

## **Television Form: Past, Present, Future**

“Why Scholars of Historical TV Should Pay Attention to Form”

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The idea to convene this panel began with an offhand remark at the last *Flow*, in which a TV historian commented that they were “no fan of the ‘aesthetic turn.’” Scholars of historical TV have often kept the programs they study at an arm’s length, focusing on the development of the industry and its relationship to commercial culture and social change, rather than individual television episodes or scenes. Indeed, in many studies of historical TV, television seems to stand in for something other than itself. This tendency to stand back from the object may stem from TV studies’ origins in departments of communications and cultural studies, both disciplines concerned with questions of power and interrogating hierarchies of value. Television has, historically, been disparaged as a medium, and terms like “aesthetics” and “form” are often used in the service of canon-building, effectively perpetuating these very hierarchies.

While formal analysis has been gaining ground in studies of contemporary TV, television before 1980 has been subject to very little close formal analysis. Implicit in this absence is the assumption that television has only become “worthy” of formal analysis in the Golden Age of “quality” or “complex” TV, which is seen as worthy of such study because it has “style.” However, implying that a television show lacks style is similar to saying that a story lacks language. A television program’s “style” includes its the formation of its world (whether fictional or implicitly “real”), its relationship to (and acknowledgement of) the viewer, and the system of visual conventions it constructs in order to communicate. While scholars of historical TV may shy away from formal analysis because of its association with value judgments, eschewing such analysis has the effect, intended or not, of devaluing the medium, as close attention is itself largely the currency in which cultural value is measured.

Considering the relationship between form and history in the years since the last *Flow*, I have concluded that objections to the “aesthetic turn” in media studies risk conflating formal criticism with *formalism*. In my opinion, the aim of formal criticism is not to fetishize the text outside of its cultural and historical context or its relationship with its audience. Nor is it to make judgments of value or construct a TV canon, as “aesthetic” has frequently been interpreted in these discussions. Instead I argue, following Mikhail Bakhtin, that formal analysis is *inherently* historical analysis. A TV program’s style—for example, its mode of address—reveals cultural assumptions: who the intended viewer is (in terms of gender, age, race, and class), and what his or her relationship is to the television, and to the ideologically loaded space of the home. In my work, I analyze several programs’ narrational and presentational modes to examine the experience of being a viewer as television became a pervasive part of the postwar American home. In the 1950s and 1960s, shows like *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) called the viewer’s attention to the apparatus to demonstrate the uncanny and threatening nature of television’s domestic infiltration. The series showed television as a threat to the home and the family, through both direct representations of television and

allegories of the TV viewing experience.<sup>1</sup> At the moment where television programming shifted from live TV to pre-recorded telefilm, the question of liveness<sup>2</sup> and its simulation formed the plots of numerous episodes. As the show's opening narration made clear, the "twilight zone" is an interstitial space between disintegrating boundaries of the real and the virtual. The ability of uncanny narrator-figure Rod Serling to cross diegetic boundaries between story world and paratext reveals new conceptions of televisual space, correlated with previously-unseen diegetic levels that are seemingly specific to TV as a medium.

Scholars of television history may worry that formal criticism ignores contexts of production and reception, but the content and form of TV's developmental years have a lot to tell us about these industrial and social factors. As just one example relevant to the theme of this panel, the metafictional formal experimentation seen in much of early TV (a phenomenon with significant parallels to the "late style" of contemporary TV) demonstrates television's search, in moments of technological transition, for a medium-specific visual and narrative language. My method builds on traditional communications-based approaches, using formal analysis to examine the industrial and cultural contexts that led to particular textual forms. My objective is to work towards a historical poetics<sup>3</sup> of television by to examining the development of televisual conventions, systems of representation, and deviations from those conventions, and how they ask to be read and interpreted. The ultimate goal of such textual analysis is to gain an understanding of the *experience*<sup>4</sup> of a TV program as a cultural artifact, as part of the lived, everyday texture of an era.

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<sup>1</sup> "Where Is Everybody?" (1959), "The Sixteen Millimeter Shrine" (1959), "A Thing About Machines" (1960), "The Hitch-Hiker" (1960), "Static" (1961), "Showdown With Rance McGrew" (1962), "Little Girl Lost" (1962), and "What's in the Box" (1964) are all good examples.

<sup>2</sup> "The Lateness of the Hour" (1960), "The After Hours" (1960), "The Hitch-Hiker" again, "Five Characters in Search of an Exit" (1961), "Shadow Play" (1961), "Living Doll" (1963), "Miniature" (1963), "Stopover in a Quiet Town" (1964), and "The Fear" (1964), among others.