



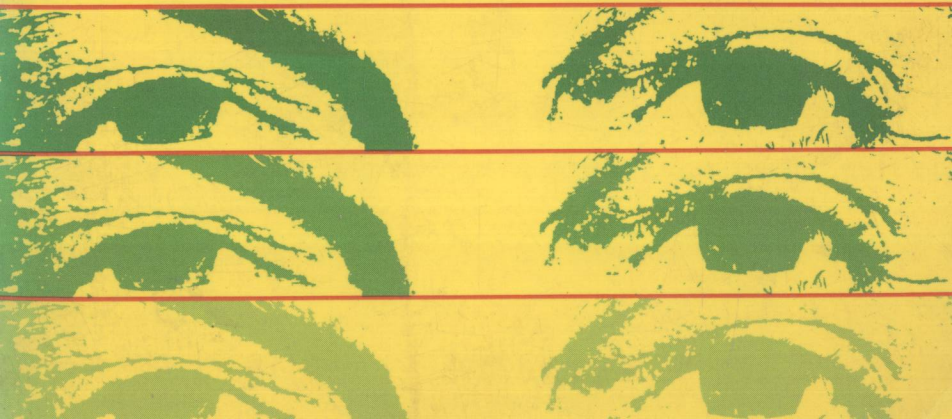
Television

The Critical View

Fourth Edition

Edited by

Horace Newcomb



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TELEVISION

THE CRITICAL VIEW

Fourth Edition

EDITED BY

HORACE NEWCOMB

University of Texas at Austin



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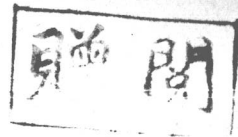
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TELEVISION: THE CRITICAL VIEW

*For my colleagues
past and present
in the Department of Radio-Television-Film
The University of Texas-Austin
Artists, Critics, Scholars, Teachers*

PREFACE TO THE FOURTH EDITION

It has now been more than ten years since the first edition of this collection appeared. In that time television studies and television criticism have flourished. There are now far more courses in colleges and universities that take the medium seriously as an object of study. And as some of the essays in this edition make evident, serious thinkers who may never teach a course in television have also turned their consideration to the medium. In this sense, I think we have begun to think of the medium in light of Moses Hadas's admonition quoted in the Introduction: "all who take education seriously in its larger sense—and not the professed critics alone—should talk and write about television as they do about books."

People concerned with general literacy, with the political role of mass entertainment, and with the imaginative life of the culture now deal thoughtfully with television. While most of the writers whose works are collected here are "professed critics," they write for all of us. And they are brought together here as part of a general cultural discussion, not an exchange among a small group. To the degree that we learn from them, and apply what we learn, the climate of television criticism may develop in even healthier ways.

The best indication of this is the range of concerns and methods gathered here. While some underlying matters run throughout these essays, they represent a rich diversity of approaches. This accounts for a comment I hear often about the book, that it is unsystematic and eclectic. Intended or not, I take that judgment as a compliment. Television is too big and too baggy to be easily or quickly explained. No single approach is sufficient to deal with it adequately. Multiplicity is what I am after, both as editor and teacher.

This should not be taken as an endorsement of casual or unsystematic criticism. Rather, the aim of the book is to provide a variety of models with which students and their teachers

may create and adapt careful and systematic approaches of their own. Out of the exchange of ideas and critical questions, forms of writing and thinking, we are able to sharpen our best individual responses. If some of the essays here contradict one another, that simply means we will have to criticize the critics as well as the object of their study. The result should be a still more precise understanding of television. For the climate of television criticism to continue in its current vitality, that precision is ever necessary.

Austin

April 1985

H. N.

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 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.

Baltimore
November 1975

H. N.

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TELEVISION: THE CRITICAL VIEW

HORACE NEWCOMB

INTRODUCTION TELEVISION AND THE CLIMATE OF CRITICISM

Writing in 1962, Moses Hadas suggested that television, already considered a nearly worthless pastime, be taken far more seriously by thinking persons.

Because he is not directly determining profit and loss, because he is contemplating a range of subject matter almost unlimited in scope and has regard to an audience almost as large and varied, the critic of television is in effect dealing with universals and hence he must cultivate the philosophical approach. To have validity, universals must, of course, be solidly grounded in particulars, and our critic must obviously be expert in various relevant techniques; but these are ancillary to his larger aims. The larger aims are, in a word, educational. And education in its fullest sense, not schooling alone, is the single most important enterprise of civilized society.

A truer analogy than drama, therefore, is literature, which has traditionally held the general educational mandate television has now come to share. In literature, too, the scope is vast, the audience coextensive with literacy, and the benefits need not involve cash expenditure. In literature, as we have observed, there is a tangible critical climate, guided and made articulate by professional critics, perhaps, but shaped by all who take books seriously and write and talk about them. The critical climate, in turn, determines what books are made available; no writer who wishes to be heard and no sane publisher will fly in the face of it. A similar critical climate must be created for television; all who take education seriously in its larger sense—and not the professed critics alone—should talk and write about television as they do about books.¹

I take Hadas's phrase, "education in its larger sense," to mean something like "culture" in its most pervasive and all-inclusive form. What he is suggesting has little to do with the idea of formal instruction, or as he says, with "schooling." It has much

to do with the ways in which members of a society are shaped, changed, directed, and influenced by their most pervasive forms of communication. It has to do with the ways in which the lives of people are reflected by the content of those communications forms. We are "educated," our culture is reflected by the stories that are told to us in literature or by way of television, by commentary on daily occurrences (the "news"), by the thorough explorations of important or unique events (documentary), by the personalities and stars who entertain us. This is the sort of education that goes on each day, unconsciously and largely without evaluation on the part of the audience. It is part of the texture of our lives.

This broad educational or cultural function of television has not, of course, been overlooked or denied. From the earliest development of the medium it has been of great concern to those who deal with television on a daily basis: newspaper critics of television, researchers, professional educators, and parents. Television producers and network officials have recognized the enormous power of their "business" and have issued statements denying the negative influence of TV almost at the same time as they have praised its positive effects. Governmental agencies such as the Federal Communications Commission, and professional organizations such as the National Association of Broadcasters have written professional regulations and codes designed to clarify the function of television and to protect the viewing public from possible harm. The most careful defenders of television, therefore, have often based their concerns in fears of television's educational function, an attitude which is, to some degree, well founded. If it is not always easy to accept the judgments of elitist critics who fear for the degradation of mass "taste"; it is quite simple to accept the concern of writers who remind their audiences that television is a complex financial system in which the viewers are consistently manipulated for profit. The realization that television demands no essential literacy forces us to see that among its available victims are children, an issue that forms the basis for extensive research into the effects of violence and aggression as seen on television. A similar concern for TV's political and economic power warns minority or special interest groups that their integrity must be protected and that other audiences must be forewarned about false stereotypes and negative portrayals.

Unfortunately, our fears about television, no matter how healthy or well founded, have restricted the development of a