



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

## **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Brought To You in Living Color: A Cultural History of American Color Television

Institution: New York University

Project Director: Susan Murray

Grant Program: Fellowships

## *Brought to You in Living Color: A Cultural History of American Color Television*

### *Research and Contribution*

In the June 30th, 1951 issue of *The Saturday Review*, Goodman Ace cynically addresses the arrival of color television. He, like other critics at the time, was not convinced of the need for the new technology so early in the medium's development and was instead suspicious of the motives behind the networks' moves toward color. With his characteristically droll style, Ace writes, "So color is the transfusion television needs to arouse it from its coma of monotony. Of course it is unfortunate so young a medium needs a shot in the arm so soon, but it's hereditary, following closely the pattern of its parent, the motion-picture industry, developing the same anemic symptoms and doctoring itself with the same miracle-drug, color."<sup>i</sup> Critics such as Saul Carson, John Crosby, Robert Lewis Shayon, and Jack Gould were also, at various times, of the opinion that color might be a cover up for poor programming, motivated by set sales or the desire of particular companies to gain control over certain aspects of the television industry. Furthermore, the public battle for Federal Communications Commission (FCC) approval of a color system standard had highlighted the industrial and commercial justifications for color and failed to fully address the potentialities color offered for specific aesthetic developments.<sup>ii</sup> As Neil Harris has argued, "So suspiciously was television viewed by many critics then, that color sets, the most complex consumer commodity that had ever been mass produced...seemed like a wooden victory, a source of shame, a measuring stick to berate all involved with the industry."<sup>iii</sup>

In the midst of such criticism, RCA and NBC invested heavily in and expanded its promotion of color television technology, spending the majority of the 1950s working to brand itself in relation to color, while CBS and ABC (reluctant to funnel profits to RCA by promoting color themselves) did not start making the transition until closer to 1960. Despite NBC's efforts, *Time* magazine declared color television, "the most resounding industrial flop of 1956."<sup>iv</sup> And as late as 1958, the magazine opened an article on the subject with, "hailed as a prodigy, color TV is still a retarded child."<sup>v</sup> NBC's failed investment in color throughout this period reveals how a complex nexus of commercial aims, critical reception, and cultural discourses around color and vision inflected the larger industrial and popular responses to the idea of electronic color in the early stages of its dissemination.

The history of color television in the U.S is most often told—when it is told at all—as a long drawn out legal battle occurring in the post-war era in response to FCC management and restrictions and the competitive machinations of RCA/NBC and CBS. That story is certainly relevant and interesting, however, with few exceptions, it is also where the scholarship begins and ends on the subject. Few historians of television have asked how the introduction of color to the medium was utilized in terms of any number of historically located discourses around technology and vision/perception, video or electronic aesthetics, network branding, product design, program identification, spectatorship, or functions of genre. And, unlike some recent color film scholarship, we have not yet read industrial discourses around, and studies of, electronic color in relation to, broader philosophical and cultural conversations about the nature of color. For the most part, we have been satisfied with the story of color television being a rather straightforward, dry-as-toast narrative of the basics of industrial competition. And even though the study of color in design and media has become a key area of research as of late in other fields (see Blaszczyk, Coates, Kane, Misek, Peacock, Higgins, Yumibe and Brown, Simon, Street, and Watkins) surprisingly this fervor has not extended to research on television color specifically. There has been little scholarship produced on color television in recent years and there has never been a full history of American color television published.<sup>vi</sup>

The most likely explanation for this oversight involves the placement of the battle for FCC approval as the sole focus of all color television history, as well as the reluctance of many contemporary U.S. television studies scholars to engage with questions of technology, vision, and aesthetics. Television is most commonly thought about, even by area specialists, in terms of the cultural narratives it creates and engages with, rather than as a highly complex technology of visual culture. Some media scholars have engaged with the question of aesthetics in relation to the culture or history of television production (most

notably John T. Caldwell) and some have engaged with television technology (Lisa Parks in her work on satellites, for example).<sup>vii</sup> Few scholars, however, have considered the actual mechanics/physics of television broadcasting in relationship to the history of industry, culture, video aesthetics and theories of the seeing subject, and this is my project's ambition.

This book project, which is under contract with Duke University Press, examines over forty years of explorations in a unique form of vision that baffled and inspired television executives, engineers, designers, and critics and which revealed the limits of control over the technology itself and over the seeing subject and imagined consumer desire. The more than three decades between the early tests of mechanical color television in the late 1920s and full adoption of color by U.S. networks in the 1960s saw extended and compelling popular, scientific, and industrial conversations about the utility and meaning of electronic color. This occurred alongside and in between debates about technical standards, dueling technical systems, concerns over interference and bandwidth, color in product design, programming, perception and psychophysics, optics, fidelity, color harmony, colorimetry, and aesthetics. This project tells this story, culminating in the postwar decades, as color sets went on the market and NBC executives began to brand the network in relation to color technology. This was a period when industry insiders, audiences, engineers, regulators, critics, color specialists, consumer analysts, design experts, and psychologists all weighed in on the use and meaning of color and its effects on emotions, vision, and desire. Of course these discourses did not occur in isolation as they borrowed from and intersected with larger historical notions and beliefs about color, even as they worked to tease out the specific definitions, applications, and implications of color television technology.

In this project, I will investigate the commercial, scientific, and cultural discourses through which the technology and perception of electronic color took shape, and in doing so, position color television as central to the broader history of twentieth century visual culture. I will argue that the development of color television was the first deliberate attempt at negotiating an advanced aesthetics for television and that color technology was a site of great anxiety and tension for the industry—not just in terms of who would ultimately win the “color war,” but more essentially than that, over what television was supposed to do and to be. I will also analyze the way that color was used in advertising and programming, its relation to genre, form, as well as cultural beliefs about realism versus spectacle and fantasy. This project aims to intervene into a variety of scholarly disciplines as it brings to light previously overlooked or understudied historical connections central to twentieth-century constructions of visual culture.

#### *Methods and Work Plan*

The chapters contained in this work will be roughly in chronological order and address specific issues related to the industrial, technical, and cultural explorations and applications of electronic color. The table of contents will be as follows:

1. *Introduction*
2. *'Now Comes Color': Mechanical and Early Electronic Systems*
3. *'Natural Vision vs. Tele-Vision': Defining and Standardizing Color*
4. *'Chasing the Rainbow': Experiments in Network Color, 1950-1955*
5. *Color City: Expansion, Stabilization, and Promotion, 1956-1960*
6. *'Wonderful World of Color': Network Conversion, 1960-1970.*
7. *Conclusion*

During the academic year 2013-14, I have held an ACLS fellowship and been a fellow at the NYU Humanities Initiative, dedicating myself full-time to the research and writing of this intricate and complex history. As of April 2014, I have completed the majority of my archival work and have full drafts of chapters three and four and I am in the middle of writing a draft of chapter five. I have also submitted a pilot article for this project to *Screen*. I plan to complete the research for and write a draft of chapter six (perhaps the lengthiest chapter in the book) over this summer and during the 2014-15 academic year. In terms of the book project, my NEH fellowship/sabbatical period (which would begin in June 2015) would

be devoted to the full-time research and writing of chapter two (another lengthy chapter) as well as to drafting the introduction and conclusion. I will also use that time to do final revisions of the entire manuscript and to organize and acquire permissions for the large collection of color images that will be included in the book. In addition, I plan to research and write an additional journal article on an episode in color television that will be only briefly mentioned in my book, but which I believe presents a rich moment in the history of visual culture and the alternative uses of the technology: the collaboration between CBS, the University of Pennsylvania Medical school, and the pharmaceutical company Smith, Kline & French in the refinement of a color television system for medical training in the late 1940s.

### *Competencies, Skills and Access*

The arguments and chronology of this monograph will be based on archival research from the AT&T archives, the NBC collection at the Wisconsin Historical Society, the Frank Stanton, Thomas T. Goldsmith, NBC, and Frederic E. and Herbert E. Ives collections at the Library of Congress, and the Inter-Society Color Council, David Sarnoff and RCA collections at the Hagley Museum and Library, together with other primary sources, such as press accounts, FCC and National Television System Committee documents, and color television guides, manuals, technical journal articles, and television textbooks from the 1940s-1960s. I have also viewed programs and industrial films from the Paley Center collection and the Prelinger archives. The secondary literature will be drawn from a range of fields including philosophy, design, art history, psychology, cinema studies, history of photography, history of science and technology, media studies/history, and American studies.

This work is, in many ways, an extension of the research I have been doing for the last fifteen years. My first single author book was also a historical work and focused on how the industry utilized performers to brand networks and define television in its transitional years, roughly from the mid-1940s until the mid-1950s. In the years since that book's publication, I have continued to publish extensively in journals and anthologies on the topic of television and its intersections with other cultural and aesthetic forms, while also expanding my scope to include other visual mediums, such as digital video and photography. In writing *Brought to You in Living Color*, I will be well served by my extensive knowledge of mid-twentieth century American history in general and television history in particular as well as my expertise in the areas of visual culture and media theory/studies.

### *Final Product and Dissemination*

The monograph will be published by Duke University Press and the article on color medical television would be submitted to a journal such as *Technology and Culture*. With the help of those who do publicity for my department, NYU, and Duke UP, I intend to reach the widest possible readership for this work—which would include both scholars of the humanities as well as a more general readership.

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<sup>i</sup> Goodman Ace, "The Hue and the Cry" TV and Radio, *The Saturday Review*, June 10, 1951: 24.

<sup>ii</sup> See: Robert Lewis Shayon, "2,591 Years of 'Progress': Thales, Paley & Sarnoff," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 34 (July 28, 1951): 26; 83; Jack Gould, "The Hidden Costs of Color," *New York Times*, May 1, 1966, II: 13; Saul Carson, "On the Air: Color for What?" *The New Republic*, 121, October 31, 1949, 20-21.

<sup>iii</sup> Neil Harris, "Color and Media: Some Comparisons and Speculations," *Prospects*, 11, 1986 (Cambridge University Press): 7-27.

<sup>iv</sup> "Faded Rainbow," *Time*, October 22, 1956.

<sup>v</sup> "Television: Chasing the Rainbow," *Time*, June 30, 1958.

<sup>vi</sup> Exceptions include: Jonathan Sterne and Dylan Mulvin who have two forthcoming articles on compression, fidelity, psychophysics, and standardization in the NTSC tests and reports (1950-53) as well as Andreas Fickers on color TV in Europe and Britain and Oren Soffer on color TV in Israel.

<sup>vii</sup> John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture* (Chapel Hill: Duke UP) 2008; Lisa Parks, *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites and the Televisual* (Chapel Hill: Duke UP) 2005.

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