

**"See Television at its Best on Stand No. 19". Display of technology and construction of symbolic meaning: The public presentation of televisual dispositifs at the *Radio Show at Olympia* (London) and at the *Grosse Deutsche Funkausstellung* (Berlin), 1928-1939**

Anne-Katrin Weber, University of Lausanne – New York University

The 19<sup>th</sup> century utopia of seeing by electricity becomes reality at the mid-1920s as the development of first televisual prototypes starts in different countries. The audience for these technological novelties is mostly limited to circles of technical experts, who follow the latest scientific advances through the specialized press. However, the annual Radio Shows held in major European and American cities are some of the rare occasions on which a broader public has the opportunity to experience the devices and to “see at distance”. For media historians today these events thus are a welcomed – but still very neglected – object of research for studying the appearance of television in public space. Organized by the radio and electronics industry to present their newest products, the Radio Shows are dedicated to wireless technology and its components, and include televisual dispositifs from 1928 on. The Shows extend the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century World fairs and honour industrialized modernity for which radio, and thereafter television, are some of its most powerful symbols. As spectacular exhibit pieces, the televisual dispositifs are meant to contribute to the celebration of scientific progress, to the cult of technology and to materialize evidence for the national leadership in these matters. Furthermore, in succeeding to radio as a domestic appliance, television enfoldes the promise of a new consumer good for which the Radio Shows present a first advertisement platform.

Nevertheless, despite the similarity of devices developed in Europe and the U.S. and despite the common issues of their public presentation through industrial fairs, the symbolic meaning of televisual dispositifs differ within the political, social and cultural contexts prevailing in particular countries. Indeed, as Fickers has convincingly shown in his comparison of the Paris and New York World’s Fairs, the definition and signification of television as communicated through its display largely depend on the national frame (Fickers 2008).

This paper proposes to analyse more closely the exhibition of television at two different industrial events, the *Radio Show at Olympia* (London) and the *Grosse Deutsche Funkausstellung* (Berlin) between 1928 and 1939. By studying the scenographic setting and the discursive presentation of televisual devices at these important fairs, I will discuss how the political contexts of both nations and their technological and political competition are translated within the exhibition space, and more particularly how the presentation of television reflects these issues. Since the twelve-year period considered for this study embraces important political events, namely the arriving at power of the national-socialist party in Germany and the increasing tensions in the immediate pre-war years, it articulates this interrelation between the display of technology and the construction of symbolic meaning in a chronological perspective that reflects the “time of crisis” of the 1930s.

The methodological frame answers the problems arising from the suggested topic and is based on two main theoretical approaches. The concept of “dispositif” as used in contemporary film studies allows to analyze television and media on their material, semantic and symbolic level context and to articulate them as mobile networks and hybrid forms instead of invariable categories (Albera/Tortajada, 2010; Kessler, 2003). Defined as an interrelation of machine, audience and media content, the notion helps to understand technical artefacts as social and historical constructs and therefore allows to revisit the history of early television beyond the (often adopted) narrative of grand inventors and misjudged genies. Choosing a comparative approach of two events offers the advantage of shedding light on the transnational character of televisual development, and helps to explain similarities and differences regarding political and cultural meanings of televisual dispositifs for each nation (Bignell/Fickers, 2008). Eventually, this specific angle of research in early television permits to work with historical sources that are rarely considered, such as iconographic archival material that makes it possible to reconstitute the display of technology at the shows.

My presentation will be organised in three parts. First, I will rapidly outline the context of the two Radio Shows and present the televisual devices and their relation to other media and the media system in general. I will then examine the early years of the exhibitions during which – this is my current hypothesis – the dispositifs are presented mainly as technological feats with little attraction to the audience outside the exhibition halls. Finally, I will focus on the second half of the 1930s. As I am going to discuss it here, the announcement of the “first regular television broadcast in the world” by national-socialist official Eugen Hadamovsky in 1935 marks a shift in German and British television history that fundamentally changes the role and place of television in both societies. The German declaration evidently is a sign of national affirmation towards its international concurrence and it indicates the increasing awareness of national-socialist officials about the potential of television as a new propaganda tool. In Britain, the German launching of a regular broadcast is closely observed by the BBC and British state representatives, and serves as an important argument for the opening of a British television programme in November 1936. The following exhibitions of television at the Radio Shows reveal its new political and social function as they differ considerably in their “mise en scène” from the former events, and the exhibition becomes henceforth an important place for the renegotiation of television’s meaning and signification within Great Britain and Germany.

**Anne-Katrin Weber** is preparing a PhD thesis on television exhibitions in Germany, Great Britain and the United States in the 1930s at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, under the supervision of Professor Olivier Lugon (Lausanne) and Professor Andreas Fickers (Maastricht). Currently, she is a fellow of the Swiss National Science Foundation and a visiting scholar at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin and, from July 2010 on, at the New York University. She is the co-editor of *La télévision du Téléphonoscope à YouTube : pour une archéologie de l'audiovision* (2009) and the author of several articles.