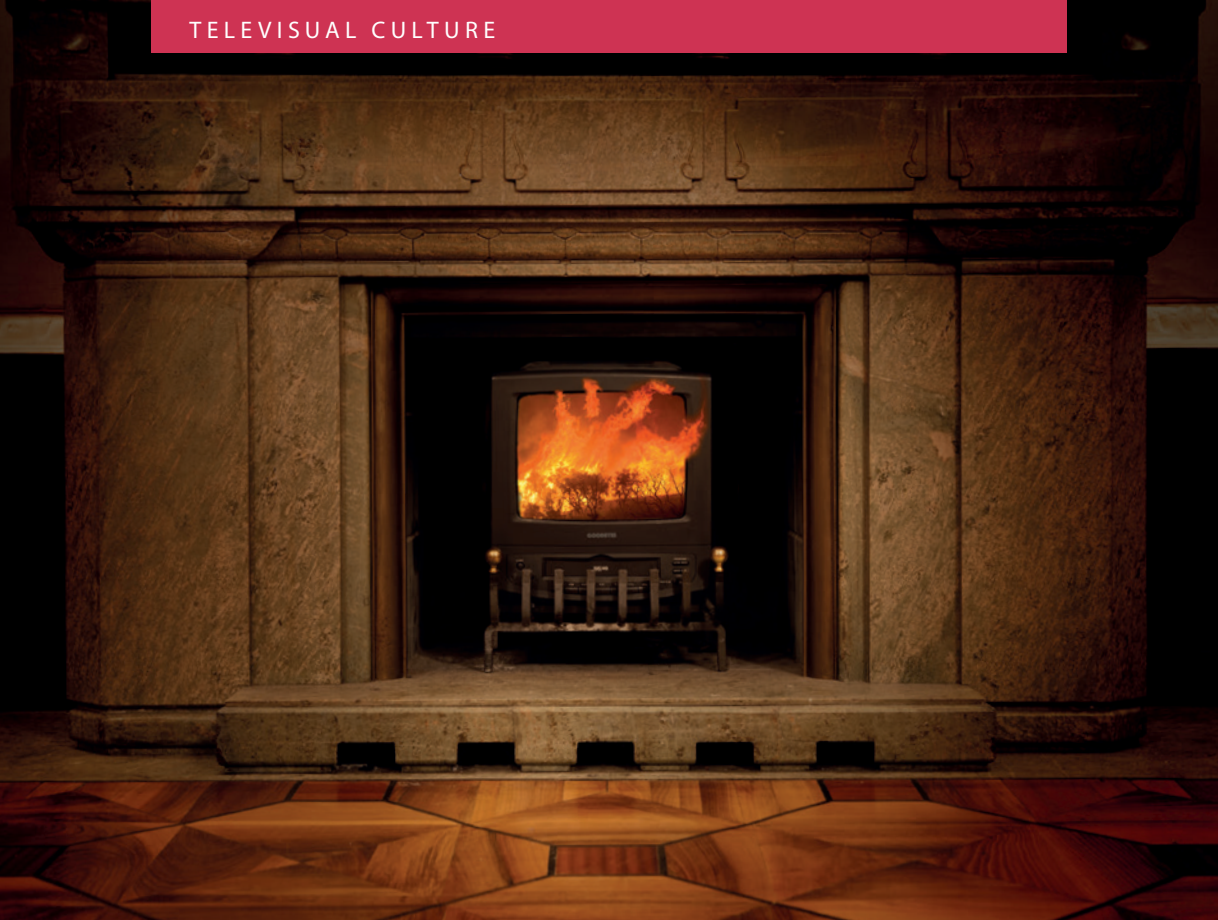Lorenz Engell

Edited by and with an introduction by Markus Stauff

Thinking Through Television

Amsterdam
University
Press

Thinking Through Television

Televisual Culture

Televisual culture encompasses and crosses all aspects of television – past, current and future – from its experiential dimensions to its aesthetic strategies, from its technological developments to its crossmedial extensions. The 'televisual' names a condition of transformation that is altering the coordinates through which we understand, theorize, intervene, and challenge contemporary media culture. Shifts in production practices, consumption circuits, technologies of distribution and access, and the aesthetic qualities of televisual texts foreground the dynamic place of television in the contemporary media landscape. They demand that we revisit concepts such as liveness, media event, audiences and broadcasting, but also that we theorize new concepts to meet the rapidly changing conditions of the televisual. The series aims at seriously analyzing both the contemporary specificity of the televisual and the challenges uncovered by new developments in technology and theory in an age in which digitization and convergence are redrawing the boundaries of media.

Series editors
Sudeep Dasgupta, Joke Hermes, Misha Kavka, Jaap Kooijman, Markus Stauff

Thinking Through Television

By Lorenz Engell

Edited by and with an introduction by Markus Stauff

Translated by Anthony Enns (except Chapters 4, 5, 10, 12)

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Introduction

Markus Stauff

In the current moment, probably no one would doubt that media shape human thinking. There are, however, many levels (and different approaches) to this connection between media and thought. The volume at hand, which exemplifies (rather than represents) the vast and versatile work of media philosopher Lorenz Engell, makes a number of specific interventions in this discussion: first, in alignment with current debates in New Materialisms, it shows how the material processes of media have to be considered as actual thinking instead of only as shaping 'our' thinking. Second, it argues that media also think themselves and thereby reflect on and actually contribute to their historical transformations. Third, in a remarkable divergence from most similar approaches, it focuses on the allegedly boring and outdated medium of television.

There are good reasons for this: whatever the future of television might be and whatever the term 'television' might come to stand for in the coming years, the multitude of forms and operational procedures that have been emerging with and around television can be described as 'under-thought'. There is certainly no shortage of groundbreaking and thought-provoking work on television. Compared to other media, especially film and digital media, a more theoretical and philosophical approach is conspicuous in its absence. While most research inquires into how television changed the patterns of communication, the basic social fabric, and the spaces of everyday life (with concepts like mobile privatization, the family circle, and ambient television), the medium's contribution to a culture's modes of thinking and to the emergence and structuring of its basic categories (think of time, event, memory, choice, evidence, etc.) is seldom addressed. This is all the more regrettable since, even if television might have lost its character as the defining medium in most areas around the globe, the realities and manners of thinking it brought into being have had a lasting impact – which is often overlooked because of the lack of conceptual work. This is also why this volume seemed a more than appropriate contribution to a book series

which, under the title *Televisual Culture*, seeks to foster discussion about the lasting, sometimes hidden, transforming and transformed, 'legacies' of television.

Thinking Through Television discusses topics and procedures that grant access to the thinking of media more generally. More specifically, it shows that the neglect of television is detrimental to media philosophy and media theory. As the dual meaning of its title suggests, the volume, on the one hand, offers a thorough reflection on the dominant aesthetic, epistemic, ontological, and cultural forms of television. The features dealt with here – transmission, seriality, history, agency, and others – are not surprising; they build on a pretty broad consensus about the cultural forms and material operations that became articulated by television in the second half of the 20th century. By contextualizing them within (and thinking them through) theoretical and philosophical concepts from Heidegger and Wittgenstein to Deleuze and Luhmann, the specificity and consequentiality of these often taken-for-granted features of television are reappraised and opened up for comparison with other media and broader cultural dynamics. On the other hand, *Thinking Through Television*, of course, means that television (similar to the typewriter for Nietzsche and film for Deleuze) actually enacts thinking and thereby forces philosophy to think differently. Philosophical concepts are not applied to understand the intricacies of the medium of television better; instead, television's procedures, which here are fully appreciated as the medium's acts of thinking and reflection, are used to gain new insights on both the medium and philosophy itself. There is a media theoretical twist to this: media bring new objects or new spatial and temporal orderings into the world, and, in the process, they also change (philosophical) thinking. Additionally – and the least explored so far – they unavoidably reflect, conceptualize, and think through their very own existences, operations, and transformations. John Caldwell and others have convincingly shown that media-theoretical reflections are ubiquitous within the media industry's work environment and lead to reflexive aesthetics (e.g. Caldwell 2008; Mayer 2011), but Engell additionally argues that media practices (in the widest sense) constitute media philosophy and that media philosophy has to be anchored in the forms and practices of media. Media reproduce and transform themselves by clarifying and experimenting with their basic building blocks. A medium, as Engell argues in Chapter 2, can best be considered a space of possibilities, and emerging forms, ʹsuch as an event, experience, function, representation, symbol, image, text, or systemʹ, can thus be conceived as actualizations of a medium.

    While this might sound abstract and conceptual at first, Engell's writing immediately concretizes these philosophical arguments through analyses that provide close and detailed attention to the actual functions of television, including its formal as well as its technical and institutional operations. The texts thereby show that we can learn much more about television than we thought by paying more attention to how the medium itself articulates problems, offers provisional answers, and reflects on and transforms its core characteristics. Engell suggests ways to access what television has to say about its own history, its seriality, and its audience. The performance of witnessing and scrutinizing on forensic crime dramas like *CSI*, for example, articulates new models of viewership just as the global event of the Moon landing did 50 years ago.

Television's (Non-)Exceptionality

The focus on television in this volume might be both misleading and appropriate. It could be considered misleading since Engell's engagement with television is solidly embedded in similar work on other media and is therefore just one topic within the development of a broader philosophy of media.[1] As he explains in Chapter 8 and in a number of other monographs on the topic (Engell 1995; 1992; 2003), cinema and the succession and transformation of films in history offer just as much – but different – insight into history, historiography, modernity, and memory. His more recent work discusses museum display cases next to film and television, to highlight the 'ontographical' quality of media (this term is also taken up in the final part of this volume). Here again, instead of defining the nature of 'being' through pure philosophical thinking, the operations of the medium – that is, the transposition of elements from one framework into a different and differently ordered one – are scrutinized for their contribution to this 'being'.
    Engell's media philosophy goes far beyond what is considered the mass media, and his texts regularly include references to the basic cultural technologies of numbers, writing, and, not least, the realm of digital and ubiquitous calculation. Nevertheless, he clearly deviates from both pan-mediality and medium specificity (most prominent in McLuhan). While his philosophy highlights differences between media (e.g. analysing how TV organizes history and memory differently than cinema), his focus on each medium's processes

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1   For a full overview of his publications and his current research projects, see https://ikkm-weimar.de/en/ikkm/people/lorenz-engell/

of transformation problematize a simple equation between a medium and its alleged social or perceptual impact. This is shown, for example, through the distinction between medium and form, which he takes from systems theory. Instead of outlining the basic features of television (or any other medium), he focuses on its forms, which continue to articulate – and thereby change – its potentials. Even though most of his work involves an analysis of media content (movies, TV broadcasts, etc.), his emphasis on 'form', in principal, goes far beyond a formalist approach and instead includes all of the changing, perceivable, and effective elements of the medium – including the set, the remote control, and the mechanisms of audience measurement and their entanglement with broader technical and economic transformations.

And yet, the focus on television – and the assumption of its exceptionality – is also more than appropriate. It is no coincidence that it is the ever-returning key topic of his research over the past 30 years– a research trajectory that reveals no major breaks or ruptures but rather constant curiosity and changing alignments. His writings engage with media historiography, postmodernism, actor-network theory, anthropology, and the work of a number of very different philosophers who have played a more marginal role in media theory, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Günther Anders.

First, there is what could be called the strategic appropriateness of his focus on television, which results from the tension between the medium's philosophical complexity and richness and the already mentioned lack of theoretical research on television and philosophy. As Engell dryly remarks in the introduction to this volume: ´The intellectual and philosophical evasion of the mega-medium of television, the refusal to reflect theoretically on its simultaneously extensive use and effectiveness, denies the fact of television but nevertheless does not change it.´ The ignorance of television in intellectual and philosophical thought is not just a gap to fill but also a symptom of the frictions between traditional philosophy and television's philosophy – thereby hinting at the provocations television might have to offer. In his first monograph from 1989, based on his PhD thesis, Engell invokes Aristotle and Heidegger as allies to counter Neil Postman´s (and the Frankfurt School's) verdicts that TV undermines rationality and reflection; he does not defend the rationality of the medium but rather analyses its temporal and rhetorical forms in order to show that its alogical qualities have to be considered an important disclosure of and reflection on nonrational aspects of being (Engell 1989). Chapter 7 of this volume exemplifies this early phase of his work by stating that ´people do not watch television because they wish to escape boredom but rather, on the contrary, because they wish to find it´.

In the 1990s, Engell and Oliver Fahle published a bilingual (German and French) anthology on Deleuze's film philosophy, in which his own contribution takes issue with the ´all-too-convenient divide between an affirmation of electronic images when they are part of artworks and their renunciation as dead images when they appear on TV´ (Engell 1997, 469, my translation), which he identifies in Deleuze's work. This, of course, is a pattern that can also be found in other philosophers´ work (Giorgio Agamben and Jean-Luc Nancy come to mind) who praise film or media art for its aesthetic and political potentials but only have snarking asides on television. (Stanley Cavell, who is extensively discussed in the first chapter, is one of the few exceptions, although he characteristically published many books on film and only one article on television.)

Engell counters this compartmentalized treatment, which made film the medium for aesthetic and philosophical concerns and television the medium of aesthetic and philosophical poverty, as discussions of television were limited to questions related to social practices, representation, and political economy. The focus on television is essential to Engell's work because if one aims to approach *all* media as philosophical machines then it is best not to start with media art or canonical films but rather with the allegedly lowest and dumbest media forms. While this collection includes chapters that analyse texts that would now be called 'Quality TV', it at no point assumes that these texts would be more philosophical (or would offer 'better' philosophy) than a soap opera, a replay in TV sports, or a live media event.

Next to this strategic role of television for media philosophy, the medium offers procedures and practices that make it not only an especially fruitful but also a historically paramount philosophical machine. The two chapters in this collection that discuss the broadcast of the Moon landing outline how its ´range of visibility and simultaneity´ differentiate it from other media. Because of the exponentially increased number of images that are globally circulated in real time, television experiments – and thus philosophizes – with ordering images in linear, serial, parallel, eventful, selective ways. Next to the Moon landing, the remote control is another key element because it reorganizes global visibility into (a reflection on) individual choice. This combination of the Moon landing and the remote control allows us to see another aspect of television's exceptionality in Engell's work: more than any other medium, television embodies the tension between its seemingly homogeneous and homogenizing functions and its constant technical, industrial, and aesthetic transformations. Television offers exceptionality in its multiplicities.

Is This German Media Theory?

This focus on television is also one of the clearest differences between Engell's approach and the scholarly branch that has been branded 'German media theory' since the early 2000s. German media theory can be said to be notoriously disinterested in television. Its lines of research and especially its media-archeological work regularly jump directly from the innovations of the late nineteenth and early 20th century (moving images, wireless communication, sound recording and transmission, etc.) to computing and the Internet. The few pages Friedrich Kittler – often considered the founding figure of German media theory – published on television in his overview monograph on *Optical Media* certainly belong to his less inspired writing. For German media theory, television seems to be too dominated by commercial popular culture and thus too banal to require any archeological or philosophical scrutiny.

Even to start asking about Engell's relationship with German media theory might sound like a silly shortcut between nationality and academic paradigm. After all, Engell's name never seems to appear in references to German media theory – one review positions his work at the middle ground between media archeology and cultural studies, though (Powell 2014, 411). And yet, there are aspects of his work that might, in an international context, suggest a connection. Furthermore, for more than ten years now, Engell has co-directed one of the major German media research institutes (the IKKM in Weimar) together with Bernhard Siegert, who is one of the most well-known representatives of German media theory. Both focus less on the content of media texts and the political economy of the media industry than on the recurrent procedures and operations of media as world-generating: the very basic categories of culture – like time, space, (human) agency, rationality – exist not before but rather through media. Indeed, studying media's constituent role in culture, society, perception, and agency is the stated research objective of the IKKM.

German media theory famously focuses on materiality; in a refreshingly anti-humanist take (intended to radicalize and technologize Michel Foucault's work), they find it downright naïve to ask about 'reception', as media execute their specific order and their way of making distinctions irrespective of how people use them. Engell would partly agree with this assertion. Niklas Luhmann, one of his main reference points, countered the idea of individuals as originators of meaningful exchange with the remark that ´only communication can communicate´ (Luhmann 1992, 251). In other words, it is not people but rather the historically increasing

differentiation of subsystems and their specific codes that allow for and structure communication. In this approach, however, and in Engell's media philosophy, the symbolic forms of media and the development of subgenres (eventually, all of the differences that make a difference) are considered effective operations of media. In his introduction here, Engell approvingly refers to Kittler's dictum that only that which is switchable exists. For Kittler, this means materially switching between 'on' and 'off', but for Engell, as his analysis of the remote control in Chapters 2 and 4 shows, buttons only become operational in relation to the channels and genres that make choice a reflexive procedure (which does not necessarily imply that each TV viewer reflects upon it). While German media theory is mainly interested in dynamics that avoid or happen uncoupled from thinking (e.g. communication as the mathematically calculable distinction between signal and noise), Engell would surely side again with Luhmann, who argues that there is no communication without metacommunication, such as the constant observation of what is considered to be part of this observation and what is not (see Powell 2016 for a detailed account). Media are thus much more dynamic and flexible entities in Engell's philosophy than in German media theory: the operations of media might produce surprising new ways of thinking that are not already determined by the basic alternatives of the switch, and these new ways of thinking might also transform the media themselves.

And yet there's one aspect in Engell's work that he shares with German media theory: both emerged through a certain intentional (and certainly not ignorant) isolationism. While the IKKM has actively contributed to international exchange since its inception, neither German media theory's nor Engell's writing engage much with the internationally more common approaches in media studies. Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, and Postcolonial Studies are not considered as sources of either inspiration or antagonism. German media theory abhors the focus on representation and meaning, claiming that the politics of cultural studies is too superficial (because it ignores the 'deeper' technological or even ontological layer). Engell's media philosophy does not in principal oppose such questions (his *Introduction to Television Theory* covers some of the key authors [Engell 2012)]) but rather circumvents them by restricting his articulation of media's philosophizing to topics that have already been taken up by canonical philosophers. There is therefore no explanation as to why television should not also be thinking about race, class, and gender—topics that, historically, have been just as constitutive of the medium as seriality or simultaneity.

Both of these approaches show that a certain withdrawal from the internationally dominant debates and the circle of internationally significant peer-reviewed journals might be a condition for their highly original contributions to the field. On the other hand, this withdrawal also prevents productive discussions. It would be interesting input for media studies to discuss the similarities between Engell's and Paddy Scannell's appropriation of Heidegger to disclose the temporal and experiential qualities of television (Scannell 2013). It could be just as productive to combine Engell's scrutinizing of history as a sequence of experiments with research on TV's never-ending quest to find and mold its audience (e.g. Ang 1991; Ouellette 2002; McCarthy 2010). This book hopefully allows for more of such debates.

The Structure of this Book

The introduction to this volume is a translation of the first chapter of Engell's German-language *Introduction to Television Theory* from 2012, which discusses some general preconditions for television theory in dialogue with McLuhan and Cavell and thereby lays the groundwork for the approach used in the following chapters. These chapters can be read individually, but the connections and interrelations between them also serve to develop a broader argument.

The first part, *From Transmission to Selectivity*, focuses on the ongoing historical transformations of television and on how the formal and material operations that emerge within these transformations offer insights into the medium's entanglement with broader worldviews and cultural patterns. Using early institutional experiments as key reference points, including the Moon landing, the introduction of the remote control, and the process of digitization, the chapters in this section analyse television's historical trajectory as aiming first at global visibility and then – as soon as this was achieved – turning to the question of ordering, segmenting, and selecting the seemingly unlimited visibility. The systematic argument is that (contrary to its reputation as a monotonous standardizing machine) television, throughout its history, enacted institutional and aesthetic experiments in order to determine the nature of a global audience, individual choice, etc. This argument also addresses questions related to contemporary media culture, such as the organization of information, the individualization of choice, and the increasingly haptic quality of media.

The second part discusses the category of *Televisual Events* in depth by focusing on seemingly familiar topics like global media events, TV scandals, and the TV coverage of war. The main focus, though, is the question of how the global reach and ongoing flow of television redefines what an event can be – and what events eventually make visible.

The third part continues this investigation into the temporality of television (time being clearly more pronounced than space in Engell's work more generally) by now focusing not on the special moments of the event but on how television organizes the overarching temporal patterns of *History – Memory – Seriality*. The material operations of technical media (e.g. the Maltese Cross of analogue film or the tube projection of analogue television) are basic ways of organizing time, and the aesthetic forms enabled by these operations create history and memory as they reflect on them. Seriality has often been discussed as one of the most characteristic features of television (which glaringly shapes post-televisual media practices), yet it has rarely been analysed as a mode of temporal reflection in a philosophical sense.

Finally, the section on *Objects – Agency – Ontography* offers an in-depth discussion of what television (and the forms described in the prior sections) has to offer for the ongoing discussion on new materialism and object-oriented philosophy. The temporal forms of television and its eclectic use of innovative visual technologies offer insights into the status of objects and their agency. While partly representing a new direction in Engell's work – in which television's 'thinking through' sometimes leans towards a 'mere' reflexive approach – it can also be considered a slight shift in emphasis. The experiments of television have always been approached as ontographic constellations – that is, assemblages that bring 'real' temporalities, audiences, choices, and visibilities into our world (by thinking through them and thinking them through). As such, one could argue that television's ontographic work produces realities that still impact and shape the thinking and doing of digital media.

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