

The Circuits of Television. Histories, technologies, imaginaries

International Conference

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Organized by Marie Sandoz, Markus Stauff and Anne-Katrin Weber

Television has been conceived as a mass medium that broadcasts a linear program flow to a wide and anonymous domestic audience. Occasionally, the medium is praised for its power of dissemination; more often, it is criticized for centralized transmission of indiscriminate content to distracted or passive viewers. Television, in this perspective, lacks any kind of direct feedback mechanism.

In this conference, we want to rethink television history and theory by focusing on the medium's circuits and multiple loops. This shift in perspective brings to our attention television's technological flexibility and interrelations with other media, as well as its sprawling, often hidden, cultural, industrial, and political productivity. Taking as a starting point the *Circuits of Television*, this conference also aims to inquire the much-overlooked connection between the history of computing, cybernetics, video art, ecology and system theory - where circuits and feedback loops are key concepts - and television's historiography.

Looking at televisual apparatuses and imaginaries within and beyond the cultural form of broadcasting, the medium's history offers a rich variety of circuits that embed sound and vision, signals and data, places and behavior in feedback systems for different ends. Famously, in the late 19th century, inventors and writers were imagining interactive forms of television such as picture telephones. Similarly, in the postwar period, broadcasting television's history was ripe with unsolicited and solicited forms of audience feedback, ranging from letters of discontent viewers to audience polls and the collection of behavioral traces through set-top boxes before social media. At the same time, television found numerous applications in closed-circuit systems in the

military and the industry, in science and education, serving automation and other practical goals. Not least through video art and surveillance systems, feedback functions have been spreading across private and public spaces. Television's constant shape shifting (e.g. through video and remote control, through satellite and cable) generates new apparatuses and new imaginaries of circuits' applicability across these different domains. In short, past and present ideas, practices, and apparatuses of television encompass multiple loops.

The conference aims at tracking televisual circuits from the 19th to the 21st Century. It seeks to grasp their functions and operations ranging from interaction and communication to automation and control. The notion of "circuits" is thus proposed as a heuristic tool to revisit and complicate television's long history. It fosters an expanded definition of television that is not limited to broadcasting TV but includes television's useful forms and its entanglements with the histories of computer, telecommunications, video art, cybernetics, ecology, and "closed world" epistemologies.

In line with this expanded definition and our desire to cross disciplines, we hope to bring together television historians with scholars working in the fields of media history and theory, science and technology studies, art history, history of science and knowledge, history of medicine, environmental history, economic history, social history and related fields.

This international and bilingual (French/English) conference is part of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) sponsored research project on *Operational TV. Audiovisual Closed-Circuits from the Military to the Classroom, 1930s-1990s* led at the University of Lausanne by Anne-Katrin Weber, and co-organized with the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis. The keynote will be given by Prof. Kit Hugues (Colorado State University) whose recent monograph *Television at Work. Industrial Media and American Labor* (2020) explores how American businesses appropriated television as a "workplace medium" supporting industrial efficiency, ideological orientation, and corporate expansion.

We want to invite emerging and senior scholars to contribute research that may include but is not limited to the following topics:

Media archaeological approaches to televisual circuits:

- Televisual circuits in the *longue durée*: ideas and fictional apparatus of interactive and bi-directional television from the 19th Century on

- Closed-circuit television in the military, science, industry; television as a tool for surveillance, targeting, and automation
- Feedback mechanisms and television in medicine and education
- Televisual circuits and the renewal of television historiography

Televisual Circuits and Broadcasting Television:

- Televisual scandals: deprogramming and censorship of broadcast content because of public protest
- Televisual tools and community building: "Watching ourselves on TV"
- Audience feedback: letters, surveys, and audience surveillance
- Rearticulation of liveness and flow in institutional settings

Televisual circuits and the remapping of media ecologies:

- "Closed world" thinking in the postwar era, cybernetics, and the emergence of television
- Computational circuits and their entanglement with television
- Concepts of circularity/circuits in ecology and energy flow analysis and its relation to cybernetics and television history
- Circuits in Video Art and their link to television history

Presentations will last a maximum of 20 minutes.

Please submit an abstract of no more than 500 words (including 2 or 3 key references) plus a short bio (max. 150 words) to marie.sandoz@unil.ch, **before June 21, 2024.**

Decisions on acceptance will be announced mid-July. Travel (by train only) and hotel will be covered by the organizers.