

## How to Look at Television

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It comes as no surprise that television has frequently served as a source and reference for Kelly Mark's work. In a practice that revels in upending common perceptions of the everyday world, television is prototypical and ubiquitous, the epitome of banality. As readymade, as medium, or as a catalogue of genres, Mark has put her engagement with television to good use in such works as Prime Time (2000), Glowhouse (2001) and Glow Video Installations: Horror, Suspense, Romance, Porn, Kung-Fu (2005). More recently, with REM (2007) Mark exploits the narrative impulses of her habitual channel-surfing.

Premiered in the exhibition "Stupid Heaven" at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery in Toronto, REM takes the form of a feature-length movie presented on a television in various "living room" settings. The movie, a little over two hours long, is the product of Mark's television watching over a four month period during the summer of 2007. Following a few simple rules and procedures, (1) she recorded about 170 films from TV, including a few re-runs of classic TV shows, slicing and dicing them to assemble REM. It includes station logos and program intros; notices about nudity, language, violence and that the material has been modified for television viewing; and extensive credits for producers and stars (though the only editor noted is Richard Marks, ACE).

Theodor Adorno, whose title I've borrowed for this text, (2) was among the first theorists to develop a thorough critique of mass media. Along with other Frankfurt School theorists, he demonstrated how television used commodity logic, standardized formats and common stereotypes to impose social norms and maintain the status quo according to the interests of political and economic elites. Developed in tandem with the initial rise of television, this critique maintained that television served to integrate the working classes into consumer society, patterning their daily behaviors and beliefs, keeping viewers passive both physically and psychologically. While this critique may be at some historical distance from Mark's position, even in the era of 500 channels, reality TV and Youtube it continues to shape contemporary media studies. It is an apt allusion to the working class posture that Mark maintains throughout her work, and for the gesture of resistance that REM manifests.

Specifying the setting in which her movie will be viewed, Mark insists on the corporeal experience of TV. In Toronto, REM was presented in four adjoining room-like settings, each composed of TV and stand, sofa, coffee table, rug, ashtray and clock. Assembled from cast-offs and thrift stores, they had something of the retro chic of working class living rooms, not fancy but serviceable and almost stylish. (In Vancouver there were two identical settings, 100% Ikea. Other settings may vary.) The clock is stopped at 4:05, perhaps to suggest the notion that time itself seems frozen in the thrall of TV. (3) Or perhaps

Mark wants to suggest that there is something in the experience of watching REM that goes beyond the mere physical endurance of time spent. These rooms, however composed, assert a domestic social space, an affirmation that whatever experience occurs here is potentially a shared experience. This opens up the dynamic of exchange, the potential for a conversation.

Mark starts from the self-evident principle that being engaged in your everyday environment means that you actually have to pay attention to all the mundane details that make up your everyday experience. REM exploits fully the standardized formats and stereotypes of popular media. Despite its disparate sources, its persistent genre-jumping and frequent interruptions for ads, the movie seems to make a certain kind of sense. A character in one film lights a cigarette and then another character in another film takes a puff, or a series of scenes show a series of characters laughing or running or lying in bed, or a chatty guy in a pick-up is replaced by another chatty guy in another pick-up. The hooks may be gestural, scenographic or narrative but they all keep the story moving along, or sort of anyway. Rather than the fragmented attention span that critics like Neil Postman declare to be one of the harmful effects of television viewing (4), Mark has focused rigorously on the discontinuities and cuts, the pace, characters and storylines of her summer's worth of viewing, and distilled their similarities into a quasi-coherent narrative. It may be no less insipid than the source material she started with but it has equal power to command a state of absorption from the viewer.

Montreal filmmaker Olivier Asselin describes narrative as "a category of understanding which allows us to feel and think." (5) In this light, REM shows and tells the distinct ways in which the artist has used the tropes of television to feel and think through her experience of television. By this, Mark positions herself in the line of critical inquiry extending from Adorno, while building a crucial distance from the normative narratives of television. That this distance is cloaked in self-conscious humour, easy laughs like the identity of the editor, for example, puts Mark far from the psychological and cognitive impairment described in the classic critique. We are reminded that REM is debuted in the context of an exhibition called "Stupid Heaven." The pleasures of television may indeed be stupid, but not mindless; they might induce a timeless catatonic state, but that state may indeed be blissful, like stupid heaven.

(1) Mark's rules were that she could not consult a program guide or otherwise plan what she would watch, and she had to find her opening and closing scenes on her first night of viewing. Further than that, she would watch and selectively record from 8pm until 4 or 5 pm for three or four days in a row, then sort and edit the captured material for another two or three days, alternating between watching and editing throughout the summer.

(2) T.W. Adorno, "How to Look at Television," originally published in The Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television, Vol. VIII (Spring, 1954), and subsequently in The Culture Industry (Routledge, London, 1991).

(3) The clock stopped at 4:05 is also a reference to the final scene in REM, a clip from "Living in Oblivion – 1955" picturing Steve Buscemi waking from a nightmare and looking at his digital alarm clock, which reads 4:05 AM. In fact there are numerous time signatures in REM and they appear in linear sequence, as if the action of the movie occurred over the course of a single day.

(4) Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business (Viking, New York, 1986).

(5) Olivier Asselin (can't find citation)