Think Again: Artificial Intelligence, Television & Video

by Joseph Milutis
While many early media theorists and video artists considered television to be part of a concerted electronic extension of the nervous system, what was never taken into account was television’s status as a thinking machine. The nerve metaphor, as it corresponds to sensation, provoked visions of television as a dance machine, a color machine... in short, a machine to produce synesthetic response rather than a machine for ratiocination. Perhaps we consider television’s operation to be differentiated from computer processes of electronic thought not because of a division of labor between media but because of artificial divisions within television itself. Television has always set up some pretty rigorous boundaries between what is “unthinking” and what is “thinking.”

“Educational television”: a legalistic concept at best, an oxymoron for those viewers who think they are thinking, but a tautology at heart. For television always implies an extension of intelligence, even though the PBS notion of “quality TV” cordoned off thinking TV like a vast suburb populated by distinguished detectives, precocious chefs, and pernickety home-improvers. This notion of quality TV now extends virally into commercial television’s self-presentation. One can, however, perhaps remember when the eruption of Orson Welles, Truman Capote, or Oscar Levant into the flow of popular television was an aberration, causing a collision of genius with banality that was sometimes productive of chaos or irony but that always seemed to point to a technological limit. (In 1958, Steve Allen described Oscar Levant’s Los Angeles television show as having “all the fascination of an automobile accident.”) How did vast sectors of television, part of our concerted video memory, come to be considered “unthinking”? This question becomes especially important now if one considers the videosphere as a model for artificial intelligence.

Television, as a machine that has the capacities to visualize thought, and thus, in its simulation, to mechanize it, thinks most obviously in the detective/cop/law genre. Each detective’s world presents to viewers a certain mechanism of thought. Whether it is the detective’s mind, the apparatus of the police unit, or the structure of the courts, we see how thought moves through these material worlds. This movement of thought has come to be represented by signature styles of camera movement which oftentimes simulate the looking that facilitates the search for truth, but which, more importantly, foreground a nonhuman form of looking that is not godlike but purely technological.

The history of cinema, as theorist Gilles Deleuze suggests, is the evolution of these nonhuman forms of looking. On TV, these nonhuman forms can flourish and proliferate, since they are not easily explained by the directorial unity that accompanies film art. The “Baltimore” of NBC’s Homicide, for example, is neither a space inflected by a single
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director's vision (compare Antonioni's suburbs) nor a real Baltimore—the desire for which is more easily satisfied by “Homicide Tours” that have capitalized on the show's popularity to reinvigorate an urban economy. The Baltimore of Homicide is, notwithstanding the importance of the local to the flavor of this show, what Deleuze, in Cinema 1, calls an "any-space-whatever . . . a space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible." It is no longer Baltimore, but the effect of Baltimore, expressed through certain optical maneuvers that inhabit the emotionally-thought states of the detectives as much as the detectives inhabit its space.

The originality of this existentially spiritual cop show has been its ability to encourage reflection on the mortality of the detectives themselves within a city-managed machine bureaucracy that seems to have a life of its own. The detectives perform their variations on "to be or not to be," in front of what is perhaps the most famous dry-erase board ever; their emotional and professional crises emerge, at times, from the feeling that the board looks back. The board is the evidence of their accomplishments and an abstract map of their fate as connected to those lost to the living. The board is a place of catalogued extinction: blank for vengeance gained, red for crime unpunished, with the name of each primary detective responsible at the top of each column. At times, the names of the detectives themselves migrate from the top of the board down into the realm of wrongful death. These red and black names of the murdered not only form a graphic repetition throughout the show but reflect the red and black theme established by the palette of the original opening credits. In these credits, the alternation of black and red climaxes when, after a close-up shot of an archival photograph of 19th-century Baltimore police, the names of the actors are displayed above streaming white fragments—what seems to be both a pixelation and an anamorphic distortion of the archival photograph. This is the noosphere of police work—where the intellect not only flows between members of a highly collaborative, elite crime unit but between the living and the dead. It is not a supernatural force at play here but the immortal technology of advanced police work. Job description: "We speak for the dead."

The rapid back-and-forth of these light fragments below each singular name hints at the possibility of an alternative form of vision beyond the individual, named human body. Primarily, this video noise exposes forms of knowledge that no one detective can master. (The soundtrack of African drumming during this image may also point to forms of African-American knowledge that occasionally come into conflict with the old-world, old-Baltimore knowledge of the white, ethnic detectives in this show.) If a Philip Marlowe dies, the criminal, in effect, wins, since there remains no one equal to Marlowe's job; with the fragile body of the singular detective goes the truth. But the criminal in the world of the collaborative, institutional police of TV must hope for the abolition of the entire machine that thinks by itself, if he or she wishes to avoid justice. Common features of these ensemble crime shows are justice-perverting bureaucratic snafus, unscrupulous lawyers, and other characters who function as avatars of the systems' essentially nonhuman qualities. As early as L. A. Law, we saw something out of the confused dreams of Meyerhold and Kazan—the casual interplay within characters of robotic and human attributes. The nonhuman was located in acting and mise-en-scène; even the rooms of L. A. Law seemed like machines, not only because what happened within them was highly standardized but because of the occasional diegetic presence of invisible workers within the walls whose operations frequently caused the process of law to halt. Like HAL, these corridors even had a murderous tendency, as when electrical chaos somewhere beyond the perceivable world of MacKenzie, Brackman, and Phillips caused the malfunction of an elevator, killing the powerful and wily Roz Shays. Now, it is no longer the mise-en-scène but the camera that hints at the invisible operation of a technical intelligence that, while godlike, is nonetheless metaphysical.

Homicide is law enforcement in the age of fuzzy logic—that form of Artificial Intelligence created not by a computer mastermind but by what computer scientist Marvin Minsky calls a "society of mind." Emergent A.I., as it is called, renews the thought process with an unfathomability, a potential for loss of control, that classic A.I. does not foster. We can read cultural theorist Sherry Turkle's description of emergent A.I. as a talisman for understanding new forms of thought visible in shows like Homicide: "intelligence was distributed; it existed within the system as a whole, not within any particular agent in the system. Intelligence did not reside in an isolated thinking subject, but in the interaction of multiple fragments of mind, figuratively speaking, in a society of mind." PBS still fetishizes the perhaps less threatening forms of intelligence that can be contained in the mastermind genre. No less interesting than Homicide, shows like Inspector Morse dramatize the concerns of classic A.I., which are also the concerns of the classic detective story of the 19th century.

The central themes of both older forms of A.I. and classic whodunits are the plays of apparatus versus intuition, complex versus simple. When a machine "thinks," it has crossed a border into intuition. Similarly, the classical detective must not be unduly dependent on the syntax of bureaucracy or the other thought machines that form the arsenal of early police technology. Instead, the detective must return to the elementary and the plainly obvious. The goal is not to be smart but to recognize smartness as a syntax or system. This is the method that Edgar Allan Poe outlines for his master detective Dupin in "The Purloined Letter," a method in which success is determined "in mere observation and admeasurement of the astuteness of his opponents."

The crimes of Inspector Morse are set in Oxford and we are thus led to presume a climate hospitable to criminal genius. However, this is sometimes a red herring. The cultured viewer of these PBS shows is tantalized with clues that satisfy an ability to notice references to high culture, but these references always turn out to be mere distraction. In an episode in which a theater showing Last Tango in Paris is central, we are led to believe that the clue to the murder lies in the fact that there was an extra stick of salted butter in the victim's fridge. In an episode about an ill-fated relationship between an older woman and a college student, camera shots of the student's room linger on his copy of
Sophocles' *Oedipus*, leading the viewer to believe, falsely, that there is a stranger bond between the two. Examples such as these abound. Morse is sometimes too smart about high culture and not smart enough about human relationships—and this is a source of his own distraction. He is, though, an avid crossword fan, and as any fan of puzzle-masters like the New York Times' Will Shortz knows, most times being smart is a dead end. For those who would congratulate themselves while glibly filling in the four-letter Italian word *paine* for the clue "Italian bread" might never discover that the real answer is *lira*—another kind of Italian bread. Like any crossword aficionado, the detective must repress mere smartness and somehow go beyond it. But this "beyond" of smartness is everywhere in the fuzzy logic of *Homicide*. The sheer stupidity of the criminals gives these street-bred killers the same upper hand as the *haute bourgeoisie*’s criminal mastermind, since there is no recognizable pattern to senseless crime: "You want sense? Violence is a contagion—trying to make sense of violence is like trying to make sense of cancer." This is what more contemporary, emergent A.I. practitioners call "true intelligence," not based on calculation but on something dangerous and irra-

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-ational—an intelligence that borders on madness in order to know madness better. The newer emergent A.I. of these connectionists is, as Sherry Turkle says, not based on storage or brute-force calculation, and because of this fact, it announces a certain "liberation from rationalism."

This seeming paradox of a form of intelligence that is a liberation from rationalism has been part of the legacy of 20th-century alternative-art practices. A.I.’s relation to the media is not an obscure conjunction when one considers Surrealist automatic writing, Cagean aleatory music, Eisensteinian montage, and Hitchcock’s cinema of the mastermind; metaphorically or literally, they all partake of giving thought over to the machine. For the Surrealists, it was a way for the body to overcome its habitual alienation from the system and unlock the unconscious mind; Cage's experiments produced a new consciousness of the everyday and its relation to art. For Hitchcock, the machine was a Hollywood and a continuity script already in place, while for Eisenstein the goal was to construct a "class consciousness" in a new technological context, utilizing the new forms of thought that film produced. Similarly, emergent A.I. projects like ELIZA—the first chatterbot, and a psychoanalyst one at that—are invested in the creation of new consciousness (as such they might open up new alienations because they have

self-reflexivity that is now the norm of TV intelligence. Boyle points out that, owing to the unpredictability of introducing new informational structures into TV, these video activists, in their search for truth, unwittingly became the foreparents of the guerrilla techniques of trash TV (from That's Incredible to *Caps* and *Entertainment Tonight*). It is easy to forget that *Max Headroom* was a network-sponsored, guerrilla video hack transformed into an A.I. ratings monster.

Today, the trelliswork of computer intelligence proliferates on our video screens. Glowing green and electronic grids, scrolling digital hieroglyphs, and crisis data in the form of radar beeps grant a new kind of authority to antacids, automobiles, and foot powders. These wireframe abstractions, familiar to computer animators, expose the raw infomatics of the image. Appearing in the interstices of television advertising, such visualizations are not mere metaphors for thought, they are a direct form of thought, but one to which human intelligence has little access. They provoke a form of disembodied viewing, but not the kind of disembodiment typical to the viewer of a film or photograph, where the viewer steps into the place of the cameraperson; the implied viewer of these images is computer intelligence. Where these Tron-like grids appear, TV has gone beyond the quaint postmodern ruse "I'm not a doctor,
but I play one on TV." Instead of this by now patent admission of false authority trotted out as a means to inspire trust, we are given a straightforward admission that advertisement operates beyond any contractual address to the human. We are voyeurs of pure spectacles of scientific thought, of the computer addressing itself and announcing through these skeletal images the death of the consumer. Even when these images are rendered, and thus returned to a sort of hyperreality, the implication is still one of human absence. Virtual cameras liberate the eye from physics and the body and go where only data can go. A 3D animation of detergent lifting tomato sauce from a white shirt accesses truth by entering a machine (the washer) and an experience (the washing) previously inaccessible to vision; by removing from our vision the body, the work of washing, and the very reality of the washing machine, the image is an ecstatic one of redemption and resurrection in which stains will rise not only from the clothes but from the imperfect and long-suffering body as well. Say goodbye to laundry-vérité.

New trends in video art—once the realm of "I" and real-time narcissism—likewise embrace certain forms of vision that operate without human camerawork or contractual relation. Works like Suicide Box, Rumor of True Things, and Ocularis (all in the Video Data Bank's McLennium compilation) hint at an intelligence that resides in feedback loops, surveillance systems, and the society of video fragments that communicate beyond human ken.

To describe just one of these works briefly, Paul Bush's Rumor of True Things begins with sounds of telephone disconnect tones accompanied by breathing, heartbeats, and computerized images of eye and breath; it's a montage that elicits the feeling that, for the rest of this piece, the typical connection between viewer and video, seer and seen, will be broken. Bush has accumulated industrial, medical, and military video of computerized landscapes, globes, and maps—a world transformed into data. Throughout, true things—pedestrians, drivers, sex, the weather, sea and sky—are made into information. The decay of true things into their informational doubles is the photogénie of the computer image; objects of the world are obliterated when they are taken up into the metaphysical ether of data.

Thus, at the beginning of Paul Bush's video, instead of the brute materiality of the Earth, we see weather patterns that machine vision has been programmed to see. Shortly thereafter, the subjectiv—
ty of a military computer gives us a different vision of the same topography. These subjective computer images are as lyrical as those of the French Impressionists, whose concept of photogénie expressed their belief that film inherently transformed real-world objects into something tenuous and spiritual, partaking of the phantasmic qualities of interior mental states. However, the subjective description in Bush’s video goes on without any human interiority. This hyper-photogénie would then imply a lyricism of the technological obliteration of both the object and the subject of everyday vision. Take, for example, a recent ad in the Wall Street Journal for Sprint. This “You see coffee/ We see data” ad dramatizes the border between the everyday and the sublime world of business calculations by placing a cup of coffee squarely on this border; as a corporate “we” scrutinizes the cup, it is de-objectified and transformed into something fantastic. Instead of the repetition of cup after cup of coffee (implying anxiety), “you” are delivered into the more fruitful structure of the feedback loop (“We help your business do more business”). The actual object of the ad remains elusive, as if Sprint is selling only transcendence.
One of the functions of *Rumor of True Things* is to point up the disturbing but sublime qualities of video and dataspheres. From seeming detritus, Bush constructs our vegetal world’s digital double. This double world, along with the metaphysics of televisual thought, inspiring hyper-Cartesian cogitos or fits of madness reminiscent of Oscar Levant or Artaud, goes beyond the coherent traditions of video narcissism and essayistic thought. Perhaps it is time to consider more fuzzy versions of narcissism, like the OZ group’s redefinition of A.I. to mean that which convinces the spectator that what she or he is seeing is intelligence. By concentrating on the dynamics of human perception in relation to computer technology rather than on a certain reality of computer thought, the projects of the OZ group extend the project of emergent A.I. and deliver it into the realm of human interaction, subjective appearance, and drama. Granted, the implications of this reformulation would mean that perhaps the intelligence of television is a product of the imagination, or that all human intelligence is just an elaborate aping (but of what elusive original something?). Follow through that line of thought and it starts to seem that belief in any form of intelligence, machine or otherwise, becomes a primal form of narcissism, while to suddenly question that belief is the challenge that our electronic ecosystem now presents to its inhabitants.

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