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Teaching TV at Advanced Level – Mapping the Box

As a media teacher who watches little television (except sport and films), I experience guilt on two levels: how can I do my job properly and do I secretly think, like ‘high art elitists’, that TV is crap?

The new AQA specification is forcing me to confront this particular blind spot though, at the time of writing, I’ve yet to watch much more television. Film is my favourite medium and so, in an attempt to make sure I do not treat ‘the box’ the same way I treat cinema, I intend to use material cribbed from John Ellis’ *Visible Fictions* (1982) as a starting point to examine the aesthetics of television.

As I have only used this material in a limited way so far, what follows needs a health warning. However, I think that even if much of Ellis’ analysis turns out to be inaccurate (an unlikely event) or outdated (more likely), the process of discovering this with students should give an insight into what is specifically ‘televisual’. I intend to present it to students in this way: “Let’s see if Ellis is right and whether what he says is interesting”.

Table 1 (extracted from pages 127-138) sets up cinema and television in opposition, as Ellis saw it in 1982. This helps the pedagogic process as meaning is created by what things are *not*. It also sets up a useful framework for a comparison of the media – something that may be useful for AQA’s A/S Textual Topic:

Film and Broadcast Fiction. Much of what is described in the table is obvious ('cinema is never live') but should not be ignored. Many of the points are similar (10 and 11) and whether the hairs are worth splitting could be a topic of discussion.

The oppositions that make up the table were taken from the first edition of Ellis' book; I do not know whether he has updated this material in the second edition. This too can be used to advantage: in what ways has television developed since the early 1980s? (See Editor's note.)

Television	Cinema
1. image poor quality	1. image high quality
2. small image	2. massive image
3. image is 'stripped down' and so lacks detail	3. image (excessively) detailed, lush
4. viewer larger than image	4. viewer smaller than image
5. viewer looks down on image	5. viewer often looks up at image
6. engages look as a 'glance'	6. engages look as a 'gaze'
7. spectator concentration not necessary	7. spectator concentrates
8. close-ups (CUs) used to approximate normal size	8. CUs massive, used to mark emotional climaxes
9. image illustrates soundtrack	9. soundtrack illustrates image
10. sound anchors image	10. image anchors sound
11. sound main carrier of information	11. image main carrier of information
12. normal light conditions	12. darkened conditions
13. domestic surroundings – not anonymous	13. theatrical surroundings – anonymous crowd
14. can be 'in background'	14. always 'in foreground'
15. often chosen as a 'last resort'	15. chosen as a 'special event'
16. multiple cameras used in studios	16. single camera set up
17. fragmentation of events structured by continuity of performance	17. fragmentation of events structured by continuity of editing
18. image held on screen only until information value has been exhausted	18. image held on screen only until its aesthetic value has been exhausted
19. aesthetic emphasises CUs and fast editing	19. aesthetic emphasises movement and image
20. events shown in real time from multiple viewpoints	20. events shown in narrative time, usually from singular viewpoint
21. image has immediacy (often live)	21. image never live
22. image transmitted and received at same moment	22. image fixed in past
23. is perpetually present – soaps mimic real time	23. image is in past tense
24. uses direct address (though not for 'ordinary people')	24. third person address (occasional voice over)
25. sets up a distance between viewer and viewed	25. attempts to overwhelm the viewer

Taken from Ellis (1982)

Some suggestions for consideration

3. image is 'stripped down': this is one area in which technological developments have made a difference. Television sets with automatic tuning and factory settings now offer sharper and more balanced pictures. These have enabled viewers to benefit from the explosion in digital video effects and plenty of money is now spent in making television programmes look visually interesting – especially in terms of title sequences and graphics.

Nevertheless, this isn't the same effect as achieved on a cinema screen, where camera and film stock developments contribute to increased 'realism' or 'spectacle'. Perhaps we could re-write this as 'television image is enhanced by graphics and effects'?

5. viewer position: does this have any affect on how a text is experienced? The back rows of multiplexes (which didn't exist in 1982) look down on screens and cinemas used to (and some still do) have a circle.

8. spectator concentration: how much less do we concentrate on films on television than we do in the cinema or on anything vital such as watching our football team playing? Why is concentration not necessary to watch television? Watching an edition of *Horizon*, on mega-Tsunamis, I noticed that virtually everything was said twice, first by the voiceover and then by the interviewees. Is this a result of padding or pitching at a relatively low intellectual level? If the text demands concentration then points 6 and 14 will not follow.

Similarly the rise of the High Concept blockbuster has meant many films require very little concentration in order to follow the narrative.

13. domestic surroundings: since the 1980s there has been an increase in the number of television sets per household and the idea of 'family viewing' has begun to recede. Certain types of viewing, such as 'big screen sports' or music programming often takes place in bars or someone else's home. Digital cinemas, when they arrive, might show 'live' sporting events on a regular basis. Is this distinction still important?

18. image held on screen only until information value has been exhausted: the image of television carries less information than cinema and is, in itself, less aesthetically rich. However cinematic lighting, and digital special effects, have become part of television's language; see *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. *Dallas* spent \$1

million an episode nearly 30 years ago to emphasise the luxurious lives of its characters. But if we compare the spectacle of TV with, say, *The Perfect Storm* (2000), Ellis' point remains valid – though students should be warned against assuming anything absolute in the oppositions.

In addition, we should consider the double-layered text of music television, where written text spools across the screen giving additional information about the band playing (MTV) or memory prods for those reminiscing on VH1.

19. TV emphasis on close-ups and fast editing: this could be easily be tested, but we would need to define what constituted typical TV (see below) and typical film. This in itself can be a useful discussion.

Groups can be given different TV genres and asked to count the number of close-ups and shots in a 60 second sequence.

21. TV has immediacy: this is obviously true of news and sports events but how is this signified and how is it different to 'non-immediate' television? Interactive TV may add to this immediacy where the viewer has the ability to choose the camera angle; Sky Sports' playercam for instance.

22. TV on demand: when the networks get plugged into the internet, will – in effect – mean television is no longer transmitted as programmes and can be accessed at any time.

23. TV mimics real time: except in the case of repeats and imported programmes. 'A second chance to see' (euphemism for repeat) a 'Christmas edition' occurs throughout the year and *Neighbours'* Christmases do not happen in December. Similarly, 'TV Heaven' was inaccessible to Ellis in the early 1980s, now whole channels are given over to 'Gold' (another euphemism for repeat) programming. What effect will daily watching of UK Gold's schedule have upon viewers?

General issues

One major area of consideration, I think, is to distinguish between texts made specifically for television, such as sitcoms and chat shows, those which television mediates (the news, concerts and sport), and films that were made for a different medium. Is there such a thing as typical TV?

Similarly, the reception of television, its domesticity and availability, mean the series and serial narratives are ideal for hooking audiences (which cinema can only use in the form of remakes and sequels).

This leads us into the economic framework of television: it is usually cheaper than cinema (by the hour, adverts excepted) but because of the small screen nature of the medium does not need to spend as much money anyway. It could also be fruitful to compare cable/satellite stations such as Bravo with a terrestrial channel, or BBC News 24 with BBC News. Can we see the effect of a bigger budget on the screen? We can also consider the question of what happens when we watch a film on television. Special effects blockbusters are inevitably diminished even on DVD. For example, the light in the eyes of the replicants in *Blade Runner* can virtually only be seen in the cinema. Are 'made for television' movies aesthetically different from those that are designed for the cinema? (They certainly tend to have different themes – often concerned with social problems.)

Unlike cinema, television is never ending; though non-24 hour broadcasters do pause. It might be appropriate to add a 'point 26': 'TV flows forever v. cinema as a complete text' (this follows from point 22). Ellis elaborates the idea of 'flow' in his book, following Raymond Williams' *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974). Other useful texts are Len Masterman's *Teaching About Television* (1980) and Selby and Cowdery's *How to Study Television* (1995).

Outside of aesthetics we can consider television's role in the effects debate, institutional aspects such as public service broadcasting, access TV and scheduling. Scheduling is particularly interesting at the moment with the movement of news programmes allowing ITV to have an extra advertisement break in peak time (already completed programmes having to be cut to fit a shorter slot) and BBC needing 60, rather than 50, minute drama in the run up to their late bulletin.

The fragmentation of the audience in the face of satellite, cable and digital channels is another issue that will shape television in the next decade. Having taken ten years to get something of a grip on Media Studies, I think it will take me another ten years to get a grip on television, the only problem is I won't have any time to watch it.

(Editor's Note: John Ellis' new book is reviewed on page 23 . Nick was also unaware, when he wrote this article, that David McQueen had adopted a similar *strategy in Television; A Media Student's Guide* , Arnold 1998.)

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