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Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism

Television

A: tilifiziũn. – E: television. – F: télévision. G: Fernsehen. – R: televidenie. – S: televisión. C: dianshi 电视

Television is the most intimate and perhaps most significant artefact of an epoch-making process, in which technological invention, cultural reorganisation, and the control of public discourse have been driven ever more vigorously by capitalist imperatives. Television is a machine that not only functions best within capitalist structures, but also reproduces and upholds them.

Critical theorists have long treated television as a crucial symptom of the postwar-era, but the significance of this symptom has been cast in very different ways. Broadly speaking, they have either examined the specific ideological positions and cultural values promoted by television-programming – along with its possibilities for radically new forms of cultural experience – or they have explored the ways in which television has become a social technology in a more general sense, an apparently universal mediator capable of connecting the circuits of economic valorisation to the reproduction of social relations and the cultivation of subjectivity. Thus, the critique of television has necessarily encompassed several kinds of analysis, from close readings of particular programmes to theoretical descriptions of the televisual system as a whole. At the same time, the critique of television necessarily opens outwards, towards fundamental philosophical and political questions.

At the beginning of his essay 'Prologue to Television' (1953), **Adorno** formulates the crucial outlines for critical reflection: 'The social, technical, and artistic aspects of television cannot be treated in isolation. They are in large measure interdependent: artistic composition, for instance, depends upon an inhibiting consideration of the mass public, which only helpless naïveté dares disregard; the social effect depends upon the technical structure, also upon the novelty of invention as such, which was certainly decisive during television's beginnings in America; but the social influence also depends upon the explicit and implicit messages television programmes convey to their viewers. The medium itself, however, as a combination of film and radio, falls within the comprehensive schema of the culture industry and furthers its tendency to transform and capture the consciousness of the public from all sides' (1998, 49). The only thing worse than exaggerating the world-historical success of television is underestimating the degree to which it has developed into a social force of nature. That is why it is necessary to look at television methodically, according to Adorno's distinctions, in order to approach its complexity.

1. *Technological-economic-political apparatus* – Television has maintained, with only slight deviations, the parameters of its initial technical organisation: centralised broadcasting and scattered, non-reciprocal reception. It is a medium controlled like no other by state- and corporate interests, maintaining the gap between those who transmit and those who receive even while providing an imaginary bridge between them. This is true on a strictly financial level: the costs of programming and distribution have grown significantly (due to constant expansion, innovation and stronger competition) while the price of reception (in terms of household-equipment and fees) has become relatively more cheap, and an ever

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greater share of the *faux frais* of capitalist production appears in the form of publicity-expenses, which become its condition of economic existence. At a more general level, the costs of television are spread throughout the economic system as a kind of overhead expense, as if the unavoidable price of commodifying everyday life and spectacularising politics must be paid by everyone.

During the days of terrestrial broadcasting in Europe, the television-monopoly was held by the state. In the Western-European countries, television was socially controlled by law through oversight boards. In the 'actually existing socialist' countries of Eastern Europe, oversight and regulation was exercised by committees of the respective ruling parties. This principle changed with the introduction of newer media-technologies, especially the individual reception of satellite-transmissions. The spread of television burst through national borders; programmes would henceforth be produced for, and circulated to, an international audience. Above all, it was through television that 'commodity aesthetics' functioned as a 'motor of globalization' (**Haug** 1999). In the USA, public television gave way from the beginning to a full-blown private-commercial production and broadcasting system.

In the climate of neoliberal deregulation that marked the 1980s and 1990s, television-systems around the world expanded and became more thoroughly integrated into large corporations, generally at the expense of existing state-operated channels. Although much programming remains relatively local and national in its content, the dominant media-companies and their products operate on a global scale, putting the formerly national broadcasters under constant pressure in the battle over market-share. As television-companies have been absorbed into larger operations that include other media-, manufacturing and telecommunications-units, there arise opportunities for classic kinds of vertical integration (production and distribution by the same firm) as well as new kinds of commodification (in which copyrighted products can be 'leveraged' across several product lines, from toys and clothing to restaurants and theme-parks). By controlling significant portions of the television-spectrum, a handful of corporations are able to promote a range of their own goods, and to repackage the output of other culture-industries, especially advertising, journalism, and sports. In their business-strategies and marketing techniques, media-companies are exemplary (for further discussion, see **Herman** and **McChesney** 1997).

1.2 Marxist approaches to television range between ideology-critique and the question if and how the medium can be critically refunctioned. The radical-democratic vision of television essentially stems from **Brecht**'s radio-theory and Dziga **Vertov**'s film-theory and praxis. It is oriented toward the necessity of creating visual reciprocity and an open-ended circuit of transmissions, whereby everybody would act as both sender and receiver. Just as **Vertov** treated cinema as a means for making images as social facts, he anticipated that television would provide a means for distributing images as tools of social emancipation. Thus, television would enable a qualitatively new synthesis of art and technique. This optimistic perspective, which calls for a radical reorganisation of the circulation of images, has not disappeared from leftist culture. It reappeared in the avant-garde film-making and videomaking groups of the 60s and 70s, who responded to the dominance of television by creating alternative modes and sites of image-production. Its most important theoretical expression appeared in Oskar **Negt** and Alexander **Kluge**'s *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* (1972) which outlines the need for products capable of liberating the 'imaginative faculty' and activating the 'sociological fantasy' already at work in the industrial organisation of television (1972, chapter 3). Their call for a new, positive reappropriation of television remains largely unanswered, with the notable exception of Kluge himself, who continues to produce innovative material – in legally guaranteed 'windows' – for several commercial networks in Germany. In his 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media' (1970), Hans Magnus **Enzensberger** argued that a 'means of distribution' can be changed into a 'means of communication' by reversing the relationships between senders and receivers.

Twenty years later, disillusioned, he spoke of television as a 'nothing medium', whose 'pointlessness' and 'distractedness' appear to be 'the only universal and generally available form of psychotherapy' – and for which, given the 'social costs' of chemical drugs, there is no alternative (1988, 101).

This cynical apologia stems from the observation that television, despite its initial utopian promise, did not develop any open-ended structures of discourse. On the contrary, it was organised by strict schedules, which, like radio, juxtaposed different kinds of programming in succession. The calculations of programming precede the moment of presentation: before one can speak about a specific piece of televisual imagery, one must reckon with the televisual apparatus that conveys it as well as the whole televisual programme of which it is a part. To address this situation, Raymond **Williams** famously described television's characteristic form as 'flow': television presents itself as a stream of images and sounds in which interruption is just as important as continuity (1974, 86). The programme guarantees neither open-ended diversity nor single-minded coherence. Williams recognised that this apparently technical or formal feature has important ideological implications. *First,* it allows television to recycle other cultural forms, and *thus* gains an arbitrating power over them. By deploying that multiplicity of forms and genres, then, the televisual programme (whether on one channel or many) offers flow instead of communicative interaction. In practice, this model has been phenomenally successful, turning every television-system into a kind of cultural marketplace, where the choice of programmes replaces the ability to make our own images.

1.3 In the course of almost seventy years, television has undergone constant development as technology and as medium alike: from a single channel to contrasting and competing channels, from a monopolised medium of the state to 'dual systems' where legally-established governmental channels and programmes coexist with private commercial ones (see **Hickethier** 1998). The means of broadcasting have changed. As cable-distribution and satellite-transmission became available to individuals, terrestrial broadcasting headed toward extinction. Thus, the linkages between viewers of a single channel are erased, just as the possibility of 'zapping' erases the connection between viewers and particular programmes and broadcasters. From now on, spectators 'compose' their own programmes and constantly adjust their choices. With the possibility of individual recording and stockpiling of television-programmes, viewers can also erase the temporal connections to the centrally-controlled programme-grid. Television is no longer a primary activity; instead, it is received in increasingly casual ways. Through interactive contact with media-programmes on workplace-screens, the basic attitude of television viewers becomes interchangeable with the attitude of data-workers. They are ready to alter every programme available without restriction. Individual (digital) channels already offer paying customers the chance to intervene in the broadcast (for example, the choice of camera-angles at sporting events). Through the integration of video-cards in personal computers, television changes from one 'programme' into many.

2. *Aesthetics* – What distinguishes television from previous visual media, then, is that it is a network of transmission before it is an apparatus of representation or recording. Whether we must therefore reconceive our histories of media and culture in light of the primacy of transmission – as Régis **Debray** has proposed (1997) – is a much larger question. It is enough to emphasise here that telematic considerations – the problem of sending images at a distance – define television much more than optical or rhetorical considerations. This history has left its imprint on the priorities of the television-industry. If, at a technical level, television transmits in 'real time', that sense of temporality is never immediate or unmediated: the 'liveness' of television must be carefully staged and regulated, for it is the binding element of the televisual compound. Viewers must learn to switch between different kinds of imaginary time – the time of the newscast, the time of advertising, the time of entertainment – within the synchronising flow of the

programme. If television has an 'aesthetic' of its own, it is an off-balance aesthetic, in which we are meant to learn to shift between images without losing our bearings.

If television is structurally incapable of producing discrete works of art – let alone autonomous ones – it would seem impossible to speak of televisual aesthetics. Rather than asking whether television can be an art, it seems more relevant to ask if there can be art in the presence of television. For Perry **Anderson**, the arrival of television signals 'the ubiquity of the spectacle as the organizing principle of the culture industry' (1998, 105 et sq.). The supply of images provided by television overwhelms the capacity of the artistic field to mount any resistance or to strike any distance. There are at least two ways in which theorists and artists have responded to this dead-end. First, as noted before, they demonstrate that it remains possible to answer the televisual system through some alternative mode of cultural production. Video-art has often played this role, as well as cinema itself: in both cases, televisual practices of image-making can be broken down for analysis, or refused outright. From many examples of such artists, two names will suffice: Jean-Luc **Godard** and Anne-Marie **Miéville**, who have not only produced video-works that directly engage and criticise the operations of television (*Six fois deux*), but have also addressed the practical difficulties of developing a radically democratic media-system, whether in France or Mozambique. (It is worth remembering that **Brecht** became interested in experimenting with television: he asked for fifty cameras to record his theatre-work, but was offered only four, and nothing further came of it; see Adameck 1998, 128).

A second way of responding to the crisis in art and aesthetics has been paedagogical and theoretical: instead of bemoaning the supremacy of the spectacle, critics have offered reconceptualisations of spectatorship. Much of this work has been inspired by feminist scholars, who insist that television cannot be simply dismissed as the enemy of art when it remains an important element in the active imaginary lives of so many people. If television is not governed by a particular aesthetic in the classic sense, then, it nevertheless provides materials with which viewers can productively engage, even in the most unpromising situations. This trajectory of this research in the 1980s and 1990s turned film- and television-criticism into one of the most popular genres of social critique. For example, Tania **Modleski**'s early work highlighted the complex relationship between women's work in the home and the genre of soap-opera: she argued that the strategies of televisual storytelling brought about a compromise between programming logic and the needs of women to exercise their own imaginative capacities. Other feminist critics, often influenced by psychoanalysis, repositioned television within a larger history of the visual media and the always imperfect regulation of sexual difference (see **Mellencamp** 1990). As this conception of spectatorship evolved, new ethnographic research began to examine concretely how various audiences remake what they see on television, inflected by household-dynamics. Thus, the framework of criticism shifted from the centralised broadcasters and the programme as such to the scattered viewers and their diverse experiences (**Morley** 1986). If this criticism does indeed offer an aesthetic, it is one developed *in spite of*, even *in defiance of* the aesthetic material itself. From this perspective – associated with the academic field of cultural studies – viewers do not learn to make 'judgements' of particular visual objects, but, rather, learn the 'practices' of everyday life.

Even if the presence of television is inescapable, *what people do with it* is not so obvious. In spite of all constraints there is an element of creativity in spectatorship. For many critics, the uses of television can be resistant and subversive, even when viewers produce nothing more than idiosyncratic meanings or fleeting moments of pleasure. Clearly, these arguments defy the more strident denunciations of television as a whole, and, instead, call for a constant critical engagement with the actuality of television.

The aesthetic positions around television are often set in terms of larger debates about postmodernism, where it is almost always

taken for granted that television is a paradigmatically postmodern object. In his well-known book on postmodernism, **Jameson** (1990) treats television and video-art as two components of the same medium, so that an examination of both will provide not only an account of 'cultural hegemony' of the former but the 'possibilities and potentialities' opened up by the latter (67–96). This proposition is distinct from the strategy of video-artists themselves, or the critics who try to develop a 'resistant' hermeneutic for the treatment of discrete televisual texts. Jameson's dialectical procedure leads away from aesthetics, no matter how ingeniously reinvented, and towards the social and economic dimensions of the televisual system.

3. *Ideological formation* – The historical importance of television does not consist in some particular technical innovation, or in any special artistic achievement, but, rather, in the distinctive social ordering functions and new experiences that have evolved through it. There have been significant innovations in the quality and quantity of images, but that does not change the fact that television always been an apparatus of social ordering, exercising distinctive kinds of control and violence.

3.1 In the eyes of its dominant functionaries and practitioners, contemporary television is a 'marketplace'. Yet almost all of the earlier television-systems adopted somewhat different self-images, having been created as public projects and invested with state authority. Depending on the tenor of the political régime, such public monopolies might be cast in terms of an official national culture, or entrusted to a bourgeois élite as a vehicle of its own kind of acculturation. In 1948, Adolf **Grimme**, a broadcasting pioneer in the Federal Republic of Germany, defined radio (and so also television) as an 'instrument for forming the people and thereby the shaping of public life' (cited in Rundfunk 1990, 159), which could be seen as the basis for the 'political mission' of radio and television in the building of a democratic German society after the War. In the early years of the German Democratic Republic, television was seen as a new medium of social communication. By the 1970s at the latest, this perspective was suppressed by the interpretation and practice of television that prevailed in the Soviet Union, where it, like all mass-media, was treated as a 'means of mass information and propaganda' (**Jurovski** 1975, 7). Thereafter television developed in the GDR as a centralised state-institution for the ongoing strategic direction of organised social processes, and was defined according to that function. Some individual theorists countered this interpretation by arguing that the role of television as a cultural forum could not be separated from the communicative function of the medium (see **Hoff** 1985).

3.2 Television, no matter what its scale, necessarily addresses its audience as a mass, even though there are many modalities of that address. Put another way: television mobilises its masses in ever more differentiated ways. Although it has often served as a symbol for a certain kind of totalitarian control, it would be hard to demonstrate that television was ever very successful in the role of single-minded propaganda-machine. It would be easier to speak of the ideological effect of television, whereby the most advanced systems develop a repertoire of offerings – 'something for everybody' – through which audiences exercise a margin of choice and distinction with each turn of the channel. **Marcuse** argued that this proliferation of choices was a way to dominate the expression of desire, and thus constitutes the totalitarian thrust of 'advanced industrial society' in general. Indeed, he thought that the simplest way to see 'one-dimensionality' at work was to take in a few hours of television or radio, switching the stations at random (1964, 20). Thus television presents a vicious circle of illusion, enveloping all who catch a glimpse.

This view remains a kind of abstract negation – indirectly echoed by the later slogans of **Debord** ('the society of the spectacle'; 1967) and **Baudrillard** ('the age of simulation'; 1976) – which would later become a kind of cynical affirmation. **Adorno** (1953a)

sees things quite differently, insofar as the 'stultification, psychological crippling and ideological disorientation of the public' could be broken through television, because its ideology is not 'the result of evil intentions, perhaps not even of the incompetence of those involved, but rather is imposed by demonic objective spirit' (1998, 69). That is why Adorno thought that 'there is some hope in trying to raise awareness', even if it consisted only in concerted action by producers and viewers whereby 'the public could develop an aversion to being led around by the nose' (ibid.).

Such an effort would in any case confront human perceptions already radically altered by radio and television. 'As the relationships of the human world become unilateral, the world, neither present nor absent, becomes a phantom', remarked Günther **Anders** (1956, 129). Jean-Paul **Sartre** wrote of the 'intensified serialization of the listener' through broadcasting: the dispersed audiences know each other only through the machines that connect them (1991, 437). One cannot watch television without being aware that there are others watching, somewhere else: everybody is unified precisely by being cut off from each other through the machine. After travelling to Cuba in 1960, Sartre asked whether television could regroup people in productive ways, if only the institution did not impose a single programme and if the act of watching could become collective. In this respect, Sartre proposed a media-specific variation of an archaic vision: 'So you need a carnival, or the apocalypse, or some upheaval, in order to make a comparison' (1991, 438).

That gesture – holding out hope for television – recurs in even the most radical criticism. For a recent example, we can look to Pierre **Bourdieu**'s attack on current television-practices (1996). In his sociologically detailed description, television is shown to be managed by a very limited class-fraction, serving as the front that allows journalists and other 'collaborators' to masquerade as the voices of the entire polity. What had been distinct fields – politics, science, the arts – are thereby stripped of their distinctive kinds of discursive authority and put at the mercy of the marketplace of audience-ratings. Bourdieu insists that such consolidation of cultural and intellectual power must be reversed, and he urges the creation of new, autonomous means of communication (which may or may not be technically advanced) to serve different social groups.

3.3 Thus, television has been understood as the agent of both mass-politics and class-hegemony. In both cases, the advantage of television to the ruling order consists in its pacifying ideological function. It remains to be asked whether there might be some more direct economic function at work. Of course, critics have recognised that television has been an important part of building a culture of consumption, both directly through advertising and indirectly, through the various *milieux* of commodities it puts on display. Étienne **Balibar** has drawn an important theoretical distinction here: on on hand, mass-identifications and class-based discourses organise subjects as social groups, which can be seen as a state-oriented function; while on the other hand, the promotion of commodity-consumption corresponds to a fetishising function, which serves capital and the market (1993, chapter 3). If contemporary television does indeed resemble a market of fetishes more than an arena of ideological positions, its economic power may be waxing while its political role wanes.

Here lies television's most 'vulgar' aspect: it captures the play of images by which people identify and orient themselves in an already diffused collectivity. It restructures our creative psychic life around the habits of consumption, and thereby demands some portion of our 'free' time as the price of social belonging. The economic analogy is exact: just as wage-labour and industrial production 'socialises' the labour-time through which society is reproduced, so too does television 'socialise' the time of imagination and culture. Watching television is indeed a kind of labour in both a narrow sense (it creates value for broadcasters) and in a broad sense (it translates our own activity into an abstract 'consumptive force' which must be always driven onwards).

Thus it provides a concrete mechanism by which the 'means of consumption' can be expanded, and new areas of life opened up to capitalist valorisation (See **Smith** 1997, 195–7). In that respect, television is just the beginning. Indeed, the 'expansion of the means of consumption' seems to be a good first explanation for the way the internet is being steered today, which appears less as a liberation from television than its expansion. Television already circulates hitherto unimaginable social energies on the scale of both vast crowds (international acts of celebration and mourning) and obscure niches (privatised acts of consumption). It already generates more information than we can absorb, and takes up more time than we can afford. It would not be easy to uproot and throw away, nor do we have anything with which to replace it. Yet, alongside everything terrible about it, television preserves one final possibility: that it will teach us what we need to know and what we could scarcely otherwise experience. Learning about the world, sharing the happiness and suffering of other people, feeling a sense of belonging: television promises everything we cannot fail to wish for.

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Advertising, aesthetics, actuality, available time, cinema, commodification, commodity-aesthetics, communication, consumerism, counterculture, cultural critique, cultural studies, cultural imperialism, culture-industry, delusion-context, diffusion, entertainment, facts, fascination, *faux frais*, fetish-character of the commodity, fiction, free time, hegemonic apparatus, ideology-critique,

ideological powers, illusion, image, internet, manipulation, mass-communication, mass-culture, mass-media, media-imperialism, narcotic, postmodern, radio, resistance-aesthetics, subversion, telecracy, time, use-value promise.

Ästhetik, Bild, disponible Zeit, Fakten, Faszination, faux frais, Fetischcharacter der Ware, Fiktion, Film, Freizeit, Gebrauchswertversprechen, Gegenkultur, Hegemonie-apparate, Ideologiekritik, ideologische Mächte, Illusion, Internet, Kino, Kommodifizierung, Kommunikation, Konsumismus, Kulturimperialismus, Kulturindustrie, Kulturkritik, Kulturstudien, Manipulation, Massenkommunikation, Massenkultur, Massenmedien, Medienimperialismus, Postmoderne, Radio, Rauschgift, Subversion, Tatsache, Telekratie, Unterhaltung, Verblendungszusammenhang, Warenästhetik, Werbung, Widerstandsästhetik, Zeit, Zerstreuung.