

The revolution still remains untelevised. But that's ok. Helidon Gjergji and David Lachman's picture tv.

By Hamza Walker

As of February 17, 2009, the endearing imperfections of analog television broadcasting--vertical roll, snow and fuzziness from a weak signal--will be history. All television in the United States will be broadcast digitally. The signal will come in two grades, SDTV (Standard Definition Television) and HDTV (High Definition Television), which has twice the resolution of SDTV. Television sets have likewise been upgraded as the cathode ray tube has given way to the substantially less bulky plasma screens whose higher resolution and 16:9 aspect ratio allows for a significantly broader and better picture. These advances amount to no less than a sea change for an industry whose basic technology has remained remarkably stable for the past 50 years.

By its very nature, however, the television industry has always been immune to sudden change. It consists of a two-part technology (transmission and reception) whose technical standards are subject to federal regulations. Structural changes to the basic technology not only involves the producers of television, but the consumer market as well as the state. The same immunity to change likewise applies to its programming. Just as television's audience developed rapidly, so too did the protocols governing how its content was assembled and packaged for broadcast. Borrowing editing and recitation techniques from film and radio, television's evolution consisted of the heavy and steady refinement of conventions to the point of their being a highly discreet, one might even say scientific, means for the dissemination of information.

Helidon Gjergji and David Lachman's video work *picture tv* is not simply distorted television, it is television being distorted in a now historical fashion. Relative to current television technology, its diagonally warped lines of resolution carry with them the veneer of nostalgia. Consisting of random segments of television, *picture tv* is not about a particular show or genre but television in a very general sense. *picture tv*'s edits mimic channel surfing, reproducing an attention span no more or less restless than one for which the structure of television already allows. Revealing the extent to which television fragments time down to a fraction of a second and reconstitutes it as packets of information, channel surfing reflects an attention span television has created in its own image. Trigger finger on the remote control, viewers quickly decipher, decide and move on. The death threat is delivered. Click. The breath is freshened. Click. The skin is softened. Click. An infant's body is discovered. Click. Ninja demons are cast back to hell. Click. The Sacramento Kings are down by four. Click. The father is not forgiven. Click.

Under a stringent economy in which time is literally money, lots of money, each of these moments, with respect to their function in the larger flow of information, must deliver a maximum of content in a minimum of time. As a result of being conceptualized as a series of such moments, television is reduced to a series of highly formulaic genres. When channel surfing, each moment is read metonymically, the well machined part capable of standing in for the whole. But television is less defined by the sum of its parts as they add up to a complete episode of a given program and more defined as a collection of juxtaposed parts. This is as much the case when station hopping as it is when watching a single program that, in addition to its own formulaic edits, is punctuated from beginning to end by commercials. Rather than watch a single program which entails passively watching television *in parts*, Gjergji and Lachman have chosen to channel surf which entails actively watching television exclusively *as parts*.

Hardly an end in itself, abstraction for Gjergji and Lachman is a means for better framing television whose violent fragmentation of the organic flow of time makes it an extremely abstract medium. Non-objective painting's claims on abstraction actually pale in comparison to those of television which is abstract by virtue of its integral relationship to reality rather than through having abandoned reality. Applied consistently enough in purpose and effect to qualify as formalist

abstraction, Gjergji and Lachman's distortion of television is being done for anything but the sake of converting television into an abstract painting. Since television is abstract, their use of abstraction only further reveals that which already happens to be the case. In other words, it functions as a double negative, literally making manifest the abstract qualities already part and parcel of how television operates. Distorting to the point of disassembling television's figurative content and presenting the distorted image in a monochrome technicolor amounts to subjecting television to a reductivist logic that, historically speaking, is the province of modernist painting. That, however, is besides the point. More important, the reduction yields properties--the vertiginously scrolling scan lines, the peripatetic flickering, and a Technicolor RGB palette—that belong to television and television alone. Furthermore, were Gjergji and Lachman borrowing lessons from painting as anything other than a means to an end, they would have eliminated the sound which remains unaltered and in tact throughout the work.

No matter how formally seductive its imagery, *pixture tv*'s audio track should dispel any and all doubts as to whether or not you are looking at an abstract painting or watching television. While Gjergji and Lachman borrow a modernist painting paradigm meant to lend television watching a sense of reflexivity it is usually denied, the audio tracks expose this use of abstraction as little more than a ruse. To reflect upon television requires that the viewer be given access to an abstraction that is anything but an end in itself. Such access is not granted through *pixture tv*'s imagery but almost solely through its sound which is capable of conveying the content independent from its related imagery. There are even a couple of instances (a commercial for patio furniture at Loews and a sword flight set to high tempo break beat) where sound provides the rhythm for the editing. But these instances do not so much underscore the pivotal role of sound in television as much as they attest to the ubiquitous influence of music videos.

According to *pixture tv*'s audio track, TV sounds just as ridiculous as it looks. The hyperbolic tropes it maintains have come to define the medium. By today's standards, however, network television appears conspicuously bad. Even if the commercials were removed, there would be no mistaking *pixture tv*'s appropriated bits of network television for subscription television whose success is a significant development in the history of television. The expansion of television in the direction of subscription television represents a shift in its structure insofar as it substantially redistributes viewership. What was considered "quality" programming has migrated elsewhere leading network television, and particularly local television stations, to reflect a poorer socio-economic demographic. Structurally determined by advertising, conventional network television, as sampled by *pixture tv*, comes across as a hopelessly finite universe of retreads.

If *pixture tv* functions as critique, it does so through its position relative to its subject. Neither good, nor bad, the television it appropriates is simply a fact of life. Whatever distance *pixture tv* has from television of this order has to do with video art having forsaken its historical relationship to television. Along with more affordable video projectors came a more general critique of cinema. Video art that imbricates itself within the mechanics of broadcast television has become something of a rarity. Dependence on the television monitor for playback was perhaps the last shred of video art's historical relationship to television. Although projected, *pixture tv* is nonetheless an anachronism. It is a good old fashion piece of video art hailing from a moment when the genre was inherently a critique of television. Using formalist painting tropes to quite literally look at television, *pixture tv* allows us to take note of how much has changed by virtue of just how much has stayed the same. Although television changes, it does so gradually. If, as Marshall McLuhan famously stated, "the medium is the message," then it is hardly surprising that "the revolution" was not televised. As a consolation prize, however, *pixture tv* ain't bad.

Hamza Walker is Associate Curator at The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago