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Dredging, drilling, and mapping television's swamps: An interview with John Caldwell on the 20th anniversary of *Televisuality*

Markus Stauff & John T. Caldwell

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Abstract

In 1995, John Caldwell's *Televisuality: Style, Crisis and Authority in American Television* familiarised media studies with a heterodox methodology, mixing formal analysis and technical insights with work floor knowledge with elaborate theorising. In this interview Caldwell describes how this approach emerged from a conjuncture of practices as different as art school, farm labor, and high theory. Instead of defining the theoretical essence of the medium this combination of approaches allowed for a recursive mapping and drilling of television's dynamics. Caldwell claims the 'commercial media industrial systems' can neither be understood nor effectively criticised with a one-size-fits-all approach; rather, only if we seriously take into account the changing concepts and practices that emerge within these systems. This also requires a pedagogy which does not teach a well-defined model of analysis but rather makes room for collaborative, open-ended research.

Keywords: ANT, production studies, style, television studies

It has now been 20 years since John Caldwell's *Televisuality: Style, Crisis and Authority in American Television* was published. With its combined attention to television's aesthetic, economic, and technological aspects, it was a highly innovative book that questioned a great deal of conventional wisdom. The book's central claim that, during the 1980s, television had transformed into a visual medium in which program styles became an economically-valuable, technically-shaped, and culturally-reflexive category turned attention to previously ignored historical and theoretical features of the medium.

The early and mid-1990s were an especially fertile time for books that helped to understand television as a complex cultural phenomenon consisting of much more than individual texts and modes of reception; books that made clear that television – similar to photography or film – provokes particular questions which might be productive for culture and media theory more generally (e.g. Ien Ang's *Desperately Seeking the Audience*; Lynn Spigel's *Make Room for TV*; John Hartley's *Tele-ology*; Henry Jenkins' *Textual Poachers*; Daniel Dayan's and Elihu Katz's *Media Events*; Richard Dienst's *Still Life in Real Time*; Jostein Gripsrud's *The Dynasty Years*; Marie Gillespie's *Television, Ethnicity, and Cultural Change*).

In this context of exciting and pathbreaking research, Caldwell's book stands out because of its style, the breadth of topics it covers, and its simultaneously eclectic, inventive, and rigorous approach. The book's most important insights are articulated in terminology that mixes established academic concepts with industry and tech lingo – think of 'auteurist spin doctoring' or 'ontological stripmall'. In contrast to other research which focuses on one program or one network, *Televisuality* tackles news and live television, children's programs, and mini-series, combining aesthetic sensitivity (and close reading) with in-depth knowledge of technical developments and industrial practices.

The book also prefigured the two most dominant interests in television: research on production culture (also the main field of Caldwell's follow-up projects) and research on television aesthetics. However, unlike the book's intense and complex mix of these two approaches, current research more often than not separates or at least tames the two. *Televisuality* might have been too heterogeneous in its methodology and too comprehensive in its scope to figure as a model to be applied to other fields or case studies. I find it difficult to identify a book that reads or argues like Caldwell's. The 20th anniversary of this important work seemed a perfect occasion to ask him about the circumstances that contributed to such a peculiar book.

Stauff: *Televisuality* was a surprising book when I first read it. I had to look up more words than in most other academic books I read in the early stages of my PhD. Even today, when the vocabulary has become less of a challenge, the book still surprises me. Its language, its broad range of topics, and the original way it combines analysis with theory makes me wonder how such a book came into being. It is striking that the preface mentions your work in video post-production in the 1980s, while the acknowledgments (with names like John Baldessari and Mike Kelly) hint at

your background in art. Could you elaborate a little bit on how the entire project took shape?

Caldwell: I tangled with a set of contradictions in the mid-1970s. I was drawn to apparatus theory for placing technologies at the center of analysis and showing how culture and ideology were embedded in those machines. This began when I was doing my MFA at Cal Arts from 1976-78 (Kelly was my colleague, Baldessari my mentor). However, I was troubled by the grand aspirations of these totalizing, top-down generalisations about film and video. They felt like one-size-fits-all attempts to reduce and explain media systems that were much more complex. Because I made moving images, I was also curious about the rich forms of worker chatter and diverse theorisation I heard in my other ear while on the ground in production communities. So I guess I have always been trying to figure things out by banging my head against both 'above' and 'below' perspectives.

I began thinking about the televisual in earnest after I started producing and exhibiting media professionally in 1978 and began my university-level production teaching in 1981. This probably impacted the language I used, since, in hindsight, some passages of the book now seem less indebted to propositional rhetoric than to collage, montage, or conceptual art schemes. I must confess that early on I did not imagine that any book would result from this analysis or that my work would circulate as a stand-alone scholarly monograph. But I did make heavy use of the televisual cases in teaching both media practice and theory long before the book came out. As such, my impulse in prose and analysis at the time was to force the syntax and dialects of intellectual high theory to reckon with the syntax and dialects of commercial low culture. In retrospect, I wonder about the wisdom of this shotgun wedding discourse, since the resulting exposition may have created challenges for friends of both the low culture bride and the high theory groom. I certainly appreciate the task faced by translators of this hybrid discourse into other languages. Yet I also reasoned at the time that this kind of hybrid language might be appropriate because it also typified the onscreen narrative discourse and collage formalism of many postmodern shows from 1985-1994.

Stauff: The book starts with a reference to the drama series *Northern Exposure* (1990-95), which makes it very obvious that television aesthetics became highly coded and reflexive in the 1980s. Nevertheless, this was a feature of television rarely discussed in the early 1990s. When did the specific visual and aesthetic qualities of television and their interrelation

with economic strategies and technological innovation become interesting to you?

Caldwell: After returning to Northwestern University (Evanston, Illinois) in 1985 to complete a PhD, I realised that our collective disciplinary ship was beginning to sail in another direction, far from either stylistic analysis or production studies. I understood why. Baudrillard and Lyotard had convincingly explained away any nagging questions about visuality via 'etic' postmodern theories. Also, John Fiske led the charge into cultural studies by making it antithetical to aesthetics and contrasting it to visual studies. The ship that sailed, between 1985 and Henry Jenkins' landmark book *Textual Poachers* in 1992, in short, was audience studies and fan ethnographies. Fiske and Jenkins were particularly good at deciphering reception-text interactions. But I was indeed puzzled about why they had helped set up an unnecessary zero-sum game where agency now resided almost entirely with audiences and fans – but *not* with production workers. From that period on I was determined to understand other forms of agency central to the media ecosystem, to consider 'emic' approaches to media apart from fan communities, and to actually listen to human subjects involved in making media. The development of *Televisuality* in the 1980s was also the beginning of my continuing research into production cultures.

Your question about economics is a good one. Fredric Jameson left the door open by connecting postmodernism to late-capitalist consumerism, yet he never addressed the level of micro-economics that I was acutely aware of when trying to budget a production or book expensive online edit time in a Chicago post house. Such things systematically determine the look of a production and have little to do with pastiche or the simulacra, per se. Why then do we not talk about these tools and workaday practices in cinema and media studies scholarship? The decade of the 1980s was also a period of incredible technological change. Each year brought announcements of new cutting-edge tools, and the below-the-line craft trade magazines did exactly what my human informants on sets did: they repeatedly connected whatever new production tools were being discussed with the actual onscreen looks of new television programming. The idea that technicians were closet aestheticians and crewmembers low theorists that deconstructed film/video helped fuel my work on *Televisuality* (chapters 3 and 5 respectively). This was probably the start of my continuing commitment to examine production simultaneously as a hybrid of economic/technical/labor practice that is always embedded within and explained by trade cultural expressions. The ghost of a Geertzian herme-

neutic is already at work here, which is something that takes center stage in *Production Cultures* in 2008.

Stauff: Adding to this relationship between technology, theory, and aesthetics, you also show that during the 1980s a program's look became increasingly important for the industry. How did you discover the 'programming potential of visual style' as a feature not only of some prestige programming but also connecting the most variegated forms and genres?

Caldwell: While tools and workers helped me understand the connection between economics and culture at a micro-level, Mimi White, Chuck Kleinhans, Nick Browne, and a generation of new television studies scholars in the 1980s helped me understand the role of programming in popular consumer culture and industrial economics. For anyone reading the trades or talking to professionals it would be difficult to ignore industrial anxieties about institutional strategies and survival in the face of intense new competition in the 'multi-channel' market of the 1980s. I have assumed in all of my work that times of technological change and economic instability trigger both new innovation practices and excessive forms of industrial theorisation from below. The narrative of *Max Headroom* was in part about strategies to defeat channel switching and the remote, so the flurry of anxiety-induced industrial theorising that I was seeing *offscreen* in mundane work-worlds also began to infiltrate the *onscreen* world of fans and viewers as well. One of the biggest insights I gained from my research was that the drive to individuate a show or series is a requisite for *any* television show in development – from the most prestigious to the lowliest, cheapest format. This forced me to think of the question of style ecumenically, as 'look-independent' – a necessary program-development question that all television producers must face, something that directly impacts the ways shows are programmed and their ultimate chances for survival as a series. The question then becomes: why is this series organised and performed as it is, in this particular channel niche or network-programming slot?

Stauff: *Televisuality* is full of surprising and eye-opening connections stemming from your aesthetic sensitivity, appreciation for industrial practices, and in-depth knowledge of technology. Beyond your training as an artist and your experience in the media industry, what additional knowledge and expertise did you tap into while researching and writing the book?

Caldwell: Another formative personal experience, beyond the video production and art world influences that you describe, directly impacted my ap-

proach to the book: farm labor. While film/video production gave me a tool-based understanding of how things end up on screen, and performance and conceptual art enabled me to deconstruct institutional systems behind cultural surfaces, my experience in farming (from childhood until I was 18) made me appreciate what I would now call complex systems theory. Some students and my own children have characterised me as 'trying to connect everything to everything else', which is probably a valid claim. To me, working the land, tending to seasons, rotating crops, preparing soil, seeing any crop as merely the end result of a much deeper, living, context-sensitive infrastructure, all underscored the interconnectedness of things when I was younger. Although cinema and media studies did not use the term 'media ecosystem' in the 1970s or 1980s, I talked at length during this period with two of my four farm-bound brothers who eventually became agronomists and crop scientists. They were very good at seeing and mathematically modeling complex crop systems over time that strongly inflected my approach to my research. Like croplands, televisual and (later) production culture ecosystems alike also have far too many variables to reduce to clean causalities. Given this, my first impulse when facing any of these media systems is to obsessively examine, carefully describe, and systematically map the institutional/cultural terrain that comprises them. Only then would I allow myself to engage in the primary task of what anthropologists in another field might call 'pattern recognition'. I think the many conceptual tables, institutional maps, charts, and taxonomies that litter my published research reflect this procedural workflow – a process that allows for analog data mining and subsequent pattern analysis.

1st: Dragneting and Dredging the Media Field
(to establish scope, terrain, and boundaries of 'cinematic' and 'videographic' practices)

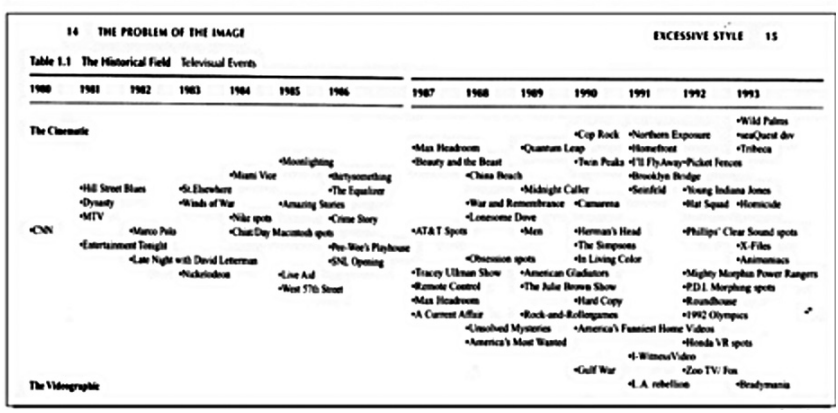

Fig. 1

2ND: DRILLING AND MAPPING TELEVISUALITY

(core-sample of 'hermeneutic front-loading' for viewers—in cross-sections of textual flow—within the manic 'endless' opening of an epic mini-series)

Table 6.1 The Viewer as Contestant: Game Show Categories in *War and Remembrance* (Televisual maps, discursive networks, and structural relationships marked in the first twenty minutes)

Context/Level for Viewing	Conceptual Items in Map
Cities of the war Displayed as stock footage with graphic subtitle as I.D.	London ___ Paris ___ Berlin ___ Moscow ___ Rome ___ Auschwitz ___
Historical figures of the war Displayed as archival photographs in title sequence	(Yalta Conference) ___ FDR ___ Churchill ___ Stalin
Characters in (hi)story Displayed as non-synchronized dramatic bits from scenes; then displayed as monochromatic photo-stills	FDR ___ Hitler Capt. "Pug" Henry Mrs. Henry ___ Mistress W. Henry ___ Son's Wife ___ Tudsbury etc. etc. etc. (21 total presented with footage)
Actors in miniseries Displayed as graphic titles lower-thirds, or as ponderous voice-overs	Ralph Bellamy Robert Mitchum Polly Bergen ___ Victoria Tennant Michael Woods ___ Robert Morley etc. ___ Peter Graves ___ etc. (29 presented as graphic credits)
Sunken battleships Intoned over long empty shots of sea in harbor; shots invoking absence, time	The *California* The *Maryland* ___ The *Oklahoma* *Nevada* ___ *Pennsylvania* ___ *Maryland* The *Tennessee* ___ The *Arizona*
Major battles Displayed and decontextualized by images of explosions, and violence	Philippines Guadalcanal ___ Singapore Hiroshima
Emotional traits associated with war The opening claims to bring these unique traits "alive"; illustrated by gestural performances (e.g., Hitler gyrating, troops cheering, a smoking corpse)	The turmoil The tragedy ___ The passion The fury ___ The glory The horror
Sponsors First introduced by show over faux marble background, then aired in full motion as displays of patriotism	Ford IBM ___ Nike American Dairy Association ___ GE ___ Exclamation Toys 'R 'Us

Fig. 2

Your question about what influenced and connected my work also vaguely evokes a psychoanalytic projective test. But the question does intrigue me about the possibility of an affective dimension to my thinking as well. Case in point: I still have PTSD flashbacks from having had to slaughter cattle and hogs as an adolescent (something that nauseated me, and that I could only make sense of as a meat-processing 'off-world' for faraway city dwellers). Yet my adolescent brother – also a farmworker who later became a biologist – suggested at the time that I might follow his analytical posture while working. He survived and prospered working full-time in meat packing (eight hours a day) because of a cognitive shift – he went entirely left-brain, by systematically seeing and mapping the complex hierarchies and interrelated physiological systems he was carefully disassembling. I might have been taking roughly the same approach when I produced the pattern analysis in Tables 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 5.1, and 5.2 of *Televisuality*. At the time, I felt like Table 6.1 – the 'endless opening' of an epic mini-series as a form of 'hermeneutic-frontloading' for the viewer – was particularly productive as a heuristic payoff from this approach. And this underscores one of the tensions in all of my work: while much of it takes very seriously what media workers say and do on the ground (my emic commitments outlined above), this only gets us halfway. That is, it is crucial that we force the industry to answer questions other than its own (our etic imperative). I have little faith that avoiding either of these analytic phases will result in meaningful or thorough media studies work.

So together, these four experiences (professional video production, avant-garde art, cropland husbandry, and kill floor work) probably fueled the complex systems approach I have used in academic work since. Instead of asking what one factor causes a given historical change in film/television (authorship, financing, programming, ideology, promotion), or what one impact results from a given formal film/television mode (suturing, enunciation, signification, scopophilia, queering, cinephilia), I have always preferred research questions of a different order and scale. Specifically, it is far more likely that a hundred variables (rather than one or two) animate most changes in film/television or viewer engagement. Given this, how can we as scholars systematically or credibly research media with that many interrelated variables? What methodologies fit that kind of diversity, complexity, and scale? The clean propositional argumentation and deductive logic of film philosophy and film theory that I was schooled in seem mute and unconvincing in the face of complex media culture systems, unable to even begin unpacking the aggregating layers of social-cultural-institutional-formal practices that always animate any film/television phe-

nomenon. While early examples of complex systems mapping infuse *Televisuality*, later publications overtly employ complex systems perspectives. This includes my publications on: para-industries, stress aesthetics, cultural economies, shadow-academies, and the Industrial rhizome of Hollywood sub-companies.[1]

3RD: PATTERN RECOGNITION AND/AS EMIC ANALYSIS

(search for craft-level tropes hardwired into post-production tools; here, 4 new digital interface designs favor some looks, not others)

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Table 5.2

New Ordering and Performing Models	Concept of Form/Focus of Transformation	Style-Implication
Video as library ex: "Pastiche" ex: "Harry" ex: still-stores	Views footage and imagery as *digital archives* (spatial)	Penchant for accumulation, recall, and highly dense manipulation of stored still imagery
As sync block ex: "Da Vinci" ex: "Animator Studio" ex: "MatrouStudio"	Forces imagery and time code data into look of *film footage* (temporal)	Visually stimulates linear footage out of video fields; thinks in scenes, not shots; program malleability
As emotive persona ex: "Paintbox V-Series/ Quantel"	Views postproduction workers as *visual artists*, not linear conformers (intuitive)	Transforms high-tech highly capitalized environment into impulse-driven and user-friendly surrogate emoting subject
As desktop ex: "Avid" ex: "Media 100"	Manages video-audio pictures like *cut-and-paste layout* process (entrepreneurial)	PC revolution boasts implosion of TV industry and personal mastery of segregated crafts. Teases cult of professionalism, but actually diverts massive film/TV equipment capital to digital storage manufacturers.

Fig. 3

4™: THEORY BUILDING IN TELEVISUALITY

(derivation of more general aesthetic principles from Etic analysis of institutions, trade discourses, production practices & machines)

64 THE PROBLEM OF THE IMAGE

Table 2.1 Reconfiguring Quality TV The changing relationship between defining series looks, showcased flourishes, and outright exhibitionism

	Emmy Bait 1973–1983 *M.A.S.H.*	**Faultlines** 1979–1991 *Dallas*	**House Look** 1981–1987 *Hill Street Blues*	**Designer Video** 1984–1991 *Miami Vice*
The Look	Zero-degree telefilm, but with special episodes that showcased style	Zero-degree hybrid telefilm, showcasing regional geography	Single, continuous, and distinctive series signature	Both a series look, and an obligatory weekly ritual of style
Showcase	TV as stage, stand-and-deliver acting, rapid wall-to-wall dialogue, and word-driven stories; flat lighting	Narrative complexity, with dramatic economy; exploits spatial and architectural showcases	Verité Panavision; volatile open space; chaotic visual image overwhelms dialogue; use of practicals for realism	Cinematic style; visual backgrounds inflect all dialogue; brooding men in stylized space; practicals as optical sp. fx.
The Logic	Unmotivated look with auteurist exceptions	Variant looks only if motivated by psychological fissures in characters	Motivated series look dominates episodes	Weekly performance of style and stylistic cycling
Flourishes	As episodic exceptions, and repertory specials	Only as special effects in script and altered states	As corporate, ensemble house-look	As episodic norm, and scenic obligation

Fig. 4

Where has all of this gotten me? The big challenge now for mainstream media studies is how do we systematically research media phenomena that are organised and function less like rational markets or symbolic systems and more like industrial swamps? Media researchers inevitably confront murky affairs comprised of hundreds of simultaneous social, industrial, technological, cultural, labor, and economic variables – some of which compete, reinforce, undercut, align, ignore, aggregate, or negate the others – rather than one or two variables or factors that we normally favor. I would argue from media industries research that this is the new normal for media systems in the unregulated, outsourced, transnational world most function within. I challenge my doctoral candidates and myself to find better methods for responding to this fundamental question and research predicament. This is why inductive research, qualitative fieldwork,

evidence-based argumentation, and theory-building (rather than theorising) were so fundamental to *Televisuality* and to the books that followed.

Stauff: Considering the amount of material referenced in the book, I also wonder how you selected, organised, annotated, and scrutinised all the material? Can you describe how you watched teslevision in the late 1980s and early 1990s? When did you start to tape television specifically for this project? When did you decide to go to the archives, and what did you look for? Finally, how did you decide which examples to focus on for you case studies?

Caldwell: As I suggested above, the cases and analyses I selected from 1980 to around 1986 were chosen primarily for teaching theory and practice, to illustrate specific stylistic practices and production lessons in a lab or classroom setting. As such, establishing a preemptive big picture argument was not initially a prerequisite or priority of mine. The downside to this sort of eclectic front-end VHS recording and collecting of what I considered symptomatic phenomena is that my dataset was growing far in advance of my ultimate research questions. Getting the cart before the horse in this way would require considerable retrospective editorial work. But there was also an upside to this profuse tactical recording. Multi-channel television in the cable era was so expansive and diverse that pre-determined selection of a narrower sample risked missing important mid-level connections between series and episodes (i.e., inter-network programming strategies, placement in a network's flow, sweep-week stunting, links to unfolding industry-wide trends, etc.). In addition, I realised the trap of depending on university archives or VHS libraries from Blockbuster (or later, DVD box sets) since they uniformly strip each show of its key animating contexts. I also felt that my approach was an appropriate way to research the excessively ephemeral nature of television in the 1980s.

Having many hundreds of hours of these off-air/off-cable recordings meant that I could always go back and analyse the many meta-texts – promos, advertisements, previews, PSAs, network graphics, and branding IDs – that are woven through almost all American television when it is first consumed. If television is by nature ephemeral, then meta-textual television is hyper-ephemeral (good luck finding any of that 1980s meta-textual material in archives). I still use some of these recordings in my current UCLA classes, where students are uniformly taken aback not by the primary text (the series episode) but by the 1980s meta-texts that are woven into them. Returning to formal doctoral coursework in 1985 forced me to

finally get my theory and methodology ducks in order. I tried to use much of what I learned there as a devil's advocate to interrogate my initial hunches about why all of this was happening to television in the 1980s. I started with Peircian non-verbal semiotics, journeyed through theories of formal excess, ideology, postmodernism, and finally Bourdieu's critique of cultural capital. All of these helped me shake-down potential higher-level logics for the mountain of video data that I had been accumulating and mapping. Essentially, in my dissertation I tried to reverse engineer from my recorded shows and televisual case studies to find out where and how the exceptional or symptomatic examples I had recorded related to each other, to get a sense of the overlapping systems that gave these examples significance and resonance with each other.

It wasn't until my faculty appointment as Associate Professor of Film/Video Production and Television Studies at California State University Long Beach in 1989 that I came to grasp the final missing pieces of the televisual puzzle: television economics, programming practice, marketing, and promotion. These were things I had to actually teach in my television studies classes; they were also unremarkable but pervasive practices that the mainstays of my televisual studies thus far (C.S. Peirce, Frederic Jameson, Antonio Gramsci, Irving Goffman, Peter Wollen, Pierre Bourdieu) were uniformly silent on. Why? CSULB allowed me to integrate culture and economics, art and industry, systematically throughout the chapters of *Televisuality*. The hybrid chapter titles and mixed concepts in the book that you puzzled over earlier are the clearest evidence of this re-booting of the televisual project: 'Interactive Pizza' (my rebuttal of the quasi-spiritual utopianism of new media theory), 'Boutique: Designer TV', 'Franchizer: Digital Packaging', 'Loss Leader: Event Status Programming/Exhibitionist History', 'Trash TV: Thrift Shop Video', and 'Tabloid TV: Styled Live/Ontological Strip Mall'. Rather than give you a book with just another invented humanities-based aesthetic taxonomy, I broke down each of the pervasive televisual industrial practices I had researched and mapped them into the terminology and logic of *markets* and *retail economics*. At last, this allowed me to push my historical phenomenon out from under the totalising shadow of top-down postmodern explanations. I had long surmised that there had to be other reasons for the culture that surrounds us beyond postmodernism. Marketing and programming allowed me to begin sketching out that complex scenario and alternative to postmodernism in this book.

The final chapter in the methodological journey for my book came with my visiting faculty appointment at UCLA from 1992 to 1995. UCLA has one of the largest television program archives in the world. I made systematic

use of it in television history courses to see if I could better ground and substantiate the sometimes rather speculative theoretical claims I had made in my dissertation. Chapter 3, 'Unwanted Houseguests and Altered States (Short History of Artistic Posturing)', is probably the best example of the integral pre-history of the televisual that the book needed. I was able to find hundreds of examples over five decades of television history (key examples from the archive are cited with inventory numbers that start with 'PVA-' followed by a number) that proved that U.S. network broadcasters and Hollywood television production companies were very comfortable employing clear and self-conscious views of modern art. Primetime narratives regularly used excessive avant-garde stylising as code during the classical and network era for acute psychological states that inevitably proved the normalcy of the classical psychological realism that dominated the television look at all other times. This televisual pre-history helped me establish, historically, that the role and function of stylising excess shifted dramatically after 1980 – from bracketed moments representing altered states in traditional narratives to acute wall-to-wall house-looks that dominated an increasing number of series during the decade of the 1980s. The final resources I mined at UCLA were the industry press kits and photographic stills collections. One thing I demanded from the publisher, Rutgers University Press, was that any book on television's visual style must necessarily include images. Of the hundreds of visual images in *Televisuality* more than half were photographic stills I shot off of video monitors (freeze-framed at key moments), but the rest were promotional and marketing photos from press kits in UCLA special collections. These allowed me to cross check my assumptions even as they suggested emic perspectives on how each show was programmed and marketed by the industry.

Stauff: With its theory building, *Televisuality* gives a specific twist to the established theories of media studies. You do not criticise them head on but question and bend the concepts through confrontation with the latest developments of television style and economics. Would you describe this as your general attitude or rather as something appropriate to your field of research?

Caldwell: At one point I had a big appetite for high theory or screen theory. While I was typically amazed at the often provocative and sometimes elegant arguments in it, I regularly had the feeling, after I concluded reading it or applying it in film/media analysis, that I had not learned a whole lot beyond what I had known or assumed when I started. In this sense, it

felt more like clockwork theory: once you tightly wound up the conceptual clock it methodically clicked away until it reached its known end. Alternatively, I asked what kind of theory would increase the likelihood of learning something new during the research process, of seeing the same phenomenon in novel ways? This is why finding the hermeneutic process embedded within the very object of academic research – media industry practice – was so important to *Televisuality* and to everything I have published since then. What I saw in industrial practice seemed to go well beyond the various theories of self-reflexivity that I had been well trained to identify. It was not just that producers and cinematographers reflected back on themselves or their conditions, but that a higher order of subsequent interpretation and analysis unfolded alongside these industrial behaviors. This other, hermeneutic, low-theorising process meant that media industries continually change, creating a moving target that we as scholars seldom fully recognise.

But if endless morphing and reiteration characterises all commercial media industrial systems, I puzzled, what would be the most appropriate and productive ways to study such a moving target? This is why some recursivity characterises *Televisuality*; a constant returning to my original assumptions, but with each return drilling down deeply (in a modified way) into yet another layer of the media-cultural rhizome. Of course, recursivity was not a term I would use at the time, but in retrospect it fits. At the time, *Televisuality* seemed not unlike a drill press, whose bits slightly wear and morph due to each drilling into a beam that is being successively inched through the machine tool. My hope at the time was that this sort of relentless, focused drilling, inching down the advancing target (and comparisons of the resulting cross-sections), would teach me something new about complex phenomena that we tended to prematurely generalise about in that period. I found that when aggregated as evidence, cross-sections of the beam being researched created a bigger picture of the whole that became the book *Televisuality*.

Stauff: Related to this particular form of theorising (and again, I would argue, to the writing style), the political implications of the book also seem to diverge from what was common in 1990s media studies. *Televisuality* includes and combines criticism of texts/ideologies, of technologies and of working conditions, while simultaneously conceding fascination for the industrial bells and whistles. Would you consider it a contribution to media critique?

Caldwell: Most of my work betrays some deep reservations about the flexible capitalist media industries and the neoliberal economies that now seem to inflect everything anyone does, including academics. When I speak folks regularly ask me about an underlying cynicism that seems to seep out of my research. I usually respond by suggesting that there is also, simultaneously, a deeper optimism in my work – one that results from shifting the site or location of agency from the macroscopic political-economic perspective of corporations that we are prone to over-generalise about to the perspectives of the human subjects (the employees) that make up the corporations. Media corporations are not one thing, not monoliths. Inter-personnel and inter-departmental tensions, contestation, hegemony, and instability churn within most companies. Potential openings from this instability make critical pessimistic write-offs of large media companies unwise since all such enterprises are in fact constantly changing inside, even if their official, outside project (i.e. their purpose as understood by their management and stockholders) remains the same. I am also a long-time educator of many undergraduates that have struggled but eventually found needed employment in the capitalist media enterprise. A number of them have made progressive, even if modest, tactical changes within the overall corporate culture of their work worlds. Tactical, progressive changes generated by media workers and professionals are not things that scholars and elites should write off out of hand. Standpoint theory is a framework that I have come to apply to my work retrospectively. The idea is that those at the bottom often have an optimal vantage point for understanding cultural and institutional power at the top. Not only do media workers and professionals often have the most informed and effective critiques of media capitalism and economic neo-liberalism, they also serve as potential agents of incremental change (within the bigger system). Once you look past the sometimes snarky or ironic critical pessimism that may leak from my accounts of television and media industries, you will also, hopefully, find optimistic possibilities for progressive media practice (as in the conclusions to my chapter on the 'LA Rebellion' and my 'Postscript' on alternatives to scopophobia in *Televisuality* and various later publications).

Stauff: From my point of view, *Televisuality* was well received and still is frequently referenced, but I would also say it is not received in its full breadth. How do you yourself perceive the reception of the book? Do you find certain parts or arguments of the book neglected?

Caldwell: It is not uncommon for parallel phenomena to appear at the same time in very different places. In 1995 three English-language books appeared at the same time: Jostein Gripsrud's *The Dynasty Years*, Jane Feuer's *Seeing Through the Eighties*, and my own *Televisuality*. It became possible to teach this historical period for the first time or in new ways. I took this sync in scholarly publishing as a welcome confirmation of the nagging hunches I had about television for over a decade. I did not view these two other terrific books as competing with my own. Rather, if television is as vast and complex as I have noted, these books can be employed in teaching and research to complement rather than compete with each other. Each book engages the period with different theoretical perspectives and methodologies. I considered *Televisuality* then and now to be a part of a collective intellectual dialogue, not a final or definitive statement about the period.

I haven't thought much about your question regarding what parts of the book have been under-recognised. However, I have been gratified to see that many of the ideas and arguments that I took a stab at understanding in that 1995 book have predated later scholarship, sometimes by many years. This includes analyses of: media and network branding (p. 198, p. 9, pp. 284-297, pp. 250-257); the prominence of signature showrunners and auteurist television (pp. 105-133, pp. 13-18, pp. 171-172); the logic and value of pre-HBO cinematic television (pp. 11-15, pp. 83-95); serial television before media seriality studies (pp. 160-192); the de-legitimation and cultural legitimation of television (pp. vii-xi, pp. 250-257, pp. 193-222); the role of cultural capital in creative labour practices (pp. 74-77); the non-linguistic embodied aspects of media consumption (pp. 25-27, pp. 336-347); the pervasiveness of media repurposing before transmedia (pp. 149-151, pp. 297-301, pp. 110-133); the close and odd historical relationship between television and modern art (pp. 73-107); the centrality of television's pre-paratextual hybridising metatextuality (pp. 114-133, pp. 167-192, pp. 223-233); media archaeology (pp. 73-107); digital media interface design (pp. 134-159); the gender and sexual politics of media technologies (pp. 74-75, pp. 330-334); the pre-remediation ways that old media television was cloning and managing new media (pp. 149-151, pp. 263-283); and the utterly unremarkable realities of commercial digital interactivity at a time when speculative arts- and humanities-based new media theory was celebrating it as a largely metaphysical enterprise (pp. 249-250, pp. 258-262, etc.). Given this wide range of topics, I would like to think my cultural and institutional radar is as sensitive and wide-ranging today as it was in 1995, but I am not sure. My book *Production Culture* seems to have a bit of this radar-scanning quality as well.

Stauff: While I very much agree that *Televisuality* had a major impact on many levels, I do not see other books, or other research more generally, doing media studies in a similar way: mixing production and visual analysis, technological and aesthetic insights. *Televisuality* did not become a model or a paradigm for television studies. Would you agree with that assessment? What is (or was) your experience with your own students or with colleagues? Does the book cover too much to apply its mode of analysis anywhere else?

Caldwell: I did not initially intend *Televisuality* as a script or template for future books but as a set of provocations directed at the cinema and media studies status quo and a series of systematic attempts to make sense of a complex media/culture system. I imagined the book at the time, and still do, as an intellectual toolbox or tool kit for media research and cultural analysis. It contains lots of devices, lenses, eyepieces, and methodological tools capable of disassembling different parts of the industrial-cultural machinery in front of me. My subsequent experience with ethnographic fieldwork over the past fifteen years has confirmed my initial assumption about the importance of mixed critical, textual, and cultural analysis in *Televisuality* as well. That is, that effective research on either onscreen content or industrial cultures challenges us to better integrate multiple methodologies and critical perspectives in our work.

I did generally intend *Televisuality* to pester two cherished but largely unquestioned assumptions that spurred so much speculative theorisation before 1995. At that point, untenable orthodoxies about media specificity and the nature of textual analysis had ossified. First, I was troubled by the general premise in theory that television was one thing, one identifiable medium, with distinctive traits that intellectuals could extrapolate theories from. The media specificity thesis behind this view had proved very productive in earlier television studies, from the sophisticated "*Channels of Discourse*" in 1987 which generally theorised television in polar opposition to cinema back to McLuhan's broadside provocations in 1964. Yet the trusty premise seemed to pale and falter in the face of the eclectic, hybrid stylistic, artistic, and production modes that seemed to define television history from its very beginnings – at least if one looked outside of the university seminar room. Television's presentational hybridity and aesthetic excess showed up everywhere I looked over the years that I researched *Televisuality*: on screen, in the archive, at trade meetings, in technology settings, on sets, in trade talk.

Second, I was frustrated by the general academic habit of segregating

textual analysis away from industrial and labor analyses – even as criticism had long shackled texts within overly bounded poetics, stylistics, or formalist schemes. Instead, I hoped that *Televisuality* would underscore at least some of the fundamental ways that television texts are inextricable from industrial and labor practices; and, in turn, how industrial and labor practices are themselves also regularly textualised. As such, I had hoped to make textual analysis in *Televisuality* more context-sensitive, that is, less hermeneutic (criticism-based) and more institutional (research-based) and grounded.

How then to best research and write, first about television's dense institutional and cultural mixage, and second about the workaday industrial authoring of television texts? Books are judged in part by their cohesiveness, with an efficient and reductive through line normally the goal. *Televisuality* clearly has a through line, but it moves more like a dragnet that trawlers use to fish *en masse* than like the clean arc of the moon across the night sky (a cleaner metaphor of the sort that formulaic, Aristotelian screenwriting professors favor). And that is okay. Netting and dredging of this sort has its place, particularly when industries and cultures mix and change rapidly, outpacing our academic paradigms. Dragnetting American television from 1980 to 1990 and the systematic sorting, mapping, and analysis on deck that followed from 1991 to 1995 made it impossible for me to either research or theorise television as one thing or to analyse texts with anything like a de-industrialised Kantian distance.

I think *Televisuality* may have become a model for subsequent work by others, but not in the ways that you are suggesting. My primary identity over the past two decades, even as an actively-publishing researcher, has been as a professor and mentor to graduate students and doctoral candidates at UCLA. That seems a fair enough goal for me. As a toolbox full of provocations and a somewhat obsessive attempt at industrial-cultural sense-making, I have seen the integrative methods of *Televisuality* (textual, industrial, stylistic, and cultural analysis) resonate within the dissertations of a number of younger scholars in the field, and resonate productively. That integrated orientation certainly served as a starting point for my own cultural studies of production research after 1995 and for my *Production Culture* book after that. I am happy to say that the later book emerged from teaching a community of dozens of PhD candidates during that period who were pursuing similar production studies work. This mode of dissemination and adjacent influence actually seems preferable to the kind of cloning and reiteration that can sometimes take place in doctoral programs associated with the organised research centers of some senior scho-

lars. I will consider my efforts worthwhile if I can continue to trigger this kind of intellectual resonance and adjacent disciplinary reverberation in the future.

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Note

1. For more detailed examples of these arguments and projects see Caldwell 2009, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2014; Caldwell & Vonderau 2013.