

Phatic (Dys)functions: The Shifting Contour of the TV Screen

This lecture is grounded in a debate in communication theory about the functionality of phatic communication, the terms of which I will shortly review, but which will be familiar to readers of lectures 2 and 6. The lesson of this debate, which shows the inherent dysfunctionality of the concept, is then applied to a further dimension of contact – that is, tactility – and its fortunes in media studies of television, with particular attention to screens themselves. Again, the consequences of contact with the tactile medium of tv, while full of potential for valorizing in various ways synesthetic experience, tend toward dystopic elaborations in theory as well as in various kinds of popular practices (pop music and film).

The Rise and Fall of the Phatic (Dys)function from Jakobson to Baudrillard

Let's recall a few points from Lecture 2. Russian linguist Roman Jakobson ("Closing Statement" 1960) derived the Phatic function of his poetic model of communication from Malinowski's concept of "phatic communion," the use of language to maintain a social relation through ritualized formulas such as greetings, chit-chat about the weather. If Jakobson advances this social function, it is by inclusion of the means of discontinuing communication rather than simply prolonging it (including confirmation of

the interlocutor's attention). The "mere purport," as Jakobson puts it, of prolonging communicative contact suggests the emptiness of such contact; the example from Dorothy Parker is illustrative: 'Well, here we are', he said. 'Here we are', she said, 'Aren't we?' 'I should say we are', he said. (354) This not only makes the function susceptible to atrophy in which there is "constant contact without a message," ((Umberto Eco quoted by Peter Pericles Trifonas, *Umberto Eco and Football*, Cambridge: Icon Books, 2001, 49.)) but in addition suggests that the emptiness of contact has a propitious technical function as a test of the system itself: "Hello, do you hear me?"

The Phatic function shares a great deal with the Metalingual function. The former "checks whether the channel works" (353); the latter is used by Addresser and Addressee "to check up whether they use the same code." (356) A double check: first on the channel and then on the code. Jakobson also calls it a "glossing function" an explanation added between the lines or in the margins; and, since he develops an exasperating example of someone whose unfamiliarity with school vocabulary leads to repeated requests for definitions ("The sophomore was plucked"), such requests for "equational definitions" are dull, repetitive, "strictly metalingual" (356), yet somehow vital.

As I underlined in Lectures 2 and 6, Jean Baudrillard has advanced a telling critique of the Phatic function as a "simulation pact" based on "telephasis" (*Seduction*, 163-66). Baudrillard writes: "The phatic function of language, used to establish contact and sustain speech's formal dimension: this function first isolated and described by Malinowski with reference to the Melanesians, then by Jakobson in his grid of language's functions, becomes hypertrophied in the tele-dimension of the communications networks. Contact for contact's sake becomes the empty form with which language seduces itself when it no longer has anything to

say.” (164) This is what Eco calls “sports chatter” – vapid phatic communication in which one may be totally immersed but with negative consequences.

In *Seduction* Baudrillard has much to say about the phatic function as it hypertrophies in the cold universe of information systems. The zero degree of contact in the tele-dimension: tele-phasis. By the time Jakobson revisited the concept he had lost its original symbolic sense in Malinowski, Baudrillard maintains. That is, it no longer involved incessant and metabolic ceremonial challenges and ritual exchanges: “Language has no need for ‘contact’: it is we who need communication to have a specific ‘contact’ function, precisely because it is eluding us.” (164) The phatic function “analytically restores” what is missing in communication, far, far removed from the “frayed spaces” of genuine interpersonal exchange in the pulsing (beyond meaning) “tele space” of networked terminals at the ends of which classical assumptions about “inter-individual logic” no longer make sense.

So, Phatic communication is primarily (dys)functional; to put it another way, this function is almost immediately tied to its dysfunction: it holds open the channel but in so doing puts genuine communication at risk. How, then, does tactility, another kind of contact, fare in studies and popular visions of television?

The Vicissitudes of Tactuality

One of the most enduring figures in ongoing efforts to decode the experience of television is the medium’s tactility. Whether it is a trope of stickiness, massage, jolts and other body blows, or the effects of a protruding gaze of an eye-window-frame-potato processing, pabulum dispensing machine, seems moot. The idea of the television screen’s

tactility entered the technological imaginary when Marshall McLuhan theorized tv images as projective “tactile promptings.” He wrote of the “plastic contour” of a “light-through” device and the “ceaselessly forming contour of things limned by the scanning-finger.” ((Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964, p. 72.)) Besides the intimation of a coming shift from medium as message to that of massage in late 1960s, these cryptic remarks on the “scanning finger” at once evoked the continuous process of scanning by means of electrons fired by the cathode ray gun, sweeping across the lines of dots in the phosphor-coated mesh of the picture tube, and the gestural pointer that follows a line of text, the path of an object, or outlines a figure in a dot assembly operation. Yet the “finger” that McLuhan gave us could also be taken too literally because, as he clarified, “the tactile image involves not so much the touch of skin as the interplay or contact of sense to sense, of touch with sight, with sound, with movement.” ((Letters of Marshall McLuhan, eds. M. Molinaro *et alia*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 287.)) The tactility in question was, rather synesthetic tactuality or as Derrick de Kerckhove once described it: “multi-sensory seduction.” ((Derrick de Kerckhove, *Brainframes*, Utrecht: BSO/Origin, 1991, p. 50.)) But the salient point is that the machine stares down the viewer. Moreover, these “scanning fingers” are being pointed in two directions – from the screen to the retinas of the viewers, whom it is said, for De Kerckhove, to “prime” or even “irradiate” with its cold blue light – a light without images – and “contaminate” – “mesmerize” and “transitorize,” the extreme version of which belongs to Jean Baudrillard. ((Baudrillard, “Holocaust,” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glazer, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994, p. 51.)) The tv’s scanning finger is thought to transmutate those at whom it is pointed, turning them into screens or terminals – “mediatizing” them so they may interface and enter into communication. ((Baudrillard, “Radicalism Has Passed Into Events,” in *Selected Interviews*, ed. Mika Gane, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 146;

idem, "Aesthetic Illusion and Virtual Reality," in *Jean Baudrillard: Art and Artefact*, ed. N. Zurbrugg, London: Sage, 1997, p. 22.)) The scanning finger of the tv audience, no longer even permitted to passively vegetate but condemned to the labour of participation, is loaded with remote control zappers; and, further, it has its "minds' hands" full of eyes and glances it continuously throws back at the screen. ((De Kerckhove, *Brainframes*, p. 51; 79.))

Figures of tactility are creatures of specific junctures in media and communication studies. One version of this argument is that in the transition from a hypodermic to a resonance model of communication in the early 1970s, heavily influenced by brain hemisphere research (marking a shift from left to right hemisphere), figures of tactility took pride of place. ((For a discussion of this history see Joyce Nelson, *The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age*, Toronto: Between the Lines, 1987, p. 73ff.)) If the injection of a message through some medium by a sender into a passively waiting blank slate of a receiver could be reconfigured such that each element was less isolated and, in fact, subject to new combinations emphasizing form over content, and the receiver was less passive and more active (more processual), already full of a complex matrix of codes and sub-codes, and hence more actively engaged, then messages could be crafted so as to draw out to some degree the codes, needs, and expectations they would meet upon their reception.

Another version is specific to the development of McLuhan's own thought and the turnabout from the analyses of *The Mechanical Bride* to those of *Understanding Media* as far as the tension between tactility and mechanization are concerned. ((For a discussion of this history see Joyce Nelson, *The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age*, Toronto: Between the Lines, 1987, p. 73ff.)) To put it bluntly, for McLuhan where mechanization was tactility would be; which is to say if the bride of mechanization was

pneumatic and vehicular in a world of looking without touching, then he bride of electronic media was barefoot and braless in a world of multisensorial tactuality where looking was touching, and vice versa, and more. McLuhan's vision of media and popular culture changed radically from the early 50s to the early 60s. "Tactility," as Don Theall has pointed out, "is the essential symbol for the intersensory operation of the body's processing of sensory material." ((Theall, *Beyond*, p. 170.)) At times the erotic potentialities liberated by tactility were too much for even McLuhan to bear, as Theall astutely observes.

Cyberfeminists such as Sadie Plant have traced the migration of images from medium to medium, from the specular toward the digital, in the course of which touch is the choice sense of the "immersive simulations of cyberspace, and the connections, switches and links of all sorts." Linking McLuhan with Luce Irigaray, Plant pursues the integral through an erotics of 0/1: the zero that touches everything and is "the very possibility of all the ones" (that is, zero is not an absence but the proliferating touch-point of women's speech and body-sex). ((Sadie Plant, "On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Stimulations," in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, ed. G. Kirkup *et alia*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 270.))

But tactility also left itself open to critique and distortion in the form of dysfunctional representations of televisual contact. The extension of the senses in technologies in McLuhan's celebrated sense of outerring was also applicable to the tv screen and its less than felicitous "promptings." Savvy performance pop band The Tubes used a combination infant cradle chair upon which was a small tv set was mounted, with a nipple attachment, as cover art on their release *Remote Control* (1979), as they sang about telecide, while simultaneously helping to usher in the era of rock video (**Figure 1**). This extraordinary image makes nurturing ambivalent. It also alerts us to another tradition of television studies – English cultural and

media studies – in which the medium, in Richard Hoggart’s words, circa 1960, has an educative “kneading effect.” John Hartley explicates this image in a remarkable series of reflections on dough (quoting at length British chef and cookbook writer Elizabeth David (recently referred to as a “gloomy sensualist”) on bread making in relation to the couch potato who is warmed, puffy, spongy, and gaseous after hours of viewing) and another sense of the term, relevant to my inquiry: “feline kneading is said to be what kittens do to stimulate mother’s milk – otherwise known as ‘pap’.” ((John Hartley, *Understanding Television*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 141.)) Hartley isolates the ambivalence of pleasurable nurturing and sensuous massage and sucking as a reductive manipulation (after all, ‘pap’ is slang for a soft substance without value; not to mention that one must at some point punch down dough), but reminds us that Hoggart used the imagery in a entirely positive sense, perfused with vigor, stimulation and engaged in a process, again with reference to dough, of “proving popular consciousness.” Hartley recounts it this way: “Television ‘proves’ popular consciousness by aerating it and allowing the mixture of ‘detailed and intelligent presentation’, and ‘the texture of other people’s lives, assumptions, hopes’ to ferment in the warmth of the suburban kneading-trough until ‘general education’ has occurred.” ((Hartley, *Understanding*, p. 141.)) Until, then, the audience rises (or fails to rise) to the occasion. The passage through the universe of orality from the nipple to the cigarette to the bottle passes by way of the television.

Perhaps the most extended elaboration on the “tactile promptings” figure in popular culture is David Cronenberg’s film *Videodrome* (1982). With this example we leave behind the fairly benign figure of dough and even the potential provocations of sensuousness and enter into a more diabolical, yet identifiably Canadian imaginary. Right down to the character of Professor Brian O’Blivion, a parody of Marshall of McLuhan (crossed with Sigmund Freud) who spouts oracular statements about the tv medium and

runs the Cathode Ray Mission which offers daily doses of the tube to the homeless, Cronenberg's vision shows how tactility hypertrophies into inducing tumors by means of an experimental broadcast called Videodrome. The plot traces the passage from positive promise (therapy and social good) to the deleterious diversions of tactile tv that I have been outlining here (Videodrome plays those who watch it "like a video recorder" and then kills them), as Videodrome has fallen into the wrong hands. The special effects of this media horror film show the "tactile promptings" of tv to originate with a broadcast signal, transferable to a videotape of an episode, and then to any tv – screen and entire set – upon which it is played. The throbbing cassette, undulating cabinet, inhaling and exhaling speaker grille, and ballooning screen, into which one may bury one's head, reach a kind of epiphany of murderous tactility when the tv screen stretches like a plastic film, conforming to a fist pointing a gun at the protagonist, whom is then shot. The film is a parable of immersion in a virtual universe, played at first as induced hallucinations, but then graphically and brutally spectacularized as a predatory tangibility. Videodrome is delivered by a not incidental content (snuff films) that parodies the standard connection of electro-tactility with eroticism while showing that the content produces death on the level of form (from the signal and its effects on the technologies of video and television).

Conclusion

When McLuhan changed his mind about pop culture from the 50s to the 60s, his multi-modal sensory understanding of tv's tactility opened a passage to a more general sense of haptic space in which an optical sense assumes non-optical functions and, more generally, tactile opens out to haptic space. The implications of this shift have had profound effects in architecture, for instance, with the theorization of a haptic horizon, realized

through hypersurfaces of screens functioning as walls and ceilings and floors (Freemont Street in Las Vegas or other early examples of pixel-topological architectures), or liquid architectures (Fresh H2O eXPO, Nox Architects, Zeeland, The Netherlands) without horizontal floors and an “all-around ground,” eschewing the distinction between feet and eyes; or a proprioceptive surround – the skin of culture or smooth space. ((On the haptic horizon and hypersurface hypothesis see Steven Perrella, “Hypersurface Theory: Architecture/Culture,” *Architectural Design* [Hypersurface Architecture] 133 (1998): 11-12; in the same volume see also Lars Spuybroek, “Motor Geometry,” pp. 50-1; on skin see De Kerckhove, *The Skin of Culture*, Toronto: Somerville House, 1995) and for smooth space see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 492-3.))

In the era at the end of the cathode ray tube’s dominance of the field, new flat screens are emerging in domestic, commercial and public spaces – the so-called “plasma” and liquid crystal display (LCD) and organic light-emitting diode technologies (OLED). Nothing of the tactile, qua haptic, seems to have been lost in the dying days of the reign of the cathode ray tube, although after the ray gun the “scanning finger” may be lost. Here emerges the possibility of media surface environments, of new televisual mediascapes, of wearable and wrapable television (like adverts around buses) and pliable jumbotrons blowing in the wind. The science fiction vision of “wall-to-wall television” is upon us. ((The image of a cyber-Graceland with wall-to-wall-television is from Steve Beard, *Digital Leatherette*, Hove: Codex, 1999, p. 51.)) If we pass by way of Cronenberg into this space via the throbbing, stretching invasive screen, we are again struck by the immediacy of promise and compromise.

Haptic space has been infested by surveillance and simulation in simveillance environments. Instead of seeing through surfaces or exposing appearances, in simveillance the panoptic gaze is distributed across vanishing surfaces – vanishing in the respect that they are no longer media of appearances – no longer obviously screens but are *unsupported*, without frames or furniture or supports like legs and cords, put it in developing this fantasy of perfected surveillance: “With simulation we move from the problem of the transparency of the medium, the surface, to a kind of pure transparency – what’s visible is all that’s visible – from a stage of mediated seeing to the immediacy, to the ecstasy, of perception.” ((The future anterior of a totally front-loaded simulation is explored by William Bogard, *The Simulation of Surveillance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 35; see also Winfried Pauleit “Video Surveillance and Postmodern Subjects: The Effects of the Photographesomenon – An Image-form in the Futur antérieur,” in *ctrl[space]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother*, ed. Thomas Y. Levin *et alia*, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press 2002, pp. 465-79. “The photographesomenon thus does not show an event; it indicates various facets of image construction. It does not show a crime either; it shows incidents departing from the norm and deviations that only appear meaningful after the event, but always already contain the crossing of a threshold.” (p. 471) I am trying to imagine a similar account based on tactility.)) The medium is no longer the message because it has been eliminated in a frightening total transparency of hypersensitive smart virtual environments. Whether in the end this is more horrifying than Cronenberg’s vision, is probably undecidable, for as the shortloved but prescient new wave band The Buggles (1979) told us some time ago about VTR – “we can’t rewind we’ve gone too far” (“Video Killed the Radio-Star”) into the future anterior of contact (which will have been made) is already accomplished because there is nothing more than that, all the time, everywhere, already, without the possibility of its negation. And in this, then, is a certain kind of horror.

