a **transnational interface**—simultaneously capitalist, bureaucratic, and nostalgic.

Course Theme Connections

Theme	Explanation	Examples & Theorists
Reality/Fantasy	TV settings merge capitalist hyperreality (ads) with diasporic longing (folk symbols), creating a palimpsest of belonging .	Example: "The Chinese-language signs... register the transnational conditions of life" (p. 20). Theorist: Baudrillard (simulacra of "transnational China").
Function of Images/Screens	The TV becomes a " semiotic magnet "—attracting handwritten signs, stickers, and relics that decentralize its authority as a screen.	Example: Surveillance cameras + holy images transform TVs into panoptic-sacred hybrids. Theorist: Bruno Latour (objects as "actants").
Space/Time	TV settings compress migrant temporalities: live broadcasts (present), bureaucratic licenses (local time), and souvenirs (past).	Example: Soviet-era variety shows juxtaposed with U.S. promotional stickers. Theorist: Andreas Huyssen (twilight memories).

Critical Questions + Theorized Answers

Q1. How does McCarthy's concept of "misuse value" redefine the political potential of everyday media?

- **Answer:**
 - **Subversive Materiality:** By repurposing TVs as sites of cultural assertion (e.g., Sicilian peppers on screens), immigrant workers **resist commodification** of identity.
 - **Tactical Aesthetics:** Gluing bus-pass ads to TVs reclaims corporate interfaces for grassroots needs, echoing **de Certeau's "tactics"** against capitalist strategies.
 - Example: Russian deli's Fila sticker—a U.S. brand repurposed as Slavic decor—subverts globalized consumer culture.

Q2. Why does McCarthy critique the idea that media erase "sense of place" (Meyrowitz)?

- **Answer:**
 - **Re-localization:** TV settings show media *embedding* locality (e.g., NYC licenses + Italian flags) rather than erasing it.
 - **Spatial Dialectics:** Live satellite feeds (global) are filtered through hyper-local objects (e.g., surveillance cameras), creating **relational space** (Doreen Massey).
 - Example: A pizzeria's TV, flanked by municipal permits, anchors global media in the "here and now" of urban regulation.

Q3. How do TV settings challenge Western notions of "legitimate" art or design?

- **Answer:**
 - **Vernacular Aesthetics:** Immigrant curators elevate cluttered, "illegible" TV displays to **folk art**, rejecting minimalist, corporate design norms.
 - **Rancière's Equality:** TV settings democratize media art, asserting that diasporic bricolage is as valid as gallery installations.
 - Example: The Russian deli's chaotic fridge/TV collage—briny posters, Soviet tapes—becomes a **working-class masterpiece**.
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Key Takeaway

McCarthy's TV settings are **diasporic counter-screens**:

- They reject mass media's "space-binding" fantasy by grounding screens in **material labor** (surveillance, licenses) and **cultural memory** (souvenirs, holy icons).
- They assert that transnational identity is not virtual but **tactile**—assembled through stickers, magnets, and handwritten signs.

This concludes the analysis! Let me know if you'd like to synthesize themes across all batches or focus on specific theorists. 📖✨