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# TRANSMISSION

Toward a Post-Television Culture

2nd Edition

edited by Peter d'Agostino  
David Tafler



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*DEDICATED TO*

PASQUALE D'AGOSTINO  
1900-1985

ABRAHAM TAFLER  
CLAIRE S. TAFLER

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## Preface

It is almost a decade since the initial publication of *Transmission*. Originally subtitled "Theory and Practice for a New Television Aesthetics," *Transmission* now reflects a shift in emphasis toward a post-television culture. The focus is on television and on the related systems that have evolved and have been absorbed into the fabric of daily life, from automated banking and video games to computerized war. The glow from these cathode ray tubes, light-emitting diodes, and liquid crystal displays projects an ever increasing realm of mediated consciousness throughout a continually enveloping electronic landscape.

In this vein, the title, as well as the approach, to this book were inspired primarily by the work of Raymond Williams and Walter Benjamin that set a broad base for cultural studies. Williams contributed to the study of television by looking at its origins, content, and flow. He critiqued a culture that was becoming more and more technologically determined.

Unlike all previous communications technologies, radio and TV were systems devised for transmission and reception as abstract processes, with little or no definition of preceding content. . . . It is not only that the supply of broadcasting facilities preceded the demand; it is that the means of communication preceded its content. (Williams, 1975, p. 25)

Benjamin's early analysis of photography and film explored the social, economic, and political implications of works of art in an "age of mechanical reproduction." This investigation has been extended here to TV, hypermedia, and virtual reality in an age of electronic transmission.

With the content and contextualization of new technologies shaping ever evolving perspectives, philosophical questions continue to emerge as to what is real and what is not, from Plato's Cave to this oxymoron called *virtual reality*. When foraging along the electronic spectrum, it becomes necessary to reframe those philosophical questions and reconsider the inherent meanings and current uses of terms like *virtuality*, *reality*, and *actuality*. Issues concerning race, gender, and ethnicity as

well as the erosion and possible reclamation of oral traditions firmly rooted in the past and still manifested in the present are also addressed in this volume.

The actual events-wars, individual crises, and the myriad of topics that thematically drive the chapters in this book are not, however, the primary subject of our text. The emphasis here is on the mediation of the events being analyzed. We envision *Transmission* to be an interference pattern within the prepackaged flow of technologically determined ideology. Charting the territory of a post-television culture and suggesting alternative structures may yield something beyond the sterility and predictability of a pervasive high-tech culture.

*Transmission* is intended as a multidimensional source book, and not a homogeneous blend. The reader is therefore encouraged to cross reference, compare the sometimes dialectical positions of the authors and work toward one's own synthesis of ideas presented.

Peter d'Agostino

### Reference

Williams, R. (1975). *Television: Technology and cultural form*. New York: Schocken

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*Transmission* compiles the work and concerted efforts of its many contributors. It has been informed by the authors in the previous edition and those in this current volume. Four of the chapters, by Erik Barnouw, Deirdre Boyle, John Carey and Pat O'Hara, and Todd Gitlin were also part of the initial publication. Deepest gratitude is extended to all of the authors and publishers who have provided material for this book. Our series editor Bob White provided the faith to proceed while his critical feedback motivated us to stop and reconsider our ideas before committing them to print. Thanks are also extended to the past and present editorial staff at Sage (Ann West, Sophy Craze, Astrid Viriding, and Tricia Bennett) for their guidance and patience during the editing process.

To my wife, Deirdre Dowdakin, and my daughters, Brita and Lia, for their love, support, and understanding. —P. d'A.

To my family and friends for their love and support. —D. T.

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## Introduction

PETER D'AGOSTINO  
DAVID TAFLER

*Transmission* presents an overview, a shifting territory previously known as television. Inside its borders, a multiplicity of events for the exchange of information transpire across an expanding spectrum, come from divergent sources, rush toward a number of applications. While the word *transmission* may still refer to the technological apparatus of television, to the sociopolitical structures of the medium, and ultimately to the exchange of information, in a post-television culture, television no longer means television. An omnipresence now pervades every facet of daily life; CRTs (cathode ray tubes) dot the landscape and occupy the hubs of all human activity, from the office to the ballpark, from transportation platforms to transporting vehicles, from libraries to supermarkets, from ATMs to research laboratories. Television has now become a bank machine, security monitor, information terminal, computer interface. No longer a formidable household icon, television comes unhinged; it no longer stands alone as it did at a time when the family gathered in front of the living room screen, twisted the dials, and chose their favorite programs. The individual now holds a remote, separates from the body, and plunges into cyberspace.

The rubric of an electronic information superhighway heralds the arrival of a post-television culture. With the option of going on-line, people turn to the "'net" to form their community.<sup>1</sup> Defined by common interests, perhaps by their economic status or other factors determining privileged access, individuals form alliances that transcend geographic location, history, routine. They communicate on-screen using language or other abstract symbols. Initially, nothing matters but the message.

Only later might visual or other kinesis factors enter into a relationship. The old boundaries disappear.

Today, television's interface, everywhere intertwined with everyday activity, separate channels in separate spaces, public and private jurisdictions at work and at home, marks an individual's activity beyond the physical constraints of absence and presence at the edges of the network. Ambivalences correspond with the onslaught of yet newer technologies, generating the constant buzz out there.

With the proliferation of channels, with the growing number of on-line network services, with the increasing number of voices addressing the same issues, screening the same images, the viewer-participant now receives and sends abbreviated reports, continuously and often instantaneously, about an exploding number of remote affairs transpiring on a shrinking planet. Ranging from weather forecasts to war reports, this information from other regions and other places offers little of immediate personal consequence and detracts from issues of more concentrated significance. Little in-depth analysis takes place.

When it comes to war and other national traumatic events, a hyper-dramatization characterizes the media scenario. Television networks work to expunge and exploit the horror. When satellite hook-ups eliminate the temporal span between the battlefield and the living room, the networks remain constrained by censorship. The active players then become the tools, the military hardware, the aerial representations of (sexual) projectiles hurtling against some unknown other. The respective agents of power compete for time on the television screen. Alternating visits with conflicting generals measure the distance in the conflict. Disremembered before it begins, the theater misses the historical issues that go beyond the boundaries of the televised conflict. If memory plays no role in television, then television has limitless license to bend the collective consciousness in ways only possible when no tether holds the audience logic.

The historical framework defining television experience adjusts and shifts. These shifts have come about rapidly. Technology changes terminology and new paradigms shape the evolution of new tools. Tomorrow, television again becomes something else. Along the proposed electronic highways, interactive multimedia raises questions of information rich and information poor. Visionary propositions and technological advances must be tempered by the realities of control and ownership that serve the political and economic interests of the communication industry rather than those of the public. Auxiliary devices

create the impression of alternatives.<sup>2</sup> How can telecommunication technologies be put to the service of people; how can they flourish and survive with their resources intact?

Not long ago, television's window on the world, its limited network spectrum, became a fixed icon on the landscape, its seasons simulated the artificial passage of time, its programming served as a harbinger of trends. Years of programming went by with scores of researchers documenting how television technology molded social habits, political strategies, marketing campaigns; fueled professional sports; corrupted society's values; and consumed elective time. From this historical vantage point, the status of television appeared stable.

The media continue to structure overall consciousness. As part of the distribution process, they filter and frame activity, produce meaning, shape discourse, introduce, play out, emphasize, and exclude certain vital information until the very reality on the screen becomes a meta-drama, recognizable but detached from everyday life.

Mainstream television, still driven by the loud voices of multinational corporate power brokers, however, represents only one reality, familiar but inappropriate. Mainstream television culture continues to pretend to represent the whole community. On the screen, that reality obscures cultural difference, more difficult to discern but ever present. Weighing in, a post-television environment can no longer simply satisfy its constituents with endless replays of the same old traumas. While mass-distributed television programming shrinks to accommodate a smaller audience, television, a world watering hole, must reflect and shape the tensions, questions, and shifting values of a world in rapid transition.

On the reception side, individuals resist television, understand its difference as part of their daily lives, in their private spaces, accepted unconsciously. Through critical interpretation, viewers bring their own background to the reception experience, thus breaking the hegemonic foothold of the medium. Active screening, not to mention production activity, helps to temper television's predominant influences.

Accommodating to this resistance, television plays on gender relations, on class differences, through positing conformity and encouraging resistance. Television undercuts its own critique by creating a homogenized mainstream reality. Within each socioeconomic cycle, television plays off the audience in front of the screen. As a domestic medium, television moves into the family and unravels the myriad relationships: daughter-mother, father-son, husband-wife, among siblings,

and between children and parents of the opposite sex. Outside the family, television stereotypes and reassures constituents of each class grouping. Radical messages simply replay themselves as exotic entertainment, advertising gone MTV, encouraging consumption of yet more bourgeois ideology. In the end, television annihilates difference by appropriating factions outside the social center.

That oscillation between involvement and detachment, between the de facto world and the de jure, signals the pleasure of the encounter with the television medium. People sometimes resist this anesthetized pleasure and grab hold of technologies that provide the means for resistance. Along with new hopes, the transformation of electronic media into multiuse utensils raises new challenges and demands new ways of thinking.

David Antin (1975) once described television as "video's frightful parent" (p. 58). In a post-television environment, television first turns to video. Video offers the possibilities for breaking television's hold. Video inhabits the neighborhoods of "broken experience" and not the domestic world of sitcoms and soap operas. Off stage, its presence shapes the ethical standard, the environment outside the window. Video and television, each one encircles the other, watches the other, defines and contextualizes the other's relations to the world outside itself. Video indicts television's fiction. Television derides home videos. Where each steps out, the other calls attention to that masquerade until the Rodney King tape shows up. Here, video shockingly makes itself present by indicting the silence of passive consumption.

In earlier ruptures, radical groups like TVTV (Top Value Television) used video to break the boundaries of television. In the process, they triggered the networks' move to ENG (electronic news gathering). On the residual edges of this new frontier, video made possible the dream of reclaiming some lost territory, staking claim to new turf where the rules and regulations have not yet been invented. Technological limitations became the foundation for breaking with stylistic norms, those conventional approaches to interacting with people in the surrounding community.

With new technologies fueling the transformation of the Portapak, the camcorder ushers in the first explosion of new stylistic codes and constructions. Video revolutionizes television. In a post-television culture, video is propagated through the spread of cameras and their accompanying monitors. To maintain a meaningful identity, smaller communities in the inner city and in the outlying rural areas use video

to build a new anchor for maintaining their values, for establishing their own codes and signs, defining their own reality as it may appear on and beyond the electronic screen.

Video activism means undermining the credibility of the message by exposing the vehicle that delivers that message. In the process, other languages evolve. On this level, information flow yields to format. Opportunities for information access compete with applications generating immediate pleasure. Surrounded, the community finds itself consumed from within.

A critical historic moment rests within the space of time in which the alternate group can produce a novel approach and the appropriation of that approach by mainstream agencies. In that constant process of exploration, a process that means staying one step ahead of the flood, an interactive environment emerges where people maintain a commitment to resisting the effects of television's constantly evolving content and form.

Apparently, for some groups, the distances remain great. Their efforts to build their own language emerge from a long-standing cultural posture when encountering all new experiences, particularly electronic experiences. With indigenous people, such as the Aboriginal peoples of Australia, other factors enter into the equation, for example, landscape, vegetation, movement that corresponds to the flow of a given story. Differences lie in the size of the community; the spread between notions of urban, suburban, and rural; needs, messages, relations within the family—who stays home and who watches when.

New interactive television networks emerge in the bush for bridging these differences. Questions remain, however, about the very nature of interactive television. Not only do concerns focus on substitution—not only does interactive television replace the telephone or face-to-face encounters—they focus on whether a unique communication medium such as interactive television can change the mind-set of a community, its people's relationship to space, to time, to their own reality, to their relations with others, to their notion of community.

At the bottom, there remains the question of control. Who controls the tools often determines the nature of the system put in place. Increasingly complex technologies facilitate user-friendly exchanges, but they operate at the mercy of an army of service technicians, system regulators, corporate entities designing the respective interfaces, changing the parameters of the exchange. In the end, communication becomes something else. Who knows where that destination lies.



Video, a temporal medium, captures transition, embodies degeneration. Video lies along the ideological interface, the divide separating government and commerce, regulation and restlessness, control and freedom. Mediating difference and not based on preserving values, video negotiates change. A post-television culture requires new thinking and new theories of experience.

As other high-tech applications proliferate, they threaten to accelerate the eradication of cultural difference. Each new system's material reality makes claims on its users. Each new wave proportionately affects the language, ritual, influence, and power among communities. Borders change; territories diminish. As distances diminish, the collision among social forces disrupts, fragments, and eventually destroys contingent customs and practices, particularly those predicated on earlier, now outmoded networks of time and space.

While technology may destabilize frontiers, does high technology inevitably destroy tradition? Can an indigenously developed telepresence accommodate newer technologies and thus maintain the traditional bridges sustaining older cultures? "The electronic age is also an age of 'secondary orality,' the orality of telephones, radio, and television, which depends on writing and print for its existence" (Ong, 1982, p. 3). This notion of "secondary orality" harbors the potential for the continuity of oral cultures without the disruptive and arbitrary shifts to literacy.

Significant upheavals often mask the less perceptible, more gradual changes transpiring within an everyday environment. On a micro level, the conjunction of electronic windows wedding the television with the telephone, coaxial with fiber optic, with the computer-driven CD, laser disc, CD ROM, alter overall viewer reception habits by further fragmenting attention and communication. Traveling the internal conduits within an expanding body, 24-hour electronic traffic patterns serve as the social matrix. Presence and absence become meaningless. Even in the receiver's absence, answering machines, modems, and FAX terminals continue to downlink messages for future referencing.

Electronic corridors secured by access privileges, the doors and hallways, the screen portals of the future yield to those carrying the appropriate assigned digits on the global highways: those individuals in constant contact, personalized, monitored, and approved; those individuals privileged and equipped to enter the proper pathways for moving through the circuit. Input devices proliferate and hierarchical differences mark the playing field. Security buffers telecommunication stations.

Artificial intelligence operations match producer-user systems. Power gateways designate the information recipients, and allocate resources accordingly.

The university lies within the ghetto. Cars with phones roll by homes where people have difficulty paying for their basic telephone service. Computers in police cars help sustain the steeper thresholds between the haves and have-nots. Everybody carries a gun. Computers on the beach pacify the old outcasts, while the channel surfers, oblivious of their presence, continue to ride back and forth across the airwaves. The tools do not guarantee access. Once access becomes available, the users do not necessarily avail themselves of the myriad opportunities placed before them. People continue to pursue prescribed objectives; they adhere to well-charted pathways. Only a venturesome few go beyond.

Safe within the conceptual lodge, the young navigate future relationships, free from disease and unwelcome confrontation. Growing up on the electronic grid, taking the phenomena for granted, the youngest generation acquires its own language screaming "CD" or "TV" before knowing how to say "mommy" or "dada." These synaptic shifts have profound consequences. When the computer appears in the baby's room, the television set follows the phonograph, follows the telephone, follows the desktop computer, to the scrap heap of historical nostalgia. In cyberspace, no one can hear you beyond the screen.

Separating space from time, becoming involved in the machine, technology shapes aesthetics, aesthetics become the currency for navigating through the technosphere, a virtual reality of artifice and new structured convention. The chapters in this volume range across this terrain, from topics exploring television's relationship with domestic and international conflagrations, to topics surrounding the implementation of new technologies such as interactive networks and virtual landscapes. Aesthetic values, gender and race issues, class determinants motivate the selection of material and inform its discussion.

The organization of the book matches chapters that now have some historical bearing with chapters focused on more contemporary issues that arise from similar concerns. Without dwelling on individual programs or tapes, the book moves across the television terrain examining the impact of video on commercial television, the relationship of media to the social causes it (mis)represents, the effects of new communication tools on participating constituents.

In the opening chapter, "**Lost Generations**," Sean Cubitt pinpoints the interplay between television and video. Television embodies a society

situated in front of the screen. Captivated by narcissistic impulses, television's play updates and perpetually revises the psychoanalytic play on the body within its social relations, focusing on death, on the environment. In contrast to "being" there for a society in transition, video straddles change by constantly becoming something else.

Cubitt argues that alternative media must escape the demands of popular sentiment to arrive at a true democracy of the individual image. Measuring television's specific historical and material conditions means evaluating the symbolic language and manipulated communication, dialectical struggle, and psychoanalytic angst, all against the lifestyle and postmodern setting of the suburban environment. At the end of science, the *danse macabre* of ecological disaster, the mediasphere extends the grip of wanton consumption and eventual annihilation toward a future woven between dystopian technocratic nightmares and its own profound self-interrogation.

Here, outside the commercial boundaries, outside of its own marketplace, art production builds meaning while straddling a world organized by territories, constrained by boundaries. Art represents a time and place beyond the constancy of the media facade. Cubitt propounds a negation of television's eternal presence, to release/recognize the historical imagination/historical change. Cubitt argues that video's "indefiniteness . . . becomes its field of possibility." About difference, dialogue, place, and time, video works toward discovering/elaborating the terms on which the future might emerge. In a postmodernist chronology, the question becomes this: What comes after video?

Once again, historical circumstances might tend to repeat themselves. Looking back at the turn of the last century, motion pictures, collective dream machines, stretched the conceptual thresholds of the industrial revolution. Cultural change took off in an inflamed environment of the imagination. In the context of a world often disrupted by war, financial upheaval, and concomitant cycles of technological, political, and social revolution, technological innovation fueled militarism, imperialism, colonialism, and other forms of adventurous exploitation. The players, meanwhile, fueled technological development.

On the cusp of the twenty-first century, when processing speed sucks up memory at the speed of light, digital instruments supplant analog systems. A cognitive apparatus predicated on a sequence of single points conjoined across a three-dimensional grid, a computer's simplified set of instructions impedes the imagination. With everything becoming bits and bytes, margins separating transmission and reception

shrink. The desktop computer station becomes the post-television future. The simple act of watching means settling for software options. One can no longer simply discover oneself in the act of watching. The viewer reaches out for the joystick. The targeted audience grabs the remote and hopscoches across the sterile spectrum, a capitalist wasteland of shopping channels and shopping malls. In between, the commodities range from born-again religion to reborn politicians. Outside, the physical parameters of the universe change forever; new principles take hold.

In his chapter, "**Surrealism Without the Unconscious**," Fredric Jameson plots mainstream consciousness along aesthetic and technological axes. Technology defines the materiality of the contemporary media, its artistic mode, and social institution. Of all media, according to Jameson, video fully embodies the postmodern, the art form of late capitalism. With culture and media entwined, video lies at the locus of a new social and economic conjuncture. Unlike commercial television's simulacrum of fictive time, video's rigorously nonfictive machine language, machine time (television flow), depersonalizes the subject into a quasi-paralyzed member of the cultural apparatus.

At that juncture, fringe and center dematerialize within a reactivated signifying system. Video disturbs historical reception through its reexamination of the "consciousness industry." Video's space time specificity arrests commercial television's exemplary unity. Video splits into video and television. Jameson argues television lacks memory. While memory plays no role in postmodernism, after postmodernism, after video, there's no presence. In that structural degeneration defines video's inherent status, the video text itself represents transition. No video masterpieces can emerge as a new canon.

Jameson goes on to acknowledge video's relationship to computer and information technology, to videotext. In the ceaseless interaction among signs and logos, reproductive technology can break with its automatic referentiality. In establishing some autonomy from the referent, reference and reality disappear. Meaning becomes problematized.

What remains of television, television programming stitches together the many contradictory threads to sustain the complex social-economic-political environment. Television, positioned unconsciously as reality, remains a domestic medium. It presumes family, presumes that women are preoccupied with family. Television focuses around familylike groupings more than around individuals. Therefore television does not attribute to the viewer the same powerful voyeuristic gaze when

compared with the film viewer. Television submits to a collective discourse. Insofar as women develop different relations than men, more in tune with family and friends, television may appear to draw women into a more involved relationship, "becoming subject to its discourse." In fact, women negotiate their experience with television in different ways depending on their respective socioeconomic class and/or generation. On both a conscious and an unconscious plateau, women organize, often resist, and occasionally absorb the subject(s) of their fascination.

As an affective system, quasi-private/public television momentarily placates deep-seated human needs: the imagination, desire, and guilt-free consumption. Andrea Press's chapter, "**Women Watching Television: Issues of Class, Gender, and Mass Media Reception,**" scrutinizes the integration of gender and class in the metamorphosis of television. It raises the question: To what extent do respective constituents have the ability to generate their own meaning(s) within prevailing and marginal media systems? Press examines how viewer resistance, or lack of resistance, to culture's often hegemonic messages operates within television, the most salient instrument of that struggle.

The media's negotiation, management, and comprehension of reality make their own processed image into the reported movement. From that representation, the audience formulates its positions and chooses its eventual actions.

Todd Gitlin, in "**The Whole World Is Watching,**" analyzes the effects of these framing mechanisms on the world at large with regard to a hegemonic ideology that attempts to naturalize the artificiality of media conventions. Gitlin critiques the role of mass media as core systems for the distribution of ideology. Focusing on the complex relationship of television news and the New Left of the 1960s, Gitlin looks at the way the media frames actual events and deforms their social meaning. Through media instruments, the public world penetrates the private sphere, the sanctuary of the home. Within that body, the synchronic array of ceaseless imagery shapes residual values, emotions, and the very language of the individual/group discourse. The flow remains one sided. Individuals have no leverage over what constitutes information. Mediated meanings fall into concrete patterns that hover back and forth over the same familiar territory, a distant territory. Meanwhile, the mediators bypass relevant news to the community when the hook lacks the magic to fall into those categories that titillate the viewer for a moment of his or her attention. As a consequence, nothing on the screen mobilizes public attention for any meaningful duration.

In a post-television environment, other voices reach the screen. Accompanying the spread of satellite dishes, cable systems, and other forms of electronic distribution, the conjoining of specialized communication tools with everyday media appliances has begun to notably alter the cultural practices of the most remote communities in the bush as well as lend a voice to their disenfranchised brothers and sisters in the larger cities. Collapsing the differences between larger and smaller communities, media centers disassemble the output of the large media machines and permit individuals to form their own constituencies.

A new level of cynicism accompanies this access. Television plays out the omniscient myth of an ever-presence waiting for the viewer to tap. On both sides of the screen, the text implicates its participants in the production of force. "Wasted time, being wasted," the spectator remains trashed. Television, about being-not-at-home, tries to locate the certainty, the "in" of being-in-the-world. Surveilling, being under surveillance, television's interrupted discourse seeks to recapture its own rupture.

Avital Ronell's "**Video/Television/Rodney King: Twelve Steps Beyond The Pleasure Principal**" compares television to a shock absorber, to a drug in its relation to law, in its relations to itself as force, alternately stimulating and tranquilizing. She uses the Rodney King case to examine "television watching the law watch video." She discusses the strategy of reducing the videotape of the beating into a photograph, where it lacks the force of the moving narrative. In the hemorrhaging of meaning, television's call to consciousness reverts to video's call of conscience—the "interpellation that takes place between television and video, the way the one calls the other to order, which is one way of calling the other to itself."

A large global population sown together by satellite can no longer sustain regional hatred, rampant exploitation of human and natural resources, and imperialist forays into neighboring territories. When the respective territories of individual and group, large and small community conflict, the electronic highway will channel the respective constituents' frustration and anxiety. To this end, it weaves and strokes and makes benign most of the explosive forces operating within the combined social body by channeling specific messages onto carefully formatted and regulated tracks. Yet, while reaching for the stars, the global community continues to fight medieval battles. With no place to hide, the problems turn in on themselves. With time running out, the challenges defy solutions.

Out of the 1950s come fear, imagination, and suppression. Out of the fear of the hydrogen bomb and the fascination with Sputnik, imagination overtakes reality. Media goes with the imagination by ignoring, masking, or revising earlier history. Erik Barnouw's "**The Case of the A-Bomb Footage**" chronicles the history of film footage of the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Filmed by independent Japanese filmmakers, the footage was confiscated by occupation authorities and remained "classified material" in Washington until 1968. After obtaining permission from the National Archives to review the films, Barnouw edited the material into the documentary *Hiroshima-Nagasaki, August 1945*. The chapter concludes with a description of the television premiere of the program on the 25th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing.

The Hiroshima-Nagasaki documentary chronicles the reality of a modern world gone awry in waging war and suffering devastation. The electric effect on audiences foretold the fascination with televised images of the Vietnam War on the nightly news and its antiseptic aftermath, "smart" bombs and their adjoining cameras during the Gulf War. Yet, network television at the time ignored the independent documentary until forced to take notice.

Marita Sturken's chapter, "**The Television Image and Collective Amnesia: Dis(re)membering the Persian Gulf War**," examines late twentieth-century high-tech conflicts in light of earlier twentieth-century military-industrial relationships fueling the incipient shape of television. On the outskirts of the Persian Gulf War, the media's military technospeak displays the fleeting images of television coverage from the margins of the battlefield. When compared with the edited photographic/filmic footage of previous wars, most television viewing experience was forgettable as empty spectacle. Nevertheless, the vicarious experience of the bomber, of the smart bomb, of the fiery night spectacles of SCUDS versus Patriot missiles, obscures the pain of individual suffering experienced by soldiers and civilians. As a consequence, a collective amnesia sets in of a war not remembered but occasionally reexperienced through television reruns.

Globally, television mobilizes attitudes and opinions. Locally, it markets commodities and mainstream positions. While many voices come from multiple directions, each program's structural format plays a major role in shaping and accommodating new social alignments particularly when it comes to race, gender, and Third World constituents' struggles.

With television now a source of entertainment sometimes called news, a computer screen, arcade, and money dispenser, security watchdog, and departure/arrival board, has it become impossible to upset cultural practices, shift aesthetic parameters, and aspire toward non-commercial objectives that affect social organization and its reception?<sup>3</sup> Perhaps video art's relationship to television still allows it a unique position from which to play, replay, recontextualize television experience. Caught between camps, video practice occupies no distinct communicative or aesthetic function. Not adhering to format and genre models, video's frontiers remain unstable. Each new camera design invokes different applications by different populations. In a medium that blends imagination and reality, a medium that perpetually recontextualizes information, there are no absolutes.

In her chapter, "**Guerrilla Television**," Deirdre Boyle looks at some of the earlier "video documentarians" who created a new style of alternative television. Her primary focus is on the 1970s group TVTV (Top Value Television) and their innovative programs *Four More Years* and *Lord of the Universe*. After chronicling the rise of the group, Boyle discusses the reasons for its eventual demise and the subsequent impact on the alternative TV movement.

Video made television portable. Video became the new frontier. The Portapak led to the first generation of video pioneers/artists. Video gangs or media groups were like an extended family. Eventually, the artists and documentarians split. In the early years, guerrilla television embraced art as documentary and stressed innovation and critical relationships to television. Video theater preexisted public access. The lack of editing tools made video vérité the only style, an aesthetic dictated by equipment. TVTV's adaptive and creative attitude in *Four More Years* broke ground by pointing the camera away from the podium during the Republican national political convention to reelect President Nixon. The tape experimented with graphics and wide-angle lenses. It was the beginning of electronic news gathering (ENG).

As a catalyst, video generates transition. Portable, more affordable electronic instruments offer a small window of opportunity for recouping television experience. The use of accessible tools permits the development of a new rhetorical standard enabling small communities to revise and sustain their sense of identity. Communities with limited resources can now begin to build texts that fortify their own practices, some passed down from generation to generation, others generated by

contemporary circumstances, some perhaps recovered. These recitations help to mediate relationships, fortify identity, contribute to the sense of belonging and purpose most individuals require to operate successfully within their respective societies. A home videomaker captures the Rodney King incident and exposes it to the world.

Laurie Ouellette's chapter, "**Will the Revolution Be Televised? Camcorders, Activism, and Alternative Television in the 1990s,**" focuses on the incendiary efforts of independent groups to use new media technology to promote an ideologically self-aware, critical analysis positioned outside of the standard discourse that reifies conventional practice(s). Today, activists use video to document their own demonstrations. They develop programming for local and national cable access with the intent of publicizing their causes and/or subverting the messages of mainstream media. Groups such as Paper Tiger Television have spawned a number of media collectives to resist mainstream media's normal viewing habits. The community becomes a producer as well as a consumer of images. Community producers build alternative structures while simultaneously recontextualizing the commercial media industries.

With the creation of the national cable access satellite network Deep Dish TV, diversified programming has spread to numbers of satellite dish owners and cable system operators across the United States. Wrap-around shows, panel discussions, and phone-in programs work to build an interactive dimension to the media discussion. While gradually restructuring the minute patterns of individual behavior, electronic media transforms the broad dynamic interactivity of larger social factions and groups.

Eric Michaels's "**The Aboriginal Invention of Television in Central Australia 1982-1986**" focuses on the use of video by the Warlpiri people, who, engulfed by Eurocentric forces and yet resident on the margins, ask the pivotal question facing all Third World communities besieged by new technologies: "Can video make our culture strong? Or, will it make us lose our Law?" Can varying modes of cultural production continue across media? What happens when varying modes of media production cross cultures?

Not all bodes well. The broad-scale distribution of carefully crafted, self-regulated tools has a downside. In a contracting world, real-time visual telecommunication accelerates the homogeneous nightmare. As high-tech applications proliferate, they threaten to accelerate the eradication of cultural difference. Telecommunication tools' built-in governors structure their attendant use and discourse.

Once constructed, the signal requires distribution. Each transmission center makes claims on its users. When a fringe community transmits its own signal via the center, modifications to the original message may adjust it to the extent that it ceases to exist. Each new wave proportionately affects the language, ritual, influence, and power among communities. As a means for an alternative voice, each new technical inroad marks a small part of the fall from those fundamental thresholds that hold the line against the future erosion of indigenous cultures.

A post-television discourse must reconstitute frontiers; it must inhibit high technology's destruction of fragile tradition. A post-television manifesto must challenge indigenous groups to establish their telepresence, to assimilate newer technologies while maintaining the traditional bridges sustaining their older cultures. While history preexists television, it does not operate as some a priori force. Revising applications and their concomitant tools can modify, perhaps alter, each wave of change. Because specific tendencies only become discernible in time, the timely recognition and comprehension of new communication paradigms require an evolutionary approach when examining this subtle metamorphosis.

At the core lies the question of the shifting interface. Across the global, within the local community, the electronic media distort culturally determined reference points. Questions of proximity, of the relationships among individuals within the community, remain dormant in the effort to present the subject as relevant to its reception, to integrate the audience within the text. Questions of time remain constrained despite the broken barriers, the oceans, the ranges, the routine of day and night. A post-television environment bridges these disproportions. Its technological shifts have a profound effect. The aftermath triggers a self-reflexive wake, a moment for reexamining the social, cultural climate, its erosion and reclamation.

A child interacting with the screen rewires centuries of cognition, of consciousness, with limitless consequences. The console at the viewer's fingertips directs an array of auditory-visual events, on the electronic screen, radio, tape deck, CD player, and CB. Projections of the past, and of what yet remains ahead, peel away from the ephemeral bubble that encloses the wide-eyed time traveler. Wars and other regional conflagrations appear and disappear leaving their human scars and ecodevastation.

The cybernetic platform of the immediate future may be found on the ground. Switching on or off the designated pathways, the driver will

integrate certain immediate features of the grid while bypassing what lies beyond his or her use and/or fascination. Mapping positions, recursions, loop procedures, deflect attention. Endless, limitless corridors exhaust the explorer. Avoiding entrapment, the viewer moves off the track.

Other spectators occupy auxiliary stations on either side of the screen. A seamless experience of desire and expectation separates the active grazer from the outside scavenger who assembles the inchoate discards compiled from the other's actions. No longer equal, each potential interactor will either compete for control of the remote or separate into her own modular unit. Each new module becomes an arena for renewed privilege and competition. Television's metamorphosis from windows to microchip passageways transforms the environment into a multidimensional earth station.

While the body resists fragmentation for the sake of love and procreation, the family tether continues to unravel in myriad ways. In its place, the simultaneity of networked experience shared by users around the globe becomes a new tabernacle for the virtual community.

It does not seem likely that a utopian juncture will emerge where society can successfully accommodate the individual within a regulated system of transmission and reception. Nevertheless, a new paradigm for processing experience and practice remains a fundamental necessity for survival. John Carey and Pat O'Hara's "**Interactive Television**" surveys the brief history of the actual and simulated forms of two-way TV. Interactive television, still largely an unrealized concept, dates to the technological origins of television in the 1920s, to the home-studio interviews with Edward R. Murrow, to the plastic drawing screens attached by children to their TVs in the 1950s, picturephone in the 1964-1965 New York World's Fair, 1960s and 1970s pilot projects. Carey and O'Hara provide a detailed account of the Berks Community Interactive Cable TV system in operation since 1975 and designed primarily for use by senior citizens in Reading, Pennsylvania.

The Reading system began with a clear understanding of local conditions, needs, and resources. From its originating sites—neighborhood communication centers, city hall, various administrative offices, schools, and with telephone hookups for home participation—the system established a center-to-center to home talk format. With one camera at each location, each shot transition meant a shift in location. With no reaction shots manipulated by a director, the system remained crude but direct. Over time, shared codes of behavior evolved. Communication patterns became more consistent and efficient.

No single instrument or application fully embodies the shifting televisual climate though the word *interactive* has been increasingly thrown about. Interactive media have a multifaceted history. They cover a wide span of diverse systems. Some operations offer new territory while others recycle in new formats the limited choices of older systems. Hierarchical differences separate these systems, which range from multiple choice modules in the home to talk-feedback formats that encourage an open exchange of ideas.

The early interactive laser disc art installations of the 1980s took advantage of their systemic novelty to engage viewer-participants in an open-ended encounter. The encounter challenged viewer-participants to build a unique experience specific to their situation. David Tafler's chapter, "**Boundaries and Frontiers: Interactivity and Participant Experience—Building New Models and Formats,**" begins with the pioneers at the MIT Media Lab and later focuses on those interactive video laser disc experiments where a reception-based approach prevailed over other technologically determined efforts.

Some exploratory efforts and pockets of resistance operate along the electronic margins, in the digital arts and sciences. Here, a final platform exists for engaging and contesting new influences, for making self-connections guided by originating spiritual, ideological, aesthetic, and social standards.

Electronic art, the site of collision, of struggle, a breeding ground of renewed resistance against the rituals of passive consumption, ploughs the narrow, electronic/mathematic corridors spawned by engineers and technicians in their quest designing industrial applications, sustains the psychological, ecological, and sociological concerns on the cultural edge.

In a digital future, absolute values yield fleeting images that haunt the mind. Virtual realities form a vicarious environment for collective experience. Television projects the present, frames the past, and alludes to an empty future ready to be filled with forgettable spectacle. Maintaining a perspective on the state of the art means articulating a strategy for continually reassessing that experience in front of the screen. As the experience evolves, that strategy must change to accommodate this transition. Not only does this reflexive process never end, it accelerates over time.

The electronic interface, a sophisticated feedback loop, works to reduce time by increasing input-output frequency. The present immediately becomes past performance. Once removed, never in absolute contact, the individual deduces his or her conditions through a series of readings predicated on direct or indirect experience.



In essence, never on the screen or within the controls, the interface resembles a cognitive membrane, a prelude to remembering, an ephemeral territory that circumscribes the individuals' relationship to the machine, to ancestral forms of communication, to marks left on the stones, to voices passed down through generations upon generations of storytelling.

On those tracks, the body remains subject to deprivation and desire: when phenomenological contradictions accentuate the mind-body split, when cyberadventures compete with CAT scans, when virtual realities clash with dramatic representations of countless tragedies from all over the neighborhood, from all over the globe, those latent pressures threaten to overwhelm the spirit and consume the planet.

Peter d'Agostino's chapter, "**Virtual Realities: Recreational Vehicles for a Post-Television Culture?**" looks to the future by examining the poetics, technics, and politics of high-tech models, projections, and fantasies. The technofuture platform harbors all sorts of utopian possibilities and dystopian problems. At the end of the century, questions of what constitutes the cybernetic body—its theology, memory, and overall intelligence; its environment, day-to-day routine, and leisure—arise from the visions conjured by contemporary dreamers. In fact, many of the ideas surrounding media, virtual reality, recreation, and escape have been around for some time. To what degree will these visions anticipate the freedoms afforded versus the controls implanted?

Never alone, television accompanies other outreach devices. RVs, called recreational vehicles or caravans, bring the safety and reassurance of the home, with all of its running water and electronic apparatuses, to the outback. Borders change; territories diminish. As distances diminish, the collision among social forces disrupts, fragments, and eventually destroys contingent customs and practices, particularly those predicated on earlier, now outmoded networks of time and space.

The chapters in this volume renegotiate the electronic screen, from its mass implementation as a narrowly defined home output station to its more global presence and universal concept as a multiuse conduit and instrument. *Transmission* explores an understanding of reflexivity, its impact on the complex interrelationship of structure and content within the context of new television/video practice, a practice that continues to expand in proportion to the growing tele-electronic dimension of everyday experience.

No single anthology can, in and of itself, embody the full range of ideas percolating around a complex communication subject. This book

makes an effort to address the interstices binding the tools with the users, to examine how relationships change within the family, within our society, how individuals bring their own experience to bear, thus breaking with the hegemonic foothold of the media.

A different future challenges the accepted frames. By both constructing and deconstructing messages, this anthology works against building a foundation for defining where television has been. Instead, *Transmission* looks at the array of forces moving the contemporary video landscape forward. It monitors the progress of this ongoing transformation by staking out the issues that mark this future. *Transmission* looks forward.

## Notes

1. The "'net" refers to Internet, CompuServe, Prodigy, America On-Line, and any number of other on-line subscriber services.
2. Periodically, efforts to generate new alternatives meet with limited success. As of this writing, a non-PBS public support television station, WYBE in Philadelphia, struggles to survive. Meanwhile, Philadelphia community groups battle for the realization of public access, previously promised and contracted when the local cable franchises reached their respective agreements with the city.
3. Academies sustain old practices. As a result, values endure. Unlike this century's technology's more recent art forms, painting remains a high art form precisely because it is preindustrial. Its handmade status gives it value. Ironically, despite mass production, replication, and transmission, or as a consequence of it, a commodity remains valuable when it remains collectable on the marketplace. In the not too distant future, day-to-day exhibition and media saturation will perhaps no longer prioritize collection over transmission.

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