



THIRD EDITION

# TELEVISION

THE CRITICAL VIEW

EDITED BY

HORACE NEWCOMB

# TELEVISION:

## *The Critical View*

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**HORACE NEWCOMB**

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# **PREFACE**

## **TO THE FIRST EDITION**

The essays in this collection were selected because they view television in broad rather than narrow perspectives. Newspaper columns have not been included. This is not to say that newspaper criticism is excluded by definition from a breadth of vision, but simply that the pieces included here all develop their point of view in the single essay rather than over a period of time, as is the case with the columnist.

The essays in the first section all deal with specific program types. They serve as excellent models for practical television criticism because they show us that there is a great deal of difference between watching television and "seeing" it. They are, of course, involved with critical interpretation and assertion. Other analyses of the same programs may be offered by other critics, and the audience, as critic, must learn to make its own decisions. These essays will help in that learning process.

The second section is comprised of essays that attempt to go beyond the specific meanings of specific programs or program types. They suggest that television has meaning in the culture because it is not an isolated, unique entity. These writers want to know what television means, for its producers, its audiences, its culture.

The essays in the final section are concerned with what television is. They seek to define television in terms of itself, to determine how it is like and how it is different from other media.

All the essays are seeking connections, trying to place television in its own proper, enlarged critical climate. Consequently, many

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*of them use similar examples, ask similar questions, and rest on shared assumptions. Some of the connections are obvious. Others will occur to the reader using the book. In this way the reader too becomes a critic and the printed comments may serve to stimulate a new beginning, a new and richer viewpoint regarding television.*

I would like to express my thanks to John Wright of Oxford University Press for his initial interest and continued support for this book. His suggestions have strengthened it throughout. A special note of thanks must go to all my friends and colleagues who have made suggestions about the book and who, in some cases, have offered their own fine work for inclusion. Thanks, too, goes to my family for the supportive world in which I work.

H.N.

*Baltimore*  
*November 1975*

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# PREFACE

## TO THE THIRD EDITION

The third edition of this book attests to the continuing and growing concern with sound analysis and criticism of television. It is a concern manifested not only by the fact that there is a demand for a new reader, but also by the availability of materials with which to create the new collection. Still, like all anthologies, it is incomplete. That is so because no single book contains all that it should and, perhaps more importantly, because the essays themselves are partial explorations of their subject, even when they attempt total explanations.

As I read all the essays I sense that they offer something like an overview of television when taken together. Like puzzle fragments they can be pieced into larger patterns, each filling gaps and oversights in one another's presentation.

In a real sense, then, the text is "completed" whenever a teacher plots some systematic course through the selections gathered here or whenever students begin to perceive patterns on their own. I am most grateful, therefore, for the many uses to which the book is put, the ways in which I am told it contributes to classroom studies of television. It is pleasant to recognize that use, rather than the mere passage of time, demands regular revision of this collection.

Once again I am most appreciative to the John and Mary R. Markle Foundation for support during the preparation of this volume.

*Austin*  
*December 1981*

H.N.

# I

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## SEEING TELEVISION

Most of us look at television without ever seeing it. It surrounds us. We seem to measure our days by "what's on?" and "when does it start?" But few of us think about what it is that we look at, and consequently we form no critical view. The result, of course, as many people have pointed out (some of them in essays that appear in other portions of this book), is that we are easily manipulated by TV. The way out is to become critics of what we see, a suggestion that is far more rewarding than it might sound. The same suggestion is made by Michael Novak:

Prime-time television is worthy of a serious critical effort. If one watches a show, and tries to criticize it afterward, the effort bears fruit; and the shows bear the scrutiny. The television camera is a very rich instrument of creativity, and the power of its impressions, even when the subject matter is prosaic, is quite remarkable. Thus a segment from *All In The Family*, or *Rhoda*, or other shows can generate quite intense and fruitful argument about the values, perceptions, characterizations, artistic techniques and the rest.

(*Commonweal*, April 11, 1975, p. 40)

The essays in this section follow the lead suggested by Novak's comments. They usually begin with careful description, demonstrating that there is much to be seen in the programs

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that we often take for granted. Following the description, however, these critics go on to larger concerns. They attempt to draw conclusions that take us once again beyond the narrow concerns of journalism or research. They reach out for extended meanings and can be seen as evidence for or against the theories that are developed in later parts of the book. As such, they are perhaps the best models for the sort of television criticism, expansive and detailed, that is necessary for a fuller understanding of the medium in its present form.

This sort of criticism is based on careful observation and critical assertion. Conclusions rise most often from personal interpretation. These critics often disagree about the meanings of programs, but as with all good criticism, even the resonances of their disagreements aid us in a fuller understanding of our subject matter. We are never likely to agree about such matters as "values, perceptions, characterizations, artistic techniques and the rest," but we can have a far more adequate response to television when we are able to "see" what we watch.

James Chesebro's essay, which begins the section, focuses on several of these topics and works to synthesize them. Drawing on scholarly paradigms and working toward a set of measurable descriptions, his goal is not so much to explain his individual response as to develop a theoretical model that will account for general responses to many types of television programs. He creates a schema that allows him to compare these programs in several ways, to discriminate among them. The fact that his essay deals with some of the ways in which television programming has and has not changed over time reminds us that we share our history with television and that television is integral to that history. He suggests, then, that we not only compare television programs, but the social attitudes and forces surrounding those programs; for in the history of television programming he reads elements of our social history. Given the tendency to dismiss the medium as fleeting, amorphous and isolated, it is important that we remember these larger connections.

Michael Kerbel's essay helps to create that sense of memory and history in another way. Most of the readers of this essay will read descriptions of drama they will never see. They must

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use Kerbel's descriptions to re-create the plays in their minds. A few will be able to see the productions in rare exhibition showings. A few more will remember the actual performances. All of us, however, should be able to use the essay to consider the place of these productions in the history of the medium. In shows such as *Lou Grant* with its focus on modern social problems, in episodes of *The Waltons* or *M\*A\*S\*H* we can recognize serious drama at work and see the continuation and development of a tradition.

Richard Corliss, Robert Sklar, and Robert S. Alley survey types of American television drama. And even though Alley's examination of police drama and family melodrama seems far removed from Corliss's and Sklar's studies of television comedy, the three writers are at work on similar projects. In comparing and contrasting, describing and evaluating, they are helping us to recognize the differences within familiar patterns. This creation of the significant difference is the television producer's goal, the network executive's dream. For it is by combining the familiar patterns with something different, something distinct, that important shows are created. Similarly, all three authors have as a goal the matching of television shows with larger cultural patterns. They seek to demonstrate how these shows speak to and for their mass audiences.

In another cluster, Dennis Porter, Bernard Timberg, and Robert Craft all approach, in serious and skillful fashion, that most maligned of television forms, the soap opera. Taken together the essays demonstrate what many critics have suggested—that soaps are also one of the richest and most important of forms. Porter's exploration focuses on specific relationships between the formal aesthetic characteristics of soap operas and the experience of viewing them. In defining the connection he argues for direct political consequences as a central effect of soap watching and sees in the form a seductive replication of American ideology. Timberg is more concerned with formal characteristics, particularly with the visual coding of content. His essay is a rare example of an analysis focused on the technical features of television and it should make us aware that these features are easily as important as more noticeable elements such as plot, character, and dialogue. Any program can be exam-

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ined from a similar perspective if approached with care and skill, and increased attention to these aspects of programming can greatly enhance our understanding of television. In his lament for the demise of *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* Robert Craft indicates another aspect of soap opera richness. It is a fertile field for experimentation, and from various parodies to the mini-series, it has been a source for innovative television. In Craft's view *MH2* not only entertained with a form that explored its own structure, but with one that gave us a better perspective on television as a whole and on our affection for the medium.

The essays by Roger Hofeldt, Horace Newcomb, Michael Schudson, Karin Blair, and Anne Roiphe form yet another group. Each of these essays offers a close reading of an individual television program. This is a form of criticism and analysis that is most common in academic circles as well as in newspaper and magazine journalism. The essays take the programs seriously on their own terms, but do not stop with those terms. They remind us that television grows out of entertainment forms, cultural history, and social structures that far exceed the history of the medium. In linking the programs to cultural roots, to patterns of social thought, they enable us to better understand how these new forms of entertainment synthesize and extend older meanings. These essays all demonstrate that individual programs can, as Michael Novak suggests, bear careful criticism. They also demonstrate how television can be described and defined by careful, articulate, sensitive viewers. Other readers and viewers must check their own responses against these essays and, hopefully, go on to create their own analyses.

The previous cluster ends with Roiphe's comments on a mythic America. In viewing the Super Bowl as a "mythic spectacle" Michael Real presents us with another approach to television's representation of America. His essay should be related to Porter's interpretation of soap opera and to essays by Kellner and Gitlin in later sections. All of these writers are concerned with the ways in which American ideology is reproduced in television. Real strips away an apparently innocuous surface and argues for a far more profound deeper structure.

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Daniel Menaker also approaches a type of program that we take as self-evident. Although his essay is less serious in tone than Real's, its implications are equally important. If he is right in suggesting that we can best understand television news in terms of television's world of fictional "stories" and "characters" then we must reevaluate our reliance on this form for certain types of information. In a very different vein Jonathan Black raises the same questions in his criticism of *60 Minutes*. He demonstrates how meaning is "made" rather than "found" in some of this popular series' presentations. The upshot of such analysis is that we will, in Shayon's terms, become critics of far more than television by attending closely to these forms.

Finally, nowhere is this sort of critical acuity more important than in our reading of commercials. Martin Esslin suggests that we can best understand these forgotten, overlooked, ignored, and despised distractions, by thinking of them as drama. Since drama presents us with important, even crucial, cultural information in profound and compelling forms, we should reassess our reaction and relation to commercials. No one would seriously dispute the importance of having a better way of understanding television commercials. Esslin offers us a superb new springboard from which to plunge into a deeper form of analysis. With his provocative concepts in mind any television viewer will suddenly discover himself or herself surrounded by "little plays," and will face the necessary task of evaluating those plays in terms of how they transform our lives and our aspirin into dramatic illusion.

All of these essays make demands on the reader-viewer. They ask that we take more seriously an activity that is usually taken for granted. What they promise, of course, is the potential for taking control. In that sense the essays are models for our own criticism as well as examples of someone else's engagement with our most prevalent medium of communication.



# JAMES W. CHESEBRO

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## COMMUNICATION, VALUES, AND POPULAR TELEVISION SERIES— A FOUR-YEAR ASSESSMENT

Our attitudes and behaviors are typically a reflection of the values we have acquired. As we mature, our value orientations are subtly shaped by our parents, churches, and schools. However, researchers are less confident that the mass media—particularly television—decisively affect and control our value judgments. As Steven Chaffee, L. Scott Ward, and Leonard P. Tyston have observed, "There has been little evidence for mass communication as a causal element in a child's development. . . . Debate usually centers around the relative effects of processes initiated by the more primary agents."<sup>1</sup> Even though television viewing is now this nation's major activity, Jeffrey Schrank has accurately noted that, "Exactly how television has influenced our psychology we don't know."<sup>2</sup>

Yet, we clearly have reason to believe that television could be affecting our value judgments. Producers of popular television series admit, for example, that they selectively dramatize certain values rather than others. While entertaining their viewers, these

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<sup>1</sup> "Mass Communication and Political Socialization," *Socialization to Politics*, ed. Jack Dennis (New York: John Wiley, 1973), p. 391.

<sup>2</sup> *Snap, Crackle, and Popular Taste: The Illusion of Free Choice in America* (New York: Delta, 1977), p. 25.

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