



## TV or Not TV. What Was the Question?

By J. Hoberman

Ah, television. Is there any force, sex included, that casts a more universal, more mysterious spell upon American lives? Language aside, isn't its quasi-scientific feedback system—a tawdry, funhouse mirror—the major thing we have in common? And is there anything new that anyone can say about it? That was the question that drew fans of intellectual vaudeville to the Kitchen 10 days ago for 22 hours of "Television/Society/Art: A Symposium."

This was a conference that could not fail. Television's utter familiarity makes it the ideal subject for theoretical analysis. For if Marxism, semiotics, or psychoanalysis have something to tell us about TV, the corollary is that we can assess the value of those systems by examining exactly what that something is. Nor would the conference lack drama. For the left, a critique of network TV should be the most important matter on the cultural agenda. But can the left ever analyze its own blanket assumption of audience passivity, missionary dislike of popular taste, and reluctance to consider why (other) people watch?

Although the tone of some participants suggested they were holding their subject at arm's length, clothespin clamped to nose, the symposium's timing was not inappropriate. TV has reached a cusp of sorts as the forces of cable, satellite, Portapak and Betamax mass to challenge 30 years of network hegemony. Or will they? A decade ago video technology was inextricably bound up with rosy visions of the future—a two-way TV system in every geodesic dome. At "Television/Society/Art," just about everyone believed the situation could only get worse.

Organized by Ron Clark, the symposium's six panels were heavily weighted

toward British semiotic film theory and American academic Marxism, with more than a *soupeon* of the Soho art world thrown in. The stairs to the Kitchen were freshly painted. The editors of *Screen*, *October*, *Semiotexte*, and *Social Text* were somewhere among the 200 people crowded into the room. There was a heady buzz of anticipation, and Douglas Kellner—a young professor from the University of Texas at Austin—rose to knock the crowd dead with an ambitious paper he called, "Television Images, Codes and Messages."

### The Man Who Would Be Television

If Kellner's paper turned out to be a bland compendium of obvious truths and unexamined positions, his view of his subject was far from tentative. "Television Images, Codes and Messages" ransacked the vocabularies of semiotics, phenomenology, critical theory, myth criticism, and Freudian analysis in a grand attempt to "overcome the one-sidedness and limitations of previous theories." Kellner began by comparing television to religion. He ended by staking it out as "the new frontier of cultural studies." There was no mistaking his candidate for sheriff. But if Kellner hoped to take the conference by storm, he'd have had a better chance of blitzing the Dallas Cowboys.

A model of television lifted piecemeal from "advanced" film theory and exclusively oriented toward indigenous network TV was surely sufficient for tenure and might even make Kellner's name in the academically suspect field of American Studies. But who among the assembled art critics, Marxist intellectuals, video artists, and film theorists ever watched the tube? In the days that fol-

lowed, more than one panelist would brag about not even owning a set. Kellner's little critiques of *Fonzie* or *Mod Squad*, his invocations of sitcoms known to factory workers and secretaries from Maine to Arizona—so daringly delicious in the context of classroom discussion—weren't going to carry him very far this morning. Neither of course was his academic name dropping nor his pop semiotic model, and he compounded the latter's grossness by passing out the sort of mimeographed chart that students cover with doodles and then crumple beneath their seats.

In a word, Kellner's success seemed problematic. Minutes into his presentation, two British panelists seated in front of me began to nudge each other and snicker. "It's unbelievable!" There was a frozen moment when the floor was opened to comment. Then Stephen Heath, a Cambridge-based *Screen* semiotologist—the

Vainly, he called upon higher authority ("I get this from Adorno!"). Abjectly, he protested that his paper was intended for an American audience. Too late, his blood was in the water with no lifeboat in sight. He was misusing the word "code." He was being intellectually dishonest. He was writing the prologue to an eighth-grade textbook. He was coopting everything that everyone was saying. He was creating a totalizing system. He was, in short, acting exactly like television itself.

### Good Marx and Bad

"So far there is no Marxist theory of the media," wrote Hans Magnus Enzensberger in 1970, and despite Raymond Williams's *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* or Matellart and Dorfman's *How To Read Donald Duck*, this remains more or less the case. But the august assemblage of Marxist thinkers gathered at the Kitchen raised unconscionable hopes. The tone was set by the welcoming remarks of John Hanhardt, curator of Film and Video at the Whitney Museum. *Alphaville*-precise, he emitted a seamless flow of hard-line fixed syntagms: "controlled-circuit-of-dis-course" . . . beep, beep . . . "capitalist-bourgeois-culture" . . . beep . . . "dominant-ideological-state-apparatus" . . . beep, beep, beep! By the time he proffered the prospect of "cultural revolution," the masses were psyched.

The first seminar, "Television as Social Communication," included Kellner; Julianne Burton, a film teacher from California; Herbert Schiller, the pioneer communications theorist; Michele Matellart, a French writer who had studied in Al-lende's Chile and recently returned from Mozambique; former SDS president Todd Glin; and the *Screen* editor, Mark . . . . . Continued on next page

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man who translated Barthes into English and brought Jacques Lacan to bear on Howard Hawks—stood up and in a controlled fury of understatement, lit into Kellner: "Your analysis seems extremely static. You've homogenized television quite fantastically." At once the air was thick with cries: "Lack of theoretical rigor!" "Absolutely no understanding of semiotics!" "Apology for the industry!" "Grossly incompatible systems!"

With his wide face, rimless glasses, and flat, oversized pancake of a beret, the beleaguered Kellner bore a startling resemblance to Ché! Boy-argued. Fudibly, he tried to embrace his critics' positions.