

TELEVISION AND THE TRIUMPH OF CULTURE: THREE THESES

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Mediascape

This essay is about what the West German film director, Wim Wenders, has described in *Chambre 666* as the "anti-matter of cinema" — television. I will present, and defend, a theoretical strategy for interpreting television as the Real World — the excremental vision *par excellence* — of a postmodern culture, society and economy in radical decline. In much the same way that video art teases to the surface the inner semiurgical laws of motion of television as simulacrum, this essay examines television for what it really is — a mediascape! It's TV then, not just as a technical object which we can hold apart from ourselves, but as a full technical ensemble, a social apparatus, which implodes into society as the emblematic cultural form of a relational power, which works as a simulacrum of electronic images recomposing everything into the semiurgical world of advertising and power, which links a processed world based on the exteriorisation of the senses with the interiorisation of simulated desire in the form of programmed need-dispositions, and which is just that point where Nietzsche's prophetic vision of twentieth-century experience as a "hospital room" finds its moment of truth in the fact that when technique *is* us, when TV is the real world of postmodernism, then the horizon finally closes and freedom becomes synonymous with the deepest deprivals of the fully realized technological society.

But, of course, if we can speak now of power and TV, this just might mean, as Foucault has intimated, that the disappearing locus of power has probably already slipped away from TV as the real world, and taken up residence now in that digital paradise, that perfectly postmodern because technologically signifying world, of the computer.

TV or Not TV

I would like, then, to examine three theses concerning television, the death of society, and the triumph of an empty, signifying culture. Specifically, I begin with two great refusals of conventional interpretations of television: a refusal of the *positivist subordination* of television to a representational logic or, what's the same, to TV as a "mirror of society"; and a refusal of the *Marxian subordination* of television to a cultural reflex of the commodity-form or, what's the same, to an electronic reproduction of ideological interests. Against this double-subordination of TV to a reflex of society or ideology (against what amounts to a *modernist*

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reduction of television to a xerox copy of culture, society and economy), I want to argue just the opposite.

TV is, in a very literal sense, the real world, not of modern but of *postmodern* culture, society and economy — of society typified by the dynamic momentum of the spirit of technicism triumphant and of real popular culture driven onwards by the ecstasy and decay of the obscene spectacle — and that everything which escapes the real world of TV, everything which is not videated as its identity-principle, everything which is not processed through TV as the technical apparatus of relational power *par excellence*, is peripheral to the main tendencies of the contemporary century.

In postmodernist culture, it's not TV as a mirror of society, but just the reverse: *it's society as a mirror of television*. And it's not TV as a reflex of the commodity-form, but the commodity-form in its most advanced, and exhausted, expression living finally (as Marx prophesied) as a pure image-system, as a spectral television image. As the wall posters everywhere around Montréal these days tell us, the major philosophical question is: *TV or Not TV*. Or, if you prefer a small variation, it's TV or the Museum.

Indeed, there was a report recently released by the *West German Ministry of Internal Affairs* on the subject of the "effects of new information and communication techniques on the arts and culture"¹ which said without any sense of irony:

According to experts, museums and galleries will not be threatened by any proliferation of television programs and the increasing spread of new information and communication techniques. They may even profit from this, because the museum, with its "still" pictures and exhibits, will become even more attractive as a relief from television. Museums have a so-called escape-function because they offer a refuge from an increasingly technical world. Television and the museums will not compete with each other in the future; on the contrary, they complement each other.²

Television now is the real world of a postmodern culture whose *ideology* is entertainment and the society of the obscene spectacle;⁴ whose *culture* is driven onwards by the universalization of the commodity-form; whose politics gravitate around the *lifestyle issues* of the new middle class; whose major form of *social cohesion* is provided by the pseudo-solidarities (pseudo-mediations) of electronic television images (not Durkheim's "collective representations", but Sartre's "serial culture"); whose *public* is the dark, silent mass of viewers who, as Jean Baudrillard says, are never permitted to speak and a media elite which is allowed to speak "but which has nothing to say";⁵ and where that which is bought and sold in a society where class has disappeared into mass and mass has dissolved into the new black-hole of the "blip" is something purely psychological: *empty, abstract quanta of audience attention*, the rise and fall of which is measured incessantly by overnight statistical polling.

But why go to the theorists? TV advertisers and programmers are much better.

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Speaking about *Miami Vice*, the head of series programming at NBC said recently in an interview in the *New York Times*: "There's a buzz out there about the show" ('out there' is the dense, black shadow of that missing social matter — the audience). "In the way it's shot, where it's shot, the kind of people it has, *Miami Vice* conveys a certain dreamlike quality, yet a certain humanity." Michael Mann, the producer of the show, is much more direct: "The secret of its success. No earth tones. We want to feel electric, and whenever we can we use pastels that vibrate."

A recent ad in *Variety* magazine, the bible of TV advertisers, said it all. It's an ad for TV Brazil and it shows a picture of the world with dots everywhere on it, from India to Australia to Eastern Europe and North America, everywhere, in fact, where TV Brazil productions are shown. The caption is about McLuhan and it says simply: "Maybe *this* is what he meant by the global village?"

Three Theses

My general theorisation is, therefore, that TV is the real world of postmodern culture which has *entertainment* as its ideology, the *spectacle* as the emblematic sign of the commodity-form, *lifestyle advertising* as its popular psychology, pure, empty *seriality* as the bond which unites the simulacrum of the audience, *electronic images* as its most dynamic, and only, form of social cohesion, *elite media politics* as its ideological formula, the buying and selling of *abstracted attention* as the locus of its marketplace rationale, *cynicism* as its dominant cultural sign, and the diffusion of a *network of relational power* as its real product.

My *specific* theorisations about TV as the real world of postmodernism take the form of three key theses:

Thesis 1: TV as Serial Culture

Television is the emblematic cultural expression of what Jean-Paul Sartre has described as "serial culture". The specific context for Sartre's description of "serial culture" is an extended passage in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* in which he reflects on the philosophical implications of mass media generally, and on radio broadcasting specifically.⁶ Sartre's media analysis is crucial because it represents the beginnings of a serious existential critique of the media, from radio to television, and because in his highly nuanced discussion of radio broadcasting Sartre provides some entirely insightful, although grisly, clues as to the fate of society under the sign of the mediascape. For Sartre, the pervasive effect of mass media, and of radio broadcasting specifically, was to impose *serial structures* on the population. Sartre can say that the voice is "vertiginous" for everyone just because the mass media produce "seriality" as their cultural form.⁷ And what's "serial culture" for Sartre? It's a "mode of being", Sartre says, "beings outside themselves in the passive unity of the object" —⁸ which has:

- "absence" as the mode of connection between audience members
- "alterity" or "exterior separation" as its negative principle of unity

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- "impotence" as the political bond of the (media) market
- the destruction of "reciprocity" as its aim
- the reduction of the audience to the passive unity of the "practico-inert" (inertia) as its result
- and the "three moment" dialectic: triumph (when you know that you're smarter than the media elite); "impotent indignation" (when you realize that the audience is never permitted to speak, while the media elite are allowed to speak but have nothing to say); and fascination (as you study your entrapment as Other in the serial unity of the TV audience, which is the "pure, abstract formula" of the mass media today).⁹

The TV audience is Sartre's serial culture *par excellence*. The audience is constituted on the basis of "its relation to the object and its reaction to it"; the audience is nothing more than a "serial unity" ("beings outside themselves in the passive unity of the object"); membership in the TV audience is always only on the basis of "alterity" or "exterior separation"; impotence or the "three moment" dialectic is the iron law of the hierarchical power of television; "abstract sociality" is the false sociality of a TV audience which as an empty, serial unity is experienced as a negative totality; the image is "vertiginous" for everyone; and the overall cultural effect of television is to do exactly what Sartre prophesied:

The practico-inert object (that's TV) not only produces a unity of individuals outside themselves in inorganic matter, but it also determines their isolation and, insofar as they're separate, assures communication through alterity.¹⁰

In just the same way that the gigantic red star of the supernova burns most brilliantly when it is already most exhausted and imploding towards that dark density of a new black-hole, TV today can be so hyper-spectacular and so desperate in its visual effects because, as Sartre has hinted, its real existence is "inertia" and it is always already on the decline towards the realm of the "practico-inert". What's TV then? It's Sartre's "serial culture" in electronic form, from the "viewer as absence" and "alterity" as TV's basic principle (McLuhan's "exteriorisation" of the central nervous system) to the TV audience as that "serial unity" or "negative totality", the truth of whose existence as *pure inertia* (Sartre's being in the *mud* of the practico-inert) can be caught if you glance between the laser canons of colour TV as they blast you and catch the black patches, the dead darkness to infinity, which is the pure inertial state which television struggles so desperately to hide. And that darkness to infinity between the hysterical explosions of the laser beam? That's Sartre's "serial culture" as the sign of contemporary society: just when the image becomes "vertiginous" for everyone; when the viewer is reduced to "absence"; and when vacant and grisly "alterity" is the only bond that unites that negative totality — the "audience".

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Thesis 2: Television as a Postmodern Technology

Television, just because it's an emblematic expression of Sartre's "serial culture" in electronic form, is also a perfect model of the processed world of postmodern technology. And why not? TV exists, in fact, just at that rupture-point in human history between the decline of the now-passé age of sociology and the upsurge of the new world of communications (just between the eclipse of normalized society and the emergence of radical semiurgy as the language of the "structural" society). TV is at the border-line of a great paradigm-shift between the "death of society" (modernism with its representational logic) and the "triumph of an empty, signifying culture" (the "structural paradigm" of postmodernism). In the Real World of television, it's:

- Sign *not* Norm
- Signification *not* Socialisation¹¹
- Exteriorisation of the Mind (McLuhan's processed world) *not* (Weber's) Reification
- (Baudrillard's) "simulacrum" *not* institutional discourse
- Radical semiurgy *not* (Foucault's) Normalization
- Simulation *not* Rationalisation
- An empire of voyeurs held together by up-scale titillation effects (from the valorisation of corpses to the crisis jolts of bad news and more bad news) and blasted by the explosions of the laser beam into the pulverized state of Sartre's "serial beings" and *not* the old and boring "structure of roles" held together by the "internalization of need-dispositions".
- Power as seduction *not* (primarily) power as coercion
- Videation *not* institutionalisation
- Not society (that's disappeared and who cares) but the triumph of the culture of signification

If TV is the processed world triumphant, this just means that it functions to transform the old world of society under the sign of the *ideology of technicism*. By technicism I mean that ideology, dominant in contemporary consumer culture, which holds (as William Leiss has noted) to the historical inevitability and ethical desirability of the technical mastery of social and non-social nature. The outstanding fact about the TV "network", viewed as one dynamic expression of the spreading outwards of the fully realized technological society, is that it screens off any sense of technology as *deprivation*. Like a *trompe l'oeil*, television functions as "spectacle" to divert the eye from the radical impoverishment of life in technological society. Indeed, television screens off any sense of technology as deprivation by means of three strategic colonizations, or subversions, of the old world of society.

1. *The Subversion of Sociality*: TV functions by substituting the negative totality of the audience with its pseudo-mediations by electronic images for genuine sociality, and for the possibility of authentic human solidarities. It's electronic communication as the anti-matter of the social! Indeed, who can escape now being

constituted by the coercive rhetoric of TV and by its nomination of fictional audiences. We are either rhetorically defined Canadians as we are *technocratically* composed as an audience by the self-announced "electronic bridge" of the CBC; or we are the electronically constituted audience of Nietzsche's "last men" who just want their consumer comforts and blink as we celebrate the breakdown of American institutions. In *St. Elsewhere*, everything is held together by hi-tech and the joke: nurses kill doctors; the medical staff resent their patients for dying; and patients are forced to console doctors and nurses alike in their distress over the inability of medical technology to overcome mortality. In *Dynasty*, it is the object-consciousness and dream-like state of the cynical culture of advanced capitalism itself which is celebrated. And, in *Family Feud*, we celebrate normativity or statistical polling ("survey says"): the very instruments for the measurement of that missing social matter in the new universe of electronic communications — the audience — which exists anyway in the TV universe as a dark and unknown nebula.

The TV audience may be, today, the most pervasive type of social community, but if this is so then it is a very special type of community: an *anti-community* or a *social anti-matter* — electronically composed, rhetorically constituted, an electronic mall which privileges the psychological position of the voyeur (a society of the disembodied eye) and the cultural position of *us* as tourists in the society of the spectacle.

2. *The Psychological Subversion:* In the real world of television, technology is perfectly interiorized: it comes *within* the self. There is now such a phenomenon as the *TV self*, and it builds directly on Sartre's sense of "serial being". The TV self is not just a pair of flashing eyeballs existing in Andy Warhol's languid and hyper-cynical state of "bored but hyper." The TV self is the electronic individual *par excellence* who gets everything there is to get from the simulacrum of the media: a market-identity as a consumer in the society of the spectacle; a galaxy of hyper-fibrillated moods (the poles of resentment and manic buoyancy are the psychological horizon of the TV family); traumatized serial being (television blasts away everything which cannot be reduced to the technological limitations of "good visuals" or, as Sartre has said, to "otherness"). Just like in David Cronenberg's classic film, *Videodrome*, television functions by implanting a simulated, electronically monitored, and technocratically controlled identity in the flesh. Television technology makes the decisive connection between the simulacrum and biology by creating a social nerve connection between spectacular visuals, the news as crisis interventions (image-fibrillation) and the psychological mood of its rhetorically constituted audience. TV colonizes individual psychology best by being a "mood setter".

3. *The Technological Colonization:* The outstanding fact about TV as the real world is that it is a perfect, even privileged, model of how human experience in the twentieth-century is actually transformed to fit the instrumental imperatives of technological society. Marx might have had his "factory" as a social laboratory for studying the exploitation of "abstract labour"; Hobbes might have written with the

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ping-pong universe of classical, Newtonian physics in mind (in the old world of modernist physics it's all action-reaction with things only causally related at a distance); but we have television as a privileged model of how we are reworked by the technological sensorium as it implodes the space and time of lived human experience to the electronic poles of the "screen and the network" (Baudrillard). Television is the real experience of the ideology and culture of technicism.

1. The dominant *cultural formation* is the psychological voyeur and the audience linked together by images created by media elites, but this only in the form of electronic stimuli formulated in response to the incessant polling of the dark nebula of that missing social matter — the TV audience.
2. *Hyper-simulation* is the (disappearing) essence of technically-mediated experience: staged communications, fabricated events, packaged audiences held hostage to the big trend line of *crisis moods* induced by media elites for an audience which does not exist in any *social* form, but only in the abstract form of digital blips on overnight rating simulacrum.
3. The *language of signification* and its surrealistic reversals is the basic codex of the real world of television culture. Cars *are* horses; computers *are* galaxies, tombstones or heartbeats; beer *is* friendship. This is just to say though that Barthes' theorisation of the *crossing* of the syntagm of metaphor and metonymy as the grammatical attitude of postmodern culture is now the standard language of television.
4. TV is *information society* to the hyper, just though where information means the liquidation of the social, the exterminism of memory (in the sense of human remembrance as aesthetic judgement), and the substitution of the simulacrum of a deterritorialized and dehistoricized image-system for actual historical contexts.

What is the perfect example of television's technological colonisation of the space of the social imaginary? It is that wonderful channel on Montréal television which consists of a screen split among 17 images, constantly flickering with dialogue fading in and out, and with the only thematic mediation consisting of a voice-over across the galaxy of disappearing images. That split-screen with its disembodied voice and its pulsating, flickering images *is* the emblematic sign of contemporary (signifying) culture. It is also the social space of serial being in a perfectly serialized culture: background radiation the presence of which only indicates the disappearance of the old world of (normative and representational) society into the new universe of (semiurgical and relational) communications.

Thesis 3: Entertainment as the Dominant Ideology of TV Culture

Television is the *consumption* machine of late capitalism in the twentieth-century

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which parallels the *production* machine of primitive capitalism in the seventeenth-century. Television functions as *the* simulacrum of consumption in three major ways:

1. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Guy Debord remarked that the "spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image."¹² That's TV: it is the break-point where capital in its final and most advanced form as a spectral image begins to disappear into itself and becomes that which it always was: an empty and nihilistic sign-system of pure mediation and pure exchange which, having no energy of its own, adopts a scorched earth policy towards the missing social matter of society. Like a gigantic funeral pyre, capital, in its present and most exhausted expression as an image, can shine so brilliantly because it sucks in like oxygen any living element in culture, society or economy: from the ingression of the primitive energy of early rock n' roll into Japanese car commercials, and the psychological detritus of anal titillation in jean advertisements to Diana Ross' simulated orgasm in a field of muscle (which is anyway just the American version of Carol Pope's (*Rough Trade*) simulated crotch-play in *High School Confidential* that, in the proper Canadian way, plays at the edge of exhibitionism and seduction).

2. Entertainment is the *ideolect* of television as a consumption machine. What is the essence of entertainment or promotional culture? It is just this: the "serial unity" of vicarious otherness which, Sartre predicted, would be the essential cultural text of society in radical decline.

In a recent debate on the state of television, published by *Harper's* magazine, (and which begins with the wonderful lines: "Disparaging television has long been a favorite national pastime — second only in popularity to watching it"),¹³ Rick Du Brow, television editor of the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, said that TV, which has always been more of a "social force" than an art form, is "part of the natural flow of life."¹⁴

When you go to the theater, or to a movie, something is presented *to* you by the creator. But in television there's a very important creator who isn't critical to the other forms — the viewer. . . . With the vast number of buttons he can press at home, the TV viewer (Sartre's "absence") creates his own program schedule — a spectacle that reflects his private tastes and personal history. . . . Today, each viewer can create his own TV life.¹⁵

Du Brow's "creator" — the "viewer creating his own TV life" — is something like Marshall McLuhan's wired heads as the circuit egos of the processed world of electronic technology. In McLuhan's terms, life in the simulacrum of the mediascape consists of a big reversal: the simulacrum of the image-system goes inside; consciousness is ablated. In the sightscape of television, just like before it in the soundscape of radio, the media function as a gigantic (and exteriorised) electronic

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nervous system, amplifying technologically our every sense, and playing sensory functions back to us in the processed form of *mutant* images and sounds. TV life? That's television as a mutant society: the mediascape playing back to us our *own* distress as a simulated and hyper-real sign of life.

And why not? At the end of his life, Michel Foucault finally admitted that power functions today, not under the obsolescent signs of death, transgression, confessionality and the *saeculum* of blood, but under the sign of life. For Foucault, power could be most seductive just when it spoke in the name of life, just when it was most therapeutic and not confessional. Following Foucault, I would just add that power in the new age of the mediascape is most seductive, and thus most dangerous, when it speaks in the name of life to the hyper — TV life. And television is most grisly in its colonisation of individual consciousness, most untheorised as a vast system of relational power, and most fascinating as the emblematic form of the death of society and the triumph of signifying culture just when it is most *entertaining*. And it is most entertaining when it is a vast electronic simulation, a sensory play-back organon, of *mood*: mood politics, mood news, mood drama, and even, if we take seriously the "happy-time announcers" of Los Angeles TV, *mood weather*. But, then, why be surprised? Heidegger always said that "mood" would be the locus of culture at the end of history, tracing a great ellipsis of decline, disintegration, and disaccumulation *par excellence*. TV life? That's the ideolect of entertainment as a great simulacrum of "mood": sometimes of the radically oscillating moods of that great *absence*, the viewer, which is programmed now to move between the poles of "panic anxiety" and "manic optimism"; and always of the herd moods of that equally great electronic *fiction*, the audience.

3. *TV functions as a consumption machine (most of all) because it is a lifestyle medium.* In a superb article in a recent issue of *The Atlantic*, James Atlas argued the case that TV advertisers are no longer so concerned with the now-passé world of demographics (that's the ideolect of the social), but are instead intent on shaping advertising to fit the size of target VAL's.¹⁶ And what are VAL's but the identification of target audiences by "values and lifestyles": the "super-achievers" (call them "yuppies" now, but Talcott Parsons described them long ago as "institutional liberals" — upscale technocrats with a minimal social self and a maximal consumer self who define freedom within the limits of mass organizations); the "belongers": the old class of middle North Americans who value, most of all in nostalgic form, the social qualities of friendship and community and at whom the fellowship hype of beer commercials is directed; and the new, rising class of middle Americans who value the friendship of the herd most of all, and at whom are targeted the belongingness hype of commercials for the *Pepsi Generation* or the promotional hype, under the sign of altruism, of *Live Aid* or *We are the World*; or, finally, the "emulators": what David Riesmann used to call "other-directed personalities": bewildered and in the absence of their own sense of self-identity, hyper-sensitive to the big trend lines of contemporary culture as defined by media elites.

The conclusion which might be derived from VAL's research, or from Arnold Mitchell's book, *The Nine American Lifestyles* is that class society has now disappeared into mass society, and that mass society has dissolved into the TV blip.

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The notion of the serial self in electronic society as a TV blip, a digital neuron floating somewhere in the bigger circuitry of the screen and the network may appear vacuous, but that is only because that's exactly what the TV blip with a lifestyle is, and has to be, in the new relationship between television and the economic system. The political economy of TV has such a perfect circularity about it that its serial movement could not sustain anything more substantive, and anything less instrumentalist in the consumerist sense, than the '80s self as a blip with a lifestyle. From the viewpoint of an image-hungry audience, the product of television is, and obviously so, the spectacle of TV as a simulacrum of lifestyles. But from the perspective of TV advertisers and media programmers, the *real* product of television is the audience. So, what is TV? Is it the manipulation of society by a media elite using the spectacle as a "free lunch" to expand the depth and pace of universal commodity-exchange in the marketplace? Or is it the manipulation of the media elite by the audience, that electronic congerie of TV blips with nine lifestyles, using the bait of their own consumer gullibility as a lure to get what they want most: free and unfettered access to the open skies of serial culture? What's TV: *The Will to Power* or *Capital*? The high commodity society of neo-technical capitalism or just that moment which Nietzsche spoke about in the fateful words which began *The Will to Power*: "Nihilism is knocking on the door. Whence comes that most uncanniest of guests?" *Or is TV both?* "The spectacle to such a degree that it becomes an image" *and* a perfectly cynical exchange between media programmers operating under the economic imperative to generate the biggest possible audience of TV blips at the lowest possible price for sale to advertisers at the highest possible rate of profit; and an electronically composed public of serial beings which, smelling the funeral pyre of excremental culture all around it, decides of its own unfettered volition to celebrate its own exterminism by throwing its energies, where attention is the oxygen of TV life, to the black hole of television?

TV or Not TV? Well, you just have to listen to the stampeding of feet and the rustling of the flashing eyeballs as the TV blips, who constitute the growing majority of world culture, are worked over by the exploding laser beams to know the answer. And TV life? Well, that's technology now as a simulacrum of disease.

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Notes

1. In May 1985, *Exposition Vidéo*, a presentation and interpretative analysis of video in relation to television (and society) was held under the auspices of Vidéographe/G.R.A.A.V (conservateur: Jean Gagnon) in Montréal.
2. Werner B. Korte, *ABT-EMPIRICA*, research summary of a report prepared for the West German Federal Ministry of Internal Affairs on the "effects of new information and communication techniques on the arts and culture".
3. *Ibid*, p. 19.
4. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Detroit: Black and Red, 1983, theses 29 and 30.

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5. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication" in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, an important collection of essays on postmodernist culture and society.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Theory of Pracial Ensembles*(1) London: Verso/NLB, 1982, pp. 27-276.
7. *Ibid*; pp. 275-295.
8. *Ibid*; p. 271.
9. *Ibid*; p. 274.
10. *Ibid*; p. 271.
11. For a brilliant account of the culture of signification, see Jean Baudrillard, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*, trans. by Paul Foss, Paul Patton and John Johnston, *Semiotexte*, Foreign Agents Series: New York, 1983.
12. Debord, thesis 34.
13. "Television Looks at Itself: Proprietary Thoughts on the Future of Prime Time", *Harper's*, March 1985, pp. 39-49.
14. *Ibid*; p. 47.
15. *Ibid*.
16. James Atlas, "Beyond Demographics", *The Atlantic*, vol. 254, no. 4, pp. 49-58.