

Introduction: Material cultures of television

Iris Kleinecke-Bates

‘Even within the most secular and self-consciously modern systems of belief the issue of materiality remains foundational to most people’s stance to the world’ (Miller 2005: 2), argues Daniel Miller, in the introduction to his edited collection on materiality. The collection, through a series of diverse approaches to the topic, addresses the complex relationship between subject and object, between material culture and selfhood. If popular critique sees materialism as concerned with an endless proliferation of *stuff*, this attitude, Miller argues, denies the far more subtle and complex relationship we have with material objects and the way materiality and identity are not only interlinked but, on occasion, blur and lose their distinctive outlines and shapes. Miller’s project is, at least in part, an identification of such a more complex and inclusive definition of materiality, a way of thinking about objects less as simply artefacts (although they are always also that), but to think of subject and object as intricately interwoven in the construction of the self. Objects, so Miller suggests, ‘become the primary means by which people are socialized as social beings’ (Miller 2005: 6). Materiality, in this context, becomes central to the way we understand ourselves and the world around us.

Such ways of contemplating the power of material culture are also perhaps particularly pertinent to the way we think about television: as an object, as a tool, and indeed as a ‘companion’, because our relationship with this medium is not infrequently marked by a blurring of strict subject/object boundaries. As Anna McCarthy suggests in her work on space and place in relation to television, the medium continuously transcends simplistic notions of material and immaterial in the way it operates (McCarthy 2001). All the while, its presence in our lives and its significance as both object and as what, drawing on its function as an informational medium, has often been called ‘window to the world’, indicate the need for a more thorough investigation of its material (and immaterial) reality in our lives. After all, if, as Miller suggests, ‘humanity is viewed as the product of its capacity to transform the material world in production, in the mirror of which we create ourselves’ (2005: 2) it seems pertinent to look more closely at a medium that, in both overt and subtle ways, mirrors but also constructs the reality which in turn shapes us.

In the Easter break of 2016 on the 21st and 22nd March of that year, I hosted a conference at the University of Hull. The theme of the conference was ‘Material Cultures of Television’. The diversity and interdisciplinary nature of topics proposed, which was revealed in the response to the call for papers, reflects the diversity of approaches and ways of understanding this topic and also perhaps highlights the significance of television not just as a conveyer of content but as a material object, as a presence in itself. An interest in materiality within television studies is of course not in itself new, and has been reflected through various scholarly perspectives, from work on space and television in the home, to television set designs and the role of the television set itself as a material object, to heritage and costume, to product-placement and the role of material objects, popular culture, and merchandise, but these discourses on materiality within the context of television as object and medium have rarely been collated, or ordered thematically under the rubric of materiality studies and object-orientated philosophies. With this in mind, the conference aimed to spark debate and explore the interplay between television, materiality, design, and identity, as well as the

intertextual and intermedial dimensions of television and the relationships that are formed, through its material cultures, with audiences and environments. The diversity of papers presented at the conference addressed this and more, but also highlighted the need for further work, further investigation into what materiality can mean in relation to the medium.

This edition includes a small selection of the papers presented at the conference and seeks to explore how a focus on materiality can enhance our understanding, and connection with, the medium. The intention is to provide an insight into how materiality impacts on the understanding of television as a medium, yesterday and today, but also highlights ways in which television materiality contributes to the production and transformation of material cultures beyond the screen.

Three of the articles in this collection consider the significance of material reality and significance of early television. Rees, in 'Magazines and the Domestication of the Television Set, 1946-1976' focusses on the physical place of television in the material reality of the home and examines the impact of other media, in particular magazines and advertisements, but also government reports on house building and social surveys, in the construction of specific versions of a television lifestyle. Focussing on the period of 1946 to 1965, Rees investigates the development of television from expensive consumer good to widely-known household object and traces the shifts in the construction of the television lifestyle over this period. This focus opens up useful avenues for thinking about the place of television in the home, and its relationship with other household objects, indicating a relational, rather than absolute or unchanging meaning that emerges out of the interplay of television and its context. It also highlights the way attitudes toward television were shaped by the media and indeed actively constructed and written through the interplay between government, media, technology, and architecture and design.

Deborah Chambers, in 'Designing Early Television for the Ideal Home: The Roles of Industrial Designers and Exhibitions, 1930s -1950s' also thinks about the complexity of television's material presence and the domestication of media technology in the home. By looking at discourses on good living and the 'ideal home' and the significance of art, industrial design, and exhibitions as cultural agents that helped to popularise television as national medium in Britain during that time, Chambers traces the aesthetic symbolism of the early television set and the importance of developments in design and aesthetics in shaping cultural tastes and social meanings of the medium. Bringing together modernist ideas about 'good design' and traditional ideas about nationhood, family, home, and gendered consumer values as generated in the intersection of government policy, industrial design, and national exhibitions, Chambers argues that these diverse trends and influences on the new medium created television's status as a domestic cultural artefact for the home and influenced cultural tastes.

Maija Mäkikalli, in 'Television in Hiding' is also concerned with early television as a material object, notions of design, and the domestic setting, but focusses on the specific cultural context of Finland in the 1950s and 60s, which saw a brief peak in a particular television model with doors. Looking at this phenomenon, which only lasted for a period of around 15 years, but which, in that time, produced a significant number of 'hidden' television sets before going out of construction by the early 1970s, Mäkikalli identifies that although such 'camouflaged' television sets were also common in other countries and often went hand in hand with ambivalent feelings towards the new medium and technology, in particular for

middle-class viewers, there are also more culturally and socially specific forces at play in the Finnish context.

A different approach to the material reality of television is taken by Dana Mustata in her study of Romanian television and the TVR building's form and function in 'House of Unvoiced Politics: Broadcast Architecture as an Alternative Historical Source'. Starting with the premise that material artifacts can reveal information that is not accessible through written sources, and drawing on a material culture approach and Bourdieu's theory of practice and design, Mustata's work focusses on the often undocumented and neglected aspects of broadcast histories of Romanian television during the Cold war hidden in broadcast architecture which can reveal insights into the everyday social organization and work practices of TVR and can therefore shed light on the 'hidden' negotiations between the television station and state power. By looking at the way the TVR Television Centre aspired to Western standards of performance but also negotiated relations with the west which were perceived as more 'problematic' and less desired, while at the same time attempting to reflect a socialist architectural tradition and socialist hierarchical mindsets, Mustata focusses on the way architecture, through the way workspace becomes utilized by TVR's employees, both supports but also undermines and circumvents state control.

Elsewhere, Chris Baumann, in his article 'Beyond the black box: Digital media players as interoperable systems', looks at more recent phenomena in media materiality. His article considers the materiality, interconnectivity, social practices, and institutional interventions in the context of digital media players. Introducing the notion of 'interoperable systems' as a way of approaching the study of media technologies, he focusses on a study of Microsoft's Xbox One and the technological, social, and organizational mechanisms as well as the limitations and the practices that this motivated amongst different social user groups in order to investigate the interaction of technologies and humans and the way media technologies establish themselves in the social world of their users. Looking at the continuing drive for more and more effortless and seamless interconnectivity and easy integration into the media-sphere of the home, Baumann draws on science and technology as well as platform and media industry studies to highlight that streaming devices, presented as user-friendly and effortlessly interconnecting, integrating, and transmitting data and information across various hardware and software, are complex systems in which 'different layers – technological, data, human, and institutional – intersect and work together in intricate, context-specific ways.'

(Baumann 2019: ??)

My own article, 'Television Style / Stylish Television: *Mad Men*, Television, and the Fashioning of the Self', uses the iconic image of the cathode-ray television set as a starting point to think about the role of television on AMC's *Mad Men* (2007-15). Thinking about television's role in the context of *Mad Men* and the way it is used narratively to explore the show's concerns with advertising, history, and identity, but also as a material object that can transcend clear notions of the material and the immaterial I focus on television as both as an integral part of the narrative and mise-en-scene of the show and beyond that, as an icon in itself. As a nostalgic and fetishized object of desire the role of television replicates the show's own preoccupation with consumerism by creating a television experience that fetishizes its materiality as an authentic period object by constructing it as a mise-en-abyme of longing and nostalgia.

Lastly, and moving away further from the materiality of media technology itself, Kodi Maier's article 'Kids at heart?: Exploring the material cultures of adult fans of all-ages animated shows' instead focusses on television animation merchandise. Television animation is often primarily aimed at children, and even though producers and creators are often aware of the existence of adult audiences for shows that are aimed primarily at children, this has often had little impact on merchandise. More recently, however, this attitude has seen a shift;

shows such as *Adventure Time* and *Steven Universe*, which have a known multi-generational appeal, have seen the emergence of a number of merchandising programs specifically aimed at adult fans. Maier's work explores this emergence of adult-aimed merchandise for animated shows and its significance of such material cultures around television animation, in particular around Cartoon Network, which is leading this recent foray into adult merchandising.

Together, the collection of articles highlights different ways in which material culture studies can be utilized to think about television's own materiality and its meanings in the context people's lives and the way this object functions both as a consumer product and object of desire, and as the conveyer of content and therefore, immaterial way of accessing materiality in the form of objects of desire.

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