

Remodeling Television

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The questions motivating this panel emerged when I was teaching my Media Art and Activism seminar last spring. I found myself re-inspired by the work of early video artists and activists, whether Douglas Davis sending his seven most private thoughts into the world live via satellite from the Houston Astrodome in a search for a more intimate kind of television, or the members of the Paper Tiger collective who created televisual forms of criticism. Focusing on the last part of the call, I want to sketch out or blueprint three ideas for remodeling television studies.

Blueprint 1: Diagram it. TV scholars do a lot of writing, and we work with websites, videos, photographs, drawings and maps as well. How can we use these media to better communicate what television is as a medium, economic system, site of social assembly, discursive formation? Remodeling television could involve creating conceptual diagrams, maps, graphics, drawings, databases and/or models that demonstrate what television is or could be. Lynn Spigel's recent book *TV By Design* reveals that there is long, intricate history between television, art and design. Take a blank piece of paper and draw something that communicates what television is without drawing a TV set. I will collect these and share them with you all. Imagine all the ways that spectrum, transmission, networks, audiences and reception could be visualized and communicated. The point here is that we have the freedom to be creative in the way we imagine what our object of study is and how we study it.

Blueprint 2: Bring on the theory. Our field's formation is based upon myriad interdisciplinary and theoretical engagements. As we analyze more and more programs, technologies and industrial maneuvers, it's important to continue theoretical encounters as they (re)shape the study of television. For instance, Bruno Latour's actor network theory might be used to remodel television as a constellation of human and nonhuman actors delegated with duties, force and ethics. The work of feminist economic geographer(s) J. K. Gibson-Graham might help us to rethink the meanings of capitalism (and noncapitalisms) in relation to television. And why have so few TV scholars dealt with the work of Slavoj Zizek? He is as prolific as a long-running sitcom and sometimes as humorous as well! The point is that remodeling television involves seeking out new theories and critical models to connect to TV. Hay and Oullette's aptly titled *Makeover Television* is a great recent example. It mines Foucault's work on governmentality to analyze reality-based shows and remodels television criticism in the process.

Blueprint 3: Reverse Glasnost. Finally, a remodeling of television studies requires openness to sites beyond Anglo-American commercial and public broadcasting. A priority here is the investigation of (formerly) socialist and communist systems. There is a tendency to reductively define all such systems as "totalitarian," but most of us know little about their structures, funding and output. Even beyond the official television systems of the communist bloc, there were other surreptitious networks that are worth

thinking about. Samizdat networks existed across communist countries, facilitating the distribution of manuscripts, stories, photos and recordings that critiqued communism and hence could only be broadcast abroad. Here broadcasting takes on a very different technical configuration and purpose. The point here is that there are past, present and future televisions to consider in a region that extends from Eastern Germany to Kyrgyzstan, from Siberia to Albania. Indeed, there are all kinds of televisions that have emerged in different parts of the world that are rarely mentioned in textbooks on the history and theory of the medium. One of my favorites is described in Eric Michaels' book *Bad Aboriginal Art* (excerpted in Newcomb's *Television: A Critical View*). During the mid 1980s Michaels left UT-Austin to head to the Australian outback where he spent years trying to unlearn and relearn what television was. The Aboriginal people he worked with, he concluded, had re-invented it.

Rather than accept the refrain that the digital revolutionizes television, I am more inclined to invest hope in critical thinkers who are interested in and curious about different options, alternatives, and arrangements around the world that can be used to rethink, reform and remodel television. Diagramming it, theorizing it and being open to systems we do not know is all part of the process.