

TELEVISION AS A MEDIUM AND ITS RELATION TO CULTURE

by

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This is Part 4 of a four-part Report to UNESCO on "Innovation and Decline in the Treatment of Culture on British Television", submitted by Stuart Hall in November, 1971. The full Report is in limited supply, but may be consulted on request through the Centre. Part 1 surveys the existing patterns of coverage; Part 2 identifies the characteristic forms used in the transmission of cultural programmes; Part 3 deals with the social and institutional context. Part 4, offered here as a separate working paper deals with the nature of the TV discourse, the 'elementary forms' and the types of transformation which the TV medium effects on its materials.

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PART IV  
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Some Provisional Notes

1. So far we have been trying to give the reader some sense of how British television presents and handles culture and the arts at the present time. We have tried to set the present 'uses of television' within their institutional and social setting. We turn, now, to the nature of the medium as such and its paradigmatic relation to culture itself. This is an extremely complex question and our purpose here can only be to offer some very provisional formulations.

Technical Determinants:

2. Can an aesthetic of medium, and a systematic account of its social uses, be given primarily in terms of its technical characteristics?

Clearly, there are certain technical givens in any medium - especially one which, like television, is a product of an advanced electronic technology. Television screens are small. The overall scale of the visual image is thus compressed as compared with the cinema screen. At its present level of technical development, the television image has poor definition, and the variations in tonal range and focus are limited. It is impossible to reproduce on television the contrasts, either of depth or of light and shade, with anything like the intensities possible in film. Yet these basic technical qualities are not fixed enough to provide the basis for a television aesthetic. Both definition and contrast have clearly improved as a consequence of the move from 405 to 625 lines. Potentially, the television image is probably capable of a definition and tonal variety as refined as that of the cinema. It would be foolish, therefore, to speak of anything further than the technical limits of the television at its present determinate stage of development. We are, after all, in any proper time-scale, still at what one television critic called the 'Grammer Gurton's Needle or horse and buggy' stage in television. Its great and significant work, in terms of which an aesthetic might be convincingly elaborated, remains to be accomplished. We may, then, want to hold to some notion of the intrinsic technical properties of a medium, such as will provide one level of determinations for its uses and potential as a communicative form - but we will have to recognize that technical development may itself, at a later stage, and within changed structures of use (economic, technical, social, etc.), redefine these 'givens' or even transform them out of existence.

3. We need go no further than the potent observations of Marshall McLuhan to detect the problems which arise when we make hard-and-fast distinctions between technical qualities and use-qualities of a medium. McLuhan, it will be recalled, defined a 'hot' medium, like radio, as a medium that "extends one single sense in high definition". A 'cool' medium, like the telephone or speech, is low in definition

because so little 'data' is given, and so much needs to be "filled in by the listener". The distinctions are, of course, highly arbitrary: the movies he calls a 'hot' medium, though it is directed at more than a single sense: whereas the telephone is a 'cool' medium, though it is directed through a single sense. This suggests that the matter of 'single-sense' is not so important, for McLuhan, as the matter of 'high' and 'low' definition. On this level, McLuhan argues that the television image is 'cool' because it "requires each instant that we 'close' the spaces in the mesh by a convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile...". Now it is true that the television 'image' is composed of dots and lines transmitted each second, only a small number of which the viewer 'resolves' into an image. But it does not necessarily follow, because the image requires the sensuous participation of the viewer, that "television is a cool participant medium" - in the social sense. This is a metaphorical play with the double meaning - physiological and social - of the word 'participation' which McLuhan neither justifies here nor indeed acknowledges. It is a product of that technical determinism which runs right through McLuhan's later work. It is perfectly possible - indeed, it has been forcefully argued - that though we have, sensuously, to come to the aid of the television image, socially and emotionally, it leaves us uninvolved, alienates us from the 'passing spectacle' of what is being shown. The repetitive nature of television contents and forms, and the saturation quality of its coverage, might offset its technical properties. As Jonathan Miller has remarked, "The type of psychological transaction which takes place while 'filling in' the information gaps contained in a poor image has no bearing upon the sense of conscious involvement. The picture gets 'completed' in accordance with purely automatic rules of visual inference: and if this activity ever reaches consciousness, it does not do so in the form of participant pleasure, but as a subliminal exhaustion which actually undermines attention. There is in fact an inverse relationship between the quality of the picture and the degree of conscious psychological involvement. The poorer the image the more alienated the viewer becomes from it". As Miller subsequently observes, people tolerate the poor image of television not because of the feeling of participation they get from feeling in dots, but because television, as a medium of social communication, is cheap, convenient, omnipresent, and answers certain congruent needs and interests in the viewing population.

4. Much the same point can, and has, been made about the technical way in which the television image is produced (a recent and bitter exchange of correspondence between McLuhan and Miller in The Listener has not to any degree fundamentally altered the position). There are two related points in the argument here. McLuhan argues that the television image "is not a still shot. It is not a photo in any sense but a ceaselessly forming contour of things lined by the scanning-finger. The resulting plastic contour appears by light through not light on, and the image so formed has the quality of sculpture and icon, rather than of picture". Thus, because the linear structure of the screen and of the scanning-finger is similar to the movement of a hand feeling its way across a page of Braille, McLuhan offers the proposition that television is not a visual medium, but an

audio-tactile one. But once again, we seem to be in the presence of a half-concealed pun, this time on the notion of 'scanning': and from this confusion, McLuhan once again tries to derive social effects and possibilities for television from the technical level alone. It is certainly the case that the television image is produced by a beam which scans over several hundred lines; but, as Miller again observes, "the fact that the actual movement is a scanning movement...doesn't mean that television is to be subsumed under the general category of a tactile experience. It simply means that the tactile and visual modalities employ identical techniques when exploring a contour" - a particular form of the general case that all perception involves "an active negotiation between the agent and the environment".

5. Two general points follow from this brief discussion. The first is that the technical properties of a medium, at a particular stage in its historical evolution, do impose certain constraints on its use - though McLuhan seems to have got even this level of determination wrong. Thus, though it is incorrect to say that television is a tactile medium while film is a visual one, it is correct to say that, as visual images, at the present stage of development, the television image does differ significantly from the cinematic one. And this imposes certain limits on the uses which can currently be made of television as a medium. The relative visual poverty of the television image is a technical matter in part, since the film image "is a photographic emulsion which is an extremely fine-grained affair, and the television image is made up of these 500 lines", which is a very crude one. Now, one of the aesthetic consequences of this technical variation is that the television image cannot as effectively transmit small or distant objects: it's also been said that television cannot cope with the wide-angled shot, though this is more doubtful. Certainly, in general, television tends to avoid the distant-focussed shot, the detailed visual exploration of a complexly defined space, and is, until recently, reluctant about the panoramic view: it favours close or mid-shots, fairly large objects and heads. Miller argues that the famous Western film shot, of the lone horseman on the skyline, isolated in time, distance and relationship, is virtually impossible to 'read' on the television screen at the present moment. So the level of technical determination is important, though it is neither immutable nor all-determining.

The second, and contrary point, however, is that we cannot move directly from technical questions straight to either the aesthetic properties or the social uses of television. There is no one-to-one 'fit' of that kind possible in the analysis of the media. For technical questions are almost immediately compounded by other levels of determination. One such level is the corpus of traditional practices and uses which develop within the ranks of the broadcasting professionals and which try to make sense of, and elaborate modes on the basis of what the medium is technically capable of. Thus, for example, television is good at reproducing images in mid- or close-shot - but most producers try to avoid like the plague what is called in the profession "a succession of talking heads". They can't, of course, fully escape this, and most television studio discussions do in fact consist mainly of two-shots of 'heads' talking and

responding (the famous cut-away 'reaction shots' being a further, aesthetic elaboration of this basic fact).

Similarly, the taboo on the wide-angle or long-distance shot is being rapidly expelled in the actual practice of television production. Increasingly, documentary programmes with a geographical, architectural, archaeological or historical subject matter are beginning to experiment with the wider-angled shot. In addition, the development of colour has brought into television production a more 'epic' approach, involving outdoor settings and lavishly set and mounted indoor scenes: and these have simply required the producer to overcome, by one means or another, the technical inhibitions against using the 'intimate' screen for 'epic' purposes. The proliferation of outdoor television spectaculars like Mountbatten (ITV, Thames), Civilization (BBC) and the two-and-a-half hour Violent Universe is pushing towards new wide-angled possibilities in television production. Thus we can see, in these and other ways, how the social practice of television production works against, seeks to transcend and surpass the built-in technical limitations of the medium. Technical determinations therefore provide, at any single point in the evolution of a medium, only one level of determination. If we wish to understand the aesthetic potential and the social characteristic of television, we must take directly into account the level of the social practice of professionals and technicians in the medium, and the level of social uses by the audience to get anything approaching a complete view. A social aesthetic depends, ultimately, not on the level of the 'hardware' but on the human uses of the hardware: that is, on the form of its social appropriation, embedded in the different levels of social praxis.

Sartre seems to us absolutely correct here to point to "the impulse towards objectification" (the individual or collective project), projecting itself "across a field of possibles, some of which are realized to the exclusion of others". We must "determine the field of possibles, the field of instruments" - but only as one 'moment' in an analysis which then tries to situate the de-totalizing project of social praxis. Any analysis which misses out one of those moments in the dialectic - which abstracts either the technical determinations or the 'freedom' of social praxis from its matrix - is bound to lead us to false conclusions.

#### The Determination of Technical Determinants:

6. We have suggested that the so-called technical properties of the medium cannot be all-determining. Nor, indeed, are technical changes matters which can be understood in technical terms alone. For the media are also institutions (of broadcasting) and industries (producing the photographing, transmitting and receiving instruments): and the way media are embedded in these complex structures has a reciprocal effect on which technical components will be developed and which neglected. So that technical development is itself socially constrained and shaped.

### The Advance to Colour Production

7. The question of colour is central to this part of the argument. Given the present 'horse-and-buggy' level of television's technical performance, both the manufacturers of television equipment and the producers of programmes had several alternative lines of development before them which they could have pursued. One avenue was to explore the possibility of a much greater refinement of the black-and-white image, coupled with research into improving the quality of reproduction on the home screen. Such an improvement in refinement and in the quality of reproduction would then have opened the possibility of further development in the aesthetic uses of the black-and-white image - aesthetic explorations which the present poor quality tends to constrain. In this way, the communicative uses of the medium might slowly have attained something of the quality and complexity of black-and-white cinema in its more advanced and sophisticated forms. Instead, however, technical and financial resources, and a great deal of promotional energy in the broadcasting organizations were diverted into the rapid development of the colour image.

This matter is worth exploring further, since it brings to the surface the complex ways in which technical, aesthetic, professional, institutional and economic levels of determination inter-penetrate in the historical evolution of a communications medium.

The motives of the electronics industry were clear-cut. Investment in colour at that point brought them clear economic rewards. Anxious to stimulate the sales of receivers, and to activate the turnover from old sets to new, the manufacturers were able to offer a highly-publicized 'marginal variation in the product' - colour reception - to the prospective buyer. This clearly benefitted the manufacturers. Its benefits to the majority audience are less obvious. For the price of new colour sets was so prohibitive that only the well-off could afford to buy one. The colour set thus entered the space reserved for the luxury consumer goods - thereby cross-cutting one of the most significant social characteristics of the medium: its extremely wide distribution over the population as a whole, through the ranks of wealth, status and education - the great heterogeneity of the majority audience. The mass of television viewers in Britain continue to view, in black-and-white, programmes conceived for and produced in colour.

The choice between alternative technical strategies has also had immediate repercussions at the aesthetic level. Most programmes are now, routinely, produced in colour, and any ambitious producer who wants to retain institutional support within the organization and critical recognition outside must produce in colour or fall behind in the race. Clearly, some programmes have, from an expressive point of view, benefitted enormously by the addition of colour. Yet, at the same time, the aesthetic development of black-and-white television - a development by no means exhausted when colour was introduced - was cut short, at a level of achievement well below that, say, of black-and-white cinema at its best. Similarly, the advance to a colour

aesthetic in television began at a point in the evolution of the medium well behind that already available, in film, to an Antonioni, a Peckinpah or a Weidenberg. Such ground is irrecoverable. As one critic observed, "a huge sector of aesthetic invention is virtually ruled out of court". And this because, as a result of very complex pressures, one technical potential of the medium had been realized at the expense of others.

The advance to colour was an even more complex process within the broadcasting organizations themselves. Here the contradictions between the development of a medium's potential, and the socio-economic and institutional factors are even more clearly revealed.

The colour system adopted by Britain is generally acknowledged to be an advance on all the earlier systems. Its quality is excellent, given the technical limitations of the medium. In his article on "A Year of Colour", in the BBC Handbook for 1969, David Attenborough stated that the Corporation had taken great care that colour should not impair the quality of the black-and-white image, since the majority audience still possessed black-and-white sets only. Colour, he insisted, should be used where it was 'natural' or enhanced the communicative impact of a programme. It should not become an excuse for spectacular productions or be used as a production fetish. The use of colour should be seen essentially as a part of 'high-fidelity television' - presenting the viewer lucky enough to have a set with a more accurate and informative a picture than was possible in black-and-white. Programmes would continue to be made in black-and-white where a producer could make out a good case that this would be positively better for his subject-matter. This was certainly a careful and coherent response to the introduction of colour at the programme executive level.

But the evolution of a medium like television, which is at the pivot of a national communications network, is rarely so straightforward a matter. The section in the Handbook on TV Enterprises - the organization responsible for selling television programmes abroad - put a different, more hardheaded, gloss on the matter of colour. It noted, with jubilation, that the "colour year" was the first time that the US had become the biggest buyer of BBC television programmes. Colour, then, was not only a technical triumph, but also part and parcel of the economic and institutional drive to produce a marketable product for sale to other national networks abroad. We say "economic and institutional", for the motives within the BBC were indeed mixed. Sales of programmes in the lucrative American market, and elsewhere, no doubt made a significant contribution to the depressed financial position of the BBC. But it also brought kudos to the BBC in the international television stakes, and thus, indirectly, advanced the competitive position of the BBC at home, and enhanced its prestige as an organization. Where the BBC is concerned, in the long run, prestige is far more important than hard cash, for if its prestige as a national organization remains high, money - in the form of a higher licence fee, etc - will follow. It mattered, therefore, that colour should be seen, not simply as another weapon in the armoury of

communicative instruments in the hands of its producers, but that it should also be a tour de force of technical virtuosity, a triumph of managerial skill - an index of the BBC's long march to technical perfection. Later Handbooks proclaimed a "period of expansion and successful trading" - the "penetration" of the Japanese and Russian colour markets, and so on. And, as the costs of lavish colour production mounted, so the practice of 'co-production', with costs shared between the BBC and other European networks, followed inevitably. Colour production was, by now, stimulated by such complex motives and riding so many contrary streams that it would be difficult to conceive of it as, in any simple sense, a 'technical development'.

The trend in the commercial companies was more open and straightforward. The big ITV companies were soon, also, "fully colour capable" - which included the fact that they could record simultaneously on both British and American colour systems. Indeed, some ITV companies were producing in colour for the export market before a domestic colour service was available. The first major colour-export 'breakthrough' in ITV was ATV's This is Tom Jones. More of the same has followed, a path marked out and occupied largely by one of the big five London companies, ATV. ITV's successful marketing and exporting operation was crowned by the award of the second Queen's Award to Industry for its contribution to the exports drive - and a knighthood for the great show-business entrepreneur and doyen of commercial television, the Head of ATV, Sir Lew Grade. Whatever else the advance to colour production meant, both for BBC and ITV, it certainly had a very great deal to do with its marketable and exporting potential.

The advance to colour, then, also had direct programme consequences. Colour increasingly sets and redefines the limits within which television producers conceive and execute their work: but it also affects the whole balance of programme policy. Plays with lavish studio settings, exotic locations or elaborate costumes, built around great set-pieces, flourish in an era of colour production, as against plays in black-and-white, with a documentary or realistic flavour. It is still, after all, true that in culture (though not in nature) colour is the language of photographic romanticism, black-and-white is the language of realism. The general production swing to historical adaptations, 'period' serializations, set-piece 'epic' documentaries and 'international jet-set' thrillers, remarked on earlier in the Report, has been amplified by the shift to colour production. Colour did not determine the general draining of the documentary impulse from television drama and fiction, but it underwrote, at a technical level, a tendency already powerfully stimulated by other pressures, and it compounded this shift in programme content, balance and emphasis.

If British television exports in colour - other national networks import in English. Increasingly, if American shows like I love Lucy and The Defenders command the world markets in television at the level of mass entertainment, British television programmes are coming to command the world markets in the prestige range. It may be too soon to speak of a new wave of cultural imperialism: but, around the world, 1969 was certainly The Year of the Forsythe Saga and the Royal



Investiture, 1970 The Year of Civilization...

8. We would argue, then, that not only is it impossible to deduce a television aesthetic directly from the technical elements of a medium at one, determinate, stage in its evolution: but that the technical development of a medium is itself a determination function of the socio-economic and institutional networks into which any communications medium is and must be inserted.

#### Technics of the Medium

9. By technics we mean those qualities of the television medium which, though not belonging to the technical sphere as such, seem to be intrinsic to its nature, its use, and to its characteristic mode of communication.

10. Television is a hybrid medium. In part, this is because it is so extraordinarily heterogeneous in content and subjectmatter. But, in terms of its formal properties, television also appropriates and cannibalizes a variety of forms and techniques from other sources, including other media. Its position as a highly advanced and socially-specialized technology is marked by the degree to which it combines old and new media into a new medium. As Enzensberger has remarked (in his article "The Consciousness Industry"): "All new forms of the medium are constantly forming new connections, both with each other and with older media..."

In the domain of culture, broadly defined, a good deal of television appears to be a relatively untransformed reproduction of presentational forms typical of other arts and entertainments: the cinema, the theatre, the concert hall, the circus, the stage show, the music hall, the cabaret, the public lecture, the after-dinner conversation, the seminar, the interview, etc. We stress the point relatively untransformed. It would be quite wrong to believe that these forms and contents come to us via the television screen un-transformed. There is practically no un-mediated or un-transformed transmission on television. As Richard Dyer recently remarked, "pure, straight transmission in television is a utopian category". Television always manipulates its raw material - it is, by nature, a "dirty medium". Though nature and actuality constantly appear before us on the screen as if transparently captured by the telecine, the images we see are constructions of or representation of 'the actual' not reality itself. This is the case even when television seems content simply to reproduce a theatre play in its original terms: the production has, in some way and to some degree, been rethought/reworked/realigned for television transmission. The transparency of the television screen is an illusion.

The most significant test case here is, perhaps, the cinema, which provides a product which can be fed into the transmission channels more-or-less direct, and which might therefore appear to be the perfect example of 'straight transmission' on television. Yet this is

not the case. There is an important controversy in progress at the moment about the degree, nature and extent of cuts imposed by television on films transmitted on the television screen. The cutting is mainly of two kinds, (a) to tailor films of uneven length to the rigid requirements of television programme schedules, especially on ITV where an evening's viewing is composed of part-network, part-local programmes; (b) to remove "unsuitable incidents", especially though not exclusively violent incidents, during the viewing hours when children are watching. The average length of cuts made currently to films playing on ITV screens (the major offender) is seven minutes, according to a recent issue of Films and Filming. There is also the continuous selection process by which some films are chosen for television from what is generally available. Further the transmission on the small screen of an image intended for the big screen crucially alters its form and impact. Film on television is, thus, on several levels, the product of small but significant transformations, made at different levels, as the product passes from one medium to another. Again, an Enzensberger reminds us, "The most elementary processes in media production, from the choice of the medium itself to shooting, cutting, synchronization, dubbing, right up to distribution, are all operations carried out on the raw material. There is no such things as unmanipulated ... filming or broadcasting".

11. What makes television distinctive in this connection is (a) the relatively low level of the type of transformation which television operates on the great bulk of its contents; and (b) the very high proportion of cases in which the raw material which television transforms is itself the content of another medium. A great range of transformations of material for television transmission consists of minor cuts in film, slight alterations of angle, lighting and composition of theatre plays for more compact television camera movements, rearranging the seating at public occasions so that they offer a more orchestrated 'studio audience' for the performance being filmed, rearranging the order or length of acts so as to suit the requirements of the camera or the schedules, etc. Small changes can certainly have large consequences: one of the films recently cut in the London area of ITV is Howard Hawks' great masterpiece, Kio Brave, from which one whole crucial scene was excised, though time was found to preview the following day's film presentation. But this is less important, in the long run, than the fact that the modifications made for transcribing a content from its indigenous medium or location to television involves transcriptions of a relatively minor kind in formal terms. The instances where television fundamentally modifies its subject-matter are far fewer than we might suppose. Television uses up - indeed, exhausts - the contents of other media and of everyday life: but it does not, characteristically, decisively impose its forms upon that material. In much of the transmission in the arts, the content which television is reworking is already formed in another medium or presentational mould. The weak character of its transformations is the source of what was called above "the utopia of straight transmission".

12. The question of forms seems inseparable here from contents. A fair proportion of television content is actuality - pictures of

people, events and places in the 'real' world, transmitted to us via the medium of the set. A great deal of television material which is not live actuality, is in the form of a report of documentary: that is, it tries to reproduce the forms of a 'live actuality'. Because television communicates in pictures, and is a rapid if not instant visualiser, a very high proportion of television is conceived in the naturalistic mode. Moreover, a good deal of television consists of visual rapportage of everyday life and events. When the illusion of formal transparency is linked with the weight of naturalistic content in the medium, we can understand why television's channel functions appear to predominate so widely over its medium functions. The cinema, of course, is also a medium of visual realism, and the documentary film made for the cinema has many of the characteristics of a television programme - indeed, as a presentational form, the documentary is in general an ambiguous or intermediary zone between the two media. Many cinema documentaries are transferred straight from film to television, and vice versa. But characteristically, though the cinematic image has a fidelity or transparency to actuality, we have come more and more to think of the cinema as exploring, through its forms and language, the 'raw material' or actuality with which it deals. On the other hand we tend to think of television as reproducing the reality with which it deals.

Thus, in the domain of culture and the arts, the audience probably values television as much, if not more, for its ability to give us the artistic experience direct, in its original form, as it does television's capacity to do something in its own terms with that experience. Via television, we can be in the theatre, Covent Garden, the Festival Hall, the Talk of the Town, Barnsley Working Men's Club, the Variety, etc. This is television's relay function.

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13. Television's power to 'capture reality' in visual terms, and transmit it into the living room is, then, at the present time, its dominant function. In technical terms, this is often conceived as

coincidental with television when it is transmitting 'live' - as opposed to using film or video-tape. But more careful consideration suggests that there is a complex and shifting relationship between the channel/medium continuum in television and the live versus filmed/taped distinction. Television might transmit the last night of the prom concerts on the night and at the time when the occasion is in progress: the technical link, then, is direct between the 'outdoor' cameras and the transmitting/receiver apparatus. But it might film the last night of the proms, 'as it happened', and transmit it at a later time or date. In the first case, television is transmitting 'live'. In the second, it is transmitting filmed or stored images of an actual occasion: the feel of actuality is an illusion. But both types of transmission still belong, essentially, to television's channel functions. That is, in both cases, the presentational form is dictated largely by conditions in the concert hall: television only weakly imposes its own forms upon this already-formed material. The same is true, in reverse, when productions are mounted entirely in the television studio, and when the presentational forms and techniques have been worked out with television's requirements as the sole determinant. A studio television play may be transmitted 'live' or it may be filmed/videotaped and transmitted later: but in formal terms, this is television operating as a medium: the script has been prepared, acting positions and movements worked out in relation to camera positions and angles, etc. In some cases, we have a complex interplay of all the elements. For example, a Wednesday play with a strong documentary emphasis may be filmed on location, and transmitted at a later time. Its context and location then is very close to that of an 'actuality' transmission (this is indeed the illusion being sought in moving from studio to location). But it has been conceived formally in television terms, and probably edited, much as a film would be. Its mode of transmission is in the filmed/taped category, not in the 'live' category. In short, television's channel functions (where the imposition of television forms is weak) and its medium functions (where the imposition is stronger) make indiscriminate use of the technical means of transmitting material. The fact that much of television's 'canned' material creates the illusion of 'live actuality' is important; but this is an aesthetic and social matter - not a technical one. It has to do with television's innate naturalism, of form and content, and the developing body of practices and idioms in television, which tend strongly to favour and exploit that naturalism.

14. The occasions when television exploits its powers as a medium must be linked, essentially, not with the technical means of transmission, but with two types of production:staged performances, and studio production.

By staged performance we mean a television production which has specifically been mounted for television, whether it takes place in a studio or on location. In the area of culture with which we are dealing, a staged performance may be a play, concert, musical show, etc., which has been written, or devised for television: where camera angles, mise-en-scene, acting or performance is shaped and guided throughout by the technical limits and opportunities of the medium.

Staged performances can make a 'mixed' use of the different modes of transmission - i.e. 'live or 'canned'. The television play may be recorded earlier on tape and transmitted later, though in script-form and performance it has been wholly conceived in televisual terms. The acting performance before the cameras can be supplemented by inserting into the transmission sequences which have been filmed or taped at a different place and time. In some Wednesday Plays, for example, or in Softly Softly, the police series, the production is composed of mixed elements, some acted before the cameras, some fed in through tele-cine in taped or filmed form.

There does appear to be a continuum or spectrum here which impinges directly on the domain of culture. It seems to be a general rule that the more serious, 'high brow' or 'high culture' in orientation the production is, the less it will be conceived ex novo for television - the more it will borrow forms from other media. The Shakespeare play will tend, on the whole, to be either a straight relay from the Stratford stage, or a production in studio which is subordinate in form, setting, acting technique, rhythm and staging to theatrical forms. The closer we get to the popular end of dramatic productions - popular plays, serials, series - the stronger will be the medium elements, the more distinct they will be from theatrical conventions.

15. The predominant way in which television operates as a medium (rather than as a relay) is in the great variety of studio situations.

Studio situations characteristically mix the modes of transmission. That is, in documentary and current affairs programmes, the programmes will be composed of sequences in the studio plus filmed inserts. Arts review programmes are similar - the compere or reviewer/anchor-man presiding 'live' before the cameras over a set of filmed or canned inserts. Discussion and interview programmes have little or no filmed/canned content: they are almost exclusively studio productions (again, transmitted 'live' or 'canned').

A great range of programmes - sports coverage around the country on Saturdays on both channels, the attempt to integrate the various regional news-magazine programmes into a single transmission in the late afternoons (Nationwide) or the arts-magazines like Review or Aquarius - are sequences of filmed inserts presided over by a compere or presenter. The presenter in the studio provides, visually and verbally, a framework for the different, dispersed items (in the case of arts magazines, previously filmed excerpts, in the case of sports coverage, 'live' transmissions from different locations). He 'builds a programme' for the viewer in the studio out of these filmed and video-transmitted items. An edition of the sports programme, Grandstand, for example, consists of (a) bits of 'live' video-transmission from the race track, rugby game, horse jumping competition, swimming, or athletics meeting, with the commentator on the spot providing a 'voice-over' commentary; plus (b) the tying together of these reports, 'in studio', by a resident compere, who administers the breaks between one event and another, smoothes the transitions from one place or sport to another, and, occasionally,

makes use of studio aids, charts, diagrams, superimposed captions, etc., to 'give an overall sense' of the results or state of the sporting world that afternoon. Now, in terms of the distinctions drawn above, the 'in studio' bits of that programme are formally strong in medium elements. No other medium, except perhaps radio (but without the visual element) can 'create' a programme of this kind out of discreet fragments. The filmed or video-transmitted elements are weak in medium elements: the form of the race-meet, the rugby game, etc., belong intrinsically to sport not to television. However, television has also transformed even these bits of actuality. It does not give us the whole rugby game, but edited highlights of it: it does not cover the whole field statistically, but moves cameras around, shifts angles and distances to re-create parts of the game for us in visual terms. So, in both aspects, the programme transforms its content. But the degree of transformation differs, as we move from the outdoor situation to the studio.

16. Such a programme, which combines 'live studio' and filmed insert elements, is close to a television original. There is nothing quite like it in any other medium. Radio, as we have observed, comes close in some respects, because it too can integrate into studio transmission taped inserts. The filmed newsreel comes close to it in another sense, since it too can edit together bits of film taken on different occasions - though, unlike television, the newsreel rarely if ever makes use of the 'live' studio situation.

Such a television programme is itself a curious hybrid. If we break the programme down into its elements, we find studio sequences, filmed sequences, video-transmitted elements with commentary over, and so on. Intrinsically, the whole programme, as a programme unique to television, consists of the assembling together of these channel-originated and medium-originated materials, into a single programme unit under the guidance/direction of a producer and a presenter. The presenter is responsible for imposing a unity over the different elements before the camera: the producer is responsible for transmitting this constructed programme to the viewer.

17. This assembly role of television is one of its unique properties. The degree of technical co-ordination required to effect these switches from place to place, event to event, 'live' to 'canned' material and so on is enormous. So are the social, communicative - indeed, managerial - skills required to effect smooth narrative transitions between studio, reporters, events, etc. The programme is an enormous feat of collective socio-technical co-ordination and control. but the effort to account for the programme as a whole in terms of a unified set of aesthetic criteria, or the attempt to derive such a coherent aesthetic from such programmes, is an extremely difficult, if not impossible, task. When the viewer is not totally absorbed into the 'raw-material' of the programme, what he tends to notice most are aspects of this assembly and co-ordination process. He notices the mannerisms of the compere, his style or delivery, his encyclopaedic knowledge... He notices especially when things go wrong in the flow of production - losses of contact with a commentator at the other end of the line, unrehearsed pauses as we 'lose' and

'regain' sound, references to play in the rugby game unaccountably followed by an insert from a boxing championship, and so on. That is, he notices breaks in the smooth assembly and co-ordination-integration of the elements, because formally this is what the programme is. The aesthetics of the medium, then, tends to be fragmented or serialized. It is difficult to see what common formal terms can be applied, overall to a programme which consists of good or poor coverage of the rugby game, good or bad link-commentary or illustration provided in the studio, and good or poor continuity maintained by presenter/producer between these elements.

The predominance of the assembly process as a characteristic of television communication has, of course, crucial consequences. It highlights the role and performance of the presenter or compere - to the degree that programmes become associated with the style, manner and personality of their presenters. These 'resident managers' imprint programmes with their personalities because the programmes themselves so centrally depend on the live execution of the skills of communication-management before the camera. But this, in turn, means that the vast bulk of television material is mediated to the audience through the techniques and personae of the presenter. Now this is of critical significance in the domain of culture, since what is important for this domain are the social values and attitudes invested in or overprinted on the cultural material itself. Television can almost never be the means by which the viewer gains access to the 'raw-materials' of culture, free of the mediation of cultural-social values inherent in the presentational elements of the programme. Thus Monitor derived its strengths and weaknesses, not simply from the range of cultural things it offered to the viewer, but because of the socio-cultural package in which the 'raw material' was integrated. It was Wheldon-on-culture which Monitor offered us - and, through the presenter, a selective range of cultural attitudes were powerfully mobilized and transmitted. Because television so often consists of embedding one kind of content-form within another, the very form in which the links and connections are forged is itself an intrinsic and powerful formulative element of the programme itself. Just as the camera guides, selects and omits as it ranges over and around its material, so the presenter or producer guides/selects/omits/ stresses what has already been guided/selected etc. The collective values and attitudes which structure and frame such processes of selection and assembly thus interpenetrate every content which television appears to 'present straight'. In short - whether to good ends or to bad - television is technically and socially a thoroughly manipulated medium. The utopia of straight transmission, or the 'naturalistic fallacy' in television, is not only an illusion - it is a dangerous deception.

18. The whole argument hinges around one of television's technical properties which has not yet been clearly pin-pointed. We speak of the 'television camera'; but we think of it as we think of a film camera. In the cinema the production/editing of the image, and the distribution of the image are two distinct processes. We do not often take into account the fact that the television camera has a decisive dual function. It records and stores images: but it also transmits

images. When equipped with film stock, the 'television camera' functions like a film camera: it stores content on the film stock itself. When equipped with video-tape, the camera can also store information and content for later transmission. But when, in studio, the 'camera' is linked directly to the transmitting apparatus, it stores nothing - it is a medium for passing the images directly into the channel and through to the receiver. In short, the television camera is itself a storing, an assembling and a transmitting device. The technical heart of the process is not the camera alone, but the link-ups from cameras to transmitting apparatus - whether the link-up is made direct, from studio camera to the open channel, or indirectly from film-camera on location through the studio link into the channel, or from filmed or canned inserts, via tele-cine machines, into the channel. Any single television programme can make use of those three functions. With the great expansion of inter-continental television systems, the links through cameras to studio to receiver-channel are now world-wide.

19. Television is a highly sophisticated and technically advanced piece of equipment. Its decisive socio-technical 'breakthrough' can be identified with the link between cameras and transmitted apparatus - between pictures, however captured and stored, and the open channel. Its techniques are unique; so are its social uses. But it is formally and aesthetically a grossly under-developed medium. Its forms and techniques are cross-bred with other forms and media, its aesthetic massively interpenetrated by social values and relations.

20. Is there, then, no formal aesthetic which embraces the heterogeneous contents and occasions of television within a single coherent language? Are there a series of distinct, discreet television discourses, rather than a single discourse composed of different narrative elements? Our argument is the reverse of this proposition. Despite its massive heterogeneity, there does seem to us a single, coherent language of television to which all its different practices can be referred. This language is, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable from that of the cinema.

21. Despite the many differences between the content, nature and social uses of television and the cinema, we believe that a formal aesthetic for the medium must and can be elaborate. And we would base this elaboration on the phrase which the whore sings in Truffaut's film Shoot the Pianist. "La television, c'est un cinema, ou l'on peut aller en restant chz soi".

22. Before amplifying that assertion, we might consider, in the light of the previous argument, whether television, like the cinema, is - in Roland Barthes' phrase - "a message without a code". In the recent semiological literature a major debate has been in progress concerning the status of the cinematic image as a 'sign'. Barthes, Metz, Pasolsini and others (following the lead of earlier film critics like Bazin) have argued forcefully that, since the photographic-cinematic image is a simulacrum of reality, it is a parole without a langue: reality itself is the code from which the message of the image is derived. Our proposition that the 'language' of television is



equivalent in many respects to that of the cinema could, then, be taken to mean that television, too, relies on the reality itself, as its essential code.

It is clear, however, that the photographic image (whether still, cinematic or televisual) is a visual sign of a special type. Wollen and others have suggested that, in Charles Peirce's typology of signs, the class of iconic signs is that to which the film image most closely conforms. That is, whereas in written language the sign is wholly arbitrary, and in speech almost entirely so (there are some intermediate zones in speech - onomatopoeia being one), the photographic sign is not arbitrary in the same way, since it is always a formal representation on the screen of a form which also occurs in some sense within 'nature' itself. An iconic sign, according to Peirce, "is a sign which represents its object mainly by its similarity to it; the relationship between signifier and signified is not arbitrary but is one of resemblance or likeness".

From this point of view, it seems clear that the photographic discourse cannot be easily assimilated to the paradigms of a linguistics or semiotic whose object is, predominantly, written or spoken language. But it also seems clear that its signs messages are not - as they frequently appear - direct representations of the real world, but are a coded set of visual 'utterances'. What remains obscure, in the semiology of television as of the cinema, is the question of what the unit of analysis should be which corresponds to the parole, and how the rules of transformation are to be decyphered. But there seems to us little doubt that the television image, even at its most naturalistic/documentary extreme, is a coded sign, transformed by a socio-symbolic practice, and not an unmediated representation of the 'natural' world.

23. We suggest therefore that Barthes is wrong when he argues (for example, in "The Rhetoric of the Image") that in the photographic sign "the relationship of signifieds to signifiers is not one of 'transformation' but of 'recording'". But he is correct to see that the relatively untransformed nature of the photographic sign does generate and lend support to "the myth" of the 'natural' photography". Again, he seems to be incorrect when he argues that the technical interventions in the photography - "framing, distance, lighting, focus, filter, etc." - all belong to the plane of connotation, when clearly, these ways (and others in the moving film) of manipulating the 'raw material' of reality are so clearly an aspect of signification - that is, of denotation. But he is powerfully suggestive when he goes on to propose that what the photo establishes is "not a consciousness of being-there of the thing...but an awareness of the having-been-there... In the photo there occurs an illogical connection between here and then... Its reality is that of the having-been-there, for in every photograph there is the stupefying evidence of this-is-what-happened-and-how". This quality of this-is-what-happened-and-how - the illusion of immediacy, or transparency, to the events in the real world - is something which television powerfully transmits; this is one of its essential characteristics, whether (as we argued above) any particular

Crest  
Barthes

transmission is, actually, 'live' or 'filmed'.

24. We would like, now, to amplify the proposition (paragraphs 20 and 21), that television is intrinsically a sort of cinema.

We mean by this that, though television continually cannibalizes and hybridizes the content and presentational forms of other media and events/occasions, the universal set of practices by which this extremely heterogeneous raw material is transformed into television is a set which derives from the cinema. Thus, whether television is transmitting an interview in studio, a circus performance, a political rally, a demonstration, the results of a natural disaster or a chamber concert, the technical instrument by which it intervenes in these natural and cultural spaces is the camera: the basic link-up in television is the connection between cameras and the transmitting/receiver apparatus: the basic unit of all standard television discourse is the shot or sequence: and the rhetoric of all television discourse is a cinematic rhetoric - framing, distance, lighting, focus, filter, editing, mounting or assembling images together in sequence (montage), angle etc. There are of course important differences in the balance between these rhetorical elements, and the "conditions of fabrication and of distribution" as between the cinema and television. But, as Christopher Williams has remarked, "Perhaps quantitatively television drama will use more close ups and close shots than the cinema would, but the language will stand or fall as an alternating dialectic expressed through close and long shots, just like the movies". "It's moving pictures, the photographic study of reality and of people in reality; the telling of stories grounded in such a study."

25. Formally any studio interview is composed of alternating shots, taken from different cameras feeding into a single transmitter, of speaker and responder: the use of cameras permitting reaction shots against the voice of the speaker out of shot, or, alternatively, shot-to-speaker, followed by shot-to-replier, or even shot-to-speaker followed by audience reaction-shots, and so on. The filming of an orchestral performance or of a soccer game is no different. Use is made of angle, selection, focussing-in and out, etc., to emphasise details of an action or performance, or to link, visually, one action with another - the conductor/the string section, or the half-back/the forward line. Composition of individual frames carry meaning but are perhaps not as powerful a level of signification as in the cinema, because the visual detail, contrasts etc., are not so rich or refined. Television, unlike the cinema, tends to work, basically, in terms of sequences, not in terms of single frames or shots.

One important way in which television does differ from the cinema is in terms of the editing process. When television transmits from film, it is possible to edit in the cutting room: the technics of television here are exactly the same as in the cinema. Video-tape, on the other hand, is edited and viewed on one machine, and cannot be cut and manipulated with the same degree of precision as film-stock. Video-tape is more usually edited in terms of short sequences, which have some internal rhythm and coherence, rather than in terms of

single frames. Video-tape is thus more quickly assembled for the purposes of final transmission, but there is much less flexibility of control over the visual material than is the case with film. Finally, however, since so much of television is transmitted 'live', a great deal of editing is done during transmission, in the control room itself: the producer mounts the programme together, by selecting one preferred image from the images simultaneously available to him on his six monitor screens to feed into the transmitting channel. The sequences, edited 'on the run', are linked into a discourse. This kind of editing 'in the channel' is a much rougher, cruder, more instantaneous affair - the selective decisions being limited, at any one moment, by what his floor cameras are pointing at, and the choices of emphasis, continuity, and the association being made from moment to moment.

This constitutes a fundamental difference in the kind of editing characteristic of television as a medium. But the principle - that television lives by the selection, editing, mounting and assembling sequences of images - applies equally to television and film alike. Cinema has the advantage over much television in that its composition of individual frames can be more detailed and controlled: its discourse is consequently much tighter, more coherent. Television has the advantage over the cinema in that it can 'edit in' images and sequences from several different places into the single channel, or alternative 'live' sequences with filmed or video-taped inserts. Its discourse is consequently looser, more heterogeneous. But these distinctions, though important in distinguishing television from the cinema in certain respects, represent mainly variations on a set of standard modes of signification.

26. Where television does differ from film is in terms, not of how it communicates, but of what, characteristically, it communicates. The great bulk of the content of film is, openly and recognizably, fiction. Because the camera possesses the power of such fidelity to nature, the majority of films work within a naturalistic/realistic set of conventions: but the material is clearly a fictional representation of the 'real'. Television, by contrast, constantly reproduces the events, actors, manners and interactions of everyday life - its subject matter is, so frequently, the subject-matter of 'reality', that we are constantly tempted to believe that it has no intrinsic mode of signification at all - that it is a discourse without conventions. The failure to recognize that television is, in every instant, a mode of communication, not 'real life' - a failure common to producers, critics, administrators and theorists alike - has prevented the articulation of a coherent social aesthetic for the medium. The whole apparatus of the medium appears to have been trapped within the illusion - the "utopia" - of "straight transmission". It has colluded with the fantasy that what we are seeing is a 'slice of life' and not a message about 'life'. In short, the symbolic mediation in television has been collapsed - with fatal consequences. The illusion that television transmits 'reality' in the raw leads us to pose the question - is life like that? The

recognition that television transmits a symbolic representation of, a message about, reality, leads us to pose a quite different questions: namely, who says? Why does he see life like that?

The consequences of this displacement are manifold, and can only be briefly documented. Producers have become accustomed to think of their routine functions (apart from specially mounted productions) in terms of their ability to be 'faithful to reality'. They go to the scene of an event or occasion, and they try to give a faithful reflection of what is there. Yet, in fact, every programme about a real event or occasion is a re-invention, not a reflection, of reality. What they offer is an interpretation, in visual terms, of some raw slice of experience which they have seen and filmed. A television programme, like a poem, is "the adoption of various strategies for the encompassing of situations", as Kenneth Burke once remarked. "These strategies size up situations, name their structure and outstanding ingredients, and name them in a way that contains an attitude towards them".

Administrators, too, have been absolved of their determining editorial responsibility, falling back on the prevailing excuse that their task is to open a 'window on the world'. Like the producers, much of their thinking about the medium is done within the limits of literary realism: the television programme is conceived as Stendhal conceived the novel: "a mirror in the roadway". When these common metaphors of reflection are extended to the domain of culture, they become something like the phrase used by Humphrey Burton to describe the arts review magazines - "magic casements". And here we really are deeply enmeshed in the toils of the naturalistic fallacy. A 'magic casement', is presumably, a sort of 'window on culture, on the realm of fancy and the imagination'. The most important, and neglected, aspect of the 'window'/'casement' metaphor, is the question of the frames which windows impose upon scenes, the structures they make of what has been brought together, related together, within their viewpoint: most crucially of all, what is excluded by framing reality in precisely that way.

Theorists of the medium have not, on the whole, helped in any significant way to cut through these mystifying formulations about television. It is only recently that the critic and analyst, George Gerbner, remarked that "Television violence is not violence - it is the communication of violence". Yet this aspect of television, which has been massively researched and theorized about, and which is a subject of widespread public anxiety, has been systematically dealt with on the basis of a one-to-one-link, on a behavioural continuum, between television and the real world. This is not, of course, to absolve television of all effects: but it is to insist that, in this area as in all others, the behavioural link - television-to-nature - is, consistently, the wrong dimension along which to look for social effects: the crucial link is the socially-mediated one - televisions-to-culture. As Gerbner remarks, "The symbolic functions of the communications are not necessarily the same as those of the behaviour they symbolise...".

Even when television seems most to open a 'window on the world', it selects what it sees: and it can only communicate what it selects by transforming behaviours into images: by translating the social into the symbolic. All such transformations must, by definition, be forms of accomplished work. There must be rules and conventions - that is an aesthetic: and there must be techniques, codes, idioms and values - that is a set of social practices.

The working knowledge about television, the ideas about what sort of medium it is, the theories about its use, and the sum total of established conventions are all sedimented as a form of socio-technical knowledge within the profession itself. These form part of the practical do's and don't's which television producers pick up 'on the run', which they apply and refine in their working lives, and which they call upon and elaborate through their work on any particular programme. Such 'working knowledge' - professionalised, informally codified as a set of routines, transmitted from one generation of producers to another as the folk-lore of the industry - rarely if ever is forced back to first principles, or obliged to examine its theoretical and ideological presuppositions. The 'naturalistic illusion' has thus become deeply imprinted into the technical conventions of television production, and underpins many, if not all, of the significatory techniques which are used in the making of programmes.

There is no space here to examine in detail what the existing set of codes and idioms are in British television: we can only offer a highly abbreviated characterization. On the whole they seem to amount to recipes and tags which can be intergrated within the notion of 'what constitutes good television'. Good television captures the on-going form of real life, it is close to actuality. Good television is smoothly edited, chaired and presented - it offers a polished professional product, largely in terms of the assembly of material, the smooth management of the transitions, the efficient orchestration of the studio situation. It is 'good television' if there are no breaks or discontinuities. Despite recent innovations, it is still the case that, by and large, in 'good' professional television, the technical nature of the medium is thoroughly suppressed: any reminders that there are cameras, cameramen, sound booms, interviewers, commentators, technicians, secretaries, script-girls, location - or studio-managers, producers, directors, telecine recordists and so on, invisibly intevening as a collective production unit between 'reality' and the viewer destroys the illusion and immediacy and transparency. Some of the more 'creative' programmes - especially in the comedy and discussion area, do now make use of the television 'hardware' as part of the set: but standard television production, which aims at the polished, professional product, still characteristically suppresses the technical component. All television must be 'rapid' - it is not a medium which can be permitted to stray from its point, desert or digress from its original programme conceptions, turn up unexpected materials etc. 'Good' television talk is brief, concise, makes one or two points only in a clear and simple

manner. Television is not a medium for complexly structured or nuanced argument or exposition. 'Good' television conversation is well-bred, allows a balance of points of view, never disrupts the even tenor by shows of anger, deep commitment, flights of rhetoric, symbolic or metaphoric statement, etc: it fits without awkwardness into the effective studio management of television's conversation-occasions - it enhances the moderating-mediating role of the presenter. 'Good' television is, essentially, majority television - that is, for an audience composed not - as it almost certainly is - of different groups with cross-cutting minority interests, but as a large, undifferentiated homogeneous mass. Thus, 'good' television must be either plain, simple and straight, or it requires the mediation of the explainer/guide/moderator, who 'stands in' for the absent audience and makes the complicated plain, simple and straight. There are, of course, two variants of this gospel: the demotic variant, which pretends that television is exactly real life, where 'the people' are, 'what the people want'; and the paternalist variant, which pretends that the medium itself must continually translate complex realities into the simple terms which 'the man in the street' can comprehend. 'Good' television visualises whenever it can, never uses a word when it can supplant it with an image or an illustration, and is constantly beset by people who do not understand its visual mysteries and who insist that television should sound intelligent as well as look professional. 'Good' television is visually dramatic, the pictures are full of incident: 'Bad' television is static, talking heads, long camera takes, pictures which do not 'move'...

Some of these idioms may well be the distilled wisdom of the profession. Many of them are pure fictions. Yet they enclose the practice of television production like an iron corset. Any producer who wishes to work outside of their conventional limits has to struggle hard and ceaselessly against the tide of professional orthodoxy. This is constricting enough in the news/current affairs/documentary area: but it is punishingly limiting in the area of fiction, drama and the arts.

28. Around these conventional wisdoms there has accreted over time a hard shell of professionalism, to which most broadcasters are strongly committed, and which it is difficult to break or dislodge. This is not helped by the speed at which television is obliged to work, the massive absorption of varied contents to which it is devoted, and the short life-span of the programme as a finished product. The faster the rate of production, the more producers are obliged to fall back on known conventions and idioms to get their work done; the more these conventions become rooted in the socio-technical protocols of the industry. The more heterogeneous are the contents and the materials with which television deals, the more a few simple, well-tried rules are used to pacify and dominate the material. The more evanescent is the life-span of programmes, the less time and opportunity there is for professionals to think back over their mistakes, build up an informed critical knowledge about the medium, raise television production to a self-conscious and self-reflexive level. Here, the long term interests of the medium are contradicted by the way television work is organized - producers have little time for this

kind of critical collective self-reflection. Programmes are 'used up' once and for all as commodities and then abandoned to the files or, more often, simply wiped. The 'actuality' myth actually works against the repetition of 'great' part programmes, and creates the illusion of the instantaneous: yesterday's programme, like yesterday's newspaper, is a discarded commodity from which no-one can learn anything of much use. In any event, only the prestige programmes are retained for posterity, whereas producers would probably learn more from less prestigious productions; there are very few repeats on television; and there is no sustained, developing body of criticism or theory to support their efforts. In this way television continually destroys its own product, and leaves its practitioners relying on half-formed and convenient ad hoc routines which have to 'make do' - "for all practical purposes". As Tony Garnett, a Wednesday Play producer who spent much of his working time in television struggling against the dominant television conventions, has remarked, television producers are always talking, not about what it would be right to do, but rather about "what sort of works" in television. What "sort of works" in television is, really, television's accreted common sense, its conventional wisdom. And nine times out of ten, common sense is wrong.

29. There are institutional reasons too - ultimately political ones - why the deeply manipulative nature of television as a medium is subject to such widespread non-recognition. For both the BBC and ITV are massively constrained, within the limits of their charters, on the question of editorial freedom. Until recently, all programmes had to be balanced, in terms of point of view or interest, within the individual programme. It is now commonly accepted that they need to be balanced only within a responsible space of time. But whenever the subject matter of programme is political, controversial or likely to arouse strong feeling, television becomes vulnerable to political, institutional and interest-group pressure; and to defend itself against, or pre-empt such attacks, it will tend to try to balance out the extremes in terms of the people it invites to participate. Editorial balance and objectivity is then reinforced by the 'neutral' role of the studio presenter/interviewer, who compounds his role as technical manager or administrator of presentation with his role as the socio-political manager of opinions and attitudes. Even in areas which are not overtly political - the domain of culture and the arts - television rarely expresses an overt view: the presenter is, again, a ubiquitous figure. In this way, television meets the public requirement that it should not have opinions of its own, that it should not editorialise; while concealing the fact that, since it must constantly select material, edit, mount in sequence, omit, emphasise, link and associate, it cannot help but editorialise. And each single act of selection is saturated by social values and attitudes. Television has suppressed this level of 'editorialising' by setting up a false opposition between overt content and attitudes and the technical/professional aspect of television production. The first, it is suggested, falls within the domain of politics and opinion, or at best of programme policy, and the professional broadcasters must avoid it: the second falls within the domain of the medium's technical requirements, and here television can operate objectively. The

apologia is then underpinned by the "utopia" that, for much of the time anyway, television does not select or re-produce at all: it simply shows what is already there.

30. The American documentary film-maker, Frederick Wiseman, has put the point succinctly in an interview with Cinema magazine; his observations could be applied, tout court, to television. "...the editorial decisions are going on all the time: what to shoot, what not to shoot, how to shoot it...I'm constantly thinking about what it is I'm getting, what it's saying, and what I want to say out of the material. That goes on in a much more intensive way in the editing room. It becomes a more rational process. You have to develop a theory about your material... The structure is very elaborately worked out, in terms of thinking about it, the relationship of the ideas and the pictures, the condensations and compressions involved, and the rhythm of it...Each film represents a theory...towards the material, and the theory is the structure of the film".

31. If television does not as yet have a social aesthetic, it is not because the medium possesses no intrinsic form, but because its powers to transform content, and its existing weak and strong transformations, have been subjected to a sort of collective repression. Television's formal underdevelopment is the outcome of this socially-located phenomenon.

#### Politics of the Medium:

32. Some ago, in his remarkable essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin remarked on the absolute uniqueness of the camera. "The camera need not respect the performance /or the event/ as an integral whole. Guided by the cameraman, the camera continually changes position with respect to the performance. The sequence of positional views which the editor composes from the material supplied him constitutes the completed film. Hence the performance... is subject to a series of optical tests". The naturalist painter, Benjamin observed, "maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web". The camera, whether on location or in studio, does not reproduce the form of an event or production as a whole, it penetrates into that seeming totality, it dissects reality, breaking it down into the composed reality which is the product of the dialectic of shots, angles, edited sequences, etc. Its "illusionary nature" is thus the product of the fact that "the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect, freed from the foreign substance of equipment, is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by a specially adjusted camera and the mounting of shots together with similar ones. The equipment free aspect of reality here has become an orchid in the land of technology".

There is no space to develop in detail what the consequences are of this revolution in the means of communication for the aesthetics of television communication. What is certain is that the use of the camera enables the medium to explore reality - a potential which is not always realized. Thus, for example, the way a football game is



photographed for television contains, embedded in its rhetoric, a theory about the game, as well as pictures of the game. We could derive from the so-called formal analysis of such a transmission the common-sense ideas about what is and what isn't exciting in sport, what does and what doesn't constitute a 'significant play', how good and bad moves are anticipated in the shift from one monitor to another, at which points the producer believes a detailed view of the execution of a particular player will be significant, at which other points he believes the whole shape of the play and the disposition of the field matters most. Each shot also contains assumptions about the audience - what he is assumed to find exciting, what dull: how he is likely to 'read' the game as presented: perhaps about the role of sport in the structure of leisure itself. Similarly, the way a camera is used to explore a painting or piece of sculpture has imprinted into its movements and sequences a 'theory about' painting, and a theory about what the audience will find important about painting. If we know how to read the rhetoric of images, we ought to be able to tell, from the way the material of culture is handled visually in Civilization, what sort of script Sir Kenneth Clark would have to write for that film, and what view of culture made him choose to take those objects filmed in that way. When filming in the studio, the producer has greater control over his material, and he can pre-dispose it for the fluid transcription into images and sequences. 'On location', the director must edit and compose as he goes, and, while appearing to follow the natural 'line' of an event or action, must constantly translate this into a different logic - the logic of presentation, exposition, and reception, including the ability for the finished product to be 'read' in a certain way by an audience. The producer may or may not be consciously aware of this massive and persistent manipulation of reality, and much of the practice of television production and criticism is clearly based on a sort of collective 'forgetfulness'. But this does not mean that no manipulation is taking place. It simply means that, for much of the time, television operates with what can only be called an unconscious aesthetic based on a veiled social practice.

33. Benjamin argues that the development of forms of mechanical reproduction in the modern world profoundly transforms both the status of the work of art itself, and the relationships of viewers and audiences to what they see. "The uniqueness of a work of art", he suggests, "is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition". Our attitude towards its uniqueness, its un-reproducibility, weaves what he calls on 'aura' about it, with a basis in ritual. But with the growth of means of communication which are fundamentally manipulative - that is, which, by their nature, continually break up and rearrange totalities, so that they cease to be 'whole in themselves' - and which assert the endless reproducibility of the work in new forms, that 'aura' is destroyed forever; there is a tremendous "shattering of tradition". "The technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition". And artistic production comes to be based, not on ritual but "on another practice - politics".

34. For the same reasons, the mechanical means of reproducing reality

profoundly alters the traditional attitude of the audience to what it sees. The unique object becomes the object of infinite reproducibility. The tradition in which the object is embedded becomes a plurality of traditions, offering different ways in which the object may be appropriated, both by the camera and by the audience. The notion of an audience frozen in a single attitude or stance towards art is transformed by the continual re-appropriation of the work within different attitudes and stances: thus its 'aura' of distance, intangibility, and the appropriate attitudes of reverence and silent acknowledgement, are de-totalized. With respect, then, either to art or events in the real world, the coming of the camera, and its use as a means of everyday communication greatly enlarges the audience's 'sphere of action'. "By focussing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film on the one hand extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations, and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world assunder by the dynamite of a tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling... Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye - if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics /our italics/ as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses". The everyday milieus of social life become, for the first time in a mass medium, the scenarios of action: ordinary people become, in their reproduced image (and still, of course, contained within and by a rhetoric of domination and expropriation) the actors in a 'play' which is everyday life. Television itself, of course, continues to be governed by ideologies and social practices dictated by the social exclusiveness of its 'means' and 'content': it continues to reproduce the model of small groups of communicators - the arbiters of taste, the judges of action, the guardians of tradition - speaking to the excluded, atomised, serialized, 'anonymous' audience. But here the forms of domination are deeply contradicted by the images of a transformed world, which tradition and exclusiveness can no longer pacify and appropriate, and which break through the 'aura' in every hour of broadcasting, it transmits.

35. Television holds an ambiguous position between what is traditionally defined as 'art' and what is commonly understood as 'communication'. But this is not a simple confusion. Within the prevailing wisdom, it is seen as a medium which continually lowers 'art' into the contours and images of everyday life. But it could equally well be understood as a medium which, by revolutionizing the boundaries between these two hitherto exclusive domains, perpetually raises everyday life into a sort of artistic communication - which continuously transforms the 'real world' into a powerful image of itself.

36. For these reasons, television is least comfortable, and seems least to exploit its intrinsic qualities when it inhabits - with the traditional attitudes - the domain of 'high art' itself. This relationship - between the traditional culture and the medium - seems increasingly an inadequate way of trying to conceptualise the relationship of the medium to culture itself. It is in relation to television that we seem most to require new ways of defining the categories of everyday life, 'art', entertainment. It is not therefore surprising that, in drama, it is the blurring of this fine distinction - the overlap between fiction and documentary - which has proved most revolutionary. And the documentary or everyday elements of life, integrated into a fictional form of representation, on the one hand accounts for some parts of the spectrum of television production which we still think of as 'art', (for example, the documentary Wednesday plays as against the Shakespeare production); but also overlaps with domains which are only ambivalently, if at all, appropriate to 'art'. The quality of the serials, the popular dramas, the thriller stories and the situation comedies is of course extremely variable. But, when they are done with care, originality or conviction, they seem to inhabit a world natural to television in ways which the routine handling of traditional 'high art' material does not. If we think about the medium, rather than about art as traditionally defined, we would be obliged to list, as variable points of reference from which a truly television art could be elaborated, not Aquarius or Monitor but Steptoe and Son, Till Death Do Us Part, Coronation Street, the early Z-Cars, Family At War, Monty Python's Flying Circus, the early Rowan and Martin Laugh-In, and so on. And - whatever is the individual critic's list - these programmes seem to contain elements of what is a truly authentic television language because they exploit its potential outside the traditional aura of 'art', which, increasingly, comes across as a domain of exclusive privilege and taste, appropriated into a social mode and invested with ritual values altogether at odds with television's indigenous open style. Popular drama, the serials and so on, are, of course - given the present structure of television - mercilessly subject to routinization, to formula work, shot through with the 'false demotic', and so on. What is intended here is not a defence of these kinds of television works as against 'art' television, given the present way in which television is owned, managed and run - but an effort, by way of such examples, to wrest from its present uses some image of the medium's true potential. And what, at the very least, it seems possible to claim is that an authentic development of television as a medium will rest on a full recognition of the degree to which it has already - in fragmented and unsuccessful ways - revolutionised the basic triadic relationship between communicator-message-audience. It may be possible, from such a position, to reappropriate the traditional content of 'art' and culture - but this, too, like everything else in television, will have to begin by recognizing that the ritual relationships between 'art' and audience has been destroyed, and that the transformation and reproduction of the content of 'art' is utterly different when the instrument of reproduction is the camera, and the recipient is the great mass of the viewing public. What is so striking, then, about the existing uses of television in

the domain of art and culture is its rooted anachronism: its playing over again of old tunes, its attempt to restore modes of deference, of dutiful attention, in a period and a medium which is beginning, in however contradictory a manner, to transcend them.

37. Television is still, of course, a medium in which characteristically the few address the many. Presently, the only 'feed-back' which really counts is the feedback of audience figures - that which assures the broadcaster of his dominant minority position in a majority medium, and which reinforces the exclusivity of discourse. Everything about the medium - its structures, its financing, its institutional hierarchies, its ethos, its attitudes to subject-matter and audience - is aimed at a use of the medium for disseminating information and experiences from an elite source to an uninformed audience. Yet what is potential in the very language and form of the medium is a different, and alternative set of relationships: in which, through the mutual exploration of reality, new, transformed realities begin to be jointly created. Nowhere is it so clearly the case as in the domain of art and culture that television is, at present, a powerful mobilizing mass medium of a special, and specially democratic kind, which is currently defined and used in sophisticated elitist ways. The images of an unintelligent audience, a homogeneous mass of anonymous viewers, linked to the medium only by their common ignorance, which sustain so much television production, and of the privileged professional minority in its midst, are ideological fictions of a powerful sort which now constitute the major breaks and constraints on the development, in television, of its intrinsic social and political qualities.

38. Television invites us, not to serve up the traditional dishes of culture 'more effectively', but to make real the utopian slogan which appeared, in May 1968, adorning the walls of the Sorbonne. "Art is dead. Let us create everyday life."

SP 34