BAIMP Image Studies Essay 2 –

Technology and not culture have determined television's form. Discuss.

Television is integrated within the very tapestry of social life; yet the modern incarnation of the televisual medium can be analysed as either being a product of natural perpetual technological development or contrarily as a consequence of ever shifting cultural needs and ideologies - the TV set that sits in the corner of every living room a dichotomy of either the deterministic or the symptomatic. Whether it is the artistic qualities intrinsic within man or the inevitable push of new technologies from machine that have decided the current form of television has been heavily debated academically, yet close observation of the programming from the last twenty years certainly suggest a technological determinist stance.

   Marshall McLuhan famously quoted that 'The medium is the message[1]' when referring to technological determinism within the media; or that development with technology decides the unavoidable social and cultural change consequences that occur. It 'suggests that the nature of the communications medium has a direct impact on how society and its members think and operate[2]' and recent industrial progression over the last twenty years within the television industry certainly advocate the case for technological determinism as the advent of new technology at both the viewers and the producers fingertips allows faster and more powerful manipulation. The 1980's saw the dawning of 'Paintbox' technology with the producers of the BBC's 'Top of the Pops' programme – whereas before post-production was laborious to style the producers now had the quick and effective ability to provide the then cutting-edge alluring and dazzling colour displays, fades and cuts to grant the show a more rich, vibrant and 'young' impression. It was overproduced to dangerous extremes of good taste and all because the technology was *now there*; putting to shade the artistic value of the production - although as the styling of the show was repeatedly overhauled with musical trend changes more time was dedicated to the human, artistic value - 'A consideration of the televisual mode of production – its production technology, methods, personnel and organizational form – shows that the overexcessive looks of primetime television in the 1980's were not just illustrations of a stylistic or post-modern sensibility, but were rather indications of substantive changes within the televisual industry and its production apparatus[3]'.

   The arrival of interactive technology within the grasp of the viewer also holds true to McLuhan's notion of determinism; television has become interactive because it now *can be*. The American music-video channel 'MTV' started as a single channel playing twenty-four music videos that the producers felt popular with the occasional presenter-based slot dedicated to viewer's live choices by telephone, but the influx of mobile phone ownership in the mid nineteen-nineties brought to their attention the possibility of text-message based decisions which were not only more instant than a telephone call but a whole new breed of programme could be constructed around them. Texts could be scrolled along the bottom of the screen of the video itself allowing viewer anecdotes without the hassle of a one-to-one interaction with a presenter; and resultantly other channels were launched based on this cheaper premise by means of the beginnings of digital television.

   Other programme's based on the democratic ideology of public voting for a decision from the producers have since been created; the 'Interactive Revolution' of instant text-messaging and e-mails allowing everyone to have their voice heard. The whole success of the 'Big Brother' television series phenomena hinged around this premise and the 'boom' of subsequent reality-based television could intrinsically be distilled down to the straightforward fact that recent instant communication

technology simply allows viewers to instantly submit their opinions - 'snail-mail' or the postal service would take a minimum of a day; too long for programme's requiring near instantaneous public opinion. The other side of the camera also readily manipulates new technology as reality television producers now create the very programmes based on the equipment at their disposal; Channel Five's 'Back To Reality' featured a self-enclosed studio environment where the contestants of the show lived, where 'The mansion had some impressive features. Producers added the Truman Show style element of having complete control over the time of day & arranged for the sun to rise & set at the push of a button[4]' thus allowing complete manipulation of the contestants sense of space and *now* time. Although technological determinism could be viewed as an ever pressing-on process of refinement and modification inside the highly theoretical world of 'television hardware'; the fact remains, that similar to computers, the more stylistically inclined world of 'television software' equally is just as important - without the reflection on the cultural trends of an audience it is catering for then a television programme is irrelevant, simply inappropriate and just ultimately leads to unsuccessful televisual programming – they need 'unconscious recognition of the narrative style or grammar (to be) identical to their own so they can read them 'effortlessly'[5]' exactly as 'soap opera presumes, or requires, a viewer competent in the codes of personal relations in the domestic sphere[5]'.

The relationship between technological innovation and cultural identity are
'Intimately bound together and the family is often the crucible within which they are resolved… within the pattern of most people's domestic lives, the texts and technologies of communication and information are crucially involved in the management of time, in the management of the division of labour, and in the creation of and sustenance of social relationships and individual identities. The use of telephone, computer, video and television enables social spaces to be organized, linking and separating individuals to and from one another within the family and household, and also between the household and the outside world[6]'. Therefore, parallel with the conception that individual viewers can now interact with their programme using modern technology it is the family that at least has been doing so on a cultural level from the very beginning; essentially being able to switch channel to choose what culturally 'turns you on' with a programme is interacting with the television set in one basic way.

It is this cultural reflection at the level of producer and programmer of a television channel that determines symptomatically what gets exposed and what remains as idea, or further down the production line as cutting room rejection. Care has to be taken at this cultural level to walk the fine-line between entertainment and obscenity because any televisual encoding is fundamentally all for one seemingly obvious purpose – that it will be viewed. 'Our response to nature is codified, and our perception of a sunset, a stag-beetle or a roaming eyes movements relies on an encoding and decoding process that is as specific to our culture as our language is. The signified is as arbitrary as the signifier, because its form is culturally determined[7]' or a programme could be culturally encoded based on reality, yet it is the viewers within reality that determines its success by decode. Television is naturally written with the cultural audience in mind; it is organized accordingly to the needs of the culture rather than internal demands of the 'text' itself nor the individual communicator or author. Thus the intrinsic constitute of television (i.e. the programmes) could be seen as being highly culturally determined, indeed 'the technology within television is one kind of reality, and the culture to which we belong another. But we perceive both of them in a similar way, and as a result they interact with each other in a similar way[7]'.

For the post-modern televisual programmer of the future it is understandable that a relationship must be struck between the innovative possibilities of new domestic and production technologies and the cultural desires it is broadcasting to. Instead of providing towards either end of the spectrum a balance must be struck; a symbiotic relationship between the two where both innovation and taste is catered to.

Stylistically and theoretically inclined together – an equilibrium of neither over-excessive or empty style, but rather 'stylistic originality and motivated style[8]'. Vacant 'style over substance' for the sake of new technology is only naturally appropriated with the dawning of bright new technological ideas as discussed but anything new quickly becomes old and irritable to a culture if over-done; to remain fresh care and caution must be enforced to almost regulate the output over time.

The current state of the televisual era could be argued as due to an evolving process of both technological determinism *and* attending to cultural requirements – without one the viewer is unexcited and indifferent, without the other the viewer is alienated and unengaged. A mutual stability between the two must continue to develop if television is to remain entertaining, and with the example of 'Reality TV', when successful is evidently engaging to the popular culture of the UK today.

Academic texts

Surname	Initial	Date	Title	Publisher
3(p. 125) +8(p.126) - Caldwell	J	2000	Modes of Production: The Televisual Apparatus	Blackwell, Oxford
5(p. 128) +6(p.196) - Morley	D	1992	Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies	Routledge, London
7(p. 66/7) - Fiske and Hartley	J + J	1978	Reading Television	Routledge, London
Williams	R	1974	TV, Technology and Cultural Form	Fontana, London

Websites

Site name	Web address
1- Media and Technology Communication	http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/comm321/gwalker/media.htm
2- Subject_T	http://www.geneseo.edu/~bicket/panop/subject_T.htm
4- Five.tv – Back To Reality	http://www.five.tv/accessibility/programmes/backtoreality/intro/