

“Television in Your Face: Our Bodies, Our Interfaces, and the Things that Lie Between”

Amelie Hastie, Amherst College

The remote control predicated a spatial distance between the viewer and what she or he sees on screen. Increasingly, devices such as laptops, tablets, and smart phones produce a more immediate proximity to what we see, particularly as our interfaces are, in essence, these very same objects we hold in our hands. I would like to consider how our spatial relation to the screen is re-organized by the material interfaces we use. How do our bodies adapt to what we see through how we see it? And what role does spatial proximity or distance, as enabled by those things we control, play in relation to our narrative, perceptual and affective experiences?

The hand-held screenic device makes television viewing more like reading. At least, the device we hold becomes more like a book, at least in our very proximity to it. But of course the television set was not originally designed as a replacement for the novel. Rather than isolate readers in space from one another, as novels do, and, in a sense, from the very rooms where they sit, the television sought to unify members of a room (as members of a family) in a shared space. With the TV as the centerpiece of the room, viewers were encouraged to gather around it to see the content on the screen. Its placement, whether in private or public space, was predicated, certainly, on sharing the space in which it was lodged, but it also necessitated some distance between it and viewers.

This architecture of space enabled particular kinds of viewing practices, coterminous with the structure of content of commercial broadcast television in particular. Thus, as many critics have argued, television's form invited a distracted viewer, one whose distraction was born of the "interruptions" that make up commercial broadcast television. Its structure similarly allowed for a sense of distraction, whether it meant one could look across the room at another viewer, shift one's line of vision to another part of the larger space of which the viewing room was a part, or to simply take in a broader point of view around the set itself. In this form, the viewer watches the set and the texts it screened in the *context* of the space in which it was/is situated.

Time-shifting has eliminated some aspects of this viewing. But space-shifting -- transferring the interface to an extension of our bodies or something very near to it -- has altered other aspects as well. I would like to consider further how this shift in interface and space has in particular altered our perceptive and affective experiences of "television" in terms of form and narrative content. Recent changes in programming enable especially fitting models. For instance, the US serial *The Killing* (adapted from the Danish series *Forbrydelsen*), which aired on the cable channel AMC for its first three seasons, shifted to the Netflix delivery system for its fourth and final season. Thus from

a weekly series available for "appointment viewing" on the television set (whether or not one was predisposed to watch it with commercials intact or if one watched it via time-shifting devices which sped through commercials), the entirety of its last season -- only six episodes -- was offered to viewers at once via Netflix streaming. Again, a viewer would have the option of watching the final season using the television as a delivery apparatus or a handheld device fitted with a Netflix app, and I want here to imagine that difference between them.

Serial television, of course, draws its format from 19th-century serial novels, those works which came to readers weekly or monthly and which originated cliff-hangers. Commercial television -- from daytime soap operas to night-time dramas on broadcast networks as well as pay-cable channels -- utilizes this narrative structure, but it produces other interruptions as well. In part, these narrative interruptions create also an affective interruption; we can hardly dwell on our emotional responses when the screen content radically shifts. The spatial organization of conventional television watching in the home also enables such affective interruption -- not because the narrative stops, but because the set is within the context of other objects (and potentially people) in our shared space and in our view. Those objects and accompanying viewers can, in effect, help contain our perceptual and affective responses. The handheld device eliminates this interruptive effect; suddenly we are face-to-face with a dead body, a pool of blood, the killer himself. In this final season of *The Killing* we watch the murderer himself being tormented and brutalized by his school-mates. On the small screen, in our hands or on our laps, our experience of the narrative becomes increasingly visceral. As our physical intimacy with the material platform intensifies, where does our affect go? What can contain it when the space between us diminishes?