



Watching TV: Historic Televisions and Memorabilia from the MZTV Museum

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BY Beth Seaton

There is something strangely admirable about Moses Znaimer's ability to appropriate the strengths of his imagined adversaries. While known for his confusing aphorisms regarding the nature of TV, what is perhaps less acknowledged is that many of these sound-bites are actually samples: riffs poached from cultural theorists

whose work on television often stands in direct contrast to Znaimer's corporate ideology. The shadowy form of McLuhan is frequently glimpsed here, as is that of Raymond Williams, whose idea of television's "flow" is easily recognized in Znaimer's oft-mentioned "commandment" that "the true nature of television is flow, not show; process, not conclusion." Like an advertisement whose words and images are mined from the detritus of consumer culture, Znaimer succeeds in the pomo art of appropriation.

Postmodern times of course demand the skill of collage: in these days of "fiscal responsibility" such (involuntary) collaborations are appropriate. In this respect, the "partnerships" of publicly-funded cultural industries with private-sector enterprises have become frequent occurrences. For Znaimer, the MZTV "Watching TV" exhibition at the ROM represents the second of such collaborative efforts. (The first was

the CBC's broadcast of his diatribe "The TVTV Revolution"). Despite the prevalence of these new "associations," there is something strange about Moses Znaimer's recent alliances with public institutions, not the least of which is his animosity towards their supposed custodianship of an elitist "public taste." (Oh, but if only the CBC had such powers.) These liaisons involve a commercial broadcaster who is known not only for his self-aggrandizing promotions, but also for a programming schedule heavily geared towards promotional culture. What is perhaps oddest is that these publicly-funded institutions are now in the business of doing the promoting for him.

That said, the *Watching TV* exhibition cannot be easily dismissed. While Sony Corporation has contributed a few of its many dollars towards the show (an endowment acknowledged by the inclusion of a large SONY HDTV), the exhibition repre-

sents an important contribution to the historical study of television. Most compelling about this exhibition of 60 TV sets is its representational breadth, in which each set, located within a sequential path of technological and cultural change, is illustrative of a moment in television's evolution. Znaimer's archive includes some of the earliest and most "primitive" televisual devices. Their presence bespeaks a mystery and fascination now long departed as the "magic box" evolved into the most ordinary of domestic objects. And yet, none of the televisions on display ever succeeds in collapsing into the status of the "ordinary." While put into service of a larger historical narrative, each TV set stands alone as an artifact made novel again, the once-familiar now rendered unique and exotic by virtue of its distance from the banalities of the present-day. What is intriguing about this collection then is not only the story it tells of North America's obsession with television, but also the fetishistic objects themselves.

The premise driving this exhibition is that, as "common" household objects, television sets have been too easily consigned to the refuse bin. Thus, the MZTV collection rescues the idiot box from the trash heaps of history. Not surprisingly, this logic meshes nicely with Znaimer's oft-repeated complaint regarding the unfairly denigrated status of television (although it's questionable whether anyone really bothers to disparage television anymore). This assumption also allows for a particular type of "salvage ethnography," a common curatorial practice within museums of ethnography which argues that the artifacts of "primitive cultures" need to be saved from the contaminating forces of progress and change. Thus, *Watching TV* saves the object of television and its unfairly maligned face.

Also in line with conventional curatorial wisdom is the exhibition's expression of a national or cultural imaginary. Just as natural history museums schematically propose a "founding myth" for the education and edification of its citizens, so too does *Watching TV* lead the viewer through a foundational history of television—originating in the genius of John Logie Baird and the mechanical television, moving through the initial pre-broadcast and pre-network years, the electronic TV, and so

on. History here is overwhelmingly spoken of as the unwavering march of technological innovation. Yet, this is a teleological project made all the more attractive by shifts in aesthetic as well as technology. The visually arresting TV sets on display tell an accompanying tale of how design moves compatibly with societal ideas of progress, technology, and the aesthetics of domestic life. Hence, the discernible shifts from the bakelite art deco designs of the forties (wherein TV took pride of place in the home), to the Bauhaus minimalism of the fifties (in which its presence was pared back simply to screens and receivers), to the monstrous console sets of the sixties (in which TV was disguised as a piece of furniture), to the space-age dreams of the seventies (in which TV sets often took the form of astronauts' helmets), to the flat-black pomo functionalism of the eighties and nineties (a television set is a television set).

Such a focus also betrays the limits of its perspective. In its overwhelming concentration on television as "object," this techno-teleological treatise makes little mention of the economic forces which have informed it. As a social and symbolic, as well as material object, television has long been embedded within the structures and dynamics of consumer culture. And yet, with the exception of a brief nod to early forms of product tie-ins (namely, children's toys), any engagement with the influence of advertising on television is ignored. In fact, the question of television programming is largely left in abeyance. No wonder, really, for to raise the question of programming would also force the question of the commercial incentive which drives it. Despite the "foundational history" which this exhibition purports to represent, television here is rendered ahistorical—all contaminants of an economic and political nature safely erased.

Sadly, the exhibition catalogue reproduces this imperative. While innovatively designed, the text's three essays are careful not to disturb the soft focus upon the commercial. In sum, critical inquiry is not welcome here. Nowhere is this prejudice more visible than in ROM ethnographer Grant McCracken's essay, entitled—what else—"Moses Znaimer and the Future of Television." After all, at the end of the story, when all is said and

done, this is the *real* subject here.

One invented consensus is that no one loves or knows TV like Moses, especially not cranky professors who have been teaching classes on the media and culture for the past 15 years. In his sycophantic essay, McCracken repeats this tired old refrain: academics, elites and other experts dislike TV, or think they know what's best for TV, but they don't, they are boring, they aren't hip; Moses is hip. Moses is the TV God, the TV revolutionary. This, of course, is a cover-tune written (and endlessly sung) by Znaimer himself. In offering his services as back-up crooner, McCracken's stylization strays little from the original notes. His own evidence of the presence of belly-aching elites and intellectuals is found in Dwight McDonald's "A Theory of Mass Culture" and the Massey Commission, both of which were written over 40 years ago.

Leaving such historical absences aside, it is intriguing to read what McCracken finds so innovative about Moses Znaimer's *TV-Fashion TV, Media TV, Movie TV*, etc. He writes in reference to these programmes, "Znaimer's television dispenses with...editorial presence. It invites you to watch without a lifeguard. It supplies no Adrienne Clarkson or Robert Fullford to "explain" things to you." (Oooh, those authoritative CBC elites.) It may be argued however that TV commercials operate without any "editorial presence" as well. Similarly, the programmes cited above may be easily described as extended ads, mere vehicles for the selling of (model, fashion, celebrity, techno, music) products, in much the same manner as "Entertainment Tonight." There are no anchors here, no chirpy Mary Harts doing the happy-talk thing with her big-jawed colleague. Moses' television is supposedly a medium in which there is no mediation—it's just you and the box. In fact, this is what the *Watching TV* exhibition attempts to communicate. Such disingenuous expression becomes all the more galling at this point in time. It's rumoured that Moses and ChumCity are going to buy out TVO. Would someone please "explain" this to me?