

Television as Cultural Form

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Since its appearance as a major means of "mass communication" in the aftermath of World War II, television has increasingly become one of the most powerful metaphors of contemporary American culture. Occupying a central place at the crossroads of politics and business, entertainment and information, home and world, sound and image, work and leisure, television is certainly not simply an effective means of disseminating knowledge or images, but a cultural form, a regulating metaphor for social life. Many of its characteristics underpin the ideals of a culture of work and consumption: a technological achievement, a means of communication covering vast distances and bringing information and images to our homes, a service product in all its varieties and programmes, produced in a professional, disciplined and punctual manner and presented as a response to our "demand."

This does not mean, however, that television is accepted without criticism. Indeed, it has frequently been the object of scientific research and intellectual criticism as well as public controversy (see Newcomb for an overall view). The most significant part of the discourse on television is in the sphere of public speech. Very rarely is television taken as a whole institution in this kind of discourse. Nonetheless, public discourse may turn out to be an interesting object of sociological or cultural analysis when it is considered as an essential part of the way television is instituted by several forces in society. Indeed, although it might at times be of a critical nature, this kind of discourse must be considered within the same context as some other discourses on and around TV: commercial advertising for TV sets, expert opinion on the virtues of a recent innovation, or the presumed or demonstrated dangers of television for children, etc. All these public discourses together are involved in the signification of television, thus influencing television's signification of the world. Cecelia Tichi has shown how the public discourse on TV has become an essential part of the analysis of TV as cultural institution.

The social scientific study of media is understandably characterized by an academic distance from the commonsense assumptions which seem to govern most of the public discourse. Indeed, what is nowadays called "media studies" has a long history rooted in the sociology of mass communications and in the social

psychology of the immediate post-war period in the US. Emerging as a response to the hypodermic-needle theory of the pre-war and war years, the early sociology of mass communications was characterized by meticulous empirical research on the "effects" of media messages on discrete, observable individual behavior and opinion (Lazarsfeld *et al.*). Since the prior "hypodermic-needle" theory of direct and immediate effects had been commonsense in the years of totalitarian regimes in Europe, the main objective of these empirical studies was to develop a precise measurement of how effective the media actually were. The findings of such studies (especially on voting and buying behavior) indicated that the media do not create any significant change in individual attitudes and opinions. We might say that most of the media research in the last three decades has developed as a critical response to this dominant paradigm (see Hall; and Barthes especially for work associated with semiology. See Gitlin for a succinct criticism of the concept of effect).

Following its social and cultural installation in the 1950s, television has rapidly become a prime object of attention, analysis and criticism (see Spiegel for the process by which TV is instituted as family entertainment). The recent media studies seem to employ various different methodologies ranging from the semiological analysis of media texts to the ethnographic study of audience groups (Fiske; Morley; and Carey). One common aspect of these various approaches is their rejection of a simplistic dichotomy between "direct and total effect" and "no effect," and their insistence on questions of cultural domination and resistance. The emphasis is on the cultural meanings produced by television, and how these are received or interpreted by heterogeneous audiences. Television is conceptualized as an institution which is responsible for the reproduction of meanings and values in society, and the audiences are regarded as consisting of several groups who might differently interpret or even contest as well as accept these meanings. Although the value of this research is undeniable, it overlooks a fundamental aspect of our experience of television. Television is not simply a medium for producing or reproducing meanings, but it is itself an important cultural form. Ironically, what seems to be missing from most of the television research is precisely the question of what television is.

Yet this question can not be so easily isolated. It is related to a wider social institutional framework on which modern culture is based. In this essay I want to make some initial observations about television as both responsible for and part of our "modernity." My purpose is to provide a description of the fundamental features of television as a specific institutional-technological complex. To begin with, I would like to emphasize a number of implicit assumptions about television. This hidden set of background assumptions is regarded as natural; they are what make television a natural, routine object of experience for us. They constitute a kind of "fore-knowledge" of television, and this is why they need to be made explicit if we want a genuine understanding of our experience of television.

The first of these assumptions is that television is an instrument, that is to say a medium of communication through which information and images are transmitted. This is a philosophical-moral assumption: events happen in a place called the "real world," which is by definition separate from television or media, and media professionals and journalists report these events to us. The possible problems are biased, subjective reporting and what communication theorists call "noise," i.e., anything that interferes with the clear transmission of the message. When the report is objective and all noise is eliminated, one has a transparent view of the event. The questions of bias and noise are questions of moral and professional training, that is to say essentially technical questions. Television thus provides the receiver with an objective and transparent view of the world. The implication is that there is such a thing as transparent communication in which the message sent is identical to the message received. Most of the time critics as well as defenders of television make precisely this kind of assumption. While for the defenders, television should be unbiased, objective, hence transparent (questions of moral and professional training), for many critics television itself is a kind of noise which interrupts better, freer or more authentic forms of communication (Mander; and Postman).

Closely related to the first, the second assumption is that of the separation of a place called "real world" from television. The core of this assumption is that television is not part of the "real world"; it is only a medium which transmits the events. This is an assumption that goes as far back as the Ancient Greek notion of mimetic representation that characterizes the visual paradigm of Western civilization (Auerbach). The Western tradition of oil painting, with its rule of perspective formulated in the Renaissance, is regarded as a distinguishing instance of this visual problematic (Panofsky). The emergence of technologies of mechanical reproduction, such as photography, film and television, and the simultaneous birth of mass culture constitute an important turning point in this history (Benjamin). Today the public dissemination of these mechanically produced images and their penetration into our everyday lives have reached such a level that it is difficult to think of reality as simply independent of these visual representations. Is it possible currently to think of politics independent of media and in particular television? Visual representation on a mass scale is a fundamental aspect of politics today, just as the "image" which the politicians have to establish and elaborate through self-presentation, as well as visual and verbal rhetoric on a daily basis are. The media apparently simply represent what happens in the real world of politics; but in reality they are themselves part of this real world, with their massive power of representation from daily news photographs to political commentary. The same applies for all the different spheres of life: how is it possible to think the ups and downs of financial markets independent of the business news on television which provides information in the shortest time possible? In many spheres of life television does not simply influence society, it directly participates into its daily running. Even the most objective and unbiased news reporting of an event (if there is such a thing) is to underlie the significance of that event. As numerous studies have shown, the journalists do not have political or

subjective bias in a simple way, but they have implicit and explicit criteria on what makes a good news story, and are clearly selective in their presentation of what happened or how it happened. The paradox is that such a direct participation into the making of reality requires the assumption a "real world" independent of television. In other words, this second assumption implies that television is bound to misrecognize its own activity in the real world; it has to deny its own role in the making of reality and construct itself as a simple instrument which provides a transparent view precisely in order to construct reality "as it is."

The third assumption is perhaps the most difficult to understand, but it follows logically from the first two. It is essential to the institution of television that the audiences are considered as a group of people who are separate from or external to television. Television professionals as well as many researchers would concur that the people's attitudes, norms and opinions are strongly influenced by television. The effect of television is often taken as evident, but the important point here is the assumption of an individual or an attitude which is prior to television and is then changed by the action of it. This view of causal effect or influence might be considered in two ways: either as a total impact on mass or social behavior, or as the effects of single messages on observable behavior. The former can be understood in a historical sense, in terms of a difference between a social situation in which television occupies a central role and one in which it does not. The latter idea is more structurally related to the assumption that the audience is external to the institution of television. However, "influence" is not the only consequence which is associated with the idea of the externality of audiences. More important than this is the freedom of choice which is attributed to the audience member. Once considered as entirely outside the institution of television, the audience member can be considered as exercising his/her freedom of choice before various TV programs. Of course, in the case of critics of mass society--"the thesis of total impact on social and individual behavior--it is precisely the lack of exercise of such freedom that matters.

I now want to examine these assumptions in detail. My purpose is to establish a view of television which is different from the one that is implied by an unproblematical acceptance of such assumptions. To begin with, I define the idea of television as a simple medium of communication as the technician or technological reductionist concept of television. Against this technological reductionism, I would like to take an approach that is closer to that of the paleontologist's: technology is not a mere instrument but signifies some fundamental characteristic of a social or cultural ethos. (Such a view of technology is broadly influenced by Andre Leroi-Gourhan.) What kind of social or cultural ethos is expressed by the instrument or apparatus of television? When we ask such a question, we immediately realize that the answer is not straightforward but indeed multifaceted and complex. There is the TV set as an everyday object and a piece of furniture that we find in the sitting rooms of people; there are cameras, transmitters, antennas, receivers, tubes and screens; there is the studio as well as a whole social

organization that we call a "TV channel" (with its specific set of positions and roles from the highest administrator to the reporter and the cameraman); there are various kinds of programs, etc. The product of the operation of this complex apparatus are a set of images and information. Let us restrict ourselves, for the time being, with the visual aspect. The concept of "image" as a mechanically reproduced visual representation or sign that is common to modern media can be seen as a major element of contemporary cultural ethos. Following Martin Heidegger's view, we might define the modern age as the "age of world picture." Image or imaging is a primary means of world-constructing in Heidegger's sense. In his words, "it is not simply that we have a different picture of the world, but we now have the world as picture" (116).

According to one of the deepest assumptions of modern Western culture, technology is a completion of the natural deficiencies of our body. It is a result of our desire to command nature, by controlling forces that remain out of our reach. Television is a prime example: it covers distance for us and brings information in the form of images. However, as more than one critic has pointed out, in the modern age, the desire to control and dominate nature is itself out of control (Heidegger; also Adorno and Horkheimer). Technological inventions provide speed and comfort, but they also produce a new set of problems. The invention of the automobile is also the invention of car accidents (Virilio). In the case of television, the concept of "live action" is a good example. Reporters are prouder of the speed with which they bring information than of the quality of the information they produce. Of course, the assumption that once we see a "live image" we know what is going on is highly debatable. Images are always framed, are taken from a chosen point of view, and are also open to manipulation by words. Nevertheless, what matters is not so much the truth or falsity of a particular piece of information, but rather the overall communicative and cultural environment that television produces. This environment includes not only the camera, tube and technical equipment but also a social organization, laws, implicit and explicit assumptions, audiences of several kinds, etc. The product of this overall institution is a specific combination of words and images. In other words, television is not simply an "instrument" or "medium," but a medium that is itself a message, as Marshall McLuhan once defined it. Images and words produce a specifically televisual combination which is different from a cinematic or photographic one. It is this specific combination that is responsible for, what I called above, a cultural ethos. Television then is not simply a machine that supplies us with images and information, thus supplementing our body and helping us command nature. To say the least, it is a "supplement" which transforms our body, our psyche and indeed our relationship to the outside world.

One implication of such an approach is that television can no longer be taken as a separate social institution, such as government, education or family, in a conventional sociological manner. Television is an essential aspect of our sociality today; we live in a televisual world, and not just a televised one. For instance, the

popular middle-class complaint about the excessive nature of television assumes that television is a separate institution which can and must be limited, rationalized and used in an economical way. However, such a line of argument continues the same televisual assumptions in an inverted form. The very assumption of technology as command of nature constructs nature as ("naturally") excessive as well as deficient, i.e., as a violent force that needs to be controlled. A critical response to television in terms of controlling its excesses, then, is part of the same way of thinking. Indeed, this is a response which naturalizes television; hence, an essential part of its "normalization," its "pass" into culture. But how can we protect ourselves from such an excess, if the very means of controlling what we assume to be uncontrollable is itself out of control, or, in Heidegger's words, if we do not have a different picture of the world, but the world as picture? Television itself is commanded and framed by the very force of its own desire to control visually, and to produce images, news and information anytime, anywhere. This technological or televisual desire which frames television itself has no clear boundaries (see Fry for the concept of the "televisual"). So, if television has no clear limits, how can we speak of an outside world that is then "represented" by television? It is not only that there are screens everywhere from shops to airports and streets; more importantly, the image is already there before it is "taken" by the camera. The politician prepares his speech in view of television, already framed by it. He is "imaged"; his image is already there long before the cameraman arrives at the scene. In the mall where each single shopwindow presents us with a radiating glow of lights, we are walking inside the tube.

Nonetheless, such a conceptualization of television without the further qualification of the notion of image would be misleading. Image, as I mean it here, has two important characteristics. First, it is that which is produced by means of mechanical reproduction, that is to say, it is by definition a copy. Secondly, as a visual sign, image is polysemic. It does not have any fixed meaning by itself, and is always in need of other images or of language (conceived in a broad sense, words as well as thoughts) to become meaningful. However, the modern idea of observation depends on the assumption of the radical autonomy of the visual signs from the linguistic and other ones. The camera is usually seen as an instrument of observation and production of pictures. But it is also an embodiment of a foundational belief in the independence, autonomy and superiority of seeing over all other senses, as well as over thought and language. The idea of the "world as picture" means precisely this autonomy of seeing from all other senses and from thought and language, as well as the privilege accorded to it over them. "Seeing is believing" as the everyday phrase goes.

Television would perhaps claim to be working according to such a principle, but actually there is no flow of images without an accompanying flow of sound. Television is never simply visual. Indeed, sound is an integral aspect of televisual image, and it changes its nature. It gives the image an acoustic quality. However, unlike cinematic narrative which has a beginning and an end, the combination of

sound and image is structurally related to flow on television. Television is in fact constant talk; several people talk to us, some are invited or incited to talk, we watch people talking to people, others talking to us, and so on. All television is talk show. Without denying the significance of the different genres and forms of narrative on television, I would like to emphasize a level of television discourse that seems to have a global strategic importance. We often hear on television, for the benefit of the viewers, the following statement or words to that effect: "here is what we brought to you tonight, the kind of programs you want to watch, the images that you want to see, all the information you need, etc." This is often said by the anchor person on the prime time news, but also typically by the overvoice who announces the upcoming shows in between two programs. Both of these figures, but particularly the latter, can be regarded as the "voice" of television. It is television itself that speaks to us in the above statement. We, the audiences, are directly addressed as individuals ("you") who demand and desire television. But do we? Are these programs not produced by television?

In order to understand the significance of this message, we need to refer to a distinction made in linguistics between the "subject of utterance" and the "subject of the statement." When I say "I am lying," I am lying as the subject of utterance, but telling the truth as the subject of the statement. When television tells us that it is the result of our desire, it behaves as if it is the subject of the statement although it is the subject of the utterance. Television acts as if it is simply the receiver of the direct expression of a natural desire, while it is actually we who are the receivers of its unique utterance, and while television itself is the producer of this language which can only be known, desired and spoken, and for which the demand can only appear once it is uttered, and not before. We can now see why the third assumption about the externality of the audience is false, yet necessary to the operation of television. The audiences are produced by television itself, as if they were subjects free to choose whether to watch it or not.

We might extend this argument to our everyday, habitual relationship to television. Watching it is part of our cultural "habitus," which might be defined as the "system of socially acquired bodily and psychic dispositions" (see Bourdieu for an extended discussion of the concept of habitus). The "remote control" is always within the reach of our arm ("the world at our feet" but the world as picture), we turn the TV on and off, depending on our will and choice. But is television ever off? We know that television is always there, day and night, 24 hours. Whenever we turn it on, we are sure to find an image "there." In other words, we are not simply choosing between channels or programs when we turn the TV on, but are receiving, at any moment, television itself. Our desire for image is desire for something, a figure, a word, already there, already produced by and as television. Our belief that we choose between programs is another instance of the inversion that I described above. Perhaps the best moments which explain television are the moments when we do not look at anything particular on television but "just watch television," as we often like to say. What is to note is that this illusory sense of freedom we have

before television, the structural inversion which television produces, is not unrelated to our uncontrollable desire to command nature, to have visual control of our environment.

Television studies have approached television in terms of separate analyses of its different genres such as soap opera or news. Although this approach has proved useful in many respects and has taught a lot about television, it remains a limited one. There is one important general characteristic of television which cuts across its different genres. Television provides us with serial narratives. Stanley Cavell described this as the "serial-episode" format of television, which he defined as the aesthetic interest of television (250). While the aesthetic interest of commercial cinema is genreindividual story which depends on novelistic conventions, television is a programmed and scheduled flow of images and sounds, characterized by an everyday, serial format. This is a universal characteristic of television which is applicable for news and documentaries as well as the more familiar conventional television series of soap opera and action-adventure films. This serial, everyday nature of television implies another consequence about the nature and time of the television image. It is news features rather than soap operas that must be regarded as paradigmatic of television: television is a "current of simultaneous event perception" (Cavell 250). The time of television is always present time, always "now, this" (Heath 278-279). As the technology of instantaneous transmission, television creates a sense of "presence." Yet the nearness of what television brings is highly problematical, not because it is merely an image instead of a real thing or event, but rather because television images are never perceived but merely watched.

Taking my clue from a critical definition of Western culture of technology, I have defined television as a kind of surrogate body. As a provisional conclusion, we might say that television is "farsighted" in both senses of this expression (Weber 113-114). On the one hand, it is the technology of seeing-at-a-distance. Not only does it see better and further, but it also has the power to anticipate what is likely to happen in the future and take appropriate actions in advance. Cameras are always where they are supposed to be--we might even talk of a deep structural complicity between television and the world. Yet, does it not also suffer, on the other hand, from farsightedness in a medical sense? That is, is not its ability to see at a distance heightened only at the expense of its ability to see what is closest? (Weber). Does television not reduce knowledge to information, as bits of image and sound that should arrive as fast as possible? Perhaps the closer the events and objects are on the screen, the more difficult it is to see and understand what they are.

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