

From Screen to Site: Television's Material Culture, and Its Place*

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Television, Philosophy, Modernity

Like all technologies of “space-binding,” television poses challenges to fixed conceptions of materiality and immateriality, farness and nearness, vision and touch. It is both a thing and a conduit for electronic signals, both a piece of furniture in a room and a window to an imaged elsewhere, both a commodity and a way of looking at commodities. It therefore makes sense that TV—understood as a particular form or mediation of inscription, speech, and images—should become a cardinal trope in diverse philosophical texts on modernity’s core problematic. Alongside the cinema, though rarely in textual proximity to it, TV serves as a kind of rhetorical toy in numerous acts of writing, and representing, the modern. Martin Heidegger’s famous description of television as the “abolition of every possibility of remoteness” in “The Thing” leads smoothly toward Jacques Derrida’s coded allusion to television’s particular (im)materiality in an essay on a novel by Philippe Sollers: “While we remain attentive, fascinated, glued to what presents itself we are unable to see presence as such, since presence does not present itself, no more than does the visibility of the visible, the audibility of the audible, the medium or ‘air’ which disappears in the act of allowing to appear.”¹ Together, these images bracket a core preoccupation with television as a form of writing across space, as remote inscription that produces—and annihilates—places: the place of the body, the place of the screen, the place of dwelling.²

* Thanks to Jon Connolly, Tom Cohen, and Sudhir Mahadevan.

1. Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. and introduction by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 165; Jacques Derrida, “Dissemination,” in *Dissemination*, trans., with an introduction and additional notes by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 314.

2. Richard Dienst demonstrates that regardless of what television is taken to be, this sense of simultaneity always serves as a demonstrational optic through which the particularly political dimensions of late modern theoretical projects come into focus. It should be noted that Dienst advances this thesis in relation to temporality, which is subordinated to space in his analytical schema. See Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994).

As this suggests, the material aspects of television's specificity as a medium have proven particularly attractive to critics interested in some of the more paradoxical modalities of recording and representation. Samuel Weber both narrates, and participates in, what might initially be termed the "television gesture" in modernity's critical tradition. In an essay entitled "Television: Set and Screen," Weber describes the medium as a "technological novelty" that must be seen as "*both the consummation of a very old tradition and at the same time the heightening of its internal ambivalences.*" This tradition, he indicates elsewhere, incorporates both writing and deconstruction; within it, "what television does . . . is to 'materialize' in a relatively immaterial manner, the irreducibility of . . . iterability, in the mode of presentation we call 'vision' and 'audition.'"³ I will return to the specifics of Weber's engagement with television shortly; for now, note simply that—like Fredric Jameson's description of TV as "surrealism without the unconscious"⁴—Weber invokes television as a spatial and semiotic framework for describing ongoing crises in a dominant organizing logic relating signs to things, and sign-things to each other. This does raise the question of whether critics such as Weber and Jameson are actually interested in television at all. Arguably, they want to learn *from* television while avoiding having to learn *about* it. But because they scrutinize the hybrid technological forms associated with television so closely—the screen and the network, for example—such engagements are more than merely televisual gestures. Their interest in the medium's material, technical entities, understood as giving concrete form to modernity's problems of materiality and disappearance, opens up possibilities for dialogue across discursive realms. Television, a quintessentially interdisciplinary object, brings discourses like geography, political economy, video art, and critical theory into alignment with philosophy. In Weber's case, for example, modern technics in the form of television provides a forum in which to explore Heidegger and Walter Benjamin together. Although we might question particular critics' views on television's relationship to the modern framing of being, to phenomenological problems in fixing the place of the body, to emergent specters of late modern political life, the medium clearly has potential as a window on the way we negotiate modernity in critical writing and practice.

But television can perform this task only if the conceptual models that interweave it with ongoing philosophical projects are sufficiently nuanced. A great deal is at stake, in particular in the way critical invocations of the medium take issues of scale and space into account. The fact that the medium's paradigmatic spatial form is the network means that it embodies the methodological conundrum of scale in a number of different analytical areas. Networks are difficult spatial

3. Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 123, 124. Emphasis in original (page numbers in text hereafter).

4. This is the title of the chapter on video art and television in Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 67–96.

phenomena to grasp because they exist on more than one scale; as Bruno Latour notes in a sound byte from *We Have Never Been Modern*, “even a long network remains local at all points.” Latour’s goal here is to render problematic any easy acceptance of the concept of “the global”; as he notes, “the words ‘local’ and ‘global’ offer points of view on networks that are by nature neither local nor global, but are more or less long and more or less connected.”⁵ These issues of scale and connectedness, of regional differences and spatial totalities, are certainly matters for philosophical thought, but they extend beyond this realm too. Indeed, the complex problem designated by the concept of scale is explored perhaps most extensively in the discipline of geography. Scale, as David Harvey sums it up, is a concept “both crucial and problematic” for the study of space, particularly in an era in which the concept of “the global” achieves ascendancy. As he notes, “what looks like a system at one level of analysis (e.g., a city) becomes a part at another level (e.g., a network of cities).”⁶ The same principle applies equally to television. Television looks very different, depending on whether one’s level of analysis is the microlevel of the network’s terminal point—the screen, a particular viewing subject or collectivity—or the standard, centralizing transmissions that appear on its face. We might choose to emphasize, or argue for, one level over the other when we invoke television in theory and in criticism, but the result is inevitably a simplification, an artificial resolution of the dialectical tensions between the discrepant scales that comprise the phenomenal form of the medium. This scalar complexity can make writing about the medium’s relation to places, bodies, and subjects a particularly difficult process.

As I will suggest in the following, TV’s value for philosophical inquiry into ongoing transformations in the relation between materiality and technics hinges on the dialectical movement between “global” generality and “local” specificity that the medium embodies. This movement is perhaps most often expressed as a (problematically idealist) distinction between “the real” and “derealization” (television embodying the latter, acting upon and eradicating the former).⁷ But it is also sometimes invoked in terms of “space,” and more crucially, “place.” Television becomes a force of *placelessness*—as in one sociologist’s description of TV as “no sense of place.”⁸ Now, such characterizations have value as ways of thinking

5. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 122.

6. David Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), pp. 202, 52.

7. Television haunts anthropologist Marc Augé’s somewhat predictable discovery at Disneyland that “we live in a time in which history is staged, made into a spectacle, and derealises reality . . . not only do we enter the screen, inverting the process at play in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), but behind the screen we find another screen.” Marc Augé, “An Ethnologist in Disneyland,” *de-, dis-, ex-* 4 (2001), pp. 190–91. See also Margaret Morse, *Virtualities: Television, Media Art, and Cyberculture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

8. Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

about the medium's historical role within the economic geography of American culture. TV's commercial emergence coincides with the "golden age" of Fordism, and television advertising was crucial for the rise of the national brand economy within which the Fordist wage contract took shape. Arguably, this rise of national brands and retailing chains at the expense of local ones is the eradication of regional specificity and, by extension, a form of placelessness.⁹ But the idea that the television *apparatus* is itself an encroaching force of placelessness is a flawed, dangerously fetishistic one. The language of placelessness makes us forget that television is an *object* and, like all objects, it shapes its immediate space through its material form. The term is also quite vague; is placelessness really an adequate description of the range of ways in which we encounter television within spaces of everyday life, from the living room to the departure lounge to the department store?

Thus, rather than focusing solely on the immateriality of the television image, as terms like "placelessness" and "derealization" encourage, a television theory must also take into account the very material *thingness* of television technology (paradigmatically, the console itself). This involves looking not only at the medium's very *spectacular* reorganizations of space and time—the live broadcast of the media

9. On the Fordist economy, see Michel Aglietta, *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The U.S. Experience*, trans. David Fernbach (London: NLB, 1979 [2000]) and Alain Lipietz, *Mirages and Miracles: The Crisis in Global Fordism*, trans. David Macey (London: Verso, 1987).



Left: Television set in hotel bathroom, San Francisco. 1998. Author photo.
Right: Television set in knish store, New York. 1998. Author photo.



Television set in video/music store, New York. 1998. Author photo.

“event,” for example—but also the rather more banal and quotidian materiality of the TV *set* itself, the *unremarkable* functions it performs, as a piece of furniture.¹⁰ It means bothering to think about the very basic and barely noticeable physical form of television—inquiring into the assumptions behind the placement of TV sets in hotel bathrooms; wondering why people often decorate TV sets with plastic flowers, or posters, and why they cover them with cloths as if televisions are precious icons.¹¹ And it means taking into account multiple forms of televisual temporality, too: not only the seemingly instantaneous temporality of live transmissions, but also the routine and redundant cycles of the broadcast day, the endlessly repeating programs that play on the CNN Airport Network, the synchronized flashes of multiple monitors and video walls that constitute the visual architecture of retail stores, bars, and public squares. In short, the philosophical engagement with television’s materiality as modern technics must articulate its concern with questions of being and perception with the modern preoccupation with the *everyday* in all of its seeming banality and unreadability.

10. On the need for a more thorough understanding of the unremarkable in cultural studies’ engagement with everyday life, see Toby Miller and Alec McHoul, *Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Sage: 1998).

11. On such treatments, see John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Ondina Fachel Leal, “Popular Taste and Erudite Repertoire: The Place and Space of Television in Brazil,” *Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (1990), pp. 19–39; Marie Gillespie, “Sacred Serials, Devotional Viewing, and Domestic Worship: A Case Study in the Interpretation of Two TV Versions of The Mahabharata in a Hindu Family in West London,” in *To Be Continued: Soap Operas Around the World*, ed. Robert C. Allen (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).



As I will propose, *site* as well as *sight* is a crucial conceptual framework for any attempt to think through the televisual as a material scene of representation. Three aspects of TV's technological form in particular can be foregrounded in the intellectual history of the medium, as moments in which television opens up new ways of thinking about place. The first I have already mentioned: it is the indexical force of formal ideologies of television like "liveness" that, through a range of representational and electronic techniques, translates perceived temporal simultaneity into the sense of spatial collapse that Heidegger noted in "The Thing." However, as Jane Feuer has proposed, the ontology of televisual liveness in actual occasions of the transmission and reception of signals from one place to another instantaneously is not a determining aspect of the medium's cultural effects. Rather, it is

through the *ideology* of liveness—sustained in ways less spectacular than the "media event," and filtered through micro-level visual techniques of the broadcast text, whether literally live or not—that television sustains both the intimacy of its direct address to the subject and its claims to documentary truth and historicity.¹² Liveness might thus be seen as a temporal ideology that works to construct two fictive spaces for the viewer simultaneously. On a small scale, it is the space of imagined co-enunciation signified in the direct address of the talking head on-screen; on a larger scale, and in collective terms, this space is the familiar imagined space of the nation looking in on its key sites—a space always constituted, as Benedict Anderson famously noted, via perceived temporal simultaneity.¹³ This is the

12. Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1983). On the banality of liveness, see Mimi White, "Site Unseen: CNN's War in the Gulf," in *Seeing Through the Media: The Persian Gulf War*, ed. Susan Jeffords and Lauren Rabinovitz (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1994).

13. On direct address and the construction of a fictive national space through the live, or live-coded broadcast, see John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, revised ed. (New York: Routledge, 1992); see also Mimi White, "Site Unseen," and Sasha Torres, "King TV," in *Living Color: Race and Television in the United States*, ed. Sasha Torres (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998); and Mary Ann Doane, "Information, Crisis, Catastrophe," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

spatial operation of television most often scrutinized in theory: space-binding, the “abolition of every possibility of remoteness.”

But another aspect of television that makes it a key heuristic instrument in the philosophical exploration of place, materiality, and technics is far less recognized. This is the fact that its material form is profoundly *site-specific*. As Weber points out, although it is commonplace to note TV’s pervasiveness, “for all its ubiquitousness it is not very well understood” (112). I think this is because we have not yet addressed some of the implications of TV’s ubiquity—not only that it is constantly available in the home, but also that it is present in other places too, the everyday locations where we shop, eat and drink, wait, and travel in our daily itineraries. What is interesting about this ubiquity is the way it illustrates something specific about TV as a medium: its peculiarly malleable and heterogeneous physical *form*. It can encompass giant video walls and video banks, flat screens that look like illuminated signs, small and large consoles, and all sorts of signal forms, from live transmissions to prerecorded program cycles, to simultaneous mixtures of both. And such divergent forms of television coexist unproblematically; one need only take a cab ride through Times Square, populated with more forms of the televisual apparatus than one could possibly count, to grasp the inadequacy of theoretical models that attempt to address the medium’s materiality via an abstracted or idealized sense of its technological manifestation on the level of the everyday. More often than not, such models turn away from the fact of television’s multiple phenomenological forms, its ubiquity and difference across a range of spaces, installing instead a more idealist notion of TV and its place: the screen in the home. However, although the home may be economically central to the broadcast television apparatus, this does not mean that critics should accept the pervasive ideological association of television with the domicile as an adequate representation of the actual geography of the medium. When we take the diverse proliferation of material forms and places of television into account, the medium starts to look very different. It becomes impossible to argue that the TV set always organizes relations between, say, public and private, subjects and collectivities, participation and isolation, in identical ways across locations. Rather, television’s heterogeneous materiality requires that we accept that its operations upon the subject and its use as a form of communication between individuals must change from site to site, institution to institution. If the flexibility of the technology allows the medium to disappear into the everyday places where it appears, then surely it must simultaneously disappear into the particular relations of public and private, subjects and others, that characterize these places.

The third crucial feature of TV’s material relation to space is another form of disappearance, one anticipated in the second: it is the screen’s peculiar ability to *dematerialize* at the point of its encounter with philosophy. Despite its integration into everyday life, something we ignore, in Toby Miller’s words, “like a pet or a vaguely dotty relative,” television embodies technics for philosophers in a total(izing) and aphysical frame. As Weber notes, “the television transmission does

not . . . as is generally supposed, simply *overcome* distance and separation. (This is the illusion of a ‘global village.’) It renders them invisible, paradoxically, by transposing them *into* the vision it transmits . . . the space defined by the television set is already fractured by the undecideability of that which appears on the screen. Is it taking place here, there, or anywhere?” (122). In this account of television’s spatiality, the insistent localism and materiality implied in TV’s site-specificity, and all the questions raised by this localism, recedes and is replaced by a theoretical model of TV as global epiphenomenon of modernity. The screen here is not a local object we put things on and move around in a space, nor is it even a *network*, really, in a Latourian sense, that is to say, something that is both global and local, an agent or actor in cultural and scientific definitions of particularity and universality, fetish and fact. It becomes a thing that, in Weber’s words, “takes place” and not a thing that makes a place, or a thing that is made *by* a place.

I dwell on Weber’s account because his concern with processes of site and place is unusual in philosophical accounts of television. Others read the disappearing acts that TV performs in the place it inhabits as a predictable series of remote operations performed on the subject—operations that have no material form at all, despite the overproduction of material, embodied metaphors to describe such operations, such as “brainwashing,” or the expression “glued to” the TV set. A recent, highly nuanced critical account of modern ideas about human perception and mass influence suddenly takes on a paranoid voice when it addresses the topic of television and its immense powers, powers that are systematically denied, even by television’s critics:

Television . . . has become so fully integrated into social and subjective life that certain kinds of statements about television (for example, about addiction, habit, persuasion, and control) are in a sense unspeakable, effectively excluded from public discourse. To speak of contemporary collective subjects in terms of effects of passivity and influence is still generally anathema. . . . There is usually a tacit a priori conviction that television viewers constitute a hypothetical community of rational and volitional human subjects. The contrary position, that human subjects have determinate psychological capacities and functions that might be susceptible to technological management . . . must be disavowed by so-called critics of those same institutions.¹⁴

The author, Jonathan Crary, breaks here from a careful account of the history of attitudes toward theories of behavior modification via perception into an act of

14. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 71–72. To be fair, Crary’s position on the perfidious influence of television is somewhat ambiguous here; in a footnote to this passage he alludes to the uncertainty of “whether or not attention can be controlled or managed” even though the passage itself clearly comes down on the affirmative side of this question.

witnessing, of speaking the truth (apparently axiomatic) about television's influence. The problem, of course, is that the statements he describes—statements about viewers as a suggestive mass—are far from excluded from cultural circulation. Rather, such statements fairly constitute the contemporary public discourse on television, *especially* in the media.¹⁵ They form the basis of the media critiques that emerge in popular and academic journalism around violent events like school shootings, for example, critiques that often offer “the influence of the media” as a master hermeneutic. And such fears of manipulation are the basis of a long-standing Hollywood formula, in which media paranoia takes on occult and insidious forms—from the '50s “cult classic” film *The Twonky* [1953] to more “serious” middlebrow critiques, like *A Face in the Crowd* [1957], or more recently *The Truman Show* [1998].

Such free-floating and ever-present ideas about media influence are abetted, on some level, by the conflation of TV's pervasiveness with a sense of dematerialization and derealization. TV's ubiquity makes it possible to speak of its cultural effects and operations of television without having to address its material form, because these operations are so obvious, so clearly already “known,” that they are curiously independent of the material place of the screen and the viewing encounter. This tension between materiality and immateriality, what Weber nicely calls TV's “ambivalence,” is no doubt what makes the medium attractive as a figure for modernity's spatial ruptures. The ambivalence, as Weber notes, is in part a result of its liveness—ambivalent because liveness is an attribute that applies also to recording, as in the terms “live mic” or “live recording.” But it is more centrally, I think, a sign of the conceptual challenge of reconciling the universalizing rhetoric of television (as brainwashing apparatus, as the disappearance of physical space and time) with its myriad site-specific uses and appropriations. It is the challenge of *scale*, in other words. When TV comes to defining modern technics, the sense of extreme material heterogeneity that I have sketched above must somehow conform to an epistemological condition characterized by broad homogeneity. Given this situation, it seems absolutely crucial to move in an alternative direction and *diversify* some of the paradigms through which the materiality of TV may be understood, and its relation to historical subjects best grasped.

Returning to Weber now, and examining his televisual theory in more detail, I want to contribute to the project of expanding our grasp of the material and political forms of television in everyday life, by staging a dialogue between two different theoretical approaches to the medium's spatial ideologies—that is to say, two different ways of thinking about the TV set, and TV images, as material things that shape experience in the sites in which they are viewed and used. Weber marks out these issues as a relationship between the material form of the

15. For a full discussion of these cultural fears about communications technology, see Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000).

screen and its *place*, and it is, specifically, the theoretical work that this word *place* is made to do that forms the basis of my own account. A close reading of one particular video-television installation and its relationship to its location over time alerts us to the contrasts between an ontological notion of place and a geographical one. Both, as we shall see, are helpful frameworks for thinking about the quantum and macro forms of the TV set as a material object in social space, though in the end I will prefer the geographical understanding. To my mind, it offers a more complete and historically flexible understanding of materiality, though it does so by building directly on the intellectual lineage that defines the ontological approach.

The Place of the Screen: Heidegger and the Geographers

The ontological conception of place is, simply, the idea of place as dwelling, or, in Heidegger's words, place as "the house of being." Heidegger develops this idea not only in the canonical essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" in which human and environment harmonize at a Black Forest farmhouse, but also in a less-frequently cited piece entitled "An Ontological Consideration of Place."¹⁶ In this essay, Heidegger approaches place as an essential concept for thinking through "the relationship between the ontological dimension of being and the political structure of human existence" (18). He reflects on the idea of place as a human construction and discovers, in the modern separation of political rights from dwelling, "the assumption that 'place' is created and can be created by man" (24). This assumption is dangerous, he proposes, insofar as it neglects the fact that the first experience of place is *being*—"Ontological place . . . precedes the political, social, or economic aspects of existence whose reality lies only in their being adjectival qualifications of being" (26). Philosophical inquiry, therefore, must work to disentangle the place of being from *Gestell*—the setting in place performed by technics, the state, etc.; as a concept, place thus "points both to [the] unique dimensions of being and to the distortion and perversion which arise from its concealment" (26).

Weber offers a provocative theoretical application of Heidegger's ontological notion of place to the relationship between the TV set and its environment. He asks in the introduction to *Mass Mediauras* "how do 'technics,' film and television, the 'setup' and the 'set,' change our relations to places, positions, and emplacements?" (7). Stressing the need for answers that avoid "ontologizing television" and instead recognize its heterogeneity as an apparatus that assumes different forms at moments of production, transmission, and reception, Weber nevertheless proposes that television ultimately "*takes place*"—a term that deftly links the medium's present-tense temporality to its spatial problematic. Invoking the live-transmission's construction of a place for the viewer

16. Martin Heidegger, "An Ontological Consideration of Place," in *The Question of Being*, trans. and introduction by William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1958).

and its representation of space-binding as a process, he proposes that television upsets the ontology of place because it

Takes place in at least three places “at once”: 1. In the place (or places) where the image and sound are ‘recorded’; 2. In the place (or places) where those images and sounds are *received*; and 3. In the places (or places) *in between* . . . the unity of television as a medium of presentation thus involves a *simultaneity* that is highly ambivalent. It overcomes spatial distance but only by *splitting the unity* of place and with it the unity of everything that defines its identity with respect to place: events, bodies, subjects. (117)

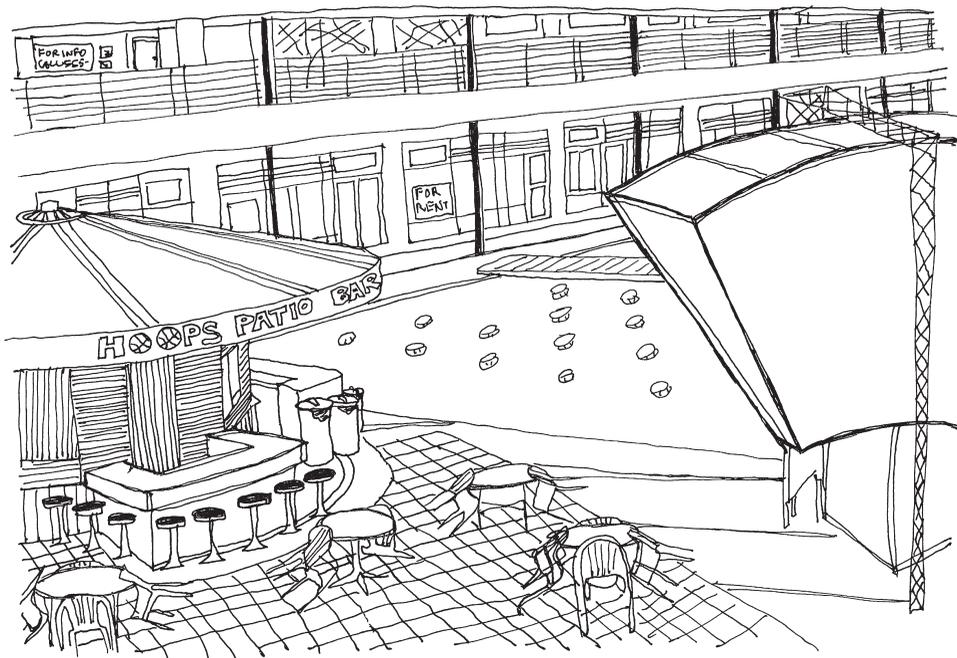
What is absolutely brilliant about this account is the way it grasps the shape-shifting, scale-busting operations of TV, diversifying rather than ontologizing television technology as a heterogeneous collection of forms and modes of representation and transmission. Television does not simply render the distant present; rather, it intervenes in the experience of space and time via three distinct, relatively autonomous, warping operations.

However there are reasons to take issues with the way Weber renders the concept of place—the site of the TV set in particular. For though he refuses a singular understanding of the screen’s discursive and material networks, he presents the place of the screen as an essential kind of unity, a physical and metaphysical phenomenon that is bounded and stable up until the moment that technics enters the picture to order and “re-place” it. “Ever since Aristotle’s *Physics*,” he notes, “place has been defined in terms of immanence, stability, and containment, as [quoting Aristotle] the ‘innermost motionless boundary of what contains.’ In the goings on of modern technics . . . this innermost boundary is forced, driven out of its motionless state” (70). TV’s technological specificity is its ability to alter the fixity of place, to map a “different kind of topography,” as Weber describes Heidegger’s *Gestell*—a term he translates as *emplacement* over other alternatives like *enframing* and *installation*. Place, in Weber’s schema as in Heidegger’s, precedes *Gestell* and is *acted upon* by technics. A TV aerial protrudes from the roof of the Black Forest farmhouse, and the fabric of space and time are ripped asunder.

I will return again to the consequences of this way of thinking about site and screen presently, but first I want to outline the geographical alternative. Although it is wholly coherent on its own terms, Weber’s description of the Aristotelian notion of place as the dominant one in social thought quite conspicuously oversimplifies the intellectual history of the concept. For several decades, geographers like David Harvey, J. Nicholas Entriken, and Doreen Massey have opposed the ontological understanding of place with a more dialectical view. To some extent, their approaches draw on Heidegger’s—recall that the central problematic of his “ontological consideration” is the fact that places are produced in political networks as well as in the ontological networks of being, and he wants

to understand what that means. But whereas Heidegger's poetic preoccupations mean that the political production of place is, not surprisingly, a "distortion and perversion" that conceals the aspects of place that reveal being, proponents of geographical concepts of place accept, even promote, what Entriken calls, following Heidegger, its "betweenness." The Marxist geographers' notion of place refuses the Aristotelian formulation of place as bounded ontological plenitude and instead insists that place is *always* a reflection of wider social forces—even, or perhaps especially, in the case of places that are unspoiled, isolated, protected. The long networks of modernity do not enter and interrupt the workings of a previously place-bound world. Rather, they make it possible to historicize the geographical orders that precede them as place-bound ones, and to conceal the forms of interconnection, of external/internal relations, that constructed places in previous eras. From the perspective of the Marxist geographer, both the Black Forest farmhouse and the Mall of America are carved out of the same dynamic, ongoing processes—the specificity of each one is determined by the particular form these processes assume within it. In Harvey's words, "place gets constructed through the working out in that place of interventions and influences from outside." In this respect place exemplifies the principle of dialectic materialism—forces and relations manifest in things.¹⁷ For

17. Harvey, *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, p. 49.



Rachel Harrison. 1993 view of Rio Videowall by Dara Birnbaum, Rio Shopping Mall, Atlanta. 1989.

Harvey, Massey, and others, place is thus not a romantic, timeless sense of communal, ecological belonging, but rather an expression of general space-time relations on all scales as they appear in one particular physical site.

The dialectical strain in geographical approaches to place can strengthen philosophical models of the TV set's material relationship to its location, models exemplified here in the best sense by Weber's schema. Contrasted with an ontological sense of place, the geographical sense of place accounts for, and even measures, spatial *differences* rather than *essences*. Though both the ontological model of place and the geographic one are conceived very specifically as *political* engagements with the philosophical and material consequences of location, the latter, unencumbered by commitments to the concept of being, offers a more thorough account of the viewing, or not-viewing, subject as a historical person, located in a particular social formation. This is because the geographic model allows us to see TV not only as a thing that binds spaces together, as Heidegger himself observes, but also, importantly, as a thing that is place-bound, that is to say *site-specific*, in the way it interweaves with the practices and institutions around it.

Because it is *both* space-binding and site-specific, enmeshed in, and constitutive of, the ambient flow of everyday life in the home and other places, the television set must be seen as a central force in the *dialectical* construction of a place. Indeed, we can learn a lot about the specificity of a place as a snapshot of wider social relations by looking at what the TV set is doing within it. I mean "looking" very literally here. Weber accounts for the political effects of television's material production of space with a deft exploration of the words we use to describe television—farsightedness, remote control, the French word *parasite* for static. But what if we take a different approach, exploring not words but images, and exploiting the materiality of television through another medium defined by a vexed relation between materiality and immateriality—photography? By photographing TV sets in their television settings—something I have been doing for several years now—one can grasp not only what the television set *looks* like in its place, but also how, in its banal appearance in shopping malls, bars, restaurants, and so on, the screen interlaces with the relations of power and everyday practices that define its place. What such an investigation communicates is that, instead of television "taking place," what often happens in such environments is that place "takes television."

Rio (Atlanta)

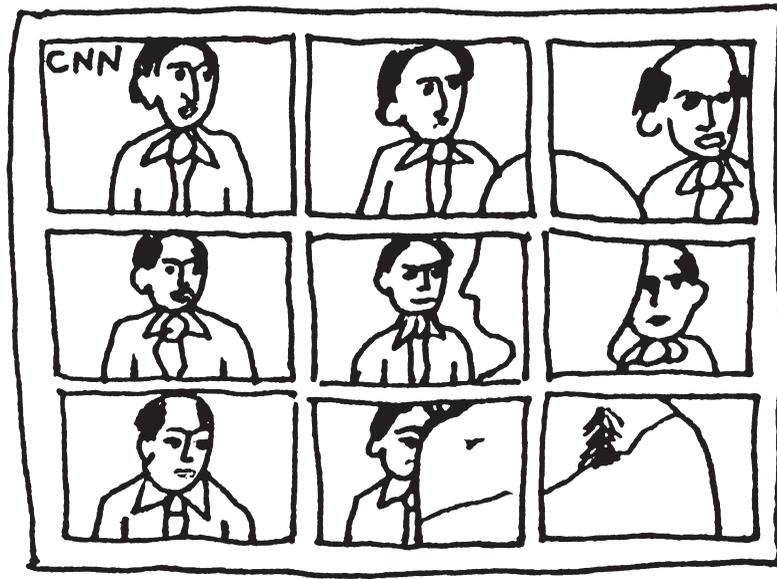
This possibility is illustrated in the tensions between an ontological and a geographical notion of place that surface in one particular televisual site—a video installation commissioned in 1989, for a shopping mall in Atlanta, by Dara Birnbaum.¹⁸ The mall was designed by the Miami firm Arquitectonica and named

18. The discussion of Rio in this section draws on chapter 7 of my book *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001).

Rio in reference to the hit song by the '80s pop-music icons Duran Duran. However, despite this glamour, the mall was located in a poor inner-city neighborhood targeted for gentrification because of its proximity to the city's downtown. It was constructed in the early 1990s on an empty piece of land that had been razed during processes of urban renewal in the 1970s, and intended as a festive entertainment environment for the throngs of young urban professionals predicted to move into the area at any moment. Birnbaum's installation was commissioned as a prestige piece for the mall's wacky-looking atrium, crammed with brass frogs, a reflecting pool, and a perisphere.

The installation was a video wall consisting of twenty-five monitors arranged in a square matrix. The piece's complex system of interactive, "live" image manipulations sought to call attention to the role of mediated places like shopping malls in the destruction of an ontological sense of place. The twenty-five screens used sophisticated computer circuitry to display layers of imagery from two sources: live news from the Atlanta-based CNN and footage showing the site before the mall was built (a grass slope sparsely dotted with trees). This "lost landscape"—a place "taken" by the mall—would appear on-screen through a random process determined by the movement of shoppers throughout the site. Whenever a shopper entered the visual field of one of several surveillance cameras dotted about the space, a computer-based keying system would digitize his or her image as a silhouette and use it as an electronic video cutout through which one set of footage (the landscape) could be seen in a human outline superimposed on the other (CNN).

As part of a place named after another place, *Rio Videowall* dramatized a set of ideas about how television and consumer culture create, in the words of media critic Joshua Meyrowitz, "no sense of place." The video linked and likened the physical space of the mall to the generalized, abstract space of TV's continual information flows and cycles, and it used the body of the consumer as the point of this articulation. Images of the lost landscape became the repressed other of the "global" CNN newscast with its omnipresent mutterings. The installation was very savvy about television's ability to *take place*, relativizing the eternal present of live news and diminishing its pretensions to realness, liveness, and immediacy by comparing it with the more "live," more "real time," more "present tense" surveillance image of the shopper in the mall. It seemed a canny demonstration of Weber's proposal that "television takes place in taking the place of the body and at the same time transforming both place and body" (117). Similarly, the fact that the video wall's "global" media network, CNN, was a local economic institution employing a large sector of Atlanta's professional class would serve as a reminder of the televisual process "taking place" at the scene of production. This carefully planned relationship between site and screen called attention to technics as a way of ordering, and emplacing, the subject—it seemed designed to signal television's ability to "split the unity of place." Reading about the piece from afar, and thinking about these issues, I looked forward to visiting Atlanta and experiencing this work in person.



Rachel Harrison. Detail of Rio Videowall by Dara Birnbaum, showing prerecorded landscape superimposed onto "live" CNN broadcasts via a digitized silhouette of a shopper-spectator. 1989.

But what I discovered on my first visit to Rio in 1994 was not what I had expected, unfamiliar as I was with the politics of land use in the city of Atlanta (since chronicled in Charles Rutheiser's book *Imagineering Atlanta*).¹⁹ It was a surprise that served as a moment of reckoning in my ongoing evaluation of geographical and ontological perspectives on place and the place assigned to television within them. Around 11 a.m. on a sunny Saturday morning in March, a time when one might expect to encounter throngs of shoppers in an outdoor mall, the open atrium mall was almost completely empty. The video wall was blank and dark, surrounded by stacked plastic chairs and tables. It was not the centerpiece of the mall as much as it was the centerpiece of Hoops, the outdoor sports bar nearby; like most TV sets in bars, it was probably being used to screen sports. From the large speakers attached to the screen, the sound of Black Entertainment Television (BET) echoed throughout the plaza. The stores were, for the most part, deserted shells with "For Lease" signs in the windows. All that was open were two take-out food places, a gym, a vitamin store, and a bar. Of these, all save the gym were closed. In short, Rio was crumbling. I had come to see a video installation "take place" but instead, what I saw was a place that had taken over a video installation. Despite its Mondrianesque postmodern architecture, its perisphere, and its frogs, the mall looked like a failed investment. And indeed, shortly after my visit, the owner filed for bankruptcy. Birnbaum had made an admirable and carefully planned attempt to expose the spatial forms of contemporary consumer culture by juxtaposing television images with an ontological view of the lost pastoral landscape that the video image, as part of the mall, had destroyed. But her attempt was undermined by the very forces she sought to bring to the spectator's awareness.

19. Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (London: Verso, 1996).

Yet from another perspective, the mall was quite a “success,” albeit not the kind of success that Birnbaum anticipated when she designed the piece as a sly critique of consumer space. Rio may have failed to attract rich white yuppie consumers, but when the mall was purchased later that year by an Atlanta entrepreneur, it became a black business and cultural center. When I revisited the site in 1998, it housed several black-owned businesses, including an art gallery, and a dance studio that served as a performance space for Kwanza celebrations, local theater productions, community-oriented festivals, and United Negro College Fund benefits. The sports bar Hoops, now bought and renamed by a local radio personality named Youngblood, was a particularly popular attraction. The video wall occasionally provided Youngblood’s patrons with a source of entertainment, but a representative of the mall’s management company told me that it had gradually stopped working, its circuitry deteriorating through exposure to the elements over the years—the place, it seemed, had taken over the TV set and left it to decay.

The very irrelevance of the video wall in the cultural context of Rio after 1993 suggests that Birnbaum’s concern for the sense of the “place” destroyed by the mall, while admirable, was in an important sense incomplete. For this concern was rooted in an ontological view of place—the pastoral ideal of the lost natural landscape recovered by video technology. As an ideal, it obscured the fact that this small green place destroyed by Rio only existed because of a prior destruction: that of an inner-city neighborhood, ravaged by urban renewal. Moreover, one might even argue that Birnbaum’s use of closed-circuit video to make a critique of commercial culture overlooked certain aspects of inner-city racial politics articulated around consumption. After all, the surveillance cameras she placed around the mall implicated the installation in a racialized visual discourse of crime and visibility, even though their intended use was simply to transform shoppers’ images into silhouettes that could be digitized on the video wall’s screen. This transformation of the real subject of the camera’s gaze into a digitized, featureless outline erased all signs of race and other forms of human specificity. It emptied out identity and installed a standardized, abstracted subjectivity in its place, making the consumer and his or her particularity into a disembodied trace flitting across a screen. Accompanying this ontological notion of place, in other words, was an ahistorical, “ageographic” notion of the subject. Birnbaum’s attempt to involve the actual spectator so closely and directly thus simultaneously reduced that consumer to a one-dimensional, faceless thing—enacting, rather than revealing, his or her “reification.”

Had I never visited Rio, remaining content to parse the deft conceptualism of Birnbaum’s ontological approach to site and screen from afar, it would have continued to be for me a place perhaps existing *outside of* geography. What I discovered when I went there instead was the fact of the video’s place *within* geography—its place in the local patterns of land use and gentrification, the racialized politics of downtown-periphery relations, the vicissitudes of Atlanta’s consumer economy. It was designed in some sense to illustrate the process by which modern technics “take” an (ontologized) place, but revealed instead the facts of the

video's place in a *geographic* sense. The relationship between site and screen unfolded not on the basis of the site's ontological unity, but rather via its material history and geography of a southern black metropolitan culture. Nothing could have communicated the materiality, and site-specificity, of television's complex spatial operations more effectively than the blank and uncommunicative surface of the video wall. This brief history of *Rio Videowall* shows how the idealist prisms of spatial collapse and virtuality are inadequate as ways of thinking about the relationship between the screen and its place. It suggests instead that approaching place as an active and dynamic form of materiality, quite capable of overpowering technological modes of spatial rupture, adds important nuance to our sense of television's role in the lives of the hypothetical subjects who go about their everyday business in its presence.

In conclusion, I want to suggest a final reason why the philosophical preoccupation with space-binding in media should be supplemented with an awareness of television's site-specificity. This is the fact that without a model for thinking about the determinations of place, and for describing the material status of the TV set as more than just a window to other worlds, theories of television's spatial processes risk sounding like a technological occult. After all, the language of television theory borrows heavily from the vocabulary of sorcery—one need think only of terms like *materialization* and *dematerialization*, *manifestation* and *presence*. As Derrida notes, “contemporary technologies like film, television, telephones . . . live on or off of, in some way, a ghostly structure. Film is an art of the ghost, which is to say, it is neither image nor perception. . . . The voice on the telephone also has a ghostly appearance. It is something neither real nor unreal, something which returns, is reproduced—finally, it's the question of reproduction. From the moment when the first perception of an image is linked to a structure of reproduction, we are dealing with the ghostly.”²⁰ However, as Jeffrey Sconce points out, these occult connotations are grounded in particular cultural histories, in anxieties that emerge from material social relations. Without an awareness of these histories, he notes in his own comprehensive account of associations between electronic media and the occult, many theories of contemporary media merely replace “the humanist illusions of traditional metaphysics [with] the technological illusions of electronic presence.”²¹

Building on Sconce's point, I cannot think about the occult connotations of space-binding, connotations that lead theorists to characterize the TV set as a

20. Jacques Derrida, “La danse des fantômes/The Ghost Dance,” interview with Andrew Payne and Mark Lewis, *Public* 2, 1989, pp. 61, 68. Quoted in Thomas Keenan, “Have You Seen Your World Today?” *Art Journal* 54, no. 4 (Winter 1995), pp. 102–105. Keenan astutely points out that this is one of several occasions on which Derrida hints at the possibility of a broader engagement with television in his work, although he does not follow up on it. This is surprising, Keenan notes, because “nothing would seem a more tempting target for a deconstructive reading than television—so utterly metaphysical in its presuppositions and its claims, and yet strictly discontinuous in its operations with the experience of subjectivity and representation that defines this metaphysics—and yet it has managed to evade rigorous theoretical scrutiny almost entirely.”

21. Sconce, *Haunted Media*, p. 207.

piece of furniture endowed with frightening conjuring powers, without recalling Marx's famous discussion of commodity fetishism in *Capital*. Toward the end of chapter 1, he writes:

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges into a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.²²

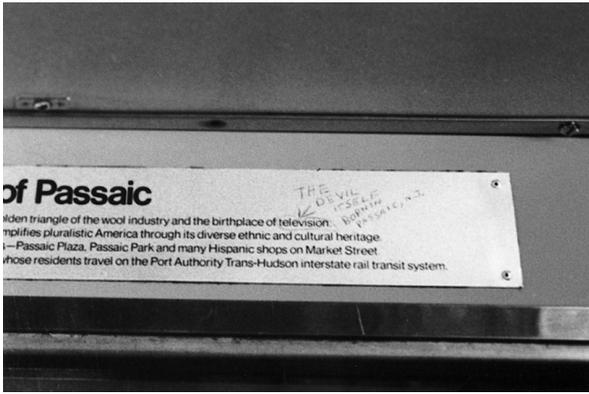
Here Marx, in one of his best displays of irony, personifies the commodity as a thing that exceeds perception, animated by an unseen force. Perhaps because he feared that his characterization of the table/commodity as a playful, deformed, fairy-tale hybrid sounded fanciful and even supernatural, he added to his description a footnote that underscores his contempt for the immaterialities of superstition. The note reads: "One may recall that China and the tables began to dance when the rest of the world appeared to be standing still—*pour encourager les autres*." This is a reference to two phenomena of the 1850s: the Taipei revolt of 1853, a proto-Communist rebellion led by a converted Christian farmer, and "the craze for spiritualism which swept over upper-class German society."²³ Marx's point is that European radicals could have found a way out of the stasis and disillusionment that

22. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Pelican Books, 1976), p. 164.

23. Translator's note, *ibid*.



*Bumper sticker,
New York. 2000.
Author photo.*



*Above: Graffiti in PATH train,
Jersey City, N.J. 1998.
Author photo. Right: Television
set in the Ear Inn, New York.
1998. Author photo.*



followed the failed revolutions of 1848 by paying attention to the events of China, instead of to the magical hoaxes of the séance table. He turns to spiritualism in this footnote to stress the misapprehensions that occur when we personify things, granting them hidden powers. The commodity's animate "undeadness" must be exposed as a grotesque joke in order to break its hold over us.

The TV set in much media theory is like Marx's dancing table. Its space-binding, scale-shifting effects, and its abolition of remoteness, become mystical, and in the process raise the unwelcome possibility that the theory itself is a form of commodity fetishism. Like the antimedia slogan "Kill Your Television," a slogan which implies that destroying a commodity is a direct action against capitalism, the occult conceptualization of space-binding risks misinterpreting social relations between individuals as social relations among things, and thus reproducing "all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labor on the basis of commodity production" (169). The superstitious treatment of television sets in the material practices of the everyday testifies to the richness of the occult as a resource for thinking about television's omnipresence in consumer culture. For example, I've photographed several interesting attempts to link television and Satan over the past few years. Two of the resulting images are reproduced alongside this essay: one shows the talismanic placement of Lucifer's image on the TV set of a venerable beatnik institution, the Ear Inn on the far West Side of lower Manhattan, the other captures a graffiti writer's invocation of the devil, in response to a transit-car plaque identifying Passaic as the birthplace of television. Despite their occult sensibilities, these anonymous acts of "writing" television display a strongly materialist sense of television as an object that mediates relations among people, in particular places. As I've suggested in the foregoing, this sense of material culture, and place, is one way in which media theory might break the spell of concepts like the immaterial and the unreal in the philosophical encounter with television.