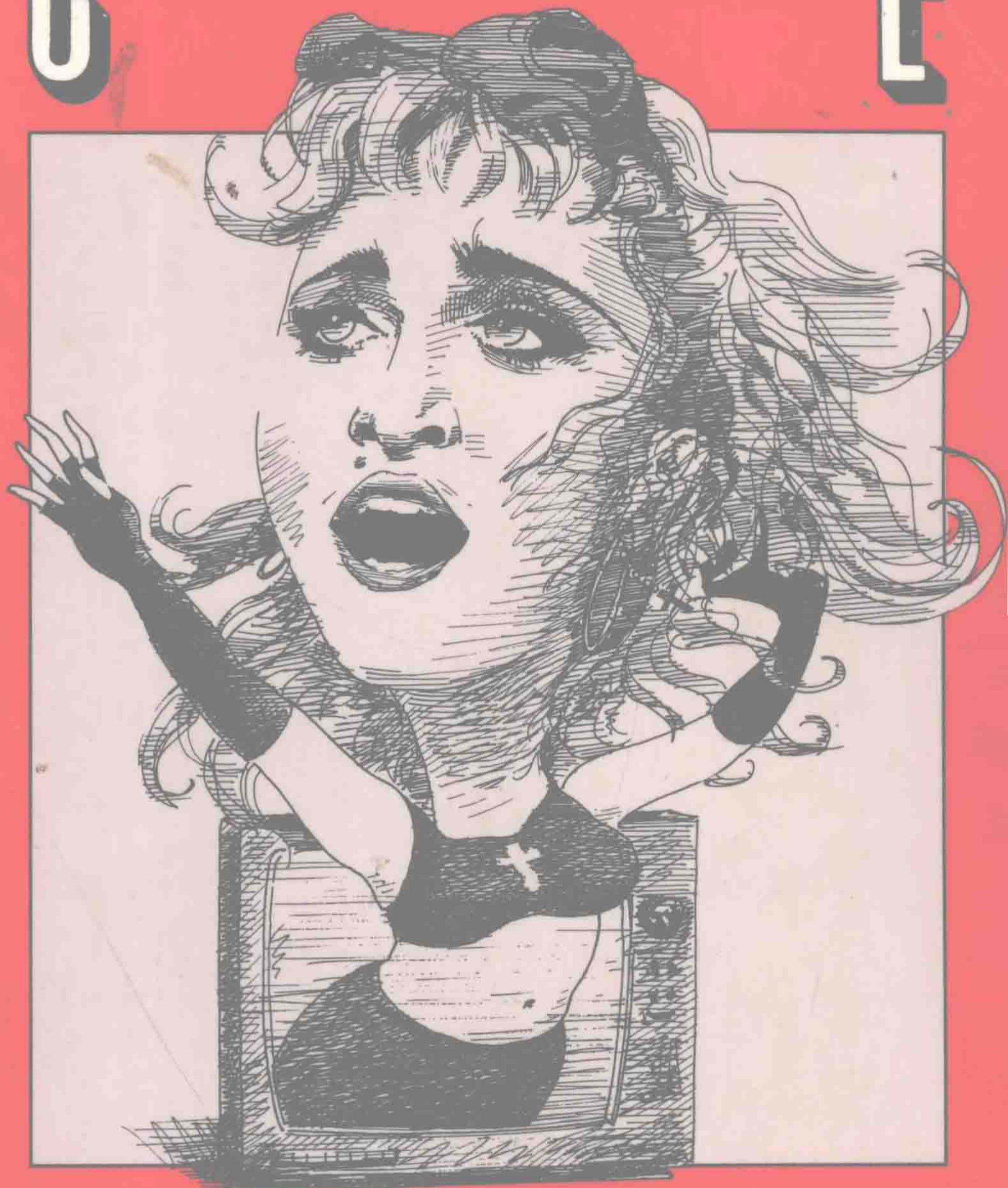
Television and Contemporary Criticism

CHANNELS OF DISCOURSE



EDITED BY ROBERT C. ALLEN

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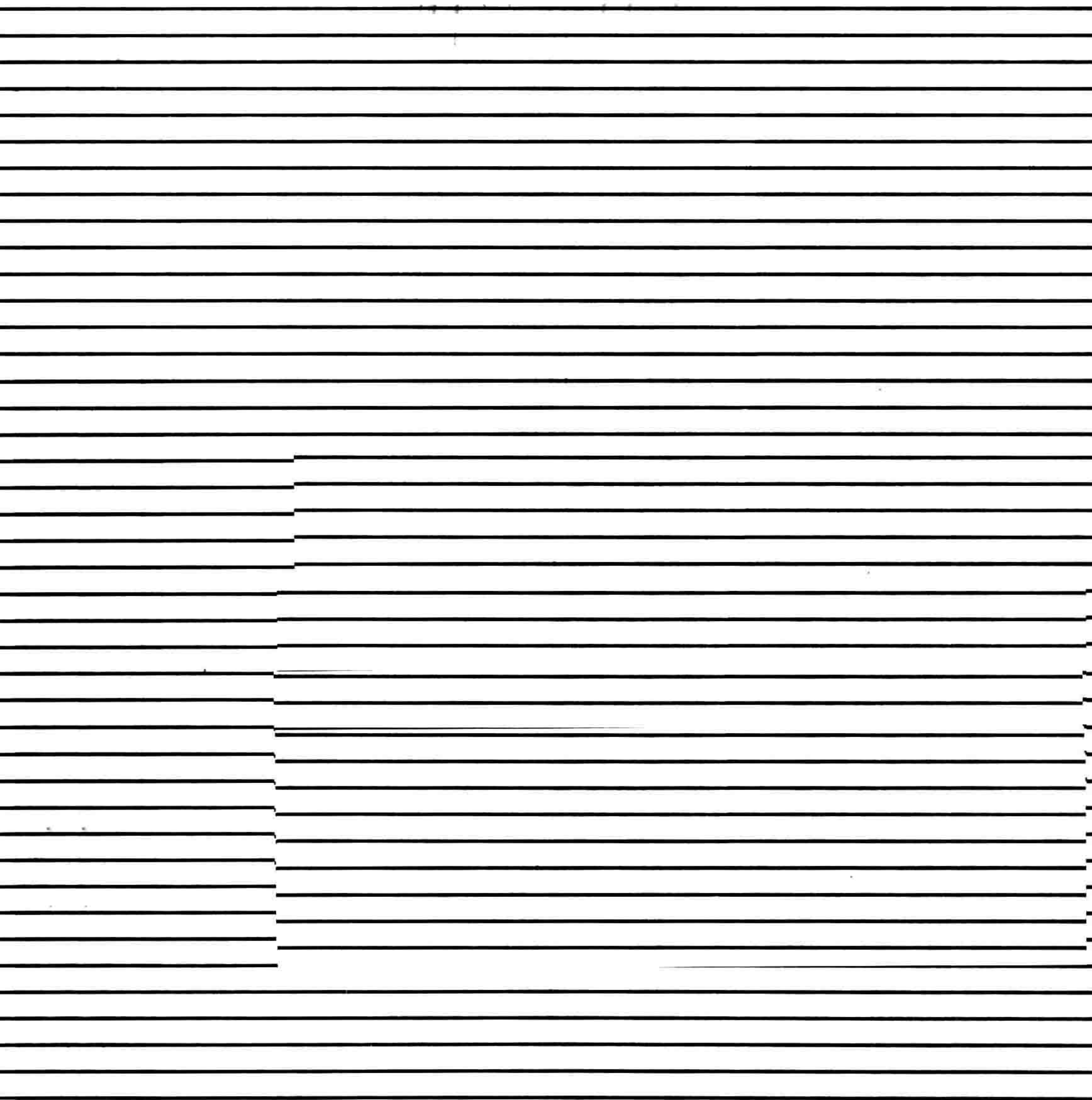

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FRONTISPIECE

The ideal TV room, as envisioned by Bloomingdale's in 1949. (Courtesy of Bloomingdale's)

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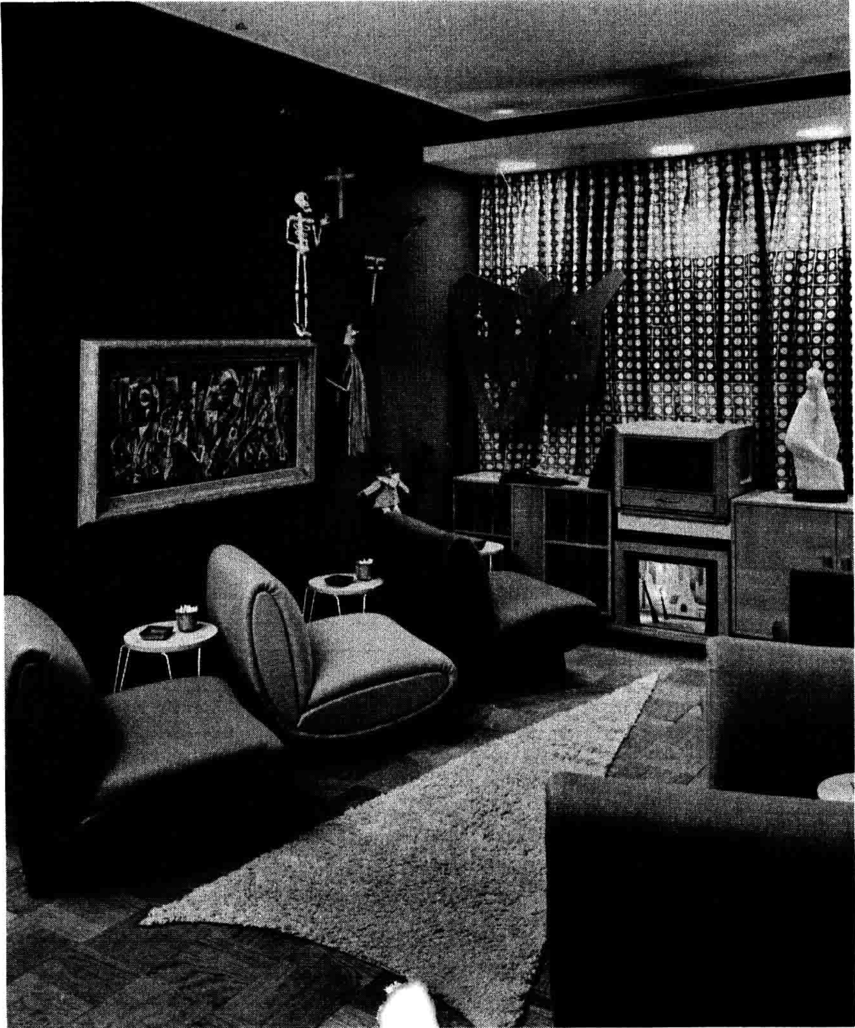

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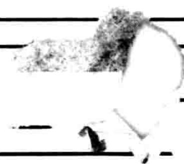

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INTRODUCTION
TALKING ABOUT TELEVISION
ROBERT C. ALLEN

What is there to say about television? At times it seems that the entire culture revolves around the images and sounds that emanate from the television screen, that all talk is somehow television talk. Yet, paradoxically, given the centrality and ubiquitousness of television in American and European culture, it somehow seems that not nearly enough has been said about television: the manner in which its sounds and images are organized; its nature as a powerful economic and social institution; the curious relationship between ourselves and the worlds, both fictional and nonfictional, that project themselves into our living rooms. Perhaps it is the case that a phenomenon so pervasive as television usually remains invisible to critical scrutiny.

This collection of essays contains more talk about television. A few words about the nature of that talk are needed before you participate in the discussions that follow. These essays introduce some of the major strands of current critical practice as developed in literary, cinema, and cultural studies; they discuss how television might be defined as an object of study within these critical frameworks and provide examples of the type of analysis that might be produced as a result. The approaches differ from each other in many respects, and each focuses on a different aspect of our relationship with television. Indeed, I asked each contributor to emphasize the particularities of the approach he or she describes. Despite their differences, however, all of the approaches outlined here grew out of, were strongly influenced by, or were developed in reaction to the insights into language and culture provided by structuralist linguistics and the "science of signs" (semiotics) that developed out of it.

Although each of the following chapters speaks a somewhat different critical language when it "talks" about television, those critical languages belong to the same linguistic family. I am using the term "contemporary criticism" as a shorthand designation for this diverse family of critical languages: semiotics, narrative theory, genre theory,

reader-response criticism, ideological analysis, psychoanalytic criticism, feminist criticism, as well as other branches of the family not included here (the discourse analysis of Foucault and the deconstructive criticism of Paul De Man and Jacques Derrida, for example). Thus contemporary criticism marks out a very general set of assumptions about both criticism and the object of critical analysis that sets it apart from traditional literary criticism on the one hand and, because the object of study here is television, from traditional mass communication research on the other. It might be useful to suggest here the nature of those assumptions, keeping in mind that they are shared, in varying degrees, by the specific critical approaches discussed in each chapter.

All of the approaches regard television as one of a number of complex sign systems through which we experience and by which we know the world. Perhaps it would be more precise to say that television represents an ever-changing point of convergence for those sign systems. In the light of initial insights provided by semiotics pioneers Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce, scholars have attempted to describe the operation of those systems, their interrelationships, and their determinative effect upon our knowledge of the world around us. The one question that runs through each chapter might be summarized as "how are meanings and pleasures produced in our engagement with television?" The apparent naturalness with which we understand the sounds and images on television might seem to render this question unnecessary. After all, no one had to teach us how to "read" television programs. But the naturalness of our relationship with television is illusory. Television, like the cinema, painting, or photography, does not simply reflect the world in some direct, automatic way. Rather it constructs representations of the world on the basis of complex sets of conventions—conventions whose operations are hidden by their transparency. Furthermore, despite the seemingly self-evident manner by which we are able to make sense of television, that ability is, in fact, a result of our having learned those conventions of television reading—even though we are usually not conscious of their operation, nor can we remember having been taught them. In recent years scholars have given particular attention to those forms of cultural production that would seem to be most automatic and "natural": the nineteenth-century novel, the photograph, movies, and, increasingly, television.

One of the guiding principles of contemporary criticism is, as Jona-

than Culler has put it, that "if we are to understand our social and cultural world, we must think not of independent objects but of symbolic structures, systems of relations which, by enabling objects and actions to have meaning, create a human universe."[1] This emphasis on structure and system has led to a shift in focus in contemporary criticism from the individual work (of art or literature) to the codes and conventions that operate within the work and link it with other works and other sign systems. Put another way, the work has been reconceived as a site of intersection for a complex tangle of signifying practices rather than as a self-sufficient, independent "thing." This is not to say that under analysis individual works simply dissolve into the externally originating codes and conventions that govern their ability to be read (as a novel, a film, or television program). Each work does present itself as a new reordering of cinematic, televisual, or literary material and is, to a certain extent, experienced as such by the reader or viewer. But however distinctive, each work is always a re-ordering of already-existing codes, conventions, and materials.

Contemporary criticism's foregrounding of the codes and conventions at work across individual works (or "texts," as they will be commonly referred to in the following essays) and the inevitable circuit of reference set up between texts would seem to be particularly appropriate in the case of television. Our experience of television is usually not of isolated works but of chunks of time filled with multiple texts carefully linked together so that they flow almost unnoticed one into another. A commercial is followed by a network promotion for a future program, which is followed by a "teaser" for the episode of a series about to begin, which is followed by a segment of that episode, interrupted by another commercial, followed by a "newsbreak" that anticipates the late-evening news program, and so on. Because the economics of commercial television is based upon maintaining the largest possible audience over the longest possible period of time, television programming practice actively discourages the viewer from thinking of the schedule in terms of a sequence of isolated and unrelated programs. In fact, enormous amounts of energy go into covering over the gaps between programs and stitching each segment into the larger programming fabric.

Contemporary criticism has also led to a reconsideration of the role of the author in the production of art. The traditional notion of the author or artist as the ultimate and single source of meaning within a

work is difficult to maintain once one acknowledges the complex network of codes, conventions, precedence, and expectations in which every work inevitably participates and over which the author has little, if any, control. As Pierre Macherey has argued with regard to literary authorship, "The author certainly makes decisions, but, as we know, his decisions are determined; it would be astonishing if the hero were to vanish after the first few pages, unless by way of parody. . . . His narrative is discovered rather than invented, not because he begins at the end, but because certain directions are firmly closed to him. We might say that the author is the first reader of his own work; he first gives himself the surprises that he will hand on to us, he enjoys playing the game of free choice according to the rules."[2]

Where better to observe the circumscribed role of the author in contemporary cultural production than in commercial television? Because of the technological complexity of the medium and as a result of the application, to television production, of the principles of modern industrial organization (mass production, detailed division of labor, etc.), it is very difficult to locate the "author" of a television program—if we mean by that term the single individual who provides the unifying vision behind the program. Producers might come up with the basic idea and characters for a television series, but they rarely are involved in the writing of individual episodes. Television writers usually work in teams, and their jobs are finished with the production of a script that conforms to limitations already laid down by the producers. A given series might well employ a number of directors, who are unlikely to have had any part to play in the scriptwriting process and whose directorial styles must by indistinguishable from each other.

Just as contemporary criticism has questioned the notion of authorial genius as the single source of meaning in an artwork, it has also questioned the artwork's ability to show us the world "as it really is." This is not just because the artwork is to some degree a product of the artist's imagination, but, more crucially, because all our attempts to represent reality are conditioned by language, culture, and ideology. As Saussure pointed out nearly a century ago, words acquire meaning by virtue of their positions within a conceptual system of similarity and difference and not through any direct relationship with reality. To anticipate Ellen Seiter's discussion of this insight in chapter one, the word "cow" means something to us because it marks out those qualities we file under the heading of "cowness." It is only through that conceptual category that we are able to link up the word "cow" with a

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bovine creature we encounter in the "real" world. Even a photograph represents a cow to us in a particular way, through the operation of specific codes and conventions. Furthermore, what we are referred to by that photograph of a cow is, once again, the conceptual category of "cowness" rather than a "real" cow. In other words, contemporary criticism assumes that we experience the world through systems of representation that, at the very least, condition our knowledge of the world and, some would argue, construct that world.

Criticism of television news frequently revolves around notions of "bias" and "objectivity." Framing the discussion by these terms obscures the fact that there is no "unbiased" manner by which television (or any other system of representation) can show us the world. For the contributors to this volume, the question is "How does television represent the world?" not "Does television give us the 'truth' about the world?" Many of the following essays are concerned with the conventions employed by television that give the illusion of immediate access to reality and truth.

The dream of early semioticians was to develop a science of signs, whose goal would be the discovery of the laws that govern all instances of meaning production. This vision of semiotic research modeled after science has been tempered, in more recent criticism, by recognition of the enormous semiotic complexity of even the seemingly most simple communication act and of the fact that we do not experience the "laws" of semiotics except in their employment in specific instances and within specific contexts. The relationship between signifier (word, image, or sound) and signified (the concept for which it stands) is slippery rather than stable. Roland Barthes speaks of the "play" of signification. Furthermore, as reception theorists have argued, meaning does not reside "out there" in words on a page or dots on a television screen, but comes about as a result of a confrontation between viewer and image, reader and text. These confrontations, which occur so frequently and spontaneously that we seldom notice them as such, all occur within particular historical, cultural, and institutional contexts—contexts that inevitably condition the production of meaning. In the spirit of post-structuralist humility in the face of the daunting task of grasping the ways we make sense of the world around us, the essays in this book do not attempt to explain television once and for all. Rather they open up some lines of inquiry into television and, in doing so, suggest something of the complexity of our relationship with it.

The nearly equal attention given in these essays to television and to

the approaches that might be employed in its analysis is in part a result of our desire to introduce readers who might not be familiar with them to some of the approaches that have most influenced contemporary criticism in general. This emphasis on "method" or "theory" also stems from the shared belief that every critical approach carries with it certain basic assumptions about the goals of criticism, the critic's role in that project, the nature of the "thing" criticism hopes to illuminate, and the kind of knowledge that might be produced by the critical act. As you will no doubt discover as you read through these essays, they not only focus on different aspects of television, but they also define television in somewhat different terms. This possibly confusing state of affairs is not a function of the approaches chosen for inclusion in this volume. Everyone who "talks" critically about television does so within a particular theoretical framework. In much of the television criticism you encounter in newspapers and magazines (but also in more "scholarly" contexts as well) the theoretical framework employed is implicit, or the critic maintains that he or she has no particular theoretical "bias." The authors in this volume make their theoretical positions explicit and, in doing so, remind us of the inseparability of the object of criticism from the approach used in its analysis.

Although they would accord it differing degrees of importance, all the contributors to this collection would acknowledge the institutional nature of television. That is to say, commercial television is much more than just a collection of individual programs or "texts" that happen to be interrupted by commercials. It is an institution that exists primarily to translate the phenomenon of simultaneous mass viewing into a commodity that can be sold to advertisers. As Todd Gitlin puts it in his institutional study of commercial television, *Inside Prime Time,* programming executives, "want, above all, to put on the air shows best calculated to accumulate maximum reliable audiences. Maximum dollars attract maximum dollars for advertisers, and advertiser dollars are, after all, the networks' objective. Quality and explicit ideology count for very little." Gitlin goes on to quote a network vice-president as saying, "'I'm not interested in pro-social values. I have only one interest. That's whether people watch the program. That's my definition of good, that's my definition of bad.'"[3]

All works of art and all forms of entertainment are produced and consumed within institutional contexts. The image of the solitary artist pouring his or her soul into poetry that will be read aloud to a select

and duly appreciative group of art lovers will hardly suffice as a model for either the production of art or its consumption in the latter part of the twentieth century (if, indeed, it ever did). This romantic image ignores that which is most characteristic of contemporary cultural production: its inescapably institutional and economic nature. Hence, to the scholars represented in this book, commercials, station promotions, and network logos are just as much texts to be analyzed as the programs they surround.

By now it should be pretty clear that contemporary criticism represents a fundamental departure from what we might call pre-structuralist or traditional criticism: the generally accepted set of assumptions about literature and the critical act that has governed literary criticism in the United States for all but the last twenty years or so and continues to condition what we common-sensically accept "literature" and "criticism" to be. Whereas traditional criticism conceives of its object of study as a unified "work," contemporary criticism takes as its object of study the "text": the site of intersection for a complex web of codes and conventions. Whereas traditional criticism emphasizes the autonomy of the artwork, contemporary criticism foregrounds the relationships between texts and the conventions underlying specific textual practices. Traditional criticism is artist-centered; contemporary criticism foregrounds the contexts within which authorship occurs and the forces that circumscribe it. Traditional criticism looks to great art to reveal enduring truths about the world; contemporary criticism considers the worlds constructed within texts. Traditional criticism conceives of meaning as a property of an artwork; contemporary criticism views meaning as the product of the engagement of a text by a reader or by groups of readers. Traditional criticism frequently sees as its function not only the establishment of what a work means but also the separation of "literature" from "non-literature" and the erection of a hierarchy of greatness among works. Contemporary criticism examines the criteria by which those in a position to define literature make such determinations and would expand the scope of literary studies to include both "non-literature" and critical discourse about texts.

It should also be clear why commercial television cannot easily be accommodated within the assumptions of traditional criticism. Commercial television refuses to be broken down into a series of autonomous works, appears authorless, shares few of the qualities we gener-

ally associate with great art, makes few demands on the viewer, and would thus seem to leave little for the critic to interpret. Furthermore, commercial television seldom makes any pretense of being "art"; the regular and insistent interruption of programs by commercials reminds us that programs are really only "pre-texts" for the real content of television—advertising messages. The uneasy fit between commercial television and assumptions of traditional criticism partially explains the relative lack of a tradition of television criticism in the United States. It also helps to account for the fact that, in this country, at least, the "golden age" of traditional television criticism corresponds with the "golden age" of television—that brief period of live, original television drama in the 1950s. Such self-contained, "serious" television dramas as *Marty, Requiem for a Heavyweight, Visit to a Small Planet, The Rack,* and *The Death of Billy the Kid* most closely resembled the model of dramatic art with which traditional critics felt comfortable.

The assumptions of contemporary criticism also set it apart from the research tradition that has informed mass communication studies in the United States for the better part of fifty years. Perhaps because broadcasting (at least since the late 1920s) has been thought of more as an advertising vehicle than an artform, research into the relationship between broadcasting and its audience has been largely sociological, rather than aesthetic, in orientation. The emergence of radio as a national advertising medium around 1930 spurred the growth of basic demographic and marketing research in broadcasting. Broadcasters and advertisers needed to know who was listening to what stations, at what times, and with what frequency.

Some attention was paid to what we might in retrospect see as the more "aesthetic" dimensions of radio listening—what types of programs appealed to what types of listeners and why?—but these questions tended to be asked within a social survey framework: "Which programs do you most enjoy listening to?" Where answers were proposed to the question "Why do certain audiences enjoy certain types of programs?" they were generally sociological in nature. For example, after conducting a content analysis of forty-three radio soap operas in 1941, Rudolph Arnheim concluded that they "attract the listener by offering her a portrait of her own shortcomings, which lead to constant trouble, and of her inability to help herself. In spite of the unpleasantness of this picture, resonance can be enjoyed because identification is

drawn away from it and transferred to an ideal type of the perfect, efficient woman who possesses power and prestige and who has to suffer not by her own fault but by the fault of others."[4]

The advertising basis of broadcasting also prompted studies of the effects of broadcast messages on the attitudes and behavior of radio listeners. If radio commercials could not affect the decision to purchase a particular product, then, obviously, millions of advertising dollars were being wasted. The perceived need for effects research was heightened during World War II, especially in light of the use of radio as an information source and propaganda vehicle. Numerous studies investigated the possibility that, effectively utilized and tightly controlled, radio might shape the public opinion of an entire nation—for good or for evil. With the rapid growth of television as a popular entertainment medium in the early 1950s, research interests shifted to its effects on viewers and the functions served by television viewing for various subaudiences. Of particular concern was the effect of television viewing on the attitudes and behavior of children.

Over the past thirty years, sociological inquiry into the relationship between television viewers and programs has broadened in scope to include television's possible effects on the conduct of political campaigns; the behavioral and attitudinal consequences of viewing television violence; and television's depiction of minorities, women, and other segments of society; among many other topics. Although some researchers continue to attempt to measure the direct effects of viewing particular programs on particular audience groups, the "hypodermic" or direct effects model of media research has largely given way to models of media-audience interaction that emphasize the functions served by media use and the longer-term and more subtle consequences of media consumption.[5]

Since its emergence as a recognizable field of study in the 1930s, mass communication research in the U.S. has turned to the natural and physical sciences for its model of how knowledge about media-audience relationships might be generated. The application of the "scientific method" to media research is a result, in part, of the need of pioneering research administrators such as Paul Lazarsfeld to legitimize media research and, as a result, earn for it a place within the academic community. Broadcasting organizations, which funded much of the early research on media and media audiences, required that the findings that emerged from these studies be "objective" and "scien-

tific," rather than merely the expression of the investigator's opinion. Thus media research methods were made to resemble those of the physical science laboratory wherever possible. Safeguards were established to minimize the possible effects of the investigator's own expectations upon the results of the study, investigatory procedures attempted to reduce the phenomenon being studied to a limited set of variables (preferably an "independent" and a "dependent" variable), and results were expressed in quantitative terms.

The usefulness of the above model for explaining the complex nature of our relationship with television increasingly has been challenged over the past few years. Some scholars have charged that the application of research procedures from chemistry or biology to social and aesthetic phenomena is inappropriate; they argue that such phenomena cannot be reduced to the investigatory simplicity of the laboratory experiment. Furthermore, they claim that the scientist's belief in the objectivity and value-free status of his or her undertaking is illusory. Obviously, other scholars would refute these objections, while still others would acknowledge the limitations of quantitative research methods and statistical data analysis in explaining certain aspects of media-audience interaction.[6]

Regardless of how successful one believes mass-communication research has been in explaining our relationship with television, however, it should be apparent that a model of media research based upon statistics and quantitative research methods and guided by the goals of laboratory science leaves little room for "criticism" as it is generally conceived in other disciplines. The closest that one can come to "scientific" criticism would be what is called quantitative content analysis, in which one reduces the text (a television program, for example) to quantifiable data by noting the incidence of certain features and comparing that frequency with something else. For example, a researcher might count the number of black characters in a particular program in order to relate their proportion of the program's "population" to that in other programs, in other genres of television programming, or in the general population.[7]

Content analysis can be quite helpful in documenting the ways in which television programs, both fictional and nonfictional, represent constructions of the world rather than reflections of reality. For example, it can help to demonstrate television news's predilection for certain types of stories (natural disasters and political violence, for ex-

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