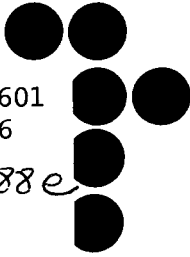


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INDUSTRY/TECHNOLOGY/ART, II
NEW READINGS OF AMERICAN TELEVISION

Thursday, March 31, 1988

Seminar Notes

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

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NEW READINGS OF AMERICAN TELEVISION

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Seminar Notes

"T.V. Commercials and the Limits of Interpretation"
Professor James Hay
Department of Speech Communications
University of Illinois

"Artful Finales: Network Series in the Age of Cable"
Professor Horace Newcomb
Department of Radio, Television & Film
University of Texas (Austin)

Professor David Thorburn, Moderator
Department of Literature
MIT

Gail Kosloff
MIT
Student Rapporteur

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This session was the second in a two-part series on "Industry/Technology/Art" concerned with the intersection of technical processes and industrial outcomes. This forum explored the content of commercial television today in the United States. This area has long been ignored by traditional scholars, but has recently become the focus of nonquantitative and humanistic interpretation. The presentations of both James Hay and Horace Newcomb provided the audience with some insight to understanding today's television content while shedding light on how American television programming has evolved over the years. While Hay explored the relationship between TV programs and advertising, Newcomb spoke on creativity from the TV producer's perspective. Both speakers acknowledged that economic forces play an integral role in shaping the content of what is broadcast on television today.

James Hay, of the University of Illinois, centered his discussion of television on the historical development of commercials in the United States and the relationship of commercials to television narrative and "audience narrativity" (in Hay's words audience narrativity is "what counts as a good story within the industry and to the audience"). Hay also acknowledges the important role the sponsors and advertising material play on "the material organization and economy of television production."

Hay is quick to point out the tremendous impact American television, especially advertising, has had on non-American, especially European, TV broadcasting. He noted the challenges foreign broadcasters face when using American programming which is usually produced with slots for advertisements. He believes that TV advertising is different than other media, e.g., press, poster, since TV ads, in the words of Williams, "can only be fully understood if their connection and interaction with non-advertising material is recognized and emphasized."

It is this inextricable link between TV advertising and television narrative which Hay finds fascinating. He acknowledges the widely held belief of media historians that

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historically "sponsors have wielded a great deal of control over early TV production." But he is more interested in studying the fit between advertising and the narrativity of early TV culture; he admits little attention has been directed to this area.

Hay provided the audience with an overview of how the relationship between TV programming and ads has changed since 1948. The major contrast being that between 1948 and 1955 TV was done live versus today's mostly "canned" programs. In these early days, Hay noted that program sponsorship did give the sponsor license to integrate the product endorsement into the program narrative. However, as live programming went out of vogue, the strategy of "magazine programming" (a policy catering to a variety of sponsors and a practice of filling open spots with advertisements) became popular.

Hay noted that conventions in camera technique and stage direction, such as visual or aural fades, evolved to deal with "spot" advertising. He showed the audience a clip of an episode from 1950 of Ralph Nelson's Mama, a weekly series on CBS sponsored by Maxwell House Coffee, to illustrate this point. Not only does the commercial deal with the topic of coffee, the program narrative includes two other mentions of coffee in the context of conversation. Hay noted that this strategy was not uncommon for the time given the financial incentives of sponsors. In contrast, Hay explained that later series produced around the "open spot" involve formal commercial interruptions. In the case of Mama, Maxwell House is only referred to again by name at the end of the episode.

Professor Hay is quick to point out the problems that are raised by integrating advertising into narrative "context," namely the difficulty of reading the messages or the meaning of the ads. He cited historical examples of such problems in comedy-variety productions like Milton Berle's or Burns and Allens's use of a "backstage" format. According to Hay, it is difficult in these situations to determine whether these "endorsements" are legitimate ads or "irreverent mockings of the sponsor's campaign style."

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Hay acknowledged that, as mentioned earlier, in the post-50s, several factors, including the change from single to multiple sponsorship of programming, reduced the prospects for integrating product endorsement into the narrative flow." He points out, using the example of The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet, that sponsors could still "plug into the narrative as a referential framework" in the mid-50s; Hotpoint Appliances inserted filmed commercials of Harriet in her kitchen demonstrating the products.

Professor Hay emphasized that he recognizes television ads as "forms or artifacts of television culture." He is interested in the study of the stylistic and semantic interplay between ads and television narrative especially in the 1980s, in both America and in Europe. He cites comedy-variety programs of this decade, such as Saturday Night Live, SCTV, and The David Letterman Show, as examples of programs which "ritually seek to blur the distinction between advertisement and comedic performance." As an example, he described how the stars of Moonlighting, Bruce Willis and Sybil Shephard, bring the context of the TV series to their respective appearances in commercials, as well as making reference to their endorsements in the course of the episodes. In one instance, Hay notes Willis' character David asks Shephard's Maddy if she really enjoys eating beef; this makes reference to Shephard's TV ads for the U.S. beef industry. It is left up to the viewing audience to make the connection between both characters roles on the TV show and Shephard's commercial endorsements for beef. Most importantly, according to Hay, "the text is no longer a discrete object of study."

Hay notes his agreement with scholar Todd Gitlin that "television and television advertising evince a tendency to appropriate, to assemble and reassemble the signs and discourses of television crucial to understanding how advertisements operate within the current cultural production occurring through television." In this context, Hay alludes to the popular Miller Lite TV commercials which feature Joe Piscopo. He notes the breadth and durability of these ads and likens Piscopo to Bruce Willis. He notes that Piscopo's performances often mimic the style of the TV programs in which the ads appear, e.g., one Miller Lite ad appeared in the context of Miami Vice and appeared to take on the style of the program.

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Hay went on to discuss the importance of ads, especially in this age of cable television, as "markers" (in the sense of billboards along the highway) of differences with other "viewing formations" (in the sense that whatever viewers glean from TV is always mediated through historically specific forms and social and cultural formations and transformation). In this context, Hay noted the commercials during an episode of the series Scarecrow and Mrs. King. He is most interested in how these ads "amplify and potentially contradict certain conditions of the female protagonist in the episode, and more importantly, how they become part of a text or narrative that the viewer must navigate. Hay notes that more and more pressure is placed on the viewer in today's TV ads to recognize these TV personalities and recall their TV roles in order to glean the full meaning of the TV ads. For example, when one watches a commercial for Crystal Light with Linda Evans, the viewer must make the connection between Linda and her character in Dynasty (which is also named Crystal) in order to maximize the effectiveness of the commercial.

Hay concluded his talk by citing that this blurring of distinction between advertisement and comic performance also takes place on cable television networks. He explains that the Nickelodean channel's Nick-at-Nite "Turkey Television" produces advertisements, like network television ads, simulate and parody its own comedy programs such as Donna Reed, My Three Sons, and so forth.

The second speaker, Horace Newcomb, of the University of Texas, noted that he would focus his talk on the TV producers perspective. He acknowledged his on-going affection for the media of television and noted that it is probably not even fair to assume that all the members of the forum audience watch TV. He advocates that TV is our culture's central story-telling system. He noted that when he studied TV in the 70s, the "network era," the shows were characterized by familiar patterns of stories and the shows fell into neatly defined categories, e.g., westerns, doctor and lawyer shows, soap operas and so forth. Today, these distinctions have blurred somewhat with the emergence of "dramadies" (e.g., The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd, Hooperman, Frank's Place) and "warmadies" (e.g., The Bill Cosby Show).

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Newcomb recounted that the nature of TV program production was changing even before the advent of cable. He cited the impact of VCRs, more than cable, on the decline in network TV viewership. TV's "share," according to Newcomb, has dropped to 60 percent. He noted that with this decline in audience share, advertisers are willing to pay more for a premium audience; cable can provide an advertiser with this specialized audience. He believes in these tight economic times for the networks, it is a difficult time for producers, especially independent producers, to experiment creatively. Newcomb acknowledged that the real revenues are in syndicating and stripping programs for local markets with local advertising.

In looking at the programming offered on TV today, Newcomb personally believes Frank's Place is the best show on TV. He gives the show high marks because everyone on the program is treated with a lot of dignity. He also likes the show because they use film and not videotape. Newcomb believes this show is an "astonishing example of what can happen with TV when you have a creative force working behind it." Newcomb believes that there are still certain producers willing to be creative as exemplified by Frank's Place. In contrast, Newcomb strongly voiced his dislike for current programs such as Thirty Something although he admits it is a creative work of programming, well-produced and well-written. Newcomb acknowledged that both shows give us more depth and great narrative. However, he does not find it entertaining to watch Thirty Something because the characters problems are too personalized. Overall, he finds open-ended serials like Hill Street Blues and St. Elsewhere more interesting since the programs allow the viewer to "explore the roots of his own culture."

Newcomb believes this is an exciting time to be studying TV because of the creative possibilities afforded by television. However, he would agree with Hay that creativity and programs can be sparked by "economic pressures" in the television realm. Newcomb noted that the 70s brought a great flowering of experimentation with Norman Lear and an upsurge in creativity. Newcomb leaves us with the optimistic belief that even in the 80s, with mounting economic pressures on the TV producers, this environment can nurture creativity in TV programming. Newcomb reiterated his belief that it is difficult to predict creativity,

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but in general he believes that the quality of programming is improving.

Professor Newcomb explained to the audience how one TV program can be perceived a good show by one television executive only to be put down by another. As an example, he noted that dramadies such as Hooperman are touted by executives at ABC as "innovative" while the other networks label work of this type a "mish-mosh." In Newcomb's opinion, the answer to this is easy. ABC has been successful with its Hooperman and therefore would not call this type of programming anything but great. Newcomb is partial to the open-ended serial; he sees this as the most appropriate form of story-telling.

Newcomb believes that today's producers are "exploring and pulling apart the familiar forms" of TV programming. He noted that he is not suggesting that they are even doing this consciously. He believes that the result is that "producers are making a lot more compelling narrative and stories on TV than we see in the theatre."