Television's *Liveness*: A Lesson from the 1920s

Wendy Davis
Division of Teaching and Learning Services (DTLS)
Central Queensland University

Keywords: Television, *liveness*, history, image, surface, scene

Abstract
This paper explores the contested concept of television's *liveness* by highlighting a number of common analytical perspectives between the work of media studies scholar Paddy Scannell and my own approach to television. Outlining such connections provides a point of departure for the paper's discussion of one of John Logie Baird's mechanically scanned television images. Through the discussion and analysis of this image in terms of *liveness*, the paper argues for the need to include some consideration of television's experimental period in contemporary television and media studies. The paper also signals the way Scannell's body of work informs such a project. Through his theoretically and historically informed practices of media studies Scannell broadens the horizons of our engagement with media technologies, offering great possibilities for future scholarship.

Introduction

Television is one of the key technologies of the past century. We could propose a number of reasons for this, including television's capacity to broadcast a seemingly infinite variety of programme genres and its ability to transform and adapt to various domestic, national and cultural contexts. Also, central to television's attraction is the quality it shares with radio of being able to broadcast events to mass audiences as they happen. This capacity is sometimes connected to television's characteristic '*liveness*'. The 21st century sees television at a crucial moment in its development. The contemporary field of television is characterised by transformation. There are big changes occurring with regard to television's technological hardware, transitions from analogue to digital broadcasting, increasing satellite services, as well as the twin developments of gigantic home theatres and miniaturised communication devices on which TV images can be received. Television is shifting further away from its traditional domestic setting towards mobile and individual modes of reception. The choices of what, where

and how to watch are continually expanding. Exactly what form television is going to take in the future is still uncertain. However, given television's continuing history of change and transformation in its programming and delivery, perhaps it is naïve to think that TV will ever attain any stability as a cultural or technological form.

What seems more certain is that television is here to stay in one form or another. For those of us attempting to understand how television functions as part of contemporary culture, TV's current and ongoing transformations make this a challenging task. Arguably, it is only in retrospect that we will be able to most completely understand this moment in television's history. Whilst acknowledging the continuing flux in the field of television, my research explores a historical perspective on an aspect of television that remains a constant feature of the technology – the *liveness* of the television image. Engaging with the television image should be central to our understanding of television's force. It is the location of the technology's entry into the world and the site of the viewer's engagement with it. This recognition, together with the fact that the image's *liveness* produces and shapes the viewing encounter, provokes the need to better understand *liveness*.

This paper is in two related sections. In the first part of the discussion I place my research and analysis of televisual *liveness* in context within the field of television scholarship. In particular, I consider some points of commonality between my work and Paddy Scannell's writing on television as a broadcasting technology. This discussion functions not only to draw attention to the legacy of Scannell's body of work in this area. It also aids in explaining my own position within the field of television and cultural studies. My approach recognises that the television image's technical and material qualities constitute its quality of *liveness*. This means that as a techno-material quality of the television image, *liveness* is a feature of all television images, whether recorded and edited prior to broadcast, or strictly 'live'. Additionally, the paper explores the possibility of considering the content of television images also with regard to *liveness*. The approach I outline is that we can consider the television image as a specific kind of *surface*; an audiovisual materiality produced by certain technological processes. At the same time, television images also present various types of *scenes;* or for want of better terms – content and representations. The surface and scenic aspects of television images intermingle, in what we can understand as a relationship of disjunctive synthesis. For television to be television, surface and scene must appear together. Ultimately, this theoretical perspective allows the paper to outline two central questions for future research into the television image's scene-surface relation. In what ways do the scenes of television images exploit, or maximise, the surface potential of their technical and material *liveness*? Similarly, in what ways do the scenes of television images

diminish, or minimise, the technical and material surface qualities of televisual *liveness*?

In the second part of the paper my analysis of one of John Logie Baird's television images is undertaken in terms of what it highlights about televisual *liveness*, in regard to the theoretical questions just outlined. Baird managed to preserve his television image by using another of his inventions, Phonovision. The fact that the 'original' image is not widely available reinforces the point already made here, on the meagre quality of the television archive. However, the fact that Baird's image can still be seen in any form is testament to his inventiveness. It also suggests a further point about a practice of television history located in the era of 1920s television. That is, such a historical practice involves a degree of speculation, relying on contextual information and commentary to inform the traces and remainders of material in television's archive. While the surviving fragments of early television have significance they may not have had were there an abundance of available, intact archival material from this period to draw on, television scholarship remains an incomplete project if it fails to account in some way for this early period of the technology's history.

In my discussion of the Baird image the concepts of *surface* and *scene* are employed, formulating an understanding of *liveness* that is broader than the technology's capacity to broadcast real events in real time. As my discussion will show *liveness* can be observed through the qualities of the material surface of the television image, however it can also be a quality or affect of the scenes television images make visible. Furthermore, we must recognise that, as it is produced in television images, televisual *liveness* is mobilised in the relation between surface and scene. Finally, the paper suggests ways in which my engagement with this very early television image can inform contemporary television studies.

The Question of *Liveness* and Studying Television
The position from which my approach to television begins is that despite ongoing changes in the field of television, *liveness* remains a key problem for television studies. Moreover, understanding the quality of televisual *liveness* requires a break from the usual modes of television scholarship. In this way, adequate theory and methods of analysis can be provided to discuss the cultural force of television in terms of its *liveness*. Paddy Scannell notes a similar point in *Radio, Television and Modern Life* (1996): 'The *liveness* of broadcast coverage is the key to its impact, since it offers the real sense of access to an event in its moment-by-moment unfolding' (Ibid, 84). Although *liveness* is not the central concept in Scannell's exploration of television and radio in this book, there is a sense in which it underpins much of his analysis of how broadcast technologies have changed the experience of contemporary culture in the modern world. Indeed, in his powerful exploration of

the 'dailiness' of broadcast technologies, he draws a vital connection between TV and radio and the world of the viewer (or listener) by incorporating *liveness* into his discussion. Scannell writes:

> The *liveness* of the world returns through the *liveness* of radio and television – their most fundamental common characteristic. The *liveness* is here understood as the specific temporality, the phenomenal now of broadcasting, and this now is magical (Ibid, 172).

With this statement Scannell employs *liveness* to define the intense attraction of radio and television. Their entry into the social and cultural fabric of the world reiterates the qualities of the world. Furthermore, Scannell develops the concept of 'dailiness' to better describe the 'magical' process by which broadcasting technologies present and structure such viewing and listening experiences. In a number of ways the material presented in this paper intersects with Scannell's theory and analysis. Indeed, I would argue that my analysis of television's *liveness* could function as a corollary to Scannell's highly nuanced consideration of broadcasting, in the spirit of offering another alternative voice to the usual practices of 'cultural studies'. Thus, a further common concern can be noted in Scannell's sometimes explicit discomfort with the embrace of ideological/representational analyses in media studies resulting from the influence of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies. In an early article, Scannell proclaims:

> I wish to revalue broadcasting's social role against its devaluation in arguments that regard it primarily as a form of social control, or of cultural standardization, or of ideological (mis)representation. (1989, 136)

Such analysis of popular culture, sometimes referred to as British Cultural Studies, has been immensely influential over the past few decades, particularly so in Australia, the national perspective in which my research has been undertaken. Scannell, however, signals the possibility of a different pathway and engagement with cultural technologies like television. This is heartening, especially for researchers not interested in repeating the analyses of representation, genre, and individual programmes, in terms of meaning and power, which have tended to dominate the wider field of television scholarship. While Scannell found his theoretical home in phenomenology, my own work has been influenced by what Gilles Deleuze, in his book on Foucault discusses as the post-phenomenological project of poststructuralism.[1]

Liveness vs Live Broadcast

Perhaps one limitation in approaching televisual *liveness* is that there could be a tendency to collapse the concept of *liveness* into the idea of a live broadcast of a

live event. This is not to say that live broadcasting is not one of the primary functions of television. Indeed, Scannell himself underlines this point in his thoughtful article on the television event of September 11 (2004). There he notes that the 'power of live broadcasting' is that it reinforces the 'meaningful character of existence, even when it appears to be collapsing in ruins before our disbelieving eyes' (Ibid, 583). The ability to reassure television viewers of the significance of life is great power indeed.

However, live broadcasting is only one of the functions of television. *Liveness* has been a focus for other inquiries into television, forming a somewhat disparate field of scholarship within the discipline of television studies. For example, in an early article, Jane Feuer (1983) sees *liveness* as a powerful televisual ideology, rather than an aesthetic directly connected to television's technical processes. In his well known book, *Television Culture*, John Fiske associates *liveness* with television's textual never-endingness, connecting this to a theory of audience resistance and pleasure (1987). In separate articles, Mary Anne Doane (1990) and Patricia Mellencamp (1990) connect television's technological qualities, such as *liveness*, to TV's incapacity for history and memory, tracing the resulting tropes of catastrophe and anxiety in the televisual field. In a more productive engagement, Mimi White (1999) argues that discussing television's capacity for history is not antithetical to also exploring *liveness*, even though this is not her focus. However, White does note that *liveness* can coexist with television's discourses of history and memory.

Interestingly, many of these writers still choose to explore *liveness* through television programming with a strong connection to live broadcasting (breakfast television, the Challenger disaster and the weather channel respectively). Only Fiske considers a variety of television genres, although it must be noted that his chief concern is his theory of audience resistance and pleasure. One of my aims is to see how a more detailed understanding of *liveness* can help us to comprehend the great bulk of televisual output that is not broadcast as it happens. My position is that an analysis of *liveness* might also inform projects in television studies that seek to explain the force of other genres, like drama and comedy, which traditionally have not been framed by the question of *liveness*. Indeed, choosing an example like *Stookie Bill*, which as a dummy is obviously not alive, yet when transformed into a television image is produced in a condition of *liveness*, aids in expanding the concept of *liveness* beyond the strictly 'live'.

Liveness and the Problem of History

By using a television image from the 1920s I am clearly employing a historical perspective in my analysis of *liveness*. This marks a further intersection between my research and Scannell's body of work. Juxtaposing television with history presents a number of challenges, and clearly there is a difference between writing a history

of television and comprehending the technology's capacity to transform our understanding of the notion of history. For instance, 'television' can be considered the antithesis of 'history' in a number of ways. Because of its technological quality of *liveness*, and its strong temporality of the present, and its ability to broadcast events and images as they happen, television is often considered to be somewhat ahistorical. As Scott McQuire (1998) summarises, a number of well-known postmodern, critical theorists including Jameson, Debord, Baudrillard and Virilio have characterised television through its apparently destructive historical impulses. For these theorists, television epitomises postmodern culture's loss of history (McQuire 1998, 129). Hoskins (2000, 214) observes a similar point when he notes:

> The popular and almost conventional academic view is that television trivializes the present and creates, if anything, an ephemeral and ultimately simulated history that disappears and is forgotten in the ever-succeeding moments of still more television images.

As Scannell (somewhat more succinctly) describes with regard to broadcast media, 'history appears as a narrative that unfolds in the present' (2000, 21). These same qualities are connected to the poor archival practices of television, a point that poses a further challenge for any historical exploration of television, particularly in terms of its images and programmes. Unlike film for example, hours of television broadcasting has either not been stored, or, has been considered to be of little historical value and later discarded.

Liveness, then, is both a problem and an attraction for television studies, as well as for television history centred on television's images. Very often the historical materials simply do not exist, although this should not deter scholars from working in this area. What it does mean, however, is that perhaps television history centred on TV images will not look like history of other aspects of television that have access to more complete archives and resources. In television studies what has been achieved most successfully are cultural histories of broadcasting, televisual institutions and reception as we find in Scannell's work, or indeed in the writing of US cultural historian Lynn Spigel (1992, 2001). To summarise, the mode of engagement in such writing explores the discursive production of television as a social and cultural object, utilising a commanding grasp of archives related to television (eg. its early policies on programming and style, and in Spigel's case, its marketing to the newly emerging postwar American suburbs). For the television image and its quality of *liveness* any form of historiography, or even a historical sensitivity, remains strangely unexplored. This does not mean we cannot incorporate a historical dimension into such a discussion. However, given the lack of existing source material, television history that engages with television images and the concept of *liveness* may have to begin

from the position of 'making do' with whatever images have survived given that access to an archive can be difficult.

There are precedents for such study. Some pertinent work has been done in this area by William Uricchio (1998a, 1998b). Uricchio employs a historical perspective to examine the debates surrounding television's conception and invention in the late 19th century. Uricchio frames his discussion of television with a broader argument about the practice of media history in relation to television. He believes that those involved in television studies can learn from the re-evaluations that he sees have occurred in film scholarship. Uricchio notes that it would be useful for television history,

> [t]o extend film's recent historiographic break with teleological-driven history – and the consequent 'rediscovery' of historical possibility so evident in the continuing work with early cinema to television. In this work, technological and cultural dead-ends are every bit as interesting as the patterns of success which have tended to dominate media history. (Ibid 1998a, 125)

This is a key point for the engagement with *liveness* and the television image this paper develops. That is to say, Uricchio's perspective on technology and media history opens the way for reconsidering concepts, such as *liveness* and the television image, which have been frequently employed in television studies, yet, as he also points out, insufficiently considered. In observing the explanatory potential that lies in 'technological and cultural dead-ends' Uricchio also acknowledges the possibility of employing sites, such as the mechanically-scanned TV image that is my interest, to illuminate further conceptions of technology.

The value of these early television images is not only that they enhance our understanding of the point of their invention. They can also offer potential insights for more contemporary television scholarship. As Tom Gunning (1998) outlines, considering the history of visual culture is a valuable method for understanding the cultural force of contemporary technologies. He advocates examining technologies at their point of introduction or invention, before they fade into what he describes as the 'world of habit' (Ibid, n.p.). So while the Logie Baird television image would seem to be far removed from the contemporary manifestation of the television image, the point of intersection is that in its opening stages of development, television's technological capacity and quality of *liveness* is clearly evident. Thus, such images become useful sites with which to explore and inform contemporary transformations in our understanding of televisual *liveness*.

Dead End: A Mechanically Scanned Television Image
In 1927 John Logie Baird used one of his many inventions to record a television signal, preserving some of his experimental television images (McLean 2005). One of these images is *Stookie Bill*, which can be viewed as a digital restoration online at http://www.tvdawn.com/tvimage.htm. *Stookie Bill* is the name of the dummy that appears in the image, facing straight ahead while a human hand moves the head from side to side. The image appears stretched and distorted, permeated by wavy vertical lines. It is black and white, with a low degree of resolution.

In the 1920s, television's inventors were exploring two types of scanning to produce the early television images – mechanical and electrical. While electrical scanning ultimately triumphed, the mechanical scanning device invented by German Paul Nipkow (the 1884 Nipkow disk) that was employed in Baird's experiments was important in the overall development of television. Indeed, as Brian Winston notes, '[t]he first decades of the twentieth century were the golden age of the Nipkow disk and its variants' (1998, 94). Nipkow's 1884 spinning disk system was originally patented as an 'electric telescope', and Winston describes its operation in the following way. The invention employed a perforated disk, positioned between a lens and a selenium element in an electrical circuit. By spinning the disk, images could be scanned and broken into a sequence of impulses of light. As these light impulses struck the selenium plate the electrical circuit was activated. At the other end of the electrical circuit, the current was reproduced as light waves. The light passed through a disk spinning simultaneously and the image would be constructed and visible through an eyepiece (Ibid, 92-93).

While electrical scanning prevailed in the story of television's technical development, it is still useful to focus on a mechanical Baird image in the bid to better understand the *liveness* of the television image, particularly given that the 1920s was a period of contestation between mechanical and electrical scanning. Throughout his early career Baird's focus was on mechanical rather than electrical scanning; however, as his son Malcolm Baird (1996) writes, later he did move to exploring the technology of electrical scanning. As I have noted, it was Baird's invention of the Phonovisor in September 1927 that allows us to engage with the *Stookie Bill* image. Winston describes how Baird contrived to us 'ordinary gramophone industry audio equipment to impress the (television) signal on a wax disk. 'He tinkered with it for three months, recorded some images, publicised it, and moved on' (Norman 1984, 46-7, cited in Winston 1998, 269).[2]

The slightly grotesque *Stookie Bill* dummy seems a somewhat unusual choice for creating an early television image. However, McLean (2005) describes how Baird used dummies rather than people in his experiments because they could withstand the intense light needed at that time for mechanical scanning better than his

human assistants. Hills (1996) recounts Baird's own description of the success he had in transmitting an image, initially with a dummy and then with a human:

> The image of the dummy's head formed itself on the screen with what appeared to be almost unbelievable clarity…I ran down the little flight of stairs to Mr Cross' office and seized by the arm his office boy William Taynton, hauled him upstairs and put him in front of the transmitter'. After paying Taynton two shillings and sixpence to stay in position, Baird finally saw a human face recognisably reproduced on his apparatus. (Ibid, n.p.)

It seems that while success came rapidly for Baird, in the end it was short-lived. As Winston describes, in 1928 the Baird Television Development Company was focussed on thirty-line picture scanning, that engaged twelve and a half frames a second, while also building 'televisors' for domestic sale (1998, 95). Winston also outlines (Ibid, 96) how by 1930 Baird's company had formed a somewhat tenuous relationship with the British Broadcasting Corporation. By then televisors were being sold for 25 guineas a set, and in April of 1930 both pictures and sound were being transmitted. As Winston writes: 'The system still produced an oblong picture of only thirty lines definition, although it had by now improved sufficiently, for actual programming to be undertaken' (Ibid, 96).

Sadly, Winston also observes that by 1936, Baird's company had 'achieved their ultimate in mechanical scanning, 240 lines at one twenty-fifth of a second. But it was a dead-end' (Ibid, 98). Finally, electrical scanning gradually took precedence, 'in terms of performance, ease of operation, reliability and general 'elegance'' (Ibid, 98). Baird's image may be a technological dead-end in terms of its technical process being utilised in the later history of TV. However, *Stookie Bill* is by no means a dead-end for television scholarship seeking to add nuance to the conception of *liveness* through an engagement with the technical and material qualities of the TV image.

Liveness: Surface and Scene

As I have discussed in the first part of this paper, a typical understanding of *liveness* might be television's capacity to present 'real events in real time', describing the technology's capacity to transmit events and episodes as they unfold. Indeed, there is nothing incorrect about such a definition of *liveness*, except for the fact that, as I have also noted, when we consider the range of television programming available, clearly a vast amount of television images are not real events in real time. Rather, even so-called 'reality TV' is recorded and intensely edited prior to broadcast. Does this mean that *liveness* is no longer a central feature of the contemporary television landscape? Only if we insist on reducing *liveness* to the technical and temporal capacities of television. As McQuire (1998, 96) suggests:

> Even in an age of pre-recording, the primary televisual fantasy is that everything is 'live', is occurring right now – or, at least, is being seen right now, even if only by the imaginary dyad of host and viewer.

Here McQuire hints at some of the ways in which *liveness* remains a quality of the television image through what might be described (with apologies to Walter Benjamin) as the 'aura' of television.

My proposal is that both understandings of *liveness* are valid. Furthermore, they need to be considered together. *Liveness* is connected to the temporal and technical capacities of television. And, as McQuire's comments highlight, *liveness* has also become something of a 'televisual fantasy'. The idea of *liveness* is frequently constructed by the discourses of contemporary programming. That is to say, *liveness* is produced through the appearance and formation of particular televisual scenes. Whether such *liveness* is technically 'authentic' is not a primary concern, however, *liveness* still remains a quality of all television images through the technology's specific technical and material image processes. This is what we can call the *liveness* of the television surface. The suggestion I am exploring in this paper is that *Stookie Bill* alerts us to the technical and material aspects of television's surface *liveness*, from which we can also consider the ways in which such surface *liveness* resonates and connects with the scenic *liveness* of television images. This perspective allows for a consideration of the ways in which televisual scenes incorporate markers of their surface *liveness*.

Through an awareness of television's technical processes we can presume that as *Stookie Bill* was mechanically scanned and transmitted, the image would have been in a continual, active mode of composition. Therefore, although nothing much happens in the scene of the image (a dummy's head is moved by a human hand), through the technical processes that characterise the production of the television image, materially the objects that constitute the image's 'scene' appear in a condition of process and modulation. Reminiscent of an improperly tuned television set, the wavy lines visible in the image are indicative of the scanning and transmission process, whereby the material effects of these processes are perceptible in the image. The appearance of such lines can be understood in terms of the television image as a particular kind of surface. Materially, the composition of the television image is forever incomplete and partial, and at no point can it be reduced to a single, coherent frame (as film can be). The television image has no separate frames as such, because the image is produced through a continuing signal that modulates in intensity.

While in the *Stookie Bill* image a modulating signal was generated from waves of light, the principles of these technological processes (if not the actual technical

means by which they occur) resonate with the contemporary operation of television today. It is the scanning and transmission processes that produce the specific techno-materiality of televisual *liveness*, no matter what the source of the image. Indeed, it is valuable to realize that even in its infancy television images were not only focused on capturing and representing the 'real world'. The sources of experimental television images were just as varied as the sources of contemporary programming. For example, as Winston describes, a number of early television systems, both mechanical and electrical worked best when transmitting film (1998, 97). Richard Dienst explains that this was 'because lighting could be better controlled, these television cameras scanned flat images more easily than three-dimensional scenes' (1994, 21). Dienst also believes that experimenters, such as Baird, were initially satisfied to turn *something* into a TV image. He notes:

> Experimenters were content from the start to transmit blurry outlines of faces, silhouettes, cartoon cats, and easily recognisable symbols…In these early prototypes, a transmission could be considered successful as long as an image took shape against the choppy grey static (Ibid, 20).

Eric Barnouw also describes how the first successes with American inventor Philo T. Farnsworth's electronic system came, 'when he transmitted various graphic designs including a dollar sign' which witnesses said 'jumped out at us from the screen' (1975, 78). In 'jumping out' at its observers we can recognise the technological force inherent in the immediacy of television's scanning and transmission processes. It seems that it did not matter what the source of the television image, but rather that the technicalities of scanning and transmission produced a specifically televisual image. The focus on representing reality was a potential fully realised later in television's history.

My discussion so far highlights the point that televisual *liveness* does not rest in the particularity of an episode or incident before it is incorporated and transformed by the technology's technical processes. Rather *liveness* can be understood as a techno-material effect of the technical principles that allow episodes and objects to appear as television images. Moreover, as the *Stookie Bill* image demonstrates, the object in the image can be neither alive nor real, yet will still be permeated by the televisual quality of *liveness* as it is transformed into the image.

Clearly, the technology of television is constantly being refined and is presently undergoing a worldwide transformation from analogue to digital delivery. However, while technical processes are changing, it seems that scanning and transmission have changed little in principle. As David Elimelech Fisher and Marshall Jon Fisher comment with regard to the place of scanning and transmission in digital television: 'Images will still have to be scanned before they

can be transmitted into binary signals' (1996, 341). Similarly, Dienst maintains that although technically there are different types of transmission (broadcasting, metal wire, laser technology), each relies on a 'common two-step procedure that I will call the de-screening and re-screening of light through a video signal' (1994, 17). In other words, the principles of television's technical processes of scanning and transmission are central to understanding television's surface of *liveness*, whether it has been produced by mechanical, electrical, analogue or digital processes. And while, when we watch television today, the indications of the *liveness* of the image surface (lines etc.) are not particularly visible, by understanding the techno-materiality of television, we can see perhaps how they, and television, have faded into our 'world of habit'.

The lines are not all that can be seen in the *Stookie Bill* image, for these lines are part of a televisual scene; a presentation of content; the representation of an event where a dummy was placed in front of the television camera and moved from side to side by a human hand. So, in this image what we actually see is a disjunctive, partial composition of dummy's head, human hand and wavy lines. The three intermingling objects constitute the image as a scene; a scene which is produced and appears as a particular technological, visual surface. It is the lines that most strongly signal the television image's disjunctive synthesis of surface and scene and the production of *liveness*. They indicate that the surface is characterised by the quality of *liveness*, however, they are also a feature of the televisual scene as they permeate and distort the appearance of the other two objects. The partiality and incompleteness of this image formation is accentuated by the acute visibility of these wavy lines.

Scenically, the movement of the human hand is also valuable to consider in terms of what this image can tell us about television's *liveness*. Practically, we could surmise, the hand appears in order to create an image with some interest and movement in the testing of the early television technology. However, I would suggest that the hand can tell us more than this about television's operation and its quality of *liveness*. We can understand the hand as a form from 'outside' the technology. It enters the scene of the image, effectively breaking down any barrier between 'inside' the image, and 'outside' the technological processes. As an action that becomes part of the scene, the hand exerts a degree of control over the dummy's hand, and animates it through movement.

Seizing the opportunity to interrupt the image's ongoing process of composition (its *liveness*) and take it in a new direction, the hand must necessarily grasp the moment available for manipulating *Stookie Bill*. That is, the hand interrupts the image while it is in the process of formation and becomes part of the televisual scene. At this stage in television's development there is no opportunity to stop, reshoot, or reedit, to change the image's appearance. Even though Baird had

found a way to record his television signal, at this point there is no way the image can be interrupted or transformed except 'on the run' – as it is being composed and appearing.

What are the implications of this action for our understanding of *liveness*? *Liveness*, then, is connected to the televisual capacity to accommodate unexpected movements and actions, creating new forms and image configurations. *Liveness* is also, even at this embryonic moment, a quality which the technology seeks to control. *Stookie Bill* is not left alone to stare vacantly at the television camera. The scene is explicitly manipulated to create interest and movement, without which the *liveness* strongly connected to the televisual surface would have remained somewhat static and uninterrupted.

Theoretically, one potential of the television image through its continual, modulating processes of scanning and transmission, is that it could unravel, flying off in all directions, meaning the image would lose the capacity to present visible, perceptible scenes. This would perhaps be the endpoint of *liveness* – where the image was so interrupted by signals of its surface (lines etc) that its scenic potential could no longer be realized. However, for the technology to present its images to its audiences, I would suggest that the synthesis of scene and surface needs to be maintained and controlled, albeit as an irreducible relation. Television holds the potential for the *liveness* of its surface, to be scenically exploited. That is, as we see in the *Stookie Bill* image, television can well accommodate unexpected, spontaneous, disruptive and interfering actions and movements as part of scenes. Arguably, this is the attraction of television; the lure of the unexpected together with the knowledge that at any moment the image could present its viewers with something totally unplanned. However, as we also see in the *Stookie Bill* image, more often than not such scenic movements functions to control and manipulate the unfolding of the scene. And this occurs all too frequently in the faux spontaneity[3] of many television genres, the 'unexpected' twists and turns of the soap opera, the heavily controlled 'unpredictability' of the game shows, and the continual 'surprises' and 'jokes' of the television sitcom.

The latter possibility is why so much of television appears to be banal. We are now so familiar with television's genres and procedures that very few images offer anything truly surprising or unexpected. Think of the news which (with minor local variations) is the same every evening the world over. As audiences we are well versed in the strictures and modes of appearance of television images and it is rare that a television event really fulfils the potential of *liveness* to portray unexpected scenes.

Conclusion

Liveness is a key quality of very early television, and remains so to the present day. Although contemporary television bears little aesthetic resemblance to the mechanically scanned image of *Stookie Bill*, this image is a significant point of inquiry for a concept such as *liveness*, which has previously proved vexingly ahistorical. By alerting us to the potentially useful concepts of surface and scene, *Stookie Bill* provides a lesson in utilising this perspective in engagements with contemporary television.[4] The point I have highlighted in this paper is that as the technology was refined, and explicit scenic iterations of the *liveness* of the televisual surface (such as lines) became less visible, television images have produced *liveness* through the unfolding of scenes in other ways. This can include the incorporation of live footage, as well as other mechanisms such as direct address. This has also resulted in what I described earlier as 'faux spontaneity' which is in fact heavily edited and controlled. It is the rare television image that is actually let to fulfil the radical potential inherent in televisual *liveness*.

Finally, I will return to the point at which this paper began, acknowledging the influences and connections to Paddy Scannell on projects such as my own. The space Scannell's work occupies in media studies/ television studies/ cultural studies, or whatever name we give this mode of research and analysis, is powerful. Specifically, as I have practically demonstrated, the legacy of a practitioner such as Scannell is not only in the conceptual and analytical work undertaken. Of equal importance are the points of departure created for emerging scholars in related fields. As Scannell and others demonstrate, it is both possible and vital to generate alternative methods of thought and practice with regard to contemporary media culture. One lesson Scannell sets for current generations of media scholars is of the necessity to find one's own voice. Not only that, we must set ourselves a task of producing our own bodies of work. This requires recognising the achievements of previous scholars, without simply repeating their ideas. It would be both humbling and pleasing if my writing on *liveness* can be seen as this kind of project.

Notes

[1] In *Foucault* (1988) Deleuze discusses the relationship of Michel Foucault's historical practice to the work of phenomenologists Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. See in particular the final pages of the book, 108-123.

[2] The restoration of the surviving Phonovision recordings has been undertaken by researcher Don McLean and these images can be viewed on his website, http://www.tvdawn.com/recording.htm. As well as six of the Baird discs, McLean has restored other television recordings dated up until 1935, including some early BBC

transmissions from 1933. The site also includes a 1967 30-line remake of the first British television play – *The Man with the Flower in his Mouth* (McLean 2005).

[3] Brett Mills (2004, p. 69) has described the 'faux-improvisational' style of contemporary television comedy, a description which bears influence on my use of the term, 'faux spontaneity'.

[4] Elsewhere I have argued that the surface-scene relation of television's *liveness* connects the technology to the contemporary operation of social force and power Gilles Deleuze (1995a, 1995b) has defined as control (Davis 2006).

References

Baird, M. (1996) 'Eye of the World: John Logie Baird and Television (Part II)', *Kinema*, Fall, available at http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/baird962.htm (accessed 11 May 2005).

Barnouw, E. (1975) *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davis, W. (2006) 'Event TV: The Politics of Control and Inhabited Resistance', Ph.D thesis, Central Queensland University.

Deleuze, G. (1988) *Foucault*, translated from the French by S. Hand, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

——— (1995a) 'Postscript on Control Societies', in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, translated from the French by M. Joughin, New York: Columbia University Press.

——— (1995b) 'Control and Becoming', in *Negotiations: 1972-1990*, translated from the French by M. Joughin, New York: Columbia University Press.

Dienst, R. (1994) *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Doane, M.A. (1990) 'Information, Crisis, Catastrophe', in P. Mellencamp (ed) *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, London: BFI.

Feuer, J. (1983) 'The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology', in E.A. Kaplan (ed) *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology*, Los Angeles: American Film Institute.

Fisher, D.E. & Fisher, M.J. (1996) *Tube: The Invention of Television*, Washington: Counterpoint.

Fiske, J. (1987) *Television Culture*, London: Routledge.

Gunning, T. (1998) 'Re-newing Old Technologies; Astonishment, Second Nature and the Uncanny in Technology from the Previous Turn-of-the-Century', Paper presented at the Aesthetics of Transition Forum, 26-28 February, available at http://web.mit.edu/m-i-t/articles/gunning.html (accessed 22 September 2005).

Hills, A. (1996) 'Eye of the World: John Logie Baird and Television (Part I)', *Kinema,* Spring, available at http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/hills961.htm (accessed 11 May 2005).

Hoskins, A. (2001) 'Mediating Time: The Temporal Mix of Television', *Time and Society* 10(2-3): 213-233.

McLean, D. (2005) 'Phonovision: The Recovered Images', available at http://www.tvdawn.com/tvimage.htm (accessed 25 October 2005).

McQuire, S. (1998) *Visions of Modernity: Representation, Memory, Time and Space in the Age of the Camera*, London: Sage.

Mellencamp, P. (1990) 'TV Time and Catastrophe or Beyond the Pleasure Principle of Television', in P. Mellencamp (ed) *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, London: BFI.

Mills, B. (2004) 'Comedy Verite: Contemporary Sitcom Form', *Screen*, 45(1): 63-78.

Scannell, P. (1989) 'Public Service Broadcasting and Modern Public Life', *Media Culture and Society,* 11(2): 135-166, available at http://mcs.sagepub.com (accessed 4 February 2007).

——— (1996) *Radio, Television and Modern Life*, Oxford: Blackwell.

——— (2000) 'For-anyone-as-someone structures', *Media, Culture and Society*, 22(1): 5-24, available at http://mcs.sagepub.com (accessed 4 February 2007).

——— (2004) 'What Reality has Misfortune?', *Media, Culture and Society*, 26(4): 573-584, available at http://mcs.sagepub.com (accessed 4 February 2007).

Spigel, L. (1992) *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

——— (2001) *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Uricchio, W. (1998a) 'The Trouble with Television', *Screening the Past*, 3: 1-10, available at http://www.latrobe.edu.au/www/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fir98/Wufr4b.htm (accessed on 16 August 2000).

——— (1998b) 'Television, Film and the Struggle for Media Identity', *Film History*, 10: 118-127.

White, M. (1999) 'Television *Liveness*: History, Banality, Attractions', *Spectator – The University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television*, 20(1): 39-56.

Winston, B. (1998) *Media Technology and Society: A History: From the Telegraph to the Internet*, London: Routledge.