

**Susan Murray**

***Bright Signals: A History of Color Television***

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018, pp. 320

Belonging to what is probably the last generation growing up in households with both black and white and color television sets, I remember referring to the latter as ‘the color TV’, in order to distinguish it from the normal, monochrome ‘TV’. Before long, of course, our domestic media typology has altered. The color TV became simply ‘the TV’, and the older model was now called ‘the black and white TV’ (shortly before it was delegated to serve as a monitor of the Commodore 64 computer). The fact of ‘color’ became absorbed in television as an unchallenged norm that needs not to be named. This transition in the very meaning of what television is appears conclusive and irreversible. Whereas the cinema, too, became predominantly a color medium long ago, black and white films are still routinely produced in various areas of the industry. Consider, for example, arthouse releases like *Roma* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2018) and *The White Ribbon* (Michael Haneke, 2009), indie films like *Frances Ha* (Noah Baumbach, 2012) and *Control* (Anton Corbijn, 2007), and even genre films like (most of) *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez, Frank Miller, Quentin Tarantino, 2005) and the recent *Mad Max: Fury Road* (George Miller, 2015) rerelease. However, one is hard-pressed to come up with titles of recent television programs in black and white, outside occasional gimmicky one-off episodes or flashback sequences.

For this reason, it is striking to read in the very first sentence of Susan Murray’s *Bright Signals* that in fact, ‘Color television was a hard sell’. It was not only that the apparatus was technologically complex and costly. Murray’s book painstakingly details how the television industry had to work through a wide range of material, institutional, and cultural hardships during the development and introduction of color broadcasting. Beyond the problems of adding visual information to the limited broadcasting frequencies and standardizing electronic representation of color across the industry, there was also a need to address the problems inherent in the subjectivity of perception and commonplace notions about the volatility of color. As the book argues, most significantly — and perhaps most elusively — the novelty of color television had to assume its place in mass culture as nothing short of a new, advanced way of seeing the world.

*Bright Signals* tells the history of color television’s novelty period, focusing on the decades that preceded the commonplace application of color in American

television broadcasting in the 1960s. Color has been considered a part of televisual aesthetics from as early as the initial imaginaries of ‘seeing at a distance’ in the nineteenth century. However, while the first demonstrations of working prototypes of image transmission apparatus took place in the mid-1920s, color broadcasting remained an unfulfilled promise for several decades longer. The first chapters in the book offer detailed accounts of early experiments with electronic color reproduction technologies. As these chapters make clear, the technological capacity was only part of the difficulty of achieving color television, since conceptualizing the nature of televisual viewership appeared to be no less challenging. Murray couples the technological history with discussions of modern philosophical and physiological conceptions of the seeing of color and shows how they influenced the construction of color television. In one of the most fascinating sections of the book, Murray demonstrates how the initial efforts of the NTSC to standardize color practices effectively cast the historical debates about vision into mid-century technological design. The task the NTSC took upon itself was to investigate the nature of human vision in order to best adapt the transmission systems to it. More specifically, it drew on measurements of the psychophysics of perception in the pursuit of what would be a ‘good enough’ color image in relation to spectrum economy and signal compression.

At the same time, the book makes clear that color television never took the so-called natural conditions of vision as a reference point in a straightforward manner but was rather shaped in accordance to very particular cultural powers. For example, one of the main early challenges of color television systems was to achieve an acceptable reproduction of the color of skin-tone — and it was Caucasian tone (and in particular, the flesh tone of young white female models) that concerned the broadcasters’ measurements. Even once color television was first commercially deployed in the 1950s, producers and advertisers needed to learn how to deploy color in different narrative and commercial frameworks. For them, it was essential that the sensory excess of color vision will be properly tamed so as not to break conventions of realistic screen representation.

Viewers too, (now framed as consumers rather than as viewing subjects) needed to learn not only how to adjust their new color sets, but also how to view color programs. In the second half of *Bright Signals*, Murray offers illuminating discussions of the first programs that introduced color to mass audience, the promotional campaigns that accompanied them, and the early deployment of color in international television services. Special attention is given to cultural documentaries that presented color as an improvement of the medium’s verisimilitude and sense of ‘liveness’ and embedded it in a richer intermedial and artistic context. Lastly, Murray shows how by the late 1950s, in the eve of the mass dissemination of color sets, color programming acquired a new cultural meaning, becoming an index of ‘naturally vibrant capitalist America’ in the midst of cultural debates pertaining to the cold war and space age.

The book’s most significant triumph lies in its historiographical and heuristic scope. Ostensibly, early color television appears to be a narrow aspect within the

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history of the medium. But Murray's work relates color television to a range of cultural phenomena and discourses in a manner that continuously allows her to open up novel lines of inquiry. Tackling questions related to technological history, aesthetics, cultural studies, studies of marketing and design, media archaeology, and theories of spectatorship, the book posits the coming of color to television in the center of some of the most prevalent issues in media historiography today. Murray's characterization of the aesthetic function of early color television draws extensively on historiographic studies of early film color, particularly as she emphasizes the dialectics of realism and sensationalism in color moving images. However, more than applying such ideas to electronic media, *Bright Signals* also complements the historiography of color film (that typically focuses on the period of early cinema through the 1930s) by exploring the distinctive mid-century mass culture of consumerism and everyday modernist design. Furthermore, it highlights the unique nature of the formation of color television styles, which, unlike in cinema, often did not emerge out of open and anarchic experimentation but were rather products of complex process of standardization and the race for regulatory approval.

Reading the riveting examples that *Bright Signals* discusses, particularly in its late chapters on early color programming, I found myself at several points putting the book down to look up Murray's references on YouTube. Dedicating more space for close aesthetic analysis of selected scenes could be of benefit for readers interested in questions of televisual style and form. Similarly, I wish the book elaborated more on some non-entertainment deployments of televisual color (in medical or military fields, for example) which are mentioned only in passing. But it is clear that no book with such an ambitious purview can achieve everything in a single volume. The book's production and design also merit special mention — with over one hundred color images from television programs, advertisements, charts, test patterns and photographs, the book is, on top of everything else, a strikingly beautiful object.

Beyond being an extraordinarily researched and lively account of this key period in media history, *Bright Signals* also demonstrates the importance of further theorizing our relationship to colored moving images today. If at first blush we might think that the drama around the introduction of color television belongs to a bygone, naïve era, it quickly becomes evident that the cultural debates about the emotional effects of color are still present in our media environment today. Consider, for instance, the numerous reports about the phenomena of 'post *Avatar* depression', which some moviegoers have allegedly experienced after watching James Cameron's lushly colored 3D blockbuster. As one viewer described it in a CNN report, 'When I woke up this morning after watching *Avatar* for the first time yesterday, the world seemed... gray'.<sup>1</sup> More recently, several advice columns have recommended readers to change their cellphone

<sup>1</sup> <<http://edition.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index.html>> [accessed 28 January 2019].

## Reviews / Comptes-rendus

display to greyscale, claiming that the sensation of the colorful screen is one of the factors that may cause cellphone addiction.<sup>2</sup> We are still learning how to live with color visual media, and *Bright Signals* is invaluable in advancing the understanding of the historical and theoretical issues at play.

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<sup>2</sup><<https://lifehacker.com/change-your-screen-to-grayscale-to-combat-phone-addicti-1795821843>> [accessed 28 January 2019].