



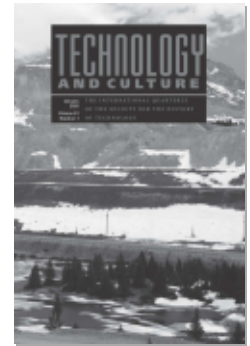
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Bright Signals: A History of Color Television by Susan Murray (review)

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(Review)

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into the unknown” (p. 49). Thor Magnusson, with his insights based on a profound knowledge of both theory and practice, provides us with as good a map as we are likely to get.

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Bright Signals: A History of Color Television.

By Susan Murray. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Pp. 320. Paperback \$27.95.

The contours of Western culture have been shaped by countless attempts to isolate, harness, and control color as a stable object of inquiry. Such efforts inevitably fail, however, because color is always on the move, shifting and escaping the rules that attempt to master and contain it. Such is its nature. Colors fade, oxidize, and change based on their environment. To quote Bauhaus colorist Josef Albers, “in visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is, as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art” (Albers, *Interaction of Color* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013], p. 3). As a shape-shifting apparition, color thus becomes one of the most challenging topics to address in any history of standardization. And yet, this is precisely accomplished in Susan Murray’s *Bright Signals: A History of Color Television*.

The book charts the path from early color television experimentation and innovation through its acclamation as a televisual norm in the 1960s and 1970s. Experimentation begins in the 1920s in London, with John Logie Baird’s demonstration of a 120-line mechanical system with “rotating Nipkow disc,” followed by a series of problematic live broadcast tests and calibrations for color, through the politics of color advertising and shows suitable for network programming. The book’s inquiry concludes in the 1970s, marking the transitions to digital television. Upstaged by a new age of digital media, color was called into question once again, no longer able to retain the title as the “most significant technological development in the medium’s history” (p. 256). Murray illustrates the ways in which these developments came about, from the struggles between executives and technicians, advertisers, and psychologists, to the conception of these standards. Together, these struggles eventually gave a radical new face to televisual viewing. Color television, she writes, “was imagined and sold as a new way of seeing” (p. 4). A noteworthy example is the way color television helped the medical profession by introducing a new form of depth “seeing” that greatly aided in medical training (p. 5). Other tie-ins connect color television to a broader culture of color film, postwar consumerism, colorful

synthetic textiles for the home and office, posters, corporate logo design, and the counterculture zeitgeist of the 1960s.

Bright Signals's chronological organization draws from the formation of "FCC color standards" as signposts (the Federal Communications Commission is a government agency tasked with overseeing standards for radio, television, wire, and related media). Each chapter in this lineage focuses on a "particular issue or stage" in the television industry's gradual development and standardization of color. These stages move from "innovation [to] standardization, calibration, conversion, and global expansion," carving a path from an "overt" technological history to more "traditional cultural and industrial" ones (p. 7). Contrary to previous histories of color television, Murray explains, which suggest that the formation of color standards "occurred in isolation," *Bright Signals* demonstrates how they were in fact heavily reliant on "complicated scientific, organizational, and historical precedents and entanglements" (p. 8).

In Murray's words: "there have been countless books and articles written about postwar U.S. television," but "few mention color as more than an aside" (p. 2). Indeed, this is unfortunately also the case in many fields, given the difficulties of addressing color at all within the confines of Western culture. The history of color television in particular, Murray explains, is a field that has been particularly "reluctant" to "engage with questions of technology, vision, and aesthetics." By contrast, Murray's history draws from diverse fields such as those noted above, in addition to "the study of subjectivity and perception," color psychology (notably in her discussion of design and branding choices of major broadcast network logos in chapter four), the play between the spectacular and the real, video aesthetics, and color changes in the reception of certain television genres (some better suited to appear in color than others, pp. 2, 9). Together, these disciplinary backgrounds help a reader to understand why a certain standard—namely the highly debated North American, National Television System Committee (NTSC) standard for color discussed in chapter two—presented several issues early on for the industry, and how and why their eventual agreement was framed as an "ultimate victory" for both the industry and television audiences alike.

Bright Signals is especially valuable for those studying the history of technology and who wish to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the technical norms governing color television and the multidisciplinary fields required to turn these eccentric experiments into cultural norms.

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