

Extract from *Videography: Video Media in Art and Culture*
by Sean Cubitt, pub. Macmillan 1993, on the installation
A Situation Envisaged: The Rite II (Cultural Eclipse) 1988-90
by David Hall

In the installation *A Situation Envisaged: The Rite II* (1988), Hall builds a great monolith of 14 monitors, their screens facing the wall while they replay broadcast television, without sound, so that a raging aurora of phosphorescent colours surrounds the black mass of the technology. A single screen faces the viewer, replaying an image of the moon recorded on a reconstruction of John Logie Baird's original mechanical televisor system of the 1920s. A soundtrack orchestrates the sound of many broadcasts into a composition, almost musical. To some extent, the piece is legible as a purification of television through the medium of video sculpture: the removal from broadcasting of the anchorage in referentiality that underpins its claims to represent the world to its viewers. Though television could not claim either the power of cinema (in terms of the special qualities of cinema viewing such as scale, volume, darkness, quality of reproduction and so on) nor its immense potential for imposing subjectivity on its audience, yet the younger medium has a power of its own. As the ubiquitous hearth of the contemporary home, familiar as furniture, and as a source of images as reliable as tapwater, TV produces its own kind of subjectivity if looked at through the gaze of film theory. TV flow and TV presence – its address to the viewer as if it was always live – keep broadcast and viewing in a perpetual present, united now by time rather than by the spatial devices of the cinema. In removing broadcast to an unfamiliar setting; by piling broadcast upon broadcast to the point of anonymity; and by taking the next step, which is to fulfil that move towards anonymity by defacing the image, turning its face away, Hall removes the contingent content of broadcasting, leaving us with the sole experience of TV as a light source, as fundamental as the moon. The reduction of sound to musical accompaniment simply furthers this purification of the medium to the point at which it is only itself.

So we can read Hall's work as a Greenbergian, idealistic attempt to simplify TV down to its basic functions, at which point it should reveal, on the Greenberg thesis, the purity of form alone, a work, in Wollen's terms, on the signifier. Yet the piece is considerably more ambitious than this. In his notes on the piece as shown in Oxford in 1991, Hall quotes Raymond Williams to the effect that 'Unlike all previous communications technologies ... TV was a system primarily devised for transmission and reception as [an] abstract process, with little or no definition of preceding contents ... It is not only that the supply of broadcasting facilities preceded the demand; it is that the means of communication preceded the content' (in Iles 1990, p. 39). TV is already an abstract process, at least in the sense that, invented as a distribution medium, it functions autonomously from its content. So to remove the content from the set is a simple if powerful gesture in restoring to TV its own actuality. Yet at the same time, this is a critical act, suggesting that all TV is the same, or that watching the phases of the moon might be as (if not more)

entertaining and instructive. Thus the meaninglessness of the piece is the first building block in an elaborate statement of the relation of the artist to television. If meaninglessness is the quality of TV, not of the work, then the work's reproduction of meaninglessness is itself an act of signification, one with a genuine referent in the shape of the broadcasts which it replays. Meanwhile, if the monitors don't provide us with meanings, we will provide them ourselves: the aurora of light as smoke, as solar eclipse, as the specific palette of the electronic painter; the monitors as the black pillar of Kubrick's *2001* (1968), as a prison in which we keep our images, as the night sky against which the moon shines ... The difference, however, between these meanings and those supplied by normal broadcasting is that, while still occupying time, they are not shaped by the flow of TV time into TV's characteristic set of temporal structures and narratives. They do not follow schedules, storylines, the hiatuses of programme breaks or the micro-narratives of ads, the longer loops of weekly time slots and seasonal timetables. The flow that broadcasting so successfully fragments into manageable (and managed) chunks is here set free. TV's organisation of time is such that it turns the perpetual present which it is capable of into the time of timekeeping: split apart into measured segments, carrying, as Adorno would say, the rhythms of the factory and the office not only into leisure time but into the family home, centre of the reproductive processes of capital. TV brings the time-organisation of capital into the domestic arena.

Hall's *The Rite II*, then, unsettles this temporal organisation of viewing subjectivity by confronting it with a view of television which is profoundly utopian: TV as continuous process, continuous change, rather than continual repetition. In doing so, he addresses the viewer not as the subject of an organised, hierarchical ordering of time, but as a subject relatively unformed by the processes of meaning-making within the 'text'. Instead, we are left to spend time, to take time, to while away the time, beguiled but not bewitched. So he creates a brief utopia, not only negatively by removing sexist and racist representations, ideological commentaries and so forth, but positively by creating a play of light in which we TV subjects are freed to explore the passing of time and its multiple meanings in our own time: not as one, but in the plural. At once focusing on and undermining the nature of TV as flow, as a medium without content, he makes us aware of the processes in which TV produces itself as content, and us as its subjects, while simultaneously removing the chains of subject formation, subjection, that normally bind us to the administration of time, the time-budget, of TV.

And so, finally, he is engaged, like Gidal, in an exploration of the utopian possibilities of subjectivity. This time is undifferentiated: it is impossible to tell if we are at the beginning or the end, or which burst of colour comes, logically, meaningfully, Symbolically, before another. To some extent, then, this too is an idealist version, heading through its sheer beauty towards that libidinal gratification from which we began this exploration. To some extent, Hall obliterates difference, rather than addressing it. But it could be argued, in his favour, that to shed the imposed differences of dominant television is precisely to throw yourself into the maelstrom of the processes of differentiation, just as there is always an urge, looking at the piece, to look along the narrow gap between screens and wall to identify which programmes are actually playing. You can't see much when you do: only the fact of the gap between image and light, only their difference, endlessly renewed.