

TELEVISION STUDIES – OCW UC3M

Topic V. Television Aesthetics.

Outline:

This topic will address and highlight the formal characteristics of television language. The first part will use concepts taken from semiotics (John Fiske) in order to establish the basic characteristics of television language and its main differences with film language. The second part is based on the contributions of authors such as John Ellis and will give an overview of the evolution of television style from the origins of television in the 50s to the present, including how aesthetics have determined the representation of reality in certain television genres. The third part will deal with the importance of videographic language codes as one of the hallmarks of television and the gradual integration of computer graphics image.

The fourth part will deal with the close relationship between videographic and cinematic codes. It will therefore study how that relationship established what John Thornton Caldwell called televisuality, a dominant feature of television style since the 80s which is responsible for the gradual emergence of a television image which is more sophisticated from the point of view of the form. The fifth and final section will explain the possibilities of television language as a space for formal experimentation through practices such as video art and music videos. The screenings show the evolution of the TV style since the 60s to the 2000s, while the compulsory reading gives an overview of the major approaches to the formal analysis of the television text.

Specific objectives of the topic:

- Knowledge of the most relevant television genres.
- Knowledge of the main theories of approach to the television text and methodologies of textual analysis.
- Ability to conduct assessments of own and others' ideas in relation to television experiences.

- Knowledge of television theory and its application to media storytelling.

Detailed content:

- Introduction to the language of television.
- Shot-by-shot analysis.
- The evolution of TV-style.
- Televisuality.

Introductory Notes:

The first approach to television aesthetics comes from the work of television studies scholar John Fiske in the book *Television Culture* (1987):

“The codes of television. An event to be televised is already encoded by social codes such as those of:

Level one: “REALITY”

appearance, dress, make-up, environment, behavior, speech, gesture, expression, sound, etc.

these are encoded electronically by technical codes such as those of:

Level two:

REPRESENTATION

camera, lighting, editing, music, sound which transmit the conventional representational codes, which shape the representations of, for example: narrative, conflict, character, action, dialogue, setting, casting, etc.

Level three:

IDEOLOGY

which are organized into coherence and social acceptability by the ideological codes,

such as those of: individualism, patriarchy, race, class, materialism, capitalism, etc.”

According to Fiske, these elements can be organized to conduct a shot-by-shot and semiotic analysis of a television program:

- . Camerawork
- . Lighting
- . Editing
- . Sound and music
- . Graphics
- . Mise en scene
- . Casting
- . Setting and costume
- . Make-up
- . Action
- . Dialogue
- . Ideological codes

Gary A. Copeland, in the text “A History of Television Style” (Television: Critical Methods and Applications, 2007), defined in general terms the evolution of the television style:

“The history of television style intertwines issues of technology, economics, and aesthetics. No single element explains sufficiently why television looks and sounds the way it does today. Though technology, primarily in video, continues to provide a number of evident opportunities for changes in style, technology alone is not sufficient to cause change. There must also be a perceived aesthetic need, and the change must not lose money for a network or a station.

Television drew from radio, motion pictures, and theater for its style. Radio was one of the biggest influences, because control of the television industry rested with those who controlled the radio industry.

Television began as a live medium, and live broadcasting was seen as more appropriate and, consequently, superior to the medium than recorded performance. Filmed programs gradually began to replace live ones, and then videotape was introduced, both to replace kinescopes for recording live

programs for later playback and to serve as an original recording medium. The introduction and development of electronic videotape editing made videotape even more viable. Today that analog-style electronic editing has been replaced by computer-based nonlinear editing.

Some have argued that television is primarily an aural medium. Despite and in conjunction with the presence of pictures, television audio plays an important role in building both narrative and mood. Musical styles for background and incidental music have changed over the years; the use of laugh tracks has not, in any significant way. Networks seem to be comfortable with the conventional use of recorded laughter in comedies, although some recent television comedies – a small minority- have done without”.

John Ellis, in his book *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty* (2000), establishes three main periods in the development and evolution of television. The first stage was “scarcity” and refers to the presences of public service television in the context of the consumer society (television as a consumer good). In most countries this stage ended in the late 70s or early 80s. Its main feature was that few channels broadcast few hours a day. The second stage was “availability”, and was based on market fragmentation. This was the result of technological changes such as local television, satellite and cable. In addition, the crisis of the concept of television as a public service occurred. The third stage is “plenty” and is characteristic of contemporary television, marked by the increase in supply, fragmentation and technological change.

John Thornton Caldwell analyzed the impact of new technologies in the development of the televisual image in the book *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (1995). The concept of “televisuality” has different characteristics:

1. Televisuality was a stylizing performance and exhibitionism that utilized many different looks. The presentational manner of televisuality was not singularly tied to either low- or high-culture pretense.

2. Televisuality represented a structural inversion. Televisual practice also challenged television's existing formal and presentational hierarchies. Many shows evidenced a structural inversion between narrative and discourse, form and content, subject and style.
3. Televisuality was an industrial product. Frequently ignored or underestimated by scholars, television's mode of production has had a dramatic impact on the presentational guises, the narrative forms, and the politics of mainstream television.
4. Televisuality was a programming phenomenon: Showcase television in itself was nothing new, but the degree to which broadcasters showcased to counter program was distinctive.
5. Televisuality was a function of audience: While the audience was being redefined and retheorized from the outside by broadcast and cable programmers, the cultural abilities of audiences had also apparently changed by the 1980s.
6. Televisuality was a product of economic crisis. Televisuality cannot be theorized apart from the crisis that network television underwent after 1980. Stylistic excess can be seen as one way that mainstream television attempted to deal with the growing threat and eventual success of cable.

Televisuality can be mapped out along several axes: formal, authorial, generic, and historical.