

Telemediations

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Telemediations

This chapter argues that responses to new telecommunications media in Britain during the 1930s were marked by a crucial change of emphasis from distance to environment. Spurred by new techno-cultural developments such as the “talkie” film and the invention of television, some writers began to think less of the capacities of communications media to transmit over distance, and more about how these multiple channels had begun to coalesce into a new kind of virtual space enviroing all social life. It was during the 1930s that an instrumental approach to telemedia (a set of ideas about what could be done with or through new communications systems) was supplemented, if not quite displaced, by an approach to telemedia as a cultural gestalt (a set of ideas about how such systems could be understood to surround, to sustain, and to condition human experience). Put simply, the 1930s was the decade during which the focus of attention began to shift decisively away from *tele-* and towards *-media*, where it has remained ever since.

The Communicative Environment

“Medium” is, and always has been, a capacious term. This is one reason for the vitality of contemporary media theory, which has been able to capitalize on the wide conceptual range covered by “medium” from the middle ages to the present day. In all senses the general connotation, from Latin *medium*, is that of interposition or *between-ness*. In early modern English usage the word was employed variously to mean an arithmetical average, the middle term of a syllogism in logic, or a compromise between two extremes of conduct or attitude. By the end of the sixteenth century, “medium” had crystallized into the more familiar sense of a thing or process coming between a cause and its effect: any instrument or agency — natural, technological, or supernatural — *through which* some activity or goal could be accomplished.

The rapidly expanding discourse of seventeenth-century natural philosophy seems thereafter to have catalysed the differentiation of “medium” into a name for two related but now distinct ideas. On the one hand, a “medium” could refer to a carrier or channel for the transmission or transportation of a message or content (as in the notion of spoken, written, or

printed language as a medium for the exchange of ideas, or money as a medium for the exchange of economic values). On the other hand, a “medium” could also be one of a much broader range of elemental substances, such as air or water, which not only intervened between seemingly discrete entities, but enfolded and pervaded them. In this latter sense, which survives in a few specialized contexts (such as the growth medium used by experimental biologists for growing bacterial cultures), the term “medium” was understood to refer not merely to a self-contained system used by individual agents for a specific purpose, but to a substance or environment in which entities themselves were suspended, and through which they were partly constituted. A further sense emerged from the periodical culture of the eighteenth century, when circulated print in journals and newspapers began to be thought of as a primary “medium” for the dissemination of information, and this sense continued through the newspaper boom of the nineteenth century to be picked up in the twentieth century’s “mass media”, a phrase which by the 1920s had become a common way of talking about modernity’s multiple and multiplying array of electronically-enhanced information systems.

The invention of new technologies for transmitting over distance — telegraph, telephone, teletype, radio and television — accounts in large part for what John Guillory has called “the explosive currency of the word [*medium*] in the communicative environment of modernity”.¹ Yet it may be that the notion of a “communicative environment” itself owes something to the extensive reorganization of media concepts around new technologies in the early decades of the twentieth century. The novelty of such systems as the telegraph and the telephone meant that at the end of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, the trend ran towards thinking of media as systems for the transmission of data. “Instead of an intervening substance or agency, media came to denote the varied technical forms of communication, forms which are nominally said to contain the information — the ‘content’ — that they communicate”.² By the end of the 1920s, however, a further transition was underway. Some writers again began to think of media (initially, “mass media”) as a ubiquitous, all-pervading presence from which there could be no respite or escape.

¹ J. Guillory, “Genesis of the Media Concept”, *Critical Inquiry* 36:2 (Winter 2010), 321-62 (p. 321).

² L. Gitelman and T. M. Collins 2009). “Medium Light: Revisiting Edisonian Modernity”, *Critical Quarterly* 51 (July 2009), 1-14 (p. 4).

One plausible reason for that transition was the development, at the end of the 1920s, of technological systems which addressed multiple senses. For the first time, in sound film and soon thereafter in television, audio and video were combined, beginning the reversal of what Sarah Danius has described as high modernism's "differentiation of the sensory".³ Where the increasingly specialized sensory investigations of nineteenth-century physics, optics, acoustics, and otology had laid the groundwork for the development of telegraphy, film, the phonograph, and the telephone, and prepared literary modernism's fragmentation of the sensory field, these new technologies of sensory simultaneity promised to reintegrate the senses within the same technologically-mediated experience.⁴

The major conceptual difference between film and television is that the former operates as a storage medium, recording a trace for later projection, whereas the latter operates as a transmission medium, making a signal produced at one physical location available elsewhere near-instantaneously. In 1927, however, just as the wonders of television were coming to wide public notice, film production had been disrupted by the introduction of synchronized sound. Each of these novelties added a supplementary sensory experience to a pre-existing technology: the cinema talkie was understood to have added sound to cinematography (an addition that was not always welcomed by critics and cinephiles), while television was understood to have added an optical dimension to the telephone. Early public demonstrations, which frequently made use of a telephone to allow audience members to communicate with the figures appearing on the screen, encouraged that interpretation.⁵

Between the first public demonstrations of John Logie Baird's "televisor" at Selfridge's in 1925 and the beginning of Baird's broadcast service in 1929, the question of what television was *for*, what kind of technology it was to be, invited futurological speculations, but few had realized that television was more than just an add-on. The first book to treat television as a significant technology in its own right, Alfred Dinsdale's primer *Television (Seeing by Wire or Wireless)* (1926), drew a direct comparison with sound cinema. With synchronized sound, Dinsdale explained, it had become possible for cinemagoers "to enjoy simultaneously both the

³ S. Danius, *The Senses of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 155.

⁴ See J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MA: MIT Press, 1990) and T. Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁵ J. Moran, *Armchair Nation: An intimate history of Britain in front of the TV* (London: Profile Books, 2013), pp. 22-23.

sights and sounds of distant places, musical entertainments, and so on”. Film, however, still suffered from “a time-lag disadvantage”:

Will the day ever come when we may, by wireless, both see and hear simultaneously what is occurring at a distance, and that instantly as the occurrences take place?

A mad dream? Certainly not! *It has already been accomplished in the laboratory of a scientist, and over short distances outside of his laboratory, and this new and startling scientific development is called*

TELEVISION!⁶

Dinsdale’s excitable introduction presents television as a technological landmark precisely because it fuses two existing forms of simultaneity, combining the sound film’s audiovisual simultaneity with the communicative simultaneity of telephone and wireless. This insight was unusual.

It took Baird until March 1930 to begin the first synchronized sound-and-vision broadcasts; before that, and for some time afterwards, television was still generally regarded as a supplement rather than a technological revolution. *The Television Girl* (1928), by the romance novelist Gertie de S. Wentworth-James, attempts to imagine television as it might be embedded in social life, but trips over the analogy with telephony suggested by Baird’s name for the invention. A high-tech “Blair televisor” provides the means by which Wentworth-James’s gadget-obsessed London osteopath comes into accidental contact with the “television girl” of the book’s title. Here, however, the “televisor” features as only one device in the array of hazily-envisioned future technologies (including a “super-gramophone” and a “super-wireless”) that grace the protagonist’s bachelor pad. The televisor turns out, in fact, to be a kind of super-telephone (“a telephone with television attachment”) on which the two lovers can be connected through the already hackneyed telephonic trope of a wrong number.⁷ Despite the book’s title, the television girl is really just a telephone girl — that familiar figure of popular 1920s fiction — with added visual interest. In sensory terms, sound and vision remain separated into two distinct channels rather than cohering in a single system.

Multisensory Media

⁶ A. Dinsdale, *Television (Seeing by Wire or Wireless)* (London: W. S. Caines for Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1926), p. 12.

⁷ G. de S. Wentworth-James, *The Television Girl* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1928), p. 16.

The depiction of television as an optically-equipped telephone persisted well into the 1930s. It is in this capacity that the technology tends to appear in the science-fiction cinema of the decade, in films such as Maurice Elvey's *Transatlantic Tunnel* (1935) and William Cameron Menzies' 1936 adaptation of H.G. Wells's *Things to Come*. But there were some who understood the technology as something altogether new — and newly dangerous. Olaf Stapledon's visionary *Last and First Men* (1930), for instance, anticipated a new age in which all technical media would be unified in a seamless global field, and looks back ruefully from the far future at a time, not so long after the present of the 1930s, when “the American press, gramophone, radio, cinematograph and televisor ceaselessly drenched the planet with American thought”.⁸ In *Brave New World*, written in 1931 and published the following year, Aldous Huxley likewise imagined a dystopian society of human drones conditioned by propaganda, by the dissolution of family life through eugenics and contraception, by the pacifying drug “soma”, and above all by the perfection of a fully immersive world-wide media environment designed to address all the senses simultaneously. Entertainment here is indeed all-embracing, surrounding citizens, waking or sleeping, from the moment of artificial conception to the moment of a death eased by advanced pharmacology and audiovisual distraction.

Television, of course, is among the most important constituent technologies of Huxley's media dystopia. Buzzing over London in their personal helicopter, Lenina Crowne and Henry Foster skirt the vast premises of the Television Corporation at Brentford, while their colleague Bernard Marx pilots his aeroplane past the tower housing the Bureaux of Propaganda by Television, by Feeling Picture, and by Synthetic Voice and Music.⁹ But Huxley's World State has extended its franchise beyond merely audiovisual media. A cabaret advertises “LONDON'S FINEST SCENT AND COLOUR ORGAN”. Later, en route to visit a reservation of “savages” in New Mexico, Bernard and Lenina stop over at a Santa Fe hotel boasting “[l]iquid air, television, vibro-vacuum massage, radio, boiling caffeine solution, hot contraceptives, and eight different kinds of scent”, as well as the usual “synthetic music plant” (86).

⁸ O. Stapledon, *Last and First Men* [1930] (London: Gollancz, 2003), p. 23.

⁹ A. Huxley, *Brave New World* [1932] (London: Granada, 1981), pp. 58-61. Further references in brackets are to this edition.

In the reservation itself, the vacationing couple encounters a society of people isolated from the media apparatus of the World State, including Linda, a woman left in unhappy exile after conceiving a child with a colleague during a holiday trip, and her son, John. After returning to civilization with Bernard and Lenina, Linda grows moribund. Taking to her bed “with the radio and television always on, and the patchouli tap just dripping, and the soma tablets within reach of her hand”, she succumbs to a multimedia system that offers not just a representation of reality, but a substitute for it. Transferred to a hospital ward, Linda is confined to a room where television plays at the foot of every bed, “a running tap, from morning till night” (160). No distinction is made between delivery systems: tincture of patchouli and television programming both drip into the senses from taps that seem never to run dry.

The appalled fascination with which Huxley describes the various *synthetic* products scattered throughout the novel (“synthetic music”, “synthetic starch”) is a small lexical step away from his equally appalled fascination with the *synaesthetic* properties of a media system which encompasses the whole sensorium. Seen in this light, the real new technology of television marks a plausible waypoint on the road to the fully immersive fantasy medium of the novel’s ultimate entertainment system: the “Feelies”. It is the “Feely Palace” to which Lenina takes John the Savage that fully realizes Huxley’s premonition of a multisensory media environment. Society, in the novel, is itself such an environment; the Feelies merely replicate intensively what the media technologies of *Brave New World* — scent organs, music boxes, televisions — already do in their extension throughout the social field. The show begins with an olfactory performance, “rippling arpeggios of thyme and lavender, of rosemary, basil, myrtle, tarragon; a series of daring modulations through the spice keys into ambergris”. It then moves into the auditory (“a trio for hyper-violin, super-cello and oboe-surrogate”) before all the senses combine in the feature presentation, a mindless but relentlessly sensuous blockbuster entitled *Three Weeks in a Helicopter*: “Sunk in their pneumatic stalls, Lenina and the Savage sniffed and listened. It was now the turn also for eyes and skin.” (136) Scent, hearing, vision and touch: the film may be, quite literally, tasteless, but all the other senses are assaulted in perfect synchrony.

The link between television’s audiovisual environment and the sensory plenitude of the Feelies was not lost on contemporary readers, in part because television, having only recently made the transition from science-fiction to social fact, was scarcely less fantastical. C. Day Lewis, in

The Listener, expressed disquiet about the possible effects of such rapid media transition for literary work: “When television is perfected — and possibly Mr. Aldous Huxley’s ‘feelies’ introduced — they will provide us with an unreality far more unreal or a realism a hundred times more devastating than the most frenzied ambitions of the entertainment writers can rise to.¹⁰ A few months later, William Emrys Williams, at that time the secretary of the British Institute of Adult Education, though soon to be editor-in-chief of Penguin, argued in the same publication for the superiority of media which addressed one sense at a time:

The wireless play in a sense is the antidote to cinema drama; yet when it succumbs to television we shall have another example of the irresponsibility with which scientific precocity can destroy an aesthetic definition of purpose. As things are, the listener to a wireless play is bereft of those exactnesses of depiction which the cinema so freely provides. [...] We are, so to speak, blindfolded and compelled to listen [...]; and the frequency of the experience might give us our ears back again. But television is (unhappily) soon going to stop all that; and is going to establish a new rival to the cinema, armed at all points with the same equipment and resource.¹¹

For Williams, television threatened to detract from the appreciation of language which radio broadcasting, because of its intense focus on one sense, could still encourage: unlike new multi-media systems, poetic language in isolation was subtle and indirect enough to provide the listener with a satisfying aesthetic experience. Such an experience, he concluded, was a way of speaking “to something in men which is obscure and latent [...] until we become inmates of Brave New World we shall not be able to live without it”.

Huxley’s dystopian fantasy had already become a common point of reference for those who shared his uneasiness about the expansion of multisensory media. But it was possible to conceive of this new media environment in a more positive light, as enabling individuals to inhabit the world as fully global citizens. “It is not impossible,” wrote the playwright Charles Morgan in the *BBC Year-Book* for 1930, “that the time may come when, without leaving his armchair, a man may be a seeing and hearing member of the audience in any playhouse, cinema or concert hall throughout the world”.¹² Going still further, the teacher and

¹⁰ C. D. Lewis, “The Revolution in Literature”, *The Listener* 324 (March 27), 511-37 (p. 512).

¹¹ W. E. Williams, “Can Literature Survive II — Theatre, Cinema and Broadcasting”, *The Listener* 346 (28 August 1935), 370-371 (p. 371).

¹² C. Morgan, “The Future of Entertainment”, in *The BBC Year-Book 1930* (London: BBC, 1930), pp. 41-43 (p. 41).

educationalist J. A. Lauwerys took the attainment of one set of technological fantasies as an invitation to indulge in another: “And now, that the allied problems of radio-telephony and television are to all intents and purposes solved, will our scientists sigh for fresh ethers to conquer? Are there any problems of this sort left? What about the wireless transmission of solid bodies?”¹³

Astral Projection

Science fiction of the 1930s did occasionally attempt to transmit solid bodies. As Finn Fordham points out, the technologically-attuned Arthur Conan Doyle got a head start on the competition with a Professor Challenger story of 1929, “The Disintegration Machine”. “Just as ‘telegraphy’ gave new impulses to fantasies of ‘telekinesis’ (first usage according to the OED, 1890), so ‘television’ gave impulses to related fantasies of ‘teleportation’ (first usage 1931)”¹⁴ Others followed suit. In “Travel by Wire!” (1937), the first published story by Arthur C. Clarke, a physicist recalls his team’s early experiments in teleporting a variety of increasingly complex objects from place to place, including a wooden cube, a sedated guinea-pig, and a professor of classics. “The greatest difficulty,” he recalls, “as it had been in television thirty years before, was improving definition”¹⁵ Having perfected the procedure, the scientists set up a commercial cross-channel service charging travellers £2 a trip.

Other writers, less inclined to speculate about bodily transmission, settled for the next best thing: the transmission of consciousness. Under the influence of J. W. Dunne’s parapsychological classic *An Experiment With Time* (1927), a remarkably fertile subgenre of 1930s science fiction arose around the conceit of the transmission of consciousness either in time or in space. Such works as John Buchan’s *The Gap in the Curtain* (1932), Stephen Southwold’s *Death Rocks the Cradle* (1933), Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s *Gay Hunter* (1934), and Alison Uttley’s *A Traveller in Time* (1939) transport their protagonists to distant planets or remote historical periods which, for the duration of the narrative at least, prove fully immersive and

¹³ J. A. Lauwerys, “Television, Baird, and Miracles to Be”, *The Saturday Review* (23 September 1933), 316-317.

¹⁴ F. Fordham, “Early Television and Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*: New Technology and Flawed Power”, in M. Feldman, E. Tønning, and H. Mead (eds), *Broadcasting in the Modernist Era* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 39-56 (p 41).

¹⁵ A. C. Clarke, “Travel By Wire”, in *The Collected Stories of Arthur C. Clarke* (London: Gollancz, 2001).

indistinguishable from ordinary experience. At the same time, a parallel genre of left-wing allegory (including Edward Upward's *Journey to the Border* (1938), Rex Warner's *The Wild Goose Chase* (1937) and Ruthven Todd's *Over the Mountain* (1939)) offered stories of travellers stranded in strange lands whose habits and customs reflect, in distorted or exaggerated form, the shortcomings of twentieth-century Britain.

Patrick Hamilton's *Impromptu in Moribundia* (1939) sits at the crossroads of these two subgenres. Hamilton's everyman traveller finds himself transmitted by technological means from London to the mirror-city of "*Nwotsemahl*" ("Thamestown"), the capital of "Moribundia", whose citizens communicate with each other by exhaling cartoon speech-bubbles, and embody the clichés of contemporary advertisements and tabloid papers. Moribundia in fact turns out to be a version of Britain refracted through the distorting mirror of mass media, complete with salt-of-the-earth *Yenkoccs*, rabble-rousing *tsinumoccs*, and subversive intellectuals (including, of course, Mr. *Yelxuh*).

But Hamilton's novel is uniquely detailed in its description of the technological device which projects its protagonist through space to the bizarre society of Moribundia. The book's first chapter introduces the maverick scientist Crowmarsh, inventor of the "Asteradio", an "epoch-making instrument" whose "wonder and terror [...] is equalled only by its extreme comparative simplicity of construction".¹⁶ In its name, the Asteradio brings to mind the portmanteau construction of the term "television" itself, which from the outset had outraged philological purists by marrying the Greek *tele-* ("distant") with the Latin *visionem* ("sight"). "The word is half Greek and half Latin," C.P. Scott, the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, is frequently said to have remarked; "No good will come of it"; and T. S. Eliot, writing in the early 1940s, thought the term "ugly because of [...] ill-breeding".¹⁷ To be sure, in Hamilton's novel little good comes of the similarly composite "Asteradio", which in its etymology (Gk. *aster*, "star" and Lat. *radius*, "beam") seems to compound the suggestion of cultural contamination with a sense of the device's disconcerting technical hybridity. Indeed, to its latest user the machine seems worryingly makeshift:

¹⁶ P. Hamilton, *Impromptu in Moribundia* [1939] (London: Faber, 2011), p. 17. Further references in brackets are to this edition.

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry" [1942], in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. F. Kermode. New York: Harcourt Brace/Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1988), 107-14 (p. 113).

The superficial appearance of this extraordinary piece of mechanism — if “mechanism” is a legitimate word — resembling, as it always does to me, a sort of mad cross between a telephone booth, a cabinet gramophone, an electric chair, a lift, a wardrobe mirror, an Iron Maiden and a huge camera — is as well known to any man in the street as it is by myself. The only thing, I believe, which nearly always impresses those who have actually beheld it, “in the flesh,” however, is the extraordinary air it has of crudity, of being a contraption, “put together” in a haphazard way. [...] What you actually see is something you feel your younger boy could have put together at home. (24-25)

The put-together appearance of the first television systems had likewise alarmed observers. Even Baird’s closest friend and biographer, Sydney Moseley, described early efforts as having “the ingenuity of Heath Robinson and a touch of Robinson Crusoe.” In common with the Asteradio, however, the appearance of complexity was deceptive: “Baird described it as having the saving grace of simplicity”.¹⁸ The editor of the popular science magazine *Discovery*, who had attended one of the early demonstrations of the technology at Selfridge’s in 1925, accounted himself impressed by Baird’s results, though somewhat less so by the mechanism: “His machinery is [...] astonishingly crude, and the apparatus in general is built out of derelict odds and ends. The optical system is composed of lenses out of bicycle lamps. The framework is an unimpressive erection of old sugar boxes and the electrical wiring a nightmare cobweb of improvisations”.¹⁹

Entering the Asteradio, Hamilton’s narrator finds himself in a sealed room, “lit inside with what appears to be a common-or-garden electric bulb. I sat there, looking in turn at the five reflections of myself in the famous five steel mirrors which enclosed me all about” (Hamilton: 26). The curious description of these encircling mirrors within the Asteradio, at once rather vague and highly specific, suggests that he might have crawled inside something resembling an oversized television transmitter. By the mid-1930s, the original Baird televisor, which had dissected images for transmission using a rotating, perforated “Nipkow” disk, had been superseded by a “mirror-drum” system, in which the same task was accomplished by a series of offset mirrors mounted on a spinning drum. But the mirror-drum apparatus suffered from drawbacks of its own. The mirrors required precise adjustment and were easily thrown out of synchronization by the physical forces exerted on the spinning drum. Furthermore, the number of mirrors was determined by the size of the drum, meaning that sets were limited to a scanning range of about 60 lines, making for small, low-definition pictures at the receiving

¹⁸ S. A. Moseley, *The Private Diaries of Sydney Moseley* (London: Max Parish, 1960), p. 292.

¹⁹ “Editor’s Note”, *Discovery* (April 25 1925), p. 143.

end. In 1936, however, *Television and Short-Wave World* carried an article about a superior new system which had been developed for use in Germany by the Hungarian engineer Dénes von Mihály and improved by the London-based physicist Ernest Traub (*Fig. 1*). The Mihály-Traub system was capable of producing a much larger picture at higher definition by inverting the mirror-drum arrangement, so that rather than bouncing off an array of mirrors mounted on the outside of a revolving drum, light was directed by a spinning polyhedral mirror to a set of five stationary reflectors mounted in an arc on an encircling frame.²⁰ Hamilton's Asteradio, with its five mirrors, exactly replicates the Mihály-Traub television system, which seems a plausible influence on the Moribundian mirror-universe.

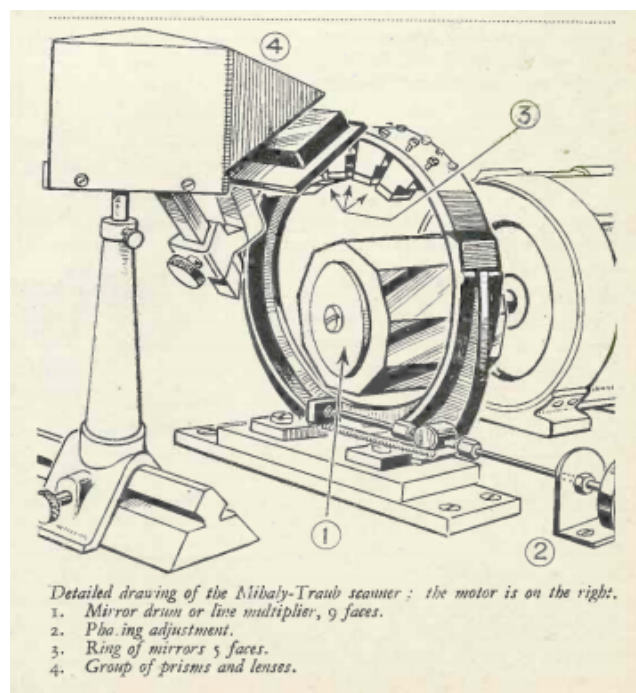


Fig. 1: The Mihály-Traub television system (*Television and Short-Wave World*, November 1936)

It remains unclear even to the hero of Hamilton's novel whether the Asteradio fulfils J. A. Lauwerys's fantasy of "the wireless transmission of solid bodies", or whether its effect is simply a more potent and complete version of the transmission of consciousness enabled by other telecommunications media. "Was my body, in the months in which I was millions of miles away in space, at one and the same time enclosed in the *Asteradio* machine on the third floor of Chandos Street? I cannot answer that question" (25). In a way, it hardly matters: even if his body remains stationary, the Asteradionaut's consciousness is fully absorbed in a virtual reality.

²⁰ Anon., "The Mihaly-Traub System Up To Date", *Television and Short-Wave World* (November 1936), 635-36.

Marie-Laure Ryan has distinguished between two strategies according to which works of art mediate the attention of audiences to create virtual worlds. The first mode, dominant in perspectival painting and in realist fiction, aims to create the illusion of an immersive virtual world by effacing the medium in which the work is produced. The second, by contrast, depends upon an interaction between the audience and the work of art in which a heightened attentiveness to the medium of the work itself becomes a primary condition of meaning.²¹ Ryan associates this second, “interactive” mode with post-perspectival painting and the “linguistic turn” of postmodernism and digital hypertext, though one might just as plausibly trace a crisis in the relationship between the aesthetics of immersiveness and the principle of interactivity to modernism’s engagement with new telecommunications media throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Communications technologies such as the telegraph, the telephone, and send-and-receive radio were fundamentally interactive: they required the participation of users communicating through an electronic instrument which, in the act of use, always recalled its status *as a medium*. Wireless broadcasting, while not strictly interactive, could hardly foreshadow a new immersiveness so long as it claimed the attention of only a single sense. Television, however, and speculative analogues such as the Feelies and the Asteradio, offered a glimpse of an increasingly immersive, multisensory media environment.

Interactive and Immersive Media

One reason the telephone has proven so central to so many recent technologically-infllected accounts of modernism is that it afforded modernist writers new opportunities for thinking about interactivity as a literary, as well as a technical, principle. As David Trotter points out, telephony drew attention to the mediation of communication in the technical field, prompting a re-evaluation of literature’s own forms of mediation. “That so much interactivity at a distance should suddenly have become available, in the 1920s and 1930s, provoked thought – and not just in the design and sales departments – about the ways in which people represent themselves to each other when interacting.”²² But television was another matter. By

²¹ M-L. Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 3-6.

²² D. Trotter, *Literature in the First Media Age: Britain Between the Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 41.

the end of the 1930s, when the telephone was already a familiar device for thinking with, as well as for speaking through, television remained for most writers an object of wild speculation. For some, like Wentworth-James, it promised a high-tech reboot of telephonic interactivity. For others, like Huxley, it threatened to end all thought, and all interaction, by drowning the senses in an immersive multimedia flood. Such uncertainties about the wider cultural effects of the new technology persisted for decades. In 1931, the novelist and screenwriter Clemence Dane speculated that, while the talkies and the wireless had transformed fiction by “training the public to listen as well as to look”, television might yet “tilt the balance” of novel-writing back towards an emphasis on visual phenomena.²³ Yet by 1950, Henry Green was still waiting for television to make its mark as he felt cinema had done: “it is more than likely”, he wrote, “that in five years’ time television will have a profound effect on novelists, and that narrative already split up into small scenes, will be split still further.”²⁴

Whether that expectation was realized is a question for another study, but it may be that, in seeing television as an extension of already-existing media forms, writers like Dane and Green in fact underestimated its implications for literary culture. To think with, and about, television, demanded more than a return to realist visual detail or a new arrangement of scenes. It required a new understanding of communications media not as sets of discrete, temporary channels between two places or people, but rather as a unified, persistent environment surrounding and conditioning all communicative acts. With television, we might say, a modernist attentiveness to the reality of telemedia began to be replaced by a postmodern obsession with the idea of a reality indistinguishable from its technological mediation.

Such a vision of reality as a fully-mediated environment may be what James Joyce has in mind when, in *Finnegans Wake* (1939), he refers several times to “the faroscope of television”, and stages an extended and technically well-informed scene in which a “bairdboard bombardment screen” appears to recreate the Charge of the Light Brigade for a rowdy pub audience.²⁵ Butt and Taff, avatars of Shem and Shaun, the twin sons of H.C.E., appear to

²³ C. Dane, “What’s Wrong with the New Novels?”, *The Listener* 122 (13 May 1931), p. 821.

²⁴ H. Green, “The English Novel of the Future”, *Contact* 1:2 (1950), pp. 21-4.

²⁵ J. Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 349.

transmigrate into the television itself, where they are reconfigured as the comedy double-act Batt and Tuff, at once narrators of and participants in the manoeuvre. Meanwhile, it's never clear whether the television broadcast is droning on in the background of their story, whether it interrupts them, or whether the scene is being acted out on the television itself. Published at the end of the decade, the *Wake* represents a bold challenge on behalf of literature to the expansion of telemedia's multisensory environment by insisting on language itself as the universal medium. As far as reading strategies go, Joyce's protolanguage resists both the realist demand for immersiveness and the modernist demand for interactivity.

The further development of Joyce's insight, like television broadcasting in Britain, was put on hold by the outbreak of the Second World War, only to begin anew, decades later, in the virtual worlds of literary postmodernism. By that time, as Joyce anticipated, literature's challenge to immersive telemedia had begun to seem about as auspicious as the Light Brigade's charge. No longer a startling new invention, television had been institutionalized as a cultural technology with a whole supporting system of broadcasting networks, official regulations, and programming conventions. Meanwhile, cybernetics and electronic computing had initiated a new series of adjustments to the concept of media, raising new questions about the relationship between human consciousness and the technological extensions of man. But those questions did not spring suddenly out of nowhere after 1945. Nor is our own interest in the expansion of virtual worlds without precedent. If we have learned to think habitually of media as "a total field of interacting events", or as an "ecology", or more recently as the ubiquitous technological sediment studied by "media archaeology", then the seeds of those conceptual transformations were sown in the flickering televisual dawn of the 1930s.²⁶

²⁶ See, respectively, M. McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* [1964], (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1994), p. 248; N. Postman, "The Reformed English Curriculum", in *High School, 1980: The Shape of the Future in American Secondary Education*, ed. A. C. Eurich. (New York: Pitman, 1970), p. 161; and J. Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012).

