

The Textual and Aesthetic Characteristics that Define Television

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Introduction

Television has, from its invention until very recently, been cast as *low culture* or *mass culture*, as distinct from *high culture*, like cinema, ballet and the opera. This has restricted serious research into television as 'a complex combination of industry and artistry'.¹⁸⁶ In this essay I explore the textual, aesthetic and cultural differences between television and other forms of media, especially cinema. The purpose is to see to what extent the two dominant forms of audio-visual information and entertainment are similar and/or different in their respective technological, cultural and economic production and reception.

I will examine the continuing process of the cultural invention of television, and make specific comparisons with cinema and other forms of media in terms of aesthetics, text, production and audience reception. In the process I will analyse the different modes of address and representation of the respective mediums to identify points of similarity and difference. Finally, I conclude that we should seek greater understanding of the nature of this difference as it can help us in our present and future readings of television as a cultural industry.

The Cultural History of Television

Television in a technological sense was invented in the last century, but that event is a small part of the cultural invention of television, in the same way that the technical invention of the cinematic process was only part of the cultural invention of cinema. To appreciate the textual and aesthetic complexity of television we must first examine the evolving history of television as a cultural medium. It is also important to understand the broader social, political and cultural contexts that preceded and subsequently shaped television. As Lynn Spigel notes,

¹⁸⁶ Meehan, Eileen R., "Conceptualizing Culture as Commodity: The Problem of Television." In H. Newcomb (ed.), *Television: The Critical View*, Fifth Edition, NY & Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994

The years which witnessed television's arrival in domestic space were marked by a vast production of discourses which spoke to the relationship between television, the home and the family. The industry and its advertising campaign, popular magazines, books on interior décor, films, newspapers and television programming itself spoke in seemingly endless ways about television's place in the home.¹⁸⁷

The iconic status of the telephone and railways last century is the equivalent of what television is a symbol today. America is the birthplace and home of commercial television, and as such it is the unique contesting historical, social, economic, political and cultural factors of the American cultural landscape that have shaped the nature of commercial television we watch today. Some of those contributing and contesting factors include,

- a) The capitalist/consumer economic system in the United States.
- b) The post-war pre-eminence of the nuclear family.
- c) The post war suburban housing boom that was said to have precipitated a 'nostalgic return to the Victorian cult of domesticity that was predicated upon a clear division between public and private spheres'.¹⁸⁸
- d) Domestic architecture of that period which itself was a discourse on 'this complex relationship between public and private space'.
- e) Radio as a domestic medium that created commercial and dramatic format conventions that were to be later adopted and adapted by television.
- f) Women's magazines and the advertising industry, which together 'offered women instructions on how to cope with television'.¹⁸⁹
- g) 'The gendered division of domestic labour and the complex relations of power entailed by it...organise the experience of watching television'.¹⁹⁰

The harnessing of television as a primary driver of consumerism was inevitable given the prior organisation of radio into the same thing when it overtook the written form as the popular expression of mass culture. The concept of having advertising on air to cover costs and make a profit had been developed in the mid-1920s by the radio set

¹⁸⁷ Spigel, Lynn, "Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948 - 1955", in L.Spigel and D. Mann (eds), *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*, Minneapolis: University of Minn. Press, 1992, p. 3.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. p. 6.

¹⁸⁹ Spigel, Lynn, "The Domestic Economy of Television Viewing in Postwar America", *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol.6:4, 1989, p. 341.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 350 - 351.

manufacturers who had heavily invested in broadcasting transmitters and other infrastructure and were seeking a way to recover those costs. Furthermore, a group of radio stations in 1926 set up the first radio 'network' thus creating a concept that would be developed even further and more profitably later with television.¹⁹¹

Furthermore television offered a perceived

...panacea for the broken homes and hearts of wartime life; not only was it shown to restore faith in family togetherness, but as the most sought-after appliance for sale in post-war America, it also renewed faith in the splendours of consumer capitalism.¹⁹²

It was said that Lucielle Ball in her character *Lucy* was the 'emblematic 1950s consumer'¹⁹³. Given that the show *Lucy*, produced by husband Desi Arnez, was a pioneer in developing the format of the standard American commercial television situation-comedy ('sit-com'), with its upwardly mobile, middle-class nuclear family, set in the domesticity of home for the consumer-obsessed Lucy and the office for Ricky. Undoubtedly the most popular show on American television for many years, *Lucy* illustrates the social, gender, class and economic contestations of its time. It also shows us how the cultural development of television occurred in the context of a patriarchal, ethno-centric, mass-consumer driven society, as well as, paradoxically, that the male supremacist attitudes and conventions of society could be subverted through Lucielle Ball's brilliant anarchic portrayals of an idealised American domestic situation.

Through technical concepts pioneered by Arnez and the *Lucy* show, a standardization of product and broadcast times was achieved which revolutionised commercial television production and invented the 'sit-com'. Whilst this system was said to be 'economically brilliant, if (visually) artistically retrograde',¹⁹⁴ it produced a format for television that lingers to this day and represents a significant historical and cultural moment in the on-going love affair between television and consumer capitalism.

¹⁹¹ Allen, Robert C., "More Talk About TV", *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: television and contemporary criticism*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 18.

¹⁹² Spigel, 1989, p. 340.

¹⁹³ Mellencamp, Patricia, '*Lucy*', *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age & Comedy*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 324.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

Television and the Domestic Space

'Television is a domestic medium'¹⁹⁵ and it is consumed in the home. The television set functions as a symbolic centrepiece for domestic space and the actual layout of the home has historically been altered to accommodate its presence. Television presupposes it will be viewed in a family and domestic context and this is reflected in programming. Lynn Spigel states that, 'Given its ability to bring "another world" into the home, it is not surprising that television was often figured as the ultimate expression of progress in utopian statements concerning man's ability to conquer and domesticate space'.¹⁹⁶ Watching television was said to 'like going to a movie', a notion that was emphasised by ads which referred to the 'living room theatre' and later television shows titled 'chairside theatre' and 'family theatre'.¹⁹⁷ But unlike the movies, television was consumed in the private space of home rather than the public space of the cinema. As Robert Allen notes,

Movie theatres are designed to limit sensory input to only the sounds and images coming from the screen. We are enveloped by larger-than-life images that fill our perceptual field. Television, by contrast, is part of a larger environment with which we remain connected even while we watch. As a domestic appliance, television must fit into the social world of the family; its sounds and images compete or coexist with whatever else is going on in that world and with other activities in which we might be engaged.¹⁹⁸

It is significant that the pioneering *Lucy* show was set primarily in the domestic space of home, often focused on issues of upward social mobility, and consumerism, with storylines that sometimes attracted lucrative corporate sponsorships, thus further emphasising the close connections between commercial television and consumer capitalism. The popularity of sit-coms like *Lucy* and soaps in the 1950s and 60s also serves to illustrate the point that TV programs and texts are saturated in consumerist logic, and further, that these type of shows 'provided an ideology of domesticity which would encourage women to accept a gender identity appropriate to their role in society'¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁵ Silverstone, Roger, "Television and a Place Called Home", *Television and Everyday Life*, New York & London: Routledge, 1994, p. 24.

¹⁹⁶ Spigel, 1992, p. 7.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁹⁸ Allen, 1992, p. 12.

Whilst recent debates question the overall construction of notions like 'home' and 'family', and feminist literature has changed the focus on issues like domesticity and the nature of audience, television remains at the heart of discourses of modernity, consumerism and domesticity.

The Form and Aesthetics of Television

John Corner, in his exploration of the character of television as a complex message system, divides television into three components to analyse separately. They are: -

1) Electronic

Because the television product is produced electronically, it provides the possibility for transmitting 'live' pictures over large distances. This builds and enhances the notion of the 'immediacy' of television and its aura of 'liveness'. Corner concluded that 'the electronic basis of television systems serves to shape...key aspects both of their aesthetic and social character.'²⁰⁰

2) Visual

Perhaps the most obvious and important difference between television and other media is its direct form of address. John Ellis has noted, 'Direct address is recognised as a powerful effect on TV'²⁰¹, and Corner says this is a feature of the visual nature of television that distinguishes it from the medium of radio and provides the sense of 'immediacy' and 'liveness'.²⁰² The visual nature of TV expands the sensory/information field and because of its distinct style of shots (close-ups and medium), editing and production appears more 'real' than cinema.

3) Mass/Domestic.

The term 'mass' sometimes might be problematic and infer a certain homogeneity regarding audiences, as well as it being said that in these days when there has been an increase in the use of cam-corders and proliferation of local broadcasting has

¹⁹⁹ Silverstone, 1994, p. 32.

²⁰⁰ Corner, John, "Television as Public Communication", *Television Form and Public Address*, London: Edward Arnold, 1995, p. 12.

²⁰¹ Ellis, John, "Broadcast TV as sound and image", *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television and Video*, Revised Edition, London & NY: Routledge, 1992, p.134.

²⁰² Corner, 1995, p. 12.

diminished the power of the term. But Cornell argues that the 'continuing dominance of the major production houses and network distribution'²⁰³ is a major influence on the nature to television aesthetics and numerous other aspects of its cultural formations. A paradox of the 'mass' communication nature of television is the fact that it is consumed in the domestic/private space of 'home'. The competing notions of 'bringing the world to you' and/or 'taking you around the world' have been said to be a 'central feature of television as a political agency.

Ultimately however, the business of television is advertising. As Allen points out, 'For the advertiser, television programs - which are the television texts viewers turn on to see and which they think of as television - are merely the bait that is likely to lure a particular audience to the TV set'.²⁰⁴ In addition, Mimi White says,

The position and functioning of advertising is a crucial aspect of ideological analysis, because it is the place within television's textual system where the economics of the system are made manifest.²⁰⁵

Thus viewers are in the first instance positioned as potential consumers, which is overt in the very nature of commercial television. The regular program interruptions for advertisements fits smoothly into the viewing pattern of the television reader, and great emphasis is placed on the 'ratings' which determine how much a television station will be able to charge for advertising. This commercial emphasis impacts on the television address to the viewer/consumer to the extent that White argues that because television stations in effect 'sell' their perceived audiences to the advertisers 'in lots of one thousand',²⁰⁶ the viewer can be regarded as both a consumer and commodity.

Comparisons with Cinema

At first it might be thought that television and cinema have much in common, but upon reflection it seems there are major differences on a range of levels. John Ellis describes a multitude of ways in which the two differ, for instance, the television

²⁰³ Corner, 1995, p. 15.

²⁰⁴ Ellis, 1992, p. 20.

²⁰⁵ White, Mimi, "Ideological Analysis and Television", in R.C. Allen, (ed.), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: television and contemporary criticism*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 171.

image is smaller and of poorer quality in terms of resolution and detail, and that the viewer is larger than the image, which is the opposite of cinema. Also, the watching of television takes place in domestic surrounds in normal light, the opposite of cinema viewing. This different regime of viewing means that television creates a reduced degree of concentration, but 'a more extended period of watching and more frequent use than cinema'²⁰⁷

The other major aspect of difference is in the way sound is mobilised in cinema and television. Because our glance at television is less focused than our gaze at cinema, sound plays the important role of maintaining viewer attention. This means one can 'watch' television whilst doing housework or cooking, but still remain alert to what's on television even if only glancing at it spasmodically. The other point about sound is that on television sound 'tends to anchor meaning', whilst in cinema the image anchors meaning. Both Corner and Ellis agree that in television 'the combination of image and sound tends to be one in which sound dominates'.²⁰⁸

Also, another way to identify difference between TV and cinema is to examine the phenomenon of 'made-for-TV movies'. These type of films have evolved from the 1960s when the 'programming practice of saturating prime time with Hollywood films' led to a shortage of available films, so studios began producing 'made-for-TV movies' to cover the shortfall. Today the two-hour made-for-TV movie is the 'backbone of the genre'.²⁰⁹ The made-for-TV movie is constructed around the requirements and needs of commercial television, therefore just prior to each advertising break, the plot arrives at the climax of some sub-drama, with a question or incomplete dramatic moment, both of which the answer for awaits after the commercial break. By contrast, cinema features are mercifully not assembled in a manner to consciously allow for commercial breaks, thus highlighting the significant difference in aesthetics, concept and function between the two mediums.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 171.

²⁰⁷ Ellis, 1992, p. 127 - 128.

²⁰⁸ Corner, 1995, p. 18.

²⁰⁹ Schulze, Lurie, "The Made for TV Movie: Industrial Practice, Cultural Form, Popular Reception" in T. Balio (ed.), *Hollywood in the Age of Television*, London & NY: Routledge, 1990, p. 161.

This is not to say that cinema is free from the grubby fingerprints of corporate capitalism and consumerism, indeed, these days Hollywood films take advantage of cinema attention to detail by 'planting' sponsors products in scenes. This illustrates the significant aesthetic and textual difference between the two mediums whereby because of the size of the cinema screen there is much greater scope for detail. Because the TV screen is smaller and of lower resolution than the cinema screen, TV favours the medium shot and close up and this further extends the feeling of intimacy that is one of television's aesthetic principles, according to Horace Newcomb.²¹⁰ This intimacy is accentuated by the personal mode of direct address that television often uses in its communication with the viewer, and is further enhanced by the aforementioned sense of 'immediacy' and 'liveness' that television evokes.

Conclusion

It is clear from the evidence gathered that television functions in different, more powerful levels than any other form of mass media in everyday life. Because it has the almost permanent presence of radio combined with the visual possibilities of cinema, as well as its own internally developed sense of immediacy and 'liveness', it is able to influence our lives to a much greater extent than cinema, radio or the print media. Furthermore, television has evolved its own unique set of conventions of aesthetics, form and style which have grown out of both the medium's total interdependence upon the advertising industry and the technology's own advantages and limitations.

Television's mode of address to its audience is the most dramatic difference between it and cinema, whereby TV addresses us personally as members of a predefined 'public'. In other words television plays a key role in our own constructions of who and what we are. This means that we need to continue with more extensive analysis of the ways in which television is both produced and consumed, as there is much more yet to understand about our personal and public interaction with the TV set in all our lounge rooms.

²¹⁰ Newcomb, Horace, "Towards a Television Aesthetic", in H. Newcomb (ed.), *Television: The Critical View*, 4th Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 614 - 20.

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