

Time for (Queer) Theory in Television Studies

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Early theorizations of the medium focused on how the physical placement of the apparatus within the living room was dependent upon (while also affecting) the ideological relations of the postwar American suburban family, making a claim between television’s epistemological capacity and gendered domestic space. Yet the ontological dimensions of television remain entrenched in asserting temporality as the definitive methodology: “The major category of television is time,” Mary Ann Doane famously wrote in 1991, for example, to open an essay on television’s ability to document and represent catastrophic events, producing a disorienting temporal experience for the viewer.¹ If attending to TV’s temporal dimensions has thus constituted some of the most “theoretical” work on the medium, my aim here is to sketch out the resonances between TV flow – the temporal experience of the spectator – and one of the most significant contemporary bodies of knowledge dealing with temporality, that of queer temporality.

Recently, a number of interventions within queer theory have situated temporality as a fundamental category of queer identity, claiming, in Beth Freeman’s terms, that reimagining queer “as a set of possibilities produced out of temporal and historical difference” allows for a more robust investigation of queerness, especially across racial and national lines.² The examples of queer time within this now-rich body of scholarship – the extended adolescence of post-closet sexual exploration, the compressed urgency of the AIDS crisis, the rhythmic performativity that produces gender, to name a few – inflect queerness with a disjunctive temporal experience. In one notable formulation of this, José Muñoz (building from C.L.R. James) argued that the present is not the negation of the future, but rather the queer expression of the future, describing in particular the “world-making potentialities” that minoritarian people project backwards into the present as a way to contest the majoritarian public sphere.³

Such a structure – a future time experienced in the present – is not dissimilar to how television has traditionally been theorized. Built on repetition to sustain a weekly viewership, television endlessly plays with temporal slippages, rendered under the abstracting, totalizing force of TV flow. Jane Feuer’s characterization of flow as “segmentation without closure” and as the means by which the text’s mode of address and its ideological problematic come into collision also speaks

¹ Mary Ann Doane, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe,” in *Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983): 222.

² Elizabeth Freeman, “Introduction,” Special Issue on Queer Temporalities, *GLQ: a Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13.2-3 (2007): 159.

³ See Chapter 3 of José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

to this disjunctive structure.⁴ Whereas television's fiction of liveness appears to relocate the experience of a past (a prerecorded text) into the present (as a broadcasted text), the importance of repetition to flow also allows for reading the future-as-past (a prerecorded text that has not yet been broadcast) in the present (via promotional trailers, spoilers, and speculation within fan universes).

To push this comparison further, if queerness can be thought of as being produced by temporal difference, it is the category of lived experience through which this refashioned identity is made apparent; similarly, the concept of flow relies upon perceived experience across a variety of temporal registers. While Raymond Williams's definition of flow has become the most signaling and cited definition within TV studies, it has been critiqued for unproblematically allowing subjective "experience" to determine TV's order of operations. Or, as Richard Dienst has put it, "'Experience' becomes the empty category in which all the findings of textual analysis – contradictory and diffuse, full of specular identifications – are deposited."⁵ My own corrective to this critique would be to note that Williams allows for such openness in his own theoretical exploration into affect, his concept of a "structure of feeling" that can be collectively perceived without necessarily being articulated; such structures of feeling, too, reanimate past and future forms of affective belonging into the present.⁶

Of course, TV flow cannot be thought of in the same televisual landscape as the one that Williams encountered in his Miami hotel room in 1973; as William Uricchio contends, "the changing status of [flow], and particularly the criticism it generated, needs to be seen against the changing 'regime of representations' of television offered by expanded broadcast channels, cable programming, and the VCR."⁷ (One could also add streaming distribution platforms, additional recording technologies, and independent webseries to this list.) As "new" media consolidates and reshuffles the specific technologies that spectators use to watch television, television "flow" must be rethought of in a different register, one that not only emphasizes the flow of content across multiple media platforms, industries, and audiences, but one that also changes the affective economies in which these series are renegotiated, revalued, and remixed. As spectators encounter fan-produced digital remixes of television series from the past, or as they watch episodic sitcoms on Netflix out-of-order (to name two examples), they summon a viewing experience that resists teleological time, an experience that also defines queer temporality. Indeed, such user-generated strategies for

⁴ Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches — An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1983), 12-21.

⁵ Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 32.

⁶ See Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 128-135.

⁷ William Uricchio, "Television's Next Generation: Technology/Interface Culture/Flow," in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, eds. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 168.

managing content constitute, I would argue, a sort of lateral viewing experience, yet one that nevertheless carries the potential for collective perception.