Television I: Television Programming

10.1 Felix the Cat, 1929.

10.2 First human step on the moon.

10.3 The toppling of Saddam.

"This is television. That's all it is. It's nothing to do with people. It's the ratings. For fifty years, we've told 'em what to eat, what to drink, what to wear. For Christ's sake Ben, don't you understand? Americans love television. They wean their kids on it. Listen. They love game shows. They love wrestling. They love sports, violence. So what do we do? We give 'em what they want."

> Actor Richard Dawson, as a game show host, in *The Running Man* (1987, US, Paul Michael Glaser)

Television has changed the perceptual base of Western culture and has profoundly influenced the development of other mass media popular arts. It has also changed the avant-garde. The structure and icon function of television programming will be discussed in this chapter. The next chapter will discuss television commercials.

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The main reason for the cultural and artistic impact of television is easy to identify: for the first time in Western history, the primary source of culture-building images is located within the home itself. Television has produced images ranging from the Felix the Cat doll (**10.1**) used in NBC's experimental broadcasts before World War II to the live shots of an American setting foot on the surface of the moon (**10.2**) to belated scenes of the invasion of Grenada to images of the 2003 war with Iraq such as the one of a <u>Saddam</u> Hussein statue discussed at the very beginning of this book (**10.3**). These four images suggest the almost unimaginable quantitative and qualitative range of images that have appeared during television's existence.

These few examples also show why television images are so powerful. They are the most real in the ongoing tradition of perspective images created by Western art and science since the time of Brunelleschi: they are instant, moving perspective images, the most powerful icons in Western history.

For most Americans today, television's home-based, factual and fictional images form the basic picture of social, economic, and political reality. Television today is so powerful that, in the opinion of the sociologist George Gerbner, television is the culture: "Today television is, for all practical purposes, the common culture. Culture is the system of messages that cultivates the images fitting the established structure of social relations. Television thereby becomes the common basis for social interaction…As such, it can only be compared, in terms of its functions, not to any other medium but to the pre-industrial notion of religion."[1]

As anticipated in the quotation that begins this chapter, contemporary image-makers are certainly aware of the central role of television in shaping human lives. When asked, in the movie *Home Alone 2* (1992, US, Chris Columbus), if he knew how to use the television, Macaulay Culkin's character quipped: "I'm ten years old. Television is my life!" (**10.4**)

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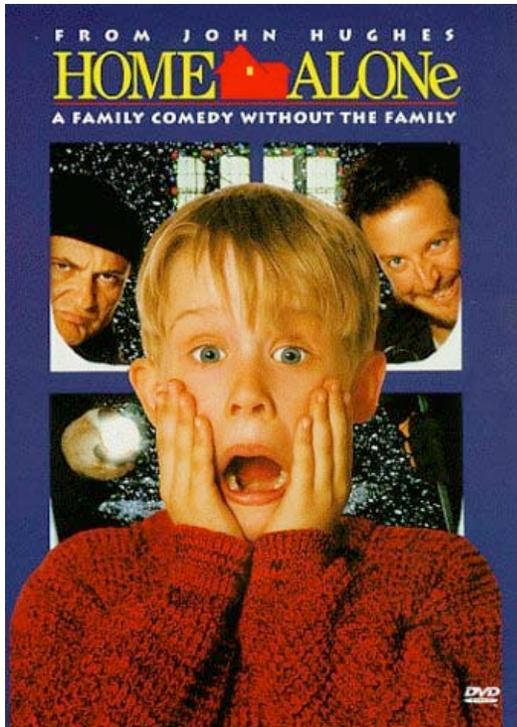
These statements remains valid even for people who do not watch television at all. For example, since the 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates, television has dominated our political process. Beyond the political arena, it affects the attitudes, perceptions, and behavior of so many people in our culture that even those who avoid it live lives surrounded by a culture that is based on the effects of television.

The power of television is not due only to its position inside the home, but to its inherent ability to store and retrieve art forms and experiences of all kinds. Our experience of reality now includes the instant replay as well as the instant news bulletin. Saturn, the earth, and the moon are on tape; so are Princess Di's funeral and President Clinton's impeachment trial (**10.5**).

10.5 Princess Di's funeral procession.

President Clinton's impeachment.

Yet such television experiences, unlike real events and live performances, have no context outside television itself. Real events have a precise time and space context; video events can go forward and backward in time and are subject to unlimited manipulation. French theorist

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Jean Baudrillard points out that in our media-dominated world, much of what we see is not real nor a reflection of basic reality. Instead, it is hyperreal: "It bears no relation to any reality whatever; it is its own pure simulacrum."[2]

The powerful realism of the television image coupled with its equally obvious potential for manipulation has made it a source of controversy from its beginnings. Several important films have dealt with the impact of television, its capacity to manipulate reality and its tendency to stimulate through violence. *Capricorn One* (1978, US, Peter Hyans) dealt with a simulated US landing on Mars. NASA convinced the astronauts to go along with the fraud by saying to them: "All we need from you is the television transmissions, that's all." Television transmissions were key to duping an unsuspecting public. *Network* (1976, US, Sidney Lumet, **10.6**) satirized the social impact of network television's drive for ratings through ever more drastic levels of violence. Michael Glaser's *Running Man* **(10.7***),* quoted at the beginning of this chapter,
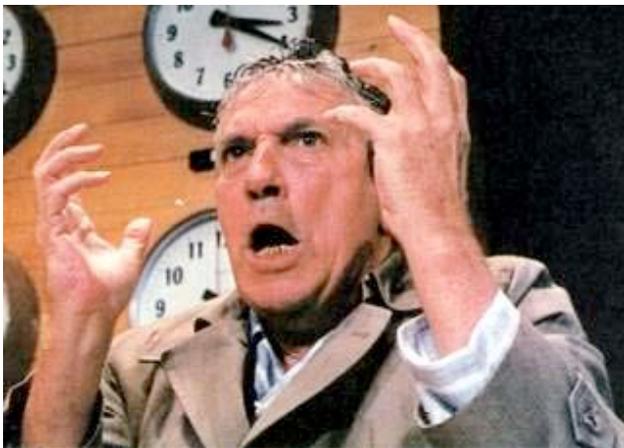
10.6 Film still from *Network*, 1976.

10.7 Film still from *Running Man*, 1987.

presented a futuristic world in which the most popular program on government-controlled television was a sadistic game in which convicts were chased and killed by well-armed, muscular freaks. The irony of the government-controlled television slogan "Seeing is Believing" was revealed in an incident which showed how editing can turn television footage into total misrepresentation. *Videodrome* (1983, Canada, David Cronenberg) pictured a perverse science

fiction world in which television experiences literally took over the perception and response

capacities of those who watched.

The relationship between television and politics has also been scrutinized by film. .

Being There (1979, US, Hal Ashby) was a brilliant parable about a man who became a leading

politician because the only phrases and gestures he knew came from television, not from contact

with real people, making him, therefore, a perfect communicator—on television. Barry

Levinson's *Wag the Dog* (1997, US, **10.8**) was an astonishingly insightful (albeit fictional) look

at presidential use of war to distract voters. The artificially constructed war in *Wag the Dog* was

precisely the kind of hyperreal simulacrum that Baudrillard analyzed.

10.8 Film stills for *Wag the Dog*, 1997.

Other films have addressed how television purports to record reality directly. Both *The*

Truman Show (1998, US, Peter Weir, **10.9**) and *Edtv* (1999, US, Ron Howard) dealt with young

men whose lives were constantly recorded by television cameras. In both cases, their lives did

not unfold "naturally," but were manipulated by media forces outside them.

The potential of television's capacity to record, retrieve, and manipulate reality is still

provoking controversy. Video cameras could be whirring in every American home, sending their

live images to a central storage bank where anyone's home life could be called up and replayed

at any time. Or, in a switch on Michael Crichton's film *The Terminal Man* (1974, US, Mike

Hodges), a video camera could be transplanted into the eye of a person and his or her whole life experience be transmitted, stored, and retrieved. Some robots today have their own television eyes; with the rapid acceleration of cybernetic technology, video cameras may soon become not merely what we carry with us in our phones, but what we wear or embody.

10.9 Film stills from *The Truman Show*, 1998.

The underlying theme of such films and observations is that television has a radically new power, only partially realized, to merge reality and fiction. Even though it is the third kind of image derived from Western perspective image-making machines, it is far more powerful than its predecessors, the photograph and the film.

Neither Brunelleschi nor the Academic painters could have dreamed it would turn out like this.

Home Entertainment Antecedents

The home entertainment provided by the television has ancestors in personal format technologies that date back centuries. These included magic lanterns (such as those used by motion photographer Eadweard Muybridge), shadow boxes using silhouette figures and sand boxes. Nineteenth century sand boxes presented cut-out figures moving on wooden stages behind glass covers. Turning the box activated sand-weighted mechanics hidden at the back of the box.

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By the middle of the eighteenth century, camera obscuras were available in portable form. A French one from 1750 is built into a leather bound book with the title *Theatre de l'univers* on it. Stafford relates the title to Shakespeare's like "All the world's a stage."[3] Decades later, Englishman John Heaviside Clark build a portable diorama in a wooden box. The 13" by 10" box came with twelve pre-painted screens as well as instructions on how owners could paint additional ones.

Another early precedent for the home entertainment provided by television can be seen in the box for viewing a tiny panorama created in 1793 by French artist Louis Carrogis, known as **Carmontelle**. The J. Paul Getty Museum owns one of the two surviving Carmontelle panoramas (**10.10**). The long transparent painting, intended to scroll through a viewing box, depicts numerous well-dressed figures strolling through an idealized landscape. As he demonstrated the panorama for his aristocratic patrons, Carmontelle recounted "lively anecdotes" that enhanced the apparent motion of the images.[4]

A Brief History of Television Technology

As with each of the technologies we have traced in this text, television was developed through a combination of conceptual preparation, scientific advances, and aesthetic needs. The scientific steps to television began in 1862, when Abbe Giovanna Caselli invented what he called the "pantelegraph" to transmit still images over wires. A decade later, other scientists began to experiment with transforming images into electronic signals. By 1876, Boston scientist George

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Carey was conceptualizing the selenium camera, which would allow people to "see by electricity." At that time, the term cathode ray began to be used to refer to the light emitted when an electric current was forced through a vacuum tube.

Throughout the 1880s, there were experiments with telephones like Alexander Graham Bell's "photophone" that transmitted images as well as sounds. (No doubt Bell would have been pleased to see his work flourishing a century later in the preponderance of video phones.)

In 1900, at the World's Fair in Paris, Russian Constantin Perskyi first used the term television. He was speaking at the First International Congress of Electricity, convened on the fair grounds. Throughout the next decade, Russian and British inventors both worked on cathode ray electronic television.

Russian émigré Vladimir Zworkin, working for Westinghouse and later RCA, advanced television technology in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1925, he took out the first patent for a color television system. Two years later, Bell Telephone and the US Department of Commerce performed the first long distance use of television, transmitting images from Washington DC to New York City. Then Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover announced: "Today we have, in a sense, the transmission of sight for the first time in the world's history. Human genius has now destroyed the impediment of distance in a new respect, and in a manner hitherto unknown."[5]

The first television commercial was broadcast in 1930. By 1936, there were over 200 television sets world wide. The following year, CBS began television development. Cable television was first used in 1936. Satellite television began in 1962. By 1969, over 600,000,000 viewers watched the US land a man on the moon.

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Pure Television: Nothing but the Facts

Unlike the complex journey required for Cubism to uncover the basic structure of "pure" painting, however, making "pure" television is very easy. All one need do is go into a bank or store and watch a television monitor as it scans the environment and whirs mindlessly on.

Pure television is pure boredom. Fortunately, we do not see "pure" television. Before television images enter our homes and build our culture, they go through an intervention and manipulation process as involved as that of shaping a painting.

Two terms will help to clarify this manipulative quality of the television image; **event** will refer to the original fact or process that occurs, or has occurred in the past, in front of the television camera; **filter** will refer to all the mean by which the original event is edited or otherwise manipulated in any way before it appears as an image on the television screen in front of the viewer.

Network television programming has three major filters that inevitably manipulate the viewer's perception of the images that appear on the television screen. The first and most important filter has already been mentioned—it is the home. The other two filters that alter broadcasted events are part of the television image itself—the filters of drama and personality.

Manipulating the Television Image I: The Home as Filter

Many people admit to the habit of walking into their home or apartment and turning on the television set, whether they intend to watch it or not. It is simply there. More than 97 percent of American homes today have at least one television set (exceeding the percentage of homes with a refrigerator). The home as a filter gives television images a context of everyday familiarity that subtly integrates them into our daily experience. As has been noted earlier, other

art forms have their special limitations of time, place, and attention. Television is always there

within reach. It's "family."

Even the cathedral, the most unified social, artistic, and political art form in the Western

tradition, required the individual to enter into its special space at special times. By contrast,

people have been known to leave home merely to get *away* from television and its incessant flow of images. Television images are simply part of the environment of the American home. As seen in a mid-twentieth century Taft Broadcasting Company advertisement that depicts a "typical" American family gathered around their television to watch the moon landing (**10.11**), the television industry is quite aware of the power of the home as filter.

The night we went to the moon.

Informing and entertaining the American family.

The Home as Filter: Childhood Ends

The home as filter for the television image not only gives it an environmental presence, it

also radically affects the relationships between people within the house. The "TV dinner" is a

symbol of the many subtle changes in family relationships that have come from television.

Parents hush children during the news. People make a daily ritual of "Oprah" or "the soaps" or

they schedule weekends around the National Football League (NFL) game. In one episode of

"The Simpsons," Homer made a point of substituting the experience of watching a football game

for the traditional Christian family activity of going to church.

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Individual Americans watch television for an average of over four hours each day. Children watch more.

Children not only have their own programming, they also watch the programs the adults watch; in fact, many children prefer adult programs. As the communication specialist Joshua Meyerwitz has observed:

"Everyone, regardless of age, tends to watch similar programs. In 1980, for example, "Dallas," "The Dukes of Hazard," "Love Boat," and "The Muppets" were among the most popular programs in the country, including ages 2 to 11."[6] Aware of the crossover nature of television programming, the producers of "The Simpsons," an animated cartoon ostensibly for children, employ such sophistication of humor and wide-ranging cultural references that the program appeals to adult audiences as well.

The education professor Neil Postman extends this observation to include a comparison with the condition of children in the Middle Ages. Medieval children, before the printing press required literacy, became absorbed in the realities of the adult world as soon as they could speak and work. Later, literacy and the necessity for schooling created the barrier between adulthood and childhood that in modern times became accepted as normal. Today, television is erasing that distinction.

According to Postman, medieval paintings that depict children as tiny adults accurately reflect the situation of the medieval child-adult, one that is returning in out culture because television "presents information mostly in visual images. All we have to do is look, which children in our culture do for more hours each week than they spend in the school classrooom. And, as noted above, they watch what adults watch.

"This means that all adult secrets—social, sexual, physical, and the like—must be revealed…It is even more than the revelation of secrets. It is the ultimate trivialization of culture."[7]

The open-window familiarity of the television image, because of the filter of the home, thus has a particularly strong impact on children. Much of the adult behavior they see would previously have appeared only to adults. Today, television not only makes the home itself a theater, it also uses the family as the main subject matter for its dramas.

The Family: The Main Subject of Television

10.12 Cast photograph for "The Waltons."
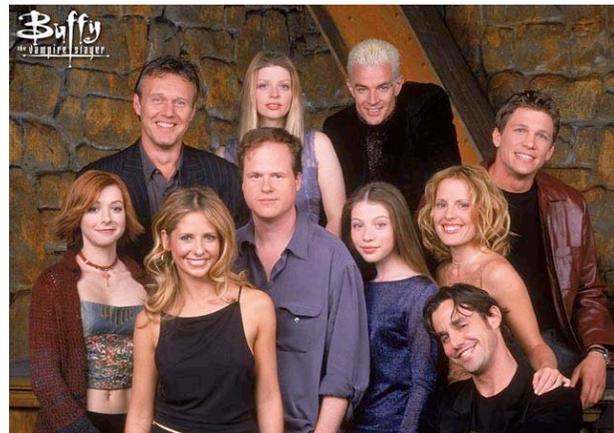
10.13 Cast photo for "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

Television has evolved an amazingly wide variety of group relationships that can be seen as variations of the family unit. Over the years, four general types of television families have evolved: the nuclear family (Ma, Pa, and the kids), the splintered family (single parent plus kids), the unorthodox family (living together in nonsexual but supportive relationship, no kids), and "almost family" (groups that do not live together but are bound by extraordinary closeness). Entries in these categories vary from year to year. Classic examples of each are, for the nuclear family, "The Waltons" (**10.12**), "Family Ties" and "Home Improvement"; for the splintered family, "Diff'rent Strokes," "One Day at a Time," and "Frazier"; for the unorthodox family "The Odd Couple," "Three's Company" and "Will & Grace"; for the "almost family," "M.A.S.H.,"

"Cheers" and "Buffy the Vampire Slayer" (**10.13**). More recently, "Friends" and "Sex in the City," two wildly popular series, presented "almost family" groupings of attractive young people.

Indeed, the two most popular and longest-running comedies in the history of television are centered around families: "The Simpsons" (**10.14**) and "Married with Children." The humor in both series turns on the comedic inversion of stereotypes. Both fathers—Homer Simpson and Al Bundy—are presented as bungling idiots, rather than the intelligent, take-charge characters men are "supposed" to be.

10.14 Production cells from "The Simpsons."

Humorous Inversions of Family Role Stereotypes

Several of the family members in these two comedies are funny precisely because they don't act as they are "supposed to." Intentional—and intentionally humorous—behavioral reversal is an important component of many culture's social structures.

Anthropologists have studied similar social role inversion in, for example, Pueblo Indian culture. The Zuni Pueblo kachina figure known as the Mudhead (*Koyemci*) is a ritual clown, who mocks the serious actions of dancers and other performers. The Mudhead clown "reverses,

inverts, and transposes the normal patterns in such a way that humor and laughter are a result."[8]

Such laughter appears to serve as "an attack on control," but it actually functions as

reinforcement of cultural ideals. Transgressing behavioral norms (by telling scandalous sexual

secrets in public) and breaking long-held taboos (by appearing to drink urine), the Mudhead

clown elicits much laughter…which serves to release the tension and, simultaneously, to

reinforce the mechanics of social control. In US society, which strongly urges men to be

physically strong, professionally productive and emotionally invulnerable, Homer Simpson and

Al Bundy are fragile failures, whose antics allow viewers humorous release from the pressures of

gender socialization.

The Bundy children also invert social expectations (**10.15**). While the daughter Kelly has

loose sexual morals and is perennially sexually active, the son Bud is a big loser both

romantically and sexually. This inverts the expectations of a society that criticizes sexually active

women as "sluts" but rewards sexually active men as "studs" or "players." The society that

punishes women for slipping from virginal virtue also considers men sexually obsessed,

reinforcing such expectations with popular slogans about how often men think about sex every

minute.
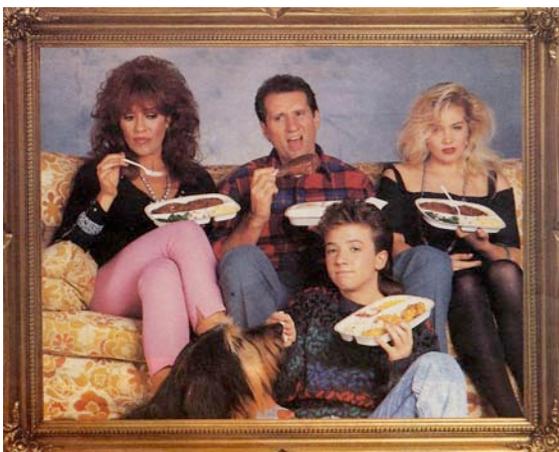
Fictional series like "The Simpsons" and "Married with Children" are self-contained dramas; they are productions that could exist as either plays or movies outside of television. The term *drama* can apply in a more general sense to virtually all network television productions, whether fictional or not. Drama is the second powerfully manipulative filter built into the network television image. Television producers are well aware of the importance of drama: The 2003-2004 advertising slogan for Turner Television Network was "TNT: We know drama."

Manipulating the Television Image II: The Filter of Drama

A good way to see how the filter of drama works is by examining a type of programming that is basically nonfictional: the filter of drama is powerfully evident even in the most factual kind of television broadcast, the news show.

The television news show is a drama, that is, a dramatic presentation of facts. It follows a recurring narrative structure and theme with as much predictability as an effective primetime fictional series.

Here is Robert Pelfrey's description of the "NBC Nightly News" in the mid-1980s:

Before 1985, NBC's opening logo pictured an image of the world spinning toward the viewer. The accompanying high-tech sound effects also dramatically suggested the scope of information about to emerge above the viewer's horizon. The current NBC logo (check this) is equally dramatic but far more patriotic: it presents a helicopter view of the Statue of Liberty accompanied by a stately orchestral theme titled "The Mission."

Following the opening logo, the "star" of the story, Tom Brokaw, looks directly into our living rooms and says, "Good Evening." The papers he folds in his hands suggest that he has just caught up with the last-minute facts that are pouring in from television cameras stationed across the world—which appears in the spread-out map that was designed into the "Nightly News" set.

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All this has taken about thirty seconds. Now, the news.

Brokaw first describes the lead international story—or domestic disaster—and then the image on the screen switches to an on-the-spot reporter. If the lead story is complicated, the coverage will switch to a second correspondent after a maximum of about two minutes. Television news keeps the pictures—and the audience's attention—moving.

After Tom Brokaw wraps up the story, a graphic menu appears on the screen to create interest in what is coming up next. Even television news has to be careful to keep its drama competitive with the dramas about miraculous ties, lost travelers' checks, and upset stomachs that regularly appear as part of the news show format—the commercials.

The drama of the news then continues with stories of lessening importance broken up by graphics reminding us to stay tuned through the commercial breaks.

Throughout the program, the sets, the graphics, and the environmental sounds are all dramatically orchestrated to enhance the credibility of the visual facts. A reporter will stand in front of the White House or another significant place to read comments that could just as easily—and a lot more comfortably—be read from an easy chair at home. The location shot, however, gives the report an on-the-spot touch of drama.

The overall dramatic effect proceeds from chaos (bad news) to order (light news). The final wrap-up is usually a human interest story. It could be a story about the first girl to play Little League baseball in Keokuk, or someone who won a million dollars in the New York lottery. Or it might be another story about the plight of China's pandas. Whatever it is, it helps to turn the tragedy of the news into a "comedy" of hope.

The news can then end with a good-natured smile or wink from Tom Brokaw and a ritual "Good night from all of us at NBC news." A closing set of graphics and high-tech sounds

completes the dramatic cycles from chaos to order with reassuring familiarity. There will be

another story tomorrow night. The world will hold together. In the meantime, right after a

commercial break, the prime-time family shows will begin.

Tom Brokaw ended his long run as NBC anchor in December 2004. Throughout his

tenure, network news maintained a remarkably consistent format.

CNN Headline News in 2004

By the time Brokaw retired, cable news networks have begun to dominate the news field.

A description of 2004 news programming from CNN, the Cable News Network (**10.16**) indicates

that many of the characteristics of television news in the 1980s continue today.

10.6 Tom Brokaw.   **CNN, Cable News Network.**

The broadcast is prefaced by a computer-generated image of the logo: CNN Headline

News, twenty four.seven. The program begins with the two anchors—usually a man and a

woman—sitting in a high-tech newsroom. In less than a minute, the anchors list the top stories of

the hour, generally six in number, each with full-screen images of the locations of the stories.

Then the anchors introduce further information on the stories, with a different on-location

reporter detailing each news event. Images of the reporters and other incidents related to the

story are seen in the top right part of the screen. Below is a red and blue bar that occupies the

bottom quarter of the screen. The bar, itself divided horizontally in two, gives "News Brief" texts and the time in each of the four US time zones, above a register that presents a running account of the New York Stock Exchange. All of the texts appears in contrasting yellow and white texts. To the left of the story image is a bright blue vertical bar with the title of the story in yellow and white. The bold primary colors of the graphic components that frame the central news images lend dynamism to the grid-based composition of the screen.

After six to eight minutes of news, one of the anchors tells viewers what will be featured in the next news segment. Then the program breaks for commercials. There are usually two to three minutes of 15-, 30-, and 60-second commercials, including a brief commercial for one of the other CNN news programs.

About ten minutes into the hour, one of the anchors introduces a special news section, such as the "Global Minute," which covers news headlines from around the world, or the "Entertainment News," which presents stories about film stars and films, musicians, etc. This is followed by a few more minutes of news, then another commercial break.

Viewers who watch CNN Headline News for an hour are likely to see approximately 15 minutes of commercials, many of them several times. Some of the companies insert the same commercial in every break, so that viewers may see the same commercial—for example, one for Ditech.com or one for Viagra—as many as eight times in an hour.

The news segment/commercial break pattern is repeated every quarter hour, with minor variations. At about 30 minutes past the hour, the anchors often present a "feel good" story, like the one about the 93-year old woman who celebrated her birthday by skydiving out of an airplane. Or they may present a humorous story, like the one about the would-be robber who mistook a coffee shop for a bank.

By the time viewers have watched the full hourly cycle of CNN Headline News, they understand the network's claim to be "The Need to Know Network."

Television news images have remarkable iconic impact. They create a picture story of the world held together by the personality of the anchorperson and, implicitly, the marvels of technology. They thus provide the viewer with an ingenious updated version of Western culture's most basic traditional myth: the experience of the autonomous individual who is at the center of the world. We have already noted that in the Renaissance, linear perspective positioned the human spectator as the "motionless center" around which the world turned. Television's iconic power is derived from its capacity to continue surrounding the stationary viewer with a (simulated) world.

The late twentieth century motto of ABC News was very specific about this iconic effect: "ABC News—uniquely qualified to bring you the world."

These descriptions of news shows as iconic pictures of the world have already referred to the third major filter of network television, the filter of personality.

Manipulating the Television Image III: The Filter of Personality

Personality is a filter that operates in virtually all network television programming. That it is present even in the national news show, when programming is supposedly "nothing but the facts," is a measure of its importance.

The personality of the anchorperson is crucial to the news show—as is reflected by his or her "star" status and yearly salary. Historic newscasters as Walter Cronkite (formerly with CBS, **10.17**), Tom Brokaw (from NBC), and Peter Jennings (from ABC) have publicly commented on

10.17 Walter Cronkite.

the difficulty of keeping news objective and factual in light of the pressure for high ratings, ratings heavily dependent on the personality that the anchorperson(s) give to the show. The script of the half-hour evening news show could fit easily on the front page of a newspaper and could be read in much less than thirty minutes. The presence of the anchorperson makes one huge difference: the viewer hears the news from *someone*. The filter of personality gives the dramatic chaos-to-order structure of the news show an important extra dimension: it changes drama into *personal* drama.

Television, perhaps more than any medium before it, demonstrates that artistic principle that was discussed earlier in terms of Thomas Eakins's paintings: facts and events alone are not enough. The drama critic Martin Esslin has described the process by which television imagery merges fact, drama, and personality:

"We are not primarily getting facts [in the television image], we are getting drama…Drama is always that of human beings. In drama we experience the world through personality."[9]

The problem in television is not the presence of personality and feeling but the ultimate effect of the mixture of fact, personality, and feeling. With a result similar to the oversentimentality of Academic painting, the television journalist can dominate the broadcast by his or her personality, even if unintentionally. Joan Lunden, one of ABC's national

correspondents, described her earlier role as television reporter on ABC's New York affiliate this way:

"People watch 'Eyewitness News' just as much to find out what Roseanne did today and what JJ did today and what so-and-so is wearing and what their feelings are that day, as they are tuning in to get the news. It is almost like a continuing soap opera, a serial."[10]

Lunden goes on to describe the "Eyewitness News" practice of running promotions—television commercials for the news show—that build up the image of each reporter as a specific personality type.

Lunden's candid evaluation of her relationship to her audience does not mean that the news she presents is false. It means that she is aware of how her personality—whether she likes it or not—becomes a filter that manipulates the viewer's perception of the images television is presenting.

The filter of personality is so familiar and so interwoven into our experience of television that it seems as natural as the facts themselves. The networks, of course, are keenly aware of its effect. At least one attempt has been made to evaluate the effect of a network broadcast without the filter of personality—an experiment that proved how decisively important it really is.

Removing the Filter of Personality: Television as Pure Fact

In December of 1981, the NBC producer Don Ohlmeyer decided to broadcast the season-ending NFL football game between the Miami Dolphins and the New York Jets without the normal crew of two or three commentators hovering over each play.

Ohlmeyer went to great lengths to eliminate personality. Technicians duplicated the sound environment of the stadium as closely as possible. Instead of the enthusiastic voices of the

announcers, people at home heard crowd noises, loudspeakers, sounds from the playing field—

and little else.

The result was one of the dullest games—or rather, television programs—ever broadcast.

The most devout opponents of sports announcers admitted that the game was almost impossible

to watch. The viewers felt alone—inside the stadium visually but somehow outside the event.

Even though the images were as factual as ever, the missing filter of personality took away much

of their interest. The public reaction to this "purely objective" broadcast resembled the public

reaction to Eakins's *Max Schmitt in a Single Scull*. It was seen as so objective that it lacked any

human connection, any feeling of drama.

The Background of the Television Image: Breaking the Closed Circle of Television

The emphasis on the three major filters might suggest that television is total

manipulation. Television, however, is obviously not this powerful. One important reason is that,

because they are able to transmit images of the real world in a more direct way than any previous

form of perspective image, television images have an innate quality that limits the ability of any

technician (or sponsor) to totally control what people see. This revolutionary quality of the

television image is an element that can be called *background*.

Background refers to the unintended and uncontrollable glimpses of reality that

unexpectedly, yet inevitably, intrude into television imagery, regardless of the filters bracketing

the event or the objectives of the sponsor.

All earlier forms of perspective images totally controlled background. A movie, for

instance, has a background as controlled as that of a Renaissance painting. The script and editing

process eliminate the possibility for background to intrude into the planned sequence and

meaning of the images they present.

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Television, because of its electronic base and rapid distribution, is qualitatively different. The editing that can be applied to television is not as complete as that applied to movies or to magazine photography.

Background intrudes even into the virtually closed system of Soviet television programming. A Soviet woman answered an American reporter's question about why the Russian people do not totally believe their government's picture of America by describing a documentary she had seen on television about drug problems in America. She forgot about the drugs, she said, but was very impressed by the quantity and variety of goods on display in American drug stores. This, she said, contradicted other government documentaries on poverty in America.

For Americans, background is particularly evident in television news programs. One of the best examples of background occurred during the coverage of one of the most important events of the late twentieth century: the 1969 flight of Apollo 11.

The Uniqueness of the Television Image: The Background Emerges

Over a hundred million Americans watched the flight of Apollo 11 (**10.18**). They saw the astronauts float with serenity and confidence against the black background of space.

When the command capsule entered its phase of flying behind the moon, however, the serenity suddenly vanished. The disappearance of the capsule left the picture empty except for the utterly still and barren lunar landscape pressed against the television screen. For a few moments there was absolute quiet from the command module, from NASA, and from the network correspondents.

For people around the world watching their sets, all that was left on the screen was the background—an unmanipulated and "unframed" picture of the reality of the moon. The surface

of the moon was so powerful by itself that it swallowed up the awareness of the recent chattering

of the commentators. All the filters disappeared. Only the fact remained, the fact of the moon.
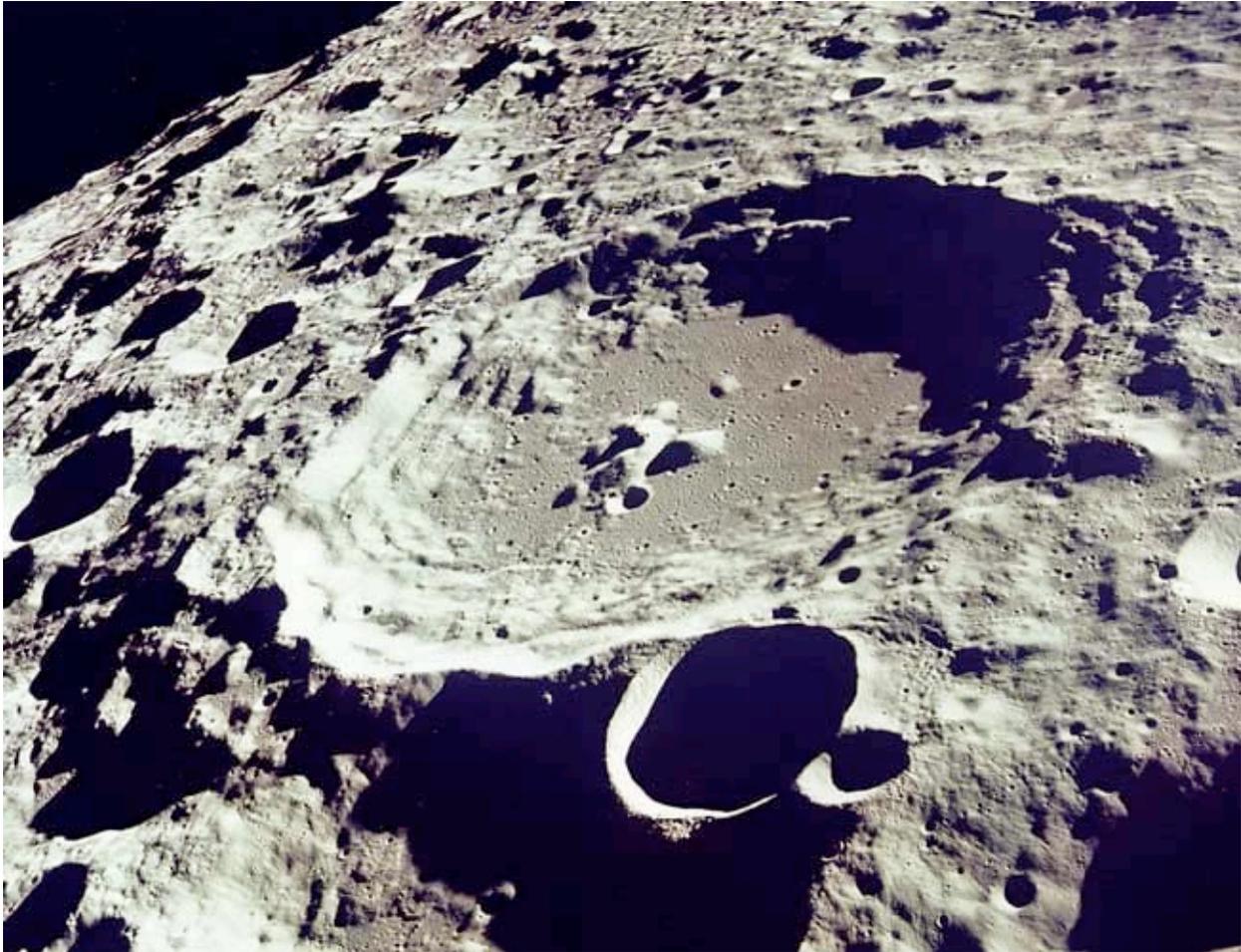
10.18 Apollo 11, image from the dark side of the Moon.

The stunning reality of sitting on earth and examining the surface of the moon

overwhelmed everything else. The experience was pure television: a perspective image

transmitted with the speed of light directly from the "event" to the viewer.

Very soon, however, the filters closed in on the mystery. Footage of a simulated lunar

capsule drifting behind a simulated moon appeared on the screen. Accompanied by expert

commentary and interrupted by commercial breaks, this sequence filled the gap until the

astronauts reappeared.

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Despite the epic quality of this example, it is true that the most important effects of the background of the television image have occurred on earth. As a recurring dimension of television imagery, these background effects are proof that television, despite its powerful filters, is not an entirely closed system of images. The social effects of background became especially apparent in the late 1950s and early 1960s when Americans became involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

Television Background: The Shock of the News

During the 1950s American society was subjected to the cultural shock of seeing images of itself on television in addition to the familiar context of the movies. On the movie screen, as was noted earlier, people were pictured like characters in a novel, completely rounded-off, consistent, and moving within a carefully plotted story and environment.

The background of the television image changed this. Television, at first gradually, and then with sudden flashes of disturbance, showed images of American's without the epic and narrative context of film: Americans saw themselves, live and (since 1960) in color. One of the first changes of perceptions involved the image of black Americans.

Television Background & the Civil Rights Movement: From Stereotypes to Real Images

Before television, blacks had achieved prominence and recognition in the fields of jazz and (though it was outside the major professional leagues) sports. Blacks were either excluded from or virtually invisible in every other field. When it began, television, to an astonishing degree, was an all-white world. Where blacks were visible, they were visible only as stereotypes.

Black stereotypes had remained unchanged in American popular art from nineteenth-century advertisements to movies like *Birth of a Nation* (**10.19**) and television sitcoms. Blacks were shown as slow-moving (except when they danced), talented only at menial tasks (except for

sports), and—most of all—very happy with having the world managed by white folks, as we

have seen in looking at images of African-Americans in advertising.


10.19 Film stills from *Birth of a Nation*, 1915.

Suddenly, on the television news, background began to interfere with the stereotypes. In

the late fifties and early sixties, black faces began to appear with increasing frequency on the

news. Unlike the stereotypes of the sitcoms, variety hours, and movies, however, they were not

content. Via television, black Americans stepped out of their stereotypes right into the same

living rooms where they had been seen for years in the late-evening times slots, on "The Jack

Benny Show," "Beulah," and "The Amos and Andy Show."

Television suddenly presented Civil Rights demonstrators on the same screen as

stereotypes. The stereotypes became increasingly unacceptable to most Americans as the Civil

Rights activity grew from isolated events to a national movement. The background of television

made the tradition of black stereotypes *look like stereotypes*, that is, narrow and offensive

caricatures.

This example brings out a principle of television programming that arises from the effect

of background: fact tends toward fiction and fiction tends toward fact. Even though stereotypes

are present, to a certain extent, in many forms of visual and dramatic art, the intrusion of

background initiates a process that forces the creation of newer, more up-to-date stereotypes. For the Civil Rights Movement, this principle meant that once the perceptions of blacks had been changed by the news programs, fictional portrayals of blacks also had to change.

Fiction Tends toward Fact: New Stereotypes to Fit the News
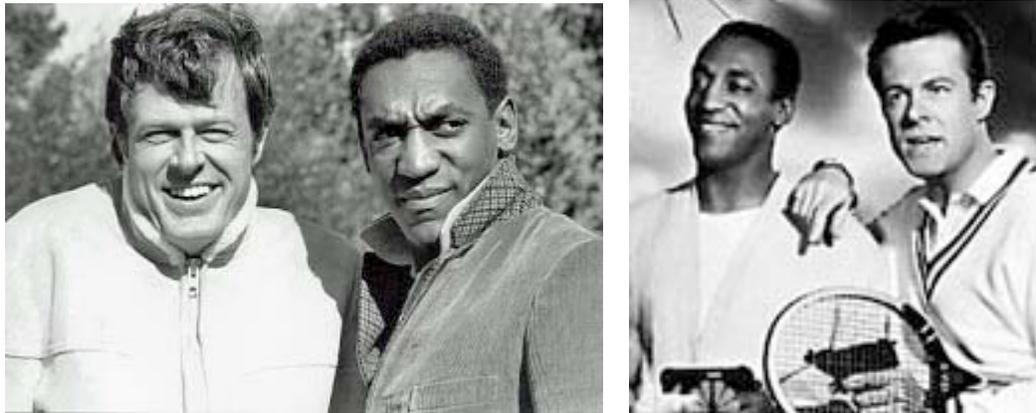
10.20 Stills from "I Spy."

The changes in television's fictional portrayal of blacks began in the mix-sixties. The 1965 show "I Spy" featured Bill Cosby (**10.20**) in an equal role alongside white actors without having to dance, make music, or wait on tables. "Star Trek," "Mission Impossible," "Julia," "The Outsiders," "Sanford and Son," "The Jefferson," "Diff'rent Strokes," "Benson," and "The Bill Cosby Show" were among the shows that featured significant African-American characters in the 1960s and 1970s. A fictionalized history of African Americans, "Roots" (one of television's first miniseries) was one of the highest-rated programs in television history, Even though the 1980s and 1990s saw a narrowing of fictional roles for blacks back toward sitcom humor or ghetto-tough images like Mr. T's exaggerated character (**10.21**), the revolutionary change in the images of blacks on television cannot be denied. The same period also produced another breakthrough series for Bill Cosby. "The Cosby Show," which depicted a middle-class black family in which both parents are professionals: one a lawyer and one a doctor. Today, Oprah Winfrey is the biggest <u>star</u> on daytime television. Period.

10.21 Cast Photograph of "The A-Team" and production still.

Compared to television in the 1950s, it is a totally new world.

Fiction Tends toward Fact: New Stereotypes for Women

The history of the stereotypes of women on television forms an equally clear example of how fictional roles on television adapt to changing facts in society. The Industrial Revolution split home and work, moving men away from the home into factories and institutionalizing the stay-at-home mother as saint and housewife. Although many women left their homes to work during World War II, social forces conspired to return them to domesticity after the war ended in 1945.

In the 1950s, women's social and fictional television roles seemed to be in total sync: women were housewives and mothers who served as happily in a man's world as blacks did in a white world. The only power women showed was either in pure fantasy shows like "I Dream of Jeannie" and "Bewitched" or in sitcoms where the humor was based on women's absurd attempts to show themselves as capable as their husbands, as in "I Love Lucy" (**10.22**) and "I Married Joan." The most famous woman professional in a 1950s prime-time series was Eve Arden's character in "Our Miss Brooks," a high school teacher. Miss Brooks' most basic

concern, however, was prowling the halls in an eternally unsuccessful effort to marry the dim-witted biology teacher.

10.22 Stills from "I Love Lucy."

Betty Friedan's revolutionary *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) analyzed the cultural construction of femininity and pointed out how it limited women's human potential. Even as she wrote, many American women were beginning to chafe against such limitations.

By the early sixties, over half of American marriages were ending in divorce, and almost half of all American women had jobs outside the home. This reality, plus the impetus to protest and change generated by the Civil Right Movement, produced a dramatic shift of fiction toward fact in the portrayal of women on television. Shows like "That Girl," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Alice," and "One Day at a Time" pictured women coping with divorce and single parenting and entering into careers and professions instead of mere jobs. Despite the increased complexity of character and role of these new fictional women, the fictional world they moved in—perhaps best symbolized by "Charlie's Angels" (**10.23**)—was still dominated by men.

The fictional television roles of women towards the end of the twentieth century showed fiction tending toward fact. In the 1973 season, for example, almost thirty percent of prime-time shows had no regularly appearing actresses. By 1984 almost half the characters on prime-time

shows were women, many of them in starring roles. Nine of the twenty-one new network shows

in 1984 starred women in career roles. All these shows presented women not only as powerful,

but as *the* power in their respective social worlds. These roles featured down-to-earth characters,

in marked contrast to earlier fantasy roles like "Wonder Woman" and "The Bionic Woman" or

the fashion model chic of "Charlie's Angels." Power for women in the 1980s, in other words, no

longer depended on miraculous circumstances.
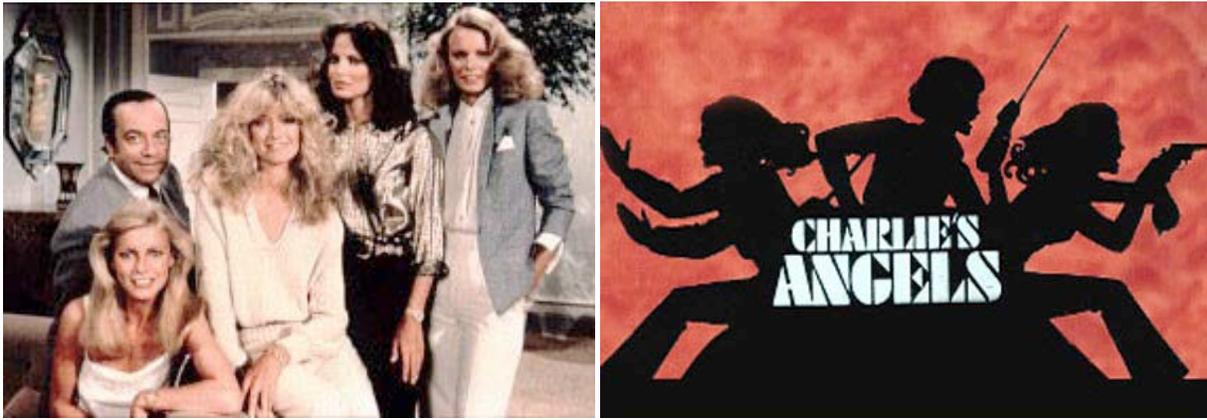
10.23 Cast photograph of "Charlie's Angels."

Although female stars of television series may have some personal power, it is still often

limited by gender stereotyping. "Allie McBeal" was ostensibly about a successful lawyer, but the

title character spent most of her on-screen time agonizing about romantic relationships (**10.24**).

Similarly, the Marge Helgenberger character in "CSI: Crime Scene Investigation" (**10.25**) is

portrayed as more compassionate, better able to deal with children, and continuously focused on

relationships--unlike her male colleagues, who rarely reveal romantic interests. All the female

characters in the "CSI" programs wear scanty, extremely tight clothing. Allie McBeal wore

similar attire—which is not exactly professionally coded in our society. Instead, it signals a

woman's sexuality and sexual availability.

Despite the lightweight and frivolous character of almost all television fictional heroes,

their images are important icons: fictional stereotypes tell people, at least in fantasy, what they

can expect to become. In order to achieve a goal, it is first necessary to be able to imagine it.

Linda Lavin, the star of the long-running series "Alice," traced prime-time television's increased

realism in portraying women to television news, that is, to background: "News influences

entertainment…the link between women and activists and reporters who care about women's

issues grows stronger each year."[11]

10.24 Still from "Allie McBeal."　　　　　　　**10.25 Still from "CSI: Crime Scene Invesestig**

　　　In spite of the changes introduced by background, young Euro-Americans continue to

dominate television dramas. This can be confirmed, for example, by a survey of the gender and

racial identities of the stars of the 2004 season Warner Brothers television programs. As

discussed and illustrated in a 16-page promotional pamphlet, 26 of the 32 stars appeared to be

white. None of the actors had a Hispanic surname; although in an interview, one of the stars of

"The Gilmore Girls" (**10.26**) stated that she was "actually Hispanic," but hired to play a white

character. Of 32 actors, five were African-American (four male, one female), and one—a

woman—was Asian. In addition to the predominance of white actors, all appeared able-bodied

and all appeared young. Only Steve Harvey, an African American comedian appeared to be over

thirty years old.

10.26 Cast photograph of "Gilmore Girls."

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In spite of the continuing dominance of white, able-bodied, young actors on television, the process of change in fictional roles that arises from the effect of background indicates that television, despite its powerful filters, can still open our culture to the possibility of change.

There is, however, one more aspect of the network television image that has a potentially powerful, though less frequent, effect on society. In the history of television there have been several instances of the background within a television broadcast being itself deliberately manipulated by people outside the television system. This deliberate manipulation of background is sometimes called feedback.

Manipulating Background: Feedback from Vietnam

The Tet offensive began on January 30, 1968, and lasted for less than two weeks (**10.27**). It was a surprise attack on the major cities and military outposts throughout South Vietnam by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese troops. The suicide attacks were a surprise because they came during a period of truce that had been agreed to by both sides in previous years.

Chapter 10: Television
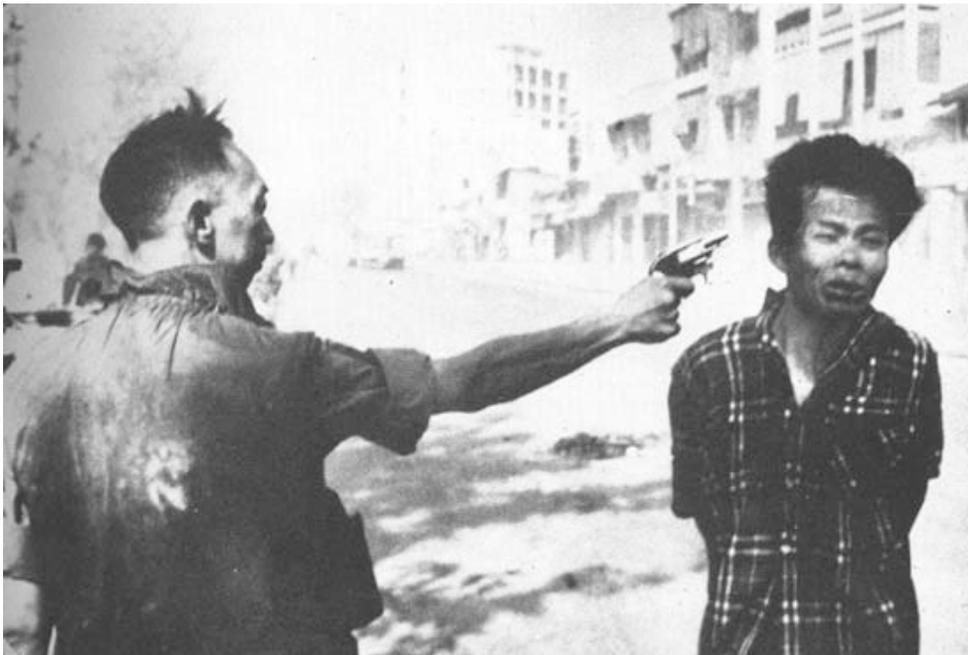
The attacks were futile from a military point of view, as President Johnson quickly assured the American public in his televised address to the nation. He predicted that all military gains would be reversed almost immediately. The president was right. Militarily.

What was never regained, or rather, what was lost by America during the brief Tet offensive, was the will to fight—and ultimately the war itself.

General Giap, the North Vietnamese commander, had correctly assumed that Americans would not tolerate for long the spectacle of their young men dying—in numbing detail—on their television screens. The pictures did not need the shaken commentary of the frightened correspondents. The background effect of death was overwhelming. No evening of "Bonanza," "Ironside," or "The Dean Martin Show" (all part of the NBC lineup in 1968) could begin to dull the impact or manipulate the message of the live horror show from Vietnam.

The Tet offensive had been planned from the beginning as a video event, as an image to turn off the war in American homes. The ritual pattern of the news show had been broken—no order followed the initial chaos, and no amount of personality could make the news bearable.

Seven years later Americans watched the final chapter of the war: Americans and South Vietnamese clinging to the skids of helicopters lifting off from the American embassy as Saigon opened the gates to the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese.

Besides dramatizing the principle of feedback, the Vietnam War illustrates the principle that fiction tends toward fact. "M.A.S.H.," despite its setting in Korea in the early fifties, met with unparalleled public acceptance because of the public's perception of the absurdity of the Vietnam War—a perception in turn based on the images seen on television.

Another important example of feedback occurred later in 1968 at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

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Feedback in Chicago: Commercials for the Revolution

The Democratic convention came at the end of a period of political violence that had included the assassinations of Martin Luther Kin, Jr., and Robert Kennedy. Along with the convention proceedings, Americans watched violence in the streets as police and demonstrators clashed outside (**10.28**). This was feedback—the battle had been planned as video events. Abbie Hoffman led the Yippies! and other antiwar groups into the streets in order to appear on television. He later wrote a book about the plan, *Revolution for the Hell of It*.

10.28 Riots outside the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention.

Hoffman explained what went on in Chicago by referring to a painting by Salvador Dali, *Apparition of a Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach* (**10.29**). Just as Dali manipulated the viewer's perception among the competing image of a face, a dog, and a still life, Hoffman and the Yippies! manipulated the television images of the convention so that the real message of the

event was not what the Democratic party had planned: "Support the war and business as usual."

Their message, made into a slogan for easy consumption, was "End the war and dump the

Hump" (Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic presidential nominee).

10.29 Salvador Dali, *Apparition of a Face and Fruit Dish on a Beach*.

Thus, as in Dali's painting, the background switched to the foreground with disconcerting

results—for the convention sponsors. Hoffman described the Yippie! strategy in terms of normal

network programming:

"Our actions in Chicago established a brilliant figure-ground relationship. The rhetoric of the

convention was allotted the fifty minutes of the hour, we were given the ten or less usually

reserved for the commercials. We were the advertisement for revolution. Watching the

convention play out its boring drama, one could not help but be conscious of the revolution being played out in the streets."[12]

Feedback, though infrequent, is a potentially devastating element unique to the television image. All too frequently it has been used by terrorists to force world governments to comply with the terrorists' wishes. In 1985, Iranians held Americans hostage. This event took the course it did only because the Iranians saw the advantage in having daily television publicity for their revolution. The spectacle of American's held hostage by Iranian revolutionaries became a daily drama played on worldwide television for over a year. Without the television cameras, it would have been an almost meaningless event.

The 1985 Beirut hostage crisis was another of feedback. American television coverage was a major objective of the incident. Despite the tragedy of a murdered American sailor, the situation eventually took on the shrewdly calculated format of a global talk show, sponsored and hosted by constantly smiling Amal militia. Then, throughout 2004, Iraqi insurgents kidnapped foreign workers and broadcast their images on television to compel their representative countries to pull out of Iraq.

A fiction-follows-fact example of feedback is "Special Bulletin," a television drama produced for NBC by Don Ohlmeyer in 1983 (**10.30**). "Special Bulletin" was based on a terrorist attempt to use feedback in a plan to force a move toward nuclear disarmament. The terrorists demanded a live feed on network television to address the American people about their objectives: their threat was to trigger a nuclear device that would destroy Charleston, South Carolina. As in the real hostage crises cited above, the goal of the terrorists was to seize the background of the television image from the networks and use it for their own ideological drama.
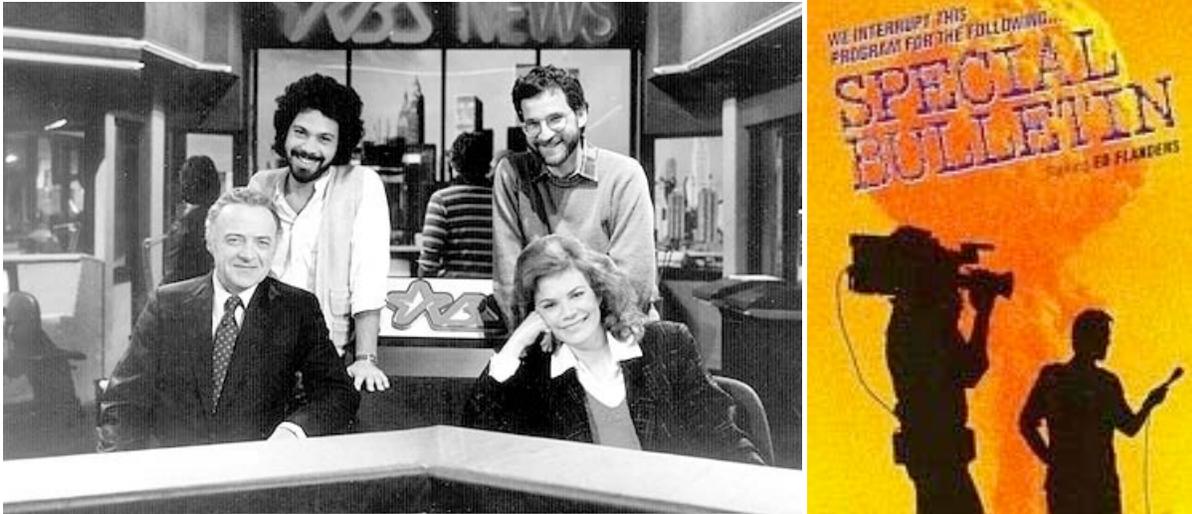
10.30 Cast photograph of "Special Bulletin."

The Impact of Television: New Forms for the Popular Arts

Television has not just created its own audience and its own "space" within the mass media: its presence has altered the form and content of all other mass media art forms. Radio used to produce prime-time variety shows and dramas. Today radio plays music, news blips, provocative conversation and commercials.

Movies used to provide general entertainment that supported basic cultural myths for mass audiences. Today's Hollywood movies, except the high-tech and/or big-name productions, aim at specialized audiences, which has opened up to filmmakers a far wider range of themes and approaches. The last decade has also seen a dramatic increase in movies made for the networks. Steven Spielberg is an important film director who first won acclaim for a 1972 movie made for television, *Duel*.

Magazines used to provide the major perspective images of news and human interest. Under the impact of television, *Life*'s global pictures and pinups were displaced by innumerable magazines, each appealing to a specialized audience. *People* (**10.31**) is a kind of pictorialized gossip version of *Life* itself. *Playboy*, symbolized by the centerfold, achieved dramatic success

with its soft-focused view of a world of eroticized commodities available to image-conscious

male consumers. *Cosmopolitan* and *Ms.* reflect segments of the highly specialized women's

audience. More recent examples of specialized magazines geared to narrow audiences are the

scores of computer and computer game magazines now overwhelming the racks at bookstores

and newsstands. Both *Video Game Guide* and *Electronic Gaming* discuss strategies and secrets

of contemporary games; *Play Station Magazine* focuses on games conceived for a specific

technological format. Television thus did not replace the popular art forms that had provided the

dominant icons of the twentieth century. Forced to take on more specialized formats, these

popular arts have extended their reach and increased their profitability.

Television, having caused such drastic changes in other mass media art forms, has begun

to feel the urgency for change in its own structure; it is at the beginning of a period of change

that could transform its role in society as drastically as its own appearance affected the other

media.

**Television beyond the Networks: Cable Networks, VCRs & DVDs Expand Television's
Reach**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, network television's "seamless" audience began to—as

the networks describe it—erode. From 1978 until 1983, the three networks lost over 10 percent

of the national television audience—even though because of population growth, the number of

people watching network television did not diminish. Network television had its first challenge

since it began to enter American homes after World War II. The challenge came from two

sources: access to alternative programming sources through cable, and changes in video

programming resulting from increased personal ownership of videocassette recorders, or VCRs.

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Cable television multiplied access to non-network programming to a majority of American homes, bringing specialized stations like the all-news network based in Atlanta, CNN, as well as more specialized channels like CNN spin-offs (e.g., CNN Headline and CNN World News) and Bloomberg Financial News and FSW Fox Sports News. CNN does not have superstar anchorpersons. CNN prides itself on covering events that the networks, because of their profitable daytime soap operas, will not cover. One such event was the trial of CBS's "Sixty Minutes" libel suit. In 1984, only CNN covered both the Republican and Democratic national conventions from gavel to gavel. Originally conceived as an alternative to network news programming, CNN is now internationally considered the standard, what is called in the newspaper business the "paper of record."

10.32 Still from "Thriller," 1983.   **10.33 Still from "You got Served," 2004.**

MTV, the 24-hour music channel launched in 1981, is another specialized channel available by cable. It draws a huge youthful audience with its visual dramatizations of recorded and taped music. MTV has produced one of television's own art forms, the "video," which already has its own classics, including early examples like Michael Jackson's "Thriller" (1983, **10.32**) and Dire Straits's "Money for Nothin'" (1985). Videos in turn influenced Hollywood movies and network television. *Flashdance* (1983, US, Joel Schumacher), a movie hit with a strong video style, was later followed by *You Got Served* (US, 2004, **10.33**), which resembled an

extended rap video. Before that, NBC inaugurated a television series, "Miami Vice" (**10.34**), with a video style attracted the young audience being visually educated by MTV. Increasingly, as we will see in the next chapter, television commercials also resemble music videos.
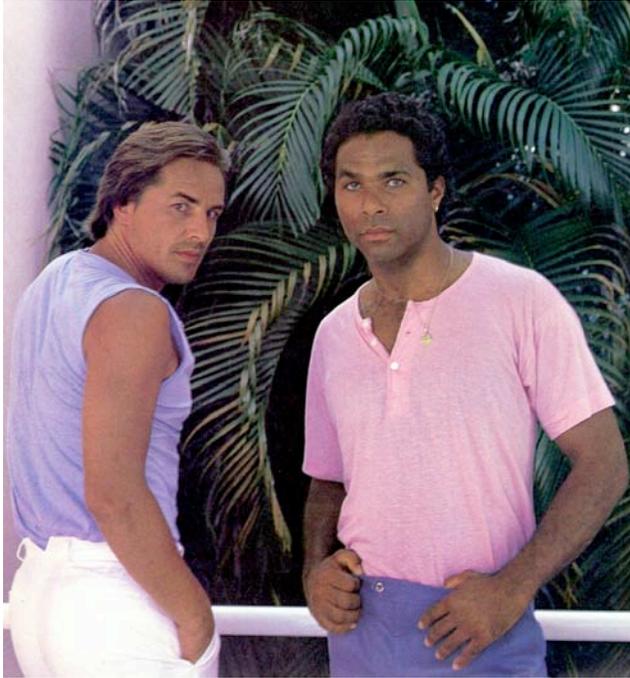
10.34 Production stills from "Miami Vice."

Videos have been widely criticized for their overemphasis on sex and violence. This criticism apparently led MTV to cut three-fourths of its heavy metal video programming in 1985. Videos have also been criticized for implanting a visual formula that deprives the listener of his or her own fantasy response to the music. Since MTV attracts many viewers who do not watch network television, it is an important development in American mass media popular art. As an art form, the videos featured on MTV fall somewhere between commercials and feature films; in fact, many directors of commercials and feature films have also directed videos. The rock video is, in this sense, an example of the influence of the television commercial on American culture. (We will discuss music videos further in the following chapter.)

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The final cracks in the monopoly of network broadcasting were the VCR and DVD players; sales of individual units skyrocketed in the 1980s and 1990s. Both enabled owners to program their own entertainment schedule.

When the viewing times for cable, VCRs and DVDs are added to network viewing time, it is clear that America is watching more television, not less.

The world is also watching more television, with increasing possibilities for simultaneous global video events. Events as early as the 1984 Olympics and the 1985 Live Aid broadcast showed the new potential provided by satellite communication networks. Michael Mitchell, who supervised the media format of both the '84 Olympics and Live Aid, claimed that these events were just the beginning of television's global impact. The media, says Mitchell, provide the "…only tool that has the ability to create a non-threatening, non-boundary-producing sense of family."[13] Today's sports events are watched by audiences that number in the millions.

Genres on TV

The increasing diversity in television formats is paralleled by an increasing diversity in television program content. Like the content of Academic painting, the content of television programs can be categorized into various types or genres. There is no formal or official ranking of these genres, but certain ones are clearly more popular than others. Among the genres offered every day on television are: news, sports, game shows, talk shows, reality shows, sitcoms, soaps, dramas (often crime dramas), and ho-to's including exercise, classes for language, cooking shows, home decorating shows, etc. There are also children's programs educational programs, programs designed especially for women (Oxygen) or for men (Spike) or for African-Americans (BET or Black Entertainment Network). In addition, there are various language-based programs, such as Fox Sports en Espanol and GALA in Spanish.

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We will focus our discussion on three television genres: crime dramas, reality shows, and talk shows.

"Law & Order": Formulaic Crime Drama

Cultural critic Frederic Jameson has noted, "[W]hen you watch a cop show or a detective series, you do so in expectation of the stereotyped format and would be annoyed to find the video narrative making 'high cultural' demands on you."[14] An example of an immensely successful television program with a "stereotyped format" is "Law & Order," which presents hourly dramas scripted according to a fixed formula (**10.35**).

10.35 Production stills from "Law & Order."

Each "Law & Order" episode is totally self-contained drama, employing an established cast of characters played by actors who can be easily changed for other actors. Dick Wolf conceived of the "model format" for the criminal justice series, which premiered in 1990, has garnered several Emmies (the television equivalent of Academy Awards) and has produced two spin-offs ("Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" and "Law & Order: Criminal Intent.") Brian Lowry notes that the original "Law & Order" is based on six "firmly established" character types:

   1. "Sardonic, seen-it-all homicide detective with a face like all NewYork and an accompanying deadpan wit, which he bounces off…

2. "His partner, the younger, sexier man of action with a few rough edges; his idealism is bloodied but unbowed. They report to…

3. "Clear-eyed, fair-minded lieutenant, captain or detective sergeant who's a bulwark of strength to the troops and invariably supplies the key investigative path they've overlooked.

4. "Elected Manhattan district attorney with one ear cocked to the details of the case, one to the media coverage and potential political fallout. Frequent quote: 'Make the deal.'

5. "Brash, articulate, single-minded prosecutor. Knows every angle and is unafraid to cut corners on civil liberties, but strangely sexless, especially given…

6. "Earnest 'second chair' (…) mini-skirted gofer to the brash, articulate, single-minded partner."

Each "Law & Order" program has four acts. First, the homicide detectives arrive at the scene and begin searching for suspects. Second, the detectives run into some complication, usually clarified by their lieutenant, and then make the arrest. Third, the lawyers begin to prepare for the trial…but moral, ethical or legal problems arise. Finally, resolution is achieved. By the end of the hour, the trial is over and "Order" is restored.[15]

Jameson discusses mass media dramas in terms of their Utopian impulses and how they deal with fundamental social anxieties. He writes, "[M]ass culture represses [fundamental social anxieties] by the narrative construction of imaginary resolutions and by the projection of an optical illusion of social harmony."[16] The growing American fear of the violent, chaotic and criminal is assuaged by "illusion of social harmony" presented in the orderly resolutions that end each program of "Law & Order."

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The impact of "Law & Order" and related crime dramas (like "CSI") on our lived experiences is revealed when actual District Attorneys urge potential jury members not to hold them—or the findings, that is, the detective work of their cases—to the technological expertise or high, dramatic standards of such television programs.

"Reality" Television

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, reality television series like "Survivor," "Apprentice," and "American Idol" (**10.36**) had become the most widely watched programs ever. Structured by scripted situations and performed by "real" people instead of actors, reality programs erode the division between on-screen and off-screen existence. Reality program participants become televised surrogates for increasingly passive viewers.

Writing in 1930—long before television became the dominant mass medium it is today— Surrealist author George Bataille could have been analyzing the way we watch television today:

"And so we enjoy seeing other people take risks as we sit comfortably back in our chair and give ourselves up to the maddening intoxication of danger, while never actually exposing ourselves to the slightest hazard likely to disintegrate our flesh, so much do we wallow in our lazy tranquility. This is perhaps the only difference between our times and those of the cavemen:

today we hire dozens of scapegoats whose task is to perform for us everything we are too cowardly to perform for ourselves."[17]

Bataille's rather cynical tone aside, he could easily have been writing about reality television programs like today's "Survivor," where viewers watch as "normal" people "just like them" are placed in increasingly precarious situations. His comments could also relate to "Weakest Link" where "normal" people brave scathing criticism--if not humiliation--as they compete for cash prizes. What is the relationship between reality programs and their intended audiences?

Years after Bataille's prescient comments, French theorist Jean Baudrillard argued that television viewers are like Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades: "The telespectator has to be transferred not in front of the screen where he is staying anyway, passively escaping his responsibility as a citizen, but on the screen, on the other side of the screen. In short, he must undergo the same conversion as Duchamp's bottle rack, when it was transferred to the other side of art, thus creating a definitive ambiguity between art and the real world."[18] There is no doubt that reality television creates just such a "definitive ambiguity between art and the real world."

We have already mentioned two late 1990s films that commented on absurdity of turning one's life into a television program. *The Truman Show* presented Jim Carrey as Truman Burbank, "a naïve, likable guy-next-door who—unbeknownst to him—is the star of a highly rated, hidden camera 24-hour TV show…[he comes to realize] that—for him—all the world's a sound stage."[19] And *Edtv* presented Matthew McConaughey as video store clerk whose every movement was televised for the viewing audience.[20] Ten years later, fact followed fiction when the FX network offered "Todd TV" which promised viewers access to "every moment" of Todd's life. Furthermore, his life was to be interactive: every decision he made was to be voted on by viewers.

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By that time, MTV (and later, other network stations) already had programs that offered insider video footage of people's lives, like "The Osbourne Show" and more recently, "The Newlyweds," featuring pop idols Nick and Jessica. Actually, instead of broadcasting everything the couple does during the week, the programs are (often humorous) composites of "high points," like December 29, 2003 program that showed Nick precariously sneaking furniture into house to redecorate it, as Jessica was out trying on expensive designer clothes. Voyeuristic access to other people's "real" lives is not limited to television, of course. The Internet has had several sites that are 24-hour video footage of celebrities like Paris Hilton and other less-known people.

MTV also developed several live programs such as "Real World" (**10.37**), where a group of previously unacquainted young people live together, and "Road Rules," where unacquainted young people travel together and compete with each other. MTV also originated "reality" dating programs, such as "Elimidate" and "Fifth Wheel," in which participants chose sexual partners for the evening and those not chosen are publicly humiliated. Public humiliation continues on such "reality" programs as "Survivor" where teams chose to eliminate members, and the "American Idol" talent show where contestants are criticized and eliminated, while the whole of America watches.

The master of public humiliation on television may be talk show host Jerry Springer.

Chapter 10: Television

The Public Humiliation of "The Jerry Springer Show"

In March 2004, Jerry Springer aired a series of "Classic Springer" programs titled "Tales of the Midget Klan" (**10.38**). In one episode, Kisa, a large white woman, broke up—on the air—with her Midget Klan boyfriend Johnny. While Kisa explained to the audience what she was about to do, Johnny was isolated in a sound proof room. The audience booed and hissed as Johnny walked on stage in a black satin KKK outfit, complete with tall pointed hat. He was also wearing a Halloween skeleton mask to cover his face.

When Springer asked him about the mask, Johnny raised his fist as if to threaten the program host and the audience laughed derisively. When Kisa ended the relationship with Johnny and introduced him to her new boyfriend—a tall African American man--the audience howled with laughter. Johnny called several other Midget Klan members on stage to support him, but their costumed presence was absurd rather than powerful. They were all humiliated by Kisa's boyfriend's mocking jibes, and by the audience's uproarious response.

The irony of "reality" television programs from "Elimidate" to "Jerry Springer" is that what we see as "real-time action" has always been edited and formatted for television viewing. And while many of the "reality" programs are not scripted in terms of participants being told

precisely what to say, they *are* scripted situations: participants are put into controlled environments and the outcome is more or less determined by the television producers. A filmic analogy can be found in *The Blair Witch Project* (1999, US, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez), which set non-actors into scripted situations that were filmed in such raw, documentary-like fashion that some viewers argued the film was "real." It wasn't.

Television & the "Reality" of Representation

This chapter has outlined some of the ways in which television, by its powerful influence on our picture of the world and of ourselves, produces a "television" culture. Television cannot be seen as just another perspective machine whose images take their place alongside more traditional ones; it has overshadowed and influenced all previous Western art forms.

Nonetheless, television images can be compared to other images from the history of Western art. Television images of history and of historical figures, for example, can be compared to Academic history paintings.

If we think of television news images as constructed histories in the tradition of, say, David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, it will remind us that television is not a pure, direct or natural medium. Like all representational technologies, television is filtered through the hands and minds of producers that control what is presented. As Frederic Jameson reminds us, "Howard Jarvis, Jimmy Carter, even Castro, the Red Brigade, B.J. Vorster, the Communist 'penetration' of Africa, the war in Vietnam, strikes, inflation itself—all are images, all come before us with the immediacy of cultural representations about which one can be fairly certain that they are by a long shot *not historical reality itself*."[21]

[1] George Gerbner, "The Dynamics of Cultural Resistance," in *Women in the Mass Media*, ed. Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kepler-Daniele, and James Benet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) 47..

[2] Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations" Lodge and Wood 405.

[3] Stafford and Terpak 307.

[4] Stafford and Terpak 331.

[5] *Inventors Newsletter* <http://inventors.about.com/b/a/075250.htm>

[6] Joshua Meyerwitz, "Where Have the Children Gone?" *Newsweek*, August 30, 1982, 13.

[7] Neil Postman, "The Day Our Children Disappear: Predictions of a Media Ecologist," *Phi Delta Kappan*, vol. 62 (Jan. 1981) 385.

[8] Louis A. Heib, "Meaning and Mismeaning: Toward an Understanding of the Ritual Clown" *New Perspectives on the Pueblos*, ed. Alfonso Ortiz (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972).

[9] Martin Essllin, *The Television Age* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1982) 22, 27.

[10] Joan Lunden, quoted in Robert Scheer, "The Rise of Joan Lunden: News Sense Unimportant," in *Los Angeles Times*, May 29, 1977.

[11] Linda Lavin, quoted in Penny Pagano, "Strong Gains Seen in Image of Women on TV," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 6, 1984.

[12] Abbie Hoffman, *Revolution for the Hell of It* (New York: Dial Press, 1968) 137-38.

[13] See <www.computerdeak.com/aid/newsweek.htm>

[14] Frederic Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" *Signatures of the Visible* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990) 19.

[15] Brian Lowry, *L. A. Times Calendar*, Sunday, May 18, 2003.

[16] Jameson "Reification" 25-26.

[17] Georges Bataille, et. al., *Encyclopedia Acephalica* (London: Atlas Press, 1995) 96

[18] Jean Baudrillard, "Aesthetic Illusion and Virtual Reality," in Julia Thomas, ed. *Reading Images* (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 200-201.

[19] Bleiler 597.

[20] Bleiler 170.

[21] Jameson "Reification" 22 (Italics mine.)