

Television Form: Past, Present, Future

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It was a surprising moment. When Ted Cruz appeared on *The Late Show* last fall, Stephen Colbert admonished his studio audience for supposedly mistreating the right-wing senator: “However you feel, he’s my guest, so please don’t boo him.” Colbert reminded us that the role of program *host* actually implies *hospitality*, and that hospitality, a law unto itself, has for millennia been understood to suspend other considerations, even intractable political differences. What is less clear is if Colbert has thought through the further implications of understanding shows in this way. His use of the singular possessive “my” is notable if not surprising. It claims the authority of the host in a way that leaves the audience strangely out in the cold, neither host nor guest. Then again, we might understand the comfort of the talk show format in exactly these terms: as a theatre of hospitality, it plays at stabilizing the roles of host and guest that television and other media have forever complicated.

Not so with *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1962), an important early source for thinking about television hospitality back when it was first up for grabs. Written by James B. Allardice, Hitchcock’s famous introductions—all 268 of them plus 93 for *The Alfred Hitchcock Hour* (1962-1965)—were incessantly self-referential in their playful attention to the new situation of television, and consistently understood that situation as a problem of virtual hospitality. Part of this problem lies with hospitality’s distributed and nested qualities. Contrary to Colbert’s rhetoric, no host can truly claim a guest all for himself; television hosts in particular act as proxy to an obvious list of other masters, whether popular, corporate, or governmental. For Colbert, coming from cable, his own obsession with the language censorship of the FCC betrays his position (an especially interesting triangulation when “hosting” a senator, whose legislation could theoretically be much less hospitable to Colbert’s show). For Hitchcock, it was the generally unnamed sponsor (Bristol-Myers Company for the first four seasons) who attracted his withering wit; he routinely portrayed this figure as a sort of awkward co-host whose inept commercials marred the evening’s entertainment.

But beyond the authority of hosts lies the space of hospitality itself, and here we can see a range of formal considerations opening up that begins with the *mise-en-scène*. Contrast the inviting chairs and couches of talk shows with the nebulous minimalism of Hitchcock’s intro-land, a sort of *Twilight Zone avant la lettre* from which the lugubrious host intoned his often startling remarks. Imposing this uncomfortable lobby or way station between us and more familiar diegetic spaces, the show refuses or estranges all three of the metaphors Lynn Spigel has shown typically helped domesticate the space of television: the mirror, the window, and the proscenium. Even when the thematics of the episodes would suggest a mirror relation by depicting week after week of domestic strife, the introductions kept insisting that television was no place like home. Equally, though, what was a home with a television in it? Hitchcock would at times present himself not as the host but as the guest, made welcome in viewer homes. This reversal emerged most often in gags that pretended he could see viewers, and those that claimed he was a miniature, vulnerable man inside the set. However articulate and well dressed, Hitchcock-

as-guest could be nothing but unsettling on these terms, stoking fears about the scope and scale of media—and of our role within these new social relations.

The question of hospitality will go wherever TV goes. On the contemporary scene, I wonder if ultimately it is not on shows with overt hosting (as on game shows and reality TV as well as talk shows), but with fiction that the question might be most incisively raised, if only because, with the decline of the anthology series, that seems to be where it's most likely to be forgotten. *House of Cards* might be a good place to start, combining as it does an intoxicating guest-at-the-White House fantasy with a perhaps equally powerful form of access in Frank Underwood's asides to the viewer. That this heady cocktail mixes with the new format of a season's instant total availability—an availability that presumes upon *our* hospitality in new ways—suggests a future of television in which these concerns only intensify.