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FLOW conference 2012

3 November 2012

From NTSC to 1080p: HDTV and the Aesthetics of Television

While it is not necessarily uncommon for television scholars and critics to find political meaning in the aesthetic forms of television, most often this understanding has been limited to an emphasis on reading television as a text. In framing television programs as simply a set of narrative, pictorial, or sonic codes, such approaches have ultimately served to either overlook or take as a given television's grounding in specific sets of technological practices. Often, this strategy is justified as an avoidance of technological determinism, of assuming that technology imbues a text with any kind of *a priori* meaning. However, at the same time, it has led to an incomplete understanding of the history of television technology, which has been reduced to a series of value-neutral aesthetic regimes: black-and-white, color, stereo, and, most recently, high-definition (HD). It is specifically this latter category that I will critically investigate today in this talk. I argue that HDTV represents a ruptural moment in the history of television aesthetics; not simply a shift in the dominant cultural discourses surrounding television, but a total reversal of the experiential framework governing the television image as an image.

As suggested by the title of this talk, the shift of television aesthetics enacted by HDTV relies on a comparison to the aesthetic regime that preceded it, specifically that of the National Television System Committee (NTSC). The adoption of early technological aesthetic norms for television was a process fraught with political significance. NTSC standards were first established in 1941, and although the standards established at that point, a black and white image comprised of 525 horizontal lines of signal refreshed 30 times per second in an interlaced pattern

(creating a visible raster of 483 scan lines), are often understood popularly as way to have produced the highest quality image given available technological constraints, the historical record suggests otherwise. The figure of 525 lines was adopted by the NTSC as a compromise between the 441 line system proposed by General Electric and the 605 line system proposed by Philco, two of the leading set manufacturers of the era, despite the fact that Dumont had demonstrated a system of nearly 800 lines as early as 1939. Indeed, 525 lines represented not a best-quality compromise, but rather a compromise also intended to foreclose the potential adoption of a color system being developed by CBS in the early 1940s, a compromise that would benefit the position of set manufacturer RCA, and by extension RCA's parent corporation NBC. It was not until 1953 that American audiences would begin to view color television, despite the fact that viable systems had been put forth over a decade earlier, and still with a image of far lesser quality than the 625-line PAL system in Europe.

The aesthetics of the NTSC era bore out not only the corporate politics of the American system of private television but also a fundamental structural aspect of the experience of viewing television, as evoked in Marshall McLuhan's famous identification of television as a "cool" medium. According to McLuhan, the aesthetic impoverishment of television, in comparison to "hot" media like the radio and cinema, cultivated a viewing experience predicated on attentiveness and critical engagement, contrary to popular conceptions of television as a medium that promoted distracted viewing. Indeed, rather than indulging the impulse toward viewing photographically-based representation as verisimilar, an experiential process long seen central to theatrical cinema, NTSC aesthetics inherently promoted a critical worldview, one at odds with the experiences of autonomy, individuality, and self-actualization upon which postwar capitalist subjectivity was predicated.

It is along these lines that HDTV marks a rupture with the NTSC regime. In reframing television aesthetics as comparable to the experience of cinema, a fact seen in the convergence of media consumption around the HDTV television set, an arrangement in which television programming, video games, and Blu-ray disc all share the same image standard of 1080p (1080 horizontal lines refreshed 60 times per second), television has now become what McLuhan would become a “hot” medium. Indeed, as McLuhan himself remarked, high-definition television is no longer television. Thus, rather than promoting critical viewing, HDTV is, in a McLuhanian reading, apt to promote an experience of television that conforms to the long-feared dominance of a representation consumed by an uncritical mass, who simply accept the image before them as an image of reality, rather than a constructed representation.

I want to conclude this talk by suggesting that attention to the discourses governing television aesthetics from a technological standpoint is of crucial importance for the future of television studies. While we must continue to be wary of technological determinist approaches, as well as remaining attentive to the diversity of modes by which television programming is seen and heard, the overall enterprise of technological development is something that should be viewed with as much skepticism as the practice of textual construction when considering the aesthetics and politics of American television.