13 One Video Theory (some assembly required)

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Against explanation

People have become concerned about "totalization" in all of its forms, one of which is explanation. Explanation, perhaps because it shares so many features with narrative (teleology, closure, the truth effect), has become suspect. It is little more than "secondary elaboration," suturing the gaps of ignorance, reasoning by enthymemes, imposing a causality that derives more from syntax than from the object of study. Explanations lend a false unity, homogeneity, universality, to a heterogeneous body of materials, ignoring or sublating real differences in the interest of an artificial verisimilitude of plausibility.

At its worst, this argument against explanation is a rejection of theory by those who would deny the fictional, speculative dimension of academic writing. At its best, this suspicion of totalization supports the increasing interest in collage/montage, allegory, and associative reasoning that is evident in poststructuralist textualism and deconstructive art (Brian Wallis, *Art After Modernism*). I want to take advantage of this situation in order to work through a theory of video, in pieces, providing an inventory of materials that might constitute the basis for a general account. The collection makes no claims to completeness, but the sequence is not random. Each item of the set will be described in an order created not by a goal (for that is unknown) but by associations, which is to say that the final principle of classification is not argumentative or expository, but poetic.

The act of unification, then, is shifted to the side of reading, partly to leave more room for the process of inference that is

involved in understanding any written text, and partly to invite additions to the sequence, to enrich the chain of associations in order to give the theory greater complexity. The question is how to distribute thoughts on video. My assumption is that a theory of video, to be adequate, must adapt itself to the cognitive style of the electronic apparatus, regardless of the medium in which it is deployed.

The television set

The problem of electronic cognition poses the question of how information is to be organized in the medium of video. If the computer as a technology supports algorithmic order, then video may be said to be the technology of heuristics (heuresis, heuretics). To the degree that the two technologies converge institutionally as well as technically, a theory of video will have to be a theory of computers as well. For now it is possible to leave the mathematics of sets on the side of algorithms in order to explore the supplement to artificial intelligence programming available in the artificial nonsense (or stupidity) of television programs: the television set (or Poste).

There is a television set in my living room, incredible as that may seem. The fact that more homes have television sets than have indoor plumbing should not detract from the unusualness of each instance.

Growing up in Montana, I did not have an opportunity to see very much television (technical and economic factors delayed the wiring of the high frontier). I have no recollection of my family owning a TV set at all. I am skeptical even of the photograph my mother produced showing me (as a senior in high school) standing next to a set in our living room. Photographs can be doctored. Certainly I would have remembered that set, which was in style something between a portable and a console, resting on four splayed legs in the corner next to the picture window. I have repressed the memory of that initiation into television in the 1950s that has become American memory itself. It should seem odd that the conventions of this unrealistic genre would be internalized by viewers as a yardstick for "life" itself. As John Waters recalls, "When I was a kid, you were raised to believe that your family should be like *Leave It to Beaver* or *Father Knows Best*. . . . I was raised to think that *Father Knows Best* was the Way It Was" (Graham, 113). In fact, it was that way (at least as far as I can remember). In memory, the 1950s is to America what the Eiffel Tower is to Paris.

In graduate school I never thought about television, except when I watched the evening news to keep track of Vietnam. The tube on this twelve-inch set (purchased used) was going bad, so that the picture was squeezed into an ever narrowing band. Finally there was just a two-inch strip of image across the middle of the screen. I remember Lyndon Johnson's face, pressed into this strip as if in a fun-house mirror, announcing that it would not run for reelection.

The first year my wife and I were in Gainesville we were invited to participate, on a trial basis, in a "Gourmet Club." Eight couples showed up at the home of the host, each with an elaborately prepared dish. In keeping with the character of the times, a huge argument broke out about Nixon. The men yelled at one another, gobbling their food without tasting it, while the women frowned at them and only picked at their plates. On the way out (having flunked the trial) I noticed a large color television console in the host's living room. "Are you sure that set's big enough?" I asked, sarcastically. "Or are you just keeping this for the neighborhood?" "After you've been in Gainesville a little longer," he replied, "you'll have one of these too." His defense of Nixon was wrong, but not his prediction about my TV set.

"Believe it or not"

The host is Jack Palance. He explains how a Martian came to be buried in a small Texas town, adding, in a voice that makes your hair stand on end, "Believe it–or not!" Palance handles all the tales from the far side. The hostess is Marie Osmond (just as scary as Palance in her own way). As if reading for a part in the junior class play, Osmond explains the origins of Dadaism in the Zurich of 1916. She is taped standing in the Dada museum, recalling in a bemused tone (and in her own words) Hugo Ball's account of his performance. "I wore a special costume designed by Janco and myself. My legs were encased in a tight-fitting cylindrical pillar of shiny blue cardboard which reached to my hips so that I looked like an obelisk. Above this I wore a huge cardboard coat-collar, scarlet inside and gold outside, which was fastened at the neck in such a way that I could flap it like a pair of wings by moving my elbows. I also wore a high, cylindrical, blue and white striped witch doctor's hat" (Melzer, "The Dada Actor," 40). Then Marie Osmond reads the text (I don't remember exactly which one, but it goes something like this): "Gadji beri

bimba glandridl laula lonni cadori gadjamma gramma berida bimbala glandri galassassa laulitalomini gadji beri bin blassa glassala laula lonni cadorsu sassala bim gadjama tufim izimzalla binban gi gia wowolima bin ber ban." "Believe it–or not!" Hugo Ball's audience is said to have laughed, screamed, applauded. Or, as in the usual account of a French avant-garde event, "a fist-fight ensued." What was the effect in the living rooms of America of Marie Osmond meeting Hugo Ball on this program, as uncanny a congruence as finding a sewing machine on an operating table? Michael Taussig reminds us of the original intent of such performances, that the wordlessness of words is more than words, that gurgling of frogs in the millennial mud of the jungle of the throat of mankind that cures in Putumayo, that too was taken up as a weapon in the confrontation with the bad new times. As the German Dadaist poet Hugo Ball wrote in his diary on 5 March 1917, planning an event for the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich: "The next step is for poetry to discard language as painting discarded the object, and for similar reasons. Nothing like this has ever existed before" (Taussig, 29). What has existed before, however, is the likes of television, one of whose precursors, as the *Ripley's* show makes clear, is the "dime museum" of P. T. Barnum, where he presented "freaks, variety acts, and other attractions in his 'lecture room' to augment the appeal of his inanimate exhibits." All were designed to convey a moral lesson acceptable to the middle class (Allen, *Channels of Discourse*, 62–63).

What is the relationship between the "monster" and its frame? One theory claims that this mediated monster is received homeopathically as an "inoculation."

Mythologies

Taussig's *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* is not an explanation but an experiment in cultural hybridization, tapping the surrealism of the colonial unconscious formed out of the mixing of European literacy and Indian orality. At stake is a program for making socially effective images. In his theoretical collage, Taussig applies Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history to the problem of ethnography, putting into practice the lesson Benjamin drew from the catastrophe of his own epoch: the political image mixes history and myth, the old and the new at once, dreams and science. "Another way of putting this is to point out that [Benjamin] didn't place much faith in facts and information in winning arguments, let alone class struggle, and that it was in the less conscious image realm and in the dream world of the popular imagination that he saw it necessary to act" (Taussig, *Shamanism*, 69). Not concepts, but images, images in which might be concentrated extensive quantities of cultural information, could penetrate thought impermeable to logic.

The province of popular media is mythmaking, just as properly as it is the function of discipline discourse to make science. Events are the raw materials for both, but historiography and journalism make different uses of them. As Taussig points out, there are always, and from the beginning, several stories available for any set of events. Science tends to select the one in the style of nonfiction treatise. Journalism tends to pick the one with the best fit to an extant narrative formula. At the time of Custer's last stand, for example, two interpretations were available—one fairly close to the version prevalent today (anticolonialist) and the other in the form of heroic legend. Richard Slotkin has shown how the Eastern newspapers of the day, principally James Gordon Bennett's *Herald*, selected the latter to form a metaphor, in the guise of news, for the threat posed to the status quo by blacks and the working class (Slotkin). The myth of Albert Einstein, associating the pure scientist with the nuclear holocaust, is similarly traced to a cover of Time magazine juxtaposing Einstein's face with his famous formula and a picture of a nuclear explosion (Friedman and Donley). In fact Einstein's involvement with the development of the bomb was belatedly political and not technical.

It is not a question of a confrontation between scholars and journalists, with one constantly trying to hold the other to the literal facts, but of a complementary collaboration in which history and myth interact. For in the age of information, history is a product of the accounts made during the unfolding of an event, as in the "social drama" of terrorism. In the case of the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, for example, the full range of literate, oral, and electronic media were engaged in an attempt, in the public sphere, to control the meaning of the event, with the various protagonists constructing their own stories and deconstructing those of their antagonists (Wagner-Pacifici). The modes of this hermeneutic struggle (a version of Bakhtin's heterological word), Wagner-Pacifici stresses, are dependent in part on aesthetic imperatives that shape the "rhetorical surround" guiding the representation and reception of information. The organizing idea of her analysis of Moro's social drama is that "good theater

encourages good politics, that bad theater encourages bad politics, and that the theatrical aspects of politics can similarly be good or bad depending on the theatrical paradigms (going back to Turner and Marx) called forth (12). In this instance melodrama triumphed over tragic emplotment, with negative political and social consequences. That melodrama and not tragedy is the dominant mode of popular media does not bode well, in this view, for an electronic democracy. Why limit the choice to these two options? Journalism is ready for the avant-garde process (for the break with realism–a trail blazed by the *National Enquirer*).

The public sphere

John Forester edited a collection, *Critical Theory and Public Life*, intended to be an applied version of Habermas's critical communications theory. Taking up the question of social construction and management of political consent, the authors address specific instances of the colonialization of the life world by instrumental reason, and the decline of the public sphere mediating private experience and the state, thus permitting direct, unmediated penetration of commodification into individual desire. The problem as stated could be compared to the hole in the ozone that has appeared over the South Pole, indicating the decay of the atmosphere mediating earth's relationship with the sun. What happens to the process of legitimation by rational consensus in an age of informational capitalism, in which the invention, distribution, and application of information replaces the industrial manufacture of goods and the provision of services as the predominant economic force in society? Forester and his colleagues still operate according to the grand explanatory metanarrative of emancipation. Habermas's reformulation of relations of power in terms of life-world colonization or penetration suggests a far wider range of sites of resistance, including not only workplaces but also homes, schools, the public sphere, the state, and cultural institutions. Thus the praxis that these essays may inform combines purpose with a vision of freedom from illegitimate power. Resistance to illegitimate power is itself social action, itself interpretive and contingent, itself an offering to others to act together, to learn together, to make possible life in a community. Resistance here does not mean the pursuit of ideal speech; it does mean organizing to make democratic politics a reality (Forester, *Critical Theory*, xv). Few could disagree with the values expressed in this

goal. The question rather concerns the model of the subject upon which the strategy of "resistance" depends. It is the subject as reader, autonomous, unified, self-aware, capable of rational analysis of information in the privacy of the home, free from the passions and prejudices of emotion. It is a subject formed in the apparatus of literacy, dependent on a specific historical configuration of technology, institutional practices (a written model of knowledge and law and the behaviors of selfhood (the humanistic ideology of individualism). Is this apparatus still in place? The debate about the constructed nature of the human subject among humanists, Marxists, and deconstructors is one symptom that things are changing. The institutions organized by the apparatus of literacy express a nearly universal condemnation of a new institution whose organization reflects a new apparatus–television, representing the electronic apparatus (different technology, institutional practices, and personal behaviors). The recent presidential election campaigns in general, and George Bush's use of television in particular, indicate what happens when a literate institutionalization of democracy is conducted by a technology alien to that apparatus. There is a fundamental confusion of realms, which calls for a major commitment to applied research in order to avoid the political equivalent of organ rejection in transplant operations. Two political phenomena fundamental to American existence—democracy and the nation-state–are based on literacy. Are they transferable to an electronic apparatus?

What needs to be thought is the other of literacy. The positivistic ideology of literacy excluded the magic of oral culture from the discourses of knowledge, but now a cooperation between literacy and orality is possible through a technology with features of both apparatuses (written and spoken). The electronic epoch does not come after literacy, but between, bringing literacy and orality into a potentially supportive rather than exclusionary relationship for the first time in history.

Is the concept of the public sphere adequate to the requirements of mediation in an electronic world, or does mediation itself have to be reinvented within the electronic apparatus?

"Differences between positions blur, resulting in unavoidable fusion and confusion. Deprived of objective limits, the architectonic element begins to drift, to float in an electronic ether devoid of spatial dimensions yet inscribed in the single temporality of an instantaneous diffusion. From this moment on, no one can be considered as separated by physical obstacles or by significant "time

distances." With the interfacade of monitors and control screens, "elsewhere" begins here and vice versa. Constructed space now occurs within an electronic topology, where the framing of the point of view and the scan lines of digital images give new form to the practice of urban mapping. Replacing the old distinctions between public and private and "habitation" and "circulation" is an overexposure in which the gap between "micro" and "macro" disappears through electronic microscope scanning" (Virilio, "The Overexposed City," 18).

How shall we think about information in an electronic apparatus? Haven't we all seen some version of the statistics? Ninety-five percent of the knowledge amassed in the year 2020 will have been created after 1980; knowledge is expanding at a rate of 100 trillion bits per year; to be as adequate to knowledge in 2020 as Diderot's encyclopedia was to knowledge in the eighteenth century would require 200 million volumes of the Britannica. By the time an American child reaches the age of eighteen, he/she has spent as much time watching television as attending school. In short, a new behavior has been invented—the daily contemplation of a multitude of dramatized murders and car crashes—whose function is a mystery to the literate mind.

Grammatology

Literate intellectuals, beginning in the Enlightenment, took up the task of inventing the "other," a project that may be understood best by analogy with the project that preceded it—the invention of the "self." The extraordinary preoccupation with every manner of otherness, defined negatively at first by its opposition to the dominant ideology of the subject in Western civilization (now characterized as "patriarchal"), may be recognized as a part of the transformation process associated with the change in apparatus from literacy to electronics. In terms of the apparatus (a social machine), the "self" is as much an invention as the technology associated with it (alphabetic writing). It is useful, in attempting to formulate a theory of video, to work by analogy with the scholarship available on the origins of literacy.

In *The Muse Learns to Write*, Eric Havelock reviews his career as a grammatologist, summarizing the insights of a movement whose coherence became apparent with the nearly simultaneous publication (in a period of less than twelve months, ending in the spring of

1963) of five studies: *The Savage Mind* (Lévi-Strauss), *The Consequences of Literacy* (Goody and Watt); *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (McLuhan), *Animal Species and Evolution* (Mayr); and *Preface to Plato* (Havelock) (Havelock, *The Muse*, 25). Publications by Walter Ong and Jacques Derrida (among others) in this decade established the continuing vitality of grammatology. The key insight of this movement, for Havelock, "involves the proposition that the way we use our senses and the way we think are connected, and that in the transition from Greek orality to Greek literacy the terms of this connection were altered also, and have remained altered, as compared with the mentality of oralism, ever since" (98). Havelock stresses that conceptual thinking had to be invented. It emerged gradually, extracted from the works of Homer and Hesiod, among others, as a new way to connect materials. In an oral culture, information is held in memory and thus made available for thought in two principal ways—by verse rhythms and by narrative. With the advent of literacy, this combination of patterns was replaced with a new manner of connections, following not the actions of a specific example but the definition of types; it reflected not doing but being. There was intelligent thought before the alphabet, obviously, but it was not logical in the way that we understand the term. The transitional step is manifest in Hesiod's innovative decision to devote a formal discussion not to a person but to a topic—*dike*, or "justice." "Having made his choice, Hesiod could not conjure the required discourse out of thin air. We could easily manage it today, because we inherit two thousand years of literate habit. He, on the contrary, had to resort to the oral word as already known—the only preserved word that was known. He had to build his own semiconnected discourse out of disconnected bits and pieces contained in oral discourse, either some pieces in which the term happened for whatever reason to occur or others in which incidents occurred that he felt were appropriate to connect with the word. His decision was compositional (rather than ideological), or perhaps we should say recompositional" (102). Hesiod did not yet have the syntax of propositional definition, but his efforts were a major part of the invention of conceptual language that culminated in Plato's dialogues. He made do with a collage procedure, revealing the extent to which the Greek invention was a hybrid of oral and literate qualities.

The other element of this invention process of special importance for our analogy with the similar process underway in the apparatus of electronics is, as noted previously, the association of the

invention of conceptual discourse with the invention of "self." "The "self" was a Socratic discovery or, perhaps we should say, an invention of the Socratic vocabulary. The linguistic method used to identify it and examine it was originally oral, so far as Socrates was concerned. Later it was "textualized" by Plato. But though oral, the Socratic dialectic depended upon the previous isolation of language in its written form as something separate from the person who uttered it. The person who used the language but was now separated from it became the "personality" who could now discover its existence. The language so discovered became that level of theoretic discourse denoted by logos" (114). The symbol of this selfhood, Havelock adds, became the psyche, the ghost of oral epic now internalized, and called "the ghost in me." A corollary of the subject formation called psyche was the invention of the institutional practice of dialectics, or reasoned argumentation, whose reception among the orally oriented citizens we may figure in Nietzsche's terms: "The dialectician leaves it to his opponent to prove that he is no idiot—he makes one furious and helpless at the same time. The dialectician renders the intellect of his opponent powerless. Indeed? Is dialectic only a form of revenge in Socrates?" (Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 476).

What is the analogy, then ? How does it direct our attention and research, as we work to formulate a theory of video? Nietzsche's sympathy with the "noble" values of oral civilization against those of literacy marks the paradigm shift that is the analogical basis for grammatology. His attack on concepts signals the beginning of postliterate thinking, and clears a space negatively for a positive invention of electronic reasoning, perhaps a hybrid of action and abstraction. The first point to make about this process is that any theory of video will be literate, a product of the thought invented out of the introduction of the alphabet into an oral culture. Thus it will be to video thinking as a kind of hymn to writing. At best it can be useful in reviewing the activities of theorization as they come up against an obstacle and are blocked by the limits of memory organized conceptually (or, as Nietzsche said, "turned into mummies"[479]).

What of this process of emergence, the gradual invention of an alternative cognition? It is happening now between us and our sets—TVs and monitors—interacting with literacy. The ghost is changing its relation to the body again. It is no longer in us entirely, but escaping out of the crypt known as "ego." At the level of writing, the same process described by Havelock of isolating and extracting

a signifier out of the flow of speech (revealing a pattern of *dike* around the stories of the heroes) is happening again as video artists play Hesiod to the Homer of the television. The prototypical example is Dara Birnbaum's *Kiss the Girls: Make Them Cry*, in which she isolates a unit of meaning, a "syntagm" such as the whirl that transforms Wonder Woman. TV shows "break down into recognizable syntagms (syntagm means here: gestures, articles of clothing, identifying shots that repeat weekly, like rules of habit in a story vocabulary). That is why they are so easy to appropriate in video art" (Klein, "Audience Culture," 584). What is being isolated in the few seconds of each syntagm, Klein suggests, is audience memory: "Body language and familiar apparel refer literally to audience memories; in short, the eras of consumerism and fashions are indexed as audience history. Bits of forties and fifties nostalgia compete in hat styles: a porkpie hat for Mike Hammer, a slouched hat for Indiana Jones" (386).

Meanwhile, all we talk about is the "other," which must be the name of an electronic resubjectivation. And who is the electronic Socrates (who today is the one most denounced)? Wouldn't it have to be a subject that is not one?

The subject of television

In its classic formulations, the concept of the "apparatus" took account of the role of ideology in the invention process.The cinema "machine," for example, was said to include the mind of the audience (ideology and practices). In this perspective it is never a question of technological determinism. The camera comes into practical existence (after a long historical evolution) as a function of a certain individualism, a tendency that continues in the design and distribution of electronic devices. In classic Hollywood films, which were dominated by a single mode of narrative form (continuity editing) and the aesthetics of realism, the assumption is "that the action will spring primarily from *individual characters as causal agents*" (Bordwell, *Film Art*, 98). That this emphasis on the individual is not merely political in a narrow sense may be seen in the rejection in Soviet cinema of Eisenstein's attempts to develop an alternative to Hollywood narrative by creating a narrative based on a collective subject.

The dominant mode of film theory has focused on this individual subject, if only to show the extent to which that subject is

positioned by collective cultural systems and operations beyond the grasp of an individual. A convenient transition from film theory to a theorization of video is available in a collection of essays edited by Robert C. Allen, *Channels of Discourse*, in which a group of academics explore the applicability of film theory to television. Although treating a wide range of critical schools, the group is unified in its politics, taking the explanatory metanarrative of emancipation as the legitimation for its critique.

It is the problem of critique and the public sphere. On one hand, the scholars manifest all the assumptions of the apparatus of literacy, including the subject of conceptual knowledge; on the other hand, they are uniformly skeptical about the applicability of current film theory to television, even if the notion of the subject at work in that theory is psychoanalytic (recognizing a split, discontinuous subject, that differs from the self of Enlightenment rationality). Thus cinema might be a transitional apparatus, part literacy, part video, designing a new mode of information in accord with an extant literate being of the "self." After all, what is cinema but novels (literate form) translated into film—the equivalent of inscribing the *Iliad*. Television is a different matter. "From these examples it should be clear that the classical cinema's unified form contrasts with the fragmentation at the heart of the televised daytime drama. Both film and television have specific systems of enunciation that structure relations of vision and identification in different ways. These produce a different type of spectator, a different subject-effect for each mode of meaning-production. I have tried to show by this example how virtually every psychoanalytic process in the cinematic apparatus is deconstructed by the complex strategies of enunciation in the soap opera (as a prime example of the TV apparatus)" (Flitterman-Lewis, "Psychoanalysis, Film," 203).

It is not simply a question of a different technology (video instead of film), but of a different institutionalization as well, and different practices of viewing that occur in the home, in the family that uses television. There are also the different forms and genres emerging in television that distinguish it from cinema. It is the question of posthumanism—the obstacle of the subject to any further thought. Yet we know from the analogy with the invention of conceptual language that the "self" is subject to change. Michel Foucault took the technologies of self as his problematic and attempted to think them through without the story of emancipation. Even Foucault, however, at the moment of stating the project at its most radical, could not

escape the ubiquity of this metanarrative of liberation. "The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our day is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization that is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality, which has been imposed on us for several centuries" (Foucault, 424). Jean Baudrillard, in the same collection of essays (representing postmodernism), indicates more specifically the association of Foucault's program with the electronic media. "Power can have no hold on persons in a media environment, because ideology as legitimation, as the manipulation of consent, depends upon a distinction between reality and copies. But in the confusion of the simulated and the real effected by the electronic apparatus, the critique of institutions based on subject positioning (the essence of film theory) loses its relevance" (Baudrillard, 268). The logic governing discourse in this view is that of the "precession of the simulacra," in which the map does not refer to the territory but precedes and generates it (the map as heuretic rather than hermeneutic).

If the behaviors of self were invented, as Havelock describes it, with the help of a freeze-frame arresting of the word out of an acoustic flow, they are disappearing again, adapting to a different flow of information. If the subject of film was still positioned by its relation to the look, to the gaze (somehow in the family of Hesiod's *dike)*, television is no longer consumed as a spectacle. The convergence of home computer, television, and telephone lines as the nexus of a new social machinery testifies to an undoing of the spectacular consumption of the commodity. It is a reversal of the process indicated by Debord, in which the seeming self-sufficiency of the commodity was a "congealment" of forces that were essentially mobile and dynamic. Now, however, with pure flux itself a commodity, a spectacular and "contemplative" relation to objects is undermined and supplanted by new kinds of investments (Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 287). Crary uses *General Hospital*, a soap opera, to exemplify the new logic available in this apparatus, in which referentiality and representation are replaced (as they were in Hesiod) with an abstract invention. "In its construction and effects, *General Hospital* announces the disappearance of the visual and narrative space that might seem to have authorized it and points toward a fully programmable calculus of continually switching syntheses of figural

and narrative units. More and more the so-called "content" of television shifts in this direction: it is not at all a question of the replication of life, but of its reduction to abstract and manipulatable elements ready to be harmonized with a plethora of other electronic flows" (289). Television is repeating, with an entirely different look, the construction of a new power of generalization, in other words, comparable to the one built out of narrative action with the advent of literacy. The *Theogony*, *Works and Days*, and *General Hospital* should be compared more systematically, in the interests of the analogy of apparatuses. And the alliance of television with other electronic networks, creating new social arrangements, contributes, Crary says, to the formation of a new subject, such that the site of greatest instability, of volatile disequilibrium, in our culture now (with no guarantees of either emancipatory or fascist control) is the connection of body to keyboard, to video tube.

Alienation

Fredric Jameson shows one way to put these pieces together in "Reading Without Interpretation: Post-Modernism and the Video-Text." Jameson identifies the primary obstacle to a theory of video—the assumption of critical distance. Or rather, he suggests that video is a medium in which not only is critical distance not involved (critical distance is a feature of literacy, and not of orality or electronics), but (and this is much more surprising) neither is memory. The virtue of his approach is to come to the discussion of video without—as nearly as this is possible in written form—the assumptions and expectations of literacy. That is, it is possible to imagine that critical distance is no more necessary for electronic memory than singing is for nuclear physics. He also tried to clear his mind of "explanatory temptations," meaning finally the entire machinery of film theory. Presuming, rather than trying to prove, that the dominant force in our culture now is video ("in its twin manifestations as commercial television and as experimental video"), Jameson excludes film theory from any account of the new apparatus. "The very richness of film theory today makes this decision and this warning unavoidable. If the experience of the movie screen and its mesmerizing images is distinct, and fundamentally different, from the experience of the television monitor, then the very maturity and sophistication of film conceptualities will necessarily obscure the originality of film's cousin, whose specific features demand to be reconstructed afresh

and empty-handed, without imported and extrapolated categories" (Jameson, 201).

To help him think from the side of the video paradigm, Jameson selects a "tutor video" that exemplifies the qualities of "flow" (in it can still be recognized, however, a "collage" style, or compilation). The text is entitled alieNATION (available from Video Data Bank in Chicago). "It includes experimental mice, voice-overed by various pseudoscientific reports and therapeutic programs (how to deal with stress, beauty care, hypnosis for weight loss, etc.); then s. f. footage (including monster music and camp dialogue), mostly drawn from a Japanese film, *Godzilla vs. Monster Zero* (1966); optical children's blocks and erector sets, reproductions of classical paintings, as well as mannequins, advertising images, computer printouts, textbook illustrations of all kinds, cartoon figures rising and falling, including a wonderful Magritte hat slowly sinking into Lake Michigan; sheet lightning; a woman lying down and possibly under hypnosis . . ." (210). Jameson's strategy is to delay as long as possible his alphabetic response to this text—his ability to recognize its associative organization by means of juxtapositions and repetitions of images and sounds, and to relate these patterns to a hermeneutic frame (translating the video into a literate discourse). He finally compromises by producing a singular reading, selecting from the flow of images a very few items on the basis of contingent associations of his own: he identifies, in short, what could be called the "secret" of the text (its ghost). He supplies, that is, a motivation from the referential realm for the unmotivated scenes of the laboratory experiments on Twinkies, and the milk carton with the hole in it (identified as a bullet hole). "For the American media public the combination of the two elements—milk and Hostess Twinkie—is too peculiar to be unmotivated. In fact, on 27 November 1978 (the year immediately before the production of this particular videotape), the San Francisco supervisor Harvey Milk was shot to death by a former supervisor, who entered the unforgettable plea of not guilty by reason of insanity precipitated by the excessive consumption of Hostess Twinkies" (220). Having produced this link, Jameson doesn't know what to do with it, except to relate the implausibility of anyone noticing this association to the crisis of the referent in poststructuralism and postmodernism. (He missed, perhaps, the installment of "American Justice" on the Arts and Entertainment channel devoted to the "Twinkie defense.") He is reluctant to take responsibility for his own status as switch, joining the play of signifiers (the "logic of postmod-

ernism" as opposed to the monumentality of modernism) with the historically real. The opening sequence of "alieNATION," in fact, is a didactic piece on how to make a circuit, complete with wiring, a switch (upon which a laboratory mouse is crawling) and an explanation of "conduction." "Conduction" is the name of the logic that the tape (representing video in general) is teaching us to think. I described conduction at length in *Teletheory and Heuretics*, so I will not go into it again, except to say that it is an electronic supplement to the established modes of reasoning, including induction and deduction in empirical and rationalist science, and abduction in hermeneutic pragmatics. If the circuit of reasoning moves from things to rules by means of abduction, from rules to cases by deduction, and cases to things by induction (see Eco and Sebeok), then reasoning moves directly from thing to thing in the real by means of conduction. Conduction concerns a logic of invention or of making, and is to heuretics what abduction is to hermeneutics. A tape such as "alieNATION" can be treated hermeneutically as an object of study for a reading, for a literate subject of knowledge, but that is not the kind of thinking organizing the tape itself. Jameson shows us, albeit reluctantly, how to think conductively, by joining the Twinkie and milk scenes into an evocation of the story of Harvey Milk. What remains to be imagined is what to do with that kind of reasoning, leaping from one bit of information to another on the basis of the weakest motivation possible. Its value is certainly not interpretive, even if Jameson thought he was behaving hermeneutically when he produced this circuit. It is, rather, as the analogy of the apparatuses suggests, an alternative means of gathering information into sets, for the purpose not of proving or testing an idea, but of having a thought, of inventing both in the rhetorical sense of finding something to say and in the creative sense of innovation.

Memory television

Jameson's observation of the absence of memory from the event of television provides a frame for a theory of video. "If anything like critical distance is still possible in film, indeed, it is surely bound up with memory itself. But memory seems to play no role in television, commercial or otherwise (or, I am tempted to say, in postmodernism generally). Nothing here haunts the mind or leaves it afterimages in the manner of the great moments of film. A description of the structural exclusion of memory, then, and of "critical distance," might well lead on into the impossible, namely a theory of video itself: how the thing blocks its own theorization, becoming a theory in its own right" (Jameson, 202). Is it that video technology is exuded from memory, or only that Jameson's preference for modernism inhibits his access to it? Jameson is a modernist ethnographer in the land of postmodernism, doing his best to bracket his science in order to describe the domains of native cognition. One of Jameson's contributions to the theorization of video, then, is just this identification of "memory" as the fundamental element distinguishing video from film (and film theory): "If the contrast here with the memory-structures of Hollywood-type fiction films is stark and obvious, one has the feeling—more difficult to document or to argue—that the gap between this temporal experience and that of experimental film is no less great" (209–10). His negative intuitions are sharp—perceiving, for example, that the concepts of "work" and "author" do not apply easily to the flow of video textuality. But he leaves us on our own for a positive account of the cultural operation of the technology.

A starting point for such an account would be to restate the relation of video to memory, saying not that memory is absent from television, but that television is pure memory—mnemonics without portfolio. The age of modernism was an era of specialization, whose dynamics in everything from art to industry led to purification, to division according to what was proper and specific to a form or an activity. Habermas represents this dynamic when he objects to the postmodernist mixing of genres (confusing philosophy and literature) and types of discourse (confusing the realms of expert culture and the everyday world) (Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 207). In this context, the "implosion" identified by Baudrillard as the feature characterizing postmodernism may be seen as a reversal of the extended drive for separation that characterized modernism ("what modernism put asunder . . ."). A more positive version of "implosion" notable in the technological register of the electronic apparatus is Stewart Brand's observation that all technologies are now converging (computer, video, telephone), a phenomenon aided by digitalization. "With digitalization all of the media become translatable into each other. Computer bits migrate merrily, and they escape from their traditional means of transmission. A movie, phone call, letter, or magazine article may be sent digitally via phone line, coaxial cable, fiber optic cable, microwave, satellite, the broadcast air, or a physical storage medium such as tape or disk. If that's not revolution enough, consider this: with digitalization the content becomes

totally plastic—any message, sound, or image may be edited from anything to anything else" (Brand, *The Media Lab*, 18).

A theorization of video requires an understanding of and speculation about this convergence in terms of video and computers as social machines (the electronic apparatus), recognizing that whatever the interest of the current use of video in the mode of leisure, as part of the entertainment industry, that restriction is superficial, a consequence of the modernist tendency to separate out one practice from another, and is not the final or necessary institutionalization for this invention. The question must be: What are the equivalents at the level of institutional practices and personal behaviors of the convergence of electronic technologies? These practices and behaviors must be invented and do not follow automatically from the nature of the equipment.

The suggestion that television is pure memory is based on the grammatological analogy with the invention of other information-storage technologies, such as writing or print, which constitute prostheses for memory. The history of writing shows that print favored a style of logical representation that finally replaced and exceeded the hermetic tradition of the memory theater—the mnemonics of places and active (strong) images derived from ancient rhetoric. What began in ancient oratorical training as a method for memorizing quantities of information by associating it in the imagination with a series of striking images distributed through the rooms of one's home, or along the street of one's community, had evolved by the time of the Renaissance into a theater, a building, designed as an encyclopedia of total knowledge. Such was the Memory Theater of Giulo Camillo, of which one model was actually built. It was made of wood, large enough for two people to enter, and "marked with many images, and full of little boxes." As one of Camillo's contemporaries explained: "He pretends that all things that the human mind can conceive and which we cannot see with the corporeal eye, after being collected together by diligent meditation may be expressed by certain corporeal signs in such a way that the beholder may at once perceive with his eyes everything that is otherwise hidden in the depths of the human mind. And it is because of this corporeal looking that he calls it a theater" (Frances Yates, *Art of Memory*, 151–52).

Yates notes that the combinatorial systems of the memory theaters subsist in the "mind machines" of today (225). Indeed, the individual who did the most to transform the function of the

dynamic mnemonic theater from religious meditation to the scientific exploration of the natural world—Leibniz—is also a major figure in the genealogy of computing. The spinning wheel in the disk drive of computer hardware is the heir of the turning wheels of the hermetic art of memory. From our vantage point, we can see that Camillo's theater has much in common with hypermedia.

Print, and the Ramist method of dialectical outlines, abstract tree diagrams, drove the memory systems out of rhetoric; both were part of the growing predominance of mathematics over images in science. There was simply no way to write and calculate in the image systems, a fact that must be understood as a problem of technology, and not as some inherent incapacity of images to support reasoning. In the era of print, formalized logic replaced associational reasoning. The artificial memory systems were rejected on the following grounds: "The animation of the images, which is the key of memory, is impious because it calls up absurd thoughts—insolent, prodigious, and the like—that stimulate and light up depraved carnal affections. It burdens the mind and memory because it imposes a triple talk on memory instead of one; first (the remembering of) the places; then of the images; then of the thing to be spoken of" (277). Mnemonics was a hog of organic memory; a more efficient method was possible, due to the visualization capacities of the printed page. The flow of programs on television now may be seen as solving the problem of storage in that the images and places of mnemonics need no longer be held in living memory, in the head, but are given over to the machine.

The absurdity and carnality of mnemonics and of television are similar (as testified to by the continuing complaints from various groups monitoring the content of television). The only thing lacking from television, in fact, to make it a full technologization of the memory theater is the expert knowledge associated with the places and images in the mnemonist's imagination. When an audience listened to a public oration—perhaps a sermon on the virtues and vices, or a learned discourse on any order of knowledge—they did not experience the walk through the places filled with grotesque or surreal scenes that was running through the speaker's mind. The experience of television today is just the opposite: the public receives only the stream of absurdities delivered into their living rooms, but none of the expert knowledge (due to the segregation of functions and discourses effected by modernism). The task of a video theory, then, is to show how to reason and calculate with the artificial memory of

television, putting in place the one dimension of the new cognition missing from the operation—the knowledge content, that about which one is reasoning by means of these violent, absurd, carnal images. Television producers show us scenes of love and death for the same reason that orators used such scenes as active images in their places of memory—because they are memorable. It is just that we forgot what memorable images are for, or how they might function towards some end other than that of spectacle. With the convergence of video and computers in on-line multimedia stations, soap operas meet disciplinary discourse.

How can one restate the present moment, full of talk about information infrastructure and universal fiber-optic wiring of the American nation, in terms of the apparatus? The technology is hypermedia. The institutional practices (just now being invented) will be some hybrid of education and entertainment. And the new subjectivation? Postliterate people, viewed from this side of the paradigm, appear to be monsters (a term that has more than one meaning).

Out of the fly-bottle

Frances Yates suggests that we have forgotten the mnemonic motivation for the imagery of many an obscure medieval or Renaissance text. In the mnemonic tradition the work of knowledge generated the scene of memory. "What scope for the imagination would be offered in memorizing Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, as advised in a fifteenth-century manuscript! Would the Lady Philosophy have come to life during this attempt, and begun to wander, like some animated Prudence, through the palaces of memory?" (Yates, *Art of Memory*, 123). We have preserved the work of learning, but not the practice of artificial memory that might have been used to operate it, although Dante's *Commedia* offers a glimpse of the possibilities. "That Dante's *Inferno* could be regarded as a kind of memory system for memorizing Hell and its punishments with striking images on orders of places will come as a great shock. . . . In this interpretation, the principles of artificial memory, as understood in the Middle Ages, would stimulate the intense visualization of many similitudes in the intense effort to hold in memory the scheme of salvation, and the complex network of virtues and vices and their rewards and punishments. . . . The *Divine Comedy* would thus become the supreme example of the conversion of an abstract summa into a summa of similitudes with Memory as the converting power, the bridge between the abstraction and the image"(Yates, *Art of Memory*, 95–96). Television puts us in just the opposite relation to knowledge. We have the artificial memory, but none of the works of learning that these scenes might represent. What if the Lady Philosophy were put on *General Hospital*? Aren't the soaps our own *Commedia*, in any case, formulating in concrete terms the abstractions of our own prudence?

A glance at almost any critical commentary on television bears out the possibility that television is not simply "pure" memory, but is in fact remembering something specific—our ideology. "In order to make sense of the *Hart to Hart* segment, the viewer is encouraged to identity with white, male Americans, family-oriented (the Harts are a close married couple, the villain and villains a divided pair), in the prime of life (which is a mix of high physical and sexual attractiveness together with a degree of experience, maturity, and wisdom). These abstract social values or agencies are given concrete representation in the program, and together produce a unified subject position that the reader is invited to occupy in order to make easy, obvious sense of the text. The unity of this subject position is what makes it so acceptable in an individual ideology" (Fiske, *Television Culture*, 50–51). In its separated, entertainment institutionalization as television, video remembers ideology; its flow is a round-the-clock, updated reminder of our collective identity. What happens when this memory converges with the computer? The theory was already noted that the subject positions constructed by the ideology were open to occupation by any member of society regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sex or class (anyone may be a WASP). What is happening on-line, when the rote memorization of television is made dynamic by telephone and computer, is that individuals are breaking out of the confines of literate selfhood to write with identity. Watch "cyberspace" for the formation of electronic subjectivation. In the MUDs and MOOs of the on-line universe the conventions of this new behavior (replacing literate selfhood) are already being worked out (how many "bodies" one may have, how many anonymous identities, whether or not killing is permitted). The outcome of these experiments eventually will be codified in the primers of whatever replaces the composition courses now required in the universities, in order to learn the procedures for storing and retrieving electronic information (for these behaviors will have to be taught, just as are the behaviors of literacy).

Thinking these thoughts, and others like them, I was watching one evening on my research television set the remake of *The Fly*, again. I wondered if this film could be the *inventio* for a hybrid text on the history of criticism, joining Nietzsche and Wittgenstein with science fiction. Wasn't Wittgenstein trying to relieve philosophy of its metaphysical illusion in the manner of showing a fly the way out of the fly-bottle? In the search for an electronic writing, such metaphors are to philosophy (that practice invented out of literacy) what *dike* was to the actions of Agamemnon. Could this monster fly be Wittgenstein's philosophical insect? Wouldn't Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who philosophized with a hammer, account for the otherwise weakly motivated presence of an anvil near the teleportation machine? If I assigned mnemonically a Nietzschean value to the anvil and a Wittgensteinian value to the fly, would I then have the outline of an abstract argument dramatized in the scene in which the girlfriend's colleague saves her from genetic merger by throwing the anvil into the teleportation machine, leading to the destruction of the scientist?

With video it is not that this story simply makes concrete a system already formulated in the abstract (in the manner of Yates's Dante), but that the story and the abstraction generate a new thought, in the manner of a metaphor (the oral scenario and the literate categories become one).

I recognize through this frame that what crawls out of the machine—part anvil, part insect, part human—is a hieroglyph, a syntagm, in an allegory of prudence. What is it trying to say? Is it the story of television trying to protect the purity of its memory, to ward off the coming merger of social machines that might result in its own disappearance, and even the mutation not only of entertainment but of all institutions in their separateness—school, work, fame? The theory suggests a different response, less hermeneutic, more heuretic: something other, something to do, not something to know or to say.

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