THE CULTURES OF EARLY TELEVISION

A University of Westminster conference
with the support of The British Academy

Thursday 2 July and Friday 3 July
Portland Hall, 4-12 Little Titchfield Street, London W1W7UW.

Starlight, 1937, by Harry Rutherford © Estate of the Artist

Welcome to **The Cultures of Early Television**, a two-day conference about television before the Second World War in Britain, continental Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union. With presentations, panels and screenings of rare archival material, thIS event marks the centenary of the first British public presentation of what John Logie Baird called “true television”, which took place in London in early 1926.

As you will see from this pack, the conference brings together scholars and archivists from Britain, Europe and North America to explore imaginings and understandings of early television, and its productions and people. The focus is intended to shift the discourse about this subject away from technologies, which has been the dominant construction of this history to date

We hope that one central strand of the discussions will be early television’s intermedial entanglements with the radio, cinema, theatre, dance and visual arts of the first half of the twentieth century. Parallel to this will be a concern to develop a transnational dialogue for a field that has largely developed along national lines.

The intention is that the conference will be of interest not only to media historians, but also to those concerned with mid-century culture more broadly, to social historians, and to those with a general interest in the development of television.

PRACTICALITIES

Registration: please register on arrival and collect a lanyard with your name. The schedule will be featured on screen, **but printed copies of both schedule and booklet will not be available**, so do bring your copy with you, ideally in digital form, or access it online during the event.

Access: The main accessible entrance is located at the front of the building, to the left of the main entrance as you face it. There is level access into the venue. The main door opens automatically. The width of the door opening is 184cm (6ft).

Inside, there is level access to Portland Hall via a lift located towards the rear of the building. The lift has a visual floor indicator and an audible announcer, as well as a hearing enhancement system, Braille and tactile markings.

In Portland Hall there is a fixed loop hearing assistance system. More detailed access information is available here, which was created with AccessAble: https://www.accessable.co.uk/university-of-westminster/regent-street-campus/access-guides/4-12-little-titchfield-street#D51A475F-5418-406D-846E-FAB8C17836CD

Drinks: at the start of both days, and twice during breaks coffee, tea, biscuits and water will be made available. Do make sure that you remain hydrated throughout the conference, especially if the weather is hot and sunny.

Lunch: thanks to the support of The British Academy, we have been able to offer free registration for everyone, as well as drinks, but **lunch will NOT be provided**, so do either bring your own or make use of one of the numerous sandwich shops nearby.

Drinks reception: this will take with complimentary wine, beer, non-alcoholic beer and fruit juice at the end of Thursday, which we anticipate will be at 5.15pm. We should leave the building by 6.45pm.

WiFi access: **UoW-Public**, is the university's simple click-to-join Wi-Fi for event spaces and public areas. Visitors are asked to agree terms and conditions before accessing the network. This network requires no password or approval.

Filming: please be aware that we will be recording many of the presentations with the intention of presenting these at a later point, with subtitles, on the University of Westminster CREAM website.

Evacuation: in the event of a fire attendees should exit via the nearest emergency exit and move toward the emergency assembly point on Middleton Place – for Portland Hall the nearest fire exit is: rear stairwell exit right hand side of Hall, upstairs and out to final exit on Riding House St. Fire stewards and house staff are responsible for guiding attendees to a place of safety.

If at any point during the two days, you have any concerns or issues, do please contact the convenor **John Wyver**, who will be present throughout on 07973 835 330 and via j.wyver@westminster.ac.uk.

PROGRAMME

Thursday 2 July

9.00 Registration; coffee and tea

9.30 Welcome

• **Catherine Dormor**, *Pro-Vice Chancellor, Head of College of Creative Arts and Technologies, University of Westminster*

9.35 Introduction

• **John Wyver**

9.45 Opening Keynote

Chair: **Catherine Dormor**

• **André Lange**, editor, *Histoire de la television* website:
'The promised ubiquity - revisiting the formative years of television, 1877-1926'

10.45 Coffee and tea

11.00 Panel: Beginnings

Chair: **Eleni Liarou,** *Birkbeck, University of London*

• **Doron Galili**, *Stockholm*:
'Pulp vision: popular genre fiction and televisual fantasies'

• **Donald McLean:**
'Looking back at *Looking In*: the evidence that increased awareness of BBC productions in the low-definition era'

• **John Wyver**, *Westminster*:
'30-line broadcasts in Britain, 1928-1935: a television of attractions?'

12.30 Welcome

• **Peter Bonfield**, *Vice-Chancellor, University of Westminster*

12.40 Screening

• *BBC Television Demonstration Film*, introduced by **Lisa Kerrigan**, *BFI*

1.30 Lunch (not provided)

2.15 Panel: People of pre-war British television

Chair: **Mary Desjardins**, *Dartmouth College*

• **Jamie Medhurst**, *Aberystwyth,* via video link
'Eustace Robb, a pioneering producer'

• **Kate Murphy**, *Bournemouth*:
'Business as usual? Women's work in pre-war BBC Television'

3.15 Coffee and tea

3.30 Panel: Early televisions in the United States

Chair: **Vicky Ball,** *De Monfort University*

• **William Boddy**, *Baruch College*:
'Interrogating the interregnum: media historiography and 1930s American television'

• **Paul Marshall**:
'Ulises Armand Sanabria and Western Television – a lost history'

• **Mark J. Williams**, *Dartmouth College*:
'Los Angeles: The "local" exception to early television historiography'

• **Ron Simon**, *The Paley Center for Media*, via video link
'The 1939 launch of American television'

5.15 **DRINKS RECEPTION**

Friday 3 July

9.00 Coffee and tea

9.30 Traces of early British television

Chair: **Kirsten Forrest,** *Alexandra Palace*

• **Simon Vaughan**, *APTS*, via video link
'BBC Television in the 1930s: a visual history through the lens of Desmond Campbell'

• **Dick Fiddy**, *BFI*:
'Traces of television's early comedians'

• **Stephen Bourne**:
'A sort of magic – Black contributors and creators on pre-war BBC Television'

11.00 Coffee and tea

11.15 Panel: Early televisions in Europe and the Soviet Union

Chair: **Jeannine Baker,** *University of Newcastle, Australia*

• **Danielle Simon**, *Middlebury*:
'Early television and Fascist spectacle at the 1939 Villaggio Balneare '

• **Oliver Botar**, *Manitoba*:
'Moholy-Nagy: the *Telehor* (Television) as the transmitter of abstract "light plays"'

• **Angelina Lucento,** *Duke University*:
'Realism in real time: early Soviet monumental painting as proto-television'

• **Jeffrey Cohen**:
'Television before the network: performance and spectacle in early Soviet broadcasting, 1931–1941'

1.15 Lunch (not provided)

1.45 Screening:

A selection of pre-war television in Europe and USA

2.45 Panel: The intermediality of early British television

Chair: **Rosie Thomas,** *University of Westminster*

• **Luke McKernan**:
'BBC television news and the newsreels in the 1930s'

• **Ian Christie**:
'Dallas Bower – a visionary at Alexandra Palace'

3.45 Coffee and tea

4.00 Closing keynote

Chair: **May Adadol Ingawanij,** *University of Westminster*

• **Anne-Katrin Weber**, *Lausanne*:
'Surveillance and targeting by CCTV - a transnational perspective on inter/war television's useful forms'

5.00-5.30 Plenary discussion

ABSTRACTS

The abstracts are included here in the order that the papers are scheduled to be delivered. Biographies of those presenting follow, ordered alphabetically.

DAY 1

Opening Keynote

André Lange

The promised ubiquity – revisiting the formative years of television, 1877-1926

John Logie Baird's invention of television did not emerge from nothing. When he gave his first demonstrations in 1926, the idea of seeing by electricity was already half a century old. This idea took shape from 1877 onward, stimulated by the invention of the telephone, the discovery of selenium's photosensitive properties, and the Siemens brothers' proposal of an 'electric eye'. From the outset, this prospect, promoted by both the specialised and mainstream press, took on an international dimension, in Europe, Russia, and the United States.

The major works on the formative years of television were written at the end of the 20th century by engineers (George Shiers, Albert Abramson, Richard Burns). Research conducted since the publication of their seminal works has led to a significant re-evaluation, characterized by three key factors:

- Access to period publications facilitated by the digitization of newspapers and patent archives, documents produced by inventors, etc.
- The emergence of issues arising from recent technological developments has brought to light trends that had been overlooked by traditional historians, such as early hypotheses regarding the digital transmission of wireless transmission of pictures.
- The rise of new approaches (media archaeology, sociology of invention, theories of the screen, etc.) that focus on the social aspects of inventions, the nature of inventors' relationships with the scientific community and the public, the forms of imagination that develop around announced inventions, the integration of technological advancements into literature, painting, and film, and the phenomena of irrationality that are stimulated by technological innovations or sometimes hinder them.

From this perspective, we will examine some examples of media discourse and manifestations neglected by engineering historians: the forward-looking considerations of the inventors themselves, hoaxes, cartoons, the statements of writers, journalists, photographers, politicians, as well as the place of women in this new technological imaginary.

Panel: Beginnings

Doron Galili

Pulp vision: popular genre fiction and televisual fantasies

In this presentation, I wish to discuss several examples of popular media fantasies from the so-called experimental era of television, roughly between 1925 and 1940. While the very first fictional depictions of television in nineteenth-century utopian and dystopian literature have drawn scholarly attention as documents of the technological imaginary that gave rise to the

medium, media fantasies from the later period remained underexplored. Yet, although television technology has already existed since the mid-1920s and even had been publicly demonstrated, numerous writers continued to offer imaginary speculations about the future forms and effects of the medium during the following decades.

Surveying a selection of science fiction and fantasy stories from American pulp magazines such as *Amazing Stories, Science Wonder Stories,* and *Astounding Stories,* I will argue that the popular, unpretentious, streamlined, lower-class oriented literary genres provide us with opportunities to examine a cultural discourse that very much went counter to how the powerful telecommunications industry sought to portray television at the time. Exploiting the new heatedly debated technology as source materials, the pulp magazines present us with a technological imaginary running amok. As I shall demonstrate, they explored ideas not only about seeing-at-a-distance by wireless but about entirely new forms of communication, vision on a cosmic scale, the dark side of mass-media, and the consequences of living in a media-saturated society.

Donald F McLean

Looking back at *Looking In*: the evidence that increased awareness of BBC productions in the low-definition era

Operating the world's first 'high-definition' service, the BBC production team at Alexandra Palace from 1936/37 showed significant innovation in communicating the cultural content of the new medium.

That success overshadowed the BBC's earlier low-definition television broadcasts from 1932 to 1935. By the 1960s, the BBC were generally considering its three years of low-definition broadcasting as 'test transmissions' or ignoring them altogether. Against evidence to the contrary, this situation prevailed and persists for some historians.

Thirty years ago, unique video-only restorations of original programme fragments from this era were met with surprise and incredulity; they showed unusual realism of performance and vitality of movement. A fragment from the world's first television revue, *Looking In*, challenged a half-century-old myth of poor-quality programmes and amateurish service. This and similar restorations encouraged re-consideration of the BBC's regular, scheduled low-definition broadcasts as a Television Service.

This illustrated talk includes comment on the BBC's initial refusal to accept the low-definition format in the late 1920s, the uncanny realism of performances on these crude home-made video recordings, and a walk-through of the first four minutes of the BBC's most publicised low-definition production from 1933: *Looking In*.

John Wyver

30-line broadcasts in Britain, 1928-1935: 'a television of attractions'?

Over the past half-century film scholars have been productively engaged in a radical reassessment of the first two decades of the cinema. Especially influential in the many-stranded debates has been Tom Gunning's characterisation of film prior to roughly 1906 (the periodisation is much disputed) as 'the cinema of attractions'. This is a cinema from which narrative was absent, a cinema of vaudeville tricks and gags, of magic tricks and one-shot views of the world known as 'actualities'. For Gunning, this is a cinema based on 'its ability to show something' rather than, as would soon

arrive, an engagement with telling. ‘The cinema of attractions’, Gunning summarised,

> directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle… It is the direct address of the audience, in which an attraction is offered to the spectator by a cinema showman, that defines this approach to film making. Theatrical display dominates over narrative absorption.

Drawing on contemporary accounts of 30-line television broadcasts in Britain between 1928 and 1935, this paper considers to what extent they might be understood as ‘a television of attractions’. The absence of any extensive recordings complicates a direct comparison with film, but descriptions highlight how central was the idea of television’s ability to show something. And the somethings were initially head-and-shoulders shots of singers, comedians and solo musicians, each a theatrical display offered directly to the viewer as an attraction unburdened by narrative or thematic association. How might an identification of ‘a television of attractions’ be useful and illuminating?

Screening: *BBC Television Demonstration Film*

Produced by Dallas Bower in the spring of 1937, this film documentary was created to be broadcast each day at 11am so that television set retailers could demonstrate receivers to potential customers. Although shot on 35mm film in a studio, and containing no material from actual live broadcasts, this remains a remarkable record of close approximations to extracts from early BBC 405-line transmissions, with fragments from talks, variety shows and dramas.

Panel: People of pre-war television in Britain

Jamie Medhurst

Eustace Robb, a pioneering producer

At 11.02pm on Monday 22 August 1932, the first programme of the BBC’s 30-line television service went on the air. The driving force behind the BBC’s first television service was Eustace Robb, a former guardsman with a public-school background who was appointed television producer in May 1932. He joined the television service from the Corporation’s Gramophone Department and clearly impressed both Roger Eckersley, the BBC’s Director of Programmes, and senior drama producer Val Gielgud, the latter noting on file, ‘He seems to have enough technical knowledge without too much and is a good type for our work. No technical knowledge of television, but the right interested attitude towards any new thing.’

This paper will explore the contribution of Eustace Robb to the development of early television. Robb has been neglected in television histories (including in Asa Briggs’ monumental history of the BBC) or is conscribed to a footnote. However, more recently John Wyver and I have turned the spotlight on the man who, according to Gielgud, ‘made bricks out of straw’ in those pioneering days of television

Kate Murphy

Business as usual? Women's work in pre-war BBC Television

In July 1932, Eustace Robb was recruited by the BBC as the first 'producer' of its experimental television service. Two months later he was joined by a woman, Jean Bartlett. By 1934, Bartlett was certainly, on occasion,

producing and directing however, we will never know if she would have continued with her television career, because this was also the year she left the BBC on marriage.

When the BBC's Television Department was set up the following year, women were immediately in the mix. Women had played a vital role in the BBC since its start, predominantly in clerical and secretarial roles but also in senior positions including as heads of department and producers. While many of the posts created for women at Alexandra Palace reflected the established practices of the Corporation there were also brand new opportunities in Make-Up and Wardrobe, for example, and also in the novel role of on-screen announcer. There were also surprises. Mary Adams, who transferred from radio to television as a producer in 1937, was paid far more highly than all the newly recruited male producers.

This paper examines the roles of women in early BBC television and considers the ways in which they both replicated and differed from the experiences of working in radio.

Panel: Early televisions in the United States

William Boddy

Interrogating the interregnum: media historiography and 1930s American television

In traditional historical accounts of American television, the period between the Depression-era rise and fall of mechanical television and RCA's launch of electronic television at the 1939 World's Fair is represented as an obscure interregnum of incremental laboratory progress and back stage patent battles.

The enthusiastic (if perhaps disingenuous) predictions of mechanical TV's imminent applications from leaders of the film and broadcast industries in the early 1930s represented a high point of private investment and public speculation around the medium, and the remainder of the decade saw television's retreat from public attention and commercial innovation. Far from the conventional narrative of television's uncomplicated passage from laboratory to living room, as late as 1947 the head of the Radio Manufacturers Association complained that "television has had more starts and stops than a horse-drawn milk wagon."

At the same time, proposing the decade of the 1930s as one of frustration and delay presents historians with the unique challenges involved in addressing moments of failed innovations, and my talk will explore some of the ways scholars from film and media studies, media archaeology, and the social history of technology have confronted the special challenges of analyzing failure as an historical feature.

Paul Marshall

Ulises Armand Sanabria and Western Television – a lost history

International histories of television rarely mention the work of American inventor and entrepreneur Ulises Armand Sanabria operating in the late 1920s, and early1930s. Why this is so is hard to gauge. In the United Kingdom, there's so much focus on John Logie Baird, and in other countries national technical heroes such as Charles Francis Jenkins. Somewhere down the years, the history of Sanabria and his company, Western

Television Inc., fell into complete oblivion. Slowly his achievements are being researched and documented.

In the field of early mechanical television, he created television systems which offered superior performance to most of the competing products. Commercially, Western Television Inc. managed to be viable for some years, and the company had many television stations operating in Chicago and the northern United States. Aided by the more liberal American broadcasting spectrum management rules, stations could deliver technical quality to the home not matched by others.

Supported by Hearst newspapers, Sanabria was well funded and able to advance the technology and arts of television across many fronts. Eventually the company and its mechanical TV systems fell by the wayside as electronic systems began to show promise. This presentation will describe some of the remarkable work and commercial operations of this very neglected man and his company.

Mark J. Williams

Los Angeles: the 'local' exception to early television historiography

This presentation will introduce historiographic issues regarding “local” television in U.S. media history, featuring a case study of the unique circumstances of early Los Angeles television, which expand and complicate the chronotopes of early television studies. It will introduce the figures behind two competing "experimental" television stations in Los Angeles, plus additional critical and cultural context important for further consideration.

Harry Lubcke was a member of Philio Farnsworth's team of young electrical engineers in San Francisco before the Great Depression forced Farsworth eastward and Lubcke south to Los Angeles, where he found funding by the rather wealthy Cadillac and regional radio network magnate Don Lee. Local radio history flavors this period of development, plus the significant transition to sound in the motion picture industry.

By contrast, Klaus Landsberg was a German emigre, schooled in the pre-war German (eventually Nazi) development of the new medium. After emigrating to the U.S., he was part of the 1939 exhibition of television at the New York World's Fair. He was soon hired by New York Paramount exec Paul Raibourn and sent to Los Angeles to initiate an experimental station on the Paramount lot — where he found mostly disinterest despite the moving image lineage of television.

These two figures were talented electrical engineers and self-promoters, but with different backgrounds and predilections for programming opportunities and development. Ultimately, Landsberg's station became the first commercial U.S. station west of the Mississippi (KTLA), but both figures were decisive in the distinctively independent post-war television "boom" in Los Angeles.

Ron Simon

The 1939 launch of American television

The public launch of television at the 1939 New York World’s Fair marked the culmination of more than a decade of experimentation by NBC and RCA. Between 1928 and 1939, television evolved from crude mechanical demonstrations—such as the transmission of a rotating *Felix the Cat* doll—to fully electronic broadcasts transmitted from the Empire State Building. Despite these technological advances, television’s debut was met with

skepticism in the trade press, which criticized both the limited number of receivers in circulation and the uneven quality of programming produced by NBC's experimental station, W2XBS.

This presentation examines the earliest surviving record of live American television: footage from NBC's *Thursday Night Program* broadcast of August 31, 1939, a live adaptation of the popular nineteenth-century melodrama *The Streets of New York, Or Poverty Is No Crime*. Often described as the "Dead Sea Scrolls" of American television, the fragmentary recording preserved by the Paley Center for Media offers a rare opportunity to study television at a formative moment in its development.

Through close analysis of the surviving footage and its production context, this discussion explores how NBC's early dramatic programming drew upon established theatrical conventions while adapting to the technological constraints and aesthetic possibilities of live television. Situating *The Streets of New York* within contemporary industry discourse reveals why this production -- directed by the young Anthony Mann -- was regarded as a turning point in the network's approach to televised drama.

DAY 2

Panel: Traces of early British television

Simon Vaughan

BBC Television in the 1930s: A Visual History Through the Lens of Desmond Campbell

"I found an old tyre, no roof, no doors and could see the sky. The smell of cats in the old banqueting rooms nearly made me sick and the whole thing looked a dreadful mess." This was Desmond Campbell's first impression of Alexandra Palace, which soon became the home of the BBC Television Service. Having worked with John Logie Baird since 1929, Campbell -- known as 'Cam' -- was appointed Head of Television Lighting, a position he held until the television service closed in September 1939.

Throughout this period, Campbell documented his work using a still camera and a 16mm film camera. His collection of around 1,200 photographs and 20 minutes of film was later donated to the Alexandra Palace Television Society by his son, Neil. 'Cam' retired from the BBC in August 1961 and returned to Alexandra Palace for the last time in 1982, shortly before he died in September of that year.

These unique records provide a rare insight into the formative years of the BBC Television Service. Dating from as early as March 1937, they reveal production practices rarely seen before and challenge several long-held assumptions about early high-definition television production.

Dick Fiddy

Traces of television's early comedians

BBC Radio paved the way for music, variety and comedy stars to move into the broadcasting sphere, often offering snippets from their stage acts (sometimes suitably edited) for the home audience. When Television began, that tradition continued with many stage celebrities performing for the new medium, some – especially those incorporating slapstick routines within their performance – especially delighting in the visual aspect on offer. Of course, footage of these TV appearances doesn't exist but many of the stars who appeared have had elements of their acts preserved on precious celluloid, some within feature films, others in especially shot variety shorts. Viewing extracts these clips, we can at least get an idea of what comedy on television was like in the 1930s. Dick Fiddy is your guide into this window on to a comical past.

Stephen Bourne

A sort of magic – Black contributors and creators on pre-war BBC TV

For too long the presence of Black contributors and creators in early BBC television programmes has been marginalised or vaporised. The BBC has also undervalued their contribution - and continues to do so – even in the light of the evidence to the contrary. From 1989-1991, when Stephen Bourne was employed by the BBC and British Film Institute on a research project, he assisted in unearthing this 'forgotten' history. Stephen compiled a unique data-base of pre-war programmes that helped form the basis of several chapters in his ground-breaking 1998 book *Black in the British Frame*. Recently, Stephen revisited this research and has made a number of additions to the data-base. He now has information relating to over 100

programmes from pre-war BBC TV. In his presentation, Stephen will give an overview of the rich diversity of this important subject and challenge the preconceived ideas that the BBC did not provide a constructive space for Black contributors and creators in its early, formative years.

Panel: Early televisions in Europe and the Soviet Union

Oliver A I Botar

Moholy-Nagy: the *Telehor* (Television) as the transmitter of abstract 'light plays'

In 1920-21 Dénes Mihály of the Budapesti Telefongyár (Budapest Telephone Factory) first demonstrated his mechanical television transmission technology, the "telehor." After his move to Berlin in 1925, Mihály would develop a version for the transmission of moving images, introducing several versions of it, including a smaller one for home use at the Fifth Great German Radio Show of 1928.

Also in Berlin, in 1922-23, in a series of publications and proposals for artworks, just as Mihály developed more sophisticated versions of the telehor, his compatriot László Moholy-Nagy developed an integrated conception of the role that technology can play, not only in art, but in his utopian ideals for society as a whole. These ideas were anthologized by 1924-25 in his first book, *Malerei Photographie Film* (*Painting Photography Film)*, in which he wrote that

> [The] concentrated work of organisation is the [intellectually charged] result [that] brings all elements of human achievement into a synthesis: the play instinct, sympathy, inventions, economic necessities. ... Men still beat each other to death, they have not yet understood how they live, why they live; politicians fail to notice that the Earth is an entity, yet we have invented the telehor: television – tomorrow one can look into the heart of neighbours, be everywhere and yet be alone...."

Moholy-Nagy also noted the use of wireless telegraphy in producing images (via microwaves), and eventually proposed employing radio waves to transmit programs that would provide remote control lighting for a mass-produced, domestic version of his *Light Prop for an Electric Stage* (1930) or for the transmission of chiaroscuro *Lichtspielen* (light plays) on nascent television into people's homes. While it was rather unrealistic on his part to imagine that television would become the bearer of abstract light "paintings" for domestic use, he did muse darkly at the possibility – just as with cinema – of the eventual commercialization of the medium within Capitalism.

In this paper I will trace Moholy-Nagy's fascination with remotely transmitted images, both still and moving, and his speculations on their possible use in art.

Danielle Simon

***Radiovisione*: early television and Fascist spectacle at the 1939 Villaggio Balneare**

This paper examines experimental television broadcasts by the Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche (EIAR) from the Monte Mario studio and the Villaggio Balneare in Rome in 1939 as part of a broader fascist project of imperial visibility. In fascist Italy, television promised powerful technical innovations, among them the possibility of reuniting voices with visible subjects and organizing dispersed listeners with a newly ordered visual field.

Situating EIAR's broadcasts within the spatial and ideological framework of the Villaggio Balneare, where the television pavilion stood alongside colonial exhibits and autarchical displays, this paper argues that experiments in radiovisione participated in the same politics of containment and spectacle that structured fascist imperial culture more broadly. Where radio broadcasting had enabled an expansive and often transnational sonic project, television introduced a different fantasy: that of fixing subjects within the frame, rendering audiences simultaneously visible, collective, and governable.

Through examinations of trade journals, exhibition materials, and descriptions of the broadcasts themselves, the paper traces how EIAR producers framed television as a medium capable of restoring a conceptual wholeness long imagined as lost to the ether. In doing so, the paper argues that early experiments in public broadcasts inherited the visual logic of fascist imperialism before television ever became a domestic medium.

Angelina Lucento

Realism in real time: early Soviet monumental painting as proto-television

Scholars of the Soviet avant-garde, irrespective of their specific discipline, have shown that the October Association, the avant-garde artist's group founded by Constructivists and Productivists in 1928, had a critical impact on the development of modern media aesthetics and media theory. To demonstrate their point, they have focused on October's photography section and their members' contributions to periodical design. The work of the group's monumental painting section, however, has gone unrecognized. This paper shows that the members of the section developed one the group's most innovative theories, the theory of monumental painting as broadcast media.

October's contributions to both the avant-garde and media theory cannot fully be understand until the painting section's achievements are brought to light. Through an analysis of visual images and archival sources, I specifically demonstrate that October's painting section, led by the Hungarian émigré artist Béla Uitz, understood monumental painting as a kind of proto-television that offered a live transmission of the experience of the new Soviet reality through its use of color, its embeddedness within the cacophony of public architectural space, and its proximity to public radio transmissions. I reveal the significance of the painterly medium to this process and to begin to elucidate the medium's impact on early Soviet theories of visual broadcast media, which provided part of the foundation for what would eventually become Soviet television.

Jeffrey Cohen

Television before the Network: Performance, Spectacle, Region and Centralisation in Early Soviet Broadcasting, 1931–1941

This paper reconsiders early Soviet television not simply as a history of apparatus, but as a history of performance, spectacle and cultural authority. Drawing on surviving photographs, programme listings, memoirs and archival traces, it asks what early Soviet viewers were actually shown before television became a mass domestic medium.

The talk argues that prewar Soviet television was more polycentric than Moscow-centred histories suggest. Leningrad inherited the St Petersburg

tradition of electronic television research and became a laboratory for adapting music, opera and theatre to the small screen. Kyiv developed scheduled programmes in 1939 and displayed recognisably Ukrainian cultural content, including bandura performance. Odessa and Tashkent also form part of the wider geography of Soviet television experimentation.

The RCA-equipped Moscow Television Centre at Shabolovka should therefore be understood not only as a technical advance, but as an act of institutional and cultural centralisation. Its larger studio, controlled lighting, camera arrangements and vision mixing expanded what Soviet television could show: cinema film, ballet, opera excerpts, children's programmes, civic ceremony and staged spectacle. The paper also asks whether the RCA–Soviet project should be seen only as a one-way transfer of American technology to Moscow, or whether practical studio-production experience may also have flowed back towards RCA and NBC. In that sense, Shabolovka may have been not only a Soviet showcase, but also an unexpected testing ground in the prehistory of American television production.

Before 1941, Soviet television was not yet a household medium. It was a managed public spectacle, using performance to make the Soviet state visible to itself.

Screening: Fragments of Pre-war Television

• *Televising the Coronation Procession, 12 May 1937*
The BBC film unit's record of the first remote outside broadcast.
• *Puddy's Coronation (aka Hail the King!)*, 1937
Teletoons animation in which characters watch the Coronation on television.
• *RCA Presents Its First Television Program, Julky 7 1936* [extract]
Pathé News record of production from the NBC studios in Radio City
• *Television Under the Swastika*, 1999
German documentary about early television in Nazi Germany [extract]

Panel: The intermediality of early British television

Luke McKernan

BBC television news and the newsreels in the 1930s

Over two and a half years, between 1937 and 1939, the BBC television service at Alexandra Palace, included news programmes as an integral part of its daily programming. These news bulletins were not produced by the BBC but featured two British cinema newsreels, *Gaumont-British News* and *British Movietone News*.

Today, these newsreels issues, while strictly speaking not 'television' in themselves, nevertheless represent by far and away the largest amount of surviving content broadcast by BBC television before the Second World War.

This paper will examine why the newsreels were adopted by the BBC, in the context of BBC aspirations and other forms of current affairs programming. Looking in on newsreels and the BBC in the 1930s can tell us much about the contemporary understanding of audiovisual news and the understanding of what television meant.

Ian Christie

Dallas Bower – a visionary at Alexandra Palace

Dallas Bower's involvement with early television and cinema includes the stuff of legend. A pioneer sound recordist in film, he worked on Hitchcock's celebrated *Blackmail*, as well as on its rival as the first British sound feature film, *Under the Greenwood Tree*. In a 1936 book, he foresaw with surprising accuracy how television would take over many of the functions of cinema. And in the same year, he became one of the senior producers of the BBC's Television Service at Alexandra Palace, responsible for an extraordinary series of cultural 'firsts', including the opening night *Television Comes to London*, a fascinating miscellany titled *BBC Television Demonstration Film* (to be shown on the first day of the conference), one act of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, a modern-dress *Julius Caesar* that included the conspirators in fascist uniforms, and a *Tempest* starring Peggy Ashcroft.

Sadly, only the opening night film and the *Demonstration* film survive; but after war closed the service, Bower produced a radio play of Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky*, written by Louis MacNeice and starring Robert Donat. Almost unbelievably, this had its first transmission on the day after Pearl Harbour brought America into the war. One more wartime achievement was his proposal to film Shakespeare's *Henry V* as a morale booster, with Lawrence Olivier directing and starring, and Bower credited only as Associate Producer. The post-war record would be patchier, with some drama and commercials, as well as an experimental film of *Alice and Wonderland*. When I made a documentary about Eisenstein for BBC Radio 3, I was able to interview Bower about his lifelong fascination with the director of *Nevsky*, also incidentally a Lewis Carroll fan.

Closing Keynote

Anne-Katrin Weber

Surveillance and targeting by CCTV –
A transnational perspective on inter/war television's useful forms

Focusing on U.S. and German developments of closed-circuit television (CCTV) in the 1930s and 1940s, this talk examines the medium's military–civilian entanglements during the interwar and wartime period. From media fantasies of teleguided planes to early experiments with televisually enhanced missiles, television was conceived not only as a broadcasting medium but also as a technology for targeting the enemy and surveilling the battlefield.

With the outbreak of World War II, military closed-circuit systems on both sides of the Atlantic became integral to research on aerial warfare and were optimized for the dominance of the "vertical field" (Parks 2018). Kept secret during the conflict, these systems nonetheless paved the way for postwar civilian applications in science, education, and industry.

Drawing on film-historical research on "useful media," this talk brings these lesser-known military applications to light and demonstrates their significance for rethinking both the scope and the periodization of television history.

BIOGRAPHIES

William Boddy

Professor, Film and Media Cultures at Baruch College, City University of New York. His major publications include *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (University of Illinois Press, 1990) and *New Media and Popular Imagination: Launching Radio, Television and Digital Media in the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2004), as well as dozens of articles and book chapters on media history, digital media, and film studies. Boddy has served as Associate Editor for *Cinema Journal*, and on the editorial boards of *Screen, The Velvet Light Trap, The International Journal of Cultural Studies*, and *Television and New Media*. His teaching interests include film theory, the history of American film, avant-garde film and video, media history, and digital media.

Oliver Botar

Recipient in 2022 of the prestigious Moholy-Nagy Award (Moholy-Nagy University of the Arts), and in 2023 of the Henszlmann Prize in archaeology and art history (Hungarian Academy of Sciences), Oliver A. I. Botar is Professor of Art History and Associate Director responsible for graduate programs and research at the School of Art, University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada.

He set up and runs the MA Program in Art and Architectural History at the School of Art and has – as Associate Director (Graduate Studies and Research) – run the MFA Program there since 2022. His Ph.D. (Toronto) was on Biomorphic Modernism and Biocentrism. The nexus of Biocentrism-Modernism, the Bauhaus, the Hungarian avant-garde, László Moholy-Nagy and the origins of new media art have been research focuses.

Dr. Botar, whose scholarly work has been trans-national since the start of his career has lectured, published, and curated exhibitions in Canada, the US, Europe and Japan, and he has collaborated extensively with colleagues in North America and in Europe..

Considered as one of the top scholars on László Moholy-Nagy, he is author of *Technical Detours: The Early Moholy-Nagy Reconsidered* (2006), *Sensing the Future: Moholy-Nagy, Media and the Arts* (2014; reprint: 2023), and the curator of accompanying exhibitions and is co-editor of *telehor* (with Klemens Gruber, 2013). Dr. Botar is the author of numerous articles, book chapters and exhibition catalogues, and is work has been reviewed extensively in both the popular and scholarly press.

He is considered to be a major scholar in the field of modern Hungarian and Central European avant-garde art and culture, and is editor (with Irina Denischenko, et al., 2024) of *Cannibalizing the Cannon: Dada Techniques in East-Central Europe*, and is editor of four special issues of *Hungarian Studies Review*, of which he has been an editorial board member for decades.

Stephen Bourne

Stephen Bourne has been a published author of history books since 1991. His best-known are *Black in the British Frame – The Black Experience in British Film and Television* and *Black Poppies - Britain's Black Community and the Great War* which he has adapted for children.

He is also the author of *Fighting Proud* which focusses on the lives of gay men in the two world wars and *Playing Gay in the Golden Age of British Television*. Stephen graduated from the London College of Printing in 1988 with a BA (Hons) in Film and Television and De Montfort University in 2006 with an MPhil. In 2017 Stephen was recognised by London South Bank University with an Honorary Fellowship for his outstanding contribution to diversity. Stephen's autobiography *Thursday's Child* will be published by Jacaranda Books in September.

Ian Christie

Best known for books on Scorsese, Powell and Pressburger, and early Soviet cinema, Ian Christie is Emeritus Professor of Film and Media History at Birkbeck, University of London, a Fellow of the British Academy and Visiting Tutor at the National Film and Television School. He was Gresham College's first professor in the history of film and media between 2017-21, with his lectures available online at www.gresham.ac.uk/speakers/professor-ian-christie.

Having scripted and co-produced *The Last Machine*, Terry Gilliam's 1994 series for BBC Television marking the centenary of moving pictures, he remains fascinated by the technological and visual culture that produced moving pictures, leading to a prize-winning 2019 book and exhibitions about Britain's little-known pioneer Robert Paul, and a collection of writing about early cinema, *What Made Cinema?* (2025). His film about Eisenstein in Mexico, *A Trip to Tetlapayac*, was shown internationally at festivals in 2023. In 2026 his collection *The Most Important Art: Exploring the Hidden Histories of Russian and Soviet Cinema* appeared, as well as a film about the Soviet avant-garde, *Voices From the Chorus*.

Jeffrey Cohen

Jeffrey Cohen is a broadcasting and media professional whose career has spanned radio, television, and communications strategy since joining the BBC in 1969. His work has included broadcasting projects in the UK and internationally, with a particular interest in the relationship between media technology, politics, and public communication. In recent years his work has centred on human rights broadcasting.

As a producer he worked on BBC programmes including *Timewatch*, *Tomorrow's World*, and current affairs productions. A long-standing interest in television history led, in 1980, to the production of a reconstruction with Arthur Askey of his 1930 appearance on Baird television. In 1986 he was part of the team marking the 50th anniversary of the launch of BBC Television, interviewing many of the surviving pioneers of the medium. This subsequently led to work on a biography of John Logie Baird for BBC Scotland and published articles examining the links between television development and military objectives.

Drawing on his personal contacts made around the world he undertakes research into the history of broadcasting and policy with much focussed on early television development and clandestine radio activity in the interwar period.

Dick Fiddy

Dick Fiddy is a writer/researcher who for many years has studied the history of British television. He is employed at the BFI as their 'Archive

Television Programmer' and also coordinates *Missing Believed Wiped*, the BFI's initiative to track down and screen items once thought missing from the official British TV archives. He is the author of several books on television history and has acted as a writer and/or consultant on various TV productions that have explored television's past.

Doron Galili

Doron Galili is a docent (associate professor) and research fellow in the Department of Media Studies at Stockholm University. He is the author of *Seeing by Electricity: The Emergence of Television, 1878–1939* and the co-editor of *Corporeality in Early Cinema: Viscera, Skin, and Physical Form.*

Lisa Kerrigan

Lisa is the senior curator of television at the BFI National Archive. She joined the BFI in 2008, having previously worked at the BBC Archive and the British Universities Film and Video Council. Her team is responsible for acquiring contemporary television from independent public service broadcasters and streaming companies, and caring for and researching the historical collections of the National Television Archive.

Lisa has worked on projects including Play for Today at 50, 100 BBC TV Gamechangers and a season celebrating the 70th anniversary of independent television in Britain featuring titles from the Associated-Rediffusion collection. She advises on academic research into the Archive's television collections and is a member of the FIAT/IFTA Media Studies Commission.

André Lange

André Lange holds a Ph.D. in Information and Communication Sciences (University of Liège, 1986). He has been a researcher at the University of Liège, the European Institute for the Media (University of Manchester), and IDATE (Montpellier). From 1993 to 2015, he was an expert and head of department at the European Audiovisual Observatory (Council of Europe). He has taught television history at the Free University of Brussels (ULB). Since 1999 he is the editor the website "Histoire de la télévision (et de quelques autres médias) histv.net".

Angelina Lucento

Angelina Lucento is an assistant professor of modern art at Duke University, where she leads an interdisciplinary research group on global Socialist Realism. Trained as a social art historian, she studies the global histories of painting and photography, with a specific focus on contributions from artists from across the former USSR and of the African Diaspora. Her work has been supported by the CEU Institute for Advanced Study, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), and the Getty Research Institute. She has published articles in *Cahiers du Monde russe*, *Performance Research*, *The Russian Review*, *Kritika*, and *caa.reviews*. Lucento is completing her first book, *The Socialist Surface: Painting for the Collective in the USSR, 1918-1941*.

Luke McKernan

Luke McKernan is a retired media historian, having previously worked at the British Film Institute, the British Universities Film & Video Council and the British Library. He has produced books on early cinema, newsreels, British news history, audiovisual Shakespeare, film audiences, and the non-fiction film pioneer Charles Urban. Most of his recent writing has been online, including his website lukemckernan.com and entries for the *Women Film Pioneers Project*. His latest book is a collection of some of his writings on moving images, *Let Me Dream Again* (Sticking Place Books, 2005).

Donald F McLean

Donald received a B.Sc. (Hons) degree in Natural Philosophy from the University of Glasgow in 1975, and a Ph.D. degree in television history from Aberystwyth University in 2018. He started work at EMI's Central Research Laboratories in 1975 in the award-winning CT Scanner development team. Over a full-time career spanning forty years, Donald managed major public sector projects, built and operated several international consulting practices, and latterly advised on business mergers and acquisitions.

Separately, Donald became the first person to find, study, and restore the world's earliest recordings of television. His peer-reviewed award-winning monograph on this work, *Restoring Baird's Image*, was described by Professor Wolfgang Ernst as 'seminal' for Media Archaeology.
He held the position of Chair of the History Group of the Royal Television Society 2013-2018, was elected Fellow of the Institution of Electrical Engineers in 1982. Donald was conferred the position of Honorary Lecturer at Aberystwyth University for 2020-2025 and Honorary Lecturer at the University of Glasgow in 2025.

Publications include *Restoring Baird's Image* (IEE, 2000), and 'Before "True" Television: investigating J L Baird's original television apparatus', *Proceedings of the IEEE*, 2022, 110/6; 'Seeing Across Oceans: J L Baird's TransAtlantic Television Demonstration', *Proceedings of the IEEE*, 107/6; 'The Great British Broadcasting Competition: a multi-disciplinary analysis of the emergence of BBC television', *Media History*, 2018, 24/1.

Paul Marshall

Paul Marshall began his electronic engineering career as a student apprentice with The Marconi Company in 1975, winning the student apprentice of the year award in 1980 after graduation from Plymouth Polytechnic. He left the company in 1984 to begin a life-long career in research and development in video displays technology used in professional flight simulation.

In parallel with professional work, he has restored to operational condition a vast quantity of broadcast TV equipment, including three large vintage TV outside broadcast units, telecines, VTRs and dozens of broadcast TV cameras. He is a founding partner of specialist film and TV facilities company Golden Age TV LLP, and chairman of a charity, the Broadcast Engineering Conservation Group (BECG). As a mature student, he completed a part-time PhD researching the early history of TV awarded by the University of Manchester in 2011.

These activities have led to the founding in 2021 of the Broadcast Engineering Museum near Gainsborough in Lincolnshire. This is now the

largest of its kind in Europe. His hobbies include keeping rare Lincoln Longwool sheep.

Jamie Medhurst

Jamie Medhurst is Professor of Film and Media at Aberystwyth University. His research interests are in broadcasting history, policy, governance and regulation. His is author of *A History of Independent Television in Wales* (2010) and *The Early Years of Television and the BBC* (2022) together with a number of articles on broadcasting history. He is currently leading an AHRC-funded project on 'Broadcasting Policy in a Devolved UK' with colleagues at Ulster, Glasgow, and Goldsmiths London universities.

Jamie is editor-in-chief of the journal *Media History*, was Deputy Chair of the QAA's Subject Benchmark Statement advisory group for Communication, Media, Film and Cultural Studies, and is a member of the REF2029 sub-panel for Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management. He is also a member of the Entangled Media Histories research network (https://emhis.org/) and is Chair the Wales Broadcast Archive Academic User Group.

Kate Murphy

Kate Murphy is a Visiting Fellow at Bournemouth University. Before starting her academic career in 2012, she worked at the BBC for 24 years, predominantly on Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*. She is the author of *Behind the Wireless: A History of Early Women at the BBC* (2016) and co-author, with Michael Carney, of *Hilda Matheson: A life of Secrets and Broadcasting* (2023).

Danielle Simon

Danielle Simon is Assistant Professor of Music at Middlebury College. She is a fellow of the American Academy in Rome and studies the intersection of musical performance and emerging media technologies in Italy during and after the fascist period. Her research has been supported by the Dartmouth Society of Fellows, the Mabel McCloud Lewis Foundation, and the American Musicological Society. Her writing has appeared in English and Italian in publications including *Laboratoire itali*en, *The Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, *The Opera Quarterly* and *Representations*, and the volumes *Sonic Circulations, 1900-1950* and *The Cambridge Companion to Music and Fascism*.

Ron Simon

Ron Simon is head curator at The Paley Center for Media where he has worked for over forty years. Among the numerous exhibitions he has curated include *Witness to History*; *Jack Benny: The Television and Radio Work*; *The Television of Dennis Pottte*r; and *Worlds Without End: The Art and History of the Soap Opera*. Simon has served as an associate adjunct professor at Columbia University and New York University, where he taught courses in the history of the media.

He has written for many publications, including *The Encyclopedia of Television* and *Thinking Outside of the Box: A Contemporary Television Reader*, as well as serving as virtual host and creative consultant of the DVD *Total Television*. He was a member of the editorial board of *Television Quarterly* and former chair of the Peabody Awards jury, as

well as a lecturer at museums and educational institutions throughout the world, receiving the Chevalier de l'ordre des arts et des letters from the French Cultural Services. Simon co-produced with his brother Kirk the documentary *Pulitzer at 100*, a film about the meaning and impact of the Pulitzer Prizes.

Simon Vaughan

Simon Vaughan has served as archivist of the Alexandra Palace Television Society (APTS) since 1992, dedicating more than three decades to preserving the history of the pioneers who launched the world's first regular high-definition television service from Alexandra Palace in 1936.

Throughout his tenure, he has undertaken major archival projects, including the identification and preservation of significant historical collections. His archive preservation efforts have been formally recognised by the Royal Television Society (RTS), which awarded him the prestigious Shiers Trust Award on two occasions. Firstly, for safeguarding and digitising over 1,200 photographs and 20-mintues of film footage taken by Desmond Campbell. And secondly, for the digitisation of the rare 300-page "Black Book," the original 1936 master manual for the Marconi-EMI television system installed at Alexandra Palace.

Simon's work has also been recognised by the British Vintage Wireless Society who presented him with the Duncan Neil aware for Excellent in Preservation. Beyond his work with the APTS, Simon has shared his expertise through presentations at institutions including the BFI and has contributed to the heritage sector as a trustee for historical organisations.

His work continues to provide invaluable source material for television historians and heritage organisations.

Anne-Katrin Weber

Anne-Katrin Weber is Assistant Professor of Television Studies at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland. She currently leads a research project on the history of closed-circuit television (CCTV) and is developing new work on public service media in Switzerland.

She is the author of *Television before TV: New Media and Exhibition Culture in Europe and the USA, 1928 1939* (Amsterdam University Press, 2022) and serves on the editorial boards of *VIEW: Journal of European Television History and Culture* and *Transbordeur: Photographie, histoire, société*.

Mark J. Williams

Mark Williams is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Dartmouth College where he founded an e-journal, *The Journal of e-Media Studies,* directed the Leslie Center Humanities Institute entitled *Cyber-Disciplinarity*, a foundational event in developing Digital Humanities at Dartmouth, co-edited the book series *Interfaces: Studies in Visual Culture*, and directs an NEH-supported DH research initiative, The Media Ecology Project (MEP) which is developing a virtuous cycle of new interdisciplinary DH scholarship about archival media that adds value back to participating archives.

With John Bell he has received multiple NEH grants in support of MEP tools and scholarship and is currently working on a Mellon grant about performance capture data regarding narrative moving image history. He recently received grants from Dartmouth's Leslie Center and Neukom Institute to augment computer vision tools for automated analyses of moving images. He has published widely on cinema, television, and new media history and theory. His book *Remote Possibilities: A History of Early Television in Los Angeles, 1930-1952* will be published by Duke University Press.

John Wyver

John Wyver is a writer and producer, and Professor of the Arts on Screen, University of Westminster. His productions for broadcast television and event cinema include numerous arts documentaries and performance adaptations, and have been honoured with a BAFTA Award for Best Arts Programme, an International Emmy and a Peabody. For the past year he has been active as the co-organiser of the campaign to persuade the damaging changes instituted at the Written Archives Centre at Caversham.

He has contributed to the *Guardian*, *The Stage* and *Sight and Sound*, as well as a number of academic journals, and his books include *Vision On: Film, Television and the Arts in Britain* (2007) and *The Royal Shakespeare Company on Screen: A Critical History* (2019), as well as the collection co-edited with Amanda Wrigley, *Screen Plays: Theatre Plays on British Television* (2022). His most recent publication is *Magic Rays of Light: The Early Years of Television in Britain* (2026).

FURTHER READING

Websites

- *History of Television (and some other media)*
  https://www.histv.net/
  A compendious collection of historical material edited by André Lang.
- *History of the BBC*
  https://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc
  Invaluable official resource, with a number of articles about the pre-war years.
- *Baird Television*
  https://www.bairdtelevision.com/main.html
  Extensive collection of riches about JLB and his work.
- *Early Television*
  https://www.earlytelevision.org/history.html
  Articles from the Early Television Museum, Hilliard, Ohio.
- *Broadcast Engineering Conservation Group*
  https://becg.org.uk/
  From a leading British collection of radio and television technology.

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Inevitably, this is only a selection of the volumes available, including those by presenters at the conference. I have restricted choices to those written in English.

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• Norman, Bruce, *Here's Looking at You: The Story of British Television, 1908-1939*, London: BBC/Royal Television Society, 1984.
Featuring numerous interviews with pioneer figures.
• Sewell, Philip W., *Television in the Age of Radio: Modernity, Imagination, and the Making of a Medium*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014.
• Swift, John, *Adventure in Vision: The First Twenty-Five Years of Television*, London: John Lehmann, 1950.
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