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2013

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13250>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Valck, Marijke de; Teurlings, Jan: After the Break. Television Theory Today. In: Marijke de Valck, Jan Teurlings (Hg.): *After the Break. Television Theory Today*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press 2013, S. 7–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/13250>.

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## **After the Break** **Television Theory Today**

*Marijke de Valck and Jan Teurlings*

*Qu'est-ce que c'est la television?* Perhaps it is telling that André Bazin's volumes on the ontology of cinema have become classics of film studies, while in television studies there is no equivalent search for the specificity of the televisual at the origin of the discipline. One could mention Raymond Williams' *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) as a landmark study in which the influential concepts of *flow* and *mobile privatization* were coined, but this would ignore that the book's leading contribution is of a socio-political, rather than ontological nature: theorizing the role television played (or could play) by grounding the technology and cultural form in the society that had produced it – a position that must be understood in opposition to Marshall McLuhan's technological determinism. By emphasizing the agency of viewers, Williams paved the way for British cultural studies, which remained one of the two most popular academic traditions in the study of television until the 1990s. The other major tradition, political economy, did not concern itself much with the being of television either, but arose out of a left-wing anxiety for concentration of power in the hands of the few, contributing to our understanding of the ways in which broadcasters, media institutions and companies serve their own (class) interests with the production of mass media. Looking back, it seems as if academic attention for television has been displaced from the beginning, never focusing on the question of what the object of scrutiny defined, but always being lured away to study what appeared to be more urgent topics: the effects of mass media on society, the exploitation underlying media industries and their role in the creation of hegemonic projects; or, alternatively, the ways in which audiences appropriated TV and television shows to actively construct (social) identities.

This edited volume opens a new academic series on television. The timing of the series might raise eyebrows. It is an understatement to say that the media sector is undergoing profound technological and economic changes. Although the postwar period saw its fair share of technological change, the settlement between film, television, radio and music industries was relatively stable, or at least seems so in hindsight, as Markus Stauff and Judith Keilbach argue in this book. The emergence in the mid-1990s of digital technologies and the internet changed all that, having a profound impact on the existing media ecologies and their respective relations (see Fuller 2005; Goddard and Parikka 2011 for our understanding of media ecology). Why gather intellectual resources for a medium that runs the

risk of becoming obsolete, one could ask? Within television studies there seems to be a growing consensus that television as we knew it is irrevocably changing. Some are gleefully announcing the death of television, others have been less sanguine but insist that television is radically changing before our eyes, as a slew of recent publications testify (Katz and Scannell 2009; Lotz 2007; Spigel and Olson 2004; Gripsrud 2010; Bennett 2011; Turner and Jay 2009; Kackman et al. 2011). Perhaps paradoxically, the question ‘what is television?’ has gained relevance as the medium falls into demise. To talk about television’s transformation, one is compelled to describe what characterized television before and what it has become or is becoming instead. Different terms have been used to interpret the tectonic shift: from network to multi-channel environment (Syvertsen 2003), from broadcasting to narrowcasting (Gripsrud 2004; Smith-Shomade 2004), from scarcity to plenty (Ellis 2000), from collectivist to individualist medium (Katz and Scannell 2009), from analogue to digital (Jenkins 2006; Sinclair and Turner 2004), from nationally oriented to globalized (Curtain 2004; Waisbord 2004), from programmers’ flow to on-demand viewing and metadata protocols (Uricchio 2004), or as a mutation in regimes of immersion (Citton 2010). The transformations have urged media scholars to stop and reflect on the central frames through which television has been analysed so far. This has led to a particularly productive surge in the critical reflection on television, which, can be argued, in itself offers sufficient reason and grounds for a new academic series.

Such exclusive attention for television, however, does not come uncontested. At a time when media convergence and digitization are redrawing the boundaries of media and the disciplines that study them, it is up for discussion if the focus on one medium is still justified. The distinction between film studies, television studies and new media studies has come under pressure; now that television is digital and interactive, the filmic is something we can experience in our living rooms through large flat screens and surround systems, and music videos are watched on the train in handheld devices. From a technological point of view, it could be argued that digitization has made everything into ‘new media’. Yet on a professional level, there are still huge differences between software developers and television producers, and most people keep on distinguishing between films, TV series, or software. For some, media convergence should accelerate the joined study of different media under the header of ‘media studies’. Others rather emphasize the divergent disciplinary heritage associated with a particular medium, or take the distinctive positions held by film, television and new media forms in our society as vantage points for separate studies. This can lead to extreme positions, like the one advanced by Geert Lovink in a recent polemical piece. He argues that the time has come for new media studies to disengage itself from the rest of media studies, since the theoretical tools coming out of the latter tradition have nothing to say about ‘the specificities of digital, networked modes of working, real-time pressures, and the mobile dimension of today’s media experience’ (Lovink 2012: 81). One need not go that far, however. The current transformations shake *all* media scholars out of their comfortable disciplinary ways and force us to rethink the relevance and accuracy of traditional approaches for objects that are changing as we write. It seems more productive to join forces and

engage in an entangled and cross-fertilized redefinition of the field of media studies, while at the same time also investing resources in understanding the medium-specific problems that – despite prophecies about an all-consuming convergence – continue to exist. This book will be part of the latter objective while in no way wanting to be detrimental to the legitimacy of the former.

At the heart of this book is the question, to what extent our theories are still apt to capture television as a medium in transition: should we invent new theoretical concepts or are our old ones still perfectly relevant? And given the current sense of crisis and instability, what new theoretical paradigms could be brought to shed their light on television? Lovink criticized media theory for beating a dead horse, arguing that ‘there is no sense in applying McLuhan or Baudrillard to, for instance, Wikipedia,’ (Ibid.: 79) because ‘these concepts are ill prepared for the fluid media objects of our real-time era’ (Ibid.: 78). The point is simple yet important; namely, that when a medium is in flux the theoretical concepts used until then might become inadequate for the task at hand. Many forms of theoretical disconnection are possible: concepts can become obsolete, inadequate or merely redundant; the urgent questions of the time may have moved into a different terrain that the existing theories no longer address; the changing medium might develop characteristics or cultural forms that are no longer addressed by the theories of old; and all of this happens in a media ecology where changes in one medium affect all the others, for example, when film had to reinvent itself due to television’s introduction, or more recently where the arrival of the internet pushed some functions of TV to the side while foregrounding others.

But the reverse can also be true; namely, that the search for new concepts locks us into the rhetoric of the perennially new, blinding us to the fact that not only have things remained the same, but that the older concepts yield interesting insights. It is not because theoretical concepts have a history that their usefulness has been exhausted. Here, too, are several possibilities, some of which are taken up in the articles in this volume. The first is the enduring relevance of theoretical concepts. *The nation*, for example has a long theoretical history in television studies, one that is intimately related to television as a broadcast medium. As Graeme Turner has recently argued, it is nevertheless too early ‘to write the obituary of national television broadcasting just yet’ (Turner 2009: 54). The same goes for a concept like *everyday life*, which also emerged on the theoretical horizon due to television’s planned flow interweaving with the flow of everyday life (Silverstone 1995). Yet, it is not because we have now moved from appointment television to ‘networked video culture’ (Marshall 2009: 41) that a concept like everyday life has become irrelevant as Herbert Schwaab argues in this volume.

Sometimes the relationship between ‘old concepts’ and ‘new objects’ is one of repurposed anachronism, as when a decidedly nineteenth century concept like *enclosure* leads Marc Andrejevic (2007) to describe the digital platforms through which we watch TV as ‘digital enclosures’, virtual spaces through which information and cultural artefacts are produced, surveilled and commodified. Or, as Joke Hermes argues in this volume, some concepts of old like *professionalism* or *social responsibility* continue to haunt the present because of the way audience members have become accustomed to appreciating TV shows. Here the anachronism

consists of the theoretical concepts of the mass communication paradigm having an afterlife outside of academia, in the daily decisions by audience members on what to watch, and on what grounds.

The essays gathered in this collection focus on the *theoretical* frames and concepts we need to understand the medium of television. The idea for a collection was first hatched during the Ends of Television conference that took place at the University of Amsterdam between 29 June and 1 July 2009. Apart from the drive to describe and analyse current media transformations, participants shared a commitment to reflect on their own position as television scholars, to debate the validity of established theories and methods, and to try different tools to study different manifestations of television today. Since then, several publications on the topic have appeared that address similar issues.

This book should be positioned as a continuation of earlier work published on the transformation of television. We specifically want to mention *Television After TV: Essays on a medium in transition* (2004) edited by Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson, the first anthology that identified the major issues for television in the period of transition. Its essays were a valuable source of reference. Less important for this book, but worth mentioning because it was the first single-author book on the contemporary changes is Amanda Lotz' *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (2007). It draws on interviews with key players as well as trade publications and focuses almost exclusively on political economy, therefore remaining fairly descriptive.

Since 2009, a number of collections have been published that more or less cover the same terrain, although with different emphases. Two bundles need specific mentioning, because they come closest to what we had originally in mind when conceiving of this book: the special issue put together by Elihu Katz and Paddy Scannell titled *The End of Television? It's Impact on the World (So Far)* (2009), and Graeme Turner and Jinnay Tay's co-edited *Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era* (2009). Both books focus specifically on the changes to television during the last decade or so, and use this to formulate what we have called an ontology of television, with the latter paying more attention to local variations in the reconfiguration of television in the post-broadcast era. *Flow TV: Television in the Age of Media Convergence* (2011) is a more recent bundle but with an almost exclusive focus on the US context, and Jostein Gripsrud's *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context* (2010) has a more European focus while focussing on the change from analogue to digital. This is also the approach of James Bennett and Niki Strange's *Television as Digital Media* (2011).

Our anthology undoubtedly covers some of the same terrain as the above books, but differs from them in its explicit commitment to think through the implications of television's transformations for television theory today. However, since theoretical concepts not only have a history but also a geography, a caveat is in place. Most of the authors gathered in this collection are writing about Western media phenomena, and thus the theoretical concepts they propose have a distinctly North-Atlantic flavour. Perhaps it would have been more accurate to subtitle the bundle, for example, 'European Television Theory Today', but since

none of the authors explicitly engaged with the ‘Europeanness’ of the theories it seemed an odd choice to do so. As a consequence, the chapters gathered here should not be read as claiming to represent a television theory that is global in reach, to the contrary. If anything, the articles gathered here give testimony to the necessary locatedness of theory, both in time and in space.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part, called ‘Questioning the Crisis’, is reserved for articles that address the widespread idea that television is in crisis. The articles clustered here not only critically interrogate the idea that television is dead – in fact, most agree that this is not the case – but also use that occasion to make ontological claims about what television is, nowadays or in previous times. In the second part, ‘New Paradigms’, we test the hypothesis that while some research questions on television may not have dramatically changed, new academic paradigms can enrich television theory and/or generate new answers. The concluding part is named ‘New Concepts’. Its contributors posit new concepts in an attempt to adequately deal with specific manifestations of contemporary television or to address (new) televisual characteristics. In what follows we will introduce the three parts and their contributions to make selective reading easier.

## 1. Questioning the crisis

Part one opens with a piece by Herbert Schwaab in which he turns a critical eye on the recent wave of academic publications on ‘mature quality’ television series, like *The Sopranos* and *The West Wing*. While one could argue that series such as *Reading Contemporary Television* point to the complete opposite of a crisis – never before did television seem such a worthy object of analysis – this particular turn in television theory only covers a very small and homogeneous section of today’s television production. Schwaab emphasizes that the academic concern with obvious narrative and aesthetic complexity goes hand in hand with the inability to locate and appreciate a specific form of television complexity. This, he argues, finds its foundations in the volatile and everyday nature of television. He begins with a quote by Dennis Potter, who says that if television works, it can be extremely powerful, precisely because it is situated in the mundaneness of our everyday life. Schwaab draws on Stanley Cavell’s writing on film to argue that the ordinary demands a specific form of attention from the viewer. Against the current trend in television studies, which prefers ‘quality television’, Schwaab poses the idea of ‘unreadable’, a form of reading that is guided by experience instead of interpretation. In doing so, he also positions himself against cultural studies and fan scholarship, whose idea of active reading he rejects. We could see his argument as a plea to restore *everyday life* as a central concept in television studies.

Joke Hermes, in her contribution, argues that despite media studies 2.0 challenging cultural authority and unlocking new and utopian concepts of audiencehood, the ideas of media studies 1.0 remain highly relevant. Drawing on Foucaultian governmentality studies, she argues that the ideas and concepts associated with the ‘mass communication paradigm’ may have lost their theoretical

relevance for the scholarly community, but that they have also spread through society – the ‘vernacularization’ of academic thought, if you will. One of its consequences is that this set of ideas has come to define what audiences expect from television. In two case studies, she shows that the ideas centred around mass media continue to haunt the popular imagination and expectations as well as the audience’s self-understanding, and that much-heralded features like interactivity, protoprofessionalism or audience productivity can come into conflict with these assumptions. Mass communication might be on its way out, but it has acquired a spectral quality by becoming a regulatory ideal by which television is judged in everyday life.

For Alexander Dhoest, the audience is an equally important factor in arguing for the continued relevance of an ‘old’ trope in television studies. With a case study on Flemish fiction, he sets out to prove that the idea of television as a (primarily) national medium is as valid today as it was in the golden age of broadcasting. He writes: ‘Even after the age of monopolistic public broadcasting and its explicit policies of nation-making, broadcasting can contribute to the construction of an imagined community of the nation as a symbolic home’. The national remains an important organizing principle and frame of reference, not only in terms of production and within programmes, but especially for audiences, who still tend to prefer national programming. Dhoest uses the concept of cultural proximity to explain the preference for local shows despite the ubiquity of global formats and the multichannel-environment. His analysis of Flemish television proves that Flemish and Dutch series and sitcoms – which share the language – are indeed far more popular than their American counterparts.

The last two contributions in this section take a different stance in their critique on the idea of television in crisis, in that the existence of the crisis is simultaneously challenged and used for rethinking what television *is*. If, in the words of Paddy Scannell, television ‘has been part of the world long enough to have accumulated a history’ (2009: 222) this allows not only for mapping and stock-taking but also for media archaeological purposes. Here, television studies seems to be making a theoretical move not dissimilar to the one that film studies did in the 1980s: using historical excavations in order to open up the televisual object, uncovering forgotten ancestors and devising theoretical concepts to grasp television’s ontology. William Uricchio predicts that the years between the 1950s and the 1980s will be considered but a ‘blip’ in the larger development of television. While these years have provided television studies with key references and concepts, the current transformations signal not the end of television, but a return to the flexible condition that already characterized television before.

Judith Keilbach and Markus Stauff move along similar lines of thinking. They argue that it is not only in the current situation that television is changing, but that television was continuously redefined throughout its whole history. Thus, television theory needs to take into account that it is dealing with media defined by ongoing processes of experimentation instead of distinct (historical) objects. Media theory is less apt at explaining transformations, Keilbach and Stauff argue, and they turn to the model of the laboratory – taken from the discipline of science and technology studies – in search for better tools. In doing so, their con-

tribution forms a bridge to our second part, in which we investigate what recent paradigms, like actor-network theory, can add to the already existing methodologies and vocabulary of television studies and media studies at large.

## 2. New paradigms

The field of television studies has a longer history of borrowing from and reworking theories and concepts from other fields. In particular, film studies, (cultural) sociology, linguistics and philosophy have contributed to the analysis of television. These linkages and the specific ways in which they were articulated have amounted to a disciplinary tradition of its own. In this part, the contributors turn to a number of different disciplines – disciplines that have been largely neglected in the literature on television’s transformations until now – to assess their usefulness for understanding television and its transformations.

Jan Teurlings puts actor-network theory (ANT) to the test, and argues that it offers productive tools for understanding television in general, but especially television *production*, which until recently was largely ignored by cultural studies scholars. He positions his work among neo-Foucaultian and cultural economic responses to the hostilities between cultural studies and political economy. ANT contributes a vocabulary – ‘translator-spokesperson’, ‘obligatory points of passage’ and ‘immutable mobiles’ – that is able to capture the transformations of television as it moves to a post-broadcasting era. He also argues that it is no coincidence that actor-network theory has recently become popular amongst media studies scholars, because its ‘mechanistic’ vocabulary resonates well with the way the media culture at large has come to foreground its own functioning. His analysis, in other words, highlights the dialectical relationship between media object and theoretical concept mentioned before.

In the next chapter, Mark Hayward highlights the way cultural studies has a longer history of adopting and adapting elements from information theory. He seeks to understand how technological developments go hand in hand with media use and aims to move beyond cultural studies’ classical Marxist and post-Marxist approaches. Instead, he situates contemporary theories on labouring audiences as emerging from the intersections between Marxism, cybernetics and information theory. Hayward argues that the historical links between labour and cybernetics in the constitution of media studies should make us aware that common terms like audiences, labour and producers are conceptually contingent and, consequently, that scholars’ deployment of them is subject to variability. We should not just replace old models with new ones, he concludes, but rethink the way we work.

Finally, Juan Lozano’s contribution bears witness to the influence of the newly forming paradigm of memory studies as well as the more established tradition of preservation and archival theory. He draws attention to the role of television memory, which manifests itself both collectively and individually. Audiovisual archives and broadcasters exploit the nostalgic taste of audiences with tailored programming: using material from the archives, broadcasting reruns or produc-



ing contemporary version of old popular shows. This type of television memory is a source for collective binding that has in fact gained importance with the advance of digital programming techniques such as on YouTube or Google. At the same time, thanks to social media, viewers play an ever more active role in keeping their individual television memories alive. Lozano argues that contemporary television theory will need to engage with these various manifestations of television memory. The recently launched peer reviewed, open access *Journal of European Television History and Culture* promises to offer a platform for the type of discussions Lozano has in mind. The first issue, with contributions by Sonja de Leeuw, John Ellis, Pell Snickar, Andreas Fickers and others, was aptly titled ‘Making Sense of Digital Sources’ (2012).

### 3. New concepts

In the third and final part of this anthology the contributors develop conceptual thinking for those aspects of television that fall outside or beyond what is considered television in classical television theory. Writing on video website Youtube, José Van Dijck takes up Raymond Williams’ classic 1970s book and wonders what he would have to say about the website. Using Williams’ concepts of broadcasting, social practice and cultural form, she argues that in the case of Youtube these amount to *homecasting*, *videosharing* and the *snippet*, thus showing the continuing relevance of Williams’ work, not by endlessly repeating him but by staying true to his thought by employing it rather than reiterating. Her essay argues that the contemporary legal-economic context needs to be updated, based upon the three concepts that she proposes.

The other two pieces in this section prove that new conceptual thinking on television is not limited to its digital manifestations or hybridization. The final two authors of this volume find their inspiration to push television’s theoretization in lesser-known uses of the medium. Margot Bouman’s chapter breaks with the familiar association between television and popular culture – yet again one of those remnants of the broadcast era, and one that is cemented in countless introductions to television studies books. Instead, Bouman looks at how the ‘high culture’ art world has engaged with television. She uses two examples of public televisual art from the 1980s to rethink television as a medium of distraction. Bouman applies Žižek’s *paradox of anamorphosis* to understand television viewing as a state of clarity as well as distortion and compares TV to other transient places like department stores, libraries, airplanes and parks. In a time when television is claimed to have become ubiquitous, Bouman argues that the twin pair of attention and distraction are not mutually exclusive, and that the psychoanalytical concept of fantasy as formulated by the paradox of anamorphosis is crucial in our understanding of it.

Finally, Mimi White turns her attention to one of the most marginal corners of television and coins the term *apparitional TV* to describe the contingency attached to viewing these shows in the age of plenty. Her case study is *Barry Chappell’s fine art showcase*, a programme in which allegedly quality art is sold for

bargain prices. The show is literally hard to track down: irregularly broadcasted it does not rely on a regular schedule, and even its use of other media like a website only mitigates its apparitional aspects. White's analysis of what is essentially a particular show draws the attention to a whole range of television shows and genres that seem to fall outside of our assumptions of 'what TV is', and they therefore have not received the critical attention they deserve. Studying these under the rubric of apparitional TV, so argues White, will challenge many of the unexamined assumptions that TV studies holds about its object of study – which is precisely why it is an endeavour worth pursuing.

#### 4. Concluding thoughts

The title *After the Break* refers to the recent digital disruptions as a breaking point in television studies. The debates on the end of television can be argued to have been a blessing for a discipline that – some excellent exceptions excluded – had become rather set and repetitive in its output. The different contributions to this book share a mission to rethink television theory in light of contemporary transformations. The result is a decidedly heterodox collection of positions, arguments and emphasis. The book does not advance one singular argument or make definitive claims about what new television theory ought to be. Some, like Mimi White or José Van Dijck, argue for the need for new theoretical concepts, while others like Joke Hermes or Alexander Dhoest argue that the old concepts are not only perfectly fine but they remain highly relevant. Some contributors, like Mark Hayward, use the current crisis for purposes of theoretical archaeology, while others like Judith Keilbach and Markus Stauff, or Wiliam Uricchio use it for arguing that television has never been such a stable object in the first place. Rather than seeing this lack of overarching argument as a weakness, we believe that the strength of the book lies precisely in the way these different chapters, at different levels of abstraction and by using different case studies, stimulate the reader to constantly reassess the previous contributions.

The pluralism of the essays collected here is not only a conscious decision on our part. It is also a sign of the times; moments of transition bring with them confusion, as the categories that we are used to seem no longer valid. Confusion may, however, hold great promise, since it enables new connections and the renewal of old friendships. It is only after the dust has settled that the newfound theoretical landscape seems logical and self-evident, even necessary. We hope this volume contributes to this process – if not in the settling, at least in the dusting up.

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