

# inside out: television on television

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MC230 Real TV : Lynne Joyrich

*Where doors and walls are made of mirrors, there is no telling outside from in,  
with all the equivocal illumination.*

~ Benjamin, The Arcades Project [R1,3]

After some high-profile staffing shakeups in the federal government this past fall, *The Sacramento Bee* ran a piece in the “Lifestyle” section comparing two recently-promoted female officials: National Security Advisor and now Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and C.J. Cregg, the Press Secretary who had just stepped into the position of Chief of Staff on the political TV drama *The West Wing*. “Yes, we know that one of them is a real person and one of them isn't (and yes, we even know which is which),” professed author Rachel Leibrock — but the fact that such a disclaimer is necessary only underlines the article’s premise: real and televisual zones are overlapping and corresponding rather than sharply discrete. In this paper, I explore the topography of the border between Condoleezza and C.J. that Leibrock so flippantly demonstrates to be both decisive and insubstantial. I figure this distinction spatially, as the boundary between what’s inside and outside of the television — between reality and entertainment, between the world surrounding the viewer and the world contained by the edges of the screen. In my investigation of the permeability of this threshold, I first review some of the literature that focuses specifically on self-reflexive television (or television as self-reflexive). After navigating this theoretical landscape and its key problematics, I apply my model to a close reading of an episode of *The West Wing* that takes the form of a mockumentary about C.J. Cregg and her role as Press Secretary, considering the formal, narrative, subjective, and economic operations in evidence. Overall, I argue that the partition formed by the six sides of the

television box isn't as rigid as it might appear, and that analysis of it thus calls for an approach that can inhabit and express constitutive ambiguity and contradiction as fluently as television itself does.

The category of self-reflexive television comprises, most literally, programs that comment narratively or formally on television itself. In his article "Prime-Time Fiction Theorizes the Docu-Real," John Caldwell comprehensively analyzes the various instances of a more specific aspect of this genre: "episodes in entertainment programs that self-consciously showcase documentary units or modes as part of their narrative and plot and/or documentary looks and imaging as part of their *mise-en-scène*" (259). He begins from an acknowledgement of the textual and political complexity of this mode, which functions simultaneously as "programming 'stunts' — special episodes aimed at eliciting coverage and viewership... invok[ing] marketing and programming strategies as well as aesthetic forms" (259), and yet "also provide[s] an extensive set of critical-theoretical mediations on fundamental aspects and definitions of television, the televisual apparatus, and the television experience" (260), a critical awareness and sophistication that emanates from media producers. In Caldwell's view, then, the latter is subsumed by the former, as ultimately "the docu-real serves the logic of corporate media conglomerates" (288). Across multiple registers, the critical, deconstructive, postmodern mediations deployed by this form of self-reflexivity feed back into capitalist self-promotion.

In her discussion of the phenomenon of "inter-program referentiality," Mimi White similarly posits that this narrative device of fabricating crossovers between different programs is (virtually exclusively) "an obvious commercial-promotional strategy" (52). She concludes that "television works to construct an all-encompassing 'world' containing everything — fact and fiction, information and entertainment, the real world and a simulacrum — the inclusivity of

which is simultaneously nothing but an image of television itself” (57). The passing reference to Baudrillard’s theory of simulation is no coincidence: in both Caldwell and White’s accounts, television appears increasingly like a simulacrum in the Baudrillardian sense, particularly in terms of the apparently inexorable circuit of capitalism. For Baudrillard, even capitalism is caught in the vicious cycle “of our time: the hysteria of production and reproduction of the real,” wherein “when [capital] wants to fight this catastrophic spiral by secreting one last glimmer of reality, on which to found one last glimmer of power, it only multiplies the *signs* and accelerates the play of simulation” (180). The mediation of the real, in other words, is a calculated capitalist ploy (if, in the grander scheme of things, a futile one).

Caldwell’s analysis of television’s explicit version of this mediation is structured around the originary opposition of “the entertainment/drama versus news/reality worlds” (in my quasi-metaphorical terms, what’s inside versus outside the television) — and while he avers that “the segregation of these worlds is far from total,” conceptually this “split” remains “a fundamental part of its viewer’s consciousness” (259). And, of course, the segregation of these two poles isn’t value-neutral: the “real” is esteemed over the spectacular in a quintessentially Modern tradition that is at the heart of, for example, classical Marxism’s privileging of the determinism of the base over the ideological deceptions of the superstructure. The strategic genius of “docu-real” television, then, is that it appropriates the more authoritative representational regime: in “an electronic culture that awards public posture and mastery of the real... prime time flaunts its ability to step outside of narrative confines and break fictional constraints; it flaunts its ability to indulge in, mediate on, and deconstruct the real” (289), with “works that perform the categories, guises, and styles of documentary and the real” (286). As in Baudrillard, then, “the hyperrealism of simulation is expressed everywhere by the real’s striking resemblance to itself” (B 180).

This explanation, I think, is also subject to the aporias of Baudrillard's theory. Most crucially, it is only from a position of deep and abiding (Modern) faith in the (former) integrity of the real and its (former) distinguishability from the realm of the imaginary or of representation that one could lament so intensely its total disintegration. It is only on the basis of a real conceptualized as having a stable definition and borders that one could posit that the real is now totally vanished into the simulacral circuit of late capitalism. I'd like to propose, at least provisionally, that postmodernism is characterized, not by the death of one term (news, reality, representation) at the hands of the other (entertainment, spectacle, simulation), but by their increasingly multivalent interpenetration. This is a view which holds the operations in question — including those of critique and marketing mobilized by docu-real episodes in Caldwell's description — in parallel, resisting the *a priori* assumption that they are mutually exclusive and that the latter necessarily negates the former.

In "Watching Ourselves Watch Television," Jim Collins offers a comparable assessment, writing that "The dismissal of television as simulation depends upon the absence of a meta-discursive, ironic component in either images or their interpreters, yet the proliferation and recycling of the already represented produces a *hyperconsciousness* that makes a totalizing, seamless concept like Baudrillard's 'hyperreal' difficult to maintain" (268). In other words, television's "endemic" self-reflexivity (270) is not as effortlessly absorbed by the regime of simulacra as TV critics often suggest. According to Collins, this view is haunted by "the Adorno/Horkheimer theorization of mass culture as bad object" (261), and "undermined by its dependence on a mass-conspiracy scenario predicated on the hidden motive of the producer of the message and the lack of awareness of its receivers" (270). Collins himself is, perhaps, naively sanguine about viewers' interpretive agency, about the transparent translation of

television's "hyper-awareness of its own simulated, commodified nature" (270) into a position of equal skepticism, "sophistication," and "distantiation" on the part of its audience. The attention of theorists like Caldwell and White to the ways TV's (often smug and self-congratulatory) self-reflexivity serves the economic interests of the media industry — precisely by rewarding viewers with the pleasurable sensation of their own knowingness and media savvy — remains essential. What Collins does contribute, in particular, is an exploration of the implications of this distinctly postmodern mode for the subjectivity of spectatorship. He posits a viewer with the "ability to step inside and outside the television address at will" (272), and "a notion of the television subject that is likewise both decentered and recentered, neither completely absorbed by all programming, nor entirely detached from it" (265). A subject, that is, who — like the textual phenomena under discussion — can occupy contradictory positions simultaneously (for example, the position of critical distance and that of capitalist dupe, of "irony" and "involvement" [272]). Who navigates the murky borderlands between (not definitively inside or outside) dichotomous terms.

In his article on reality TV, "The Meaning of Real Life," Justin Lewis elaborates on this constitutively ambiguous formation. He frames his argument with a similar (and similarly ambivalent) opposition to Caldwell's: while on the one hand "We now live in what John Corner refers to as a postdocumentary culture, one in which the traditional codes of documentary realism intermingle with genres based on celebrity and artifice" (288), on the other "the distinction between authenticity and pretense, between reality and artifice, remains vital to the pleasure and politics of contemporary TV viewing" (288-9) — that is, "Television has become postmodern in form while remaining steadfastly modernist in its assumptions" (288). In other words, Lewis, like Caldwell, is interested in the ambivalent schism between the "real" that

purportedly exists outside of television and the “entertainment” that is presented inside it, in the ways the convergence between these two registers is continuously both repudiated and remanufactured across multiple, overlapping epistemological fields. Again, ideologically-inflected value judgments are also in play, as “In most audience studies, the ability to signify reality on television is generally seen as positive” (289), while at the same time “many viewers retain a high degree of skepticism about the authenticity of factual entertainment programs” (290). Rather than ultimately collapsing both these positions into their functional economic benefits for the media industries, however, Lewis arrives at a view of the televisual “real” that retains the sort of suspended contradiction(s) that I’m envisioning. Also arguing explicitly against Baudrillard’s vision of an “exterior world” entirely “ingest[ed]” by television, he maintains that “We can accept the veracity of two distinct realities: the one we live in and the mediascape” (289). The fact that “these two worlds are juxtaposed so routinely that they seem to be two aspects of a single epistemological category [‘reality’]” (289), that “It is difficult to consciously draw a line between the logic of the mediascape and the way we make sense of the unmediated world” (299), does not entail that any and all distinction between the two has been dissolved.

What emerges for Lewis, rather, is an awareness of what I would call the permeable boundary between “realities” that nonetheless remain provisionally separate in crucial but always contingent ways. The result: “a culture with the ability to move almost seamlessly in and out of different perceptual planes, to think of a fiction program as both real and unreal... both external and internal to our world” (294). As for subjects, “Most of us inhabit a space in the grey area between these two epistemes. We flit back and forth so often and so habitually that we lose our grip on where we are” (301). Here, movement, liminality, ambiguity become the key conceptual

terms, displacing appropriation, totality, opposition (though Lewis's retention of a binary structure curbs this theoretical departure somewhat). I'd like to carry this theoretical inflection, derived from these discussions of various genres of self-reflexive television, into an exploration of television's borders more generally.

Both Lewis and White assert that the specific televisual phenomenon they explore is a microcosm of a more extensive, diffuse formal principle, one which "expresses the epistemological contradictions already involved in watching television" (Lewis, 289) or "is increasingly the stuff of which all television is comprised" (White, 60). It is not surprising, then, that since its early days television has been both feared and revered as a medium that renders ostensibly stable boundaries between inside and outside penetrable and volatile — particularly the walls of the home. In his meditation on windows, Thomas Keenan quotes Hutchinson's 1946 primer *Here Is Television, Your Window to the World*: "Television actually is a window looking out on the world... Television means the world in your home and in the homes of all the people in the world" (x-xi / 130). Keenan duly notes the ambivalence manifested here about whether television is a "breach" that allows the gaze access to what is at a distance or a machine that enacts a sort of spatial collapse of this distant place into the place of the viewer — what amounts to an overall "confusion over inside and out" (130). Lynn Spigel elaborates on the social context of this confusion, arguing that "experts of the period [the 1950's] agreed that the modern home should blur distinctions between inside and outside spaces" (212), and that "Given its ability to merge private with public spaces, television was the ideal companion for these suburban homes" (213). At the same time, this ambiguity was also the source of acute "anxieties," as "popular media expressed uncertainty about the distinction between real and electrical space" (219). In early iterations of self-referential programming, wherein "Television families were typically

presented as ‘real families’ who just happened to live their lives on TV,” these TV personalities “crossed the boundaries between fiction and reality on a weekly basis” (224). In my view, such unstable segregations are the result of a collision between entrenched binary divisions and a medium that exists fundamentally as a passage between them, rather than being reliably anchored to one side or the other.

This operation of mediation or transmission is highlighted by television’s conventional association with “liveness” in theoretical discourse. More typically considered as a temporal mode, liveness also inextricably implies a distinct spatiality. In her influential article, “The Concept of Live Television,” Jane Feuer defines liveness as “an equivalence between time of event, time of television creation and transmission-viewing time,” a formal principle which is always already bound up with “an ideology of the live, the immediate, the direct, the spontaneous, the real” (14). If what’s live is what’s present (literally, or more often on television, metaphorically), this invokes an alignment in both the temporal and the spatial sense of the word: as the fetishization of instantaneous transmission engulfs any temporal gap, the spatial gap between the place of production and the place of reception is also collapsed. As Keenan puts it (in a different article), “it has become a cliché, a veritable commonplace, to say that today things don’t happen unless a camera is there... The corollary of the cameraman’s being there is that, in a way, we are too” (107). And vice versa, as in *Here Is Television*: what’s there is also “in your home.” In his essay “Television: Set and Screen,” Sam Weber offers the most concerted elaboration of this spatial schema. If, as he points out, television means, etymologically, ‘seeing at a distance,’ what this visual technology “appears to overcome thereby is the body, or more precisely, [its] spatial limitations” — in particular, the limitation of “occup[ying] one place at a time” (115). In the case of television, by contrast, “its perception

takes place in more than one place at a time. Television takes place in taking the place of the body and at the same time in transforming both place and body. For, by definition, television takes place in *at least three places at once*" (117): the places of production, of reception, and the "in between" place of transmission. If, throughout this discussion of self-reflexivity, television's *textuality* has been theorized as perforating and compromising the boundaries between discrete spaces, as generating contradictory overlaps and simultaneities, Weber makes this claim for television as a *medium* (in its association with liveness, its perceptual apparatus). For him, television "by definition" is the perpetual superimposition of divergent spatial zones: what's inside the television and the home, what's outside of it, and (via) the conduit between the two.

Weber's crucial addition is that he understands this maneuver as a rupture as well (and simultaneously) as a fusion:

if television is both here *and* there *at the same time*, then, according to traditional notions of space, time, and body, it can be *neither fully there nor entirely here*. What it sets before us, in and as the television *set*, is therefore split, or rather, it is a *split* or a *separation* that camouflages itself by taking the form of a visible *image*. That is the veritable significance of the term 'television *coverage*': it *covers* an invisible separation (120)

The very unification of places that television effects is concurrently a breach in "everything that defines its identity with respect to place: events, bodies, subjects" (117); television's presence is also a division which is then "covered" by a further sensation of presence. Succinctly, television "overcomes distance and separation; but it can do so only because it also *becomes* separation" (116). Thus, it not only dismantles boundaries, blends oppositions, inhabits between-ness, but simultaneously partitions spaces, fractures unities, and camouflages schisms. If Lewis, then, insists that the dichotomy of televisual and experiential realities is perpetuated, even as "The world of television does not simply merge with our own; it is as much a part of it as the furniture

arranged around it” (292), this suspended ambiguity is also in play when Weber contends (similarly) that “a profound *complicity* obtains between the *medium of television* and the *world* composed by these forces” (112). That is, this interpenetration coexists with a splitting.

The movement of intermixture, however, remains primary. Troping toward Baudrillard, Weber notes that one of the defining features of television is that here (in contrast to film), “The minimal difference necessary to distinguish reproduced from reproduction, model from copy, repeated from repetition, is reduced, tendentially at least, to the imperceptible... one cannot even discern *that* or *when* reproduction or repetition, in the manifest sense of recording or replaying, is taking place” (121). This formal indistinguishability is one of the richest building blocks of self-reflexivity. Moreover, “this unsettling tendency is also constantly being recuperated and reappropriated; and this allows television also to function as a bulwark of the established order. The more the medium tends to unsettle, the more powerfully it presents itself as the antidote to the disorder to which it contributes” (126). That is, Weber, too, is concerned with the political implications of television’s boundary-blurring disposition. So we are returned to the key problematic that I hope has emerged from this survey: as critics, how can we take into account the rigorous recuperative ability of capitalism without simply slipping into a nostalgic privileging of stable distinctions between reality and entertainment, fact and fiction, “reproduced [and] reproduction”? If I’m attempting to theorize television as a medium that holds contradictory spaces — the inside versus the outside of the TV, the home, the subject — in distinction but simultaneously in imbrication, then writing about it, in consequence, must venture a parallel sort of paradox. There is a line to be walked between not discounting self-reflexivity’s meaningful critical function and not being naively optimistic about the audience’s ability to take up this distanced position — the line of there no longer being reliable lines at all. This endeavor is, of

course, complicated by the fact that (when it comes to self-reflexivity, certainly) academic criticism can't stand reliably outside of television's operations either — since television has proven the market value of a similar mode of commentary. What follows, then, is an experiment. I'd like to analyze one paradigmatic self-reflexive episode, in order to demonstrate how the theoretical characteristics I've been outlining function in specifics, but also to test drive an intellectual geometry that leaves space for their complexities.

*The West Wing* is a drama series currently in its sixth season on NBC. Palpably bred in the climate of the Clinton administration, it portrays the (personal and, literally, political) trials and tribulations of Democratic President Bartlet [Martin Sheen] and his immediate staff. A paragon of what's colloquially termed 'quality television,' it's known (demographically) for its liberal, educated audience; (formally) for its high production values and luscious, cinematic visual style, extraordinary acting by an all-star ensemble cast, and fast-paced, cerebral dialogue; (narratively) for 'educationally' offering "a realistic, behind-the-scenes peek" (nbc.com) into the inner workings of government. In other words, the program's 'quality' status evokes a complex of overlapping and often conflicting interfaces with reality. Its superiority inheres in its "realistic" depiction of politics, but the fact that it goes "behind-the-scenes" marks politics itself as already spectacular rather than real. It's realistic also because of its superiority: the didactic value of presenting intelligent, nuanced explorations of timely civic debates gives it a patina of sober authenticity. At the same time, it promotes itself as a drama that deliberately explores non-fictional situations and personages through fabricated fictional counterparts; as such, its realism is the Hollywood reality effect of suture and seamlessness, rather than the claim to a documentary-esque access to the real world. Its market appeal (especially since Bush replaced Clinton during the show's second season) lies as much in its construction of a left-wing fantasy

government that diverges radically from the actual one as in any move to collapse reality into entertainment.

Kirsten Marthe Lentz asserts that when ‘quality television’ became a recognizable category in the 1970’s, it was particularly associated with feminism and the working woman (paradigmatically, Mary Tyler Moore), as intertwined with “a self-reflexive critique of the medium itself” (47). The function of critique is paramount here: this strategy was presented as “removed from and superior to ‘normal’ modes of televisual self-referentiality... a way of making television’s banal mode of self-promotion into a new mode of critical reflexivity” (56-7). While the specifics of this historical moment are, at the very least, submerged in *The West Wing* as a contemporary drama, reflexive critical operations surface with a vengeance in an atypical episode, one that Caldwell could include in his taxonomy of “docu-real” specials. Entitled “Access,” this fifth season episode takes the form of a mockumentary: an eponymous PBS program [fig. 1]<sup>1</sup> profiling Press Secretary C.J. Cregg [Allison Janney] (a central character on *The West Wing* and probably the most influential woman in the Bartlet administration). As the story goes, C.J. has agreed to allow an acclaimed documentary team to follow her and film her activities on a typical workday. The final product is a fictional show with all the formal and narrative trappings of non-fiction, and one which thematizes the precariousness of this very border.

On the most literal level, “Access” appropriates the authoritative conventions of documentary — to capitalize, as Caldwell argues, on the privileging of realness in modern discourse, and hence simultaneously (in Baudrillardian terms) exacerbating the disintegration of the real in favor of its simulation. The mockumentary genre has become a regular, even

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<sup>1</sup> The corresponding screencaps throughout are located at <http://j-l-r.org/asmic/access> (apologies; they were too numerous to reproduce in this document).

quintessential fixture of postmodern media, so this can hardly be considered an innovative or original gesture. What is particularly evident in “Access,” however, is the equalization of varied registers of reality — a veritable smorgasbord that in itself already compromises the neat opposition of news and entertainment. In *Access* (the PBS special), a coherent narrative with reliable truth claims is constructed by supplementing coverage of C.J.’s day with an assortment of stock footage — clips which “Access” viewers understand to be: real archival record of past presidents, press secretaries, and press corps [fig. 2]; home movies of actress Allison Janney’s (rather than character C.J. Cregg’s) childhood [fig. 3]; excerpts of C.J. on television<sup>2</sup> [fig. 4]; and staged network news and C-SPAN segments relating to the episode’s fictional crisis [fig. 5]. The bad quality of the video marks all of these as suitably authentic. Also included are formal interviews with C.J. and other regular characters on *The West Wing*, as well as with characters who appear only in this episode and with made-up (we assume) historical figures [fig. 6]. Produced for and by *Access* (as the narrator’s voice over explains), these interviews are carefully composed and lit, and offer a manifest contrast to the roughshod videojournalistic aesthetic of the rest of the footage.

Appreciating the episode’s mockumentary virtuosity by parsing these diverse gradations of illusion is certainly an important aspect of its entertainment value for viewers like us. But the fact that we can separate fact from fiction in the crudest sense doesn’t negate the overall effect of a sort of continuum between them, a permeability of these distinct epistemological spaces.

When C.J. and her imaginary fellow press secretaries comment on actual events in the history of the job while archival clips are shown, some of the realness of history rubs off on them via the

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<sup>2</sup> It’s clear from the content and her hairdos that these date, within *The West Wing*’s timeline, from before the beginning of the show, which picked up the Bartlet administration midway through its first term — they are not, that is, reproduced from other existing episodes.

educational value of the function they are providing. Appropriating Janney's home movies as C.J.'s highlights the blurred boundary between person and persona. And the verisimilitude of fake news implicates real news as media spectacle as well. In other words, the historical lineage of press secretaries is filmed and presented on television just like the televisual versions who are seamlessly inserted into it; the Dayton, Ohio where Janney grew up merges with the Dayton, Ohio where C.J. grew up; the world out there that the news ostensibly represents fades before the vividness of its appearance onscreen (whether real or fake). Just as in Lewis's account, the result is neither a perfect simulacra nor a transparent gimmick, but a textual and spectatorial position wherein we retain commonsense epistemological distinctions between entertainment and reality while simultaneously experiencing and recognizing their imbrication, where we "think of a fiction program as both real and unreal... both external and internal to our world" (294).

Such effects of formal provocations embrace the situated viewing subject as much as they do abstract realities. The *verité* style of the core "day in the life" documentary eschews any sense of a contained, composed alternate universe bounded within the television and visible on/through the screen in favor of an active integration of the spectator's presence into the TV text. This occurs, of course, via the materiality of the cameraperson and his camera, who play a dynamic and unmistakable role in the episode. When the narrator tells the viewer "*Access* goes behind the podium, and we invite you to come with us," this invitation to come along into a restricted zone is not merely a figure of speech. The camera — always handheld, always moving — literally follows C.J. as she runs through the hallways and enters and exits rooms [fig. 7]. Badly composed shots call attention to the physicality of the cameraperson as he navigates spaces and stands among groups of bodies [fig. 8]. This includes shots in which the film crew (apparently two cameramen and a sound guy) conspicuously appear [fig. 9], as if to deliberately

emphasize the apparatus that spans the gap between “you” in your living room and the crew in the *West Wing/The West Wing*, between screen and lens. These are all recognizable devices for asserting video’s authenticity, regularly appropriated by fictional and non-fictional television alike. But what “Access” accentuates particularly is the permeability of the aperture, its function for the spectator as a passage between spaces.

Take, for example, the episode’s opening sequence. Following the faux PBS credits ([fig. 1]), we hear C.J.’s voice, and then see her image — strangely grey and blurry, and framed within a circle. The camera immediately pans out, and it’s revealed that what we’re looking at is a video viewfinder [fig. 10]. The shot skips and zooms around the room erratically, capturing the crew as they set up their equipment for the interview [fig. 12] and C.J.’s conversation with one of them (who remains invisible behind the camera) about the “why” and “ground rules” of the project. Reality, in other words, is kaleidoscoped: the “real” C.J. and her likeness in the ocular O of the viewfinder, the filming of *Access* (PBS special) and the filming of “Access” (episode of *The West Wing*), the eye that looks into the camera and our eye watching from home — all these overlap and converge on the plane of the screen, as if we’d donned a set of epistemological 3-D goggles. The introductory figure of the image inside the camera displays on television the conduit, the open tunnel through which the real travels from C.J.’s West Wing office/the set in L.A. to the box in front of us. There’s a cheesy rewind noise, a black screen with the title, and only then do we see the “product”: the interview itself, polished and flat [fig. 6.1]. But when it comes to television, the holes in the screen are just as much its finished merchandise.

To puncture this plane even further: close to the end of the episode is a scene wherein C.J. says goodbye to the documentary crew as she leaves for the day. As she reaches outside of

the frame, the shot pans down to reveal an arm extending from a body offscreen, shaking her hand. She then addresses the person filming [fig. 12] — a salutation, that is, directly, intimately at us, who are occupying this position, our eye merged with the cameraman’s eye. As C.J.’s arm extends into our space, we are likewise teleported into hers. This moment is overlaid with the narrator’s concluding voice over: “The next day most of the media coverage mentioned the administration’s previous debacle at Casey Creek. Over the next nine months, one hundred charges were handed down in dozens of arrests...” He is providing a denouement for the episode’s narrative, whose thematics here and throughout intersect with its formal devices. The plot involves a militia-FBI standoff that takes place in Shaw Island, Washington on the day of filming. On the show, this crisis evokes the specter of an earlier (pre-*The West Wing*) debacle at Casey Creek that ended badly for the Bartlet administration (a reference to the real life events at Waco, TX followed by Ruby Ridge). This dramatic conflict provides the context for an exploration of the ‘real’ issue of contemporary news/media saturation, the role of the presidential press secretary in this milieu, and the role of the media in governance. As the narrator puts it, “*Access* became part of the modern media machine that witnessed a harrowing and historic day” — that is, this PBS special doesn’t offer commentary from a position safely outside the fray, but participates in the construction of “history” and as fact and as affective experience. This engagement is simultaneously refracted by the episode’s mockumentary status: because of course “*Access*” is ostensibly outside of ‘real’ news, operating as entertainment and cultural critique — while, I have argued, undermining this distance formally.

“The media,” and their participation in generating Shaw Island and Casey Creek as events, are materialized throughout the program as an aggressively ubiquitous technical apparatus [fig. 13]. C.J.’s briefing room, part of the show’s regular set, appears in

uncharacteristically panoramic views, with the whole machinery of spectacle included [fig. 14]. What is dramatized is not just the act of making television (a key aspect of C.J.'s job description) but the act of watching television [fig. 15] — presented here (and indeed, often on more typical episodes of the show, if less heavy-handedly) as one of the primary channels of information flow into the West Wing. In one scene, the President is giving a press conference outside the building, while C.J. watches it live on C-SPAN in her office [fig. 15, bottom left]. Shots of the two (the material and the televised events) are intercut, as if to illustrate most patently the sort of spatial collapse television effects, wherein it brings the distinct spaces closer, even, than a stroll out the door. One crisis in the episode occurs when an FBI statement interrupts C.J.'s briefing, and Press Secretary and press corps alike rush out of the room to witness it on TV — an activity that is not only filmed but filmed being filmed (in a quintessential self-reflexive circuit) [fig. 16]. Television is such an important character in *Access*/"Access" that there are also numerous shots that bypass the intermediary diagetic viewers to represent only other television screens [fig. 16] — which, while certainly not conveying an impression of perforation, are a mind-bending *mise-en-abyme* that evoke an infinite progression of screens within screens (that is only exacerbated by the additional degrees of separation in the case of a fictional program producing fictional versions of the news).

The attention here to television that reflects and reflects on itself is apt, as windows are typically a prominent feature of *The West Wing*'s visual language. If, as Keenan suggests, the figure of the window with its ambivalences and dangers is a foundational metaphor for television, this idiom is fittingly mobilized in "Access." The glass walls of the offices often frame *Access*'s "behind the scenes" view into the West Wing's inner workings much as the edges of the television do [fig. 15, top left]. The window is the mark of access itself, of the line

of sight from one space into another that is partitioned from it. But the blinds are a reminder that the window's transparency isn't total, that it can screen as well as reveal, distort as well as transport. Windows are also ambiguous surfaces, prone to reflect back televisual images that are then overlaid on what's behind them [fig. 18], funhouse mirrors that superimpose the real (or, in this case, the simulation of it) and its mediation. If the response to narrative crisis is to run to a television, it's windows that signify television as crisis; the final shot of the episode pairs glass and screen, transparency and reflection, with the White House seal [fig. 19], strangely diaphanous for an emblem of governmentality itself. What's evident in "Access," then, is all the contradictions of self-reflexive television (and, perhaps, of television overall): it is not intended to be mistaken for anything but a self-contained fiction, a simulacrum, a gimmick; but at the same time it transgresses these categories, ruptures the screen, seeps out of the television, allows the spectator to pass into it — in ways that are no less "real." Its reality, as Weber puts it, is "both here *and* there *at the same time*" and "*neither fully there nor entirely here,*" in an irresolvable suspension.

Both Lentz and Caldwell suggest that this self-conscious self-reflexivity, this deliberate enlistment of television's most engaging paradoxes, is ultimately subsumed in its function as ingenious marketing ploy. Certainly, there is pleasure in being invited into the television (or inviting television in), in being the savvy viewer who appreciates the episode's formal and critical dexterity.<sup>3</sup> But the economic consequences of this effect are no more easily contained than "Access"'s real-world references, which spill across the reality/entertainment border in unpredictable ways. If the objective in producing this (or any episode) of *The West Wing* (we

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<sup>3</sup> Or alternately, perhaps, in being the savvy viewer who sees right through the gimmicks and hence disdains the episode, like reviewer Miss Alli at *Television Without Pity*, who writes "I am overwhelmed by the very authenticity of it all. In fact, it's so authentic I may fall authentically asleep right in the middle of it." (<http://televisionwithoutpity.com/story.cgi?show=4&story=6451>)

might conjecture) is to make a marketable commodity, this is inextricable from the show's acclaim as "educational," as reflective of aspects of the "real" political landscape and reflecting on "real" events. While the appeal of the mockumentary does not generally depend on it being mistaken for non-fiction, it is bound up with the play of these epistemologies, with the spectator's active investment in the flexibility of these distinctions. If this plasticity is recuperated by its capitalist instrumentality, then, this is precisely because corporate media depends on its own degrees of permeability. Marketing, that is, is only possible on the basis of a construction of and communication with the audience and its desires. We watch because the television addresses us, hails us as part of it and attempts to infiltrate our material and subjective experience, not because its products are sealed in the hermetic zone of its producers. And it is often in self-reflexive moments that the interactivity of the medium is particularly apparent.

As one viewer puts it, what "Access" tells the audience is that "they know we're here."<sup>4</sup> "They" — the show's shadowy producers — know that we watch PBS, that we are critical of the media, that we relate *The West Wing* to our understanding of the government and the news. With this episode's virtuosic deployment of the formal ambiguities of television's amalgamation of spaces, with its self-congratulatory criticism of the mediasphere it (of course) participates in, they are talking to us — telling us that they know what we want, what we do as viewers; that spectatorship is about access, about our entry into their world and their world's entry into us. This is an interconnectedness that corporations can capitalize on, that audiences can be seduced by, but because it is not a bounded space it is never entirely reducible to these operations. There is always something in transmission, something happening in between that is not so easily

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<sup>4</sup> Emily Salzfass, personal communication 1.1.05.

characterized as inside or outside the control of consumerism or critique, the producer or the viewer, the televisual or the real.

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