

RECIPES FOR TELEVISION

theory creams practice at the Kitchen

"Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to develop a critical theory of television in three days." It sounds like another suspense-filled episode of *Mission: Impossible*, but not even the likes of Barbara Bain and Martin Landau would touch it. A more accurate analogy for the Television/Society/Art symposium held at the Kitchen in New York City, Oct. 24-26, would have to be a cross between *Family Feud* and *The Gong Show*. Indeed, when a group dominated by theoreticians of Marxism and semiology convenes not only to "consider television as a complex social institution representative of society's self-images," but to "analyse the production, presentation, and reception of television," and further, "to examine the medium as a special technological means of artistic expression through the application of advanced forms of intellectual inquiry," it comes as no surprise that the task might prove to be too ambitious—even for a crack team of "experts".

And experts there were—armed with the jargon of their differing viewpoints, and poised to do battle. The roster of panelists, with few exceptions, was a veritable "Who's Who" of the left: art historians Benjamin Buchloh and Rosalind Krauss; film critics/theoreticians Julianne Burton, Annette Michelson, Mark Nash, Robert Sklar, and Peter Wollen; filmmakers Jean-Pierre Gorin and Yvonne Rainer; semioticians Stephen Heath, Fredric Jameson, and Sylvère Lotringer; and Marxists Michele Mattelart, Bertell Ollman, Martha Rosler, and Allan Sekula. Also included were sociologist and former SDS president Todd Gitlin; communications theorist Herbert Schiller; Douglas Kellner, a philosophy professor at the University of Texas; Steina Vasulka, one of the pioneers of synthesized video art; Nick DeMartino, founder of *Televisions* magazine; and John Hanhardt, curator of film and video at the Whitney Museum.

With \$6000 in funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, an additional \$5000 from the American Film Institute,

and monies pledged from other sources, the symposium was organized by Ron Clark, senior instructor at the Whitney Museum's independent study program, and Mary MacArthur, director of the Kitchen. The symposium came at a period bursting at the seams with computer chips, cable hook-ups which will permit hundreds of channels, satellite broadcasting, home video units, and cheaper equipment. Gene Youngblood, author of *Expanded Cinema*, has compared the impact of developments in video technology to the Industrial Revolution, and foresees the potential for two-way broadcast capability in every home.

On the art front, though, video has received comparatively little attention since its brief courtship with galleries and critics in the early '70s. This may be partially due to the fact that once the excitement about a "new art" subsided, much of the early video exhibited was just plain boring. But, more important, probably, were pragmatic considerations: video was a difficult product to market for gallery owners interested in selling art objects to collectors. Given those factors, a symposium organized by the Kitchen—one of the few spaces for viewing artists' videotapes—would seem to present an ideal opportunity not only to develop a critical theory of video, but actually to look at videotapes, and to attempt to collectively address the problems of access to equipment and screening possibilities.

Such expectations, though shared by many conferees, were not to be fulfilled, for

the symposium was about television, *not* video. According to Clark, the original plan was to invite a group of people (half men, half women) who approached the subject from perspectives as diverse as broadcast television and artistic practice, and to bring together "thinkers who have a more general overview of social communication, and who are developing strategies which might be indirectly applied." While the Marxist orientation of the symposium was his own intellectual inclination, Clark said, he also felt "constrained to satisfy the various constituencies who were exerting pressure," e.g., video artists who felt they wouldn't be represented, and the American Film Institute, which felt that he should include people who had worked in an "oppositional way" within the broadcast industry. Clark didn't satisfy them. What resulted was a group of panelists (two-thirds men, one-third women), which included only two practicing video artists, no representation of either network television or PBS (dubbed the "Petroleum Broadcasting System" during the proceedings), and no independent video producers.

So much for what didn't happen. What did happen was something akin to a sit-com or a soap opera, depending on one's threshold for expressions of intellectual outrage. As one member of the audience angrily informed the panelists: "You're just like broadcast TV, only we can't even turn you off!" Such pronouncements, and there were many, would perhaps have been un-

necessary had the symposium's structure been different, for the very first presentation set the stage for the academic spats and shouting matches which followed. After opening remarks by MacArthur, Clark, and Hanhardt, Douglas Kellner presented a paper attempting a synthesis of the major theories of film, television, Freudian psychology, semiology, phenomenology, and popular culture theory. Held by many to be rife with sloppy thinking, the paper was a compendium of truisms about broadcast television: "one of the distinguishing traits of television is its fragmentation and discontinuity"; "television is a habit-forming media"; and "a critical theory of television must make clear that the television world is artificial and mediated."

The very fact that Kellner's was the only paper distributed to registrants prior to the symposium, combined with his position on the roster, effectively made him the keynote speaker. That was unfortunate: instantly, he became the scapegoat for semioticians, Marxists, and feminists alike, all of whom pounced upon his "intellectual dishonesty." One outraged feminist semiotician declared that not only had he abused the word "code," but he had failed to examine soap operas in his analysis. Critic Rosalind Krauss accused him of "co-opting our ideas." When Kellner defended himself by saying that he was consciously disaffiliating himself from a semiological approach, he was berated by another semiotician for "rushing from the 'signifier' to the 'signified.'"

What followed was a weekend of uneven panel discussions, punctuated by harsh criticism from an audience that felt it had as much to say about television as any of the panelists. Friday afternoon's session, "Television and Social Communications" (subtitled "The social forces determining the development of television as an institution of social communication") is a good example. While most of the panelists *knew* social forces acted upon television (not a

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very difficult conclusion to reach), no one but Herbert Schiller was able to fully articulate their ideas.

Julianne Burton's presentation of four slides of ads for televisions, which she described as "television constituting itself as fashion, art, and sustenance," hung in mid-air with little explanation. Kellner ventured to say that while TV grew up in the McCarthy era, it had become less conservative in the '70s. He offered as proof *All in the Family*, *Roots*, and *Saturday Night Live*, and stated that television today reproduces the conflicts within society. Todd Gitlin made many basic points, which he seemed unable to connect: "TV provides compensation for the deficiencies of daily life . . . The essence of television is to sell ads for advertisers to consumers." Mark Nash, editor of England's *Screen* magazine, nervously quoted Hans Magnus Enzenberger, and then apologized for knowing nothing of the subject. Michele Mattelart's remarks on the use of television in Latin America and Mozambique were lost in an inept translation for anyone who could not follow her patient and careful French. (After Mattelart read the first sentence of her paper, the would-be translator blurted out the first few words, and could not translate the rest.)

If the symposium had its characters, though, one might give the Emmy to Herbert Schiller, the communications theorist who threw up his hands and defiantly proclaimed: "Network television is another arm of monopoly capitalism . . . Communications theory is controlled by the same group who emphasizes the *audience* . . . We must look at the means of production . . . It's crude, it's vulgar, but it's true!"

In contrast to the tentativeness of the other panelists, Schiller's clear line about the absolute control of the media by the forces of monopoly capitalism made a critical theory of television seem simple. However, his remarks at the evening session, "The role of television in the process of socialization in advanced industrial society," made his earlier diatribe look like batting practice. Schiller cited the fallacy of believing that hundreds of cable networks will allow everyone a piece of the pie, arguing that the same power structure will still

be in control: "They'll have a born-again network, an all-basketball network, a wine network, and then a red-wine network."

And yet the logic behind the symposium was not merely to criticize the present structure of television, but to investigate alternatives. Such was the expectation, at least, of the restless audience of scholars, activists, and videomakers who paraded up to the microphone to expound upon their own ideas. Schiller's all-encompassing formulation—reiterated by many other panelists—created an atmosphere less than sympathetic to such an examination. Just what those alternatives *should* be was difficult to ascertain, for as one "alternative" was presented by a member of the audience, a standard Marxist argument would be employed by a panelist to dismiss it. For instance, artists' video is still susceptible to the same pressures exerted by a commodity-based art world; PBS could hardly be considered an alternative to network television because of its heavy corporate funding; and activists using video as a tool can be dismissed as "reformist" because they are still working within capitalism. Thus, with the approaches commonly considered to be alternatives already rendered invalid, audience/panel dialogue was hampered, to say the least.

The problem with this vicious circle, at least from the panelists's perspective, was that they were denied the time they wanted to argue each other's points. Members of the audience, on the other hand, resented what was perceived as the exclusion of their point of view. This situation was exacerbated by the tendency of panel moderators to cut off members of the audience while allowing panelists to continue their remarks.

An example of this type of argumentation was Saturday afternoon's "Television as Art" panel. A great deal of attention was focused on this session, because it was the only one scheduled to discuss the relationship of artists' video to television. While Hanhardt attempted to specify how video art differs from commercial television, Krauss denied video the label of "art," calling it a "masturbatory means of producing something about nothing." Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler argued for an activist video art, the latter stating: "I'm more interested in what I'm talking about than the means I use to talk." A fed-up Steina Vasulka, a co-

founder of the Kitchen, said she was *grateful* to SONY and other Japanese companies for developing the technology to its present level. "You're all so afraid of technology and you think you are helpless. You *can* make your own computer chip!" After one young video critic in the audience dismissed her as hopelessly naive, Vasulka rejoined (with a nod in passing to Krauss): "I'm *glad* video is not 'high' art, because it gives us more time."

At this point, cross-fire broke out among conferees over *what* exactly the group should be discussing. When someone attempted to polemicize about the difference between video art and broadcast TV, a German trade unionist who had earlier been shouted down by the group, cried: "You're so dumb! The hemorrhoids I get from watching TV are the same hemorrhoids I get from watching video!"

That kind of divisive antagonism was also evident on Saturday evening at the "Television and Cinema" panel, when filmmaker Yvonne Rainer recounted a frustrating first experience with video post-production at WNET's TV lab in New York. A respectful but angry videomaker, Kit Fitzgerald, voiced her annoyance at Rainer's being on the panel only to give an undeservedly bad impression of the WNET facility. After pointing out that Rainer's frustration was probably due to her inexperience, not the production crew, Fitzgerald was added to Sunday evening's panel. (Because of repeated complaints about the lack of women on the panels, a semiologist named Sandy Flitterman was also added to the Sunday afternoon roster. And it should be pointed out here that the symposium organizers did attempt to respond to criticism, as evidenced by these additions to the panels.)

The inability of the "Television and Art" panel to establish a link between broadcast television and alternative practice coincided with one obvious omission: the screening of videotapes. The only work shown was by Jean-Luc Godard, and that was because he had been unable to serve as a panelist, and had sent his tapes instead. (MacArthur said she had not wished to take a "curatorial position" in arranging screenings in conjunction with the conference; she later apologized to the audience for that decision). Entitled "France: Tour Detour Deux Enfants," the series of interviews with

children focused on the power relations inherent in language. Fully conscious of the conventions of broadcast television (the tapes were actually made for French TV), the tapes could have had some bearing on the discussion of artistic practice in relation to commercial TV.

But the tapes weren't interpreted as a logical transition, for the fact that Godard was the only artist whose work was screened effectively placed a sort of curatorial blessing on his tapes (though this was not the intention of the organizers) and created an understandable feeling of resentment in some committed American videomakers.

Aggravating as the conference often was—to panelists, audience, and organizers alike—clearly it was also an ambitious and significant undertaking. Perhaps the most important aspect was the attempt to establish a format by which a critical theory of television, society, and art might be reached. And though the frustrations generated by the conference structure made the very notion of collaboration seem quixotic (the comparison between the panel/audience format and broadcast television was stated over and over again), a factor which must be taken into account is the expectations placed on the conference by those committed to video as an art. The heated debate and the disappointments, the determination of the audience to be heard, are in themselves indications of the need for a critical theory of video and television. Probably any first conference would have left its participants feeling unsatisfied. (And then too, the attempt to generate dialogue among those holding a broad spectrum of views, created its own problems: the differences among those espousing Marxist strategies is enough to illustrate this point.)

In the future, MacArthur hopes to organize an annual conference or a seminar series. It was also announced that the newly-formed Television and Video Services division of the American Film Institute will host a conference on independent television in February. Hopefully, developments such as these will begin to address the need for a more active criticism of video art.

—Cindy Furlong