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# TELEVISION RECEPTION

DENNIS GILES

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## Preface

The first two sections of the following essay are somewhat programmatic in intention. Since we have only begun to study television reception in any serious way I thought it best to identify some of the problems involved in constructing a theory of reception for this medium. In the process, I try to expose some of the assumptions film scholars hold concerning the study of television. Section 3 deals briefly with the social use of television; Section 4 with its "object use" in domestic contexts. The concluding section treats aspects of technology.

The essay is ultimately concerned with contexts and conditions—the sites and circumstances of the television experience. It is an attempt to discover (and recover) some aspects of television reception in its "average everydayness," to use a phrase drawn from Heidegger, but also in its instability, its flux. It differs from the project of classical phenomenology in that it rejects the notion that we can—or should—study the TV viewing experience "in itself," as an isolated phenomenon.

Watching television is so intertwined with other domestic activities that to disentangle it from the world which pervades and in-forms it would be an "academic" exercise in the worst sense of the word.

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Viewers watch TV while reading, writing, cleaning, cooking, eating, drinking, talking on the telephone, interacting verbally and physically with friends, family and lovers—this in distinction to moviegoing which, to a large extent, retains a "special event" status, framed off from the activities of the daily routine. In other words, television reception is much more than just "watching television"; it is messy, impure, contaminated with non-television.

Even when we discover the viewer alone with the TV set, removed from the interference of the lived world, it is difficult to determine any essential characteristics of TV viewing which are present in *all* its modalities. The viewer in question is "just watching TV," engaged in no other activity. But what is meant by "watching?" The word is deceptive. First, the medium talks; it may be listened to more than it is watched. Secondly, the term "to watch" implies a degree of concentration, some effort expended: in distinction to mere "seeing," "watching" is more active, more intrigued with its object. Certainly, some TV programs are *avidly* watched; viewers may become deeply involved with a show—fascinated by all of it, absorbed in parts of it—but other presentations are only barely regarded. Enjoyment or boredom is as much a function of the viewer's "mood" as the program itself.<sup>1</sup> The Nielsen ratings inform broadcasters when the set is "on," but they do not measure the degree of the viewer's engagement with the text. Viewing is not simply an either/or activity—on or off like a two-function light-switch. If the electrical analogy is to be pursued, reception is more like a rheostat—a dimming switch: it is a business of gradations, degrees.

Knowing that ratings are statistical samples of potential—rather than actual—reception, that viewing is often inattentive, advertisers rely on *repeated* commercials to increase the chance that their messages might, once in a while, “get through” to viewers. In a similar manner, the redundancy of much dramatic programming may be linked to the realization on the part of producers and script-writers that viewers may attend a program without watching it. Instead of evidencing a lack of creative capacity or a contempt for the audience—as charged by some critics—the predictability of made-for-television narrative (the theme and variation structure of events, the familiar dramatic formulas) might be better understood as an accommodation to the variety and *unpredictability* of viewing behaviors. The quasi-repetitious character of television texts should be related to the institution’s knowledge that at any given moment, viewers may not be receiving the full text or, sometimes, even a partial text—the viewer may have stepped out of the room.

The “use” to which television is put in everyday viewing varies as widely as the degree of attention paid to the text. TV can be used “purely”—as a textual experience; this is apparently the use intended by the industry: producers, programmers, advertisers. But pleasure in the text can range from the restless search for the new or renovated experience to the ritualistic participation in a familiar set of generic values. The desire to witness public life as a continuity of significant events rather than a meaningless jumble of incidents probably informs the use of television news, while heavily promoted specials such as *The Day After* (a nuclear attack on Kansas) may be watched because viewers demand “not to be left out” of the events TV-culture defines as important. Television programming can be used as a pacifier or a stimulus, as an escape from loneliness, but also as a device to initiate or end conversations.

Whether TV serves as a substitute or a support for social life, it is often used less for its texts than for the experience of the medium itself. As Robert Silvey has written, some of the satisfactions derived from television have little to do with the content of programs: “They may, for example come from the mere fact of sitting relaxed, with something not unpleasing to look at . . . all the better for not requiring you to make any effort to be sociable. . . .”<sup>22</sup> TV sometimes functions as a baby-sitter, as a sleeping-pill or, as Silvey stresses, simply a means of “killing time.” When television is used as a background to social interaction, its patterned images function something like wallpaper—a flowing but familiar pictorial environment which contributes to the sense of being “at home.” What matters to the viewer is not the image as text, but as context. Because the experience is more being-with television than watching it, the image operates less as picture than *as frame*.

Part of the comfort and domesticity of television seems related to its images being experienced as less insistent than those of cinema. TV imagery is often carelessly composed and predictably edited, but at times, as in commercials, it features explosive movement, primary colors and editing designed as a series of shocks to engineer the emotions—as if in parody of one of Eisenstein’s “ecstasies” of dialectical montage. But given the distractions of home viewing, given the fact that the TV image rarely dominates a room by its size alone and that it competes against other possible objects of vision in a lighted room, TV pictures are less forceful than theatrical movie images in holding the viewer’s attention. If and when they are carefully watched, commercial and promotional messages may seem rhetorically excessive, but they try to do “so much” precisely because they presume so little of viewers immersed in the living-room of everyday television.

## Texts

Given the multiple uses of television, given the degree to which the reception of texts is comingled with other activities of the lived-world, and given the varying degrees of engagement with the texts themselves, it is then *possible* to write an account of TV reception which embraces the range of the television experience? The project becomes more doubtful when one considers the heterogeneity of television texts.

The problem lies in the fact that television is the most massive of the mass media, not only in terms of the sheer numbers of its audience but in the extent of its use by viewers of nearly all ages and social groupings. The medium is distrusted—and often bitterly attacked—by intellectuals educated in the arts because it tries to provide “something for everybody.” It is significant that the texts of motion pictures became institutionalized as an object of scholarly inquiry in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, when the medium had lost 75 to 80 percent of its peak (1946) audience. The serious study of this “popular” art first gained academic credentials by emphasizing the “small” films of European art cinema, which enjoyed a limited—hardly a mass—audience in the United States. Current scholarship in cinema studies tries to balance a celebration of the diversity of film texts (authorship, generic distinctions, national cinemas, *etc.*) with a theoretical emphasis on the systematic features of “classical” Hollywood cinema (narrative conventions, fetishism, “illusionism” and disavowal, *etc.*) which are said to inform the specific instances of textual practice, that is, cinema is studied as nearly monolithic in regards to the “rules” which guide its representations. But on the textual level, the concept of a system in dominance does not prevent us from investigating films which offer unique combinations of the rules, or deviant films which seem to expose or disrupt the illusions promoted by the

system. In other words, although classical cinema may be regarded as systematic, we do not consider it homogeneous.

In contrast to the recognition of heterogeneity within the system of cinema, television programming is described metaphorically as “a featureless landscape,” a “sea of mediocrity,” a “vast wasteland,” “pabulum,” and “muzak.” In other words, TV is uniform. In television, “the system” is believed to have wiped out all distinctions that might distinguish one text from another. As a result, TV texts are treated as though they were an instinct mass, an amorphous, ubiquitous and ultimately, as undistinguished as the mass audience which views them. There is a relationship between: 1) the disdain for the massive flow of television programming (there is too much of it, therefore it must be all the same); 2) the distrust of the very concept of a mass medium (it is used to persuade, manipulate, breed conformity); and 3) an unspoken contempt for the “masses,” who through their viewing habits have created TV in their own image and at their own level—the level of “the lowest common denominator,” *ie* a “level” featureless plain. These elitist assumptions practically guarantee that most “serious” writing on television texts will be personal, dismissive and unanalytic, excepting those cases in which the writer utilizes an individual program to expose the “mindlessness” of the whole system of television.

If TV were just a leveling device, if TV texts were ultimately homogeneous, the task of constructing a reception theory of television would be drastically simplified. Viewers would be responding to a single, undifferentiated text. The student of reception would list the general features of this text as the uniform condition—the *nonvariable* factor—in all response. If one could also posit a mass audience, responding in “massive” and predictable ways, two-thirds of the job is already finished; the single remaining chore would be to describe the variations in the viewing

environment in order to account for whatever small differences that might remain in reception experiences. When I look at actual reception events, however, I simply cannot discover a mass audience, except in a very attenuated sense of the word; still less do I see a homogeneous text:

Compared with the theatrical movie experiences available in a given city, on a given day, the diversity of material and approaches available on the television screen is enormous. In the indoor cinema viewers usually see/hear one major, coherent text—the feature film—plus a trailer and a screened announcement of the rules of the house. A once varied experience has been cut down to size, and unified in the process. In the Cleveland, Ohio, metropolitan region, for example, a maximum of 40 distinct features will be playing on approximately 120 screens, but six to eight films will dominate the market that week. The movie viewer selects one of these features, buying a two hour fifteen minute reception session, more or less. On the same day and in the same city, the average TV viewer will “watch” over six hours of texts, representing seven to twelve different programs (or fragments of programs). The television experience will consist of different genres, each making distinct claims about the truth or illusion of their representations, *e.g.* fiction, news, sports or game shows. These programs will be broken by texts from another genre—advertising, promotional and public service announcements—engaging various orders of belief and skepticism, as well as offering a wide range of intertextuality. The textual modes witnessed by the television viewer will probably include direct address (*to* the viewer: verbal, visual or both; on-camera and voice-over speech); indirect address (*to* on-screen or in-text persons or characters), *etc.* Performances will be staged for the camera, staged for a “live” audience *plus* the camera (talk shows, game shows, *Bowling for Dollars*), or apparently unstaged (com-

bat footage from Nicaragua). The tenses witnessed may include present, past-presented-as-present (“live” on tape or film), past simple (“file” film on the news), future (announcements of future television or future “live” events; ranging from; “stay tuned for. . .” to “tomorrow Gromyko comes to the White House to. . .”), and subjunctive (“Gromyko would meet if. . .”; “J. R. would kill him if he knew”). The various media and arts re-presented by television may include: (I) theatrical movies (edited for television), made-for-TV movies, TV news film, animation, plus the familiar tape and “live”; (II) speaking (public, interpersonal), singing, dancing, acting, demonstrating (preparation of recipes, *kung fu* holds, deep breathing exercises).

The shifts between types and styles of television texts occur not only in the breaks between programs (and between program segments), but often are featured within a single program. On both the national and local levels television offers the “magazine” format in which the program is conceived as a kind of variety show. The form is loose enough to include both *The Johnny Carson Show* and the *60 Minutes* news magazine; local news is displayed as a magazine containing material which ranges from the “hard news” through “human interest” and “background” stories to sports and weather, trying always to mix studio visuals with exterior location shots, and match tape with “live.” In fact, the magazine analogy may be the most useful way of characterizing television reception, if it is to be compared to the experience of other media. Watching television resembles reading a popular magazine more than it approaches the event of “reading” a movie or a novel: it is usually a casual rather than a “close” reading; it engages varied materials punctuated by advertising; the experience is often interrupted; and it leaves room for social interaction during the event. In comparison, the theatrical moviegoer participates in a textual exper-

ience which may have more emotional peaks and valleys than that of television, but by any objective standard it must be described as less varied. In fact, the history of movie reception can be read as a movement in the direction of an even more unified textual experience. In this movement, the institution of the feature film was decisive.

Whether short films were mixed with “live” acts or placed with other one and two-reelers on a single bill, movie viewing had been a relatively fragmented experience. The very concept of vaudeville was heterogeneity, but even when cinema was physically removed from a live stage context, the reception traditions of popular theatre continued: the expectation of a diverse evening of entertainment with interruptions between the discrete acts. Given the abrupt shifts in moods, genres, and sometimes media, a discontinuous variety show atmosphere often pervaded the movie house. The feature length dramatic film drove much of the diversity from the evening’s bill by virtue of its length alone; more importantly, the premium it placed on narrative development and consistency of character replaced a varied carnival with a consistent and semi-predictable experience. Insofar as it defined cinema as unitary rather than diverse, one could argue that the development of the dramatic feature film left open the door for the heterogeneous television experience to fill the entertainment site vacated by both vaudeville and the movies. (Although radio provided a highly varied entertainment experience, it could not offer *spectacle*.) The process of unifying the experience of texts has continued into the 1980’s. Mixed programs composed of A and B features, newsreels and short subjects were gradually dropped in favor of a single-feature bill; the short-form of the cartoon moved to television. In recent years many theatres have even eliminated the trailers for “coming attractions,” relying instead on television and newspaper advertising to win audiences.

The penalty paid for the diversity of television texts is a fragmented experience of reception, torn by commercial breaks, shifts of media, competing and contradictory truth claims. The holes in the continuity of texts, and the gaps experienced when the viewer switches channels, or the station shifts to another textual mode, provide room for the “reality” of the domestic world to enter the textual experience and “contaminate” it, as mentioned previously. The heterogeneous and fractured text complicates the event of television reception, and loosens the viewer’s grasp of the texts themselves. One of the primary attractions of moviegoing may be that it offers a *coherent* textual experience, as opposed to the relative discontinuity of a television viewing session.

Some serious study of television text is being accomplished by those scholars brave enough to risk the contempt of their fellow intellectuals. But *which* texts are they? In almost every case, the preferred objects of investigation are found within on-going, relatively open-ended programming, in which individual episodes, however exemplary, are only islands in the stream—momentary crystallizations of the *flow* of a series. Yet a glance at the *TV Guide* for any viewing market readily indicates that the medium offers, and heavily promotes, many *one-shot* programs. They are not presented as links in a serial chain, but as autonomous texts, with secure boundaries. These programs—movies and “specials”—make up a substantial portion of the television diet of the average viewer, and pay-cable further increases the non-serial audience.

Why is *closed-form* programming generally ignored by television scholarship? Apparently because it is assumed that series and serials are more appropriate for the medium—more “completely” television—than singular programs. The open, flowing format is considered more representative of the nature or “essence”

of the medium itself. "It is the purpose and nature of television that it be on," writes David Thomson.<sup>3</sup> The preference for extensive, episodic texts is probably embedded in this conception of TV as a continuous medium/experience. In contrast to the theatrical movie, TV is available constantly—or nearly so; it is "ready-at-hand," to use Heidegger's term. Programming is "on," waiting to be tapped, from the moment most viewers awaken until they fall asleep. And like electricity or water, (which flow into the home) the supply of television seems inexhaustible; there is always *more* of it. David Thomson deplores the insecure boundaries of American television, the tendency of programs and commercials to bleed together:

"In Britain, programmes are separated, just as advertisements are signalled. There is a concession towards the movement at which an audience might turn off. There are announcers on camera . . . who mark endings and beginnings. In America, the evening is the programme: American TV deplores gaps, despite a rhythm of interruption. Ads cut directly into programmes, challenging us to tell one high-key glow from another. . . ."<sup>4</sup>

As perhaps the most forceful exponent of what I might call the Theory of Continuous Television, Thomson claims that commercial breaks function less at interruptions than as devices which assure continuity.<sup>5</sup> It can be argued as well that the temporal gaps between chapters of serial programming serve as suspension bridges which in no way contradict the continuity of the viewing experience. Viewers are readily able to bridge the gaps of a day or a week in an on-going program without losing their sense of narrative progress and/or process.

In its crudest form, this "theory" regards all television programming as a one continuous text—only a short step from

the notion of a monolithic "system" which irons out all possible distinctions in programming into a level wasteland of sheer medium, without textual qualities. When cast only as an assumption which guides the selection of texts to be seriously investigated, the theory has major drawbacks: by choosing continuous forms over closed form it evidences both (1) a refusal to recognize the diversity and heterogeneity of television texts, and (2) a scholarly and "aesthetic" horror at the spectacle of mixed media. Is a movie on television still a movie, or is it television? Why not *both*? The two categories are not exclusive. Rather, the medium of television is so inclusive, so omnivorous in its textual appetite, that it eats material from practically any medium available to it, but without digesting it fully. Television's casual appropriation of "foreign" material ensures that far more characteristics of the original texts remain in the televised version than in, for example, the theatrical film version of a novel or a play. While scholars search for a restricted medium, readily definable by its textual characteristics, neither the television industry nor its audience considers movies—among other alien texts—to be inappropriate, or exceptional, programming events. When the study of television is still in its primitive phase, when we are still groping for a body of theory to guide our practice, we should be careful *not* to assume any theoretical positions which might restrict our definition of the medium to an *ideal* of television which is contradicted by its realities.

At the same time, the definition of cinema should be extended to include its representation on television. The average theatrical film not only gains a larger audience through its television screening than it does theatrically, but the TV audience is also "wider"—it includes more demographic categories; the movie that spectators "know" and remember is more likely to be the movie-on-television than the theatrical experience of the text. The movie on

television may have been re-edited, but its text is rarely completely transformed by the medium in question. Eastwood's *Bronco Billy* is also *Bronco Billy* on television. I see no reason to privilege the theatrical version of a movie as if it were not only the first, but the *only* representation of a film. Rather, we should consider the two screenings somewhat like distinct "live" theatrical versions of a text held in common, performed in quite different conditions of reception.

Much of the reception theory we have inherited was developed by literary scholars in Reader/Response Criticism. These studies are concerned with the interaction between readers and texts, the "cooperative enterprise" established between them, and the manner in which the reader "realizes" the text—comprehends and appropriates it. For theorists such as Iser, Jauss, Stierle and Suleiman, reception events are influenced by the structure, the devices and the appeals of texts, by previous responses to similar texts, and by the "horizon of expectations" existing at a given moment of literary history.<sup>6</sup> Such an approach, I believe, is most useful for understanding the reception of individual generic texts in both cinema and television. But if one wishes to study television reception on a more general level, as I do here, this received theory appears inadequate to the task. The problem is not only that of the fragmented and relatively incoherent textual experience of television, but that TV reception is rarely "just" a textual experience. Reading a novel or watching a theatrical feature film is predominantly a series of responses to the text in question, not to its surroundings. Non-textual realities are framed off from the reading event—provisionally put out of gear—in order that one can receive the text with a minimum of interference. In communication terminology, the channel is clear; noise has been minimized. With cinema, one travels to a special site constructed

expressly for film viewing alone; one pays hard cash for an optimum reception environment. However, as I have argued above, television viewing involves only a partial withdrawal—at best—from the sites and activities of everyday life, while the porous texts of TV seem to invite the non-televized world into the mix of the total experience. The lived-world is braided into the event of TV reception to such an extent that any theory which assumes an encounter with texts alone must necessarily fail to understand the experience. We must look beyond the one-on-one experience. We must look beyond the one-on-one encounter of viewer with texts towards the *others* which share and mediate the reception event. In the sections which follow, I try to investigate some of the social and interpersonal dimensions of TV reception.

### Social Use

One of the most pervasive themes in the mass of literature attacking television is the charge that the medium inhibits social interaction. It is claimed that television so dominates the American home that people no longer know how to talk with one another. TV has, allegedly, destroyed the art of conversation by a process of substitution, with the result that viewers tend to lead increasingly isolated lives, withdrawn from family, neighbors and friends. Television is blamed for an increase in marital conflict and the decline of the nuclear family. By extension, the negative effects of television upon interpersonal communication are said to contribute to "the sense of alienation" in society as a whole, to heightened racial tensions and to the general deterioration of community life.<sup>7</sup> Has TV, then, become the anti-social medium par excellence? Is it used primarily to withdraw from social life, to escape from interpersonal relationships? Is TV viewing essentially the experience of being alone?

The most comprehensive recent study of American viewing patterns was undertaken in 1970 by Robert T. Bower and his associates at the Bureau of Social Science Research, using questionnaires to a national sample of 2335 households plus the television watching diaries of households in Minneapolis-St. Paul.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the widespread contemporary belief that television fragments family life, Bower notes that television was once regarded as a cohesive force:

“In its early days, the watching of television was often seen as an important new social activity; families would stay at home sharing the set as a focal point of conviviality, whereas without TV they would disperse to different individual activities.”<sup>9</sup>

A 1949 investigation concluded that television strengthened family solidarity and helped to erase the generation gap.<sup>10</sup> Had this situation changed by the 1970's? Was the placement of the set in the family room merely a hold-over from an era of social viewing—an attempt to suggest an *ideal* of group reception to the family—or was actual reception still a viewing-with?”

“In at least 90 percent of American households,” Bower found, “it appears that the TV set or a set if there is more than one, is in the main sitting-around-in-the-evening room in the house, the living room or ‘family’ room.” That is, “they are placed in rooms where family and friends get together.”<sup>11</sup> An earlier study found the figure to be 87 percent.<sup>12</sup>

Only 12 percent of Bower's households stated that viewing was usually an affair of individuals alone with the set (these included some single-person households). Of those *families* owning only one set, 94% claimed that joint viewing was likely. Certainly, the possession of multiple sets increased solitary viewing, but even with the three and four-set families, joint

viewing was likely to occur in two-thirds of the cases. In multiple-set households one TV still served as the “family” set, viewed with others, while the additional sets were used for “personal” or children's viewing. The most favored location for the additional set was the bedroom. Bower concluded by stating: “in most families there are basic viewing patterns—*the entire family together, husband and wife together, and mothers watching with their children.*” Solitary viewing was the exception, not the rule.<sup>13</sup>

Viewing with others, however, does not necessarily mean “interacting” with them. Bower and his associates gathered no data on the degree of interpersonal communication when group viewing occurred but, in 1971, a study in the “Surgeon General's Report” on television found that social interaction definitely takes place among family members during most joint viewing sessions.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the notion that TV is used primarily by viewers for the vague purpose of “escapism”—once so popular in social science research—has been not only theoretically questioned but undermined by numerous empirical studies. Understood as a preference for fictional representations over relationships within the “real world,” escapism was said to involve “social withdrawal.” Several recent investigations on the role of television in children's lives have determined, however, that viewing is not only “likely to be an accompanied activity” but also “a truly social activity,” contradicting the escapist thesis.<sup>15</sup> Because children are relatively unsocialized—they do not yet “fit” into the adult world—and because, by cultural tradition, they are regarded as innocent beings, they are considered the prime victims of television by many critics of the medium. Thus, in the past decade, the question of children's viewing has become one of priorities of social science research. In the process, one of the long-cherished assumptions of the social sciences is being challenged, namely: that

fiction (and fictional relationships) are necessarily inferior substitutes for “reality.” The notion that the off-screen social world is as mediated, modeled and represented as the televised world, that social reality itself is as permeated by ideologies and “fictions” as *Dallas*, is hardly yet fashionable among those trained in the empirical tradition of scholarship, but it has gained enough ground that one communication researcher bluntly states: “television viewing can mean a social relationship *per se*,” citing the findings that television permits identification, contact with television personalities, distraction from loneliness and security.”<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the notion that television viewing is primarily a passive process of just “taking” whatever the medium offers is being laid to rest.

TV reception is a social experience, according to the scientists, refuting the “withdrawal” thesis of the critics. But *how* is TV used socially? And what is the relationship between the social and the personal dimension of television reception?

TV can be used as *just* a context for social interaction—the wallpaper mentioned above—or it can be integrated into interpersonal experiences. In actual viewing, I believe, television oscillates from background to foreground, from context to text. It often occurs that several viewers will be watching a program more or less attentively, when one will “bounce-off” some textual detail—an incident or a striking character—to comment on a situation in their shared *non-fictional* world. For example: a character on *Dallas* suddenly decides to have an abortion, sparking the following “real” family text:

Mother: Do you think Ruth and Bob [*family friends*] will ever have a baby? Sometimes I don’t think Ruth wants one at all.

Father: Well, she’d rather work at her job, I guess. [*Silence*, while they return, momentarily, to *Dallas*, then:]

Mother: No, I don’t think it’s the money. They’re having other troubles, you know, her and Bob.

Father: Mmh.

Child: Yuhk! Who wants another smelly *baby* around, anyway!

Mother: Heather, don’t talk that way about your little sister!

The connection between Pam’s abortion on *Dallas* and the childlessness of Ruth and Bob in “real life” is a tenuous one, granted, but the leap from details of programming to more permanent personal agendas is quite common in everyday viewing situations. The point is that program details are sometimes consciously used to initiate a conversation, more often they seem to spark an unintended recall from that “waiting room” of undigested thoughts and images that Freudian theory terms the Pre-Conscious. The family may continue the exchange, oblivious to the program for several moments, or one member (here, the Father) may withdraw from the conversation to become absorbed again in the program, while the remaining parties continue to “socialize.” Or alternately, Mother may withdraw Heather from the room—and television—to punish her.

Within a television session in a social context, viewers seem to possess the ability to watch TV alternately *with* others and *in spite of* others. However, the actual mixture of social and personal modes of viewing is undoubtedly influenced by cultural factors. The scenario outlined above is most likely to be an experience of middle class “white” Americans: the nuclear family spends a quiet evening in front of the set; face-to-face involvement

with the social world outside the home has effectively ended for the day. In Mexico, however, the television viewing I have witnessed can hardly be characterized as a retreat into private life; the distinctions Americans tend to maintain in the evenings between outside and inside spheres of existence are unlikely to be observed.

### Object Use

There is another domestic use of television which only indirectly relates to its ability to provide texts or its contextual function as medium. Television is also used as an *object*—something to be possessed, admired, polished and scratched. When the TV misfunctions, refusing its receiving and display duties, a frustrated viewer may kick it, or pound it with a fist. The kick is aimed at TV as a faulty instrument, but rediscover it in its solid and impassive role as a material thing. TVs are sold in appliance stores as pragmatic devices which “work” for the consumer, but they are also sold as furniture. The TV set occupies space and weightily “sets” in the home, usually in a prominent position in the room. Floor-model sets can be ordered in French Provincial or Mediterranean styles, among others, while sleek “high-tech” models are bought as much for their aesthetic value as objects as for any supposed technological advantage (or rather, because they seem to promise superior technology through their design alone). Art Buchwald devoted a recent column to the prestige value of the television set. His parody charged that social leadership among his group of “upscale” friends has been determined by the possession of, in historical order: a swimming pool, a tennis court, a 50-inch TV screen and, currently a seven-foot screen.<sup>17</sup> The prestige value of the television set is probably more fragile than that of other relatively expensive furnishings in and around the home because its status is determined not only by the changing fashions of design but also by technological developments. A perfectly func-

tional set may be regarded as obsolete because the sets being marketed boast a 128 channel capacity—not that the viewer would watch 128 channels if and when they all carried programming. In such cases the object-value of the TV set outweighs its pragmatic value as an instrument of reception.

The media of books, magazines, newspapers and radio are comparable to television in several respects: 1) they bring public (*broadcast, published*) texts into the private home; 2) they offer flowing but broken texts (commercial breaks, chapter breaks, *etc.*); 3) they provide both entertainment and information. However, the object-use of television is more permanent than that of the other home media, and viewers’ psychological investment in it as object seems more complex. Magazines and newspapers can be disregarded in this context, since they are disposable media, with little permanent value as objects. Books, like television, can function as decor which proclaims the taste of a household. But unlike the book, TV still furnishes the room at the same moment it is used as medium and text; when the book is being read it is no longer an object of decor.

The place of radio in American family life was once as central as that occupied by television today. The radio set in the living-room performed television’s dual role of instrument and object; *i.e.*, it received texts for the family as well as serving as a prized piece of furniture. When television appropriated the role of the family medium *par excellence*, the radio was displaced into personal spaces and transformed as object in the process. Once group listening in the home fragmented into individual reception events, radio sets shrank, multiplied, gained mobility and became intimately associated with the bedroom and the personal freedoms offered by the automobile. By 1976 there were 425 million radios in use

in the United States—more than two radios per person—and over 95% of all American automobiles were equipped with radio sets.<sup>18</sup> The trend towards personal radio was accelerated by transistor technology but not wholly determined by it. (It is simplistic to attribute changes in the use of a medium solely to technological developments within that medium.) As radio withdrew from the communal space of the family its texts were localized: national network broadcasting declined in favor of specialized “narrow-casting” for sub-groups of the former mass audience. As a result of these changes, radio is still used, but it is appreciated for pragmatically as instrument rather than in its material being. In other words, the radio set has lost most of the value it once possessed *as an object*. What radio “is” is now defined almost exclusively by what it “does.” In contrast, there is a certain *excess* attached to the valuation of the TV set in the home—a supplemental value over and beyond the instrumental value of the device. This excess—which I call object-value—is not unique to television, but I believe that foregrounding and naming it draws attention to a quality of TV reception which begins to distinguish it from the experience of other media.

Theatrical movies are received not as material objects but as coherent texts or, sometimes, as a series of stimuli which produce an experience of “thrills,” e.g. the “slasher” subgenre of horror and Spielberg films. The object-value of cinema is recovered in activities of film collecting and preservation and, less directly, in the collection of posters, stills and other memorabilia—all propped upon and secondary to the experience of moviegoing itself, but there is no “object” identified as cinema by spectators. That “apparatus” described by Metz and Baudry as cinema is not a material machine but an operation—a “working” in which the viewer is caught.<sup>19</sup>

While radio reception has become so personalized that its sets are literally worn, like articles of clothing, most families still place a “communal” television set in a central living space of the home, even when it is supplemented by personal sets in more private spaces. There, in the living-room, the TV serves as a focal point of interpersonal life for the home’s “insiders,” as well as an object to be viewed—and judged by guests. Prominently positioned in the area in which personal and public lives overlap and sometimes merge, the set serves as the face of the family to outsiders invited into the home, as it also reminds the family of its own coherence *as family*. For these reasons, middle-class homes which can afford television-as-furniture often “dress-up” the top of the set with relatively formal, commemorative photographs: graduation and wedding pictures, photos of baby’s birthday, *etc.* The family TV set is used to display significant events in the lives of its members. They are the events that “matter,” and those which represent the continuity and social extension of the family. Sometimes prized statuettes—often with religious significance—are placed on the television, or expensive clocks. The TV becomes a shrine, of sorts, to the family’s spiritual beliefs and/or economic values.

In these common examples, television is being used as a table: but for purposes of display, not as a surface for the activities and objects of the daily routine. The device used to bring “public” texts into the home is also used to present an official representation of family life to that portion of the public which enters domestic space. But in addition, the family’s display of its own values is literally propped upon an instrument which re-presents, through network programming, the joys and sorrows of family relationships as well as the problematic encounters of family members with the world outside the home. Here, the object use of television is only slightly removed from its instrumental function. Television-as-text reinforces

television-as-object in the function of representing families to families. TV provides idealized—ultimately narcissistic—pictures of family life to those who wish to encounter images and masks of themselves as it also mediates between the relative security of the “inside” and the threats/opportunities of the “outside.”

### Technology

A crucial distinction between television and cinema reception is that the television industry does not control the *site* of reception, nor the conditions within it. There are no television theatres (excepting those specialized theatres which display television as art or history). There is a manufacturing arm of the television industry—now largely in Japanese hands—but not an exhibition wing. Despite the often-expressed fears of viewers that they or their children are being “manipulated” by television, the only aspects of reception that TV producers and broadcasters control are: 1) the text itself; 2) its availability in a given market; 3) the timing of its broadcast. As I have argued above, it is difficult to discover any standard form of television reception—modes of “watching” are simply too variable. The object status of television also increases the relative unpredictability of viewing because it “frees” viewers from the control of the text itself. It is not only that the visual portion of the television text is smaller, and “less elegant” than that of cinema, or that it is watched in a lighted room; I think that the mere fact that the television set is an object *set apart* from viewers invites a use of its texts which broadcasters might characterize as willful and arbitrary.

TV is a machine which stands in front of its users, and separate from them. It must be acted upon—turned on—before it presents its show. Throughout the screening viewers are unlikely to feel that they

are engulfed by an omnipotent text which will inexorably move to its destiny no matter what they themselves do. If viewers do not like where the text is heading, they simply switch channels or turn the set off; that is, viewers act upon the text, and *it leaves*. In theatrical cinema, by contrast, the only power one has over the text is to leave it there, in *its* room, where it continues to flow for others. By switching channels on television, one excludes the text; by walking out of a cinema one is seemingly excluded *from* the text—one does not wipe it from existence by leaving. TV viewers sit outside a box looking upon its screen—probably more “upon” than “into.” In theatrical film reception, viewers are placed inside the apparatus which produces the illusion: the image originates from a point above and behind them, the projector beams *through* the space of the spectator; with stereo and Dolby sound technology, sound surrounds the auditor. By virtue of this physical situation, viewers can slip with less difficulty into the “as if” mode of fictional experience than when sitting in front of a TV set. It is easier in the cinema to be caught within the text—easier to form and maintain identifications, to temporarily lose one’s sense of an identity and a being apart from the fiction. In television reception, the objective character of the show-making machine combines with commercial interruptions to the illusionary powers of the text to invite a mode of reception less “intense,” at least in theory than that of classical cinema. It was for this reason—degree of psychological involvement—among others, that McLuhan characterized TV as a “cool” medium, and cinema as a “hot” one. Television viewers are more free to withdraw from the text, to disregard its cues, to appropriate it according to their own needs and demands rather than by its rules. By choosing to watch the text on television they have already separated it from them and watch it more objectively than they would in the trance of cinema.

The freedom of television is in some sense a freedom *not* to respond, as in an economic sense it is a freedom not to spend. Commercial television is offered apparently free of charge after one buys or rents the set, and endless stream of programming is instantly available; the cost of electricity is minimal.<sup>20</sup> The costs of many of the products the consumer buys may be increased because of television advertising, but technically the viewer is free not to purchase these products. Viewers may feel that they “pay” for programming by sitting through the commercial messages, but ultimately the sense of getting something for nothing probably influences viewers’ attitudes towards the programs, as well as toward the medium itself.

In front of the television set, viewers possess more freedoms than they care to exercise. The continuing series of choices offered by the available programming—what to see now, what to see next—are sometimes more painful than pleasurable. It is often easier to abandon control to the networks; program follows program without any physical or mental effort needed on the part of the viewer. The network tactic of using a highly-rated program as a lead-in to a weaker one successfully exploits the inertia of everyday viewing patterns.

If viewers often decline to switch channels, they likewise fail to take advantage of opportunities to control the quality of the images which are offered by their television set. The knobs which adjust color tone, brightness, contrast, image sharpness, *etc.* tend to remain unused unless the image deteriorates catastrophically from a quite tolerant standard of “acceptable” picture quality. The “automatic” fine-tuning and color control features are simply switched on, then forgotten. In a similar manner, the majority of the consumers who buy 35mm SLR cameras with both “automatic” functions and manual adjustments are content to utilize the automatic mode for most shooting activi-

ties. On older TV sets, the on/off and volume functions were combined in a single control switch; the separation of these functions on newer models does not offer viewers more control over the sound level but, on the contrary, allows them to *forgo* volume adjustment for every new viewing session. Apparently, set manufacturers have learned that viewers prefer to set sound levels just once for days or weeks of viewing, despite the variations in the personal and interpersonal use of television which inevitably occur during this period.

But at the same time that viewers seem to welcome those features of TV sets which allow them to abandon control over reception, set manufacturers exploit the growing popularity of “remote” viewing controls, which “personalize” television viewing on a moment to moment basis. No doubt, part of the attraction of the remote device is simply its “high tech” object value, but this is probably outweighed by its practical, “instrumental” values.

The remote seems used primarily for channel switching or altering the sound level, both of which decrease the effective control broadcasters exercise over the reception event through simple viewer inertia. During commercials or the “slow” passages of a program, channel switching is used to survey the range of programming choices and to take samples of the available options; the act sometimes constitutes a serious search for alternatives to the current program, but often represents merely the play of idle curiosity. The effect is 1) to decrease the viewer’s involvement in any given text and 2) to further disrupt the already precarious coherence and continuity of the textual experience.

Remote hand-held television controls and home video cassette recorders (VCRs) are both devices which, potentially, increase

the freedom of individual choice in television reception while weakening the control broadcasters possess over which texts the viewer will watch at a given time. In addition, the taping, rental and purchase of movies on video-cassette by consumers further blur the distinctions between the textual experiences of television and theatrical cinema. While theatrical movies are watched in one uninterrupted session, the coherence of the film texts played on VCRs may be broken by bathroom breaks, trips to the kitchen, or merely a decision to watch the conclusion of the movie the next evening. Apparently, movies on video are not watched as attentively as they would be in the theatre—the room is relatively well lit, others are often present for social interaction, the usual distractions of domestic life are present. Unlike both theatrical reception and the “live” viewing of broadcast television, viewers control the flow of the text; in theory, therefore, they miss only the parts of the text they choose to miss. If everyday television programming is experienced as being “free” it may therefore be “cheapened” by virtue of costing nothing except the viewer’s time.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, viewers pay money for the privilege of watching a movie or home video, and they have made a special effort to go out of the house to select it; in the event of home taping, they have at least paid for the blank tape and, at some point previous to taping considered the movie to be more worthy to be recorded than other available programming. In terms of viewer attentiveness and textual dominance of the experience, then, watching movies on the VCR falls somewhere between theatrical moviegoing and the everyday “live” television experience.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>“Mood” translates the German *stimmung*, a term used by both Heidegger and Expressionist theorists to signal an “attunement” of the subject to his/her environment.

<sup>2</sup>Robert J. Silvey, “Viewing: A Frame of Reference,” in David Manning White and Richard Averson, Eds., *Sight, Sound and Society: Motion Pictures and Television in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 53.

<sup>3</sup>David Thomson, “TV Weather,” *Sight and Sound*. Vol. 49, 2, (Spring 1980), p. 87.

<sup>4</sup>Thomson, p. 89.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Cf., especially Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1978, and Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, Eds., *The Reader in the Text* (Princeton: 1980).

<sup>7</sup>Cf., For example, Winston L. Kirby, “The Influence of Television on Social Relations: Some Personal Reflections,” in Frank J. Coppa, Ed., *Screen and Society* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), pp. 137-152, and Coppa’s Introduction.

<sup>8</sup>Robert T. Bower, *Television and the Public* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston: 1973); Bower’s study was patterned after Gary A. Steiner’s 1960 research published as *The People Look at Television: A Study of Audience Attitudes* (1963).

<sup>9</sup>Bower, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup>John Riley, Rank Cantwell and Katherine Rutliger, “Some Observations on the Social Effects of Television,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Summer, 1949 (Vol. 15, 2), p. 254; Bower, p. 144.

<sup>11</sup>Bower, p. 144.

<sup>12</sup>Jack Lyle and Heidi Hoffman, “Children’s Use of Television and Other Media,” cited in Bower, 1944.

<sup>13</sup>Bower, p. 144.

<sup>14</sup>Cited in Bower, p. 144.

<sup>15</sup>Ray Brown, Editor’s Introduction to *Children and Television* (Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage, 1976), p. 22.

<sup>16</sup>Celia von Feilitzen, “The Functions Served by the Media: Report on a Swedish Study,” in Brown, pp. 90-155, p. 103.

<sup>17</sup>Art Buchwald, “Screening the Guests,” *International Herald Tribune* Jan. 12-13, 1985, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup>Christopher H. Sterling and Timothy R. Haight, *The Mass Media: Aspen Guide to Communication Industry Trends* (New York: Praeger, 1978).

<sup>19</sup>Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982); Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus,” *Camera Obscura* No. 1 (1976).

<sup>20</sup>Silvey, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Mark R. Levy, “Home Video Recorders: A User Survey,” *Journal of Communication* Vol. 30, 4, (Autumn, 1980), pp. 23-27.