

TV Reality – Reality TV

Feedback in the Work of Karina Nimmerfall

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A professor and political activist writing in 1954 described the “reality” created by television as “the flow of representations of the human condition.”¹ TV makes the ersatz real and, in turn, the real ersatz. The professor’s thinking resonates with Karina Nimmerfall’s video-variations on the American nighttime soap opera *Dallas* (1978-1991) like a prophetic decree from an oracle with a penchant for accidental irony. In his article, “Reality Presented by Television,” Professor Smythe recognized what is central to Nimmerfall’s *Power Play*, namely television’s capacity to construct manifold realities by way of invented characters traveling in space-time continua alternative to but mirroring our own. By chance, the professor’s first name was “Dallas.” More important than the vicissitude of shared naming, that of a Canadian intellectual called “Dallas Smythe” and the brain-lite greed-heavy American television show known the world over as *Dallas*, is what the wise professor knew and what the young artist has slyly annexed for the making of beautifully urgent art. Potentially progressive and truly dangerous, the television mimics, concocts, and manufactures the world’s many realities.

Just three years before the professor’s prescient essay, another Canadian published his first book on the power of the media to fabricate reality. In *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* written in 1951, Marshall McLuhan verbally inaugurated the dialectic of progress and danger at work in media technology: “Ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind.”² McLuhan was describing advertising’s newly expanded powers of exploitation. McLuhan called upon the public mind to join the “best-trained,” who “manipulate, exploit, [and] control,” to take back control through critical acts – to fold the system of infiltration back in on itself. He beseeched the public to “observe consciously the drama which is intended to operate upon [you] unconsciously.”³ McLuhan gave readers of cultural texts, magazines and TV alike, the tools of analysis and deconstruction. A McLuhan-ite armed with the media tools of a new millennium, Nimmerfall has answered McLuhan’s call with the work of *Power Play*: two multi-channel video-space installations, *Grand Staircase (Contemporary Retro)* and *Executive Office (Contemporary Modern)*, and several glossy color photographic C-prints. Nimmerfall’s *Power Play* deconstructs the logic of television’s manufactured realities.

Nimmerfall plays within a field the parameters of which were set mid-last century by McLuhan. Knowing well that the “medium is the message,” Nimmerfall blows open the space of televisual contrivance, riffing on the faux architecture of the Hollywood imagination. Nimmerfall uses “establishing shots” as the basis for the photographic images. Establishing shots are the site-specific images – a split-level ranch house in the California hills in *The Brady Bunch*, a modern office tower in downtown Minneapolis in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, a brownstone in New York City in the *Cosby Show* – that anchor the otherwise artificial places one sees in Hollywood-based TV shows. Establishing shots help to set up the narrative and political economy – the class of identities working out life together – of a given show.

In *Grand Staircase (Contemporary Retro)* and *Executive Office (Contemporary Modern)*, Nimmerfall has created what she calls “space-time situations.” The images of a grand staircase and a corporate office are not real establishing shots, but readymade spaces Nimmerfall has pieced together through architectural modeling by way of CAD (computer aided design). We assume that the grand staircase is at Southfork Ranch and the corporate office is in downtown Dallas, but only because we have been conditioned to associate these images with the specific places of the TV series *Dallas*. They are “based more on the ‘idea’ of a grand staircase and executive office,” than the real thing, Nimmerfall explains. The artist has doubled the act of falsification: she re-fabricates the already fabricated in order to distil the potent symbolism of banal though iconic space. The coiling staircase and the dangling chandelier signify luxurious intrigue; the pool a life of devil-may-care leisure; and the office space, with a curtain glass wall behind which stand spires of capitalism, the power of money. Offered through the click, drag, and bump of the mouse working in syncopation with the computer hard drive, the digital spaces give new embodiment to the “readymade.” The architecture-video installations set in relief the manner in which these new architectural readymades – Hollywood’s establishing shots and, even more recently, the spaces of CAD – manufacture individual memory and identity.

Writing in 1964, well into TV’s adolescence, McLuhan declared TV to be a “cool, participant medium.”⁴ As opposed to hot media, “cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience.”⁵ While no champion of TV, McLuhan saw the technology’s potential for psychological interactivity. In McLuhan’s understanding of the exchange of TV watching, one finds in nuce today’s

obsession over famous personalities. He viewed TV's "mosaic" as the generator of fanatical love of celebrity, explaining that the image of the TV actor is so intimate that it is only completed in the watching by the viewer.⁶ Nimmerfall realizes the full potential of TV's interactivity, extruding the two-dimensional image of architecture seen on the flat TV screen into the three dimensions of lived space. Yet, she deprives the images of celebrities. The projected images are absent of people: none of the actors from Dallas occupy the space of the establishing shots. The flat un-peopled spaces of the projections are doppelganger Hollywood sets refusing viewers the frisson of a bodacious Charlene Tilton, the actress who played Lucy Ewing. It is the banal and empty architecture that becomes the significant vehicle revealing to an audience in the new millennium that even the establishing shots of real places are but fantasy tesserae of the TV mosaic.

Bringing to mind the early video work of Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham and the more recent of Pipilotti Rist and Douglas Gordon, Nimmerfall integrates the viewers into the architecture of the projected establishing shots. She makes phenomenal McLuhan's claim, "With TV, the viewer is the screen. He is bombarded with light impulses that James Joyce called the 'Charge of the Light Brigade' that imbues his 'soulskin with subconscious inklings'."⁷ Humans moving through *Grand Staircase (Contemporary Retro)* and *Executive Office (Contemporary Modern)* become layered in the instant: they are sandwiched by the architecture of the video projection and images floating in space. Viewers walk in, around, and through the constructed space of each projection as though walking through a Hollywood set. Nimmerfall's "space-time situations" bear an ontology of the screen. Hers is more existential decree than avant-garde promise: we are screens that look at screens within an architecture of screens. Screens make us who we are.

In bearing such consciousness, Nimmerfall's video installations offer what the art historian David Joselit has called a "politics of feedback." In everyday parlance, there are two types of feedback: the automatic looping of information within a given system and disarming noise, such as Jimi "Hendrix's famous mangling of the [American] national anthem."⁸ For Joselit, feedback is the raucous type in keeping with Hendrix's electric screech. Joselit defines "feedback" according to the guerilla video projects of the 1970s: the Black Panthers who called for community control of TV through public access cable TV and the open video collective TVTV and their reality TV antics at the 1972 Democratic and Republican conventions in Miami, Florida.⁹ Feedback here recalibrates TV's passive default into an active transformative mechanism. Feedback makes pictures move.¹⁰ Nimmerfall's work is proof that feedback – interactive TV – is not just a thing of the halcyon neo-avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s. Nimmerfall's work is proof of feedback in the new millennium.

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¹ Smythe, Dallas W., "Reality as Presented by Television," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Summer, 1954) 143.

² McLuhan, Marshall, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951; Boston: Beacon Paperback, 1967) v.

³ McLuhan, v.

⁴ McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) 311.

⁵ McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 23.

⁶ McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 317.

⁷ McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 313.

⁸ Jones, Caroline, E. "Signal Distortion" Review of David Joselit's *Feedback: Television against Democracy*, *Artforum International*, vol. 45, no. 8 (April 2007) 77.

⁹ Joselit, David, *Feedback: Television against Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007) 87-89; 97-99.

¹⁰ Joselit, 100.