"Flows and Other Close Encounters with Television"

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In his essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin quotes Paul Valery about the prospects for audio-visual systems in the impending future. "Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign." (219) While Benjamin goes on to explore the implications of the arts of reproduction, Valery more explicitly describes something on the order of an audio-visual system of transmission. Indeed Valery anticipates what has become one of the guiding terms for understanding broadcasting and other electromagnetic means of communication with the analogy to water, gas, and electricity, which *flow* into homes with a simple movement of the hand.

The specific term "flow" emerged in the 1970s as a keyword in television studies. Notably "flow" is used as a core concept in the context of emergent cultural studies and as a guiding concern for political economy approaches to global television. In this essay, I consider some of the prominent uses of the term flow, and the implications for the ways in which the term positions television as an object of study. I start with a brief review of perspectives on flow that develop in the context of cultural television theory after Raymond Williams. I then return to Williams' 1974 account of how the idea of flow crystallized in a particular context, when he was watching American television while visiting the United States, and explore the implications of this "discovery." I also turn to

political economic studies of the global circulation of media programming and information, focused on the study of media flows. Comparing the idea of flow in these formative, but discrepant contexts of television studies—television cultural studies and global political economic media studies—exposes distinctive methodological emphases. But they also have something in common; they both implicate television as an object of study in various forms of global mobility—tourism, international trade, ethnography, and diasporic communities. And both introduce the same word, "flow," at very nearly the same time, to capture this aspect of the medium.

Flow and the Television Text

In *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* Raymond Williams proposes the term "flow" to describe the distinctive nature of television. "In all developed broadcasting systems the characteristic organisation, and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow. This phenomenon of planned flow, is then perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form." (Williams, 80) With this perhaps overly terse formulation, Williams suggests that flow has something to do with the organization of television as a textual system ("the characteristic organisation") as well as with viewing and reception ("the characteristic experience"), both in turn linked to--but not narrowly determined by-- institutional prerogatives ("this phenomenon of planned flow"). In other words, as a conceptual term, flow represents the mediations between television technology (the flow of the broadcast signal), institutional terms of programming, and, ultimately of most significance, television textuality and viewer experience thereof. In elaborating on the

concept of flow, Williams explains that the term is intended to express television's

fundamental reconfiguration of the nature and experience of cultural texts. Specifically,

"the notion of 'interruption,' while it has still some residual force from an older model,

has become inadequate. What is being offered is not, in older terms, a programme of

discrete units with particular insertions, but a planned flow, in which the true series is not

the published sequence of programme items but this sequence transformed by the

inclusion of another kind of sequence, so that these sequences together compose the real

flow, the real 'broadcasting.'" (84)

The term flow has subsequently become a keyword of television theory and

criticism, albeit with substantial elaboration, revision, and criticism.[1] As Lynn Spigel

notes, "Perhaps because it has been so influential, the concept of flow has also been

criticized for its attempt to explain too much about television by devising a covering law

for the very diverse kinds of experiences we have when we watch TV." (Spigel,

"Introduction," xxv) The notion of flow has undergone a variety of refinements in an

effort to more precisely describe the nature of the cultural experiences it constitutes for

viewers, in which television watching in general supersedes the individual bounded

program (Ellis, Feuer, Newcomb and Hirsch, Fiske). Thus flow is reconstrued as

segmentation (Ellis), as segmentation without closure (Feur), as the viewing strip

(Newcomb and Hirsh), and as the associative textual strategies generative of television's

intertextuality (Fiske).

John Ellis offers an initial refinement of Williams' sense of flow, proposing that

the textual system of television is best described as "segmentation," here borrowing from

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[1] For another account of flow as a cultural and critical term in television studies see Corner.

semiotic film theory (Metz). He introduces the term to characterize television's unique

cultural/textual form, especially in contrast to cinema.

> Broadcast TV has developed a distinctive aesthetic form. Instead
> of the single, coherent text that is characteristic of entertainment cinema,
> broadcast TV offers relatively discrete segments: small sequential unities
> of images and sounds whose maximum duration seems to be about five
> minutes. These segments are organized into groups which are either
> simply cumulative, like news broadcast items and advertisements, or have
> some kind of repetitive or sequential connection, like the groups of
> segments that make up the serial or series. Broadcast TV narration takes
> place across these segments…   (Ellis, 112)

Jane Feuer offers further refinements on flow and on Ellis' idea of television as

segmentation. She describes Williams' idea of flow as something of an illusion, because

distinctive units of story and information are legible in television's textual system. "It

would be more accurate to say that television is constituted by a dialectic of segmentation

and flow. Television is based upon program segments, advertising segments, trailer

segments, etc." (15) Indeed, she notes that unlike cinema, television segmentation is not

a result of an analytic process, but is a manifest property of the text.   "Williams should

more accurately say that television possesses segmentation without closure, for this is

what he really means by flow." (15-16) Feuer adds two additional qualifications to her

discussion. First, she emphasizes that flow is an integral part of television as a

commercial form, something planned by networks, stations, and programmers to

maximize viewers, and therefore central to the commodity logic of the medium. "Flow

as such is neither natural nor technologically determined. It is an historically specific

result of network practice: 'flow charts' are constructed by network executives prior to

being reconstituted by structuralists." (16) Second, she extends the idea of flow to the

viewing situation. "The set is in the home, as part of the furniture of one's daily life; it is always available; one may intercept the flow at any point." (15)[2]

Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsh draw on the idea of flow to ground a method for analyzing television appropriate to the medium's textual system. They propose the viewing "strip"—a sequence of programs—as the appropriate unit of analysis. (Nick Browne proposes something similar with the idea of the television "super-text".) This emerges in the context of developing an approach to understanding television as a "cultural forum," a site where prevalent social and cultural issues are debated and explored from diverse perspectives. "The emphasis is on process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradiction and confusion rather than coherence." As a cultural forum, television programs address issues of social and cultural significance, and provide dramatic and narrative means for exploring issues from a variety of points of view. With this emphasis, and following Williams, they conclude that the best way to analyze the full range of television's cultural meanings is to study the viewing strip rather than individual programs or episodes. The idea of the viewing strip combines Williams' idea of flow, television's commercial programming system, and the awareness that particular viewers tend to watch more than one program at a time.

> Within these flow strips we may find opposing ideas abutting one another. We may find opposing treatment of the same ideas. … The forum model, then, has led us into a new exploration of the definition of the television text. We are now examining the "viewing strip" as a potential text and are discovering that in the range of options offered by any given evening's television, the forum is indeed a more accurate model of what goes on *within* television than any other that we know of. By

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[2] While a substantial body of television theory and history has emphasized the home as the central locus for television, in institutional, historical, and theoretical terms, Anna McCarthy's *Ambient Television* offers an alternative historical and theoretical perspective, with its examination of television in public spaces.

taping entire weeks of television content, and tracing various potential
strips in the body of that week, we can construct a huge range of potential
"texts" than may have been seen by individual viewers. (509-510)

Finally, the idea of flow influences John Fiske's formulation of television

intertextuality. Initially, his approach to flow closely follows the ideas discussed above,

as characteristic of the medium's foundational textual system.

The television text, then, is composed of a rapid succession of
compressed, vivid segments where the principle of logic and cause and
effect is subordinated to that of association and consequence to sequence.
Flow, with its connotations of a languid river, is perhaps an unfortunate
metaphor: the movement of the television text is discontinuous,
interrupted, and segmented. Its attempts at closure, at a unitary meaning,
or a unified viewing subject, are constantly subjected to fracturing forces.
(105)

Fiske notes that this textual system encourages meaning to be found across texts, creating

a system that promotes interpretation among the continuities and discontinuities of the

segments that comprise flow, rather than in terms of a specific, isolated segment or an

individual program episode.[3]

All of these accounts of flow build on Williams' initial articulation of the concept.

Even when they revise his initial formulation, they aim at explaining the unique quality

of television textuality, often in contrast to common understandings of film as a related,

but distinct, cultural form. (This emphasis on film versus television is explicitly raised

by Ellis and Feuer, and influences Fiske's discussion.) They also have implications for

what constitutes a television "text" as a unit of analysis, and for developing the best

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[3] I have also analyzed specific forms of television intertextuality that promote a sense of continuity across
programming flow. The emphasis is on specific textual practices that encourage viewers to recognize
continuities across television's ongoing "segmentation without closure," rewarding discerning and regular
viewers for their recognition of these connections by virtue of their regular viewing habits. (White, 1986)

possible interpretive approaches to television. This is the case even as flow is criticized for metaphoric implications of non-differentiation and smooth transition within programs and between programming segments (Ellis, Fiske).

John Caldwell offers a different approach in his criticism of "flow" as a key concept for television theory. In particular he addresses the way in which flow, and related concepts in television theory, are based on efforts to differentiate television from the cinematic apparatus, and the profound limits of this for making sense of television as an aesthetic and cultural set of practices. As a result, he offers a more wholesale critique of the idea of flow, suggesting that it does not begin to encompass a wide range of common textual practices and viewing habits that are clearly at stake in television. Caldwell challenges the emphasis on "flow" as a distinctive characteristic of television on several grounds. While I do not have time to review all of his perspectives, his basic framework is important, recasting television theory in productive ways. For instance, he proposes that flow highlights the continual, redundant, and monotonous aspects of television programming, to the detriment of understanding distinctions within the medium and its programs. "A great deal of television in the last fifteen years is significant precisely because it self-consciously rejects the monotonous implications of the flow…" (19)

He also argues that the common acceptance of flow provides the basis for another faulty theoretical proposition, "glance theory:" the idea that television does not engage viewers with any intensity of attention, especially in visual terms. First introduced by Ellis in direct contrast to the cinematic gaze, the idea that television invites the glance

rather than the concentration of the gaze has wide currency in some approaches to television theory. While glance theory is partially premised on the quality of the broadcast television image before big-screen television sets, digital signals, and HDTV, Caldwell specifically draws attention to the conceptual relation between the distractedness allegedly encouraged by textual segmentation or flow, and the pervasive distractedness attributed to the television viewing experience by glance theory. He also stresses that both flow and glance theory, as core concepts in television theory, developed in the context of efforts to discern essential differences between television and film, distinctions that may have little to do with the ways in which television programming is produced or engaged by viewers. "The morasslike flow of television may be more difficult for the TV viewer to wade through than film, but television rewards discrimination, style consciousness, and viewer loyalty in ways that counteract the clutter." (26) Rather than linking segmentation, with or without closure, to distraction, Caldwell proposes thinking about television in terms of its semiotic density, its complex visual/aural strategies and narrative paradigms that are just as likely to promote absorbed, intensive viewing attention as to only engage a distracted glance.

Beyond Caldwell's concerns about the limits of building television theory in distinction to cinema apparatus theory, the emphasis on flow as a unique quality of television, differentiating it from cinema, neglects important historical conditions of commercial programming. After all, the nature of flow first identified and named by Williams was not necessarily exclusive to, or invented by, American commercial television. Rather, it was arguably already in place in American commercial radio broadcasting, the model adopted and extended by television broadcasters. This is hardly

surprising, given that the major American national radio networks worked hard to secure their position as the dominating force in the emerging national television networks in the post-World War II era. (Boddy, Schwoch, 1990) Television theories that focus on differentiating television from cinema by and large pay inadequate attention to the significant relationship between radio and television broadcasting, and its theoretical and historical implications for understanding television. In the process such theories risk mistaking a characteristic of commercial broadcasting (as a technology and a cultural form) for a specific trait of television.

Finally, Williams' and other's use of the term flow is criticized from institutional perspectives. (Feuer, Budd) In particular these concerns focus on the fact that flow seems to describe television in its most advanced commodity form, undermining its value as a critical term for conceptualizing the medium apart from its consumerist imperatives. In this vein, for example, flow is a term used in the industry, involving the explicit determination of program schedules and marketing strategies. This includes the careful planning that informs the placement of commercials, efforts to maximize audience continuity on a particular channel, programming against other channels to draw a large audience share, and the intertextual proliferation of product tie-ins.

Traveling Theorists: Ethnography & Tourism

As a keyword and central concept in cultural and theoretical television studies, flow has thus achieved an ambiguous status. While it informs a substantial amount of television theory and criticism, it also seems at once too extensive and/or too confining for specific purposes of theoretical clarification or critical understanding. Yet there are

other aspects of "flow" which remain unexplored. Notably, the idea of "flow" emerges

in a number of contexts that approach television in terms of travel, tourism, and global

mobility. Ultimately I want to suggest that the emphasis on "flow," whatever its limits,

situates television according to a kind of "traveling theory," as scholars variously posit

logics of tourism, global trade, and diaspora to explain the medium's institutions, texts,

and modes of reception.

      This understanding initially emerges in Williams own account of his "discovery"

of flow--an account whose arguably apocryphal status is nonetheless made credible by its

repetition in other contexts.

> One night in Miami, still dazed from a week on an Atlantic liner, I began
> watching a film and at first had some difficulty adjusting to a much greater
> frequency of commercial 'breaks' [than is typical in British commercial
> programming]. Yet this was a minor problem compared to what
> eventually happened. Two other films, which were due to be shown on
> the same channel on other nights, began to be inserted as trailers. A crime
> in San Francisco (the subject of the original film) began to operate in an
> extraordinary counterpoint not only with the deodorant and cereal
> commercials but with a romance in Paris and the eruption of a prehistoric
> monster who laid waste New York. Moreover, this was sequence in a new
> sense. Even in commercial British television there is a visual signal--the
> residual sign of an interval--before and after the commercial sequences
> and 'programme' trailers only occur between 'programmes.' Here there
> was something quite different, since the transitions from film to
> commercial and from film A to films B and C were in effect unmarked. . .
> . I can still not be sure what I took from that whole flow. I believe I
> registered some incidents as happening in the wrong film, and some
> characters in the commercials as involved in the film episodes, in what
> came to seem--for all the occasional bizarre disparities--a single
> irresponsible flow of images and feelings. (85-86)

      Significantly, Williams does not dismiss this whole experience as aberrant, even

though he characterizes himself as disoriented foreign traveler who is watching American

commercial television.[4] After all, U.S. broadcasting is only one model for television, and

is typically contrasted unfavorably--especially at the time he is writing--with the public

service tradition of most European broadcasting systems, including British television,

with which Williams was far more familiar.[5] Instead, Williams uses this avowedly

untypical viewing experience to discern the *typical* nature of television. Indeed it

becomes a defining moment, crystallizing the full implications of flow, replete with its

commercialism, textual overloading, and distinctive consequences for reception. On this

basis he proposes as a *general rule* that flow is "the central television experience." (89)

Williams presents this experience of U.S. television, a narrative of "first

encounter," as the foundation for a far more general theory of television. He proceeds to

offer a comparative analysis of British and U.S. programs and programming as case

studies of flow. (72-112) Here, television is theoretically assessed as a cultural-

technological "other," as opposed to assimilating it into a European cultural tradition

through aesthetic analysis and canon construction. It is Europeanized nonetheless by

virtue of being situated in terms of a western anthropological perspective. The full

meaning of this "other" cultural form reveals its basic nature--flow--to the European

traveler, who considers it from the vantage of ethnography. It is thus in the formative

stages of television theory that the medium is posited as an ethnographic discovery.[6]

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[4] It is also interesting that Williams had been traveling by boat rather than plan, a mode of transportation that allows for gradual transition rather than abrupt shift. In this context, the impact of the "irresponsible flow of images and feelings" may have been exacerbated. It is unclear in the passage whether his week on the liner was a transatlantic crossing, ending up in Miami, or a vacation cruise; or whether this recounts his actual first encounter with American television broadcasting, or simply the moment when it had its distinctive revelatory impact.

[5] Typically, even commercial channels that emerged alongside public service systems have had relatively strict guidelines about intervals, stations breaks, and so on.

[6] In these terms the cultural studies connection between Raymond Williams and more recent emphasis in television studies on audience ethnographies (Fiske, Jenkins, Morley, Seiter et.al.) is quite direct.

Moreover Williams's original experience of flow is repeatable, even decades later, for those who encounter American-style commercial broadcasting for the first time through direct exposure to American commercial television programming flow. The fact that these narratives of first encounter bear repeating seems to confirm their value as tales for the tourist-ethnographer scholar. For example, sixteen years after Williams, John Caughie published his own account of a "first encounter" with U.S. television, rediscovering the full impact of commercial flow.

> For all the preparation that one receives from conventional wisdom about the annoyance of the commercial interruptions on American television, their effect still catches me a little unprepared. It is much less the regularity of the interruption, or the wonderful blatancy of their placement, more the specific way they interrupt, the effect on (or, more exactly, in) the text. . . . On American television, Cagney looks out of the frame, and the answering reverse-field is a commercial for Mack trucks. The space of the commercial is continuous from the space of the fiction... ...they can be read symptomatically as little contests between commercial logic--the need to deliver audiences to advertisers--and narrative logic-- the need to hold audiences in identification. What is so striking to someone raised in the protective shelter of public service is the visibility of the context. I *experience* the effect which I had always known in theory: a quite radical destabilizing of the text as an autonomous and logical fictional space complete within its own boundaries. For a still 'foreign' viewer, the experience of watching American television is never simply the experience of watching programs as texts in any classical sense, but is always also the experience of reading the specific forms of instability of an interrupted and interruptible space. (50)

Caughie's account bears considerable resemblance to Williams's description of "flow" both as an experience and as a theoretical concept. One signal difference is that Caughie remains more firmly committed to the idea of primary "texts," the narrative programs, *interrupted* by commercial and other interstitial sequences. This is precisely a distinction Williams had attempted to displace with the introduction of the word "flow"

in the first place. That is, Williams' encounter with the American commercial model led to a different assessment of what the object-text was: television was not best understood or interpreted as a medium where primary texts (programs, news reports) were interrupted by advertisements, stations identifications, and so on. Rather, the medium transformed the nature and notion of textual hierarchies, which were superseded by *flow*, sequences transformed by their ongoing juxtaposition with other sequences. As a result of this difference, the sense of being a tourist is much stronger in the Caughie account as he deploys his situated European gaze, holding up the British public service tradition, with its clearly delineated primary texts, as the standard against which U.S. broadcasting, with its disruptions, poses a potential crisis of meaning and stable subjectivity. He is not, in other words, willing to let American television flow constitute a general rule about the nature of television as a technology or a cultural form. Caughie's status as a foreign traveler watching television is also foregrounded as he details unexpected televisual encounters in other global locales. The story of his confrontation with commercial American TV programming flow is followed by anecdotes of stopping to drink in a Catalonian village only to see a dubbed version of *Dynasty* and the wedding of Prince Andrew and Fergie on the local television.

His status as a tourist is essential, signaling the extent to which his theoretical knowledge is intimately tied to *his* particular experiences around the world--whether in Spain, the U.S., or Scotland. From the start he makes it clear that academic knowledge of flow is incommensurate with the experience of the first encounter. "I *experience* the effect which I had always known in theory," he says, with the clear implication that his experience (and not his academic knowledge) finally makes the theory salient: he had to

watch American television *for himself* before he could truly grasp flow and,

consequently, comprehend its relation to poststructural and postmodern theory. The

theoretical and critical work of others—not only Williams, but also, especially, of native

American informants (i.e. other television scholars)—was not only insufficient evidence

but also inadequate as a way of knowing. Instead, ethnographic knowledge is advanced

for the traveler as his own, self-same subject of experience, knowledge, and study.

As a result, John Caughie (re)discovers flow through an originary and personal

experience, which occurs while he is traveling, just like Raymond Williams. And even

then, Caughie is much more guarded about the generalizability of this experience. This is

the case despite the fact that the encounter with commercial television flow has

comprised the daily experience of millions of "native" American television viewers for

decades. "There is a real risk in the theorizing and, particularly, in the teaching of

television of opening up a gap between the television which is taught and theorized and

the television which is experienced" (50), he asserts. Yet it is equally possible to

understand "flow" precisely as a concept designed to articulate theory and experience,

the structures of television and its modes of reception. This at least seems to be at the

heart of Williams's initial exposition of the term and its theoretical import.

Despite these differences, both accounts express what might best be termed "the

shock of the flow" as a signal experience for foreigners in America. Given the rhetorical

nature of these accounts, it is not at all clear that the same experience--firmly inscribed in

the strategies and practices of U.S. commercial television--is granted to the natives in

theoretically or phenomenologically meaningful terms. The implication is that native

viewers are too prone to absorption in the overwrought media environment which has

been naturalized through routine exposure; they are all too likely to go with the flow.

Because (we) Americans are always already natives within the culture of flow,

innovations such as VCR, cable, and DBS, which seem to exacerbate and intensify flow

are *a priori* rationalized as the fulfilled promise of the system which has always existed.

And because the native viewers are always already inside the system, they are implicitly

cast as unable to recognize, or theorize, the implications of their own media experiences.

Instead, the stories of first encounter claim this ability for traveling theorists.

As a result, the experience of flow-as-shock—the signal experience whereby flow

achieves its full impact and can then be recognized in its full theoretical import—is

reserved for tourists who watch American television from a Eurocentric ethnographic

perspective. And if Williams and Caughie are any indication, there is a compulsion to

recount the experience as a narrative of "first encounter" with a "native" system which is

also posited as the most elaborated commercial version of the medium. In this context

television exemplifies a non-primitive ethnographic object of scrutiny and fascination,

requiring a "thick description" in order that it can be properly assimilated into the

Eurocentric world view. With "flow" as a keyword of television theory, the Eurocentric

ethnographic perspective is inscribed as a founding epistemology of television cultural

studies whose full force subsequently emerges in the elaboration of audience

ethnographies. At the same time, this approach posits television as a cultural "other"—

not an integral part of a European cultural or aesthetic tradition—no matter the context of

its production and reception.

I even have my own anecdote to substantiate and extend the repeatability of this

experience for foreigners who watch U.S. television. In 1994, I showed a taped episode

of *The Simpsons* in a seminar I was teaching in Finland on American television culture.[7]

I had carefully described the nature of American television, emphasizing flow and

intertextuality as two key issues, as well as describing the multi-channel world of cable

and DBS systems. I was subsequently assured that this was elementary theory, basic

knowledge with which the students, having read Williams and Fiske among others, were

already thoroughly conversant. Yet shortly after I started the tape, as the program moved

directly from opening titles to commercials, the students visibly blanched; and during the

commercials they gingerly asked if I had recorded the program properly in sequence as it

had been broadcast. Given the typical abrupt transition, in the American style, from titles

to ads to program, they were certain I had mistakenly started and stopped recording over

a previously recorded tape. In other words, despite my lecture and their previous

reading, their immediate experience of American commercial television flow--even a

three-minute segment of one channel--had an impact that registered as startling, with the

capacity to disorient: the shock of the flow.

Global Media Flows

As it happens, the Finnish students were already quite familiar with the program

The Simpsons because it regularly aired on Finnish television; it was only the encounter

with American television programming flow that was new to them. But this distinctive

experience of programming flow was particularly salient precisely because of another

dimension of flow explored by media scholars starting in the 1970s. This introduces a

second register of issues regarding television, travel, and flow--the global distribution

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[7] My thanks, and apologies, to the seminar students in the Department of Film & Television at the

and circulation of programs. For even as Raymond Williams was introducing the term "flow" to account for the nature and experience of television as a system of programmed texts, the idea of "media flows" was being used by social scientists--particularly political economists--to study the ways in which news, information, and entertainment media were distributed around the globe (Mowlana, Varis 1974, 1985).

The initial media flow studies were funded by UNESCO in the interests of understanding the uneven circulation of information and media programming at a global level. They were part of a larger intellectual project, motivated by concern with the relationship between mass communication technologies, media information flow, and development in third world countries. (MacBride, Mowlana and Wilson, Nordenstreng, Nordenstreng and Hannikainen, Nordenstreng and Schiller, Sreberny-Mohammadi) These projects were also in part a response to a Cold War conflict, mainly in Europe, over competition for TV viewership around the border of the Iron Curtain, a competition cast along the philosophical values of the free flow of information. (Schwoch, 2001)

The classic flow studies along these lines are quite different from Williams in their basic impulse and understanding of the power of media. The number and range of programs imported/exported around the world were counted by nation state, in an effort to quantitatively map the ways in which global power and influence are unevenly distributed. These studies propose that television programming--understood in terms of geographical origin relative to geographical points of reception--expresses something about spheres of influence and domination in international relations. These may be broken down into specific categories--aesthetic, political, cultural, ideological, etc. But

University of Turku, whose experience I recount here.

there is always a sense of structural causality and intentionality that hinges on an initial nation-state identity.

The methodological emphasis of the media flow studies involved extensive sample bases and aimed to generate both representative and predictive results. The analysis of data in this way proposed to yield meaningful strategies of intervention to change the distribution of nation-state interests. Influence was quantified in terms of the number of programs and kinds of information that were produced in one place and ended up in others, and in the proportion of total programming hours that were considered to come from "elsewhere." Because the data suggests that texts and information flow unevenly--predominantly from North to South and West to East--programs are seen as having the capacity for a neocolonial imposition of outside values (Euro-American commercial culture) on a host of nation-states around the world. In this approach television programs are effectively conceived as travelers, akin to an unwanted immigrant population that moves around the globe with the privilege of cultural empire, inevitably introducing their values at the places they alight. These findings became an important part of the political theory of cultural imperialism.

The problems and limits of such studies are sufficiently well-known. (White, Hjarvard) Even the purveyors of flow studies acknowledge that the enumeration of where texts start and where they end up does not have much to say about the nature of their reception or interpretation. (Mowlana, Varis) And, as Caughie (among others) notes, it also says little about the particular, local strategies of flow in which the texts are inserted. (45-46) Nonetheless the persistence of the influence of this work is still apparent, especially in contemporary debates on globalization. (Curtin)

Flow in Historical Perspective

More central to my purposes is the striking use of the same keyword—flow—to anchor two distinctive, but simultaneous theoretical conceptions of television and television studies. Work in the area of media flows engages social science research methods, involving quantification, extensive sampling, and measurement, rather than the participant observation and "thick description" of texts and their reception that develops in the context of British cultural studies and television studies under the influence of Raymond Williams. Media flow studies see a disproportionate number of television programs representing, and imposing, the ideas and ideals of the Western developed, (post)industrial nations, especially including the United States, on the rest of the world. In the cultural studies paradigm, the Eurocentric ethnographic gaze experiences and diagnoses U.S. television culture as its "other." Yet despite these differences, both approaches not only share a keyword—flow—but also implicate a more general sense of television as mobile, involving travel on a global scale. Neither approach emphasizes television as an aesthetic or semiotic practice wherein the programs themselves constitute the central object of study and analysis. Instead, both approaches suggest that television is always, somehow, an "other" to its viewers, because of who is watching, where they are watching, or what they are watching.

These concerns also emerge in some of the earliest writing on television as a cultural/technological apparatus. Notably, in "A Forecast of Television," Rudolf

Arnheim offers an account of the medium that stresses its capacity for global mobility, and explicitly dissociates it from the realm of aesthetics.[8]

> Television is a relative of the motor-car and aeroplane: it is a means of cultural transportation. To be sure, it is a mere instrument of transmission, which does not offer new means for the artistic interpretation of reality--as radio and film did. But like the transportation machines, which were a gift of the last century, television changes our attitude to reality: it makes us know the world better and in particular gives us a feeling for the multiplicity of what happens simultaneously in different places. (160-161)

For Arnheim, television at its best, by virtue of its ability to move us around the world, can offer a better sense of our relative place within it. "We come to recognize the place where we are located as one among many: we become more modest, less egocentric." (161) Yet this emergent global perspective is not guaranteed in advance, since he does not allow that most viewers have the sensibility or sensitivity of the ethnographer, and are unable to be instructed and transformed in their self-perception by the encounter with the world which television can afford. On the contrary, Arnheim offers a significantly gendered (and nationalized) image of the typical viewer-traveler. In this context, he hints at something like flow, in the "variety of visible things" that television brings.

> . . . people who know how to observe and to draw conclusions from what they see will profit greatly. Others will be taken in by the picture on the screen and confused by the variety of visible things. After a while they may even cease to feel confused: proud of their right to see everything and weaned from the desire to understand and to digest, they may feel great satisfaction--like those hardy British spinsters who after a trip around the world contentedly arrive in the train station of their home town in the same state of mind in which they left. (162)

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[8] By contrast, Arnheim did assess radio, with its restriction to the domain of the acoustic, in terms of a distinctive aesthetic capacity.

Arnheim's association of television, female spectators, and travel as the embodiment of the worst television has to offer is not atypical. On the contrary, many early critics figured television's debased cultural status in similar terms, significantly including implications of "flow" even if that particular term is not used. For example, Lynne Joyrich has described Dwight MacDonald's writing on television and mass culture in precisely these terms.

> Within his framework (as well as that of several other critics), this absence of form, the 'nothing to see' of mass culture, is intimately tied to the notion of a female public and a feminized media: MacDonald defines mass culture as 'a tepid, flaccid Middlebrow Culture that threatens to engulf everything in its spreading ooze.' The aesthetic disorder he discerns in mass culture is therefore related to a particular spectator position. Remarking on the masses' lack of 'cultural equipment,' MacDonald associates mass culture with a childish, weak, and impotent viewer, condemning the media for encouraging overstimulation yet passivity, infantile regression, sentimentalism, and what he calls 'Momism.' (25)

As Joyrich elaborates in a footnote, MacDonald's use of the term "ooze" closely resonates with the idea of flow. Moreover, this sense of fluidity and lack of boundaries is commonly deployed by mass culture critics to figure the medium in terms of femininity and passivity. (183-4) Historically, women and children are proposed as the avatars of this position, the most likely viewers to be engulfed by the ooze, absorbed in the flow. But as Joyrich and others have noted, American mass culture in general and all of its audiences are considered overly susceptible to these effects. This echoes the sense that American television viewers in general are believed to be unable to establish sufficient critical distance to make theoretical sense of the medium, even though European cultural critics and the occasional male middlebrow critic are able to gain appropriate critical perspective.

As a result, "flow" can be reconceptualized as a "master" term which is implicated in a gendered division of labor. In the linkages of mass culture-femininity-ooze and "British spinsters" who travel around the world, television emerges as a debased mode of cultural expression, "not us" in the eyes of self-appointed guardians of a properly aesthetic national culture. In the context of (male) ethnographic and political economic work, the ability to diagnose "flow" conveys a more robust sensibility, including traveling scholar-viewers replete with the analytic skills necessary to assess, and as necessary redress, the terms of the medium's mobility, including the ability to differentiate and stanch the flow. Thus, as a keyword "flow" encompasses various formations and permutations of television's status as a cultural other.

With flow as a core conceptual term, television gets defined and theorized in terms of global cultures and travel almost from the outset, even as the power and knowledge of the medium relative to its viewers is variously assessed. The medium's value as an ethnographic discovery and as an instrument of social domination, along with its devaluations as a feminized debased form of cultural expression, forestalls among other things substantial consideration of the medium in aesthetic and cultural terms. At the same time, the conditions for understanding this mobile, global apparatus can only be specified and understood through particular conjunctions--of viewers, texts, programs, and programming flows. This is even true in Arnheim's case, writing well before the institution of any widespread television broadcasting systems.

In this vein, Caughie argues for the importance of *locality* to any consideration of television. But ideas about "locality," standpoint knowledge, and national identities only make sense in the larger context of more generalized ideas about television tourism, with

programs and viewers conceptualized as mobile entities. Caughie proposes that, "The continued return to locality, whether it be of nation, race, class, gender, or generation, resists the easy rationality of a general category or a universal theory." (56) Even if this is the case, the local finds its meaning most acutely in encounters between viewers and programs that do not originate in the same place. When it comes to encounters with television, the local is always plural--a relation between at least two places or identities, and often more (e.g. a heterogeneous Chinese diasporic community watching a particular Chinese-language program on television in Chicago; or an American watching RAI-4 on cable in Helsinki, Finland, perhaps viewing an American or British television sitcom dubbed into Italian).

In both the ethnographic and social scientific paradigms of television studies, locality is defined in the context of a global condition. This immediately interposes a tacit subject-object distinction. The object-text, television, is never "us" to the scholars who study it or even to the viewers who watch it. In ethnographic approaches, the ethnographer is the subject distinct from the object of study--the diverse users and viewers of television with their particular identities and sites who are themselves, in turn, distinct from the programs they watch. In media flow studies, the national subjectivity of viewers is seen to be challenged by the foreign traveling object-text. Travel distanciates and dislocates subjects of reception from the texts they encounter. In this vein, John Fiske can argue that television reception can almost always be conceptualized as a form of resistance of viewing subjects to the object-texts they encounter, because the sources of programs--in terms of class, gender, sexuality, nationality, and so on--are usually discrepant from the multiple points of reception, with their particular local determinations

and identities. Only in this vein can the ethnographer play at "going native," as Caughie does; the title of his essay is "Playing at Being American." At the same time, the European analyzers of media flow worry that diverse "natives" around the globe will mistake the values and ideas of the alien traveling object-texts as their own.

Caughie captures this subject-object distinction, and at the same time neatly indicates the differences between aesthetic methodologies on the one hand and ethnographic views on the other when he proposes that "we" television scholars are not implicated in the texts we study in the same way that film scholars were in the recent past of media studies. (54) This is a performative declaration, assuring that no one mistakes his interest in television for actually enjoying or being captivated by the medium, and claiming his position as a general perspective for all worthwhile television studies. His intellectual gaze should not be confused with the distracted glance of typical television viewers. The split he notes, between film-text studies and television audience studies, is more profoundly premised on a distinction between aesthetics and ethnography, between "us" and "others," between European culture and global cultures. In the ethnographic tradition, U.S. television is part of native global cultures, whereas in the world of political economy and quantitative social science, the U.S. is more fully assimilated into a hegemonic Euro-American culture. But in both cases, travel and global mobility are founding conditions of television's perpetual otherness.

These issues are taken up from a different perspective by Hamid Naficy in *The Making of Exile Cultures,* a study of Iranian television in Los Angeles. He introduces the idea of ethnic flow and exilic flow to understand the place of Iranian television programs in the context of a particular local U.S. television market. In the process, he offers a

reminder that even local and particular programming strategies are characterized by an

excess yielding heterogeneous and contradictory meanings, based on the flow of

programs and populations, both of which travel. In the process he also complicates the

larger conclusions of the early media flow studies, with a case study that focuses on

programs from the East and the South that have made their way to one of the centers of

Western media production—Los Angeles.

> Exile television programs are usually broadcast by television stations not as single entities but in clusters, forming an exilic flow. Los Angeles cable companies schedule *Iran* and *Shahr-e Farang* programs back to back on Friday nights and *Negah* and *Diyar* on Sunday nights; KSCI-TV schedules a series of Iranian programs from 7:30 A.M. to 9:30 A.M. on weekdays, and from 11 A.M. to 2 P.M. on Sundays. These exilic flows are themselves nested, particularly in the case of KSCI-TV, within an ethnic flow containing clusters of programs from many national, ethnic, and linguistic groups (programs in 16 languages are aired). The majority of these programs are imported from home countries. . . .
> The ethnic flow at multiethnic stations is characterized not so much by seamlessness as by segmentation. It is also intensely hermeneutic, as varied politics, nationalities, ethnicities, religions, cultures, languages, classes, news values, narrative strategies, modes of address, physical locations, tastes, gestures, faces, sights, and sounds clash with one another. This segmentation penetrates to even below the level of nationality as many emigre and exile communities are themselves not homogeneous.
> The diversity of the Iranian population in terms of internal ethnicity, religiosity, and language allows its members to access not only Persian and English-language programs but also Armenian, Arabic, Assyrian, and Hebrew programs not necessarily produced by Iranians. Access to multiple texts produced in multiple languages by multiple nationalities and ethnicities makes the flow not only interethnic but also intraethnic. This textual access means the ethnic flow is replete with excess and alternate meanings, going beyond either intent or hegemony. (93-94)

All of this takes place in relation to communities of viewers who are by and large

not "native" to the city (or the country) where these programs are shown. Ethnic

television flow can be considered to interpellate all viewers as diasporic "tourists," as it

encompasses situations where viewers, programs, and reception contexts are quite explicitly dislocated in relation to one other--at least one of them has traveled. This includes those who watch their "own" television when they are away from home, as well as those who watch television made by and for others from a place they identify as home. Exile television is at once global and local, traveling around the world, participating in global media, technology, and population flows, to address particularly situated audiences--situated in specific places and with specific national, ethnic, and/or linguistic identities.

Through the examination of various uses of the term "flow" as a keyword of television studies, I have tried to suggest that television has always functioned this way, as an apparatus of global mobility and dislocation. Of equal importance, at some level television has persistently been understood by theorists in these terms. This has most prominently been expressed in the use of the term "flow," which has simultaneously served to naturalize television's global, gendered trajectories. In practice, this has often had the effect of making television scholarship a difficult and slippery enterprise. For as television is tacitly implicated as an agency of flow, its stability as an object of analysis is all too easily undermined. The practices and meanings of television are set up in advance as a moving target, so that scholarly engagement with particular programs, audiences, or formations of television are prone to challenge for being focused in the wrong place. The impact and meaning are always liable to lie elsewhere: not in this text, but another; not in the programs, but the audience; not in the aggregate audience, but with individual viewers; not with viewers, but in the economics of global distribution; and so on. In other words, the enterprise of television studies as a whole has been stymied because the

implications of flow for understanding the medium have been taken for granted, rather than interrogated.

Instead, understanding the limits and possibilities of flow as a concept requires acknowledging its epistemological implication in networks of global mobility—of people, programs, and models for programming. In the process of reopening consideration of the term, I am hoping to denaturalize, or at least highlight, these foundational assumptions. This includes foregrounding television's implications in discourses of globality and mobility; questioning easy assumptions about what is "us" and "other" when it comes to television; and calling for new ways of thinking about our implication in and estrangement from television in historical, social, cultural, and aesthetic terms. At the same time, these crucial issues in the constitution of television theory and television studies have to be placed in historical context. With rapid changes in global television—multitudes of stations, cable and satellite systems of distribution, commercialization, globalization, Americanization, and so forth—to say nothing of the rise of the internet and its emerging audio-visual and information capabilities, the tale of the traveler/ethnographer is itself becoming something of an historical narrative, a story that can only be set in the past, at least in the terms that it has thus far been recounted. Yet perhaps it is precisely this historical distance that makes it possible to reassess "flow" in these terms.

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