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GERMAN MEDIA STUDIES

GEISLER AND MATTSON • AFTER THE BARDIC ERA

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In the previous issue of *New German Critique* on “German -Jewish Religious Thought,” biographical information for one of the guest editors, who was also an author, was mistakenly omitted from the contributor’s page. Please note the following:

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Introduction: After the Bardic Era — *German Television Since 1984*

Michael Geisler and Michelle Mattson

Only 18 years ago, in 1981, British media critics Richard Collins and Vincent Porter wrote in their monograph on the *WDR Arbeiterfilm*: “West German broadcasting has a plausible claim to being the most successful instance of public service broadcasting in the world.”¹ Even then, this statement would probably have raised a few eyebrows not only among American television executives, but among American media critics as well. Yet, at the time, it was defensible as a critical position. Politically, socially, and aesthetically, German television, in what, to historicize a famous term coined by John Fiske and John Hartley, could be called its “Bardic Era”² was without a doubt among the most lively and innovative broadcasting structures in the world.³ If the

1. Richard Collins and Vincent Porter, *WDR and the Arbeiterfilm: Fassbinder, Ziewer and Others* (London: British Film Institute, 1981) 4.

2. John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978) 85–100.

3. In “From Public to Private: Television in the Federal Republic of Germany,” (*New German Critique* 50 [Spring/Summer 1990]: 41–55) Roswitha Müller makes a first attempt at correcting this tradition by aligning the autonomous public sphere created jointly by the German television charters and the 1961 *Fernsehurteil* of the German Constitutional Court with Habermas’s model. Müller points out that “liberal pluralism – which is how one might describe both Habermas’s model of communication and the broadcasting charters of the FRG — provided, for a short period of time, a spectrum of viewpoints large enough to accommodate programs to which even Brecht would have subscribed” (Müller 46). We would put it more bluntly: Despite numerous attempts at political interference and bureaucratic structures that often turned innovative planning into a nightmare, German television between 1961 and 1984 (and perhaps beyond) provided an open arena of unparalleled accessibility — an opportunity to establish a truly democratic public medium that was systematically ignored by the vast majority of German intellectuals.

success of a particular television culture is to be measured according to such criteria as innovative programming structures, active and productive (i.e., interventionist) participation in the social debates of the period, contribution to the arts as a whole, and a diversified spectrum of offerings that appeals to different societal sub-groups (including minorities), then German television of the 1960s and 1970s certainly lived up to its mission. (This, by the way, despite constant grumbling from a cultural elite that disparaged the medium on the basis of a hand-me-down Frankfurt School distrust of all industrial modes of production).

To cite just a few examples:

- In 1958, a television play by Dieter Meichsner, *Besuch aus der Zone* provoked a discussion about the relative achievements of both German states that sent shock waves all the way to the West German parliament. Similarly, writer Wolfgang Menge's and director Wolfgang Petersen's television play *Smog* kicked off a debate on West German environmental policy that led to significant changes in the environmental protection laws of several German states and almost certainly helped catalyze the rise of environmental consciousness that was to articulate itself, at least in part, in the ascent of the Green party.

- In the early 1960s, the television news magazine *Panorama* (originally adapted from the British program by the same title), under its radical-democratic moderator Gert von Paczensky, aggressively took on the restoration policies of the Adenauer government. It is probably not overstating the case to say that *Panorama's* aggressive political reportage, in tandem with the muckraking journalism of the *Spiegel* staff, helped established the notion of a free press and free public media in a country that had not been used to either. More importantly, it did so vis-à-vis a government that, as Adenauer's ill-fated plans for a government-run television channel had shown, still thought of public broadcasting as some kind of electronic outlet for government communiqués. *Panorama's* coverage of the *Spiegel* crisis, especially the mass demonstrations against the incarceration of *Spiegel* editor Rudolf Augstein (special issue of 1 January 1962) was a significant factor in the creation of a public debate about freedom of the press. The debate forced the administration to abandon its overt attempt to censor the German press.⁴

4. On the turbulent political and journalistic history of the early days of *Panorama*, see Gerhard Lampe and Heidemarie Schumacher, *Das 'Panorama' der 60er Jahre. Zur Geschichte des ersten politischen Fernsehmagazins der BRD* (Berlin: Spiess, 1991).

•The so-called film-television agreement, renewed in four-year intervals since 1974, provided a stable financial base for Germany's struggling film industry without which the phenomenal international success of New German Cinema probably would not have occurred. As Karl Prümm points out, "The New German Cinema, admired all over the world, and presented with pride by the Goethe Institutes, is, among other things, also a result of this *revirement*. Since the 1970s, there has not been one important and successful German film that was not produced within the framework of this agreement."⁵

•Established in 1962, the ZDF experimental television workshop *Das kleine Fernsehspiel* provided a showcase for groundbreaking, innovative filmmaking (as well as some interminably boring flops). Among those who were given exhibition space early in their careers are Robert Wilson, Wolfgang Petersen, Rosa von Praunheim, Jim Jarmusch, Helma Sanders, Helke Sander, Antonio Skármeta and many other filmmakers from around the world. Even in the United States, the *Kleines Fernsehspiel* was noted as one of the most important testing grounds for young directors.⁶

•Throughout its broadcasting history, but cresting around the late 1970s and early 1980s, German television has been an active contributor to Germany's attempts to come to terms with the Nazi past, frequently setting the agenda for this debate. Examples are Egon Monk's and Gunter R. Lys's television play *Ein Tag* (ARD: NDR, 1965), which depicts a typical day in a German concentration camp, or the 1979 broadcast of the U.S. television series *Holocaust*. The latter initiated a nationwide soul-searching and cleared the way for countless documentary and fictional programs produced by German television itself.⁷

•In 1984, Edgar Reitz and Peter Steinbach's 15 1/2-hour epic television series *Heimat* (ARD: WDR/SFB) became the focal point of a national obsession with what could be called the proxemics of identity

5. Karl Prümm, "Film und Fernsehen – Ambivalenz und Identität," *Geschichte des deutschen Films*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobsen, et al. (Stuttgart: Metzler 1993) 514. To put things in perspective, however, one also needs to keep in mind that the agreement has recently come under fire from German critics who believe that it was precisely this financing guarantee that made it possible for German filmmakers to become complacent and self-absorbed, producing marginal films that never found an audience. This fundamental neglect of the market is held responsible for the continuing creative crisis of German cinema since the mid-1980s.

6. Cf. Kathleen Hulser, "A TV Workshop That Relishes Risk," *The New York Times* 15 Aug. 1982. See also Andreas Schreitmüller and Eckart Stein, eds., *Freispiele. Das kleine Fernsehspiel – Freiraum im Programm* (Munich: TR Verlagsgesellschaft, 1986).

formation, i.e. the local, regional and national boundaries of “home.”⁸

The scenario sketched out above would be hard to believe for anyone who zaps across Germany’s television channels of today. He or she would find, instead, at least 38 different talk show entries, from PRO7’s Arabella Kiesbauer (typical topic: “Kleine Männer bringen’s nicht” – “Little Men Don’t Do it For Me”) to SAT1’s late night *Harald Schmidt Show* (a sexed-up German version of David Letterman with a cult following among intellectuals); a never-ending string of American movies and television series, the vast majority of them from media monopolist’s Leo Kirch’s archives, circulating endlessly in one of several cable/satellite channels controlled by the Kirch Group; some 30-odd different game and variety shows and more or less kinky “erotic” shows from the shrill camp of transvestite Lilo Wanders (Ernie Reinhardt’s *Wa(h)re Liebe* (VOX) to the openly pornographic *liebe sünde* (PRO7) where former moderator Matthias Frings once encouraged his (presumably mostly male) audience to press their penises against the screen to allow the therapeutic effect of a spiritual healer to endow them with ever-lasting virility via the airwaves.

Conversely, our hypothetical zapper would have to look hard to find the critical television plays that were German television’s hallmark in the 1960s and 1970s, the ambitious mini-series (*Berlin Alexanderplatz*, *Heimat*, *Die Geschwister Oppermann*) of the 1980s, and the hard-hitting news magazines (*Panorama*, *Report*, *Monitor*) and carefully crafted documentaries (Brodman, Fechner, Wildenhahn, Breloer) that have been the pride of German public television throughout its history. One can still find these entries⁹ (or other, similar ones); but they tend to get crowded out by popular daytime and nighttime soaps and the renaissance of the German family series: they are too costly to produce and their audience share is too small for them to compete against Hollywood’s production

7. On German television’s attempts to address the issues of fascism and the Holocaust, and the role of the U.S. television series, see Michael E. Geisler, “The Disposal of Memory: Fascism and the Holocaust on West German Television,” *Framing the Past. The Historiography of German Cinema and Television*, ed. Bruce A. Murray and Christopher Wickham (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1992) 220–60. On the larger political and aesthetic issues involved in cinematic and videographic memory construction, see Eric Santner, *Stranded Objects. Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990).

8. Cf. *New German Critique* 36 (Fall 1985), special issue on *Heimat*. See also Santner, *Stranded Objects* and Anton Kaes, *From Hitler to Heimat. The Return of History as Film* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989).

9. Cf., for instance, Heinrich Breloer’s two-part *Todesspiel* (ARD 1997), a semi-documentary account of the events surrounding the “German Autumn” of 1977.

values and the homespun “healer and dealer” formulae.

So what happened on the way to “Television Without Frontiers” – the EC ideal of the free exchange of information over the airwaves that would hasten European integration and cultural diversity? To understand the developments that led to the current broadcasting landscape, one has to rehearse a few historical parameters¹⁰ that determined German television culture until 1984.

In 1952, regular television broadcasting resumed in Germany, starting in the British sector (Hamburg) and spreading southeast from there. This is of more than geographical and historical significance, since the British effectively defined the nature of German television (and radio) broadcasting for the next three decades, adapting a modified version of the BBC structure for the new German service. The idea was to establish a non-commercial, subscription-based network of television stations under public law [*öffentlich-rechtlich*], supervised by representatives of a broad spectrum of societal interests, yet removed from direct control of the state. The problem is that, from the beginning, this ideal chafed against the deep distrust held by *all political parties* in Germany, against a truly independent broadcasting system. Since the days of the Weimar Republic, i.e., preceding even the Nazi policy of “coordination” [*Gleichschaltung*], German politicians had seen broadcasting as the domain of the state. The Allies fought an uphill and, ultimately, losing battle against this perception.¹¹ The miracle is that, despite these early attempts at political control, German broadcasting stations were able to carve out for themselves a niche of independence

10. For an informative, concise survey of the history of German television as well as the current broadcasting landscape, see John Sandford, “Television in Germany,” *Television in Europe*, ed. James A. Coleman and Brigitte Rollet (Exeter: Intellect, 1997) 49–60.

11. Cf. Hans Bausch, ed., *Rundfunk in Deutschland*, vol. 3, *Rundfunkpolitik nach 1945* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1980) 46ff. The argument is that the British High Commissioner, Sir Hugh Carleton Greene, was “too accommodating” in his negotiations with German politicians. That may be true, but blaming the decline of German television culture on the Allies’ ‘failure’ to tell Germans more clearly what to do with their new democratic instruments reveals a strange notion of the democratic process. For an American account of the same problem see the interview with Robert Lochner in Dietrich Wagner’s documentary, *Mein Job hieß immer Germany*. (HRIII 1996). As U.S. Control Officer for Radio Frankfurt during the post-war years, Lochner helped to rebuild the *Hessische Rundfunk* — and ran into the same kind of political opposition to a broadcasting culture unrestrained by government control that Greene did in Hamburg. The same holds true for the *Süddeutsche Rundfunk* and the *Bayrische Rundfunk*. In every one of these cases the Allies enforced the establishment of a (relatively) independent broadcasting structure against tenacious resistance by German politicians.

and hold on to it so tenaciously for so long.

They did so by playing competing societal and political interests against each other: since representatives of the major social forces had been given a voice on the network's governing bodies, the *Rundfunkräte* [broadcasting councils] for the ARD and the *Fernsehrat* [television council] for the ZDF, the networks were able, for a while, to create a sphere of relative artistic autonomy at the center of the intersecting and competing pressure groups. Most notably, they could always rely upon the separatist interests of the German states to act as a counterbalance against attempts at centralist control by the governing powers in the Bundestag, since the regional administrations jealously guarded their constitutional autonomy in cultural affairs against any encroachments by Bonn. This became evident in 1961, when the *Länder* stopped an initiative by the Adenauer administration to establish a new television network under government control by taking their case to the German Constitutional Court, which, in its landmark *Fernsehurteil* of 1961, expressly reaffirmed the independence of public television from political interference.

The *Fernsehurteil*, which marked a quantum leap in German democratization,¹² paved the way for two decades of relatively unencumbered development. During this time German television was able to find its own voice and build a tradition of first-rate political reportage, aesthetically and politically trailblazing television drama and miniseries, and a broad spectrum of diversity programming that evolved thanks to the relative insignificance of ratings pressures (since the subscription system guaranteed television stations a stable financial base on top of their limited commercial revenues).

In the early decades of German television this uneasy balance of powers worked because the representatives of the various interest groups were chosen primarily for their experience, expertise, or at least interest in the media and only secondarily according to political fault lines. This gave way, however, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, to a finely tuned system of proportional representation on the basis of political affiliation that reflected the power structure of each of the German states. This system of *proportional representation* [*Proporz*] undermined both the political and artistic autonomy of the German networks long before commercial competition became a factor.

12. Especially when considered in the historical context of the 1962 *Spiegel* crisis.

Yet despite the growing influence of the political parties on the governing bodies of German public television, some (notably the CDU) felt that television was still too independent. The conservative rollback of the autonomy enjoyed by the public networks unfolded in three major stages:

1. As soon as the CDU/FDP coalition came to power in 1982, they used the *Federal* authority over the postal service (which, for reasons dating back all the way to the Weimar Republic, has authority over the airwaves and all technological aspects of telecommunication) to grant a wide array of cable licenses to commercial broadcasters, while at the same time investing heavily in a nationwide cable infrastructure, thus circumventing state interests instead of confronting them head-on as the Adenauer administration had tried. This crucial development is covered in detail in Peter Humphreys's contribution to this issue.

2. When the opportunity arose to redefine the structure of public broadcasting in the former GDR, chancellor Kohl dispatched one of his friends, the arch-conservative Rudolf Mühlfenzl to make sure not only that the new East German television networks were modeled after the existing structure in the West, but also that conservatives held the balance of power in the governing bodies of the new East German member stations of the ARD.¹³ East German attempts to create new, more independent forms of journalistic expression from within the existing broadcasting structures were thus quenched *in statu nascendi*. This contributed to the impression of a cultural takeover by the West. Yet one needs to remember that, despite all the fascinating experimentation going on in GDR television during the *interregnum* period,¹⁴ the apparatus itself was fatally compromised. It had a very problematic history, it had not managed to rid itself of the old Communist cadres, and it had failed to come up with a viable administrative structure that would have preserved some autonomy while developing new forms and genres that would have made it both competitive and compatible with the West German and European networks.¹⁵ Nevertheless, to many East Germans

13. The new stations are: ORB (*Ostdeutscher Rundfunk Brandenburg*) for the state of Brandenburg, and MDR (*Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk*) for the three states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia; the fifth state, Mecklenburg-West Pomerania, joined up with NDR.

14. Cf., for instance, Cordt Schnibben's reportage "Vom Lada zum Lambada," about the legendary TV activism of *elf 99*. (*Der Spiegel* 49 [1989]; repr. in Cordt Schnibben, *Seltsames Deutschland* [Munich: Knaur 1992] 254-63).

15. For an excellent, concise survey of this transition period, see Knut Hickethier "Das Zerschlagen der Einrichtung," *Mauer-Show*, ed. R. Bohn, K. Hickethier, and E. Müller (Berlin: sigma, 1992) 71-93.

(and to most of the West German Left) Kohl's and Mühlfenzl's heavy-handed approach to these problems smacked of media censorship and, even from a more neutral vantage point, the impression remained that, when the last East German channel ceased operations at the end of 1991, the East German states had "lost their voice." Knut Hickethier's article in this volume provides a more detailed description of the factors that influenced the developments in East German television after the demise of the Communist government.

3. The latest step in the escalating war over control of the German airwaves was a direct frontal attack on the ARD itself, the oldest network, and yet the one that, traditionally, has been most critical of CDU policy. In January of 1995, the Minister Presidents of Bavaria (Edmund Stoiber, CSU) and Saxony (Kurt Biedenkopf, CDU) jointly published their "Theses on a Structural Reform of Public Broadcasting" in which they argued that the *Grundversorgung* ("essential programming service") defined by the Federal Constitutional Court as the domain of the public networks (i.e., ARD and ZDF) could be provided by the centralist ZDF in conjunction with the regionalist network now constituted by the ARD's "Third Programs."¹⁶ The ARD as a national television service would have been abolished under this scenario.

Despite flanking support from Kohl, the proposal ran into such heavy opposition¹⁷ that it was dropped – at least temporarily, owing in part to its transparently political subtext: Stoiber and Biedenkopf had reserved their most severe criticism for the largest of the ARD member stations, WDR, which had been the most left-leaning among the public television stations. Nicknamed "*Rotfunk*" [Red Channel] in more than one CDU position paper, the WDR has always been the focus of conservative criticism. Yet this fairly straightforward attempt to gag public television journalism by eliminating the entire ARD was perhaps too transparent or, at the very least, ill-timed to succeed.

While the new SPD/Green coalition has yet to make its mark on German media policy, one would expect that ARD and ZDF will at the

16. It is no coincidence that this trial balloon was floated by two *Länder* Minister Presidents, rather than coming from Bonn. Learning from the fiasco of the Adenauer administration's attempt to push through a centralist government television channel — which violated the constitutionally guaranteed cultural hegemony of the *Länder* and was therefore opposed even by conservative *Länder* governments — Kohl made sure to start this new attack through the proper venues: the representatives of the German states.

17. Some of this debate is documented in Wilhelm von Sternburg, ed., *Tagesthema ARD. Der Streit um das Erste Programm* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1995).

very least have a little breathing space, given both parties' traditional support of the public television model.¹⁸ However should the ratings of either public television network drop down to – or below – the threshold of a 10 percent audience share, a scenario that is not too far-fetched given the heavy competition from commercial broadcasters and transnational satellite sources, the Federal Court's constitutional protection will no longer be worth much.¹⁹

Against this general backdrop, we would point to some *specific* factors contributing to the current crisis in German television:

1. In a best-case scenario, the European (not just German) concept of *television as an institution serving the public interest* (comparable to schools, universities, hospitals or public transport), makes television a fascinating arena for public discourse — as German television was in the 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand, it also makes it a target for government-takeover schemes, as the 1961 “Deutschland-Fernsehen-GmbH” fiasco or Margaret Thatcher's attempts at censuring the BBC demonstrated.

2. The resulting scenario has been a *media culture established by court order*. Much as the German Supreme Court's valiant efforts to ensure a lively and independent television culture in the public interest must be admired, one irony of this process has gone largely unnoticed: The much-heralded “television” rulings of the *Bundesverfassungsgericht* of 1961, 1971, 1981, 1986, and 1994, even as they established and then repeatedly reaffirmed their “guarantee” of a minimal supply of independent television programs in the public interest,²⁰ nevertheless

18. This support is explicitly articulated in the Coalition Agreement between the SPD and Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (20 Oct. 1998). Section X, “A New Political and Cultural Openness,” states as one of the new administration's goals “the preservation of a pluralistic media landscape and a stronger public broadcasting service. . . .” Cf. the text of the Coalition Agreement on the Greens' web site: http://www.gruene.de/sache/30_rechts.htm.

19. In the mid-1990s, both public television stations came dangerously close to that, losing most of their (formerly captive) viewers to commercial broadcasters, especially RTL. For the moment, it seems as if at least ARD has been successful at not only stopping, but reversing this downward trend: in the first half of 1998, ARD, for the first time since the 1980s, pulled ahead of everyone else in the ratings – including RTL. However, this was partly the result of major sports events (the soccer world championship) and the railroad disaster at Eschede. During both events, ARD and ZDF more or less divided the television audience between them, almost shutting out the commercial competition. (Cf. anon., “Comeback der Dinos,” *Der Spiegel* 26 [1998]: 76–78).

20. For more detailed information on the role of the Federal Constitutional Court in the regulation of German broadcasting see Peter J. Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy in Germany. The Press and Broadcasting since 1945* (New York: Berg 1990), and Humphreys's updated article in this issue.

continued a tradition of top-down democratic evolution.

3. Germany's proverbial *high-culture/low culture* dichotomy kept many intellectuals at arm's length from the medium. While this is not unique to Germany, there has been a virtual explosion of serious scholarship on media theory in England and the United States, whereas in Germany, television scholarship tends to go either the social or political science route, or is simply content to dismiss the medium in a Frankfurt School-derived critique of industrial production. Among the Germanists now holding *Lehrstühle* in Germany, there are very few who have engaged in a serious analysis of the new medium on the *programming* level, and only a handful who have done so consistently (some of them are represented in this volume). While this has no immediate impact on the quality of television programming, the absence of a public forum has left the critique of television forms and genres largely to newspaper critics and the producers themselves. This, in turn, has made it much harder for public television writers, producers and executives to identify and support promising programming innovations and formats that might have provided a viable counterbalance (in political, aesthetic, and mass-appeal terms) to the new banalities of commercial programming. Michael Geisler's article gives a more comprehensive analysis of the dominant influences on German media theory, and the new direction it has taken over the last ten years.

4. Connected to this is the fact that *German television does not have a "rerun culture."* To be sure, American films and television series seem to be circling endlessly in the dark recesses of Leo Kirch's commercial channels (and not only there), and there are a few successful German crime series, most notably *Tatort*, that are rebroadcast on a fairly regular basis. But there is nothing on German television that would compare to the American rerun culture where one can revisit practically every moderately successful series, from *Hill Street Blues* to *Mary Tyler Moore* and *The Twilight Zone* on any given day of the week. This is significant, we would argue, because these reruns are an important part of television culture itself. Through them, and through their intertextual links to contemporary social and political norms, the medium constructs not only its own history, but a considerable portion of the national narrative. Where this rerun culture is absent, the kind of semi-ironical, semi-serious discourse that clusters around the historicity of specific television forms, and that draws its metaphors from certain

television programs (e.g., a “*Leave it to Beaver* world”) is also missing. This deprives television programming as a whole of any sense of continuity, opening it wide to the kind of strip-mining of forms and genres now going on in Germany. The absence of an established and widely accepted popular television culture, as well as the early prominence of American television fare after the introduction of cable, have contributed to a sense of aversion and disaffection among German media specialists today. Both Heidi Schumacher’s and Knut Hickethier’s articles in this issue address these concerns.

5. One could argue that, just as the New German Cinema lost its competitive edge under the benevolent tutelage of German television, so German public television itself had thrived for so long under the umbrella provided by the German Supreme Court (and an SPD administration loathe to embrace the new media) that the sudden wave of competition inundating German air and cable space in the second half of the 1980s caught the two broadcasting behemoths of ARD and ZDF completely unawares. Ill prepared to counter the lowest-common-denominator programming of their commercial rivals, public television program executives reacted in knee-jerk fashion by pulling all the stops on their own programming in an effort to compete with the commercial stations on the latter’s own territory.

6. One factor that is often overlooked is the medium’s innate ability to confound critical approaches by simply outrunning them. This is particularly noticeable with regard to the new media, but this non-simultaneity of critical media discourse was already apparent in the grotesque miscalculations of German cinema owners and television producers in the 1960s. While the former tried to stuff the new genie back into the cathode ray tube from which it had sprung by boycotting it (“Not a single foot of film for television!”), thus precipitating the demise of the German film industry in the 1960s, television producers reacted to the threat and to their own inadequate projections of their future programming needs, by *relying on one single source*, indeed *one man*, for most of their foreign programming needs: the Bavarian distributor Leo Kirch. In retrospect, it becomes increasingly apparent that this son of a Frankonian vintner, a clever and sometimes ruthless wheeler-dealer, was the only man in all of Germany who saw very early on that the future of the entertainment industry would belong to those who could provide the *stories* for the electronic narrator. Since the advent of the new media, the pressure to come up with something, anything, to fill the thousands of programming

hours a week that make up the world's second largest television market (after the United States) has become even more acute, and Kirch is ideally situated to control the market. Unless the German Federal Cartel Office finds a way of curbing Kirch's activities, there is now the very real danger of a Kirch monopoly over the German media landscape.²¹

On 3 July 1996, Leo Kirch acquired the world rights (with the exception of the U.S. market) to the soccer world championships of 2002 and 2006 (for 3.4 billion DM). Only five days later, he announced a far-ranging partnership with British media tycoon Rupert Murdoch that will strengthen both Murdoch's and Kirch's strangleholds over the European TV markets.²² Kirch's most recent coup was to outflank his arch rival, the Bertelsmann Group in their ongoing struggle for domination of the German television market, especially the new opportunities provided by high-resolution digital television. Bertelsmann, the world's second largest multi-media concern after Time-Warner, had hoped to establish its own presence in the digital TV arena, but was forced into an embarrassing marriage of convenience with Kirch's DF1 when it realized that Kirch simply controls too much of the archival material the new channels will depend on.²³ However, far from removing the threat to media pluralism, this mega-fusion of Germany's²⁴ two biggest conglomerates actually increases it, because Kirch (SAT1, PRO7, KABEL 1) and Bertelsmann (RTL, RTL2, VOX, SUPER RTL) together control almost 90 percent of Germany's commercial television programming, nearly all German licenses for new American productions as well as the exclusive rights to live broadcasts of the soccer matches played in the German Soccer Association's top league, the *Erste Bundesliga*.²⁵

21. See Peter Humphreys's article in this issue.

22. See the *Spiegel* cover "Wer regiert den Himmel?" *Der Spiegel* 29 (15 July 1996): 23.

23. Anon., "Bertelsmann verbündet sich mit Kirch," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ-Online) 23 July 1996, and the editorial in the same issue. "Kartell unter Kirchs Kuratel."

24. On Kirch's links to other European media conglomerates and German media within the European context in general see Knut Hickethier, "The Media in Germany," *Markets and Myths. Forces for Change in the European Media*, ed. Anthony Weymouth and Bernard Lamizet (London: Longman, 1996) 123ff.

25. As if that were not enough, the two media giants recently agreed on a coordinated broadcasting schedule that would have eliminated any sense of real competition from the German airwaves (except for the public television stations). Cf. "Das Wort Monopol meiden," *Der Spiegel* 9 (1998): 92ff. However, for the time being, the Bertelsmann/Kirch pay-TV monopoly was thwarted by Karel van Miert, the European Union's Competition Commissioner. "Wir lassen Kirch nicht allein," *Der Spiegel* 23 (1998): 108-09.

To put all of this information into perspective, one needs to keep in mind that the current travails of German television are probably symptoms of the same kind of modernization shakedown that plagued the American television landscape throughout much of the 1980s. And just as was the case in the United States then, it is not hard to find in German television of today niches in which the best of traditional German television has survived, as well as some innovative programming initiatives. Even though the “flagship” of German public broadcasting, the *Fernsehspiel* [television drama] has been publicly buried by numerous nostalgic TV critics, these announcements were, as usual, “rather premature.” The tradition survives, though on a less spectacular basis than before. True, *Die zweite Heimat*, the 1992 26-hour sequel to Reitz’s successful *Heimat* series of 1984, was an expensive critical and commercial disappointment that will make public television producers think twice before committing themselves to a similarly ambitious venture in the future. On the other hand, Dieter Wedel’s four-part miniseries *Der große Bellheim* (ZDF, 1993) successfully fused social criticism with political satire in revealing the problems caused by the transition from the pioneers of the German economic miracle to a new generation of business school trainees who lack both the vision and the personal commitment that drove the early tycoons. Productions like Nico Hoffmann’s self-referential media thriller *Der Sandmann* (RTL2, 1995), which won the coveted Adolf Grimme Award in Gold and Urs Egger’s ambitious two-part adaptation of Josef Haslinger’s *Opernball* (SAT1, 1998) suggest that even the commercial channels are beginning to recognize the need both to continue this long tradition of topical, relevant television drama and to provide some niche where young talents may be given a chance to try new forms and modes of articulation (as RTL2 has done with its umbrella series “Die jungen Wilden”). There are even indications that some of the commercial channels are trying to remodel their notoriously uninformative news shows along the lines of the more serious newscasting provided by the public channels.²⁶ And of course, the electronic news magazines produced by some of Germany’s and Switzerland’s most respectable print publications (*Spiegel-TV*, *Zeit-TV*, *Format NZZ*) add independent viewpoints and top-notch investigative reportage to the television news and information portfolio of the German-speaking countries.

26. Titus Arnu, “Sie wollen so seriös wie die ‘Tagesschau’ sein,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ-ONLINE) 31 Aug. 1996.

German media scholars seem ambivalent about the potential ramifications of the development of niche programming. Schumacher, for instance, is rather troubled by this trend, fearing it will mean that ever fewer viewers will actually watch quality programming, while an increasing number will succumb to the manipulative, the inane, and the sensationalistic. Hickethier, on the other hand, sees the resistance of certain television genres, primarily news programming, to *Americanization* and audience disaffection with re-broadcast American series as a sign that the German television community will refuse to lower its standards in the long run, preserving a regionally and culturally unique television character. Finally, whatever the ultimate verdict on Kluge's "culture magazines" (*Zehn vor elf* and *Die Stunde der Filmemacher*) may be, it should not go without notice that there is room for this type of programming on German commercial television broadcasting.

This issue on the changing media landscape in Germany since 1984 opens with a section designed to give a broader overview of the current media configuration. The first three articles all cover the major developments that have occurred during this period. Peter Humphreys recaps and analyzes the legal and political developments that created today's broadcasting system. Knut Hickethier looks at the effects commercialization has had on program development. Closing out the opening section, Michael Geisler reviews and previews German media theory, both the theoretical paradigms that dominated German media discourse into the 1980s, as well as the new directions it has taken within the last decade. The second part introduces the theoretical work of two authors which Geisler examines in his overview, Norbert Bolz's interpretation of Benjamin's media aesthetics from his *Theory of the New Media*, and Siegfried Zielinski's provisional conclusions about our relationship to the new media from his book *Audiovisions. Cinema and Television as Interludes of History*. We have decided to close with three more circumscribed contributions about specific issues: Heidi Schumacher's interpretation of current programming trends as a move to a thorough-going commercial aesthetic for all television production; Peter Lutze's examination of Alexander Kluge's "guerrilla" assault on television via television; and Michelle Mattson's analysis of the way in which a very popular German crime series, *Tatort*, represents and constructs issues of current political interest.

Humphreys's article unpacks the agendas and decision-making processes that led to today's broadcasting system. He discusses the de-regulation that allowed for the installation of a vast commercial cable

network, the relevant political background, including the ideological split between the SPD and CDU, the crucial roles of the German federal postal ministry and of Germany's supreme court, which has consistently handed down decisive rulings throughout Germany's post-war broadcasting history. Humphreys also delineates how Germany's rather unique de-centralized broadcasting system, in conjunction with weak regulations on print media ownership, have led to the concentration of media power in Germany in the hands of a few media dynasties, most predominantly the Leo Kirch media empire and the Bertelsmann/WAZ group. Finally Humphreys outlines the impact of these developments on public broadcasting in Germany, its increasing inability to justify the high consumer fees charged to individual households by the federal postal minister, and its still precarious future.

Hickethier also touches on these legal and systemic broadcasting issues, adding a brief description of what happened to television in East Germany from 1989 to 1991, when it was essentially obliterated through its integration into the existing structures of West German broadcasting. However, he primarily assesses the impact that the introduction of commercial broadcasting has had on what we see when we watch German television. He examines the much-touted Europeanization of television, both as a real development and as a rhetorical gesture. Hickethier also provides a valuable discussion of programming trends; looking first at early programming efforts in the last half of the 1980s, and then at how the emphases have shifted in the 90s, now that commercial broadcasters have established themselves firmly within the media landscape. His analysis covers long-term trends away from narrative to interactive television, the reconceptualization of television genres, and the losses public broadcasting has incurred through the competition with the commercial networks.

Geisler then walks us through media-theoretical discourse in Germany. He argues that the Frankfurt School's wholesale indictment of industrially produced texts constituted the dominant paradigm in Germany into the 1980s. He further maintains that this indictment blocked the evolution of significant new approaches to the media for most of the 1960s and 1970s. It was only in the mid-1980s that Friedrich Kittler's work, together with the emerging influence of poststructuralism, began to transform the way German media theorists thought about their field. Ideological critique gave way to a McLuhanesque obsession with the materiality of communication and the structural and epistemological

changes wrought by the new media. Technophobes turned into technophiles, heralding the end of Humanism (Norbert Bolz) and the suspension of the physical body in cyberspace. Yet with few exceptions (e.g., Hartmut Winkler, Siegfried Zielinski), the agenda remains the same: German intellectuals harbor a deep-seated aversion to direct encounters with mass-cultural phenomena. Hans Magnus Enzensberger articulates this well, when he cynically concludes that “noise,” “boredom,” and the elimination of content, is the only true “message” of television. And Peter Handke’s or Botho Strauss’s elitist broadsides against the mass media (and the masses!) serve as drastic reminders of the fact that the process of democratization percolates from the bottom up, not the other way around. Conversely, Zielinski’s and Winkler’s investigations into the historical relativity of the epistemological “revolutions” wrought by audiovisual (Zielinski) and digital (Winkler) technologies demonstrate that the German tradition of taking a couple of critical steps back and resituating topical developments in a larger context can still open up entirely new avenues of inquiry.

We have included sections from Norbert Bolz’s and Siegfried Zielinski’s work in order to provide an example of the work Geisler discusses. The excerpt from Bolz’s *Theory of the New Media* represents Bolz’s interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s media theory and its positive potential for helping us to re-conceptualize the relationship of human beings and the new media. Bolz sees in Benjamin’s *flâneur*, moving through the Paris arcades (and through Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*) the prefiguration of the net surfer losing himself or herself in cyberspace. This, however, with one significant transformation: while the passivity of the observer remains, the detachment of the *flâneur*’s wandering, critical eye vanishes. Tactility (real or imaginary) and proximity take the place of criticism. Benjamin’s famous dictum of the “loss of aura” thus takes on a prophetic meaning: at stake is the “aura” of autonomous art as a discourse. It is only fitting, then, that Benjamin’s texts, like McLuhan’s, are mosaic, bricolage, at times bordering on casuistry. Benjamin’s work thus becomes “the interface between the Gutenberg Galaxy and the world of the new media” – an aspect long repressed by Critical Theory.

Bolz argues that the advent of the new media marks a historical moment as significant to human history as was the discovery that the earth is not the center of the universe. While the Copernican revolution dethroned human beings from their cosmic centrality, Bolz suggests that

the new media have de-centered human beings from epistemology itself: we are no longer the sole originators or processors of knowledge. Instead of viewing the new media as something artificial, as something distinct from human beings, he proposes that we rethink the very concept of the natural and the human to include the new technologies. He maintains that we must learn to “functionalize them as extensions” of ourselves. Only when we do this, will we be able to realize the emancipatory potential they hold for us.

Zielinski’s reflections on how we have responded to developments in media technology could easily have served as the concluding remarks for this special issue, since they offer us a very sober appraisal of where “we are at” with the new media, and more importantly the kinds of questions we need to be asking both about their import in human lives and our own – as yet inadequately – creative relationship to them. However, his discussion picks up in a sense where Bolz leaves off, attempting to specify the actual individual and social implications the new media have for our lives. He tries to confront the doomsayers of today that see in the media nothing but a loss of the real, a reduction of the human. Zielinski argues that while the new media have certainly shifted and re-ordered the boundaries of our experiences, they do not eliminate the social spaces in which human interaction happens. Reality, he maintains, is still very much a construction of human subjectivity. While he acknowledges that the more traditional loci of social interaction have diminished in importance, he explores the ambiguities and multivalences that the concept of “mobile privatization” (Raymond Williams) can entail for opening up different kinds of public fora and group identities. In Benjaminian fashion, Zielinski emphasizes the potential creativity the new media can release in the user, providing an opportunity to create an individualized product from their disparate offerings.

The three subsequent articles all thematize or echo elements introduced and discussed in the opening section. Heidi Schumacher’s article about new trends in television programming examines how the commercialization of broadcasting has led to its literal commercialization. She shows that television programming development in Germany has adopted the three basic tenets of marketing aesthetics: 1) catching the attention of the viewer; 2) involving the viewer through “participatory” structures on an emotional — rather than critical-analytical — level; and 3) anchoring the viewer to specific television products, ensuring that certain television programs become part of the viewer’s daily rituals.

This marks a major rupture in German television production, distribution and reception. Instead of seeing the increasing presence of interactive television as a move toward democratizing television, Schumacher emphasizes the loss of critical distance that goes hand in hand with this type of “interactive” programming (Bolz suggests that this loss of critical distance is a result of the new media’s tactile characteristics). Yes, television viewers now see television more as their own personal vehicle of expression, but it has lost its public service potential in the process. Schumacher’s article provides an example of a response to commercial broadcasting as the end of German television’s golden era. She maintains that only after commercialization has German television become a mass medium. Although one can still find quality programming in the sea of broadcasting inanity, she fears that it will come to serve only a subgroup of television viewers.

Zielinski would caution us, however, that we cannot predict or control the use an individual will make of what the media transmit, and he would remind us that we have yet to exploit fully the potential the new technologies present. In Lutze’s discussion of Kluge’s television work, the issue of individual reception and the exploration of the creative potential of new media technology are also paramount. Lutze outlines for us both the history of Kluge’s participation in television and the motivations for his involvement. He also gives us a detailed description and analysis of one Kluge production, “16 films in 24 minutes.” His analysis reveals how indebted Kluge is to the advent of new production technologies, and how, in fact, his exploration of these new technologies have influenced the further development of Kluge’s own aesthetics. Lutze underscores the tremendous burden that Kluge’s particular aesthetic strategies have always placed on the viewer, arguing that this has become even more pronounced in some of his work for television.²⁷

Both Lutze’s study of Kluge and Michelle Mattson’s article on *Tatort* discuss specific television texts, how they are structured, and what implications such structures have in terms of reception theories and audience share. Their contributions offer possible ways to talk about television on a theoretical level, while still addressing the actual material of television. Whereas Lutze looks at more challenging experimental television programming, Mattson analyzes an example of popular

27. Due to space constraints, Peter Lutze’s article will appear in a subsequent issue of *New German Critique*.

German programming. Her discussion of the long-running *Tatort* (a product of one of Germany's public stations) discusses first the apparent contradictions in the messages various episodes send out, and then examines the structural and aesthetic choices made in the production of these shows that contribute to the apparent self-contradiction of the episodes in question. She argues that the problems and peculiarities of television production are as much a result of aesthetic choices as they are of their institutional positioning within the culture industry.

Overall the issue's aim is to look at German broadcasting since roughly 1984 from a variety of perspectives and on numerous levels. The contributions constitute a heterogenous collection of articles that range from the abstract theoretical to more concrete textual and production analysis. We have included these disparate and at times even contradictory voices in order to offer a sampling of the very broad spectrum that the study of German media encompasses. Although television and television production receive most of the attention here, many of the articles go beyond questions specific to television to consider aspects of broader import. Since it is highly unlikely that Germany will ever return to a purely public broadcasting system, we hope this issue will add to an understanding of what German television as a vastly influential medium does and how it operates within radically altered parameters. Nonetheless, there is every reason to believe that someday television as we know it will become obsolete, and that we must explore now the individual and social implications the entire array of new media entail.

*Germany's "Dual" Broadcasting System:
Recipe For Pluralism
In The Age of Multi-Channel Broadcasting?**

Peter Humphreys

The last decade and a half have seen a paradigmatic transformation of German broadcasting from the traditional public-service monopoly to a dual public/private system. The introduction of the "new media," cable and satellite, part of the wider communications revolution in the advanced industrial world,¹ greatly expanded the opportunities to launch new program services, undermining thereby the "scarcity of frequency" argument for continued public broadcasting monopoly. Hitherto European thinking had held that terrestrial frequencies were insufficiently available for a truly competitive and pluralistic broadcasting market. The risk of overcrowding the airwaves had been a further, purely technical rationale for public monopoly. Satellite television and its re-transmission in multi-channel cable systems abridged national and — in Germany — state [*Länder*] broadcasting sovereignties. In Germany, as elsewhere, this state of affairs necessitated a re-regulation of broadcasting. However, it undermined regulatory effectiveness and encouraged an element of

* This article draws on research into media concentration and its regulation conducted by the author at Manchester University between 1996 (January) and 1998 (December) and financed by the British Economic and Social Research Council under its Media Economics and Media Culture research programme (Grant No. L 12625109).

1. This communications revolution is ongoing. Currently digital "platforms" are being launched in western Europe. Digital broadcasting multiplies the number of possible channels even more than cable and satellite have already done.

competitive deregulation as the states competed to attract (or retain) media investment.

In Germany the process of introducing private commercial broadcasting was a matter of considerable political conflict and public debate. Many feared its negative impact on radio and television. Public-service broadcasting had rationales underpinning it other than simply the argument concerning scarcity of frequencies. There had long existed a consensus that broadcasting had public goods characteristics. Moreover, in Germany broadcasting was regarded as more than a medium: the constitutional court saw it as a vital "factor" for the functioning of democracy, society and culture. Because of this function, the public-service broadcasters had been constrained universally to provide a comprehensive, diverse, and balanced range of programming that catered to a wide range of citizens' needs. Although the public-service broadcasters supplemented their license fee income with limited advertising, without commercial competitors they were free from the pressure to provide a service geared to maximize the audiences that could be delivered to advertisers. The public broadcasters' explicit remit was to deliver a quality service providing more than mainly mass-entertainment. Moreover, this public-service paradigm had allowed for a "separation of media powers" [*publizistische Gewaltenteilung*] between a private commercial press that was accountable to the market (and mostly to those with market power) and the public-service broadcasters which were accountable to the citizenry (through their regulatory structures — see below). Therefore, among the benefits of public-service broadcasting was the fact that it counterbalanced the concentration of private press power in relatively few corporate hands and thereby promoted pluralism in the mass media system at large.²

The accountability mechanisms for broadcasting — in place in West Germany since the early post-war years and extended to the former East Germany since 1990 — marked German public-service broadcasting as a distinctive model. For obvious historical reasons, it was more self-consciously democratic and pluralistic than many other systems in western Europe. The principal democratic/pluralist feature of the German regulatory system was the key role played by "broadcasting councils" [*Rundfunkräte*] within the individual regional broadcasting corporations

2. On press concentration see the regular reports by Walter Schütz and Horst Röper in the journal *Media Perspektiven*.

and the television council of the ZDF.³ These broadcasting councils each contained varying numbers of representatives from “socially significant groups” such as cultural bodies, churches, employers associations, trade unions, and so on, along with political representatives. This “internal control” [*Binnenkontrolle*] assured that the channels were “internally pluralistic” [*Binnenpluralismus*].

Germany’s paradigmatic transformation of broadcasting structures over the last decade was part of a Europe-wide trend toward the abolition of the traditional public-service broadcasting monopoly and the opening of the regulatory barriers to private commercial entrants. In France, the country’s leading public-service broadcasting company was even privatized. In Italy, the commercialization of broadcasting has been described as a “wild deregulation.” In Germany, by contrast, the abolition of the public service monopoly was counterbalanced by unmistakable re-regulatory features.⁴ The federal constitutional court ruled in 1986 that the constitutionality of private commercial broadcasting depended on there being a continued central role for the public-service broadcasters and a guarantee that the latter’s technical, organizational, and financial requirements would be met [*Bestands- und Entwicklungsgarantie*]. Successive rulings of the court confirmed and developed this guarantee. Further, the new commercial broadcasters remained subject to a “relatively dense regulatory code of conduct.”⁵ The commercial broadcasters were franchised and supervised by a new tier of state regulatory authorities [*Landesmedienanstalten*], which supplied public accountability. They had pluralist boards composed of representatives of the socially significant groups. In this respect they appeared to be modelled on the above-

3. There were nine of these corporations in West Germany. Unification with the former East Germany in 1990 brought the number to eleven. However, in 1997 two of the south German corporations merged, leaving a total of ten. Cooperating together in the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (ARD), they provided the First German TV channel (generally referred to simply as “ARD”). The second channel was provided by *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen* (ZDF). The ARD corporations provided their own regional channels, the “Third Channel(s).”

4. Peter Humphreys, “Political Structures and Broadcasting Marketisation: A Comparison of Britain and West Germany,” *The Market and the State: Studies in Interdependence*, eds. Michael Moran and Maurice Wright (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991) 200-18; and Humphreys, *Mass Media and Media Policy in Western Europe* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1996).

5. Silke Ruck, “Broadcasting Law in Germany,” *European Journal of Communication* 7.2 (June 1992): 219-39. This is a special issue on Media and the Changing Landscape of Western Europe edited by Wolfgang Hoffmann-Riem.

mentioned public-service broadcasting councils. Their principal tasks were licensing and program supervision; their key purpose was to ensure that private broadcasting was sufficiently pluralistic, especially with regard to balance and diversity of opinion although this might now be achieved across a range of program services ("external pluralism").

However, the principle of public separation of power has been relinquished. As will be seen, Germany is conspicuously lax about cross-media ownership. The main investors in commercial broadcasting have been press and other media companies, notably a few giant ones. Moreover, Germany has not escaped a Europe-wide crisis of the effectiveness of regulation. To a significant degree, this has resulted from the fragmentation of regulatory jurisdictions between the states in the context of transfrontier satellite broadcasting,⁶ and from the intense competition between the states to attract (or retain) media investment. Inter-state competition for media investment [*Standortwettbewerb*] appears to have impeded the pursuit of more effective regulation.⁷

The Forces Seeking Deregulation

Apart from the technological factor, there was also an ideological factor for the radical reform of broadcasting structures. The 1980s was a decade during which the doctrine of the free market was embraced by a number of west European governments, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm. In broadcasting policy, this inspired an energetic attack on the public-service broadcasting monopoly. The new received wisdom was that allegedly paternalistic and bureaucratic structures and practices of broadcasting should give way to new ones providing greater "consumer sovereignty." The CDU/CSU were also keen to counterbalance "red broadcasting" [*Rotfunk*], in other words broadcasting allegedly biased toward their political rivals, the Social Democratic party (SPD). *Rotfunk* had, in their view, been featured too much in the media output of the public broadcasters.⁸

The interests of certain influential economic lobbies reinforced ideological and political motives. In Germany, as elsewhere in western Europe, a powerful coalition of business interests drove policy during the 1980s in a deregulatory, marketizing direction. The consumer electronics

6. Together with re-transmission by cable systems.

7. *Standortpolitik* is "locational policy" in economics.

8. Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy in Germany: The Press and Broadcasting Since 1945* (Oxford and Providence: Berg, 1994) 202-03.

industry, the cable and satellite television lobby, the telecommunications industry, the advertizing industry, and German press groups keen to diversify in the media field, all exerted pressure for the opening up of commercial broadcasting opportunities. The new media, overcoming the technical rationale for public monopoly, raised their hopes that commercial broadcasting would be permitted. However, the incumbency of a SPD-led federal government thwarted their plans during the 1970s. In 1982 a change of national government to a CDU/CSU-led coalition suddenly presented a new possibility for the realization of their goals.⁹

***Federal Inroads into Broadcasting Policy;
The Bundespost Drives Policy in the 1980s***

The broadcasting revolution in Germany did not really get going until the CDU/CSU came to power in Bonn in 1982.¹⁰ Although Germany's federal order made broadcasting part of the "cultural sovereignty" [*Kulturhoheit*] of the states, the change of power to a CDU/CSU/FDP federal government mattered greatly. The SPD, which had been continuously in power from 1969-82, had been hostile to private commercial broadcasting and, mainly for this reason, unenthusiastic about introducing cable television on a mass basis. Since telecommunications was a federal jurisdiction the SPD had been able to use its incumbency of the federal Bundespost ministry to impose what the CDU/CSU called a "cable blockade" (although the SPD did agree to a limited number of experimental cable television pilot projects). However, with the change of power in Bonn to the CDU/CSU/FDP coalition control over the post office passed to CDU minister Christian Schwarz-Schilling, who in line with his party's media policy, was highly enthusiastic about the new media and the commercial opportunities they opened up.

From 1983 to 1985 the Bundespost poured one billion DM per annum into an ambitious national cable infrastructural program; from 1986, the Bundespost increased its investment to 1.5 billion DM per annum. The

9. See Hans Kleinsteuber, ed., *Medien: Thema Kabelfernsehen* (Berlin: Wissenschaftsverlag Volker Spiess, 1980); Axel Zerdick, "Ökonomische Interessen und Entwicklungslinien bei der Durchsetzung neuer Informations- und Kommunikationstechniken," *Rundfunk und Fernsehen* 30.4 (1982): 478-90; and Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy in Germany* 194-203.

10. In 1982 the FDP, the SPD's coalition partners, switched sides. This ushered in an extended period of CDU/CSU/FDP federal government which by virtue of several federal election victories continued until 1998. Following a general election in that year, an SPD/Green coalition took office.

CDU-controlled Bundespost also made available satellite channel capacity, and released local terrestrial frequencies across the country. Thus, the CDU/CSU/FDP federal government in Bonn provided the private sector with what would quickly become an abundant infrastructure for commercial broadcasting. The Bundespost action aimed thereby to inspire confidence among the new investors, to promote the commercial media policies of CDU/ CSU states, and to overwhelm the resistance of the recalcitrant SPD states to the liberalization of broadcasting. This activism by the federal authorities opened the way for the CDU/ CSU states to introduce private commercial broadcasting and exerted great pressure on the SPD states to do the same, not least for reasons of *Standortpolitik*.

***The Federal Constitutional Court Helps to Break the States Deadlock:
A "Dual" System***

The intervention of another federal institution — the federal constitutional court — was also fundamental to the reform process. Firstly, in 1981 the court had pronounced that in view of the new technical possibilities private commercial broadcasting, as long as it were to be suitably regulated, could no longer be obstructed on the grounds of "scarcity of frequencies," thereby giving states the green light to legislate commercial broadcasting. Secondly, in 1986 the court gave important clarification as to how the emerging public/private "dual system" should function and be regulated.¹¹

While the Bundespost was busy providing massive infrastructural investment to overcome the scarcity of frequencies, the regulatory policy making process for the new broadcast services became deadlocked politically. Regulatory policy for broadcasting was a competence of the states. They enacted their own broadcasting laws. Indeed, from 1984 onward the individual states enacted a wave of legislation for private commercial broadcasting. However, by definition individual state laws could not provide an adequate regulatory framework for new national services. For the latter, an inter-state treaty was required.¹²

The problem was that during 1983-86 the state politicians remained seemingly deadlocked over what kind of national-level regulations were

11. "FRAG Urteil des Bundesverfassungsgerichts vom 16 Juni. 198,1" BverfGE 12, and "Urteil des Bundesverfassungsgerichts vom 4. November 1986, BverfGE 73. See Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy in Germany* 339-40.

12. Thus in 1961 a *Staatsvertrag* had been necessary to found the ZDF, the second national channel co-managed by the states. *Staatsverträge* were also necessary to establish those public broadcasting corporations that are shared by states.

called for.¹³ By and large the CDU/ CSU prime ministers were keen to provide the most favorable regulatory conditions for commercial broadcasting. The SPD prime ministers, too, were eager to attract new commercial media investment but they were under pressure from their party's rank-and-file not to concede too much deregulation. This confrontation over the outstanding national rules — in essence about where to strike the balance between private enterprise and public-service — was becoming dangerously polarized by the mid-1980s with the CDU/ CSU prime ministers threatening to withdraw their stations from the ARD (the public-service broadcasting network) and warning that they might refuse to support the raising of the license fee upon which the public broadcasters depended (the level of the license fee was decided collectively by state politicians).

The deadlock was broken by several developments. First, increasingly irrespective of ideological color the states were becoming engaged in what might be called "competitive deregulation" to attract private media investment (i.e., *Standortpolitik*). The SPD state government of Hamburg, anxious to maintain the city state's status as one of Germany's premier media centers, led the way toward a "new realism" in SPD policy.¹⁴ Secondly, by the mid-1980s, the Bundespost's infrastructural program was making it more and more possible that the CDU/ CSU states might go their own way in any case. Thirdly, the states' inability to agree upon new rules strengthened the hand of those calling for the federal government to intervene on the issue of satellite broadcasting on the grounds that at stake were important economic matters rather than cultural ones. The threat of federal intrusion into their policy domain always served to rally the states. The issue was finally settled by intervention of the federal constitutional court.

One avenue of opposition had always remained particularly promising for the SPD: recourse to the federal constitutional court. In the past, the constitutional court had been very clear about the public mandate of broadcasting. It had ruled quite explicitly that broadcasting was not to be left to the "free play of forces" [*freies Spiel der Kräfte*]. Among the court's core principles for broadcasting were the need to provide for

13. Peter Glotz and Reinhold Kopp, eds., *Das Ringen um den Medienstaatsvertrag der Länder* (Berlin: Volker Spies, 1987); and Winand Gellner, *Ordnungspolitik im Fernsehen: Bundesrepublik Deutschland und Grossbritannien* (Frankfurt/Main: Lang, 1990) 230-40.

14. Hoffmann-Riem, "Medienstädte im Wettbewerb; am Beispiel Hamburgs," *Medien Journal* 2 (1989): 66-76; Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy in Germany*, ch 6.

"diversity of opinion" and the requirement of independence both from the state and from other powerful social forces.¹⁵ Precisely in order to prompt a court intervention on the controversial matter of commercial broadcasting, the SPD therefore appealed against lower Saxony's new broadcasting law (the first of the deregulatory CDU state laws) arguing, among other things, that it insufficiently guaranteed balance and diversity on the part of the new commercial broadcasters and provided too few powers to the new regulators of the private sector. The SPD complaint also pointed to the alleged weakness of the law's provisions against media concentration and cross-media concentration in particular, and to the excessive role the law granted to lower Saxony's government in the franchizing of new commercial operators, thereby infringing upon the hallowed principle of independence from the state.¹⁶

The constitutional court's subsequent intervention in 1986 proved to be decisive. Along with the Bundespost's activism, it helped to overcome the policy immobilism of *Länder* politics and to retrieve a minimum national consensus. In ruling upon the specific contested features of the lower Saxony law (which was in fact deemed "essentially" to be constitutional), the constitutional court in fact laid down some fundamental core provisions for the introduction of the "dual" public/private broadcasting system. In particular, the public-service broadcasters were to remain the bedrock of German broadcasting with a duty to continue universally to provide the basic services. This meant the comprehensive provision of high quality programs spanning entertainment, information, and education, catering to social and cultural diversity, and providing balanced pluralism. To this end, the public-service broadcasters had to be given guarantees concerning their technical, organizational, staffing, and financial requirements. In fact, the public-service broadcasters' provision of this basic service [*Grundversorgung*] was the precondition for the exemption of the private commercial broadcasters from the same high programming requirements and from the same degree of close regulation (that is, "internal control"). However, the private commercial broadcasters still had to observe a minimum standard of pluralism: all opinions, including minority ones, should "have the possibility" of being expressed. Moreover, adequate measures should be taken to prevent the appearance of "dominant influence over the expres-

15. Ruck, "Broadcasting Law in Germany" 222-23.

16. Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy in Germany* 243-44.

sion of opinion" [*vorherrschender Meinungsmacht*]. In other words, tendencies toward media concentration should be counteracted. Pluralistic "external" regulatory bodies (and the courts) were to ensure all this.¹⁷ These key principles, including the crucial "guarantee of the existence and further development" [*Bestands- und Entwicklungsgarantie*] of the public sector, were confirmed by several subsequent court rulings.¹⁸

The 1986 court ruling provided the basis for the successful negotiation of the inter-state treaty. This 1987 inter-state treaty (refined in 1991 — see below) produced the rules for a "dual" broadcasting system along the lines recommended by the constitutional court's 1986 ruling. Accordingly, the new private sector broadcasters were to be allowed to benefit from a significant, but still controlled, measure of deregulation. The private commercial broadcasters were still required to supply diverse and balanced programming although now this might be achieved across the range of new services ("external pluralism") rather than, as traditionally had been the case, within them ("internal pluralism"). Within these framework rules, it fell to the individual states to make their own detailed regulatory provisions.

De-Regulation or Re-Regulation?

The 1980s witnessed a flood of legislative activity by the states as well as the establishment of a whole new layer of states regulatory authorities for the private sector. Following unification there were fifteen of these state media authorities, one for each state except Berlin and Brandenburg which shared one. These private sector regulatory authorities are members of a federal association (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Landesmedienanstalten in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*) and cooperate through several organs including the standing conference of the individual authorities' directors [*Direktorenkonferenz der Landesmedienanstalten*].¹⁹ The details of the individual states' laws for private commercial broadcasting varied considerably, but they all attempted to provide for continued programming diversity, the provision of which it was for the

17. For an evaluation see Klaus Berg, "The fourth TV judgement of the Federal Constitutional Court," *EBU Review* XXXVIII/3 (1987): 37-43.

18. "Urteil des Bundesverfassungsgerichts vom 4. November 1986 – 1 BvF 1/84," repr. in *Media Perspektiven Dokumentation IV* (1986). All the Federal Constitutional Court's key rulings on broadcasting up to 1991 are summarized in Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy in Germany* 338-42.

19. For detail, see ALM, "Jahrbuch der Landesmedienanstalten 1997/98" (Munich: Reinhard Fischer, 1998).

Landesmedienanstalten to oversee. Some (SPD) laws required "internal pluralism" from the private broadcasters, some (CDU/CSU) opted for external pluralism, and the rest adopted mixed or transitional models.²⁰

The *Landesmedienanstalten* generally had supervisory boards that were composed pluralistically of representatives of the socially significant groups like the public-service broadcasting councils. However, the *Landesmedienanstalten* differed from the broadcasting councils within the public broadcasting corporations in that they were external authorities placed above the private broadcasters within their area of jurisdiction. The *Landesmediensanstalten* did not have the same range of powers as the broadcasting councils. Most obviously, whereas the broadcasting councils usually appointed the director-general of a public corporation, the *Landesmediensanstalten* had no influence over the appointment of a broadcasting organization's chief executive. They only had a supervisory and reactive influence over programming, without any say in routine operating decisions, financial matters, and so on. However, responsible for franchizing and overseeing the new private commercial sector, they were endowed with the power to fine broadcasters and the ultimate sanction of revoking or non-renewal of licenses.

Without downplaying the unquestionably significant re-regulatory elements of German broadcasting reform compared to certain other west European countries,²¹ much of this re-regulatory activity simply reflected the federalized nature of regulatory competences in Germany (that is the need for multiple state laws and regulatory authorities). Hoffmann-Riem suggested that re-regulation could also have a symbolic function: serving to provide "a politically and economically 'well-ordered' entrance into a new age of broadcasting in accordance with the market model."²²

Multimedia Diversification

One area of conspicuous regulatory weakness was the failure to curb the concentration of media power produced by the diversification and

20. Susanne Hiegemann, "Die Entwicklung des Mediensystems in der Bundesrepublik," ed. *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Privat-kommerzieller Rundfunk in Deutschland*, (Bonn: Bzpb, 1992) 31-88, here 66; Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy in Germany* 343; and Porter and Hasselbach, *Pluralism, Politics and the Marketplace* (London/New York: Routledge, 1991) 57- 59.

21. See Humphreys, *Mass Media and Media Policy in Western Europe*, ch 5.

22. Wolfgang Hoffmann-Riem, "Law, politics and the new media: trends in broadcasting regulation," *The Politics of the Communications Revolution in Western Europe*, eds. Kenneth Dyson and Peter Humphreys (London: Frank Cass, 1986) 144.

expansion strategies of major media companies. Ever since the late 1950s the publishers of the press had lobbied for the abolition of the public-service monopoly so that they might diversify into broadcasting operations. During the course of the 1980s, the press became extensively involved in the new commercial broadcasting sector, both in television and radio, and at local, regional, and national levels. Since broadcasting required heavy investment, unsurprisingly, the larger press corporations took the lead.²³

The new private commercial television sector quickly assumed features of oligopolistic competition between two giant “broadcasting families” [*Senderfamilien*], notably the Springer/Kirch group against Bertelsmann in alliance with the Luxembourg-based broadcasting multinational, the Compagnie Luxembourgeoise de Télédiffusion (CLT). The Springer/Kirch alliance controlled one of Germany’s principal new mainstream commercial channels, SAT1. The Bertelsmann/CLT alliance owned RTL (first known as “RTL Plus”), the other principal new mainstream commercial channel. Moreover, Germany’s third major new mainstream commercial channel PRO7 was controlled by Thomas Kirch, media mogul Leo Kirch’s son. In 1994, between them these three private commercial channels — SAT1, RTL and PRO7 — accounted for 80% of total television advertising revenue, and 90% of television advertising revenue in the private sector. Further, as Kleinsteuber and Peters have observed, these two new rival “broadcasting families” were loosely identified with the two main political parties: Springer/Kirch with the CDU/CSU; CLT/Bertelsmann with the SPD. Kirch Gruppe was based in CSU Bavaria, Bertelsmann in SPD North Rhine-Westphalia.²⁴

Bertelsmann was one of the world’s largest media concerns and by far the largest in Europe. Its global interests spanned printing, book, and magazine publishing, the record industry, and recently also broadcasting and film and television production. The Kirch Group was Germany’s leading trader in programme rights. It also had a significant stake (35%) in the Springer press concern, Germany’s leading publisher of daily newspapers, with a virtual monopoly in the popular tabloid market [through ownership of the *Bild-Zeitung*]. Intense rivalry

23. Horst Röper and Ulrich Pätzold, *Medienkonzentration in Deutschland: Medienverflechtungen und Branchenvernetzungen* (Düsseldorf: European Institute for the Media, 1993) 184.

24. Hans Kleinsteuber and Bettina Peters, “Media moguls in Germany,” *Media Moguls*, eds. Jeremy Tunstall and Michael Palmer (London & New York: Routledge, 1991) 184–205, here 188.

between Bertelsmann and Kirch did not prevent them sharing the pay-TV service Premiere. Nor did it prevent them trying to launch, in 1994 and again in 1997/8, a joint venture to provide a digital platform which would offer a range of new media services by means of a conditional access system (using smart cards and decoders).²⁵

From the viewpoint of media pluralism the problem was clear. A private television oligopoly had appeared, with considerable cross-media links. Press interests were also heavily involved in local radio stations in Germany. Springer had radio interests in different parts of the country. The WAZ press group, a shareholder in RTL, acquired a web of private radio interests in its home region North Rhine-Westphalia. Another major regional player was the Bavarian 'Gong group.' Holtzbrinck, one of Germany's most important magazine publishing concerns and a 15% shareholder in SAT1, was involved in radio in Germany's south and also its "five new states." In southern Germany "double monopolies," where dominant local publishers had radio stations, were not uncommon.²⁶ Röper and Patzold commented: "The more these structures consolidate, the more difficult it becomes for policy-making to establish limits."²⁷

The Inadequacy of German Anti-Concentration Regulation

The 1987 first inter-state treaty on broadcasting, modified by a second such treaty in 1991,²⁸ had attempted to contain concentration in the private broadcasting sector within reasonable bounds. Holdings in individual private television channels were limited to below 50% (and below 25% in two additional ones), the intention being to promote internal pluralism through the joint ownership of channels [*Anbietergemeinschaften*]. External pluralism was promoted through a provision

25. These joint venture attempts were blocked by the European Commission on the grounds that their market dominance would raise entry barriers to other EU companies.

26. Horst Röper, "Formationen deutscher Medienmultis 1992," *Media Perspektiven* 2 (1993): 56-74; Röper and Patzold, *Medienkonzentration in Deutschland* 189-96.

27. "Um so mehr sich diese Strukturen verfestigen, um so schwieriger wird es für die Politik, Grenzen festzulegen." (Röper and Patzold 187).

28. "Staatsvertrag zur Neuordnung des Rundfunkwesens (Rundfunkstaatsvertrag) vom 12. März 1987," reproduced in *Media Perspektiven. Dokumentation*, II (1987) 81-102; "Staatsvertrag über den Rundfunk im vereinten Deutschland vom 31. August 1991," reproduced in *Media Perspektiven. Dokumentation* IIa (1991): 105-72. The second treaty extended the West German model of broadcasting to the Five New *Länder* following Unification in 1990.

that limited the number of broadcasting licences that could be held by a single enterprise to a single national “generalist” channel [*Vollprogramm*] plus one “information-relevant” special interest channel [*Informations-Spartenprogramm*] each in radio and television. Moreover, the threshold for achieving “external pluralism” in the private broadcasting sector was the national availability of three separately-owned generalist channels. Until this threshold was achieved, each channel had to feature “internal pluralism” in its programming. However, the regulatory framework had contained a number of crucial weaknesses.

Firstly, with regard to cross-media ownership the treaty had seemed sensitive, above all, to the requirements of capital investment in the new private commercial broadcasting sector, and the press had been an active investor from the start. Thus, although the Constitutional Court had warned the legislators to guard against the appearance of “double monopolies”, the inter-state treaties of 1987 and 1991 prescribed no precise cross-media ownership rules, leaving this matter to the discretion of individual states which were naturally disinclined to deter media investment through overly strict regulation and even designed laws in such a way as to positively encourage investment from the press. None of the state broadcasting laws contained any specific reference to other forms of multi-media ownership (such as Leo Kirch’s diversification from programme supply into ownership of national commercial television).²⁹

Secondly, the federal structure of the German broadcasting system brought with it particular problems. Article 11 of the inter-state treaty of 1987 provided for the unhindered re-transmission of national broadcasting services so long as they met legal requirements and these were deemed to be a matter for the licensing state. This principle was confirmed by Article 35 of the 1991 inter-state treaty (which brought German law into line with European rules on transfrontier broadcasting providing for the unhindered transmission of all European programs meeting agreed minimum regulatory standards). A national satellite broadcasting service could therefore apply for and receive a license in a state where the cross-media ownership rules were suitably lax. By the same token, those states that provided the most relaxed regulatory conditions were the best placed to attract new media investment. Thus, as early as 1984 the Rhineland-Palatinate, had franchised SAT1, a channel largely

29. Porter and Hasselbach 121-27; also see Humphreys, *Media and Media Policy* in Germany 276-78.

owned by publishers of the press, including the mighty Springer concern.

The individual *Landesmedienanstalten* still disposed of the right to license the usage of the still "scarce" terrestrial frequencies and — if demand exceeded supply — also to allocate spare cable channels in their areas of jurisdiction. However, the *Landesmedienanstalten* came under political pressure to prioritize the economic interests of their respective states in the competition to attract — or retain — media investment [*Standortpolitik*]. Therefore, the large media companies exerted a degree of structural power over politicians. Porter and Hasselbach suggest that regulatory authorities favoured license applicants who promised to site specific activities in their particular state. "The Länder tried to outbid each other for the investment favours of private television stations, especially the two largest, SAT1 and RTL plus."³⁰ Similarly, Sánchez-Tabernero et al noted:

It would be difficult for any state government not to consider the interests of a 'local' media giant like Springer in Berlin and Hamburg, WAZ or Bertelsmann in Northrhine-Westphalia and Kirch in Bavaria. . . . [R]egional politicians [have found] themselves under pressure to create a friendly legal and economic framework for commercial radio and television run by the publishers. Nearly every province's [sic] government has tried to attract at least one of the commercial television headquarters to their state to strengthen it as a location for the growing 'cultural industries'."³¹

The *Landesmedienanstalten* were even criticized for being the politicians' "puppets" or as helpless "paper tigers," incapable of controlling the new multimedia empires.³² Zerdick neatly summarized the problem: "the objectives of the state's media laws, oriented less toward media policy than toward locational policy, [had] led to a state of affairs in which too many *Landesmedienanstalten* controlled too few broadcasters who, at the same time, [were] being courted avidly by the

30. Porter and Hasselbach, *Pluralism, Politics and the Marketplace* 21.

31. Alfonso Sánchez-Tabernero et al., *Media Concentration in Europe: Commercial Enterprise and the Public Interest* (Düsseldorf: European Institute for the Media, Media Monograph No. 16, 1993) 179.

32. Marie-Luise Hauch-Fleck, "Marionetten der Macht: Medienanstalten der Länder sehen die Konzentration bei den Privatsendern tatenlos zu," *Die Zeit* 25 (12 June 1992): 29; Volker Lilienthal, "Kampf der Papiertiger: Leo Kirch und Bertelsmann bauen ihren Imperien aus. Die Medienkontrolleure erweisen sich bislang als hilflos," *Die Woche* (15 Sept. 1994): 41.

respective state governments.”³³

Finally, concentration was made difficult to police by the opaque interlocking webs of interests [*Verflechtung*] that characterized not only the ownership structures but also even less transparent kinds of linkage (such as finance, program supply) between the new commercial broadcasters. The PRO7 case presented a classic illustration of the problem. Thomas Kirch, Leo Kirch’s son, held a 47.5% share in the television channel PRO7 and 3% more were held by PRO7’s managing director, formerly a top executive of Leo Kirch’s. It was generally assumed that PRO7 was dependent on the Kirch Group for finance and programme supply. Control of PRO7 would mean that the Kirch Group, which already had a major (direct and, through Springer, indirect) holding in the generalist channel SAT1, would be contravening the inter-state treaty rule limiting enterprises to control of one national generalist channel [*Vollprogramm*]. However, the regulatory authority which licensed PRO7 did not accept that PRO7 was part of Leo Kirch’s media empire and did not intervene. This issue was discussed at the level of the conference of directors of the private broadcasting regulatory authorities [*Landesmedienanstalten*] and several votes failed to resolve the issue.³⁴

Moreover, the federal cartel office was decidedly non-interventionist in the field of broadcasting. In Germany, the federal cartel office is an independent, para-state body responsible for safeguarding economic competition. Although it has no responsibility for ensuring media pluralism per se, which was the task of the Landesmedienanstalten, it is obvious that through its competence in the field of general competition policy the federal cartel office is a potentially important agency for ensuring media diversity. Indeed, its powers of intervention specifically in the press sector had been sharpened in 1976. Concerned about press concentration, the SPD-led government of the time had lowered the turnover thresholds for triggering the federal cartel office’s intervention far below the level for other economic sectors (25 million DM instead of 500 million DM). Since this innovation the cartel office had played a useful role in at least restraining – if not entirely curbing — press-concentration. However, with respect to the new commercial broadcasting sector Röper and Patzold have noted that the federal cartel office has failed to act against

33. Axel Zerdick, “Zwischen Frequenzen und Paragraphen: die Landesmedienanstalten als institutionalisierter Kompromiss,” *Bertelsmann Briefe* 129 (1993): 60–62, here 61.

34. Lilienthal, “Kampf der Papiertiger. . .” 41.

some obvious "double monopolies" where local commercial radio services were owned by locally dominant publishers. In these cases, it justified its non-intervention by arguing that the competition provided by the public broadcasters meant that there could be no market dominance. Further, the cartel office has allowed cross-media concentration to proceed on the grounds that press investment actually strengthens the private broadcasters' ability to compete with the public broadcasters. The establishment of competition for the latter, Röper and Patzold concluded, was the cartel office's prime concern in the matter. Further, it did not have any competence for acting against media concentration on pluralism grounds, only when economic competition was adversely affected.³⁵

It has been pointed out by Heinrich, in fairness to the cartel office, that it lacks appropriate powers to intervene much in the broadcasting field. For example, PRO7's (Thomas Kirch) launching of the Kabelkanal fell beyond the scope of merger control since strictly speaking, according to the purely economic criteria employed by the cartel office, it counted merely as internal company growth. Further, the federal cartel office did not have the legal powers to act against the obvious accumulation of media power by the Kirch family since no actual company connection could be proven between Thomas Kirch's control of PRO7, and through PRO7 also of the Kabelkanal, and Leo Kirch's (his father's) media empire (indeed the *Landesmedienanstalten*, too, failed to agree on this matter — see above). For critics of Germany's media oligopoly, these cases seemed to demonstrate clearly the need for stricter anti-concentration regulations geared specifically to the situation in the media field.

The turnover thresholds triggering the cartel office's intervention might be lowered exactly as had been done already in the case of the press. Further, the award of broadcasting licenses to broadcasting organizations (in which major cross-media interests were involved) might be treated as suitable cases for "merger control" as Germany's monopoly commission recommended. For their part, the *Landesmedienanstalten*,

35. Röper and Patzold 193-94. It should, however, be pointed out that the Cartel Office did later express strong reservations about plans by the major private TV companies Bertelsmann and Kirch Group to jointly control a digital pay-TV platform. As will be seen, this project was blocked by Brussels in 1998. Subsequently, the German Cartel Office made clear that it would not allow the ruling to be circumvented. Cartel Office director Dieter Wolf explained that pay TV made it much easier for the Cartel Office to become involved since it is more easily conceived of as an economic market. In the case of 'free TV', on the other hand, it is unclear whether the market is constituted by the audience or by the advertisers. See "Bei Verstößen hohe Bußgelder," *Focus* 25 (15 June 1998): 214-15.

which were primarily concerned with safeguarding editorial pluralism, might be endowed with the Cartel Office's powers of inquiry into the internal affairs of the broadcasters in order to ensure greater transparency concerning ownership and influence and to allow them to explore the real control relations within a broadcasting operation (so far they had been limited to sending a "questionnaire" to the broadcasters to elicit information about these matters). Also, the deficiency of measures against vertical and cross-media concentration needed seriously to be addressed.³⁶ Above all, concentration control needed to be supplied at an appropriate higher level than that of the individual Landesmedienanstalten in order to prevent "soft competition policy" from serving as an instrument of *Standortpolitik*.³⁷

Toward a More Effective Harmonization of Anti-Concentration Regulation? Or Acceptance of Faits Accomplis?

Controversy over the widely-perceived failure of the Landesmedienanstalten led to serious discussion from 1994 onward about how the concentration rules might be reformed. In their "Lübeck resolutions" of 17 September 1994, the fifteen Landesmedienanstalten recommended that a new Staatsvertrag should adopt a simpler system of "control by audience share." Accordingly, the current rules limiting shareholdings would be replaced. Instead the total share of the television audience (public and private sector) gained by channels in which an owner had an interest (of over 5%) might be limited to 25%. The purported advantage of this "audience-share model" would be that it would render unnecessary the customary webs of overlapping ownership and other links and thereby encourage greater transparency of ownership and control relations.³⁸

In 1996, after considerable negotiation,³⁹ the prime ministers of the *Länder* agreed upon a more liberal (i.e., less restrictive) version of this

36. See Jürgen Heinrich, "Keine Entwarnung bei Medienkonzentration. Ökonomische und publizistische Konzentration im deutschen Fernsehsektor 1993/94," *Media Perspektiven* 6 (1994): 297-310. Also see Dieter Dörr, "Kontrolle braucht Durchsetzungsbefugnisse. Defizite des Verfahrensrechts bei der Medienkonzentrationskontrolle," *Media Perspektiven* 2 (1995): 42-47.

37. Heinrich 298.

38. Direktorenkonferenz der Landesmedienanstalten, Beschluss der Gesamtkonferenz der Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Landesmedienanstalten in Lübeck am 17. September 1994 (Lübecker Beschlüsse).

39. For detail see Peter Humphreys and Matthias Lang, "Regulating for Media Pluralism and the Pitfalls of *Standortpolitik*: The Re-regulation of German Broadcasting Ownership rules," *German Politics* 7.2 (August 1998): 176-201.

"audience share" model. As usual, the result of their negotiations marked a compromise between the economic and cultural policy goals of the states. Reflecting the former, the third inter-state broadcasting treaty⁴⁰ allowed any enterprise to acquire as many broadcasting operations as it wants, and to gain 100% control of these, provided that the aggregate audience share of its nation-wide operations remains below 30% of the total national TV audience. Excepted from the equation would be the audience shares of channels in which an enterprise has a share of less than 25%. By this measure, critics observed, the broadcasting interests of the Bertelsmann and Kirch concerns could remain intact, an outcome that concurred with the interests of Germany's two largest states, namely North Rhine-Westphalia (Bertelsmann's base) and Bavaria (Kirch Gruppe's base).⁴¹

On the other hand, those seeking stricter anti-concentration regulation had gained the obligation on any national channel that registered an audience share of 10% to make provision for the inclusion of independent 'window programs' (i.e., small broadcasters who are independent of their 'host' major broadcaster) within its schedule. These program windows should amount to 260 minutes per week, including at least 75 minutes of prime time. Ideally, these 'window programs' were to be selected consensually by the regulators and the broadcaster. In the event of disagreement the regulators have the right to make the final choice from a short-list which is, however, determined by the broadcaster.

In order to help overcome the problem of regional *Standortpolitik* that had dogged regulation at the state level (see above), the 1996 inter-state treaty established a joint, independent organ of the 15 Länder-based regulatory authorities, called the "Commission for the Investigation of Media Concentration" [*Kommission zur Ermittlung der Konzentration*]. The KEK's role is to identify cases where media pluralism has been — or risks being — dangerously impaired by media concentration. However, its jurisdiction is invoked by individual Land-based regulatory authorities (i.e., the licensing authority for

40. Dritter Staatsvertrag zur Änderung rundfunkrechtlicher Staatsverträge vom 26.8./11.9.1996, reproduced in *Media Perspektiven. Dokumentation I* (1996). For a very detailed critical analysis see Martin Stock, Horst Röper and Bernd Holznagel, *Medienmarkt und Meinungsmacht* (Berlin: Springer, 1997). For a shorter critique see Humphreys, "The goal of pluralism and the ownership rules for private broadcasting in Germany: re-regulation or de-regulation," *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal* 16:2-3 (1998): 527-55.

41. Michael Rediske, "Ein Kartellamt für die Medien," *die tageszeitung* 4870 (9 Mar. 1996) 10.

the broadcaster in question) in cases of new applications for private broadcasting licences or if there are significant ownership changes in the existing licence holding enterprises. Also, in conducting its investigations the KEK is reliant upon the cooperation of the Landesmedienanstalten, whose investigative powers were now on a level footing with those of the federal cartel office. Furthermore, the KEK's ruling may be overridden, but only by a three-quarters majority (i.e., 12 out of 15) of the Land-based Regulatory Authorities [*Konferenz der Direktoren der Landesmedienanstalten*, KDLM].

The KEK has been criticised for its insufficient political independence [*Staatsferne*] on the grounds that its six members are appointed by the Länder prime ministers. Three were proposed by the SPD, three by the CDU/CSU. Chosen as chairman was a former SPD economics minister of North Rhine-Westphalia and President of that Land's Central Bank. This seemed to symbolise the pivotal role, as the leading SPD voice pushing for de-regulation, played by that Land (where Bertelsmann is based) in the politics of the reform of media ownership rules. Unsurprisingly, the KEK was soon attacked for implied bias: politicians and regulators in Bavaria, home state of the Kirch Group, questioned the KEK's prolonged investigation of the Kirch family's interests compared to the conspicuously quick retrospective approval that it gave to the January 1997 merger of Bertelsmann's television subsidiary ufa and the CLT.⁴² In fact, the KEK encountered considerable difficulty in pursuing its investigation of the Kirch Group, not least because of legal appeal by Kirch against the mode and scope of the investigation. Apparently assuming that there was a connection between PRO7 (Thomas Kirch) and the Kirch Group, the KEK had asked the regulatory authority that had licensed PRO7 to send out a questionnaire to determine the full extent of the Kirch Group's programme supply to the broadcasting sector at large.⁴³ According to the new rules, dominance in this 'media-relevant related market' would also be taken into consideration by the KEK if the Kirch Group's audience share should be found to just fall short (amount to a *geringfügige Unterschreitung*) of the pluralism endangering 30% ceiling. The latter would only be the case if PRO7 was considered part

42. KEK, Jahresbericht der Kommission zur Ermittlung der Konzentration im Medienbereich. Berichtszeitraum 15. Mai 1997 bis 30. Juni 1998: 22-26.

43. According to the European Commission the Kirch Group, with its stock of 15,000 films and 50,000 hours of programmes in total, was the leading German supplier of TV entertainment programmes. *Funkkorrespondenz* 27-28 (3 July 1998): 21.

of the Kirch Group. However, critics observed that the KEK had not deemed it necessary to conduct a similar investigation into Bertelsmann's position in publishing and the press.⁴⁴ The outcome, however, went in the Kirch Group's favour; eventually the KEK decided that while Thomas Kirch's TV interests were indeed to be considered as part of the Kirch Group, there was still some leeway before pluralism was threatened.⁴⁵ Thus, the principal decisions that the KEK made during its first two years seemed to confirm the view of those who had suggested that the new regulatory framework was designed to legitimise the Bertelsmann/Kirch oligopoly that dominated German private television.

It is true, soon after it commenced work in May 1997 the KEK did determine that both RTL Plus (Bertelsmann) and SAT1 (Kirch) channels each exceeded a 10% share of the national TV audience and therefore should make provision for 'window programs.' However, it has also to be pointed out that the KEK had been given no ultimate authority — only an advisory role — in respect of the choice of 'window programme' operators. The final decision here remains in the realm of the individual Land-based regulatory authorities and is therefore a matter that remains vulnerable to considerations of regional *Standortpolitik*. Also, the indications are that the KEK would probably have intervened over the plans of Bertelsmann and Kirch together to embark on a joint-venture to launch a digital pay-TV platform,⁴⁶ but in the event the project which involved the controversial merger of Kirch's existing digital pay TV company DF 1 with Premiere, the analogue subscription channel which Bertelsmann and Kirch already shared, was blocked by the European Commission's competition authority in May 1998.

Predictably enough, the KEK has been the object of considerable criticism from many sides, for being too strong, for being too weak, for being a half-measure. By 1998 influential voices were calling for further deregulation, pointing out that Germany suffered from an overabundance of regulators that was detrimental to the German media

44. "Kirch-Gruppe wehrt sich gegen KEK-Überprüfungen," *epd medien* 51.4 (July 1998): 12-13; "Kirch wehrt sich gegen Wettbewerbsbehörde: 'Ungleichbehandlung/Rechtstreit um eine Fragebogenaktion'," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 1 July 1998; "Befangene Kontrolleure?" *Focus* 27 (29 June 1998): 15.

45. KEK, Jahresbericht der Kommission zur Ermittlung der Konzentration im Medienbereich. Berichtszeitraum 1. Juli 1998 bis 30. Juni 1999: 21-24, 39-46.

46. See Lutz Meier, "So kann man etwas verspielen: Der Vorsitzende der Konzentrationsskommission KEK sieht die Digitalpläne von Kirch und Bertelsmann skeptisch. Ärger über Medienanstalten wegen Standortpolitik bei Senderfenstern," *die tageszeitung* 1 Nov. 1997.

industry's development.⁴⁷ For its part, the KEK complained about the insufficient cooperation it had received from certain state [*Land*] regulatory authorities whose help it needed in conducting its investigations. There also surfaced tension between the state regulators and the KEK over how much or how little discretion the latter should enjoy in deciding at what point a broadcasting interest's audience-share was 'only just below' the 30% ceiling and therefore should trigger consideration of its cross-media interests. The *Landesmedienanstalten* argued that only when a company's audience-share reached 28% might the KEK be required to commence any such investigation, and neither Bertelsmann nor Kirch Group quite reached this figure. The KEK, however, did not want to be bound by fixed quantitative thresholds.⁴⁸ Thus, the new regulatory arrangements do not appear to have avoided difficult jurisdictional conflicts between the regulators, nor does the *Standortpolitik* motivated politics appear to have ended.

The "Dual System": A New Public/Private Balance?

Quickly becoming one of the more densely cabled countries in Europe, Germany entered the 1990s with no fewer than three substantial generalist, private commercial television channels: RTL, SAT1 and PRO7. The early 1990s saw the launch of VOX and RTL 2, followed shortly by Super RTL. Germany could also boast an expanding range of thematic services such as the sports channel *Deutsches Sports Fernsehen* (DSF), and a number of specialist channels providing news, music, programmes for women, children, ethnic minorities, and so on. In addition, the country had a host of local cable services and foreign channels. Also, regional public-service channels were being broadcast nationwide by satellite. Germany also had Premiere, an analogue pay-TV service with 1.6 million subscribers (in 1998); in 1999, as Premiere World, this service

47. Wolfgang Clement, the SPD Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, questioned the 'regulatory jungle' in Germany. In the view of Kurt Faltlhauser, a state minister in CSU Bavaria, a KEK that amounted to a bureaucratic impediment to the development of the media in Germany 'had no future', *Medien Dialog* 16 (June 1998): 4. The chairman of the CDU's media policy committee Anton Pfeifer stated that the KEK should not become a 'bureaucratic obstacle to the development of the media in Germany,' "CDU tadelt die KEK", *epd medien* 11 (14 Feb. 1998): 17-18. Professor Dr. Wolf-Dieter Ring, the director of the Bavarian Landesmedienanstalt, was also vocal in criticism of the KEK, *Medien Dialog* 12 (1998): 5.

48. "KEK gegen fixe Zahl für eine 'geringfügige Unterschreitung,'" *Funkkorrespondenz* 46.48 (27 Nov. 1998): 24-25.

was being transformed into a digital TV platform by its owner, the Kirch Group (Bertelsmann having pulled out in 1999).

Table 1: *Germany's Private Television Oligopoly*
The Bertelsmann Broadcasting 'Family'

Channel	Main shareholders 1993 (%)	Audience Share (%) 1993	Main shareholders 1998 (%)	Audience Share (%) 1998
RTL	CLT: 47.9 Ufa: 37.1	18.9	Ufa/CLT: 89 * BW TV: 11 **	15.0
RTL 2	CLT: 24.0 Ufa: 7.8	Insignificant	Ufa/CLT: 33.4	3.8
Super RTL	Not yet founded	—	Ufa/CLT: 50	2.6
Vox	Ufa: 24.9 Canal +: 24.9 News Corp: 49.9	Insignificant	Ufa/CLT: 24.9 Canal +: 24.9 News Corp: 49.9	2.8

* In 1997 Ufa, Bertelsmann's TV subsidiary and CLT merged.

** BW TV GmbH was 80% owned by Bertelsmann, 20% by WAZ.

The Kirch Broadcasting 'Family'

Channel	Main shareholders 1993 (%)	Audience Share (%) 1993	Main shareholders 1998 (%)	Audience Share (%) 1998
SAT1	Kirch: 43 Springer: 20 APF: 20 *	14.9	Kirch: 59 Springer: 40 *	12.2
DSF	Kirch: 24.5 Springer: 24.9	1.3	Kirch: 100	1.1
PRO7	T. Kirch: 47.5 G. Kofler: 3 **	9.2	T. Kirch: 58.4	8.5
Kabel 1	PRO7: 45 G. Kofler: 10	1.6	PRO7: 100	4.1

* Kirch Group had a 35% stake in the Springer Verlag, which had 35% of Aktuell Presse Fernsehen (APF).

** Thomas Kirch was Leo Kirch's son. Georg Kofler was a former executive of the Kirch Group.

Source: 1993 data is from Europäisches Institut, 'Bericht über die Entwicklung der Meinungsvielfalt und der Konzentration im privatem Rundfunk', in *Die Landesmedienanstalten*, ed., *Die Sicherung der Meinungsvielfalt* (Berlin: Vistas, 1995) 166 and 167; 1997 and 1998. The 1998 data is from *Jahrbuch der Landesmedienanstalten 1997/1998*, published in September 1998 by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Landesmedienanstalten (ALM) 296-297, 309.

The take off of commercial television meant that the public-service broadcasters' share of the viewing audience declined appreciably. In 1990 the three public-service channels (ARD, ZDF, and the third regional channels) still accounted between them for an audience share of no less than 68.7%. However, by 1995 the public broadcasters' audience share had fallen to about 40%, where it stabilised; in 1998, the figure was still just above 40%. The main beneficiaries of this decline were the three main commercial channels, SAT1 (Springer/Kirch), PRO7 (Thomas Kirch), and RTL (Bertelsmann/CLT).⁴⁹ As well as eroding the audience shares of the public service broadcasters, the new private commercial broadcasters had had a negative impact on their advertising revenues.

Table 2: *Advertising Income of Public and Private Broadcasters in million DM*

Public	1989	1991	1993	1995	1997
ARD	935.4	761.2	444.9	301.8	308.1
ZDF	679.1	718.8	370.5	345.1	308.0
Total	1,614.5	1,480.0	815.5	646.9	616.1

Private	1989	1991	1993	1995	1997
RTL	294.4	1,010.8	1,844.4	1,960.1	2,238.0
SAT1	307.4	802.2	1,288.1	1,623.8	1,661.0
PRO7	14.5	165.1	670.0	1,333.9	1,580.0
Others	26.0	42.4	311.1	777.3	1,343.1
Total	642.3	2,020.5	4,113.6	5,695.1	6,822.1

Source: *Media Perspektiven Basisdaten: Daten zur Mediensituation in Deutschland* 1994, 10 and 21; 1995 10 and 19; 1998: 13 and 21.

As Table 2 (above) shows, the public-service broadcasters' advertising revenues registered a conspicuous decline in the dual broadcasting system. In the dual system, they were permitted to continue to run

49. *Media Perspektiven. Basisdaten* (1991): 70; *Media Perspektiven. Basisdaten* (1994): 76; *Media Perspektiven. Basisdaten* (1998): 73.

twenty minutes of advertising per day. However, in the liberalized broadcasting marketplace they could no longer charge monopoly prices for their advertising airtime. The latter was no longer in scarce supply. While the public broadcasters were prevented from carrying advertising after 8:00PM and also on Sundays, the private broadcasters could carry it for up to 20% of their air-time, including Sundays. The private commercial broadcasters could undercut the public broadcasters' advertising rates and still see their advertising revenue spiral upward. By contrast, the public broadcasters were adversely affected by this competition.

As Table 3 (below) shows, between 1989-97 the public-broadcasters' license fee income more than doubled. However, three important qualifications are required lest this be misconstrued as compensation for the

Table 3: *License-fee Income of Public Broadcasters in million DM*

	1989	1991	1993	1995	1997
ARD	3,685.1	4,427.3	6,906.6	7,288.7	8,314.1
ZDF	896.7	1,064.7	1,578.9	1,654.2	2,438.9
Total	4,581.8	5,492.0	8,485.5	8,942.9	10,753.0

Note: At the beginning of the 1980s the monthly license fee was 3.80 DM (radio) and 9.20 DM (television). By 1992 it had been raised four times and stood at 8.25 DM (radio) and 15.55 DM (television). In 1997 it was again raised to 9.45 DM (radio) and 18.80 DM (television). Since 1988 the regulatory authorities for private television have taken 2% of the license fee income.⁵⁰

public broadcasters' dramatic loss of advertising revenue. Firstly, the increase occurred partly because German unification simply increased the number of license-fee payers. The number of television households increased from around twenty-five million to around thirty-two million. (For the East Germans the license fee was raised in stages so that the full effect was not registered until 1993). Secondly, there were considerable costs involved in restructuring broadcasting in the former East Germany. Thirdly, the public-service broadcasters were encumbered by far higher production costs than the private sector. Together

50. Source: *Media Perspektiven Basisdaten: Daten zur Mediensituation in Deutschland 1998*: 11-12.

ARD and ZDF accounted for around 30,000 employees in radio and television in 1998, whereas the entire private sector employed less than 10,000.⁵¹ Moreover, the public broadcasters were bound, by their public-service remit, to invest in expensive program categories and to maintain extensive in-house production facilities. The public-service broadcasters' programming strategies were constrained by the need to provide internal pluralism, and respect the diverse views of the trade unions, churches, business associations, and other "socially significant groups" represented in their broadcasting councils. Their public-service remit entailed devoting considerable resources to informational and cultural output that was comparatively costly to produce. RTL, SAT1, and the other private broadcasters were much freer to follow fashion and popular taste. They could rely far more heavily on buying relatively inexpensive entertainment fare (such as U.S. series already amortized in the home market) and scheduling game-shows, chat shows, and the like, which were especially cheap to produce.

Also, behind the larger commercial stations stood giant media companies with deep pockets. The private broadcasters, therefore, could afford to outbid the public broadcasters for those popular program categories that were both strategic and expensive, such as the rights for recently released feature films and popular sports events (such as soccer and tennis). They were able, too, to lure popular stars and presenters away from the public broadcasters by offering more lucrative contracts. At the same time, the public broadcasters found it harder to afford the more popular films and series since the increased demand from the new private sector for these program categories significantly inflated their price.⁵²

A commonly heard complaint among Germany's liberal intellectual class was that the ratings seemed to be the new yardstick of success at the expense of program quality and of other public-service values.⁵³ Of course, the public-service broadcasters depended less obviously than the private broadcasters on ratings success. For the private broadcasters, after all, the ability to attract advertising revenue was a matter of life and death. All the same, although free from such direct existential worry, the German public broadcasters have been profoundly unsettled by the new

51. European Audiovisual Observatory, *Statistical Yearbook 1999* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 1999) 76.

52. Gunhild Freese, "Stühlerücken in der ersten Reihe," *Die Zeit* 15 (9 Apr. 1993): 24.

53. See, for example, Freddie Röchenhaus, "Wie viele Programme erträgt 1 Mensch?" *Die Zeit* Dossier 48 (26 Nov. 1993): 13-15.

competition. Above all they fear that the license fee, from which their main income derives, will lose its legitimacy if their ratings should decline too much. According to the ARD chairman (in 1994) Jobst Plog, the ARD would be hard pressed to justify its license-fee income if the ARD First Channel's audience share should fall as low as 10% (before the introduction of commercial broadcasting stable at around 42%, since 1994 it has fluctuated around the 15% figure).⁵⁴ Yet, if the public broadcasters were to chase the private broadcasters "down-market" (that is, audience maximization through scheduling mainly popular programming) in order to compete more successfully for the ratings, they would serve their enemies with another excuse to attack them.

In fact, the German public-service broadcasters soon found themselves accused by pro-commercial interests of having gone down-market. At the same time the pro-commercial lobby claimed that the new private broadcasters had themselves contributed positively to program diversity and the country's culture industries. A "convergence," the pro-commercial lobby argued, was occurring. On these grounds, the lobby called for, among other things, the eventual abolition of advertising by the public-service broadcasters. The private broadcasters had, of course, a blatantly self-interested motive for making this demand.⁵⁵ By the mid-1990s a radical political front seeking reform of the public-service broadcasters was building up momentum. Bavaria's prime minister Edmund Stoiber (CSU), backed by Saxony's prime minister Kurt Biedenkopf (CDU), suggested that the ARD's First Channel might be closed down. Georg Köfler, the proprietor of PRO7, Germany's third most successful commercial channel, supported this proposal. Others called for the privatization of ZDF. One explanation for the renewed ideological onslaught against the public-service broadcasters, suggested by ARD chairman Jobst Plog, was that it was an attempt by the right to deflect the media policy debate away from the increasingly controversial issue of media concentration. Stoiber's attacks,⁵⁶ in particular,

54. Interview in *Die Woche* (10 Mar. 1994): 34.

55. See Marie-Luise Kiefer, "Partikularinteressen als Leitlinie: zu den rundfunkpolitischen Vorstellungen des VPR," *Media Perspektiven* 10 (1992): 614-23.

56. Marc Pitzke, "Macht und Moneten," *Die Woche* (29 Oct. 1994): 6; Gunhild Freese, "Stühlerücken in der ersten Reihe"; Marlene Wöste, "ARD Under Political Pressure," *BULLETIN* 12.1 (1995): 23-24. For a detailed critique of the Stoiber/Biedenkopf proposals see Marie-Luise, "Wettbewerbsverständnis im Stoiber/Biedenkopf Papier — hilfreich für die Rundfunkvielfalt," *Media Perspektiven* 3 (1995): 109-14.

might be seen in this light as an attempt to protect the interests of the prominent Bavarian media entrepreneur Leo Kirch.

As suggested, this ideological onslaught drew much of its force from the convergence thesis, according to which the public-service broadcasters were losing their distinctive public-service character and therefore should lose their funding privileges (notably, their right to supplement their license fee with advertising revenue). However, an important cross-national survey, looking at the programming of 53 public and commercial channels in western Europe during two weeks of January in 1991, found the German public broadcasters performance to be exemplary. The German public broadcasters provided a balanced overall schedule of 50% "serious" and 50% "popular" programming. What is more, unlike most other west European public broadcasters they even maintained this balance during prime time. Germany's commercial broadcasters, by contrast, scheduled over three quarters popular programming overall and in peak-viewing time this increased to 93 percent.⁵⁷

Empirical research by Udo Krüger at the Institute for Empirical Media Research at Cologne covering the ten year period 1985-1995 suggested that the public broadcasters provision of information programming remained stable at a fairly high level (around 40% in prime time) throughout the period, whereas the private commercial broadcasters, on the other hand, furnished a much lower proportion (15% in prime time) and much of what counted as information was non-political, human interest type "infotainment" and "reality TV."⁵⁸ More recent studies by Udo Krüger have confirmed this overall pattern.⁵⁹ Although not unaffected by commercialisation tendencies (they were 'modernising' their program formats), the ARD and ZDF have maintained balanced program schedules, with fairly high levels of information content. By contrast, in the program schedules of the commercial broadcasters

57. Els De Bens et al., "Television content: Dallasification of culture?" *Dynamics of Media Politics*, eds. Karen Siune and Wolfgang Truetzschler, (London: Sage, 1992) 75- 100.

58. Udo Krüger, "Tendenzen in den Programmen der grossen Fernsehsender 1985 bis 1995" *Media Perspektiven* 8 (1996): 418-40; see also Kiefer, "Partikularinteressen als Leitlinie."

59. See Udo Krüger, "Boulevardisierung der Information im Privatfernsehen," *Media Perspektiven* 7 (1996): 362-74; Krüger, "Programmanalyse 1997: Modernisierung bei stabilen Programmstrukturen", *Media Perspektiven* 7 (1998): 314-30; Krüger, "Stabile Programmstrukturen trotz besonderer Fernseh Ereignisse: Programmanalyse 1998," *Media Perspektiven* 7 (1999): 322-39.

entertainment has far outweighed information. Moreover, whereas the public service broadcasters' information programs are devoted mainly to themes from politics, economics, culture and science, much of the commercial broadcasters' information programming has consisted of non-political, human interest type information (*Boulevardthemen*).

A study by Barbara Pfetsch, comparing the presentation of television news in 1885/6 immediately after the deregulation of television and in 1993 when the dual system was well established confirmed that there continued to exist a marked difference between the public-service broadcasters and the private broadcasters at the level of the overall structure of programming. The public channels' provision of general information actually increased over the period. As for the private channels, "instead of catching up with the information level of public channels, [they were] increasingly engag[ing] in the marginalization of political information".⁶⁰ However, at the level of the television news genre specifically, Pfetsch detected a convergence: the private broadcasters appeared to have followed the role model of the public-service broadcasters regarding news content, increasing the amount of political information within news shows, while the public broadcasters were adopting the style and mode of presentation of the commercial channels.⁶¹

Beset by mounting political attacks and unnerved by growing financial problems, Germany's public-service broadcasters received an important boost from the country's highest authority when in February 1994 the federal constitutional court made yet another of its monumental rulings in the field of broadcasting policy.⁶² Characteristically the court, called upon to settle a somewhat narrow issue,⁶³ took the opportunity to take up a much broader position on the future funding of the

60. Barbara Pfetsch, "Convergence through privatization? Changing media environments and televised politics in Germany." *European Journal of Communication* 11.4 (December 1996): 427-51, 438.

61. Pfetsch 449.

62. The "Urteil des Bundesverfassungsgerichts vom 22 Februar 1994 -1 BvL 30/88" is reproduced in *Media Perspektiven. Dokumentation* 1 (1994). An evaluation in English is provided by Anja Bandschuh, "Federal Constitutional Court Rules on Licence-Fee. New Support for German Public Broadcasters," *BULLETIN* 11.1 (Mar. 1994): 1-2.

63. The case had its origins in a 1984 complaint by the *Humanistische Union* and the Green party against the financing of cable television pilot-projects from a (very small) share of the license fee, the "cable penny." The Court saw this as an invitation to deliberate much more widely about the future of the license fee and the key role of the public broadcasters in the dual system.

public-service broadcasters by the license fee. Essentially the court stressed the need for the public broadcasters to be granted enough income to permit them to perform all their key functions. The public broadcasters' role was all the more important in view of the shortcomings of the commercial broadcasters regarding their inadequate "breadth of content" and "thematic variety."⁶⁴ This important ruling underpinned, therefore, the principle first expressed in the court's famous 1986 ruling introducing the dual system, that the *conditio sine qua non* for allowing partially deregulated private commercial broadcasting was the "existence and further development" of the public-service broadcasters. Commercial broadcasting was only constitutional so long as the public-service broadcasters provided the "essential basic provision required by the constitution" [*verfassungskonforme Grundversorgung*]. The ruling made plain that the politicians should not screw down the license fee in order to rig the market in favour of private commercial broadcasting. Furthermore, this 1994 ruling of the federal constitutional court stipulated that the license fee should in future be free from politicking; the politicians should not misuse their ability to set the license fee. To this end the court recommended new procedures for setting the license fee, including the establishment of a genuinely independent basis for the committee that oversees the whole process. This recommendation was subsequently implemented in the 1996 third inter-state treaty on broadcasting (which also introduced the new ownership rules — see above).

By the mid 1990s, the central focus of controversy had moved on from the licence fee issue to settle on the question of the scope of public-service broadcasters to become involved in providing new media services. Thus, the private broadcasters association, the Association for Private Broadcasting and Telecommunication [*Verband Privater Rundfunk und Telekommunikation*], complained about the launch by the public-service broadcasters of new thematic services, notably a children's channel called Kinderkanal and a documentary and current affairs channel called Phoenix. The private broadcasters viewed the launch of such channels, funded by the licence fee, as unfair competition and illustrative of the public broadcasters' ambition to use public funding to expand into the emerging new media markets. This matter was settled

64. See "Urteil des Bundesverfassungsgerichts vom 22 Februar 1994 – 1 BvL 30/88" (40–41), repr. in *Media Perspektiven. Dokumentation 1* (1994): 21.

by a ruling in February 1999 of the European Union competition authority that the public funding of these services was permissible on public service grounds.⁶⁵

Later in 1999, the public-service broadcasters' digital broadcasting ambitions received a boost when the prime ministers of the *Länder* finally agreed a fourth inter-state treaty on broadcasting. The primary purpose of this latest Staatsvertrag was to incorporate a revised European broadcasting directive into German law (on such matters as sports events that should be reserved to universal service providers, rather than pay-TV). At the same time, though, the treaty introduced a "must carry" provision for two analogue channels on Germany's cable systems to be allocated to the ARD, and one to the ZDF, for the purpose of providing up to around two dozen digital broadcasting channels (including the public broadcasters existing services).⁶⁶ Thus, as Germany gradually entered the digital broadcasting age, the prime ministers of the *Länder* appeared to be honouring the constitutional "guarantee" of the public-service broadcasters' "existence and further development."

During the negotiations over this fourth inter-state treaty, however, the CDU/CSU *Länder* had maintained their pressure for a structural reform of the ARD. In addition to seeking the abolition of advertising by public broadcasters, leading CDU/CSU politicians wanted to gain a commitment to the eventual abolition of the *Finanzausgleich*, the financial subsidy by which the larger ARD corporations guaranteed the survival of small ones, notably *Saarländischen Rundfunk* serving the Saarland (a small Land) and *Radio Bremen* serving Bremen (a city-state). Such a measure, if adopted, would compel a structural reform of the ARD. However, in the event the prime ministers of the *Länder* postponed making any decisions on these highly controversial issues to a future fifth inter-state treaty. Therefore, the future balance between private and public broadcasting in Germany seemed destined to remain a live political issue.

65. Jeanette Steemers, "Changing Channels: The redefinition of public service broadcasting for the digital age", Paper presented to the Joint Research Sessions of the European Consortium for Political Research, Mannheim, 26-31 March 1999. Available on the ECPR website: <<http://www.essex.ac.uk/ECPR>>

66. In fact, the public broadcasters first launched digital trials in 1997, "simulcasting" in analogue and digital a free digital "bouquet" of their existing services plus a few new ones like *Kinderkanal* and *Phoenix*.

A Cultural Break or Perhaps Things Didn't Go That Far. Television in Germany: Commercialization, German Unification and Europeanization

Knut Hickethier

1. German television before 1989

Since 1985 a “dual broadcasting system” has existed in the Federal Republic of Germany — commercial television existing alongside public broadcasting stations.¹ Because Germany had experienced only public television since the re-institution of German television in 1948,² the introduction of commercial television represented a fundamental, radical change in the culture of the German speaking world. Responsible for this introduction were the development of cable and broadcasting technology as well as pressure imposed by expansion-oriented news and media agencies. The main promoter was the Christian-Liberal coalition, which came into office in 1982 and immediately pushed for an extensive cable wiring of the Federal Republic. Starting in 1982, the two main commercial stations SAT1 and RTL plus were successively introduced into the individual federal states. Deregulation of television in the Federal Republic never went so far as to abolish all legal restrictions

1. For the development of the media in the Federal Republic of Germany as a whole, see Knut Hickethier, “The Media in Germany,” in Tony Wymouth/Bernard Lamizet, eds., *Markets & Myths. Forces for Change in the European Media* (London/New York: Longman, 1996) 100-33.

2. There was a phase of television operation in Germany between 1935 and 1943. See William Uricchio, ed., *Die Anfänge des deutschen Fernsehens* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1991).

imposed on the industry. On the contrary, the federal states created their own media departments to control the commercial stations. These state media agencies (not to be confused with "television commissions" since they are simply oversight agencies) also issue licenses for program operations and could, potentially, withdraw them, although that has not occurred in spite of considerable conflicts with individual commercial television companies. These control authorities were supposed to have at least curtailed if not stopped the impending concentration in the media industry. However, as developments have indicated, this was not to be the case, because German television viewers are part of a highly desirable market for which international concerns fiercely compete.

The build-up of commercial television continued until about 1989/90, when, in the beginning of the 1990s, RTL became the first station to challenge the dominant public networks and then, in 1993, became the market leader just ahead of the public-supported ZDF and ARD networks. Despite a rather slow start and all prognostications against it, commercial television quickly achieved a dynamic breakthrough.

By the second half of the 1980s, the presence of commercial television had already altered the paradigm of television broadcasting. Since the end of the 1940s, broadcasting's cultural mission had been given highest consideration, but now, in the second half of the 1980s, the concept of market shares became dominant even for public television. Today, the cultural component, receiving only occasional consideration by the media market, is almost perceived as an impediment to the market's unlimited expansion. Public networks clearly want to be freed from some regulations (e.g., regarding the limiting of advertising time), because they are seen as a restriction of the related programming.

Until 1989 commercial programming time slots were predominately filled with regular feature films and series, mainly from America, which had already been shown often on the public networks and for which the broadcast rights were primarily in the hands of movie middleman Leo Kirch. Paradoxically these series were often broadcast in the dubbed version paid for earlier by the public supported networks. Because these "old programs" could not make much of an impression and could hardly attract a new large audience, the private stations began to broadcast series and feature films not previously aired on public networks because, among other reasons, they were too violent or sexually explicit for their family-oriented programming.

This development was seen as following a long-established pattern in the United States, although there commercial television had existed alongside public television from the very beginning. It was thus not simply a matter of copying what had already existed in American television. Thanks to program inventories amassed through forty years of public broadcasting as well as their ownership of large production companies³ and accumulated programming experience, public networks naturally continued to produce quality programming, ambitious network films and conscientious documentaries. Although it did not receive the medial attention that commercial networks received for their outrages, public television was still slow in making structural changes in its programming. The growing trend towards more entertaining programs was slow to develop.

2. German Unification as a short term media episode

In 1989, this intense commercialization process was interrupted by the fall of the Wall and the collapse of the GDR. No one in the West or East was prepared for it. The Federal Republic was so steeped in its Western orientation and preoccupation with west European problems that no forethought or models were available for the possibility of German unification. Nor had either public television or the private networks planned for anything like this.⁴

Since the 1950s, the cold war between the GDR and the Federal Republic had been waged primarily by the media. The politics of detente had not been able to eliminate fundamental differences, and in the 1980s ideological polarization was still effected principally by the media. Most of all, the "spill over" transmission of West German television and radio programs into almost all of the GDR presented East Germans with a view of a "better" Federal Republic in contrast to the reality of their situation.⁵

Yet even before the wall fell, with the accompanying removal of

3. The largest European film and television production company, the Munich based Bavaria-Atelierbetriebsgesellschaft, is owned by the public television networks WDR and SDR, while the similarly large Studio Hamburg belongs to NDR.

4. See, more extensively, Hickethier, "Die Zerschlagung der Einrichtung. Der Weg vom Staatsfernsehen der DDR zum Rundfunkföderalismus in den neuen Bundesländern," in Rainer Bohn, Knut Hickethier, and Eggo Müller, eds., *Mauer-Show. Das Ende der DDR, die deutsche Einheit und die Medien*. (Berlin: Sigma, 1992) 71-94.

5. On general conditions see the best presentation about German-German relations at that time: Peter Bender, *Episode oder Epoche: Zur Geschichte des geteilten Deutschland*. (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1996).

Erich Honecker and Joachim Hermann, the Politburo member responsible for media, the first careful changes were made in East German television. When the Wall fell, critical news coverage became a part of East German television, allowing East German citizens to use their own television for information.

From November 1989 to March 1990 — when it appeared there would be a reformed GDR and with it, an independent, reformed East German television — a new structuring of programs on East German television took place. A new commission was created after the pattern of the “Round Table” to develop a plan to reform the East German media and to discuss and formulate a media bill. It was to be structured along the same lines as the law governing television in the Federal Republic. In the process of self determination they saw the possibility of formulating their own identity,⁶ even if it was debatable that East German citizens had an independent cultural identity. In this process of self discovery the media was very important and the news broadcast *Aktuelle Kamera* was pleased with its growing number of viewers already in December of 1989. A more open news policy, a different style of presentation (changing the attire of the moderators and the studio design), creating new programs or altering existing ones (*Donnerstag-Gespräch*, *Klartext*, *Prisma*, *AK Zwo*) and the transmission of previously forbidden TV-films (*Geschlossene Gesellschaft*, *Ursula*, *Monolog eines Taxifahrers*) were to demonstrate their own capacity for change. In spite of all this, there still existed a broad-based societal distrust, especially towards the leaders in the television industry. The ability to adapt to new conditions could not hide the fundamental dilemma of East German television: its structure and organization of personnel were essentially the product of the old regime, which had dictated everything to the last detail, and which consequently left the legitimacy of East German television in a fragile state.

The rush towards German unification was seen in the Federal Republic as a chance to intervene directly in the changing East German media landscape. It was clear that unification should bring with it a unified media system; the only question was whether a changed and fundamentally reformed East German television industry could be integrated into the dual system in the Federal Republic. This non-commercial “Eastern

6. Edith Spielhagen, “Medial aufgeschlossen, real ausgeschlossen. DDR, Medien und kulturelle Identität,” *epd/Kirche und Rundfunk* 41.45 (1990): 7ff.

TV” would have inevitably strengthened the public component of the dual system in the Federal Republic. This was opposed mainly by media concerns of the Federal administration bent on expansion, but also by the Christian-Liberal coalition of the Federal Republic. A “third model” was totally unthinkable for these media politicians and media representatives.

While the Western private enterprise organization media looked at East Germany as a yet unconquered market, the public media pursued, in the beginning, rapprochement through cooperative effort, as it had been established with other media systems in other federal states. Since November 1989, ARD and ZDF had been cooperating effectively with East German television through broadcasting ARD and ZDF programs (e.g., *Presseclub*) through East German television facilities in East Berlin. ARD programs were also incorporated into East German television programming (*Brennpunkt: Die Stimmung kippt um*). The cooperative program principle was supported by those responsible for ARD programming. As long as German unification was seen as unfeasible, the only option was the slow cooperation and integration of East and West television.

The new CDU-led GDR government, elected in March 1990, had at first no clear conception as to how to restructure the television system. Instead, under the direction of Hans Bentzien, East German television undertook its own media offensive: returning to the name it held before 1971 — *Deutscher Fernsehfunk* (DFF) — and formulating a “Statute of the TV network *Deutscher Fernsehfunk*.” During this power vacuum confronting media politics, East German television saw itself as an independent television network alongside ZDF and ARD and it demanded a self-actuated phase of reformation and new organization.⁷

Opposition to this came from two sides. Those responsible for ARD and ZDF programming and politicians in the Federal Republic presented proposals for a new organization of East German television. The *Deutsche Fernsehfunk* was declared to be “non-reformable” and infiltrated by members of the PDS (hence communists) and so they demanded a federal restructuring. This was joined by endeavors within the GDR to break up the government center in Berlin, in order to more strongly promote their own newly developing regional state interests. The plan to retain the DFF as an independent third public broadcasting system within a unified Germany became increasing less likely until it was finally crushed among the conflicting interested factions.

7. See “Unverwechselbar Pro. Epd-Interview mit DFF-Programmdirektor Wolfgang Vietze,” *epd/Kirche und Rundfunk* 41.28/29 (1990): 5-9.

The discussion was overwhelmed by the goal of both the Federal administration and those responsible for West German broadcasting, namely to establish the dual broadcasting system in the still existing GDR. Pressure was openly applied in various ways. ARD and ZDF demanded to broadcast their programs throughout the GDR with better quality than they previously had been able to from Berlin. Finally, in mid May, the CDU (West) committee of experts dealing with federal media politics, presented an integration plan with the "benchmark figures for media arrangement in a unified Germany," while the SPD favored a step-by-step integration of GDR television into the system of the Federal Republic. The media representatives and media politicians of the Federal Republic wanted a quick unification for the media as well. Throughout it was most important that the media structure of the Federal Republic remained for the most part unchallenged.

This engendered great uncertainty in the representatives of East German television involved in program development because the need for personnel layoffs were always part of the discussions. The facilities of the DFF and the East German radio network were seen as oversized and no longer financeable. Paragraph 36 of the Unification Contract, hammered out in the summer of 1990, proposed a transitional period between the day of German Unification (3 Oct. 1990) and the end of 1991, after which federal principles should be in operation instead of those of the DFF and state broadcasting systems should have been established. Among the peculiarities of television's development was the fact that at the end of the old East German television, in the second half of 1990, the popularity of the DFF programs had risen so drastically in the new federal states that it surpassed that of the previously dominant ARD and ZDF networks. Its growing popularity as a network was due to the fact that it was able to concentrate on the problems of the new federal states as an insider, not as an outside observer. Apparently, this popularity was motivated by an attempt to hold on to an identity which many of the new federal citizens felt to be severely threatened by "land annexing" West Germans. For many, the DFF offered "special help by East Germans for East Germans in coping with life."⁸

The establishment of state broadcasting networks patterned after Western models proved to be a lengthy process. The states of Saxony,

8. Holm Freier, "Lebenshilfe. Das ostdeutsche Fernsehen und die Einheit," *epd/Kirche und Rundfunk* 41.77 (1990): 3.

Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia (each led by a CDU administration) created a joint state broadcasting network — “Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk.” Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern vacillated for a long time about how to organize their television system, until finally, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern joined the interstate treaty of the existing North German Broadcasting Network, while Brandenburg decided by the end of 1991 to form its own network — Ostdeutscher Rundfunk Brandenburg — a very small station (judged by the number of viewers and hence limited financial means). The excessive rush to close the DFF and the limited time allowed the new networks to be established and achieve competence, created such chaos that much was forever lost in the process. The production facilities in the studios were for the most part dismantled.

The changeover took place in an extremely short period of time (compared, for example, to the discussion leading up to the introduction of commercial television), so that the East German viewers felt themselves run over roughshod, and rightly so. With the collapse of East German media “the country lost its voice,” according to East Berlin publicist Christoph Dieckmann.⁹ In the DFF — despite its shortcomings — East Germans had recognized themselves, felt their problems addressed by people who had the same background, the same heritage, the same sense of life and the same fate as themselves. The “voice” was squelched because the new state broadcasting networks could not become the mouthpiece for East Germans in such a short time.

Consequently, a gap developed during an important phase of unification and uncertainty arose about how things were to continue. The results were not what had been hoped for in 1989. When the GDR came to an end, many in the opposition had dreamt of taking control of the media. At the end of the transitional period it became apparent that the people of the new federal states had a new broadcasting system imposed upon them.

The deciding factor in German media development was that the organizational change in the television landscape was politically motivated. The deregulation which had been introduced in the West to accommodate commercialization was delayed here once again, solely for the purpose of laying the groundwork for the introduction of commercial stations in the new federal states. The public networks were kept very

9. Christoph Dieckmann, “Heimweh nach Ideologie? Zur Relativität von Befindlichkeiten,” *epd/Kirche und Rundfunk* 41.45 (1991): 4.

busy integrating the new stations and interfacing with their structures, while the commercial networks, working from the West, used this time to enlarge their market to include all of Germany.

In retrospect, German unification proved to be only a transitory episode in the commercialization of German television which, with the addition of the GDR territory, had become the largest television market in Europe. Gone were all hopes for a reciprocal learning experience in the television industry (such as the dramaturgical exactness and careful, aesthetic presentation of television films, which West German film makers could have learned from their counterparts in the former GDR).¹⁰ Just as no positive element of the East German state was adopted by the new Federal Republic, so it was that nothing of East German television was to remain. That in the end only one crime series (*Polizeiruf 110*) and the good-night-stories of the *Sandmännchen* survived, must be seen as an historical irony.

Additionally, television, as a form of organized public communication, completely missed the opportunity to assume the role of moderator in mediating the cultural and mental differences which broke out between East and West after 1989. Obsessed with commercialization, it was concerned only with increases in short term market share, no longer accepting any responsibility in helping to solve integration issues as had been done with great success by West German broadcasting (radio and television) after World War II in the reconstruction of the desolated remnants of the country and the integration of 12 million refugees in the 1950s and 1960s. After an initial treatment of the theme of German unification, West German interest in the problems of East Germans and their depiction on television waned. The numerous conflicts regarding disputed property ownership, unemployment, Stasi offenses, etc., no longer interested the majority of the population of the former Federal Republic or the West German film producers. As interest in these issues declined, they quickly returned to other topics. Fictional television film lost interest in East-West stories as well. Instead, after 1992 the main concern again became the rivalry between the public and commercial networks.

3. Europeanization of television?

Since 1993, the commercialization of television has dominated the public discourse so extensively that the question of Europeanization of

10. See Birgit Peulings et al., eds., *Das Ende der Euphorie. Das Fernsehspiel in Ost und West nach der deutschen Einigung*. (Hamburg, 1996).

the media has become a peripheral issue, of interest only as a component in further intensifying competition which the opening of the German television market might create for international media conglomerates.¹¹ Also no longer of interest is the prospect of networking as discussed in the 1970s relative to increased European co-production and realized in the 1980s with the formation of a "European Production Company" by a number of West European television networks. Everything in the 1990s has been and continues to be geared towards the concentration of media power and influence. Media politics has become geopolitics in Europe: The Christian-Liberal Federal government wanted the German media to be as strong and influential as possible in Europe.

On the other hand, international media concerns continue to be interested in becoming established in the German market. Nonetheless, the German market also appears complicated and risky to international concerns, who buy their way into German networks, but who also frequently get out quickly after negative results. In 1995, Rupert Murdoch withdrew from an arrangement with Bertelsmann only six months after he entered into it. Time/Warner has signalled a similar withdrawal. Although everyone is discussing the globalization and internationalization of television, practical results have not been realized, because it has not yet been established that such an internationalization should be considered an improvement or a detriment to social communication.¹² The once so ambitiously heralded Europeanization of the media has presently been limited to the public cultural channels: for the German-speaking areas (Germany, Austria, German-speaking Switzerland) there is a cultural channel (3SAT), which to a great extent, broadcasts reruns from participating central networks of these countries, thereby providing a glimpse at programs of other countries. Its effectiveness, however, is diminished since these programs are for the most part also being aired by the cable networks.

A different situation exists with the German-French cultural channel ARTE, which came into being through a governmental political arrangement. Though it originally meant to include other countries as well, it never got beyond German-French cooperation. This channel

11. See Tony Wymouth/Bernard Lamizet, as above.

12. See also Hans J. Kleinsteuber et al., eds., *EG-Medienpolitik. Fernsehen in Europa zwischen Kultur und Kommerz* (Berlin, 1990).

presents numerous documentary films, cultural features, and demanding feature films as well as theater, ballet and dance broadcasts. In spite of many problems, it is extolled as a cultural channel, whose specialty is "theme evenings," when the entire evening program is dedicated to a theme ("The Night," "Artist and Model," "Europe," etc.). Its share of the viewing audience remains small, partly because the films are voiced over. Undoubtedly it offers programming, primarily for culturally interested patrons, which gives insights into different customs and mental traditions through its many French contributions (including documentaries) with unsynchronized translations (only subtitles or voice-over) which are quite uncommon in Germany. Translation is the crux of the problem of a truly cooperative European program as was envisioned as early as the 1950s. This idea has been continually frustrated and defeated by the multilingual nature of Europe.

4. Program development trends in the 1990s

The most important characteristic of television development, aside from the explosive nature of the expansion of television offerings (from about 40 hours on weekdays on three channels in 1980 to about 400 hours on approximately 25 channels in 1995), has been the increasing structuring of programs towards entertainment. This is linked with a broadening range of offerings. The commercial stations have always been searching for neglected program niches (e.g., early morning or night television) and have milked program genres for all their possibilities. Often they dared to touch upon themes and utilized presentation modes which public networks could not pursue without breaking their cultural contract and the restrictions which had been set for them. This resulted in a dismantling of the rules of decency to which television had voluntarily subscribed up to this time and an abandonment of the accepted rules of journalism. A few general trends of these program changes can be noted:

- a) A tendency toward the sexualization of program offerings: through the introduction of soft porn, erotic shows, as well as talk shows and magazine programs preoccupied with guests' love lives.
- b) A brutalization of portrayals: a stronger emphasis on the presentation of force and positions of power in fiction as well as in modes of journalistic reporting, including a move toward sensationalism to the point of open humiliation and "confrontainment."
- c) Formats which could be grouped under the term "boulevard journalism," specializing in rumor and gossip, reports on public figures, etc.

d) A further variant is the proliferation of belittling and inane humor: all forms of making fun of people — from comedy to satire.¹³

e) A newer trend is trivial television, namely, banal, cheaply produced subject matter being turned into program formats. Initially these programs were aired at the periphery of established programs (during the night hours). ORB initiated this type of nighttime programing with a live broadcast from an aquarium with which it garnered a large share of the market in this rather sparsely used time slot. Broadcasts of subway rides, ocean sounds, a crackling fireplace and such topics became programs that filled the hours. However, the idea that this old concept of television, namely to “see into the far-off distance,” could be established in such a way that one could participate in distant everyday city life, in nature or other things, is contradicted: live programs are seldom aired, but rather well-established, incessantly replayed, canned material. When, for example, the Hamburg city channel “Hamburg 1” tapped into the activity on city plazas during the day through permanently installed cameras, this was not done in an attempt to create a totally new programing idea, but rather because of a dearth of broadcast-worthy material.

Even though aquariums, subway rides, the rushing of ocean waters are only programming place-holders, these areas can be developed: everyday situations, ordinary, customary things are shown. With that, stations speculate on the curiosity of viewers. Automatic television cameras are placed in busy city plazas in hopes that something might happen and the viewer would then be there live. The trend towards the trivial and banal was extended to other forms, for example vacation television: the WDR brought a daily report from Mallorca, the favorite German vacation spot.

f) Television entertainment increasingly targets specific groups, paying special attention to the marked difference between the old and the young. Juxtaposed with such new trends in entertainment are traditional, rather leisurely, light programing with folk music, old hits, brass bands, opera, and other entertainment preferred by a more mature audience.

g) This re-emergence of folk music on television (for which, interestingly, no similar trend is noticeable to the same extent in radio) seems to be connected to a noticeable increase in the number of viewers

13. See Hickethier, “Fernsehen und Satire — unvereinbar?” *Text und Kontext. Zeitschrift für germanistische Literaturforschung in Skandinavien*, Sonderreihe 37 (“Die Schwierigkeit der Satire”) (Copenhagen/Munich: Fink, 1996) 107-39.

selecting programs produced in Germany over those American series, feature films and made-for-television movies that were so popular after the initial introduction of commercial television. A growing segment of the population wants to see familiar surroundings, famous, familiar stars, and stories which, though out of the ordinary, are somehow connected to the here and now. (This is where television is markedly different from theater films in Germany). The result is an increased production of series and television movies in the German language. It is in this context that the increased interest in folk music must be seen. It reflects and fosters the search for the familiar in contrast to the hectic "Americanized" world of big cities and work places.

Not accidentally, therefore, sociology too has determined a specific life's milieu (the "harmony milieu"),¹⁴ in which there is an interest in preserving traditional relationships and an orientation towards "old" and "German" forms of television.¹⁵ There is also an associated counter movement to the trend of standardizing television programming through the purchase of American feature films and series. Many viewers do want new, fast-paced story telling and "modern" themes, but with a familiar, hometown atmosphere and not somewhere in San Francisco or Los Angeles.

5. Phases of program change

Historically, several different phases can be recognized in the development of the dual broadcasting system, characterized by a fundamental change in commercial programming:

First, in the mid-1980s, commercial networks established themselves through increased airings of old feature films and series from Leo Kirch's copyright empire. The networks were thereby able to establish a presence and could then probe the market and profile themselves through special offerings. This inevitably brought about a "fatigue factor": Since programming had become supersaturated with old series and feature films, it was impossible to achieve a large share of the viewer market. Once market presence had been established and reruns had run their course, the commercial networks set their sights on other genres, especially in the area of entertainment. Different stages in this development can be identified chronologically. First, the traditional

14. See Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt/Main/New York, 1992) 292ff.

15. It is significant that for years undisputedly "boring" and stereotypical series like *Derrick* have been registering on average the highest viewer ratings.

quiz programs were changed into game shows. Then they tried to monopolize sports coverage by outflanking the public networks in the acquisition of licences for broadcast rights. Thereafter, they relied on an increased number of independently produced series and TV films, and finally, starting in 1995, they competed directly with the “flagship” of the public networks, the news broadcasts.

After 1987/88, they also began searching for completely new genres, which might diversify established programming. This search consumed a great deal of time and energy because new genres are not found just “lying around.” Nor did the perusal of the American format reservoir yield much for various reasons (due to cultural barriers or legal limitations, such as with court-TV). The apparent blossoming of “reality-shows” also revealed that in spite of many years of orientation towards American television genres there was still a strong resistance to the kind of programs which could be identified as “American.”

The strategy of more fully probing the potential of existing program forms was more successful. This process can be seen in almost all types of programs. The “talk shows and conversation programs” genre was stretched to the extreme: on the one hand towards heightened aggression (a battle of words with quick repartee) and on the other towards minimizing aggression (fireside chats). However, these forms of diversification continued to be tied to the goal of profit making in commercial television. Experimentation did not last very long, that which did not increase market shares was quickly eliminated from the program.

6. Long range changes: From narrative to interactive television

At first it seemed that these program changes came about only because the available stock of fictional programs would soon be depleted and new production of narrative programs (feature films, television-movies, television-plays and series) could not keep pace with the proliferation of new channels. There were also more fundamental reasons for the change in programming strategy, in that a long range change in television offerings made its appearance. The amount of story telling, or fiction, on television began to diminish. Non-fictional entertainment increased in scope and significance. The structural basis for this can be found in the differentiated response and approachability of viewers.

The nature of fiction is to create action within seemingly confined areas, which we observe as though the action of characters continued

unobserved by the viewers. It is, after all, an old concept in entertainment — one that was developed by the theater with its peep show box and later perfected by the movies in feature film.

Because of its orientation towards the viewer, television fiction has certain limitations. The modes which allowed the viewer to be drawn in almost physically through “inductive tension,” as has been developed in Hollywood movies, especially in Steven Spielberg films, is limited in the transfer to television. The small television screen, the ever present surroundings of the daily life, limit the effect such involvement strategies can have through the tube.

Game shows, in principle, function completely differently than fiction, directly confronting viewers with the suggestion of live involvement, in that they create a feeling of bringing a different segment of the outside world into the here and now. It does not seem as if one were looking in on the game activity through a kind of fourth wall, rather, everything in the game show is directed towards the viewer, and even the presence of a studio audience helps to draw the viewer in. Here is a kind of entertainment in which television fundamentally differentiates itself from the movie theater. The live effect is something which is not part of the movie experience. Herein lie the dimensions of the new development in television, namely, in this ability of the medium to fully explore the aspect of personal contact. Such forms of “direct” involvement, as cultivated by game shows, have another advantage in that they cost less to produce. They show through their high degree of serialization potential a proclivity for repeating models which can be expanded into other program formats. As an extension of this idea, the concept of interactive television is based upon its ability to produce dialogue: the medium offers not only a new surface treatment, but it allows interaction, even if it only appears so.

That television allows the medium to move in another direction, away from dramatized television events directed at the viewer, has shown us that other basic television programs are unique in this aspect of confronting the public directly: such as news broadcasts, magazine and advice programs, and announcements.

The emergence of new program formats such as the “reality show” (known as “reality-TV” in Germany), shows how flexible and expandable this new appellative form of television is. The format of the reality show fictionalizes, in principle, the reporting so as to link the form of a

forced, dramatic narrative with appellative forms portrayed in a way that has the appearance of authenticity. However, such programs wear out faster than the traditional kind — precisely because of their direct, frontal approach, their being tied to the here and now and the requirement of live or quasi-live production. That makes it possible for fiction to always remain on television.

7. Delimitation of program forms and genres

A stronger orientation towards entertainment in programming has necessitated pushing back the limits on program form and mixing forms and formats. Its immediate goal is a new combination of attractiveness and novelty because the traditional genres have become stale and worn out. This is a sure sign of television “fatigue.” However, such an explanation seems to spring from an old attraction concept linked to the movie theater. In television the trend is rather more towards a fundamental change in the structure of offerings. The program genres which dominated into the 1980s can be seen as forms still strongly dependent on models found outside of television. Since the mid-1980s a development has emerged which moves more strongly towards new television concepts and away from traditional models to produce their own distinctive forms, as found in the diversification of talk shows which are increasingly beholden to models and traditions originating on television.¹⁶

The structural tendencies which stand out amidst this program genre change can be observed in the area of sports entertainment. Although sports on television has been limited to a few popular ones, new ones are added if viewers get an certain emotional kick out of them. Just as “bungee jumping” and the new *Fassadenlaufen* [climbing buildings] has gained popularity, since 1995, the new type of “wrestling” programs on RTL2 has generated a great deal of excitement. Here again, this is primarily an emotional experience, which is not unproblematic for children if they do not recognize the staged character of such fights. Other formats also endeavor to outwit traditional viewing conventions as in the case of inserted “reality show” segments or some contributions to news programs. Today, with small portable cameras it is easy to shoot these cheap thrills directly: We jump in as viewers and don’t let the parachute open till the last minute, or we follow the camera as it scans down a

16. For greater details see Hickethier/Joan Bleicher, eds., *Trailer, Teaser, u. Co. Programmverbindungen im deutschen Fernsehen*. (Berlin, 1996).

facade. All experience indicates, however, that exposés of this kind still won't produce a sufficient thrill. Such an inductive thrill capable of reaching the human core does not come by merely holding a camera up close but rather through a very extravagant and expensive mode of production practiced almost perfectly now in Hollywood. Such a mode of bungee-television has therefore not yet been recognized as a new format.

When it comes to conveying close, personal information, especially in the realm of political reporting, the production of new programs has, if anything, taken a step backward recently. The development of "infotainment" has stagnated. One of the reasons for this dearth of any new format development is that political news coverage is tied to a relatively rigid set of rules, which are also recognized by a portion of the viewing public. These rules of news coverage impede any formatting which steps outside of traditional bounds. The separation of news and commentary, the principle of balanced reporting, the value of news etc., cannot be easily eradicated from European culture.

8. Trends in fiction: *Made-for-TV plays, films, movies, series*

In the mid-1980s it was feared that commercial sponsors' entry into the market might lower the production standards of television plays and films. This prompted the public networks to somewhat "rush ahead" and unilaterally change their production of fiction by investing more heavily in series, purchasing and airing more feature films, and canceling, or at least extending the production time of expensive television plays. The end of television plays, or of original television fiction, was predicted, yet very little of that can be seen in actual programing.

Instead, the production of fiction has experienced a differentiation of forms with a greater distinction between the series, the television film, the spectacular movie film and the fictional experiment. The television film depicting everyday tales or more extended epic development in the mini-series, has become as well established as the docudrama, the reenacted criminal case, or the documentary/fictionalized presentation of scandals such as Heinrich Broloer has done with his films about the Barschel affaire, the demise of the Coop Concern, or the much debated two-part documentary film *Todesspiel*, aired in 1997 on the twentieth anniversary of the "Deutsche Herbst," which deals with the abduction of Schleyer and the Lufthansa plane "Landshut," as well as the suicide at Stammheim. It has been noted since the end of the 1980s that viewers have varied preferences not only in the evaluation

of individual genres and themes but also in specific forms.

a) The interest in watching mega-movie productions (such as the Spielberg "Indiana Jones" variety), capable of piquing the viewers curiosity has not waned because the viewers purposely use television to see movies they missed at the movie theater for whatever reason.

b) Viewers have become increasingly disinterested in older feature films because it is quite evident that they are only being used as "filler material" for the otherwise empty time slots. There is also an increased disinterest in American series which often have already been shown on public television. In addition, there is a loss of interest in American stories which depict a way of life somewhat removed from the stories in German productions.

In the beginning of the 1990s it was statistically recognized that viewers were increasingly interested in stories which took place in the contemporary world. Especially impressive, time and again, has been the number of viewers watching long-established German series. The most successful programs by far are *Derrick* and *Tatort*. The continued high ratings of *Derrick* (approx. 30%) – a markedly conventional and decidedly slow program — has been impressive, considering the ongoing debate about picking up the pace of the program and making it more appealing. The dominance of German programs has spurred a massive production boom and it is already apparent that the series which top the program lineup on RTL and SAT1 are preeminently of German provenance. With that, the debate over national television quotas in the upcoming European Union has, for the present at least, been eliminated.

The subject matter of these series is no different from those on public television because the commercial networks utilize not only the same authors, directors, and actors but also the same production companies. The series are predominantly about country doctors, pastors, teachers, wine growers, lawyers, commissioners, and detectives. These professional groups are not chosen to examine them from new and different perspectives but because they come in contact with a wide range of people and situations and therefore, can be used to develop a multiplicity of stories. RTL, for instance, offers a number of television films in its series *Schicksalhafte Begegnungen* [*Fateful Encounters*], as does SAT1 and also, more recently, PRO7, though it should be noted that these productions are no longer called television plays, but rather television movies, since this term seems to be more attractive and stimulating to the public. They are, nonetheless, nothing more than television films. "Television

movies” are said to be commensurate with theater movies, taking on spectacular themes such as rape, child abuse, abortion, serial killers, plots run amok, etc. which are strongly sensationalistic or at least have a melodramatic foundation. In contrast to the public television film (say, of the 1970s) these do not place as much value on journalistic research and a sense of reality as they do on a more fluid narrative style, emotional effects, and a return to the more entertaining narrative style of the movie theater. In the long run, this independent production of television films enhanced the status of this program niche. Though the tendency is noticeably towards contemporary, spectacular stories, a mixture of action and melodrama, there have also been numerous, high quality television movies. *Der Sandmann*, a movie about a serial killer (starring Götz George) by RTL2 received nothing less than the prestigious Adolf-Grimme-Prize in Gold. Competition between public and commercial television film production has markedly increased. Compared to an average cost of about 2.5 million DM for a television film at the end of the 1980s, it has risen to about 3.5-4.5 million DM at the present time.

c. Noteworthy also is the development of the daily series, the soap opera, which for a long time did not seem to be acceptable or producible. After RTL with its *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten* [Good times, bad times] proved that it could hold an audience over an extended period time, the public television networks ARD and ZDF followed suit. An irony of fate would have it that these series are being directed primarily by former DEFA and GDR television play directors, even though GDR television for many years massively opposed the “series” program format, denouncing it as a capitalistic, Western form of decadence. The center of interest in the German daily soaps are young people. *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten* became so successful because a group of 17-25 year olds was featured extensively for the first time. The problems of this age group (the threat of unemployment, the search for adventure, drug problems, etc.) were a continuing theme even if presented in an exaggerated manner. The same thing holds true for the successor soaps of the public networks — *Marienhof* and *Verbotene Liebe* [Forbidden Love]: These too deal primarily with young people and their fight for their own existence, with intrigues, malicious behavior, drug abuse, seduction and rape. No attempt is made to imitate real life nor does the viewer really expect it. The ARD series *Lindenstraße*, running weekly since 1986 and depicting all age groups more extensively,

appears somewhat old-fashioned and worn.¹⁷

This serialization of fiction is moving toward a long-term change in the direction of fictional television offerings, because it is a form specifically developed for television, with set design, production effects and acting going contrary to those used in the production of illusion in theater movies. Often, daily soaps are barely able to cover up the stereotypical, pedestrian decor, the bad play, the diminished illusionary effects created by standardized filming techniques. However, especially among young viewers, it is just that which seems to produce the suggestion of authenticity, of an increased participation in the world of the series running parallel to their own real world, strengthening the impression that the onlooker is catching a glimpse of what is happening or at least, could be happening elsewhere. This trend is growing. Meanwhile, there are also real families, who present themselves to the public in series or other periodic productions. For example, the *Westdeutsche Rundfunk* produces a series, aired at extended time intervals, about a working family (*Die Fussbroichs*) which recounts and depicts their real life stories in front of the camera. That some "acting" is included is evident, but these stories do reflect a great deal of the real lives of the participants who play themselves. Because "amateur actors" are utilized, this form of serial production cannot pretend to be an alternative to the daily soaps, but rather a special situation, since the participants can not be permanently in front of the camera.

In the daily soaps, we find a suggestion of a time equivalency — not yet a direct participation in live action, but something like a parallel world which develops alongside the normal world of the viewer, a bit of the cosmos into which the viewer can immerse himself from time to time as he desires — a stream of fiction similar to that of the daily news and political information which have a similar serial character to the soaps.

9. *The downside of convergence*

The developments traced here can be observed not only on commercial television, but also, to a lesser degree in the domain of public television. One is tempted to speak of a long-term convergence of the two, because the parameters of the both systems, commercial and public

17. This youth-orientation does not imply that young viewers are the majority of the viewing audience. The segment of the 2 to 5 million daily viewers who are over 29 years old is significantly higher. Even the segment of those over age 50 is still greater than the number of viewers between ages 14 and 29.

networks, are not fundamentally different. Nevertheless, we have to ask ourselves: what is lost in this development?

All areas of educational programing have been greatly reduced in the last ten years: various forms of television for schools, for adult education, have to a large extent been eliminated from the programs or have been relegated to the "Third Programs." Offerings which are meant to appeal to a very specific or small audience have been greatly reduced. Broadcasts of theater productions have been almost totally eliminated. In the last ten years, there has been a shocking reduction of formal experiments and film-oriented attempts at innovation. The ambitious *Kleine Fernsehspiel* (ZDF), which gave young filmmakers their initial chance at film production, has lost much of its original significance and can now hardly be found on the program. A long range trend towards standardization of modes of production and presentation — with the associated modes of perception — is apparently at work. Everything in the programing which is inclined towards separation and distinction of the individual, towards contemplation of that which is being presented, towards intensive personal involvement, springing from the orientation of individual "works" is being reduced. In the forefront of creating the program flow is that which accents continuation and non-irritating viewing.

For many young people, the conventions of the Hollywood feature film have become the deeply ingrained standard of perception. Other modes of story telling encounter strong opposition. Nowadays, the narrative approach of German film writers such as of Alexander Kluge are hardly understood. The story-telling concepts of the DEFA feature films have similarly been all but edged out by the Hollywood standards. This represents a great aesthetic loss.

10. The future of television on the digital net

On July 28, 1996, largely unnoticed by viewers, digital television made its debut in Germany, when the Kirch group introduced with D1 its first packet of 19 new programs, received on Pay-TV through a special decoder. The first program to be aired this way on five digital channels was the Formula 1 race from the track at Hockenheim. Although that did not truly establish digital television, (since viewers were not able to get program decoders for this initial event), it nevertheless introduced the next step in the development of German television, because Kirch has a huge stock of programs at his disposal and most Pay-TV

rights for feature films in the German language. Even Kirch's long-time, most significant competitor, the Bertelsmann/CLT-Group could not keep up and after a long struggle, finally got into the boat with Kirch. Whether this will bring to fruition the predicted all-new dimension of television remains to be seen. Until now, it has brought with it only more of the same old stuff. There are no new program ideas, and the viewers are becoming increasingly disinterested in watching this mass of programs. Television, which used to bring significance to its programs by merely airing them, now threatens to become a grand grab bag of offerings: And because I, as a viewer, cannot see everything that I would like to see, I increasingly tend to leave it alone altogether.

The development of this simultaneous run of commercial and public television over the past ten years has shown that, although international involvements are becoming increasingly important, and although concentration is increasing and commercialization has brought a fundamental change in television, public reaction is still quite incalculable. These new conditions do bring about changes in cultural habits, as do the themes with which television programs deal, but in spite of that a unified media under American domination is not in the offing. Interest in regional distinctiveness is stirring everywhere. More important than global media offerings is the interest in the peculiarities of the cultural region, still primarily determined by a common language and "shared experiences." Gradually, that which is not shown on television is again becoming important.

With the commercialization of television has come a strong orientation towards entertainment. Quite a sobering thought; especially when one views it a lot and experiences it as the endless recurrence of the same. Significantly, however, in a few program genres such as in news coverage, commercial stations are making a clear attempt to imitate the standards of the public networks. Except for a few cosmetic variations, the ghostly creature known as "infotainment," wherein the news is fictionalized and sensationalized, has not established itself in the interim. Viewers are clearly interested in program innovations, but when they continue to go against reigning moral conventions and expectations, they are not tolerated for long.

This development can be seen most clearly in the area of fictional television films: For a long time commercial stations avoided producing their own television films because it did not seem to be profitable. However, when they noticed that the German public had no interest in

those stations which showed nothing but films produced elsewhere, they relented and oriented themselves for the long term towards the standards established by traditional television films and plays. This brought about a convergence of public and commercial television offerings and public television networks have been hard pressed to legitimize their established subscription fees. They have been obliged to rethink their strengths, namely, presenting culture on television.

The confusion created by so many new programs has also created the impression that German television has become shallow and superficial. This holds true for the overall impression because the pallet of offerings has expanded so enormously. This program expansion has led especially to an increase in entertainment, to banality and trivialization, to more sexuality and brutality. There are still, however, high quality programs in a variety of forms and genres, but they are more difficult to find. There is also more critique of the programs; all has not been accepted without question for a long while. For this reason, pessimistic comments about the decline of culture have to be viewed carefully. Much has changed in recent years but not only in a negative direction — in retrospect, the last ten years appear as a turbulent, exciting, very energetic and also, qualitatively speaking, very important epoch of the history of German television.

Translated by Ronald Nabrotzky

From Building Blocks To Radical Construction: West German Media Theory Since 1984

Michael Geisler

If one were in a particularly ungenerous mood, one might start out this article by registering a curious silence. That silence lasted roughly from 1970, the last year in which a German thinker made a significant contribution to the media debate, to the end of the 1980s, when a spate of new theoretical voices began to make themselves heard.¹ They took their cue

1. Here I am bracketing (at least) three major theoretical constructions with media implications: Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Owen Daniels, and Assenka Oksilof, fwd. Miriam Hansen (Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1993), originally published in 1972; the updated systems theory of Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz Jr. with Dirk Baecker, fwd. Eva M Knodt (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995) — originally published in German in 1984; and, of course, Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1984-1987), originally published in German in 1981. All three are ultimately concerned not primarily with media, but with larger social constructions that *implicate* media. Kluge's concept of an oppositional public sphere focused less on television than on film, and, as such, has been analyzed in detail by Miriam Hansen, "Alexander Kluge, Cinema and the Public Sphere: The Construction Site of Counter-History," *Discourse* 6 (Fall 1983). Luhmann's systems theory presents a terminological problem: to Luhmann, the technological manifestations we commonly refer to as "media" are epiphenomena compared to *his* analysis of "media discourse" through such concepts as love, money, religion, etc. Finally, Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* while striking a slightly less pessimistic note vis-à-vis the mass media than the traditional Frankfurt School had done, nevertheless sees technological mass media as at best a derivative, commercialized, corrupted version of the enlightenment-based ideal of "unrestrained discourse" articulated in the print media. Cf. Norbert Bolz, *Am Ende der Gutenberg-Galaxis* (Munich: Fink, 1993) 78. More importantly, all three of these works are not primarily concerned with theories of electronic media, and a discussion of the (limited) role of media within their overall theoretical parameters is not feasible within this more narrowly defined context.

from the advent of new, interactive media, especially the spread of personal computers and the new communicative practice of the internet. During the same period, significant new contributions have come from Britain (John Fiske, Tony Bennet, and the British “Cultural Studies” School), Italy (Umberto Eco), France (Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio), The Netherlands (Ien Ang), and, of course, increasingly the United States (Neil Postman, Joshua Meyrowitz, Brian Winston, E. Ann Kaplan, Robert Allen, or Jane Feuer — to name just a few). In this article, I outline both the ruptures and continuities of recent German media theory before suggesting a possible explanation for the nearly two decades of comparative silence.

For almost half a century, the Frankfurt School’s critical broadsides against the “culture industry” were considered to be one of the dominant paradigms of western media theory. The theoretical groundwork was laid as early as 1944 in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s *Dialectics of Enlightenment*. Although not as popular as Marshall McLuhan’s (Teddy Adorno doing a cameo appearance in a Woody Allen film?), they were far more well-grounded in countless analyses of every aspect of mass culture, from television plays to pop music.

The unexplained blip on the Frankfurt School’s radar display of total media manipulation was Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” written with institute funds in Paris in 1935. Benjamin had taken a more differentiated position toward the media, arguing that by undermining the traditional modes of dissemination (loss of the “aura,” and with it the concept of authenticity) the modern mass media were also destroying the practice of top-down communication. (In fact, the restrictive and often positively idiotic copyright regulations in the broadcasting field could be read as nonsynchronous attempts to preserve concepts of authorship and authenticity in the age of digitized information).

It was from Benjamin’s notion of a new quality in public discourse that Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s famous 1970 *Kursbuch* essay took its cue. With altogether uncharacteristic modesty, Enzensberger titled his piece “Constituents of a Theory of the Media.” Above all, it is a scathing indictment of the German left’s nonsynchronous technophobia. Tucked away in small print on the second page is Enzensberger’s deconstruction of the central paradox (or perhaps, the hidden agenda) underlying what Jim Collins refers to as the “Grand Hotel” theory of

culture: the contention that industrialized mass culture is a totalitarian system of interlocking, but hierarchically organized discourse practices, with the manipulated workers in their dreary hovels at the bottom, and the bosses in their lofty penthouses at the top.²

The Frankfurt School theorists juxtaposed a realm of resistive autonomous art which alone can penetrate the manipulative smoke screen [*Verblendungszusammenhang*] of industrial culture (but which, by its elitist character, is inaccessible to many) and an ideologically overdetermined mass culture which encompasses the entire life experience ([*Lebenswelt*] in Schütz's terms³) of its pacified subjects. In doing so, they actually duplicated the dehumanizing structures they purported to critique. As Enzensberger put it: "Anyone who thinks of the masses only as the object of politics cannot mobilize them. He wants to push them around. A parcel is not mobile; it can only be pushed to and fro."⁴ Yet, according to Enzensberger, this is precisely the venue that leftist media theory in Germany, following in the footsteps of Adorno and Horkheimer, had taken.

Long before Jim Collins coined his apt metaphor, Enzensberger proceeded to do what British culturalists later turned into mass travel: he "checked out of the Grand Hotel."⁵ Accusing the "new" German Left of harboring some very old-fashioned bourgeois sentiments towards mass culture, along with a nostalgic longing for a pre-industrial reading circle (think of the conclusion of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*), he drew on arguments adapted from systems theory as well as his own familiarity with recent technological developments to suggest that industrial culture was by no means as monolithic as the Frankfurt School-inspired iconoclasts would have it:

... [I]t can be demonstrated that a linked series of communications or, to use the technical term, switchable network, to the degree that it exceeds a certain critical size, can no longer be centrally controlled

2. Collins took this image from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. See Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures. Popular Culture and Post-Modernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989) 7ff.

3. Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World*, trans. Richard M. Zaner and H. Tristram Engelhardt Jr. (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973-1989) *Strukturen der Lebenswelt*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).

4. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Baukasten zu einer Theorie der Medien," *Kursbuch* 20 (March 1970): 160. Translated as "Constituents of a Theory of the Media," *The Consciousness Industry. On Literature, Politics and the Media*, ed. Michael Roloff (New York: Continuum, 1974) 97.

5. Cf. Collins, *Uncommon Cultures* 16-27.

but only dealt with statistically. This basic “leakiness” of stochastic systems admittedly allows the calculation of probabilities based on sampling and extrapolations; but blanket supervision would demand a monitor that was bigger than the system itself. . . . A state of emergency is therefore the only alternative to leakage in the consciousness industry; but it cannot be maintained in the long run. Societies in the late industrial age rely on the free exchange of information; . . . Every attempt to suppress the random factors, each diminution of the average flow and each distortion of the information structure must, in the long run, lead to an embolism.⁶

From the Rodney King videotape to Miguel Littin’s clandestine video reportage about Pinochet’s Chile,⁷ and from the role played by television images in the opening of the Berlin Wall to Yeltsin’s shrewd management of CNN’s coverage during the attempted coup of 1990, the media, in particular television, has proven Enzensberger’s point many times over (albeit in somewhat different political contexts than Enzensberger had envisioned). And yet this most original German contribution to the media debate since Benjamin’s art work essay is almost routinely neglected in recent American surveys on media theory,⁸ while the Frankfurt School contributions have become a staple.⁹

And yet the continuing relevance of Enzensberger’s essay has been impressively documented in Siegfried Zielinski’s *Audiovisions: Cinema and Television as Interludes of History*. Zielinski gives a well-documented interpretive technological history of visual media, from the origins of

6. Enzensberger, “Constituents of a Theory of the Media” 98-99.

7. Cf. Gabriel García Márquez, *Clandestine in Chile. The Adventures of Miguel Littin*, trans. Asa Zatz (New York: Holt, 1988).

8. This may have something to do with the fact that Enzensberger picked up on one particular element in Benjamin’s media theory that has rarely played a significant role in media debates on this side of the Atlantic: the insistence on replacing the critique of media *reception* by an emancipatory critique of media *production*, i.e., the need to turn viewers into producers.

9. Cf. for instance the opening chapters (by Colin MacCabe and Laura Kipnis, respectively) of *High Theory/Low Culture*, ed. Colin MacCabe (New York: St. Martin’s, 1986); Jim Collins, *Uncommon Cultures; Logics of Television*, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990); *Modernity and Mass Culture*, eds. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991); John Storey, *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993). A significant exception is Mark Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 1995) 3-16. In an unusually balanced – if brief – account of various media paradigms, Poster not only historicizes the Frankfurt School critique without underestimating its role as a trailblazer for modern media criticism, he also takes due notice of both Benjamin’s and Enzensberger’s radical departures from Frankfurt School dogma.

cinema to the advent of interactive media. This kind of “integrative history” (Zielinski’s term) enables the author to provide us with an historicized reading of both cinema and television, the consecutive primary media [*Leitmedien*] of the past fifty years. Zielinski gives a sober assessment of the radical restructuring process currently underway in the entertainment industry. Video recorders, photo CDs, laser discs, and cable and satellite reception, not to mention the Web, have rendered projections of a monolithic culture industry technologically obsolete. “Despite strongly centralized economic and political power at the top of the hierarchy, the new video market is decentralized vis-à-vis its addressees and can hardly be controlled at all at the base.”¹⁰ Without giving up their status as commodities, the new technologies actually increase private control over the use of media, making the establishment of more or less organized counter-public spheres even more likely than at the time when Enzensberger first envisioned this. What seems to be evolving, then, is a texture of overlapping, interacting media discourses, with the potential spectrum extending all the way from anarchic patterns of communication (with the attendant threat of a balkanized societal discourse) to negotiated realms of audiovisual environments in which public and private spheres of production and reception are distinguished by consensus and convention rather than by a top-down production and distribution apparatus.

Enzensberger’s essay marks the juncture between the modernist and postmodernist paradigms in German theory. While the Brechtian turn towards interventionist aesthetics (complete with a very Brechtian schema juxtaposing the “repressive” and “emancipatory” uses of media) harkens back to Enzensberger’s leftist origins, the notion that competing discursive practices may coexist, interact with each other, and be governed by structural rather than political rules anticipates the postmodernist turn of the cultural studies movement.

While Frankfurt-School derived indictments of mass media continue to be published in Germany, the arena of significant debate within media studies has shifted over to the postmodernists and radical constructivists. Once they had overcome their initial hesitation toward postmodernist thought,¹¹ the avantgarde of German media theorists hastened to embrace

10. Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisionen. Kino und Fernsehen als Zwischenspiele in der Geschichte* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1989) 240. My translation.

11. My best guess would be that the 1983 publication of Manfred Frank, *Was ist Neostrukturalismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1983) might serve as a time marker here.

the new French cuisine. Similarly, the publication in 1986 of S. J. Schmidt's *Der Diskurs des radikalen Konstruktivismus*¹² provided a new paradigm for a fundamental critique of the media, this time based not on suspicions of viewer manipulation but on the idea that any kind of *content-based* critique of media communication could yield meaningful results if there is nothing for the media to communicate. The fringe benefit of this approach was that media theorists were able to continue in their complete disinterest in the actual *textuality* of media, only now this disinterest appeared under the guise of epistemology instead of ideological critique.

Kittler's Discourse Systems

The ground-breaking work of this period is Friedrich Kittler's *Grammophon-Film-Typewriter*, a book which, after its first publication in 1986, actually enjoyed a certain cult status on German university campuses for a while. To the extent that Kittler's Nietzschean montage of aphorisms may be reduced to a unified position, the book is an interpretive social history of the three primary media [*Schlüsselmedien*] or discourse systems [*Aufschreibesysteme*] mentioned in the title. This historical account is filtered through a secondary, somewhat less systematic historical narrative which describes the various ways in which these media were discursively thematized in literature, or, as Kittler would call it, the "self-inscription" of these media in the print medium. Implicit in his selection is the unstated belief that the innovative range of these three key media encompasses, or at least anticipates, the entire media revolution from 1880 to the present day — and beyond.

At first blush, this does not seem to be a radically new approach. There are a number of editions and analyses (in German as well as in English) which have collected, chronicled, or analyzed literary reactions to the competing practices of photography or film.¹³ For Kittler, however, this historiographical or thematic aspect of his work is only of incidental importance. He employs this filter because, as he argues,

How we got to this point, which can no longer be expressed in writing, is still — but barely — accessible to the written word. [This

12. Siegfried J. Schmidt, *Der Diskurs des radikalen Konstruktivismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986) [*The Discourse of a Radical Constructivism*]. No English translation yet published.

13. Cf. for instance, *Kino-Debatte. Texte zum Verhältnis von Literatur und Film 1909-1929*, ed. Anton Kaes (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1978); also *Prolog vor dem Film. Nachdenken über ein neues Medium 1909-1914*, ed. Jörg Schweinitz (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992).

book] collects, comments on, and links [*verschaltet*] those passages and texts in which the novelty of technical media inscribed itself on the old printed page. Many of these pages are old or have even been forgotten; but especially in the founding era of technical media the terror they evoked was so overwhelming that literature recorded it more precisely than in today's media pluralism where everything may continue to go on as long as it doesn't block the integrated circuits of Silicon Valley on their way to world domination.¹⁴

The passage hints at, rather than clarifies, Kittler's project: the proposition is to go back in time behind our current epistemological blinders and try to look through the sensitized eyes of contemporary writers and philosophers like Nietzsche and Rilke, in the hopes of discovering changes wrought by the new media in the deep structure of cognition itself. At the time when the "three primary media" first began to separate the communicative acts of listening, seeing, and writing into three distinct processes of mechanical reproduction, the imminent structural changes in our way of perceiving (or rather, constructing) reality could still be discerned individually, before an ever-increasing flow of mechanically reproduced data jumped the barrier between the senses, making it forever impossible to sort things out.

Kittler's aphoristic style, steeped in Nietzsche and German Romanticism, rather than postmodernist *bricolage*, yields some fascinating observations, mostly on the interface of technology, cognition, and the formation of scientific paradigms. The analogy between Rilke's idea to use the stylus of a gramophone to trace the coronal suture [*Kronennaht*] of the human skull not only betrays the age-old desire to make nature itself sing,¹⁵ it also represents the same fascination with the self-inscription of life, the obsession with imposing meaning on seemingly random "noise" that underlies the evolution of Freudian psychoanalysis (along with the

14. Friedrich Kittler, *Grammophon-Film-Typewriter* (Berlin: Brinkmann und Bose, 1986) 4. Translation mine. To the best of my knowledge Kittler's book has not been translated into English except for a brief article, "Grammophone, Film, Typewriter," trans. Dorothea von Mücke with the assistance of Philippe L. Similon, *October* 41 (Summer 1987): 101-18. None of the excerpts quoted here can be found in that short piece. However, there exists a translation of his related text which deals with some of the same issues within a slightly earlier time frame and from a more strictly literary vantage point. See *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer with Chris Cullens, fwd. David Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990). Yet many of the specific examples quoted in *Grammophon-Film-Typewriter* also appear in *Discourse Networks*; for example an abbreviated version of the Rilke passage can be found on 315ff.

15. Kittler, *Grammophon-Film-Typewriter* 63ff.

obvious reference to the “psychic apparatus,” Kittler assembles an impressive array of media metaphors in Freud’s contemporary writings).

Similarly, Kittler looks at the typewriter not as a simple writing utensil, but rather as a medium that affects the very nature of the writing process itself almost as radically as the invention of the printing press had done four centuries earlier. Kittler’s exploration of the early history of mechanical reproduction reminds us that, if we embrace the notion that media affect cognition and the way we construct reality, we need to backtrack quite a ways beyond the advent of new media, the introduction of computers and even the invention of television, radio, film, and photography to understand the epistemological changes wrought by any devices that mechanize oral or written discourse. Drawing on reflections by Nietzsche and Heidegger, Kittler sees the typewriter as an early form of digitalization. By deconstructing what used to be a holistic process: thinking, writing, and reading what one has just written, the typewriter alters our relation to the texts we produce, although perhaps not quite as radically as Kittler would have it. Once the act of writing “ceases to become an act of reading after only a fraction of a second,” he argues, “it also ceases to be the product of a subject.”¹⁶

Kittler seems to believe that his three primary media mark the beginning of a long process of exteriorization of physical experience, culminating in digital reality and the displacement of humans from the center of epistemology. It is at this point that his radical constructivist approach links up to the cultural pessimism underlying the Frankfurt School and, with a few notable exceptions, most German media theory. Time and time again, Kittler’s hidden agenda shows through: beneath the veneer of cyberpunk philosophy, his book is a work of mourning, a lament over the displacement of the printed word as the dominant medium of contemporary discourse. At his aphoristic best, Kittler extends Joshua Meyrowitz’s structural analysis of the interdependence between media technology and social epistemology backward in time beyond the advent of television.¹⁷ At his worst, his gloomy rantings about the disappearance of the human subject from modern media discourse remind the reader of countless cultural doomsayers from Ahasver Fritsch to Neil Postman.

16. Kittler, *Grammophon-Film-Typewriter* 298. My translation.

17. Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place. The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1984).

In his introduction to a 1988 Suhrkamp volume on the “Materiality of Communication,” K. Ludwig Pfeiffer outlines what might be considered to be the “program” of this new school of German media criticism. According to Pfeiffer, the authors in this volume examined “the material surfaces” of communication, since the “processes of meaning formation have degenerated to the level of stylization.” Meaning may be derived only from the surface of the storage media themselves, no longer from the content. The contemporary media theorist must trace “the communicative but unspoken historical functions of (writing-)utensils and codes, of performance, rituals and nonverbal communication, of bodies, technologies, and <media>.”¹⁸

Inversely, the follow-up volume, *Paradoxes, Dissonances, Break-downs*, focuses on the interstices in media communication, arguing that the catastrophic spectacle – real or simulated – provided by the media, is a constitutive element of any social structure. The semiotics of catastrophe, provided in earlier societies by such events as public hangings or the rituals involved in dealing with epidemics are now supplied by the media — the most recent spate of disaster movies serves as a vivid reminder of this discourse. (In fact, it might be worth exploring whether disaster films, from van Dyke’s 1936 *San Francisco* to Stephen Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* ought to be considered less as voyeuristic spectacles than as unconscious expressions of a collective desire to blaze a trail to an unmediated reality, if necessary at the risk of incurring catastrophe). The emphasis here is not primarily on the voyeuristic aspects of the spectacle, but on its catalytic function as a reminder of society’s Other. The Other of media-dominated reality is the black-out, a relay stuck in the “off” position, the momentary collapse of the system.¹⁹

18. K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, “Die Materialität der Kommunikation?” *Materialität der Kommunikation*, eds. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1988) 15f. NB: There is now an English publication, *Materialities of Communication*, eds. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, trans. William Whobrey (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994). This is not, however, simply a translation of the German volume quoted above, but rather a mix of several articles taken from that and the follow-up volume *Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche* (see below, note 19). Since the English edition contains a number of substantive changes, and in particular since one of the articles I mention does not appear in the English edition at all, I have decided to quote from the original German volumes. The translations are mine.

19. Ralph Kray and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, “Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche: Vom Ende und Fortgang der Provokationen,” *Paradoxien, Dissonanzen, Zusammenbrüche. Situationen offener Epistemologie*, eds. Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1991) 27.

The same kind of guerrilla aesthetics informs parts of Florian Rötzer's introduction to his 1991 collection of essays on the work of art in the age of digital simulation [*Digitaler Schein*]. Rötzer suggests that catastrophic breakdowns in media-generated cyberspace have become an anthropological necessity: "It is only in the accident, that is, in the collision of physical bodies with each other, that the difference between simulation and reality flashes up."²⁰ Only in extreme experiences – of pain, of death – is the body absolutely certain of its own materiality and that of the world surrounding it. Anything less than that will not point a way out of Plato's cave. Most of the contributors to the volume edited by Rötzer oscillate between a fascination with the potential fulfillment of the Romantics' dream of an all-encompassing work of art [*Gesamtkunstwerk*] and the fear of losing the materiality of experience:

The rebellion of modern art against its own appearance [*ihren Schein*], the exodus from the frame, the desire to connect art and life, or at least to absorb fragments of reality into the realm of art or to reduce the respective "media" to their elementary structures, the concentration on the material, on discovered things and on the body . . . is art's reaction to the modern process of derealization and dematerialization.²¹

In what is arguably the most radical take on this process, Vilém Flusser posits the suspension of the differentiation between "appearance" and "reality" (which includes the reality of human existence itself) as the point of origin for a "new anthropology." This new anthropology emancipates "us" (whoever "we" would be in this new epistemology) to realize finally the Romantic dream of a "second creation," one in which no aspect of our environment is "given" (datum) but everything is "made" (factum), and "reality" competes with various virtualities only by virtue of its greater resolution.²² "The World as Will and Idea" — I suppose that, for a Germanist, the loss of material reality would come with the consolation prize that German philosophy would supply most of the foundational narratives for this projected reality. From the Romantics to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, the reigning paradigms would once again be steeped in German thought. It is interesting to note that several of

20. Florian Rötzer, "Mediales und Digitales. Zerstreute Bemerkungen und Hinweise eines irritierten informationsverarbeitenden Systems," *Digitaler Schein. Ästhetik der elektronischen Medien*, ed. Florian Rötzer (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1991) 55.

21. Rötzer, "Mediales und Digitales" 45. Translation mine.

22. Vilém Flusser, "Digitaler Schein," *Digitaler Schein* 147-59.

the contributors to Rötzer's volume arrive at the same conclusion: that *aesthetics* will be the new (old) dominant paradigm of this post-Cartesian world, a conclusion also reached at the end of Norbert Bolz's more systematically developed theory (see below).²³ It is hard not to suspect that the practical agenda underlying these radical constructivist readings of the new media-generated reality is driven by German (and not only German) philosophers' desperate desire to regain relevancy structures lost to the natural sciences on one side and the more quantification-oriented social science paradigms on the other. A media-generated epistemology in which aesthetics secures for philosophy once again its place in the sun as the 'universal discipline' must be a vista too enticing for the disinherited grandchildren of the Frankfurt School to pass up. The irony is that, if this were truly the direction in which we were heading, this, too, would have already been anticipated by a German writer, albeit not a philosopher. Aesthetics (or semiotics) *is* the dominant paradigm of Hermann Hesse's "Castalia," and the methodological pursuit in which the scientific elite of that province is engaged is, of course, *The Glass Bead Game*.

In a distorted way, this bungy-jumping in virtual reality sounds like a distant, nostalgic echo of Enzensberger's concept of "leakage." Yet where Enzensberger saw in the cracks of a seemingly all-encompassing culture industry the chance for an alternative, counter-hegemonic discourse (with affinities to Kluge's notion of the "counter-public sphere"), some of Germany's contemporary media theorists merely express a yearning for disaster, perhaps in the hopes of meeting death with a chunk of authentic reality clenched between their teeth.

And Enzensberger himself is no help. His most recent contribution to the media debate, gleefully cited by cultural cynics, is entitled "The Zero-Degree Medium, or Why All the Complaints About Television Are Pointless." In a satirical *tour-de-force* through various recent media theories (including his own), Enzensberger comes to the conclusion that we were all barking up the wrong tree. All the hand-wringing and mind-twisting about manipulation and control, education, and resistance to various types of more or less pernicious television programming misses the point which is (according to Enzensberger) that television comes into its own as a medium only when it transports absolutely *nothing*. Every

23. Flusser, "Digitaler Schein" 158f; also Dietmar Kamper, "Der Januskopf der Medien. Ästhetisierung der Wirklichkeit, Entrüstung der Sinne," *Digitaler Schein* 98.

attempt to infuse television with meaning is based on a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of the medium: "We turn the television on in order to veg out." Television, according to Enzensberger is used primarily as "a well-defined method of applying an enjoyable brain-washing; it is a self-medicated form of individual hygiene. The zero-degree medium is the only universal and widely distributed form of psychotherapy. . . . [It] is the technological approximation of nirvana."²⁴

Enzensberger's *rien ne va plus* reading of television culture is given a serious theoretical spin in one of the most interesting post-Frankfurt School contributions by a German media critic. Lorenz Engell's 1989 *Vom Widerspruch zur Langeweile. Logische und temporale Begründungen des Fernsehens* [*From Resistance to Boredom: The Logical and Temporal Rationale of Television*]²⁵ starts out with a similar observation as Enzensberger, that is, that most users of television switch on the set to veg out, but Engell gives this vegging out a radically different interpretation. He sees in the viewer's use of television as a way of "killing time" a resistive act against the colonization of "free" time by the leisure industry. "Boredom" in this reading becomes *Langeweile*, that is, a period of unstructured time, a reservation of (negatively defined) autonomy in an otherwise uninterrupted flux of meaning formation. Time spent vegging out before the television set is time held back from the dictate of relevance [*Sinndiktat*] of utilizing every minute of the day in an effective or useful manner. Engell is quite aware of the dialectical corollary of inscribing a resistive aesthetics into television culture: if, indeed, television is one of very few islands of unstructured activity in an otherwise entirely colonized environment (and if major forces in society not only do not oppose this, but actually foster the further distribution of media usage), then the freedom from meaningful activity provided by television may actually be the negative complement of the dictate of relevance itself — at which point we would be within a block or two of familiar manipulation theories.

Ultimately, Engell does not provide an answer to his own objection, withdrawing instead to a vague formulation about the disturbances caused

24. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Das Nullmedium oder Warum alle Klagen über das Fernsehen gegenstandslos sind," *Mittelmaß und Wahn* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1989) 101f.

25. Lorenz Engell, *Vom Widerspruch zur Langeweile. Logische und temporale Begründungen des Fernsehens* (Frankfurt/Main, Bern, and New York: Lang 1989). Hereafter referred to as *Widerspruch* in the notes.

by television within the framework of a colonized environment.²⁶ Thus he displaces the conflict onto a different, more philosophical plateau: the provocative thesis that viewers do not watch television *despite* its sometimes boring subject matter, but precisely *because* it is boring. This is the point at which Engell's painstaking philosophical inquiry intersects with Enzensberger's glib cynicism. Viewers tune in in order to tune out.

Yet Engell takes Enzensberger's throwaway note at face value by asking *why* viewers would purposely subject themselves to an activity many of them describe as boring. To understand this, one needs to be reminded of the German word for boredom, *Langeweile* — literally a long while, a period of unstructured time. After making a number of Heideggerian distinctions between various categories of boredom, Engell focuses in on the experience of boredom as both time modulation and the suspension of (or escape from) relevance: "In boredom lies the logic of contradictions, a logic which knows no preferences, such as the essential and the accidental."²⁷

This is an interesting point to make, since it might lead to a reevaluation of television's "flow" (a concept much more accurate today than at the time when Raymond Williams first articulated it)²⁸ as a form of distracted attention (to hark back to Benjamin's art work essay), except that distraction and attention enter into an oxymoronic pattern of restful activity. The resistive reading of the flow would then consist of the selected relevances chosen by each individual viewer. Engell cautions against misunderstanding this desired boredom as simply the result of "boring" programs (e.g., "slow" programs where nothing happens); on the contrary, flashy, 'thrill-a-minute' entertainment programs, which may very well be perceived as interesting by the viewer, "do not lead away from boredom . . . but rather more deeply into it." Television, itself situated at the intersection between different time flows (the externally directed time flow of work and the internally directed time flow of leisure), explodes the experience of a "natural" time flow by the way it manipulates the

26. "Even where television does not openly disturb or reveal the production of meaning and time, it is a counterbalance to the production of meaning or the dictate of meaning, a meaning-free space of practical communication. If, as such, it is a defensively used residual or an offensive threat to meaning and time; or if, instead, it enables the functioning of meaning production as its necessary compensation [...], i.e., supports it, must remain an open question at this point." (Engell, *Widerspruch* 309). My translation.

27. Engell, *Widerspruch* 234f.

28. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Schocken 1975) 78-118.

concept of linear time not only through standard narrative techniques, but also through the insertion of commercials and trailers, through multiple redundancies and feedback loops (reruns and the conscious repetition of basic conflict constellations in serial forms), and through the tension between the “live” ideology of the medium and the actual time lag between recording and broadcasting. The pleasure of watching reruns on television depends in part on the cognitive fact of selective memory which makes us experience a text we have seen before as new, because the (formerly irrelevant) structures we have forgotten may now bond with recent experiences to form new patterns of relevancy. Together with the suspension of our normal experience of temporal flow, this creates an aestheticized experience of playing with contingencies which we enjoy not because of what it is, but because we control it: it is a world we create with our remote control — hence the pleasure of *zapping*: “When the boredom of television is suspended in genuine distraction, the pleasure we experience is derived not from the program, the broadcast, or its content, but rather the activity of television, of reception itself.”²⁹

Unfortunately, Engell’s interesting inversion of the traditional valuation attached by German theorists to escapist activities (or non-activities, as the case may be) is shrouded in a nearly impenetrable philosophical cloud that draws on every major western philosopher from Aristotle to Heidegger, to support his relatively straightforward positivistic observations.³⁰ More importantly, his defense of television as a resistive activity made up of time modulation and chaos modulation,³¹ like Kittler’s nostalgic retro-analysis of autodynamic systems, programmatically avoids any encounter with the textuality of the medium it examines.

Norbert Bolz in the Cyber-Arcades

Standing Kittler’s elegy for the human subject on its head, Norbert Bolz has staked out what has to be the most radical position on this issue. At the core of his three volumes on media theory, *Theorie der*

29. Engell, *Widerspruch* 255.

30. It is interesting to note that Engell, who relies heavily on Heidegger for his discourse on boredom [*Langeweile*], takes no less than five pages to justify his use of Heidegger as a foundation for his argument, in light of the latter’s affinities to fascism. (Engell, *Widerspruch* 11-15). Bolz (see below) seems to be above such concerns.

31. Obviously, remote control zapping is the propaedeutic for surfing the links of the internet.

neuen Medien (1990), *Am Ende der Gutenberg-Galaxis* (1993), and *Das kontrollierte Chaos* (1994) lies the provocative contention that it is not media (new or old) that causes ruptures in human interaction but humans themselves, or, more precisely, the shortcomings of humanism as an epistemological paradigm.

In *Theory of the New Media*, Bolz calls on Nietzsche, Benjamin, and McLuhan to support his claim that media theory, where it is practiced as an extension of traditional modes of cultural critique, simply misses its mark. Media, and especially “new media,” may only be approximated through the catalyst of an aesthetics that is closer to the original Greek term of *aisthesis*, than to the connotations of evaluation, taxonomy, and critical detachment implicit in modern theories of aesthetics.

In Nietzsche’s fascination with the synesthetic affects provided by Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Bolz discovers a theory of the new media *avant la lettre*. According to Nietzsche, Wagner reconciled the physical and intellectual components of sensual experience which had been separated in western culture under the influence of Hellenistic philosophy. Just as Wagner, *Nietzsche’s Wagner* that is, suspended such critical fictions as the distinctions between work and performance, music and language, style and content in the synesthetic experience of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, so the virtual realities created by the new media play their songs directly on our bare senses, bypassing that sphere of critical evaluation, often referred to in English as “appreciation,” on which any brand of critical theory might pin its hopes. In Bolz’s words: “Wagner’s is the first music to get on your nerves. All we need to do is to hook up the bared nerve ends with electronic wires to enter into the world of the new media.”³²

In the world that Bolz made, Benjamin takes on the role of Virgil, leading the neophyte through the new media reality. Where Nietzsche confronted the future possibility of cyberspace one-on-one, in his lonely struggle with Wagner, madness, and, if we believe Kittler, his typewriter, Benjamin’s *flâneur* loses himself in the great Parisian arcades the way a hacker might go surfing on the internet. Benjamin’s *Pas-sagen* thus appear as early incarnations of virtual environments. In Bolz’s words, they are, “the interface between the Gutenberg Galaxy and the world of the new media.” Benjamin’s famous acceptance of the

32. Norbert Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien* (Munich: Raben, 1990) 44. All translations from Bolz’s texts are mine.

liberating potential of the new media thus becomes both less visionary and idiosyncratic and more synchronous and postmodern. It is simply a way of coming to terms with the new media-generated reality:

There no longer exists a difference between the mechanical and the organic world; technology becomes as natural as human limbs; without contradiction, humans merge with their instruments; dead matter is seamlessly implanted into living organisms. People with physical handicaps, who depend on prostheses and no longer see them as foreign objects point the way to the video future. The extensions of man we call media are no longer *out there*. Therefore, doing justice to the technological reality of the new media implies two things: first, the instruments must be subjected to collective internalization [*Innervation*]; secondly, the collective body must be organized within the technological sphere.³³

And in a considerable leap of faith (or, perhaps more adequately, a leap of metaphor), Bolz fuses Virilio and Benjamin when he argues that coming to terms with the epistemological revolution caused by the new media is not merely an emancipatory act but an anthropological necessity. Bolz perceives the synesthetic, Dionysian potential of the new media as a primal human desire, a need for collective rapture which, if not expressed in and through the (new) media, will jump the tracks and explode in war: "War as distorted communication with the cosmos — with this thesis Benjamin walks all over any kind of pacifist reasoning. For the only thing that could prevent an orgy of destruction would be a successful cosmic communication through the technological organization of the human body."³⁴

Even if one remains skeptical about Bolz's (or Benjamin's) war games, his McLuhanesque reading of Benjamin's aesthetic theory reveals layers of media savvy that far transcend the traditional interpretation of Benjamin's art work essay as merely a departure from Frankfurt School doctrine. Bolz's reading suggests that the difference between Benjamin and, for instance, Adorno, goes far deeper. Benjamin's famous dictum about the loss of the aura thus marks the difference between the work of mourning [*Trauerarbeit*] and melancholy. Benjamin's mourning for the loss of the aura is part of the process which eventually leads him to embrace the aesthetic challenges provided by new technologies; whereas Adorno, the "leftist melancholic," as Bolz calls him (drawing on Benjamin's famous indictment of "New Objectivity") is left behind,

33. Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien* 98.

34. Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien* 100.

hopelessly shackled to the remains of his modernist ideals: "Leftist melancholy revels in paradoxes such as the idea that, in these times, only anachronism could be truly synchronous."³⁵

In his subsequent books, *Am Ende der Gutenberg Galaxis* and *Das kontrollierte Chaos*, Bolz focuses more on a radically literal reading of McLuhan's theories,³⁶ ("one needs to discern the rhetoric of the present from its technologies, not from its discourses")³⁷ recycled through Niklas Luhmann's systems theory and the concepts of radical constructivism. Luhmann replaces the sender-message-receiver models employed in traditional metaphors of *face-to-face* interaction with a three-selection model based on information, communication and understanding. Although each one of these three selections is completely contingent in itself, operative information processing does occur because of multiple feedback loops (the societal "context" of a message) and the interdependence [*Verkettung*] of any communication in any given 'medium' (in Luhmann's terms) with other 'media.' The key term is *Verkettung* [linkage] since the success of communication (in the sense that it leads to practical action in empirical reality) depends on interpenetration (understood as "environmental" stimuli that provoke different autopoietic systems into generating interpretive patterns) and multiple recursivity — a feedback loop through which a given situational theory is continually run for purposes of testing and adaptation.

Communication, then, seen as an operative concept rather than an epistemological one, depends on the *simultaneous* processing of stimuli from a vast (potentially infinite) number of heterogeneous sources. This process itself hinges on a large number of individuals performing the same operations in analogous ways, operations which are organized by "media." By "media" Luhmann means not the electronic devices usually referred to by that name, but rather such social constructions as "power," "money," "love," "art," or "religion." This is where the affinities to McLuhan's concept of the "end of the Gutenberg galaxy," i.e., the end of the print paradigm come into play. The printed word, through its most distinctive storage medium, the book, has created a paradigm

35. Bolz, *Theorie der neuen Medien* 104.

36. Cf. Herbert Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1962) and *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

37. Bolz, *Am Ende der Gutenberg-Galaxis. Die neuen Kommunikationsverhältnisse* (Munich: Fink 1993) 7.

of sequential, hierarchical information processing that has dominated western epistemology ever since Gutenberg invented the printing press. It has enabled the rise of western culture, but it has become increasingly restrictive. Hidden underneath this paradigm of sequential information processing, however, there has always been a desire for plenitude, for the more contingent, recursive, simultaneous mode of communication provided by sensory perception before its complexity is reduced and organized by language.³⁸

Citing an array of 'hypermedia texts *avant la lettre*,' from the Bible to Nietzsche, Joyce, and Benjamin, as frustrated attempts at simulating parallel information processing in a strictly serial medium, Bolz builds his case that the simultaneous, non-hierarchical, parallel processing of enormous amounts of data made possible by hypermedia is much more analogous to the way the human senses 'originally' perceive their environment than the sequential epistemology superimposed on them by the artificial device of the printed book. "The human eye can process two gigabytes per second," he writes in *Das kontrollierte Chaos*, suggesting that forcing this supercomputer to work with the minimal input supplied by a printed text is a waste of RAM capacity. In the age of hypermedia, the book has become "the bottleneck of human communication."³⁹

This is not to say that the book has not played a crucial role in the evolution of information processing: after all, "Gutenberg's cultural technique" was responsible for bringing order and clarity into a world that was under the fascinated spell of magic imagery.⁴⁰ Nor is Bolz iconoclast enough to suggest that the printed book has become completely obsolete. It will survive, he predicts, in the form of portable hardware (no one wants to read a romance on the beach from a screen, no matter how small and handy), as a mythical repository of human

38. What happens between the 'raw' reception of environmental stimuli and the structured processing of these stimuli as perception is the touchstone of radical constructivism — and, since it is based on that, of Luhmann's systems theory. The autopoiesis model of radical constructivism posits that there is no meaningful way of speaking of sensory perception as independent of the structuring work of consciousness. Since the human brain, physiologically speaking, is a "closed system," it receives environmental input only as undifferentiated disturbances, to which it then gives meaning by way of its internal processing structures; only then can we speak of perception. Without this autopoietic structuring, environmental data would remain meaningless — noise. In doing so, human consciousness trades quantity for meaning. This process occurs again on the level of language.

39. Heinz von Foerster, *Sicht und Einsicht* (Braunschweig, 1965) 62; cited in Bolz, *Gutenberg-Galaxis* 205.

40. Bolz, *Das kontrollierte Chaos* 117.

identity formation (reading a book suggests order, linearity, a beginning and an end, organization in an increasingly randomized world) and, most importantly, it will continue to play a vital role as a cognitive filter for the deluge of data with which hypermedia threatens to overload our processing capacity.⁴¹ But it will no longer be the *Leitmedium*, i.e., it will cease to determine our epistemology.

Hypermedia enable humans to process information in a way that feels more 'natural,' by associations, links, nonlinear, contingent access. Yet even as we indulge in the delight of exploring the ever more remote ramifications of our natural curiosity, we recoil in an archetypal fear that was suppressed from our collective memory by the hierarchical order and clarity of the printed book: the fear of the magic image and the chaos that hides behind its inscrutable face. This, in turn, conjures up fears of our own obsolescence, exacerbated by the arrival of electronic devices that perform sequential information processing far more efficiently than we could ever hope to. Hence our fear of robotics, computers and artificial intelligence recounted in innumerable narratives from science fiction to Günter Anders's classic lament on *The Obsolescence of Man*.⁴² Bolz's refusal to join in with this chorus is perhaps his most significant contribution to media theory (especially in the context of German philosophy!). In citing so many instances of simulating nonsequential information processing within a culture driven by a sequential epistemology,⁴³ Bolz makes a credible case that intellectuals' fears of the new technologies are not only unfounded, but actually contradicted by intellectual history itself. Scanning, selective information processing, nonlinear thinking, linkage, simultaneity and all the other new "cultural techniques" required by the new media are neither new nor inimical to human intelligence. They merely appear foreign to an epistemology based on hierarchical learning — which is why children, who have not yet acquired the cultural technique of the book, have such an easy time with computers. To anyone familiar with the Frankfurt School's way of thinking (all the way up to and including Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* and Kittler's

41. Bolz, *Das kontrollierte Chaos* 119-21.

42. Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, 2 vols. (Munich: Beck, 1988) 7th ed.

43. In addition to the works mentioned above, he also cites, among other things, the encyclopedists, the romantic *fragment*, Wagner's notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the *panorama*, Benjamin's arcades, the footnote, and the *Zettelkasten*. The most overt attempt at implementing the aesthetic of the notecard is, of course, Arno Schmidt's *Zettels Traum*.

recherche du livres perdu), Bolz's media theory would appear to mark a Nietzschean turn in German intellectuals' — and perhaps not only German intellectuals' — discourse about media.

Yet even as Bolz breaks the most persistent taboo of post-WW II German media discourse — that mass media cannot be examined in any other context than that of ideological critique — he harkens back to a tradition with very problematic affinities. For Bolz undergirds his radical departure from standard German media discourse with a rhetoric of dehumanization that conjures up bad memories. His 'Good-bye to Gutenberg' is also a 'Farewell to Humanism.' Holding humanism responsible for a series of apocalyptic visions that prognosticate "the end of humanity," Bolz argues that humanism itself, as an anthropocentric epistemology, gets in the way of evaluating the impact of the new technologies with an unjaundiced eye:

The literary culture of Humanism has shackled us with lofty concepts of truth and history. This has blocked us from casting a sober glance at the technical reality of the new media. And yet things are so simple. The great telematic network that spans the world emerged from the tiny primary cell of a yes/no switch. The Library and the Post Office, the Archivist and the Courier Service, Broadcasting and Telecommunication all function according to the simple principle of the synapse or the relays. Truth and History themselves are only sign posts, relays and archives. Because we do not wish to see that, the new media surprise us as unwanted inventions. Thus we have wonderful new technological opportunities and are looking desperately for a meaningful way of applying them.⁴⁴

Bolz is shifting into high gear here to reveal his grand vision — part McLuhan, part cyberpunk: a synergy of humans and machine, a new synthesis of human creativity (defined as *emergent* results of nonlinear linkages), and the speed and storage capacity of the computer enhanced by the interconnection of hypermedia.

If Bolz's celebrations of cyberpunk ecstasy serve as an antidote to the technophobia so deeply ingrained in most German intellectuals, they might well mark a turning-point in German media discourse; and his attack on Humanism as an obsolete paradigm is well taken as a reminder of the historicity of even the most basic metaphors underlying western epistemology. And yet, even if we need to part with the comforting humanist fiction

44. Bolz, *Das kontrollierte Chaos* 194. (Italics in the original — M.G.)

that the universe centers on the *in-dividual*, the single human being understood as the source and final destination of all human attempts at understanding the universe that surrounds them, does it make sense for humans as enunciating subjects of scientific models to posit communication systems in which they, as humans, would no longer participate?⁴⁵

But there is another, more sinister echo haunting Bolz's anti-humanism; and before I explore this, I must add that Bolz himself seems to be aware of this (mis)reading. In *Das kontrollierte Chaos* he writes

To avoid a misunderstanding common at this point let me emphasize that such a polemic against the Humanist concept of man [*"den Menschen" des Humanismus*] is obviously not aimed at human beings themselves. Rather, I wish to say by this *that human beings can live freely only once they have emerged from the shadow of Humanism*.⁴⁶

Yet it is at the least a very peculiar sense of intertextuality if Bolz supports his brand of philanthropic anti-Humanism with quotations from two character witnesses whose affinities to one particular brand of *anti-human* anti-humanism are common knowledge: Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. I am not saying that, in certain contexts, a critical appropriation of some of Heidegger's and Schmitt's concepts could not be productive, but to cite these two as expert witnesses against a possible misinterpretation of one's anti-humanist stance strikes me as daring recklessness vis-à-vis the montage effects created by textual proximity.

To avoid being misunderstood myself here: I am *not* suggesting or insinuating that Bolz shares the political affinities of Carl Schmitt. Albert Speer,⁴⁷ or even Martin Heidegger. On the contrary, in my opinion Bolz's three volumes represent the most well-argued, most innovative, and most liberating challenge to the taboos concerning the discourse on media established by Frankfurt School-derived *Ideologiekritik*. We have waited for a long time for a voice strong enough to

45. Under certain conditions, one might actually answer 'yes' to that question — if we conceive of artificial intelligence first and foremost as objectifications of the human mind, in which case computers, hypermedia, AI, robotics and neural networks are simply steps on an evolutionary ladder of which the human body is merely another, earlier rung; but that takes us into the realm of science fiction, and the most prominent proponent of this view was a science fiction author (albeit also a scientist): Isaac Asimov.

46. Bolz, *Das kontrollierte Chaos* 185.

47. It does not help that Bolz later pairs up Albert Speer as "the father of the architecture of light" with Le Corbusier, as if fascism's major role in history had been to contribute its share to the great project of modernity. See Bolz, *Das kontrollierte Chaos* 221.

question that particular paradigm. I merely wish to register a certain discomfort at the perceived need to throw out humanism altogether,⁴⁸ while at the same time relegating “truth” and “history” not just to the status of negotiable, historicized *texts* (which is a debatable position),

48. In his collection of essays focusing on a comparative analysis of what he terms the “First” and the “Second Media Age,” Mark Poster presents an historicized reading of the differences between the epistemologies engendered by technologies based on a central apparatus of distribution and the authorial position privileged by print culture versus the essentially two-way, decentralized, shifting enunciation of interactive media starting with the telephone (see footnote 9). Poster aligns the former with modernism and its dominant communication theories which purported to liberate the autonomous subject (which is posited as given *a priori*) from ideological constraints imposed upon her or him by the “consciousness industry” (Adorno/Horkheimer to Jürgen Habermas) and the latter with the postmodernist condition in which “the constitution of the subject through language, more specifically through the language patterns of the mode of information” becomes the central focus of interest. See Poster, *The Second Media Age* 73. The postmodernist new media put an end to the modernist quest for the autonomous individual or the ideal of “unrestrained discourse” because they pull the epistemological rug out from under the premises underlying the project of modernism by questioning the *a priori* nature of the autonomous subject itself in revealing it as an historical construction. By contrast, the Society of the Internet requires a discourse of shifting identities, reciprocal communication, and entirely new modes of producing, distributing, and evaluating information (just think of the gatekeeping problem in an age of unrestricted electronic distribution). The subjects participating in this discourse become themselves unstable signifiers of individual identity, repositioning themselves constantly to adapt to different modes of interaction. As Poster puts it, “Electronically mediated communication opens the prospect of understanding the subject as constituted in historically concrete configurations of discourse and practice. It clears the way to seeing the self as multiple, changeable, fragmented, in short as making a project of its own constitution” (Poster, *The Second Media Age* 77). Interestingly enough, there are a number of analogies between Poster’s reading of the current changes in the media landscape, and those of Bolz. In different ways, both posit that the epistemology of modernism is becoming obsolete, both portray the enlightenment/modernist ideal of the autonomous individual as an ideological construct, both call into question the Humanist paradigm, Poster implicitly, and Bolz explicitly. Yet despite the fact that both Bolz and Poster see Benjamin’s departure from traditional Frankfurt School dogma as a pivotal moment in modern communication theory, Bolz then feels the need to fall back on Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Carl Schmitt to shore up his anti-humanism, whereas Poster’s approach conjures up echoes of Karl Mannheim’s theory of knowledge. Bolz casts about for a methodological plank amid the shifting sands of postmodernist cyberpunk and finds it in aesthetics as the new (old) *Leitwissenschaft*. Poster, on the other hand, suggests that (to avoid the charge of “theorizing only an endless play of discourse analysis”) the interplay between the materiality of the mode of information itself *and* the social practice it engenders in everyday life provides both a theoretical and a historical grounding to analyze the changes in social and communicative interaction. That position, it seems to me, will ultimately be more productive because it harks back to Benjamin’s sensitivity towards the *practice* of communication instead of trying to find a confirmation of unmediated human experience in war or catastrophe, positing the disappearance of the body, or looking to re-install the hegemony of aesthetics as the dominant mode of inquiry.

but to “sign posts” and “relays” — and then to call on Schmitt and Heidegger to support one's *humane* agenda (to avoid the word “humanist” here). It is Bolz's sense of intertextuality that I would call into question, rather than his politics.⁴⁹

Winkler's Bafflements

It is a supreme irony that the most original, historicized, and dispassionate analysis of the new media technologies to emerge from the German discourse should once again come out of Frankfurt — albeit this time not from sociology but from the relatively new film department. Modestly subtitled *Towards a Media Theory of Computers*, Hartmut Winkler's 1997 book *Docuverse*⁵⁰ starts by taking several epistemological steps behind premises normally accepted as given by the German media debate. Winkler couches his sweeping critique of Bolz's and, to a lesser extent, Kittler's positions by professing to be “baffled” by what he sees as a central paradox of the debate on the new media: first, that

a public which, for the past 100 years, seemed to be hooked on pictorial media, on visibility, sensory experience and immediate ‘uses and gratifications,’ is now about to drop the entire paradigm to turn to a medium which – even though the current multi-media-hype may strategically cover up this fact – is absolutely not sensuous and absolutely not visual and offers very little immediate satisfaction.⁵¹

49. In the same vein as Bolz, Peter Weibel conjures up a world of artificial environments in which the physical materiality of the human body is the ticket for admission into the new cyberspace. The new media enable humanity to conquer time and space, to be anywhere, at any time, simultaneous, ubiquitous. The Faustian pact, however, stipulates that only the senses may travel, the body must stay behind. The telephone thus becomes a disembodied voice, the video camera a disembodied eye; and in the world of virtual reality, a disembodied body can travel freely, anywhere in the world. Yet, according to Weibel, this pact is not so much dreaded as desired: “. . . telematic civilization is humanity's greatest effort so far at defeating death through the partial suspension of distance and duration. . . The ‘telos’ of telecivilization is the suspension of death's domain, as we experience it through the limitations of our bodies, of nature, of time, of space. The actual goal of the disappearance of distance is the disappearance of the body. The goal of the disappearance of the body is actually the disappearance of death.” Here, as in Bolz's theories, the disappearance of the human subject is the precondition for the new media practice. Peter Weibel, “Vom Verschwinden der Ferne,” *Vom Verschwinden der Ferne. Telekommunikation und Kunst*, eds. Peter Weibel and Edith Decker (Cologne: DuMont, 1990) 37.

50. Hartmut Winkler, *Docuverse. Zur Medientheorie der Computer* (Regensburg: Boer, 1997). Winkler adopts the term “Docuverse” from Theodor H. Nelson, *Literary Machines* (Sausalito: Mindful, 1987) 4. Cited in Winkler, *Docuverse* 10.

51. Winkler, *Docuverse* 10.

His second bafflement is that this paradox had not been noticed by any of the other contributors to the media debate. Neither Bolz's McLuhanesque euphoria at the twilight of the "Gutenberg Galaxy" nor Kittler's mourning over the suspension of print culture in the materiality of autopoietic systems account for the fact that the computer, at least in the manifestations we are dealing with for the time being, is a *sequential* medium (just like language) and, what is more, a language-based and language-driven medium, whether that language is code or verbal language. The gap between the enormous social and political expectations projected onto the web and its actual use value as a new communication medium provides Winkler with his first hypothesis, i.e., that the internet is a "wish machine."⁵² Indeed, once that term is introduced, romantic projections from various euphoric treatises on the internet abound: the boundless plenitude of unlimited memory storage, instantaneous access, uncensored and nonhierarchical communication, and universal linkage stands revealed as the blue flower of the information society; Flusser's and Bolz's cyberpunk phantasies of shedding the limitations of the human body in the postmaterial, cosmic synesthesia of virtual reality appear as nothing more than the reversed side of a threadbare old cloak: the familiar German fascination with the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. And at this point Winkler takes a Blochian step beyond simply deconstructing these wishful phantasies as ideological delusions to ask what the underlying *lack* is.

Winkler then unfolds his sweeping master narrative of a cyclical media history, in which *all* technical media, starting with photography and film, figure as successive mechanical implantations designed to redress always the same dissatisfaction: the balkanization of the experiential reality in the wake of the ever-increasing division of labor, or, in less marxist terms, societal differentiation. Anticipating accusations that he is simply reintroducing reductive models, Winkler hastens to add that his concern is not the alienation between workers and their product, but the strain exerted on the collective memory by the centrifugal pull of divergent life worlds. Drawing on linguistics, anthropology, and cognitive science, Winkler develops a dichotomous model of language in which "language_1" stands for articulated texts, materialized in linear sequences, and "language_2" represents the "systemic part" of language, a non-linear, virtual structure, an n-dimensional network extant only as a

52. Winkler, *Docuverse* 11.

repository in the collective memories of all language users.⁵³ In traditional (small) social groups, reality and identity appear as given, shored up by multiple redundancies created by geographic proximity, lack of differentiation, and rigorously centralized religious practices and concomitant hierarchic discourses. Differentiation shatters every aspect of this practice: linguistically, through increasingly specialized sub-systems, epistemologically, through the centrifugal forces of secularization and disparate experiential spheres, mentally through the perceived loss of identity and reality. It is this sense of a growing distance to the unifying sphere of the collective repository Winkler calls “language_2” that is at the bottom of the “Sprachkrise” of the late nineteenth century. With the quantum leaps in differentiation brought about by the rapid industrialization of the mid-nineteenth century, writers like Hugo von Hofmannsthal sensed a growing alienation which they attributed to “conventional” language, but which should, Winkler argues, more properly be located at the collective memory structure at the center, a center which no longer holds.

In response to this sense of loss, media (photography, film, television) were entrusted with the task of reunifying the center with the fringes.⁵⁴ (Winkler is smart enough to sidestep the determinist temptation of suggesting that the media were invented for that purpose!) In the seemingly unambiguous concreteness of the photographic image (in reality the result of precisely the opposite, that is, the multivalence of the iconic sign), writers and artists believed to have found the rosetta stone of a universal signifying practice. This is the reason, Winkler argues, why the visual media tend to stick to basic human experience such as love and hate, success and failure, beauty or death: not because verbal language is ‘inherently more complex,’ but because these basic experiences hark back to the multiple redundancies of the small-group experience, we meet in these places to pretend once more that we share one world in common.⁵⁵ But this is not just an individual palliative. The concept of the bourgeois public sphere is unthinkable without the centripetal power of media to offset the centrifugal force of internal differentiation.

However, as each new ‘self-inscription of material reality’ eventually

53. Winkler, *Docuverse* 28ff.

54. Although Winkler does not seem to be aware of this, the centripetal function of *all* media as outlined in this section (204ff.) corroborates what John Fiske and John Hartley had identified as the “clawing back” function of (more specifically) television. See Fiske and Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978) 87ff.

55. Winkler, *Docuverse* 208.

turns out to be subject to the same kind of ‘conventionalization’ as the original language, or, in other words, as each new medium develops its own signifying practice, once it is used in communicative discourse, pictures cease to be “worth a thousand words” but become ‘stale,’ ‘worn,’ ‘meaningless’ — just like the language they were supposed to replace.

This is the historical moment at which the computer enters the stage, and, with it, the internet. The promise (*not*, as Winkler shows later, the reality) of the computer is nothing less than the reconciliation of “language_1” with “language_2,” of bridging the painful gap between individual memory and collective memory, discrete and communal signifying practices. The utopian vision is the *externalization of language*, a project with closer affinities to the French encyclopedists or the library of Alexandria than to Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The radical re-reading contained in this concept is that the internet, as a medium, is not so much a *beyond*, a transgression, but a kind of Hegelian loop, a *return* to the ‘Gutenberg Galaxy’ — albeit on a different epistemological dimension. The (implicit) hope is that collective memory, through the unlimited accumulated storage capacity of the World Wide Web can be stored externally, instead of being dispersed throughout humanity and thus largely inaccessible to a given individual or even group of individuals. Once all of “language_2” becomes externalized, differentiation loses its “horror” (at least on the experiential level), because the “docuverse” will provide a universally accessible collective memory that never “forgets,” suppresses, or displaces anything stored in its memory banks.

It is important to keep in mind that Winkler describes not the reality of the internet, as he sees it, but a phantasy produced by a desire or “lack” [*Wunschkonstellation*]. Not only does he remind the reader repeatedly of this, he is also quick to point out the delusional character of this projection: the World Wide Web *does* indeed “forget” (data *is* deleted, new applications eventually have no downward compatibility beyond a few generations) and “suppress” (he proposes a research project on the selection criteria of search engines), and the practice of documenting “hits” on certain links even suggests a process akin to the process of “condensation” by which language piles significations one on top of the other to create relatively stable signifying conventions.

The fascinating paradox behind these latter observations is that, even as Winkler presents them in an attempt to deconstruct the myth of the internet as *Gesamtkunstwerk* or as the final death knell for the Gutenberg

Galaxy, they nevertheless suggest that the concept of the internet as an *exteriorized collective memory* may be utopian only to the extent that it is not the ultimate medium or the end of anything (just as 1990 was not the “End of History” nor 1968 the “End of Literature”). However, at least as a useful metaphor that allows us to perceive its uses and potential abuses more clearly, the concept appears far more convincing than either Kittler’s ruminations about world domination by the “integrated circuits of Silicon Valley” or Bolz’s cynical evocation of a dehumanized virtual universe. Despite its sweeping vision, Winkler’s argument is also far more down to earth than either of its predecessors’.

Paradoxically, the strongest link in Winkler’s argumentative chain may also be its weakest. The observation that informs his first and most basic bafflement, that is that the medium to compete with (and perhaps replace) television culture is *au fond* sequential, non-sensuous, the apotheosis of the Gutenberg Galaxy, rather than its liquidator drives the meta-reflection that results in Winkler’s elegant reinterpretation of media history and the place of the computer in it.⁵⁶ However, Winkler’s definition of language appears to oscillate between a narrow commonplace definition of the linguistic system that is articulated in writing and in various alphabets and a far more overarching concept of a societal code that would include the former as a subsystem. Yet in an inductive argument harking back to Derrida and Lacan, Winkler feels compelled to nail down the discrete, isolationist nature of computer-based communication once and for all. From here, it is only one step further to proclaim the ‘masculine’ inscription of the computer by drawing an Klaus Theweleit’s observations regarding male fears of transgression, context, flow.⁵⁷ In constructing a gendered, medium-specific theory of the computer Winkler not only risks simply being overtaken by empirical reality, he also comes close to the technological determinism he so eloquently critiques in the positions of Bolz and Kittler (and which he himself otherwise avoids).

56. One may quibble with the epic grandeur of Winkler’s ‘linguistic turn’ or even the fact that this is yet another German monocausal explanation. He never considers alternatives, even though some of his own observations suggest that, for instance, quasi-religious motivations may play a role in the internet craze, or when, in dismissing Bolz’s synesthetic euphoria by repeatedly pointing to the non-sensuous experience of engaging the web, he overlooks simple experiential facts such as the haptic qualities of moving and “clicking” the mouse or the sense of empowerment derived from actively manipulating a medium instead of being simply a passive “addressee.”

57. Winkler, *Docuverse* 321f.

The key to this puzzling phenomenon lies in the Heideggerian essentialism that leads Winkler to conflate the computer and the internet. Just as language, as Winkler points out himself, is by no means as 'digital,' 'linear,' and 'sequential,' as Bolz *et al.* suggest, so the World Wide Web, I would suggest, is qualitatively more than merely another computing application. If we stop to consider what people actually *do* with the two media, then the computer may (or may not) be digital, discrete, isolationist — the underlying technology certainly is. But the internet, if measured in terms of the *social practices* it has created so far, is certainly *linked, contiguous, and intertextual*.⁵⁸

While Winkler may well be correct in his skepticism towards the utopian dreams projected onto the Web, this does not mean that what is emerging in the millions of links and cross-connections made possible by the net is not a new kind of medium, a medium that shares certain characteristics with the material carrier that drives and stores it, but that transcends this base just as film transcends its material base, photography. It is at this point, I believe, that Winkler is hamstrung by his expertise as a programmer that otherwise serves him so well. His off-hand, and somewhat arrogant, dismissal of *all* the activities engaged in by users of applications (as opposed to the initiates who write the code) as "paint-by-numbers stuff"⁵⁹ ironically underestimates both groups: the users of applications who are denied any creativity *and* the programmers whose templates, he seems to be implying, are so limited that nothing creative can be accomplished through them. On the other hand, if we treat the computer and the web as two *different* phenomena, related, but not coextensive, we might find a handle that enables us to retain the productive bafflement that produced Winkler's fascinating historical meta-narrative, without resorting to gendered determinism: the sober insistence on the computer's (and, as he sees it, the Web's) affinities to linguistic code, to sequence, discreteness, and isolation, enable Winkler to come up with a convincing explanation for both the utopian and dystopian projections onto the net; yet the mechanistic guise of the no-nonsense programmer may have prevented Winkler from recognizing the new communicative *practice* superimposed on the internet by its international community of users. This practice may or may not prefer

58. Perhaps one needs to live and teach in a geographically isolated area, as I do (Middlebury, Vermont), to appreciate the structural revolution brought about by the internet (and satellite television).

59. Winkler, *Docuverse* 377.

linearity and the Gutenberg Galaxy to visuals, synesthetic effects, and cyberspace, or the two may coexist (the most likely scenario, in my opinion). Winkler's insistence on discreteness and isolation, that is, a "masculine inscription" of the Web as the epistemological corollary of the underlying technology is already being contradicted by the new communicative practice. Yet Winkler's really pathbreaking accomplishment, in my view, lies in the construction of a plausible historical scenario for the evolution of the internet as a new communicative practice, a scenario that provides an overarching narrative at equal distance from Kittler's belletristic larmoyance and Bolz's trendy leaps of faith.

Just as Zielinski had done for television, Winkler's historical sweep situates the computer within the structural and epistemological trajectory of media history without suggesting that the Word Wide Web is the *telos* of this narrative — a trajectory which is simultaneously subjected to a radical and highly original re-reading. This makes Winkler's book, in my opinion, the most productive contribution to media studies to come out of Germany in many years.

Conclusion

It is curious to note that German media theory, including the positions outlined above, *brackets* the discourse of television (and, with a few notable exceptions, the structures of the medium as well). Between the 1960s and the late 1980s, the period that historians, borrowing a phrase from John Fiske and John Hartley, may one day call television's "Bardic Era" (that is, the time in which television served as the major conduit of public discourse),⁶⁰ Enzensberger's "Building Blocks" essay was the only substantial pronouncement on media theory to emerge from Germany. (And that essay did not specifically address television either). It was not, and this makes Winkler's insistence on the linguistic turn of the internet so intriguing, until the new textuality provided by the web promised at least a *partial* return to the Gutenberg Galaxy that German theory raised

60. Until the market penetration of cable and satellite systems, television, with very few nationally broadcast programming choices, could be said to have replaced the newspaper as the central catalyst for the negotiation of social, political, and cultural issues. This is no longer true, since the assumption that on any given night a significant number of our acquaintances would have had the same experience (a not unlikely situation during television's "Bardic" phase) no longer holds. The term "Bardic Television" is John Fiske's and John Hartley's. See *Reading Television* (London: Methuen 1978) 85-100. At the time, the authors were describing a contemporary practice. Since satellite and cable have caused the culture of broadcasting to implode, I have decided to use the term "Bardic era" instead, to reflect the historicity of the paradigm.

its voice again (characteristically to proclaim the end of that paradigm).

Enzensberger's more recent satirical recantation ("the zero-degree medium") stands emblematic for the paradigm change in contemporary German media theory. Taking McLuhan's glib and over-quoted phrase at face value, the Germans are asking just what *kind* of a message the *medium* is. The interest in exploring the *materiality of the medium*, which really is the point where the agendas of most of the authors discussed in this article converge, has yielded a number of new takes on seemingly familiar media and concepts; it has made significant contributions to a cognitive history of the media⁶¹ and to our understanding of the paradigm shift we have been undergoing since the invention of the first autodynamic devices (or *Aufschreibesysteme* in Kittler's terminology). It is a paradigm shift that is not yet completed, which makes it all the more urgent that we try to hold on to what we can comprehend en route.

However, in surveying the contributions made by Kittler, Bolz, and other German theorists in recent years, one cannot help feeling that the new hypermedia savvy, no matter whether it articulates itself in the form of criticism or praise of these new forms of communication, is merely a continuation of the Frankfurt School debunking of the mass media by other means. For the great advantage of dealing with the media as paradigm-forming technologies is that one need not concern oneself with representation. In fact, as we have seen, Pfeiffer and Gumbrecht exclude any kind of interpretive endeavor programmatically from the parameters of what they consider legitimate media research, as does Engell, albeit for different reasons. After all, if it changes our epistemology, television is television, no matter whether what we *actually see*

61. Several contributions in *Materialität der Kommunikation* provide essential elements for such a cognitive history of media discourse along the lines of Kittler's or Bolz's project, but on a more modest empirical scale. Particularly interesting is Monika Elsner's and Thomas Müller's reconstruction of the public debates surrounding the introduction of television in Germany in the early 1950s. At that time, the shock effect of the new technology produced insights that were later forgotten or levelled by the habitualization of a multi-media environment. The dominant metaphor of the time, television as a "window on the world," suggests an unconscious awareness of reconstituted boundaries between inside and outside, public and private sphere, in short, television collapses the borders between "paramount reality" and "finite provinces of meaning," as outlined by Berger and Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 25. Yet in doing so, the medium did not merely contribute towards the entropy of the bourgeois public sphere, it also performed a service: "By reconciling and integrating the sphere of intimate privacy and a media-generated public sphere, television created a *newly cohesive world view* for the maintenance of which it would become irreplaceable in the future." See Monika Elsner/Thomas Müller, "Der angewachsene Fernseher," *Materialität der Kommunikation* 403.

is Ilse Werner whistling a song to entertain recuperating German troops crowding into a Nazi *Fernsehtube* during World War II, or Mary Tyler Moore establishing herself as the first single woman professional on American television, or Wolfgang Menge and Wolfgang Petersen dramatizing the grim realities of a Ruhr area smog alert. Similarly, hyper-media are dealt with in apocalyptic or celebratory metaphors, or as a giant scam perpetrated on the naive curiosity of unsuspecting intellectuals (always excluding the respective author, of course) by unscrupulous politicians and media moguls. No one in Germany ever seems to ask what people actually *do* with the internet.⁶² This is the result of taking McLuhan's rejoinder to *Anglo-Saxon* critics *also* to look *beyond* representation ("the medium is the message") so verbatim as to exclude the text from the parameters of analysis.⁶³

What remains is to ask *why* German theorists have so much to say about media and so little interest in their articulations. Why has the text dropped entirely from the screen of their vision? One might raise an objection to this question, that is, that textual analysis is not the domain of the theorist, that it is best left to the critic or the historian. However, this restriction never seemed to stop literary theorists, from Erich Auerbach to Julia Kristeva, from referring to specific texts in detail as emblematic of certain paradigms and I suspect that it would have been thought ludicrous had they not done so. Nor have media theorists in other countries displayed this kind of phobia vis-à-vis the text: One needs only to look at Joshua Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place* (whose enthusiastic reception in Germany actually seems to have kicked off the current rediscovery of McLuhan's theories) to see that even a social scientist with a clear focus on "medium theory,"⁶⁴ can make very productive use of

62. This includes Winkler as well — although an important qualification is in order: in contradistinction to Kittler, Bolz, and Gumbrecht/Pfeiffer, Winkler explicitly rejects a technological paradigm that is simultaneously dehistoricized and dehumanized (cf. his critique of Derrida, *Docuverse*, 281). He rejects equally phobic projections of technology as fetish or 'second nature' and a Kierkegaardian leap of faith back to a universe controlled by *individual* human action. However, he maintains that the new 'data universe' may appear to us as inaccessible to individual intervention, but, since it is an objectification of our collective memory, it remains open to *collective* correction and control (*Docuverse* 336-37).

63. To comprehend the absurdity of that attitude we merely need to imagine, for a moment, that *before* the advent of the 'new' media, philosophers, literary critics, and social analysts had done the same: we might then have a never-ending stream of treatises, from the Renaissance to the Neo-Kantians, on the (corrupting) paradigm changes being wrought by *the book*, without as much as a passing glance at the texts themselves.

64. On the difference between "media" and "medium" theory, see Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place* 16.

textuality without losing sight of his structural project. And John Fiske's *Television Culture* has demonstrated that a thorough familiarity with its articulations may actually be helpful in mapping out the discourse of television.⁶⁵ Yet in Germany, ignorance of the texts seems to be the ticket for admission to the discourse. The key note was struck early on by Theodor W. Adorno himself. By way of explaining why he had based his analysis of early (U.S.) television productions only on the *screenplays*, without looking at the actual broadcasts, Adorno proclaimed that these texts, since they were products of industrial mass production, need not be closely examined in the way a literary work of art would be.⁶⁶ This is a recipe most German media theorists⁶⁷ have followed to the present day.⁶⁸

The simple answer to the question raised above would thus be that Germany's traditionally rigid segregation between *E-Kultur* and *U-Kultur*, that is, between high and popular culture, put the blinders on German theorists. Although, to some extent, all European cultures share in this dichotomous scheme, the Frankfurt School's (and in particular Adorno's) insistence on the *autonomous work of art* as the only repository of resistance against the dehumanizing effects of industrial culture shored up the intellectual elite's conservative tastes at a time when, in most western civilizations, those boundaries were beginning to dissolve. As a

65. John Fiske, *Television Culture* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).

66. Theodor W. Adorno, "Fernsehen als Ideologie," *Rundfunk und Fernsehen* 4 (1953); repr. in *Eingriffe. Neun kritische Modelle*, 5th edition (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1968) 81-98.

67. Obviously, this is a generalization that would need differentiation. Siegfried Zielinski, for instance, with the volume quoted in this paper, has clearly chosen a topic (history of technology) that would logically exclude close analyses of individual texts; whereas he has demonstrated with past publications that he is by no means disinterested in textuality. Similarly the many outstanding works on the *history* of German television (by Helmut Kreuzer, Knut Hickethier, Karl Prümm, Heinz-B. Heller, Bernd Zimmermann, and many others) obviously do not belong in this category.

68. Cf. Karl Prümm's scathing indictment of the apocalyptic phantasies and "gothic novels" spun by Kittler *et al.*, in the attempt to 'link' cinematography, computer technology, the World Wide Web and technological warfare in a kind of hyper conspiracy tale which situates the viewer in a permanently objectified position as the target of, variously, audiovisual transmissions, the physiological assault of hypermedia, or the physical assault of guided missiles. To Virilio, Kittler, and Bolz, the actual *articulations* of modern media, i.e. the *texts* are merely random emanations generated by the same ideological smokescreen which masks the secret point of convergence of all media 'implantations' — technological warfare. Since the texts are thus mere random phenomena — 'noise' — there is no point in analysing them. See in the special issue on "Literaturverfall im Medienzeitalter," ed. Helmut Kreuzer, the article by Karl Prümm, "Lesereisen in die Gutenberg-Galaxis und in die Medienwelt," *LiLi — Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik* 87/88 (1992): 86-96.

result the media, in Germany, has *never entered intellectual discourse as a referential system or a storehouse of metaphors or images*. Hence there is no ongoing intellectual discourse on medias *as texts*. Until the 1980s, a generation of German students had been systematically trained to avoid the analysis of television texts as a positivistic waste of time. This bias for “autonomous” culture naturally would leave German theorists ill-equipped to deal with contemporary notions of textuality.

At the time when structuralism and semiotics began to develop a critical apparatus for the analysis of television texts (as distinct from film), this reluctance to engage the medium on the level of the text left Germans without a critical practice and thus with little to contribute to a critical debate that was searching for definitions of textual practice which would account for (instead of simply condemn) industrial production, resistive or negotiated readings, serial narratives, and other transformations of traditional categories of authorship and readership. It was not until the mid-1980s, with the “Bardic” phase drawing to a close in most advanced television cultures, and with hypermedia slowly replacing television as the leading technology, that German intellectual history, from the romantics to Nietzsche and Wagner, once again provided the key metaphors for understanding the new epistemology.

The more troubling historical continuity in which especially Kittler’s and Bolz’s theories could be seen is a certain tendency in German thought, from Heidegger to Luhmann (on whose systems theory Bolz draws quite substantially), to examine structures by abstracting from the practice of human interaction. Contemporary German media theory programmatically brackets human individuals and their articulations from its purview (Bolz and Weibel), is transfixed by “autodynamic systems,” i.e., the “self-inscription” of media (Kittler and many of the contributors to *Materialität der Kommunikation*) onto presumably passive substances (including human minds?), or proceeds from the assumption that the only emancipatory use one can make of a particular medium is to use it as some form of new age therapy, which, once again, precludes its use for purposes of communication (Enzensberger’s second essay and Engell). This sort of theoretical paradigm would appear to be at a disadvantage when dealing with a practice that is industrially produced, socially articulated and negotiated, and steeped in popular myth. Or, to put it differently: a theoretical tradition fixated on the autonomous work of art and the individual author would naturally be more inclined to believe in the end of the individual than in textuality as social practice.

*Farewell to the Gutenberg-Galaxy**

Norbert Bolz

The acceleration of technical development around 1800 released processes that the categories of the Gutenberg-Galaxy could no longer adequately describe. From then on, speed is produced and creates a kinetic high. Fashion replaces style, advertising replaces art, and “filmic reality” takes the place of aesthetic beauty [*schöner Schein*].¹ Today, it has become a commonplace that designers and directors are the actual agents of social creativity, rather than artists. In order to do justice to this intensifying development, aesthetics must undergo a reorientation: from a theory of art toward a theory of the media-technological *aisthesis*. Walter Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* gives us the first indications of such a theory. It is an *interface* between the Gutenberg-Galaxy and the world of the new media — Benjamin’s old-fashioned name for it is the study of thresholds [*Schwellenkunde*]. “Two cultures or technologies can, like astronomical galaxies, pass through one another without collision; but not without configurational change. Similarly, in modern physics there is the concept of ‘interface’ or the meeting and metamorphosis of two structures. Such ‘interficiality’ is the very key [. . .] to our twentieth century.”²

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the machine is the form in which production accelerates so much that it actually forces a “tremendous intensification of life’s tempo.”³ While the bodily organs of human

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1. Walter Benjamin, “Pariser Passagen,” *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 5, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972) 1026.

2. Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Tortonto: U Toronto P, 1962) 149.

3. Benjamin 5:497.

beings drastically restrict the number of tools with which they can work at any one time, the machine tool is free of these organic shackles. A human being can only interfere in a uniform and continuous production movement. The simultaneity and "continuity of special processes" desanthropomorphize work. Marx calls this its immediate socialization. What he means is that the accumulated experience of human beings is thrown off kilter by the speed of production, and the coordination of hand and eye only becomes a disturbance in a world where "cyclopic machines" produce machines. "The communication and transportation organizations [. . .] are adjusted according to the method of production in big industry through a system of river steam boats, railroads, ocean steamers and telegraphs."⁴ Thus, big industry, as a system of uniform, continuous, and simultaneous special processes, determines the new life rhythms. Only against this backdrop can one understand Benjamin's observation that "the acceleration of traffic, the tempo of news transmission, through which the individual newspaper editions replace the previous ones, work toward the eventual elimination of all discontinuation, of any sudden end."⁵ The discontinuity of death is no longer a meaningful world experience — whereas the series of the perpetually novel is all the more so. Sensation becomes the measure for the new tempo of life, with which books can no longer keep pace like only placards and posters can. The text environments of this poster world change constantly and give the physiognomy of big cities the character of newspaper columns. They are as omnipresent as electric light. This pure medium without a message eliminates all time-space factors of traditional human relationships by neutralizing the difference between day and night, between inside and outside. "In a word, the message of electric light is total change. It is pure information without any content to restrict its transforming and informing power."⁶ The horror of those contemporary to this media innovation was deep enough to guide them to a recognition that they regained only a hundred years later: the medium itself is the message.

The message of electric light is the simple information of its radiation. The message of a news item is the inhuman speed of its transmission. The good sense in a contemporary's fear of the telegraph and the electric

4. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Marx Engels Werke*, vol. 23 (Berlin: Dietz, 1972) 401, 405. Cf. critically, Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964) 38.

5. Benjamin 5: 115.

6. McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 52.

light bulb is that human beings could “go blind from an over-satiation of electric light and go mad from the tempo of news transmissions.”⁷ In 1848 Kierkegaard raised the theological wrath of this prophecy to the demonization of the daily news as the true anti-Christian power. The anonymous journalist appears to him as the lowest refuse of man before God because he is the opponent of all things personal. For him, the daily news was the first agent of anonymization.⁸ Man says, “everywhere there is no one.” Naturally, the new media also bear this stigma “of the most horrifying disproportionate means of communication.”⁹ Note, however, the Gutenberg-Galaxy is not the evil. Kierkegaard only incriminates the unconditional dependence of the mass media on the dictates of the moment. Thick books — no matter how anti-Christian their content — do not participate in the evil of the information industry, they do not participate in the deadly sin of the addiction to sensation. Even the second great untimely observer of the new media’s birth saw this moment as a time of false sensitivity, an excess of omnipresent curiosity: “There is only one sort of seriousness left in the modern soul. It is directed toward the news, which the newspaper or the telegraph bring. To make use of the moment, and, in order to profit from it, to judge it as quickly as possible!”¹⁰

In the new mass media, the idleness of the *flâneur* liberates itself from the scene of the boulevard. The new media even make the work-like character of idleness itself recognizable: it makes the information industry and the news services possible. “The cultural critic, reporter, and photo journalist represent a climax, in which waiting, being ready and consequently ready to shoot become ever more important in contrast to other accomplishments.” The passive omnipresence of the *flâneur* corresponds directly to the message of the new media — that is, to the media themselves. Thus Benjamin was able to look back and discover a “divination of the radio.” Fourier had the fabulous idea of putting idlers, “who just hang about” to work “sniffing out news stories and spreading them about” so that “people could save the time they would lose reading journals.”¹¹

7. Benjamin 5: 114.

8. The term Bolz uses is “*Anonymisierung*” making anonymous – trans.

9. Kierkegaard, *Tagebücher*, vol. 2: 207; cf. *Tagebücher*, vol. 3: 155 and Ernst Jünger, “Der Arbeiter,” *Werke* 6 (Stuttgart: Klett, 1960) 138, 277.

10. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke* 1, eds. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1980) 462. Cf. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype* (New York: Viking, 1970) 38, 197.

11. Benjamin 5: 793, 964.

The less the recipient is able to interpret, the greater the stimulation from the information (over)flow. The history of forms of transmission demonstrates that the medium itself is the message. Reciprocal communication is supplanted by information, and information is supplanted by sensation. The mass media's principles of distribution enforce themselves decisively: "The novelty, brevity, comprehensibility and above all the disconnectedness of the individual news items" secures "the closure of information to experience."¹² Sensation is the principle of selection that creates events with *news value* out of data. The mass media function as a schematic that predetermines what is real between human beings with no experience and the randomness of the world. They do so in such a manner that the suggestion of ubiquity, i.e., the operative fiction that we participate in a common reality, makes the peculiar passivity of the newspaper reader and the television viewer into the fundamental form of social behavior. "We never deal with the world in its totality, but rather with specific news items. The world itself becomes real in the news only as contingency, more specifically as a threefold negation: as an awareness that the related events did not have to happen at all; and as an awareness that they did not have to be reported at all; and as an awareness that one does not really even have to listen to them, and that occasionally, for instance on vacation, one does not listen."¹³

The narrowly restricted transmission of news, which is determined by the selection process of sensation, creates a new rhythm for the *perception of time*, for which there is no longer any sense of becoming. The preparatory school for this new sense of time is the cinema. With the *fitful* rhythm of image sequencing [*Bilderfolge*], fade-overs and montage, it satisfies "the deepest need of the species to see the flow of development exposed."¹⁴ It is crucial to understand that in this instance the cinema acquires a media-theoretical significance for Benjamin that transcends everything else because its *technical* peculiarities correspond exactly to modern problems of *form*. Thus he defines film as "the unfolding of all forms of perception, tempos and rhythms that lie already preformed in today's machines, to such an extent that all the problems of contemporary art find their final formulation only in the context of film." The semantically related vocabulary — *form of perception*, *preformation*, and *formulation* — point to the strict

12. Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire" 1:610f.

13. Niklas Luhmann, *Soziologische Aufklärung*, vol. 3 (Cologne: Westdeutscher, 1974) 315.

14. Benjamin 5: 1013.

objective connection of the technical standard, apperceptive change, and media theory. It is easy to see the context of *form* that Benjamin sees as *nature's* reward for the "logical solution of a purely objectively formulated problem." The consequences for modernity were, however, that "the forms that are definitive for our epoch lie hidden in machines."¹⁵ In this way, historical materialism attacks media theory. In other words, Benjamin presents himself not as a forerunner of McLuhan, but rather as a student of Marx — a critical turning point that brought media theory more *blindness* than *insight*. For "Marx based his analysis most untimely on the machine, just as the telegraph and other implosive forms began to reverse the mechanical dynamic."¹⁶ Nonetheless, we have to thank Marx for the tremendous insight into the formal process of the means of production. At first, the new (mechanical) form stood in the shadow of the old (bodily) form, but then increasingly came "to be determined by the mechanical principle," to the point that it "completely emancipates itself from the traditional bodily form of the tool."¹⁷

The desanthropomorphization, the explosion of the bodily form, is considered the real technical reason for the fact that the paradigmatic forms of modernity are machines. When nature rewards the logical solution of objectively posed problems with form, then the *body*, as form for the means of production in an age of big industry, can no longer be considered a *natural form* of the world's fabric. This form is not found in the human being, but rather in the machine. Only with this presupposition does Benjamin's central aesthetic question gain any positive significance: "When and how do the worlds of form in film, in mechanical engineering, and in the new physics etc. that came about without our doing and that have over-powered us manifest themselves to us? When will we reach the social condition in which these forms, or those that develop from them, open themselves to us as natural forms?" Only the reception of the new media as *natural forms* of being in the world makes the emancipatory use possible, which draws out the "natural consequences of the apparatuses."¹⁸ Still, even the limited, monopolistically self-conscious use of media assumes ultimately new criteria of aesthetic value. No one comes too late, you can join a program at any time, you can turn it off at any time; each episode is self-referential, i.e., it refers to nothing but the medium. In this

15. Benjamin 5: 217, 498.

16. McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 38.

17. Marx 23: 404.

18. Benjamin 2:1506 and 5: 500.

sense, the video-clip is the original phenomenon of the program.

Henri Bergson demonstrated in *Matière et Mémoire* that every concrete observation in its apparent simplicity comprises a multiplicity of moments: the past continues in the present and in this way lays claim to a certain duration. This determines perception as a function of time. When the consciousness of time expands in a rush, the world changes because more is perceived. Ernst Jünger speaks of the approaches to the orphic zero point. "Even the individual, for whom the clock ran only half as fast, would perceive twice as much as normal. That would heighten his skill; he would be unbeatable in rough physical activities like boxing. The ancients tell us of an athlete who defeated his opponents simply by dodging them. Jazz musicians know of drugs that make one's timing perfect."¹⁹ Benjamin concludes very appropriately that if we "were to respond to certain things more leisurely, to others again more quickly, if we lived according to a different rhythm, there would be nothing permanent for us, but rather everything would happen before our very eyes, everything would happen to us." This upheaval of apperception after which the world would no longer exist, but rather affect us, has three natural agents: the dream, the child, and the collector. "For in the dream, too, the rhythm of perception and experience are changed to such a degree that everything — even what appears to be the most neutral — happens to us, affects us." A dream scene made of meaningless elements is the other stage on which the disorderly child creates his idiosyncratic systems of order: "[The child] knows nothing enduring; everything happens for him; means him; meets him; happens to him."²⁰ He or she turns out to be a collector. The element that binds the dream, the child and the collector of the new media's technical reality is their tactile instinct. The dream, of course, consists only of images, but what is decisive is the shock of their sequencing. The collector, of course, views his objects, but the decisive aspect is that he has them. Marx recognized this reduction in the meaning of possession as the simple expression of the alienation of all human senses, as the specific process of becoming stupid under the conditions of private property. "Human beings had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order for them to be able to bring forth their inner wealth."²¹ This fantastic — or one

19. Jünger, "Siebzig verweht" 1: 28; cf. "Siebzig verweht" 2:271.

20. Benjamin, "Einbahnstraße" 4: 115 and 5: 272.

21. Marx & Engels, *Ergänzungsband* 540.

might say, dialectical – transformation of tactility from the alienation of all sense to the *interplay of senses* is fulfilled in the collector.

Thus, we can formulate an antithesis that will be consequential for media theory: “*Flâneur* optical, collector tactile.”²² Under the conditions of the new media, the *flâneur* turns out to be the photographer; the collector, however, turns out to be the agent of the cinematographer. Susan Sontag thus continues a strain of Benjamin’s thoughts when she recognizes the flâneur in the photographer through the constellation of curiosity, *detachment* and omnipresence. She then concludes with a key concept from McLuhan, which is not rendered in the German translation of *On Photography*. “Photography first comes into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle-class *flâneur*, whose sensibility was so accurately charted by Baudelaire.”²³

Where the only concern is what is seen, steadfastness, resistance, and thrust — that is, the characteristics of the tactile — do not appear. However, in the departure from the Gutenberg-Galaxy, the modern privilege of the optical gives way to a new tactility. The distance of the perspectival relationship to the world makes way for objective closeness. And with that, criticism has reached its final hour, since criticism presupposes perspective and the appropriate distance. The critic could take a position and enjoy the ease of unconstrained observation. None of this is possible in the world of the new media. Their representations hearken to the imperative of a “mathematical, fact-based style,”²⁴ that does not deal well with individual differences of opinion. The fact that one would rather read the sports section than the editorial page is one of the clearest symptoms of criticism’s demise. Benjamin not only recognized this, but also derided as fools those “who lament the demise of criticism.” Tactility and proximity take the place of opticacy [*Optizität*] and critique. “Objects have attacked [. . .] human society.” They come “dangerously close to us,” and the sensation aspect of this is “their obstinate, abrupt closeness.”²⁵ But this radical tactility of the new media changes no less than the space of the world itself: they make distances disappear. What began in the nineteenth century with advertising reaches completion today in the video-clip: an *aisthesis* without distance — eye and image collide. *Aisthesis* is no longer the perception of a gaze, but rather the tactile-digital fingering of the monitor.

22. Benjamin 5: 274.

23. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977) 55.

24. Jünger, “Der Arbeiter” 276.

25. Benjamin, “Einbahnstraße” 4: 131f.

Since the disappearance of distance is a function of the world's acceleration, it behooves us to think about this tactility of the new media against the backdrop of the historical period as well. "Today a concert in London is close for the owner of a radio. In broadcasting, contemporary existence is going through an appresentation [*Appräsentation*] of its inside-outness [*Um-herum*], a peculiarly expanding *encroachment* of the world [. . .] In all forms of the increase in speed in which we are more or less voluntarily and compulsorily participating, there lies the conquest of distances. Structurally, this particular conquest of distances is (and I ask that this be understood as value-free!) a frenzy for closeness."²⁶ Today the telematic [*telematische*] speed of transmissions from all over the world has allowed their proximity to become complete. The frenzy for closeness dictates the preeminence of tactility. It is crucial for us to see that this concept stands at the center of media theory not only for Benjamin, but also 30 years later for McLuhan. Jean Baudrillard developed the most precarious aspects of his media theory in precisely this context. Thus we read about video culture: "The observation of a human face is completely different from the tactile reading of a video terminal. In the latter case it is a digital fingering, whereby the eye, like a hand, feels its way along an unending, broken line. The relationship to a conversational partner in telecommunications is the same as the knowledge gained in data processing: tactile and fingering. [. . .] The paradigm of sensate, mental observation has altered itself completely. For this tactility has nothing to do with the organic sense of touching, but refers instead simply to the immediate contact of eye and image, the end of the aesthetic distance of the gaze."²⁷ This strict orientation of media aesthetics to the concept of tactility goes back to the art historical research of Riegl, Wöfflin, Fiedler and A. v. Hildebrandt. But even then, contemporary psychoanalysis characterized psycho-sexual stages in tactile terms, so that Walter Ong speaks of a "resolution of the human life-world in more or less covertly tactual and kinesthetic categories."²⁸

The departure from the Gutenberg-Galaxy presupposes no simple intellectual, historical demarcation, but rather follows from a radical

26. Heidegger, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs* (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1979). 312; cf. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993) 105 and Paul Virilio, *Der negative Horizont: Bewegung, Geschwindigkeit, Beschleunigung* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1995) 145.

27. Jean Baudrillard, *Videowelt und fraktales Subjekt* 120f.

28. Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1967) 107

“refunctionalization of the human apparatus for apperception.” The distracted receptive stance of the masses is the new paradigm of *aisthesis*, which is now completely dominated by the tactile. “This is particularly obvious in music, in which an essential element of its most recent development, jazz, finds its most important expression in dance music. [. . .] However, nothing reveals the powerful tensions of our age more clearly than how this tactile dominance makes itself felt in optics. This is what happens in film through the image sequencing [*Bilderfolge*] and its shock effect. Even from this perspective film proves to be currently the most important object of that theory of perception the Greeks called aesthetics.”²⁹ The cinema is the school of the new tactile apperception. It functionalizes the shocking closeness, the principle of sensation. Sensation, that is, the rabid way in which the new media physically attack us, the skin-on-skin contact of eye and screen, is the technical principle of the cinematographic apparatus of recording. Filming is actually an intrusion, it forces itself operatively into its object and takes out of it “a manifoldly fragmented” image. The recording apparatus thus forces itself so “deeply into the fabric of the situation”³⁰ that every image carries the traces of the medium itself. To this extent the thesis that the medium is the message is well founded. It becomes flagrant in the mass-medial distribution of national and international politics. The structure and the operation of the recording apparatus covers the actual process so extensively, that one can no longer speak meaningfully of them as an intrusion. The secret tools of power no longer determine politics, rather, it is the pose in front of the camera. The mass media transform everything they record into a brew of their own technical means.³¹ “Today, wherever an event takes place, it is surrounded by lenses and microphones and is illuminated by the explosions of flashes. In many cases the event itself becomes the backdrop for the transmission; in this way,

29. Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” Erste Fassung 1: 466, 1049 – Cf. Theodor Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 14, *Dissonanzen: Einleitung in die Musiksoziologie* 34, 37.

30. Benjamin, “Kunstwerk” 1: 458f

31. Jünger, “Über den Schmerz” 7: 189f. 35 years later, Luhmann repeats this diagnosis, in fairly guarded formulations: “When photographers run around or kneel in order to catch the right angle for a snapshot, when cameras begin to whirl and click, flashes or floodlights illuminate the acting people, shooting instructions must be whispered, and when mistakes are made and then corrected, all this can divert attention from the main action or completely call into question the primacy of the main action.” Luhmann, *Legitimation durch Verfahren* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1983) 127.

it becomes primarily an object. We already know of political processes, parliament sessions, and competitions, whose actual meaning consists in being the object of a global transmission. The event is bound neither to its particular space nor to its particular time since it can be replayed anywhere and as often as desired."

That, however, is just a trivial side effect of the tremendous triumph in the realm of perception, for which we have the new media to thank. Because its recording apparati force their way so deeply into reality, they make spatial structures perceivable that have heretofore been inaccessible to human consciousness. And how does the camera force its way into reality? Through close-ups, reductions, time-lapse pictures, slow-motion, stop-motion, and montage – and, above all not guided by the conscious intent of the author, but rather under "the direction of the lens." It opens up "a whole other nature" beyond the "normal spectrum of sensory perception," an unconsciously saturated space that Benjamin, in analogy to the accomplishments of psychoanalysis, calls the *optical unconscious*.³² The eye of the camera does not bring into clearer focus what has already been seen unclearly, but rather it reveals in familiar phenomena the heretofore unknown structural characteristics. Film is for Benjamin a prism in which the grayness of the everyday world is segmented into a meaningful and sensually perceptible spectrum of color; "the abrupt change of position overcomes a milieu that has eluded every other attempt to open it up." The actual object of this "prismatic work" is the human collective, the masses in motion.³³ The prismatic work of film on the space of the collective body, which analyzes the architectonic character of mass kinetics is the concrete antithesis to the masses as monumental ornament: *The Battleship Potemkin* against *Triumph of the Will*. That film undertakes this prismatic work on the space of the collective body presupposes that human organs and the apparati of technology do not merely stand in a functional continuum, but rather are indissolubly coupled. When Benjamin speaks of technology as an organ, he refers to the same situation that Ernst Jünger defined as organic construction and McLuhan as *extension of man*. There is no longer any difference between the mechanical and the organic world; technology has the self-evident character of body parts; human beings meld together without contradiction with their tools; inorganic materials are built into organic materials

32. Benjamin, "Kunstwerk" 1: 461.

33. Benjamin, "Erwiderung an Oscar A. H. Schmitz" 2: 752f.

without any problems. Human beings, who are dependent on prostheses and who no longer think of them as foreign objects, point out the way into video culture. The human extensions called media are not *out there*. Thus doing justice to the new media implies two things: First, it involves a collective innervation of the apparatus; second, the collective body must be organized by technology. Marx had already linked the revolutionary elimination of private property to the development of *social organs* in which interaction with others would become an organ of the individual human body. Against this backdrop, we can understand the two central concepts of Benjamin's politics: "that of the revolution as the innervation of the technological organ of the collective; (compare this to the child who learns to grasp things by trying to grasp the moon) and that of 'cracking open the teleology of nature'."³⁴ Children trying to grasp the moon are comparable to the normal case of an "incoordination of proximity and distance,"³⁵ as Hermann von Helmholtz discussed them in his *Handbuch der physiologischen Optik* [*Helmholtz's Treatise on Physiological Optics*]. Benjamin transforms this into a sensory-physiological metaphor of his politics: The metaphysics of the revolution is a child-like grasp for the moon – it must fail. But it is only through this failure that the child learns to grasp at all, that is, to reassure him- or herself tactilely that the person next to him or her is there. Just as the child, who is still guided by utopian principles because s/he is still sensorially physiologically uncoordinated, innervates his or her organs, so too will the collective moving toward revolution innervate its technological extensions. For Benjamin this is not only a revolutionary opportunity (that — as usual — is lost), but also an anthropological necessity (with which — at the risk of our own downfall — we cannot *not comply*). For technology and the media have developed explosively in modernity with the elemental power of a second nature. And human beings are thrown into this world of gadgets. "From now on you are, infinitely further than you think, the subjects of instruments that — from the microscope to radio and television — have become the elements of your existence."³⁶ The cinematographic *gadget* is in such an excellent position for Benjamin because it teaches forms of apperception that are fundamental for the integration of technology. "Film serves to train

34. Benjamin 5: 777.

35. Hans Blumenberg, *Höhlenausgänge* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1989) 498.

36. Jacques Lacan, *Les séminaires de Jacques Lacan*. (Paris: Seuil, 1973) 76.

human beings in those new forms of apperception and reactions that are conditioned by the familiarity with an apparatus the role of which is ever increasing in human life. Transforming this huge technological apparatus of our age into the object of human innervation — that is the historical task in the service of which film has its true significance.”³⁷

Up until now this reception has failed and it finds its first expression in the dreams of demise, either the fall of the major capital cities of the nineteenth century or the entire Western world, and then, only a few years later, in the destructive orgies of World War I. In terms of media technology, war is nothing other than the accelerated technological transformation that punishes human beings because they do not use these tremendous technological tools adequately. That means learning to functionalize them as extensions of themselves. Those data streams and energy sources that go unused privately and socially “justify themselves by renouncing harmonious collective action in war that offers proof with its destruction that social reality was not yet mature enough to make technology its organ, that technology was not yet powerful enough to control the elemental powers of society.”³⁸ So far we have achieved full employment only in the work of destruction. Benjamin devoted a certain speculation to this work in what is probably one of his most irritating, and most stupendous texts. Whoever manages to follow the reflections of *One Way Street* [*Einbahnstraße*] to their end will ultimately reach *To the Planetarium*. The basic idea is that the ancient intoxicating experience of the cosmos that was forced out by the optic-ity of modern science returns in the intoxicating carnage of world war. War as a twisted form of communication with the cosmos — with this thesis Benjamin quashes every form of pacifist reasoning. For the only thing that could save us from the frenzy of destruction would be successful cosmic communication in the technological organization of the collective human body. We must, therefore, learn to recognize in the development of the new media and technologies a collective surgery of the social body. The reason why *gadget-lovers* today are once again fascinated with war lies in the fact that real cosmic experiences in the modern era have come about only in the medium of war. “Human masses, gases, electrical currents were strewn out on the field, high frequency currents traversed the landscape, new stars appeared in the

37. Benjamin, “Kunstwerk” 1: 444f.

38. Benjamin 3: 238.

heavens, the sky and the seas trembled with propellers [. . .]. In the nights of destruction during the last war a feeling shook the human skeleton that seemed to resemble the happiness of the epileptic. And the revolts that followed were the first attempts to bring this new body under control.”³⁹ This is what Benjamin’s revolutionary slogan about the innervation of the new media and technologies means.

His second key concept sounds no less fantastic: ‘cracking open nature’s teleology.’ Nature, he argues, is closed up in the hard shell of what is called Nature, and the iron jaw of new barbarians, monsters and cannibals will be necessary in order to crack this nut. Human beings become objects in the process; that frees them from inwardness and emancipates their politics from ethics. In this way, the humor of anthropological materialism supplants the morality of humanist idealism. “The diminutive, fragile human body,” that the world war tossed onto a “power grid of destructive currents and explosions,”⁴⁰ where it had to put on gas masks and climb into tanks, is far removed from mankind. Because what is at stake here is surviving civilization itself in the shell of the new media and technologies. Benjamin relies not on the experience of suffering, but rather on humor; not on the tears of the critical consciousness, but rather on the laughter of the barbaric collective. On the basis of a few Marx quotes, he greets the fantasist Fourier as the herald of the new media and technologies. He does so because he is working against a concept of labor that fixes the control of nature as anthropological and that corresponds to a teleological conceptualization of nature. Fourier was not a revolutionary, but rather a transformer of the earth [*Erdverwandler*]: The poles will melt, the sea will turn into lemonade, wild animals will befriend human beings, and an android will produce the land of milk and honey in which a morality will no longer be necessary. “As an explanation of Fourier’s extravagances we must bring in Mickey Mouse, in which, in total agreement with his ideas, the moral mobilization of nature completes itself. In Mickey Mouse humor takes on politics [*die Probe auf die Politik*]. It confirms how right Marx was to see in Fourier, above all, a great humorist. Cracking open the teleology of nature follows humor’s dictates.”⁴¹

39. Benjamin, “Einbahnstraße” 4: 147f.

40. Benjamin, “Erfahrung und Armut” 2: 214.

41. Benjamin 5: 781. cf. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Mausoleum: Siebenunddreißig Balladen aus der Geschichte des Fortschritts* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1975) 60, which reduces the spirit of Fourier’s utopia to the beautiful formulation: “Fabula rasa.”

Mickey Mouse as the mass medial didactic play [*Lehrstück*] of liberated nature — one must understand that for Benjamin the film fairy tale [*Filmmärchen*] technologically implements the essential parts of Fourier's vision. The animation of the inanimate in the cartoon is the play model for the innervation of the technical. What is decisive here is that the miracles of the film fairy tale “come about without machinery, improvised, from the body of Mickey Mouse, its partisans and persecutors, out of the most mundane furniture as well as from a tree, from clouds or from the ocean. Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort here become completely one.” In total accord with Fourier, in the world of Mickey Mouse “a car weighs no more than a straw hat and the fruit in the tree rounds out as quickly as a hot air balloon.”⁴² With that the teleology of nature has been cracked open.

The theodicy of Mickey Mouse gives us considerable insight into Benjamin's anthropological materialism; his material is the human collective, his *anthropos* a transformable, functionalized, electrified figure. “Mickey Mouse proves that the creature lives on even when it has laid aside all of its human attributes. It breaks through the hierarchy of creation that is geared toward human beings.”⁴³

However, that such a cracking open of nature's teleology has direct political significance becomes clear only when one sees it against the horizon of a Benjaminian speculation that short-circuits media theory and psychoanalysis. Along with Freud, Benjamin assumes that our civilization is built on repression and that mass-psychotic tensions build up concurrently with developments in modern technology. Still, modern technology, the spear that caused the wound, heals it as well. For film techniques explode the limits of normal sensory perception in the same way that psychosis does. In a word: Film makes technically palpable the stereotypes and the catastrophes of psychotic, hallucinatory, and dream-like perception. However, “the possibility of psychic immunization” comes with this: Chaplin and Mickey Mouse as a vaccine against Hitler. It cracks open the natural teleology of social catastrophes. In order to prevent a “*natural* and dangerous ripening” of madness, their “*forced* development” in film leads to an “*early* and healing outbreak” of mass psychoses.⁴⁴ This

42. Benjamin, “Erfahrung und Armut” 2: 218f.

43. Benjamin, “Zu Micky-Maus” 6: 144. Compare the astonishing yet inconsequential insight of Adorno: “No longer is the human the key to humanity.” Adorno, *Soziologische Schriften* 8:68.

44. Benjamin, “Kunstwerk” 1: 462.

therapeutic function of the new media reveals itself only beyond human beings. Benjamin sees technological predecessors in Fourier's android, whom he sees as a relative of de Sade. Benjamin's insight into the "constructive moment inherent in every sadism" opens up a perspective in which the *120 Days of Sodom* shields itself with the structure of the *phalanstery*. "Through his efforts, the sadist could come across a partner who longs for exactly those humiliations and pain that his tormentor metes out to him. With one blow he could find himself in one of those harmonies that Fourier's utopia pursues."⁴⁵ In this way, the pathological vectors of individual psychology gain a constructive function in the human machine of the collective. However, in order not to fundamentally misunderstand this organic construction, one must avoid all mechanistic metaphors. McLuhan's concept of the *gadget-lover* makes clear how constructively-oriented sadism transforms the human organism into the image of the machine. "Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms. The machine world reciprocates man's love by expediting his wishes and desires."⁴⁶

A note in the *Pariser Tagebuch* from January 21, 1930 reveals how Benjamin viewed the constructive element of sadism: Of Proust, he writes that he handled curiosity like a sadistic instrument with which he drilled questions into life. A note about a conversation in the *Moskauer Tagebuch* from 18 January 1927 situates this finding in the overarching context of Benjamin's research program — a startling short-circuit between the baroque, de Sade and Proust, that illuminates like a flash the life beyond human beings. Concerning Proust's "wild nihilism," which converges with the overall direction of his book on the *Trauerspiel*, he writes, it "bores into the well-ordered cabinet in the soul of the Philistine that bears the inscription 'sadism' and mercilessly hews all else into pieces, so that nothing remains of the spotless, well arranged conception of depravation, but rather evil reveals ever so clearly 'humanity,' yes even 'goodness' as its true substance." That it is in this case a lesbian scene fits well into the scheme of Fourier's refunctionalization of sadistic and masochistic tendencies. This corresponds to the utopian glance Benjamin casts on the "demise of love" that finds its best expression in the cheerful cynicism of prostitution. Just as the new media rupture the normal spectrum of sensory

45. Benjamin 5: 786.

46. McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 46.

perception, the techniques of the collective body transgress the normal spectrum of sensuality. Even the “sexual revolt against love”⁴⁷ seeks to crack open the teleology of nature. Berl’s book about the death of bourgeois thought gives Benjamin’s speculations their final form. He writes about de Sade’s revolutionary negation of what nature deems normal: “The metaphysical importance of sadism is the hope that the revolt of man will take on such an intensity that it will compel nature to change her laws.”⁴⁸

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Critical Theory overlooked Benjamin’s anthropological materialism that conceives of technology as an organ of the ‘sadistically’ re-constructed collective human body. In so doing, Critical Theory intentionally barred its own access to the reality of the new media. The taboo phrase ‘culture industry’ shattered the *interface* Benjamin introduced between the Gutenberg-Galaxy and the world of the new media; the critique of ideology suppressed media aesthetics. For example, when, Adorno, the philosopher of music, notes that, “In the windowless monads of technology there thrives that which the composer misrecognizes as the realm of his own personal intellectual freedom,”⁴⁹ he sacrifices a decisive insight to the alibi-dialectic of Critical Theory. Technology, standing before such chimeras as *Geist* [spirit], freedom, and subject dissolves and becomes part of *Geist* itself. Adorno saves himself the trouble of analyzing *gadgets*. His essentially substantive concept of technology covers over the media *a priori* of aesthetic production. Thus, while Benjamin understands technology as a medium, Adorno defines it as *Geist* incognito. Here the universe and *Geist* part company.⁵⁰

The threshold between the Gutenberg-Galaxy and the world of the new media marks the demise of aura. The decisive media-technological condition for the end of aura is the mass reproduction of images that absorb the real in that they duplicate them endlessly: “From medium to medium the real becomes volatilized, it becomes the allegory for

47. Benjamin 5: 617.

48. Emmanuel Berl, *Mort de la Pensée Bourgeois* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1970) 173.

49. Adorno and Hanns Eisler, *Komposition für den Film* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1976) 15: 388.

50. The German here reads: “Hier scheiden sich Weltalter und Geister.” It is a play on the German phrase – “Hier scheiden sich die Geister,” meaning: here opinions differ. In the sentence the plural of *Geist* refers to different opinions rather than Hegel’s metaphysical construct of world spirit *Geist*. The word-play allows Bolz to highlight the distinction between Adorno’s supposedly more metaphysical position and Benjamin’s more *mundane* one — trans.

death.”⁵¹ In a thoroughly aestheticized world, in which the real blends together with its own image, there can no longer be any critical transcendence for art. This explains Adorno’s melancholy. The *spleen* of his *Aesthetic Theory* “is a suffering from the loss of aura.”⁵² That makes Adorno the last great representative of aesthetic passion in the Gutenberg-Galaxy. He cannot carry out the command to tie into the new media. Rather, he continues to emend the good old project of aesthetic modernity. Benjamin is completely different. Around 1930 he makes the following note about the break through of “television, phonograph, etc.” into the world of aesthetic forms. “Quintessence: We did not really want to recognize it. Why not? Because we are afraid, justifiably: that everything will be exposed: by the descriptions from the television, by the words of the hero through the phonograph, and by the moral of the story through the next best statistic.” In the face of the new media we cannot save aura. But then comes Benjamin’s turning point where he says *avant la lettre* a definite farewell to Adorno’s culture industry lament. “*Tant mieux*. (So much the better.) Don’t cry. The nonsense of the critical prognoses. Film instead of narrative.”⁵³

The difference between Benjamin’s position and Adorno’s on the Gutenberg-Galaxy is that between mourning and melancholy. Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk* is a work of grieving that will set us loose from modernity. Adorno, on the other hand, remains a “leftist melancholic”⁵⁴ chained to the dead object of his erudition in the *Grand Hotel ‘Abbyss’*. Leftist melancholy seeks pleasure in such paradoxes as the one that today only the anachronism is truly contemporary or one that claims that educated intellectuals are the last bourgeois and at the same time the last enemies of the bourgeois. Or, unsurprisingly dialectical, the contemporary “dissolution of the subject” binds the possibility of experience back to the “old subject, . . . that is still for itself, but no longer in itself.”⁵⁵

51. Jean Baudrillard, *L’échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976) 112.

52. Benjamin 5: 433.

53. Benjamin 2: 1282.

54. Benjamin 3: 281; cf. *Grand Hotel Abgrund* 7-13. – Baudrillard, *Die fatalen Strategien* 147 (Munich: Matthes & Seitz, 1985); *Fatal strategies* trans. Philip Beitchman and W.G.J. Niesluchowski; ed. Jim Fleming (London: Semiotexte/Pluto, 1990). Baudrillard therefore misjudges Benjamin’s *Trauerarbeit*, when he counts him among the “melancholy moderns” — merely in order to celebrate Baudelaire as “the much more modern (though maybe one could only really be modern in the nineteenth century)” investigator of the new values of seduction and fascination.

55. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1970) 4: 14.

On the other hand, Benjamin's grieving process, his program for an awakening out of modernity as a world that is ruled by phantasmagorias, says a determined farewell to the Gutenberg-Galaxy. In so doing he undermines that Adornian definition of the intellectual as a bourgeois deserter. The *Moscow Diary* makes note of a grand scheme to

present the history of the intelligentsia materialistically as a function and strictly in the context of a 'history of illiteracy.' Its beginnings lie in the modern period, since the medieval forms of governance cease to become forms of clerically driven learning, however constituted, for the governed. *Cuius regio eius religio* destroys the spiritual authority of secular forms of governance. Such a history of illiteracy would teach us that a revolutionary energy has emerged among the uneducated classes from their centuries-old religious chrysalis, and the intelligentsia would acknowledge itself no longer as only the army of those who deserted the bourgeoisie, but rather as the avantgarde for illiteracy.⁵⁶

Against this backdrop, state-run projects for the literacy and learning of the collective body would be exposed as strategies for the exorcism of fantasy, skepticism, common sense, and willfulness. Just when Nietzsche described Wagner's total work of art as a medium that no longer knew anything of the opposition between educated and uneducated, the concept of illiteracy was invented in order to stigmatize the last enemy of the Gutenberg-Galaxy. "At the same time Edison invented the electric light bulb and the phonograph, Siemens the electrical locomotive, Linde the refrigerator, Bell the telephone and Otto the gas engine. The connection is obvious."⁵⁷

When the intellectuals — instead of being no longer in themselves, but being rather still for themselves citizens that sabotage themselves — conceive of themselves as the avantgarde of 'illiteracy,' then their attitude toward the media changes fundamentally. For the publicity of knowledge is not separate from it. Hegel's challenge to disrupt the

56. Benjamin, "Moskauer Tagebuch" 6: 310f

57. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Mittelmaß und Wahn* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1988) 66. Cf. Adorno, 8: 104f. Lévi-Strauss had also always stressed that the appearance of writing was a condition of the foundation of empires and favored human exploitation; above all, written communication had hitherto served enslavement. The introduction of compulsory school attendance must also be understood in this context: "The struggle against illiteracy is therefore connected with an increase in governmental authority over the citizens. Everyone must be able to read so that the government can say: Ignorance of the law is no excuse." Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, tr. John and Doreen Weightmann (New York: Penguin, 1974).

appearance of *esotericism* in the name of general comprehensibility is still timely. "The comprehensible form of science is the path to it that is offered to all and that is accessible to all."⁵⁸ Reflections on the media *a priori* of scientific publicity parallel Hegel's thought. In the era of the Gutenberg-Galaxy the popularization of knowledge was bound to "forms of intercourse" that were drawn from scientific research – what was difficult was left out. Under the conditions of the new media "popularization" has become "a task [. . .] with its own specific form principles."⁵⁹ Structurally, media like television and radio demand that even the interests of the 'illiterate' make their way into the organization of the substance of knowledge. That also transforms the concept of education in its very essence. *Why should we go to school and interrupt our education?* Now that children lose themselves to the total environments of the large cities and the infinite data processes of the new media, the educational institutions of the Gutenberg-Galaxy no longer have a future. "[S]wamped by information overload," the preschool child sits like a hunter in front of the television screen. "Pattern-recognition is the role of the researcher and explorer."⁶⁰

Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* and McLuhan's media theory have tried to do justice to this phenomenon in their writing styles. They are not books any more, but rather mosaics of citations and thought fragments — writing like film. Today's intellectual work at the computer fulfills Walter Benjamin's prognosis of the end of handwriting as the ascent of a constellation characteristic for the new media. Tactility, command, and the innervation of technology: "The typewriter will not estrange the hand of the intellectual from the pen until the exactitude of typographic formations makes its way into the very conceptualization of his or her books. Presumably one will then need new systems with the ability to create variable type faces. They will replace the hand current now with the innervation of the commanding finger."⁶¹

The elimination of handwriting is the decisive grammatical caesura of the modern era. Since the burden of "the pointing-writing hand" is relieved by media technology, the hand is no longer a sign of man, rather it is the commanding finger. The word is no longer the word of man, but

58. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986) 17.

59. Benjamin, "Zweierlei Volkstümlichkeit" 4: 671.

60. McLuhan, *From Cliché to Archetype* 201, 182.

61. Benjamin, "Deutsche, trinkt deutsches Bier!" 4: 105.

rather information. The grammatological unity of pointing, drawing and sign that is the hand is dissolving. For this reason we find in Heidegger's reflections on the signless being of *Lethe* in *Parmenides* an historical deduction of the typewriter's essence. "It is no coincidence that the invention of the printing press occurs at the beginning of the modern era. Words become letters, the outline of the script disappears. The letters are 'set', what is set is 'pressed'. This mechanism of setting and pressing and 'printing' is the predecessor of the typewriter. The breakthrough of the mechanism into the realm of the word lies in the writing-machine." In that the typewriter makes the human hand into the innervating organ of a keyboard, it covers over what writing means and takes away the script from the word of man. From this point on, one has hands in order to service the keyboard. With the rise of writing-machines that have made script anonymous, the world of the hand, the word and man is lost. "The modern individual does not just happen to write 'with' the typewriter and 'dictate' (the same word as '*Dichten*'⁶²) 'into' the machine."⁶³

This will not shock anyone who can no longer read his or her own handwriting. Whoever has 14 *Dioptrien* and *Rauschmusik* in his ear, like Nietzsche, loses all connection to the pointing-writing hand. He philosophizes not with the quill in hand, but rather with the hammer in his ear. It is precisely the estrangement from one's own handwriting that gives Nietzsche the insight into the media technological *a priori* of thought. After he tried his hand at the typewriter he realized what can hardly be news to the intellectual who sits in front of the computer screen today. We read in a letter to Heinrich Köselitz from February of 1882: "Our writing utensils work with our thoughts as well."

The media technological *a priori* of thought and perception becomes manifest wherever it comes to an *interface* of Gutenberg technology and new media – for instance when a learned book worm enters the "modern broadcasting studio" of a "radio station." In the new medium of radio, Benjamin tells of the fate of the Gutenberg medium, the book. In a story called "To the Minute" — because it shows how rigorously the manuscript comes under the dictates of air time – Benjamin, who cannot manage the synchronization of manuscript length and air time, breaks his

62. The word *Dichten* is the German expression for the writing of poetry.

63. Heidegger, *Parmenides* (Frankfurt/Main: Klostermann, 1982) 119, 125f. Cf. Umberto Eco, *Über Gott und die Welt: Essays und Glossen* (Munich: C. Hanser, 1986) 252: "Whatever we write on the typewriter will never be as important as the radical other art, in which the technology of typing has taught us how to see writing."

speech off abruptly and now stands dumb before the microphone that is still on. He is still speechless during the broadcast and the *interface* becomes a deadly threat. "In this booth, which is dedicated both to technology and the human beings that are ruled by it, there came over me a fear that is related to the oldest that we know."⁶⁴ Heinrich Böll was the first to portray this fear in a satiric softening: *Dr. Murke's Collected Silences*. Only in the built-in pauses is there nothing to hear. The medium broadcasts its own background noise. Only the acoustically real, not the imaginary unity of the 'cultural word,' is put into the archive and broadcast. A note by Benjamin casts a bright light on this. "Lindberg's reception; The stockmarket; The noise at the slaughter house (Marinetti / That is the new static)."⁶⁵ In the listener's booth, this new static changes the function of the voice. Under the conditions of the mass media, its message is its own omnipresence. The technical implementation of *sound* and listening exposes us to the present with an intensity heretofore unknown. The Jesuit Walter Ong, who smelled here good chances for the presence of God's word, notes: "The live human voice on telephone or radio creates a [. . .] sense of an urgent present [. . .]. Voice is 'real.' And voice is on the air today more than ever before."⁶⁶ Ong, however, no longer knows anything of the fright that marks the birth of this new medium. Walter Benjamin wrote it down. It's 'twin brother' was the telephone. And thus, it belongs in the scenario of a Berlin childhood around 1900: The birth of the new voice from within the apparatus happened in the dark. Telephone conversations were "noises of the night" for the child. "In these times the telephone hung there malformed and banned" to a dark corner that the child reached, hardly able to speak, and after much groping around, only after the "alarm signal" of its ringing went off. Gathered together here are all the decisive ingredients of the media's magic formula: *sensory deprivation*, the shock of alarm, the tactile, the cramped innervation of the apparatus. In this way the new media does actually lead *into the heart of tribal darkness*. Then "I was at the mercy of the voice that spoke. Nothing lessened the eerie power with which it forced itself on me. Unconscious, I suffered as it took away from me a sense of time and duty and intention. As it voided my own deliberation, and as the medium of the voice followed, that

64. Benjamin, "Auf die Minute" 4: 763.

65. Benjamin 2: 1283.

66. Ong, *The Presence of the World* 298.

from somewhere in the distance took control of itself. I gave in to the first best suggestion that came at me through the telephone.”⁶⁷

The urgency and the suggestiveness of this scene owe not to the depth of the memory of this childhood experience, but rather to its *interface* with the surrealist reception of the new media. *Le Paysan de Paris* from 1926 brings out fantasy as an allegorical figure that defines itself, a precondition for the possibility of the world, as a frigid illusion. Whether it is the automobile, the cinema, or the blue sky — there are only senses, media and drugs. The surrealist deals with language and image. In this way he clears out the misunderstanding that the media are instruments of communication. “The telephone seems to be *useful*: just don’t believe that, look instead at how the individual clamps hold of the receiver and cries out Hello! What is he if not an addict of sound, totally drunk on conquered space and on the transmitted voice?”

Literature abolishes itself in surrealism in that it traverses the difference between writing with the pen and the so-called *immediate* forms of communication such as the telephone. Literary scholars who have recognized the signs of the time have been asking such unscientific [*unwissenschaftlich*] questions as for instance about the function of the telephone operator in Proust or of the phonograph in Rilke. It is “the question of the effects of the most advanced telematics on what would still remain of literature.”⁶⁸ It is then consistent to ask, as does Derrida, whether the telephonic *techné* works separately from the apparatus itself by inscribing the *différance* into the *phone*. Modern sensitivity [*Innerlichkeit*] would then be nothing but phoning without the telephone — just as terminologically exact as it declares itself in *Being and Time*, where Heidegger analyzes conscience as a phone call. Would that then make being unto death being on the telephone? *It’s a joke I do not accept*, answered Derrida to the operator who asked him if he would accept a collect call “from Martin Heidegger (she said Martine or Martini).” A collect call from Heidegger — is it a joke, when one is already connected to this phantom through infinite relays [*Relais*]? It presupposes only that Heidegger finally became aware of the media technological *a priori* of his own anti-literary thinking. A puzzling sentence by McLuhan clears up the joke with Derrida:

67. Benjamin “Das Telephon” 4: 242f. Benjamin shows how the telephone became a weapon of everyday life: “Bürobedarf” 4: 132.

68. Jacques Derrida, *La carte postale* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980) 219.

“Heidegger surf-boards along on the electronic wave.”⁶⁹

A collect call from Martin Heidegger — that is one of the absurdities that would have been phoned on forever if there had been no rationalization of media fallout by the quantification of communication. As many pieces of communication as possible should go through as few wires as possible. What is said is unimportant. The recognition of the modulation of a human voice that produces the semblance of understanding suffices. “Meaning — no one is paying attention to it.” Therefore the encoding of information has nothing to do with resources of meaning, but instead with quantified communication. The meaning is not fundamental, rather it is the materiality of the signs. Under the conditions of the new media, communication is no longer defined by sense, but rather by *jam*. That is, the threshold beyond which nothing runs through the wires any more than what one could interpret as a call — where the modulation of the other’s voice is no longer recognizable. “This is the first time that confusion as such appears as a fundamental concept, this tendency within communication is to cease being communication, that is to say, no longer to communicate anything at all.”⁷⁰ *Jam* is the entropy of information — in the Gutenberg-Galaxy it is the unthinkable, for the new media it is their fundamental concept.

Translated by Michelle Mattson

69. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* 248; Derrida, *La carte postale* 25; cf. Derrida, *Ulysse gramophone: deux mots pour Joyce* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1987) *passim*.

70. Lacan, *Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse 1954-55* (Paris: Seuil, 1978) 105.

*Fissures – Dissonances – Questions – Visions**

Siegfried Zielinski

1.

Cultural critics and other professional interpreters of semiotic systems pinpoint a fundamental change [*Wende*] in history within the disparate forms of ‘computation’ — as the apologists prefer to call the symbiosis of communicative technologies and high-speed calculators. The diverse ‘discourses of disappearance’ of all possible realities and slices of reality that were written and published in the 1980s were based on this common assumption.¹ They proclaim a total loss of sensory experience, the complete melding of reality and appearance, of facticity and fictionality, of the real and the illusory. With forceful language and an array of overflowing metaphors not seen for quite some time, they lament the successive loss of language and other semiotic systems as signifying material, as if the creatively organized alphabetic rank and file had to be mustered one last time against the hegemony of both the numerical series of zeroes and ones and the visual. Ultimately, meaning would be completely lost as a relationary quality between signs. In cacotopic visions, the subject, along with its ability to act and its sovereignty in

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1. Cf. Klaus Bartels, “Das Verschwinden der Fiktion. Über das Altern der Literatur durch den Medienwechsel im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert,” in Rainer Bohn, Eggo Müller, and Rainer Ruppert eds., *Ansichten einer künftigen Medienwissenschaft* (Berlin: Edition Sigma, 1988) 239f.

relationship to objects, disappears in a world that is now governed by mere 'simulacra' (Baudrillard). The circulation of signs has fully replaced the circulation of goods and has supposedly become the dominant form of social exchange. The world has permuted into a medium, or is at least well on its way to becoming one. Or in those cases in which the military is considered the dominant superstructure, electronic diversion becomes simply occupational therapy before the big bang, a way of meaninglessly passing the time left over before the inevitable information-technological 'overkill.'

The point at which simulation can potentially substitute for everything algorithmically representable is undoubtedly an unheard-of cultural provocation (and self-evidently also a social one; since under such conditions the entire realm of production and labor are restructured, even more so than entertainment and education). However, coming to terms with this transformation must not necessarily mean developing strategies for counter-enlightenment [*Gegenaufklärung*], with which the general anxiety that many people experience in the confrontation with the obscure mechanical world and its principles of organization is ultimately only heightened. Thinking about the historical limits of rational action and at the same time being cognizant of the fact that human beings have used reason to catastrophic ends does not necessarily mean that we have to reject reason altogether on an intellectual level. No matter how displaced or even fluid the *familiar* boundaries become between sensory and media experience through technical systems and the ways human beings are bound to them — or more specifically *let* themselves be bound to them — the social space in which (even media) interaction takes place is not thereby eliminated, even when one conceives of it as a constructed reality that is largely subjective in nature. On the level of advanced audiovisions the media undergo an enormous boost in significance, the power of which is nowhere near fully exploited. It is, however, a power that is potentially broken by or bound to apparatuses and programs that are produced and sold in the market. It is related to bodies of goods and bodily goods that must be advertised and whose circulation has to be supported. It is connected in its use to manifest structures in the macroarchitecture of cities, villages and settlements as well as to the inner and microarchitecture of living spaces, unfolding in interdependent relationships with production and reproductive activities, with the way people dress, eat, move about and present themselves

socially in those places both within and outside of their own four walls. Regardless of how these discourses and partial practices are themselves configured as systems of signification.

To think of the social and the private as reciprocal also always entails considering their contradiction as an essential category of the movement between the two. Our interaction with highly developed information and entertainment technology is only in its infant stages, particularly as it pertains to their use among non-experts. It is far too early to be able to settle on a definitive position, especially since we can already discern a number of dissonances which make it clear that even the hegemony of the new dispositive order has its limits, perhaps even more so than has been perceptible as yet in the history of audiovisual media. Just as 'dromology,' a theory of speed — such as Paul Virilio tried to develop in his fascinating phenomenology of the military and the cinema — must also systematically consider the airplane crash that at the end of the 1980s has become the norm of highspeed travel, so too the fissures and contradictions are essential that reveal themselves in the development of the culture industry's superstructure. There is hope in this insight as well.

2.

Just how much more ground the media will gain in postmodern countries and how much it will be able to conquer the minds and hearts of the people depends largely on the direction the remaining social practices with which audiovisual discourse intersects will take. The phenomena we have observed in the development of media are almost exclusively manifestations of those societies that are economically and industrially furthest advanced. They will not remain untouched by the new movements toward ethnic, cultural, economic, and political self-determination that have found manifest expression at the end of the 1980s in different countries under the hegemony of the major blocks. Even if we stay closer to home, we can, for instance, share Richard Sennett's expectation that the 'tyranny of intimacy,' the ideal psycho-social breeding ground for the expanding imaginization of the subjects in the electronic fortresses of singularized living, will be robbed of their fertilizer through the renaissance of the cities, the re-conquest and reactivation of urban life spaces as "the focal point of an active social life, the place where conflict of interests and the balancing of interests are carried out, and the

space for the development of human capabilities and possibilities.”² Alexander Kluge latches on to this when he demands: “The most effective antidotes for an excess of telecracy are illuminated cities in the evening: the classic public sphere, and in it unmediated life among those present.”³ Whenever people have worked to reinstitutionalize or institutionalize new public spheres, attempts to break out of exclusively intimate identificatory connections have found new goals.

This process seems to have gotten underway already. The loss of classical large-scale commercial outdoor-culture is being counteracted in urban centers with a growing diversity of activities organized from ‘below’: experimental theaters; mobile or stationary small stages on which the *variété* with its heterogeneous entertainment offerings is being reactivated; live music in cafés, bars or in redesigned workshops and factory halls; cabaret; puppet theater for children; flea markets; trading centers; street festivals; the rediscovery of public parks as places for communication and public stagings (invigorated substantially by migrants from countries where it is common to bring culture to public spaces). Professional marketers have long since joined in this movement in concerted efforts with the community planners of late capitalism. City centers have become giant parcelled-out commercial landscapes into which the traditional, rigidly structured department stores have been integrated. Lighted arcades everywhere, passageways, and commercial event spaces, in which plebeian residents of the suburbs and the inner city housing complexes rather than well-to-do *flâneurs* — take a stroll alongside national as well as international shopping tourists. And even the traditional broadcast media are of necessity participating in this process. They need the lively cultural events as program attractions and are increasingly moving toward organizing them themselves for taping or live broadcast.

The development of media technology may have itself already contributed to improving the chances for a renewed redeployment of public cultural activities. The devices for recording, playing, and storing audiovisions independently from the organized timetables of the event planners, make it easier for people who generally enjoy entertainment and expanded cultural experiences outside the home to decide against

2. Richard Sennett, *Verfall und Ende des öffentlichen Lebens. Die Tyrannei der Intimität* (Frankfurt, 1983) 428.

3. Alexander Kluge, “Die Macht der Bewußtseinsindustrie und das Schicksal unserer Öffentlichkeit. Zum Unterschied von machbar und gewalttätig,” in Klaus von Bismarck, ed., *Industrialisierung des Bewußtseins* (Munich: Piper, 1985) 125.

participating in a superimposed time schedule. The successful mass-marketing of these devices at the end of the 1970s/beginning of the 1980s led to a reorientation toward leisure time activities more directly tied to events and experiences. The chances that the renaissance of outdoor-culture is not a mere passing fad, but rather open for further development, are even better the more the classical family loses its significance as a bulwark against public experience and the more collective interaction with multiple connections become more prominent.

'*Mobile privatization*' is the term Raymond Williams coined at the beginning of the 1980s to describe the necessary conditions for the gradual formation of a new identity for subjects. "The identity that is offered to us is a new kind of freedom in that area of our lives that we have squared off from social determinations and demands. It is private. It includes a great deal of consumption. Much of it has to do with the home, with where one lives. Much of it requires the most productive and imaginative human impulses and activities – furthermore in a very reasonable way when compared with the competing demands of orthodox politics."⁴ Where this identity formation remains a purely affirmative one it leads to that kind of singularization that we have described as an open door for the culture-industrial *dispositif*. But 'mobile privatization' is ambivalent. It may also be linked to alternative life styles and can be generalized in a group context.

Of course, the new forms of individualized sociality are determined now less by the traditional forms of social organization such as political parties or unions than by more specialized, more personalized, and scintillatingly heterogeneous interest articulations: dedicated to subversive or defensive goals, they range from computer clubs, film clubs, neighborhood or cultural associations to women's groups, history workshops and environmental initiatives, the 'Working Group of Critical Police Officers' or the Berlin Agitprop — 'Office for Unusual Measures' to the privately organized groups for those minorities at society's outer edges like immigrants, the disabled, gays and lesbians, or seniors' groups. A public sphere is reconfigured in such social contexts, not in the sense of larger, less manageable, dispersed structures, but rather more decentralized and intimate. The new communications technologies offer such groups the ability to produce both their internal and external communications. They offer possibilities that are already being used extensively, not only in the form of video recordings and printed materials (even the nomadic Berber

4. Raymond Williams, "Mobile Privatisierung," *Das Argument* 26 (1984): 261.

in the Federal Republic now have their own newsletter), but also in the use of electronic data processing in the internet. For instance, during the strike of winter 1988/89 students at the Free University in Berlin created 'Strike Net,' a computer mailbox system, through which they could quickly and reliably spread the latest news: networking through media in order to support and to complement the real network. In France's widely used video text system the — at times subversive — game with the 'Public-Dataprocessing-System' (*Volks-EDV*) has long since become an electronic variant of the nation's daily sport [*Alltagssport*].

"The unity of the public and the intimate would be a powerful form of organization."⁵

At the end of the 1980s it is gripping to watch at the universities how a new generation of computer scientists, communications technicians or electrical engineers are trying to appropriate the new technologies. The avantgarde among them have long since overcome the stage of pure fascination with the machines. They want to couple mechanical orientation with a strong cultural orientation and are easily sensitized to the wealth in (media) history. The most lamentable deficit in all of this is that there are simply not enough academic teachers that have the necessary interdisciplinary knowledge to offer. Nonetheless many students have begun to work creatively on their future modes of articulation through the integration of highly advanced communication and information technology. They have begun to practice directly with the new technological objective systems [*Sachsystemen*]. If one fixes one's gaze rigidly on the classical *dispositifs*, one will not see the manifold results of such activities, or will see them only occasionally in their more spectacular episodes. It will then be the task of future archeologists to recognize them as symptomatic of the foundational era of the new media.

3.

The sorrow that has come from the end of the cinema's hegemonic role in filmic representation should not become excessive, and, above all, should not be paralyzing. Not after two world wars, that also — especially also in Germany — took place in the movie theaters, after the cinema of Adenauer, McCarthy, and Reagan, at a point in filmic

5. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Geschichte und Eigensinn* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1981) 339.

discourse at which great cinematic events apparently can only come together when they are supported by sums with which the countries of the so-called Third World have to finance their yearly budgets for education or social welfare. Cinema was and is also a cinema of aggression. Cinema was and is also propaganda for goods, ideologies, and emotional drivel. Cinema was and is as always one of the most powerful advertising agents for lifestyles. This, of course, does not mean that it doesn't occasionally also have other kinds of experiences to offer. But the times when the subjects in Barthes's 'cubus' were not doubly robbed – of the money they paid at the ticket counter and of the time spent before, during and after the film — have become singular exceptions generally only accessible to a few at ritualized festivals of cinephilic and commercial incest, on the occasion of gala premieres with opening night opera audiences in New York and Paris, or wherever an avantgarde cinema thrives. And such exceptions will continue to be possible as long as there are, for instance, television directors and creators who try to assuage the guilty conscience they have acquired in their work on the *TV-dispositif* with the artistic productions for cinematic mythology, or who need the culturally more reputable cinematic product so that their less ambitious merchandise can bask in the glow they borrow from the artwork's aura.

If filmmakers take seriously their own penetrantly demonstrated claims to the sublime, to works destined for canonization, then they ought to welcome the further alteration of the homeviewer's screen into the audiovisual center for opulent visual and acoustic experiences, as well as the installation of the rectangular image-frame in the HiVision variant of audiovision: the 'salon' of the late twentieth century. Art demands as one of its fundamental precepts "the possibility to evaluate it as objects of contemplative consideration" (Benjamin), the concentrated collision of work and consumer, that is best achieved in isolation, in the private sphere according to the tradition of the culturally conscientious bourgeoisie. Why should this have changed in the age of electronic reproduction? Especially when one considers that the performative aspect of the film is no longer sacred in today's cinema. How many of those who continue to work as writers and journalists on the cinematic myth have long expanded their libraries with cassettes or video discs of their favorite directors, actors, cameramen or composers, to whom they can now turn at a whim, immersing themselves in the illusion of movement, just as they could with their printed editions of Ambler, Chandler

or Hammett, Proust, Joyce or Zola? Isn't the main thrust of the renewed, culturally pessimistic lament about infinite reproduction in the age of electronics just more grief about yet another privilege they have to give up to the common folk? Or does it have more to do with the anxiety of the creators that their visual and acoustic tricks are no longer fleeting in the materiality of audiovisions, but can rather be scrutinized and reviewed, that they will now have to withstand the analytical gaze?

The traditional work of art was deprived of its classical aura in its mechanical-chemical reproduction and in becoming available for a collectivized reception. But technically more advanced productive forces have created new venues for artistic expression which, in turn, created new auratic conditions. And former guarantors of a more distanced reception such as film had in the cinema have themselves been bestowed with an auratic dimension in the process of their bourgeoisification. Benjamin's 'artwork'-essay urgently needs revisions.

The ubiquity of the cinematic space, that has gone as far as its dissolution into mobility, has also made it possible to break open the forms encrusted in the *dispositif* of industrial culture, to break free from the artificially imposed norm of the two-hour movie, and to create and offer both indoors and outdoors, at different locations, and for different occasions diverse filmic experiences of varying length. Maybe even a reactivation of that plebeian mode of occasional entertainment within the context of other outdoor-pastimes, dancing for instance, or chatting, or meeting friends? Must this necessarily take on the form of image and sound blasting with which discos tempt their predominantly younger customers? And future electronic places for viewing film in smaller spaces for more intimate public gatherings: since social anonymity would be at least partially eliminated, there would be less promise in displaying taboo sexuality and/or violence. Although routinely criticized for their lack of imagination, would electronic filming and projection not also be productive for the organization of more spatially remote viewing experiences in these new cinematic spaces? Finally, since these would not be as capital-intensive, could they not also be utilized for the temporal organization of divergent public groups, for the distribution of cinematic material for which the promotional costs were not as high as the production costs, or also for audiovisions that aim specifically to fracture the dominant discourse? Perhaps the future of the cinema lies more in the interventionist appropriation of heretofore uncultivated social spaces than in the renewal of cinematic forms and the exploration of new subjects.

4.

There is even less reason to grieve over the decline of the programming hegemony held by classic television structures. Over the last three and a half decades, the organized block of public broadcasting stations has proven itself resistant to external critique and suggestions for reform. Ever since the analytical dissection of this medium at the hands of critical theorists and neo-Marxists, some of the qualities of public television, which are now tending toward dissolution, have been considered indisputable guarantees for the oppression of individuals: its indissoluble bond to institutionalized political power, the circular effect along with its organizational potential, the immediacy of address, its temporal limitations and the related structural dependency into which public television forced its viewers. Against this backdrop the apparent loss of social significance that this most institutional of institutionalized media is experiencing can only be seen as a net gain. The multifunctionality of the television apparatus, its *instrumentalization* for the processes of labor, administration, calculation, play, self-portrait, the illusionary satisfaction of pornographic needs — in brief: the heterogeneity of its uses goes hand in hand with the relativization of its mythic status as “window on the world” through which supposedly one can view global reality and, in reverse, this global reality can peek into our living rooms.

The incipient anarchy of television channels and their bitter competition opens the possibility for ideological error, or at least allows us to plan on the rupture. The homogeneous apparatus that supposedly sucked in everything and flattened the aesthetic playing field, and the one which Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* presupposed (and had to presuppose) no longer exists as a monolithic block. One reason for this is that the subject itself has become more differentiated. The homogeneous mass public, in the nebulous sense of a social norm, increasingly revealed itself to be a fiction — even from the perspective of the culture industry. In the search for new consumer target groups (to which the culturally well-versed also belong, as well as those with alternative lifestyles [*Alternativen*], non-alienated labor, socially and self-aware individuals), television also searches for a distinct profile to contrast with the institutions of public broadcasting and for the cheapest possible ways to fill up airtime. As a result, those previously shut out of the television community have found avenues for self-expression. Alexander Kluge formulates the strategy for such alternative programming as follows:

“Effective counter production must play off the strengths of its opponent.”⁶ With the Development Company for Television Programs (DCTP), a cooperative project with the Japanese advertising agency Dentsu, he has managed to carve out for himself and for a few of his colleagues airtime in the largest private broadcasters. In these segments he can air his listening and viewing schools for the sensitization of television viewing, he can tell his often very private ‘film stories’ that seem sometimes like leafing through a family album, and he can talk at length with people who have something to say. These ‘news and stories,’ like the news programs of “Spiegel tv”, demonstrate what current, interventionist journalistic work can accomplish. And the larger media groups are no longer alone. Channel 4 is the name of a collaborative group of engaged independent film and video groups in North Rhine-Westphalia that has worked out long-term contracts with RTL plus and SAT1. In 1989 those contracts gave them only approximately 1260 minutes of airtime; but this is after all roughly equal to twenty-eight traditional television features. Their first broadcast was programmatic: the television premiere of Günter Wallraff’s *Lowest of the Low*.

5.

New dependencies and relationships for cultural interaction unfold with the artifacts of advanced audiovisions. Working with the media machines and their signifiatory praxes requires new qualifications that seem to have little in common with those traditionally desired and considered sufficient for the perceptive participation in mass culture. The bitter and apocalyptic reactions among certain cultural critics to the new media derive at least partially — consciously or unconsciously — from painful experiences of cultural incompetence and an inability to act that they must have felt in the confrontation with the materiality of audiovisual discourse.

Knowledgeable management of the rhythmic interweaving of aural and visual images, for instance, requires an expert in popular visual and musical culture, who has been socialized from early childhood in a cinematic world, in the aesthetic of acceleration. It must be someone who knows intimately the fetishes, insignia, icons, and symbols of youth subculture and its commercialized expressive potential. Only to those who simply cannot read these codes, who do not have the interpretive mortar of the consumer, do these structures appear to be completely

6. Alexander Kluge 339.

fragmented and pure aggression. The search for the expression of these dream goods and these dreams as goods in the real life relationships of their young users must dead end if it does not start with their experience of reality as mediated experience, in which the continuous deciphering of signs plays a decisive role.

Yet more serious is the cultural transition that relates to dealing with these machines. Even connecting and turning on a stereo system or programming the channels in the new cable box causes tremendous problems for many people. Sovereign use of the remote control for the new set of artifacts, for the joystick, the mouse, keyboard, digitalized timers, or the scanners for preprogrammed recording, networking system components into integrated media machines demands the combined media competency of an electrical engineer and a computer scientist. The increasing importance of electronics in today's households has in fact been fostering such skills over the last decades. But additional capabilities and skills will be necessary if we want to overcome pure consumption and move toward the individual production of audiovisuals. On the one hand the realization of such cultural pleasures will not come about simply with the knowledge of output power, bits and bytes, data buses, interfaces, features, track density, shutters, blitters, returns or loops. On the other hand knowing just how important such signifiers are will increasingly become the precondition of enjoyment. The will to and the desire for losing oneself in contemplation, for thrills and kicks, education and distraction, combined with the willingness to work with one's hands and to think mathematically: a process, which has already happened in the sciences with the adoption of quantitative methods — something like the proletarianization of the academic daily grind — a process that manifests itself in media practice. Furthermore, these expanded qualifications need not be acquired just for leisure time activities. They will be expected as a matter of course from the growing army of those working in the information and service sectors.⁷

Woody Allen's insertion of his face in *Zelig* mingling with the Nazi crowds, or the hero of *The Purple Rose of Cairo* stepping off the screen while the heroine enters the imaginary realm of the cineastic play was touted as a stroke of genius. But why shouldn't the computer

7. On the restructuring of the labor sector, see Rolf Oberliesen, *Information, Daten und Signale. Geschichte technischer Informationsverarbeitung* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1982) 249ff.

user sitting at his or her keyboard at home not be able in principle to have the same possibilities for media interaction as the brilliant director? Even if many would at first rush off to battle with ‘Rambo,’ set off with ‘Momo’ in search of the lost time, travel with ‘Alice’ to wonderland, or insert themselves into an audiovisual pornographic excess.

In this sense too it is meaningful to speak of a new foundational era: the glass images of the *Laterna magica*, the photo strips for the praxinoscope or the zoetrope as well as the phenakistiscope itself [*Lebensräder*] were, with a certain amount of finesse, easily reproduced and modified. With the potential elimination of the industrially created separation of production and consumption in the new artefacts, similar preconditions — at a more advanced level — are waiting to be re-engaged. When everyday reality is increasingly permeated by media, machines for the expanded appropriation of mediality take on at least the potential for emancipatory uses.

6.

As the importance of the media grows, interactive media productions that presume participation in and contributions to audiovisual discourse acquire not lesser, but yet more important functions, not in spite of, but rather because they are more difficult to practice under such altered circumstances. The areas of friction for future projects of the avantgarde are twofold: they must on the one hand reflect the fact that we are dealing with a powerful attempt to expand culture industrial hegemony, as well as working through the increased importance of the media’s materiality by helping to make its significance visible.

The avantgarde movement, with the Dadaists as its high point, considered the *conditio sine qua non* of modern art to be the anti-industrial — that which did not fit into commercial streamlining, which broke with convention. This concept, repeatedly thematized by creative filmmakers, must now be rethought and reactivated. Increasingly we find prominent ‘cultural sponsoring’ from banks, big industries and service providers and artists who are willingly letting themselves be used to explore the potential and the limits of the high-tech venues for representation and expression that these companies are producing. With this, art/culture, technology, and commerce are melting together more and more into a symbiosis that is difficult to distill. In this context, interventionist media productions could entail a critique of the institution and not continued support for it by perfecting the aesthetic surfaces of its output. That would

also entail a revitalization of the ability for self-criticism in the social subset of art/culture which Peter Bürger, in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, described as characteristic for the latter's historical development.⁸ This does not necessarily imply a complete rejection of the commodity form, but insists rather on the tension between avantgarde and advertisement.

"Cultural critique of the large mass media that create television is only effective when it appears in product form. Ideas cannot fight material production when the latter has occupied the images."⁹ In principle what Kluge says here is correct. But the quasi subversive entry into the apparatus under commercial conditions, the entry he chose for himself with DCTP, is only one alternative, one that furthermore constantly faces the danger that its interventionist moments will be swept along in the televi-sual current of blissful consumption — in the apparatus that "homogenizes everything" (Adorno/Horkheimer). One must add to and protect this kind of work through efforts outside of the apparatus itself. The fixation on broadcasting will become increasingly obsolete as those audiovisions mediated by broadcasting become themselves only one form of distribution. The diversified markets for filmic material are now more accessible to counter-productions than was true just two decades ago, when the potential for such a practice was hailed prematurely. The fact that communications technology has become smaller, cheaper, and more decentralized while performance has increased and along with it the growth in general media-technological competence have made the conditions for counter-productions much better. The neo-conservative fiscal policy of fostering entrepreneurial endeavors is bearing fruit widely, even in media markets. Why shouldn't this also be possible for audiovision? There is one primary explanation for what we have here come to know and appreciate as 'New British Cinema,' the growing movement of regionally anchored 'workshops' for the production and distribution of interventionist media products: Thatcherism in the economy and the appropriation of communications technology by many decentralized groups and associations of individuals. In the ensuing tensions the path for work on audiovisual critique and interventionist media material is narrow. But it is passable. The work of the fourth English TV-channel has been proving this since 1982. Organized as a private channel, and

8. Compare Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974) 28f.

9. Kluge 125.

financed by the surpluses from the immense advertising revenues of the commercial television enterprises, 'Channel Four' has become a globally recognized symbol for innovative, high quality modern television.¹⁰

7.

Advanced audiovisions? We are confronted with a discrepancy that we have often observed in history: A new developmental stage for technological tools and objects of cultural interaction faces a dearth of concepts about how best to work with them, about how to exploit them from the perspective of continued work on projects of enlightenment and the widening of cultural pleasures. Already at the turn of the century, Georg Simmel characterized this quite precisely as the discrepancy between "objectivized [*objektiv gewordenen*]" and subjective culture," as the inability to exhaust "Geist objectified."¹¹

Media materiality is highly compressed, technologically advanced, and accessible. Tiny cameras no bigger than the head of a pin can enter into organisms, or project simulated movements in the architectonic dimensions of a house wall: we can now visualize micro and macrocosms. High-speed cinematography allows us to observe the fastest series of movements; even home video aficionados can dissect objective time by drawing it out with slow motion effects. What we generally cannot see we can make concrete in the synthetic image. We can connect different temporal planes not only one after another, but also one on top of the other, or parallel to one another in one visual sequence. Dimensions, directional movements, perspectives are available for visual (re)construction in astonishingly manifold ways. There are hardly any limits left to how we can unleash technological organs of perception. But what do we actually see on the video terminals, monitors, and projection screens of the globally commodified audiovisions? 'Cultural lag' as the principle for production even in more developed visualizations of culture-industrial production: film material about Wall Street for instance is set into images and dramatic scenarios that appear to have been borrowed from a catalogue of Hollywood antiques. As if

10. Compare here also Gabriele Bock and Zielinski, "Der britische Channel 4. Ein TV-Veranstalter im Spannungsverhältnis von privatwirtschaftlicher Basis und kulturellem Auftrag," *Media Perspektiven* 1 (1987): 38-54.

11. Georg Simmel, *Philosophie des Geldes* (Leipzig 1900) 479f. Quoted here from Michael Parmentier, "Ästhetische Bildung zwischen Avantgardekunst und Massenkultur," *Neue Sammlung* 28 (1988): 63.

one could grasp even a fragment of the world-wide financial market and its effects on people's lives by stylizing some of its agents as heroes of a postmodern western. In 1988, 'The Little Television Workshop' [*Das kleine Fernsehspiel*], known for avantgarde television in the Federal Republic, used highly advanced technology to produce *With other eyes* in 1988, a movie about genetic research in a laboratory that seemed to be lifted from a Frankenstein film. Against the backdrop of medically sterile walls, a naive, ludicrous psychopath bedecked with a white lab coat waves around test tubes sloshing with peculiar fluids and eery vapors: the mythic witch's brew to visualize the most pressing ethical, scientific and technological provocation of the late twentieth century. Tales about dedicated clergymen [*Pfarramtsgeschichten*] from Swabia — spiced up with issues of alternative lifestyles — are dutifully serialized; the Hessian Schölermann family of the 1950s is transported to Linden Street in Nowheresville, Germany; lawyers are cast as the heroes of Kreuzberg's everyday reality; and for the umpteenth time the lone cop is shown doing battle with the rest of the world — naturally, under the banner of the common market — as 'Euro-Cop.'

Those who maintain — as is currently in vogue among German image producers — that reality just doesn't offer any gripping stories any more, have long since disengaged themselves, in order to work undisturbed at their artistic craft, to dedicate themselves to audiovisual pottery. Greenpeace and Robin Wood stage much more thrilling productions in the real world than an entire year's worth of fictional production offers at the end of the 1980s. Where are the films that go beyond and directly oppose the public relations departments of the relevant industries, that examine the research processes and goals in biochemistry and neuro-biology? Where are the films that dissect and fictionalize complex information systems and their impact on society, that concern themselves with the intersection of human beings and machines as a unique social-psychological focal spot, that take on such issues as the remote exploration of the atmosphere and hydrosphere in physics — with all of their fascinating images? So far it has generally been left to the news media to thematize the reactor catastrophes as the rule in the purportedly perfected safety of the nuclear system. Where are the films that identify with the life rhythms of youth culture, without immediately also wanting to sell them a whole arsenal of products as well? Where is Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* brought up to the

current level of electronics and computer animation? As a contemporary “I see!,” a vision of today’s social reality? Where are the films without literature and (professional) actors about, for instance, the metropolises at the end of the twentieth century, films that would take the project of the symphonic documentarists from the twenties into a new age? Why are such topics left to the advertising agencies? Who uncovers the taboos and nightmares of the 1980s and 1990s and exposes them as ruthlessly as the Dadaists and Surrealists did for their time? Beyond the further tightening of the spiral of sex and violence that can hardly be tighter than it is already in the visual realm. Where is the television channel that uses the mobility and the speed of the machines to offer truly live television, and in so doing develops the originality of the medium? Not as an occasional or synthetic element within an otherwise conservative stream, but rather as a constant, ever-renewing institution.

Under the sign of the information age it is truer than ever before that reality has become a function, about which photographic reproductions tell us less and less. “It is not the most important thing to discover new things, it is most important to create new relations between things that already exist.”¹² The potential for the combination of the objective and the abstract with the aid of computer animation or electronic trickery — as already practiced intensively in architecture, design, industrial cinematography, in scientific research and in the arts — has yet to be exploited for the creation of fictional and factual social and private realities. Established computer animation has as yet set primarily simulated things in motion. Hans Richter, Man Ray, or Fernand Léger had already done this. What is needed is the attempt to use the expanded array of tools to make social conditions dance.

“For this reason the creation of a central film laboratory for the realization of manuscripts containing new ideas, perhaps even with private capital support, will soon be a self-evident demand, that will have to be realized.” Moholy-Nagy¹³ wrote this in 1927 in the introduction to his film sketch “Dynamics of a Metropolis.”

In the hegemonic center of the classical and obsolete *dispositifs* of cinema and television there are few attempts to utilize the tools of advanced audiovisions, to use them for more than just heightening shock effects. Godard keeps on working, Kluge keeps on working. Coppola throws

12. Nam June Paik, *Art for 25 Million People – Bon Jour, Monsieur Orwell – Kunst und Satelliten in der Zukunft* (Berlin: Daadgalerie, 1984).

13. Lázló Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei – Fotografie – Film*. (Berlin: 1927, rpt. 1967) 120.

himself again and again into the filmic adventure of productions that are located somewhere between highly developed audiovisual technology and synthetic kitsch. In the films he has made for the media future he seems intentionally to have risked the ignorance of his contemporaries; his electronic movie experiment *One from the Heart* (1981) will presumably not be adequately appreciated until the 1990s. It is symptomatic of the primarily economic orientation of the Europeanization debate, so effectively developed in the realm of public relations, that the big innovators of filmic discourse in western Europe are not even mentioned in this context, let alone distinguished. But Godard keeps on working, Kluge keeps working on the project of the continual reformation of the audiovisual. And other innovators have joined them, who have set out on the difficult path between avantgarde and advertisement. Peter Greenaway, for instance, who has confused both professional and amateur critics with his dazzling images harking back to scientific cinematography, his ascetic symmetrism, and a narrative structure that is based on number games. He is one of few cineasts who has worked intensively with the creative possibilities of the electronic screen, who has turned English bathrooms into true televisual orgies (in *26 Bathrooms*), or who has combined music and vision for the small screen in new syntheses (in *Four American Composers*). There is also Derek Jarman, who with the visualization of Benjamin Britten's "War Requiem" has not only created an ephemeral monument to himself early on, but has also compellingly demonstrated how a grandly stylized, loudly droning and leisurely cinema aesthetic can be compressed through the brutal material violence of the electronic into an antimilitaristic spectacle for a young audience.

But the most exciting things are happening at the margins of the culture industry's gravitational center. The film essay, excellently represented in the Federal Republic by Bitomsky, Costard, Farocki, or Krieg, with their quiet yet revolutionary reflections on machines, computers, money, structures and perceptions, has been, if not completely revamped, at least further developed with the aid of electronic technologies. One example would be Geoff Dunlop's *L'objet d'art à l'âge électronique*, an homage to Walter Benjamin and a critical discussion of his most famous theses. A few have discovered and stylistically honed the electronic camera as a sensitive tool for observing everyday processes, for instance in very different ways, the Americans Skip Blumberg or Paul Garrin. In *Steps* Zbigniew Rybczynski allows film/history and the present to collide

in an unbelievable provocation. Into the film sequence *par excellence*, the Odessa steps from Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, he has synthetically inserted a group of American tourists, who seem to be enjoying the scene with ghoulish delight. Rybczynski learned his craft working with video clips and thus perfected for himself the uses of chromakey and matching. He demonstrates impressively in *Steps* how such electronic matting and mixing techniques can open up new worlds of audiovisual perception: a playfully interventionist way to deal with film experience, media and political reality that are bound so closely together. The current attempts of Americans and Soviets to approach one another has at times appeared to be a gigantic staged media event more than anything else. *Out of Order* is made of the same stuff as the dreams of today's youth, without however attaching some brand name or a price tag to every image. Just the opposite is true in fact, since the main actors and creators of this modern video-musical come from Birmingham's unemployed. Over the last years the director and cameraman Jonnie Turpin has helped them to master electronic means of expression. With imaginative creativity these young people have combined social satire, an insistence on their right to meaningful work, unvarnished wit, political accusations with their life styles, their rhythms, their musical identifications: video not just as packaging for a sleeping aid, but rather as stimulating social and cultural injection, that never tries to cover up its own media-generated construction. It shows subjectively experienced reality, it *shows fiction*.

Just a few examples from the heterogeneous wealth of audiovisions that have already been produced. There is little here that bears the curse of the all-too-familiar. The unconventional creates for itself tangible expression and recognition with the aid of new production techniques. The number and the aesthetic bandwidth of these electronic missives, skits, and designs has increased to such a degree that one can barely survey the field and that one can get only a fragmented glimpse of them at the relevant festivals – from aggressive scratch videos and homages to the oscilloscope to forceful poetry about magnetic tape. Brevity is less a question of style than a consequence of the material economy. Internationally the scene is not wealthy and is not well-supported by official cultural budgets. Frequently the artists must enter into short-term sponsoring contracts with the equipment manufacturers. They are, however, flanked by a quantitatively growing establishment of artificial

electronic art productions that are beginning to reach the elite markets through low-priced editions that are establishing their own international distribution systems, and are conquering more and more space in the museal temples of the fine arts.

The time of the moving picture machines was still dominated by craftsmen. The culture industry moved into the realm of audiovisual reproduction only gradually with the establishment of the cinema. It then took over the hegemonic role, ruptured and opposed time and again by the avantgarde, which in turn was either largely absorbed by the culture industry or which ultimately sold out to it. With the rise of television the culture industry appropriated the private, familial realm, but in so doing created gaps and fallow areas in the public arena that could then be re-occupied. At the level of advanced audiovisions there is practically no longer any filmic discourse outside of the culture industry. The tension between institution and opposition has been suspended in the realm of the technological materiality of the media and transferred into the apparatus itself. It is here that the conflict will be sustained and played out. Michael Jackson is thoroughly a product of the culture industry: in fact he is one with it. But Tom Waits also belongs in its fold; he will not however be absorbed into it and with his expressive and sensual potential cannot be completely digested by it. At a time in which we can no longer imagine a media world beyond commodification, the difference between the disparate commodity spheres becomes increasingly important.

As far as signficatory practice goes, we are, on the level of advanced audiovisions, still very much at the beginning.

"We stand before a huge pile of words and misapplied symbols, and next to it there is a gigantic repository full of new discoveries, inventions and possibilities, all of which promise a better life."¹⁴

Translated by Michelle Mattson

14. Siegfried Giedion, *Die Herrschaft der Mechanisierung. Ein Beitrag zur Anonymen Geschichte*, ed. Henning Ritter (Frankfurt, 1982, 1987; Oxford, 1948) 770.

*From the True, the Good, the Beautiful
to the Truly Beautiful Goods
– Audience Identification Strategies
on German “B-Television” Programs**

Heidemarie Schumacher

German television threatens to become, for the most part, the bearer of advertising messages. This trend is explicit in the presentation of goods during blocks of advertising and in the promotion of merchandise through product placement. But, more importantly, it is implicitly visible in the tendency of programming concepts to conform to advertising strategies and of individual program segments to adopt the aesthetics of commercials. An inane positiveness radiated by every participant, the inclusion of clips, soft focus, and catchy music, among other devices illustrate a development which I consciously refer to as B-TV (in analogy to B-movies).

Neil Postman formulated the thesis of television programming as a derivative of advertising or inverted, advertising as a parameter of television programming for American television in the mid-1980s.¹ Siegfried Zielinski described German television in the age of competing “new media” as “advertisement television.”² Just as relevant is the question to

* Reprinted courtesy of Schüren Verlag, Marburg. First printed in *Medienwissenschaft* 3 (1995): 1-8.

1. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: A Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985).

2. Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisionen. Kino und Fernsehen als Zwischenspiele in der Geschichte*. (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1989). In English as: *Audiovisions : Cinema and Television as entr'actes in History*, trans. Gloria Custance (Amsterdam : Amsterdam UP, 1999).

what extent new aesthetic parameters will develop with the emergence of tabloid television. New studies of advertising television point to the interconnection of sales aesthetics and other communication offerings.

Public television as a societal institution passed its climax with its 1984 deregulation. Today the majority of the available channels are commercial. A look back at the fifteen-year old "dual system" revealed that commercialization has moved German television into the phase dominated by market forces and from a monopolistic to an oligopolistic structure. The legal guarantee for the continuance of public broadcasting stations could not prevent the current spectrum of television offerings – born as it is from the spirit of competition – from being dominated by market leaders. And thus the programming of the public broadcasters becomes more and more marginalized. At a recent Cologne Media Forum, primarily focused on the economic considerations of our media future, the apt title of one panel discussion was "Primary Source or Marginal Medium? The Future of Public Broadcasting."

Mass appeal not only brings in the bucks, it also has an impact on the programming concepts of the traditional stations: in order to maintain the legitimacy of the current fee structures, increasingly, the public broadcasting stations are responding to the success of the commercial channels. Among commercial stations, which can operate without the burden of proving legitimacy and can thus focus solely on profitability, competition for market share (viewers) has led to the development of channels and formats that – just like advertisements – concentrate above all and with all possible means on establishing viewer loyalty. An RTL-commercial formulated it in positive terms: "RTL has discovered something entirely new for television. The viewer."

The strategy of *cozying up* to the customer directly influences the design of the private networks' offerings. There are show titles like *Up Close* [*Hautnah*] (SAT1), *The People Behind The Headlines — Up Close and Personal* (SAT1); and slogans like "We're Here For You," [*Wir sind für sie da*] "We're Looking Forward to Seeing You," [*Wir freuen uns auf Sie*] or "See (?) You Soon" [*Wir sehen (?) uns!*]. Above all, there is enhanced audience participation in the studios as "guests" or "stars" in such programs as *Dream Wedding* (RTL), *Man Oh Man* (SAT1), *Only Love Matters* (SAT1), and in the numerous talk shows dominate the playing field.

The establishment of viewer loyalty as a basis for maximizing profit

by advertisers necessarily led to changes in today's television aesthetics: breadth at any cost determines concepts and realization. Only now has TV become a truly mass medium. Bemoaning the demise of television culture is now largely a middle class lament, not the dirge of those who tune in every day to RTL, SAT1 or PRO7.

The legitimacy of traditional broadcasting (its public mandate) incurs the risk of reaching only specific audience groups (older viewers, those seeking information and those interested in cultural offerings). This has put public broadcasters in a difficult situation: a target audience that is too diverse is disadvantageous for program planning in a competitive environment, special interest programming (e.g., ARTE, a channel devoted to challenging cultural material) appeals to viewer groups that are simply too small. A case in point is VOX, a commercial channel that started out with a demanding qualitative concept, yet was forced to join the entertainment bandwagon in order to survive financially.

RTL, the broadcaster with the most viewers and the largest advertising income in Europe, set the initial standards for "B-TV." In the 1980's it included low budget entertainment shows and soft-porn programs like Berlusconi's *Tutti Frutti*. Since the beginning of the 1990s there is reality-TV, (sensationalistic journalism), daily soaps, highly personalized infotainment, talk shows, and daily game shows that have made up the foundation of "least objectionable programming" characteristic of RTL and SAT1. It is a programming concept that offers the lowest common denominator for broader audiences. Because of their low production costs, RTL, SAT1 and PRO7 are counting on mixed format shows pulled together from infotainment and personality driven shows: Schreinemakers, Gottschalk, Ulrich Meyer, Arabella Kiesbauer, Ilona Christen and Hans Meiser are the names that mark this development. The lure of material gain continues to draw viewers into daily game shows (SAT1's advertising slogan: "Television doesn't make you dumb, it makes you rich") while aggressive external advertising vies for the favor of the viewers. Daily broadcasts, such as the never-ending series / soap opera *Good Times, Bad Times* (RTL) or the infotainment magazine *Explosive* (also RTL) create viewer loyalty and viewing habits.

A corollary of this increasing competition is the competing commissioned research. Examples can be seen in two texts: *Report on the State of Television Commissioned by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany* and the convergency study done at the behest of

RTL.³ The study done for the federal president — an analysis of the dual system from a public perspective — came to the conclusion that commercial stations show primarily violence, pornography, and entertainment. The Merten study, however, contends that public programming shows just as much entertainment as commercial programming. A lot of money goes into this research dedicated to mutual monitoring. It would make more sense to initiate publicly funded research that does not cast aspersions on the competition, but instead accepts the existing separation of A- and B- segments and serves to develop offerings that are sophisticated and attractive for viewers. These studies could result in the development of media competencies that allow for a critical differentiation between disparate program offerings. The pedantically condescending lessons conveyed via the research studies funded by the public television stations will not prevent commercial broadcasters from continuing business as usual. And while the public broadcasters continue to rant and rail, the commercial channels have long since introduced new formats which change so rapidly that the righteous indignation comes too late because the programs criticized have usually already been terminated. Short term and inexpensively produced broadcasts change almost seasonally because such instant or fast programming formats have the distinct advantage that they can be dropped just as quickly when they fail to generate a large enough audience.

What are the major tendencies that characterize market leaders like RTL, SAT1, PRO7, and VOX in the process of attracting the television consumer? I argue that the strategic convergence of television advertising and program forms constitutes a main feature of this development.

Market share is insured by adhering to specific principles: 1) Grab the viewer's attention; 2) establish an emotional involvement for audience members; and 3) maintain and anchor the viewer's interest. These principles — derived from communication psychology — are the foundations upon which most aspects of current commercial programming development rest. Advertising speaks first and foremost to the emotions of the consumer, a concept to which many program offerings in the commercial channels adhere. Viewer attention is steered through frequent formatting changes and through spectacular offerings, even

3. *Bericht zur Lage des Fernsehens für den Präsidenten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* presented by Jo Groebel et al.; ed. Ingrid Hamm. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 1994); and Klaus Merten, *Konvergenz der deutschen Fernsehprogramme. Eine Langzeituntersuchung 1980-1993* (Münster: Lit, 1994).

when the material itself is totally banal. Sensationalist moderators, film clips, trailers made in the manner of commercials, sexual or material lures, the transgression of public taste boundaries as well as the public display of the emotional outbursts of participants create the background for the affective charge [*Aufladung*] of program offerings. In addition, promotional sports, extensive external advertising campaigns (broadcasting magazines, billboards, radio, illuminated display cases in railroad stations, etc.) attract attention to the individual programs.

Viewer loyalty is established primarily through the representation of familiar emotional situations and the everyday problems of the viewers. The preference for everyday themes, the inclusion and presentation of afflicted individuals and the verbal construction of the greatest possible intimacy signal this intent. People identify with topics most closely when they feel a positive connection to their own personal feelings or when they may listen to someone with a problem talk about their experience or put themselves on public display. Thus, more and more viewers get to participate directly in talk shows, infotainment shows, reality soaps, and reality reports about accidents, illnesses and catastrophes. An additional ingredient in this formula is the exploitation of emotionally charged scenes: reunions after a long separation, reconciliations, confessions of love and marriage proposals, the failure of peace offerings, or the description of very personal problems on programs with a counseling format. The distance of the medium establishes intimacy by directly integrating the viewer through publicly expressed private details in front of a rolling camera. This tendency to focus on hitherto private and everyday themes is best expressed in a simple formula: with the exception of US-reruns, private stations broadcast predominantly private affairs. Authors like Meyrowitz⁴ have emphasized that the general role of television is to draw out those aspects of social life that usually take place in the background of the social stage. What cultural sociologists have diagnosed as the "Fall of Public Man"⁵ seems to converge here with the development of a happening society [*Erlebnisgesellschaft*], in its media corollary of happening television [*Erlebnisfernsehen*]. In terms of television aesthetics, these tendencies revealed themselves in two ways: first, as a generic shifting, i.e., as calculated toying with the increasingly porous distinction between fiction and

4. Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Structure and Behavior* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985).

5. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of the Public Man* (New York: Norton, 1992, c.1976).

non-fiction; and secondly, as a transformation of uni-directional television production (broadcaster to viewer) into television production that involves viewers in the formation and execution of television broadcasts and gives them access to television as a medium for the articulation of their most private and intimate experiences. This development has born fruit. For example, it is obvious that it no longer matters to many viewers that private problems in call-in counseling shows or infotainment shows are not discussed in the corresponding social arena (family, spousal relationships, workplace) but are exposed and worked through in front of millions of people. The participants act as if television existed for their own personal use, a fact that also applies to public broadcasting (SWF's *Lammle Live* or West3's *Domian*). The viewers are offered something very specific with which they can identify. The participants become actors or guests ("Stars"). Their normal existence turns public, that is to say, it becomes a media experience. The many game shows accordingly present participants in precisely this manner. As the participants approach the shiny, glitzy stage of RTL's show *The Price is Right* under the thundering applause of the champagne-hyped live audience, the host shouts: "You Are Here!"

The changed role of the consumer is not the only new aspect of this development. Television now generates new realities by intervening directly in the actual life of its participants. Linda de Mol (RTL) is the host of television weddings and Kai Pflaume (SAT1) serves as the *postillion d'amour* in marital or relationship conflicts. This trend was first introduced through the 1980's talk shows that invited both celebrities and other guests to talk about their personal histories. Not only the confessional broadcasts, but also "reality TV" and the "reality soaps," with their participant-observer format, dish up intimacies in the name of consolidating viewer loyalties. So-called "Confrontainment" shows like *The Hot Seat* (RTL) and / or *Objection* (SAT1) perpetuated the use of emotional arousal. In these shows the medial presentation of the participant's emotional outbursts was of greater relevance than the topics of their debates.

The first wave of reality-TV shows (i.e., "disaster television") may have passed (*Emergency* [RTL] now airs only as reruns), but the traces of such shows are clearly visible in new genres. Their unusual, sensationalist, and fear-inducing elements are the underlying basis and reference for numerous other infotainment shows and sensationalist special reports: the focus being whatever is spectacular along with the

emotional outbursts of those involved. The reality-shows (centered on missing persons or participant tell-all segments like *Please Call* [*Bitte melde Dich*], *Forgive Me* [*Verzeih mir*], *Only Love Matters* [*Nur die Liebe zählt*], *Looking for Heirs* [*Erben gesucht*]) are in a good position to establish interactive viewing firmly. Viewers are lured in as possible heirs, lost family members or spouses. Commercial TV competes here with the services offered by other commercialized communication systems.

The confessional, conflict resolution, and search shows [*Such-Shows*] rely on viewer identification with what is being shown and thereby develop a culture of pseudo-emotions. 'Emotions' — or more specifically, emotional outbursts — are exhibited primarily in exceptional situations, i.e., under spectacular conditions. Well-versed moderators of infotainment shows like Schreinemakers or Linda de Mol have developed interview strategies that strike at the unmediated emotional state of the participants, and are thus able to produce and stage expressions of emotion quite effectively. The game show contestants are coached by professional animators and permanently grinning assistants to present a smiling face and pseudo-cheeriness. Additionally, the willingness to talk about personal experiences in front of the camera is often promoted by the prospect of winning dream honeymoons, cars, home furnishings or new wardrobes.

The strategy of creating viewer loyalty through emotional sensations is also mirrored dramaturgically in such sensationalist special news broadcasts like *The Reporters* [*Die Reporter*] (PRO7), *The Editorial Room* [*Die Redaktion*] (RTL2), or *Case Files 95* [*Akte 95*] (SAT1). These supposedly informational programs favor sex and crime topics (prostitution, drugs, mafia, etc.) and employ a highly affective commentary style, a clip aesthetic, as well as a musical accompaniment borrowed from the crime film genre. A jumpy camera, overcharged moderation and hype replace interesting images or missing footage: just like the tabloid press, the so-called news shows that appeal to consumers' desires for authentic experience do not seek to convey information, but rather excitement, emotion and entertainment.

It is well-known that advertising often works with sexually connotative material. 'B-TV' also lives off the enticing topic of sex. After the cheap sex film revivals of the 1970s, sex became a regular programming fixture at the end of the 1980s. After Erika Berger's pseudo-education program *Give Love a Chance* (RTL) there came such broadcasts as Mathias

Frings's *Lovely Sin* [*Liebe Sünde*] (formerly VOX, NOW PRO7), Lilo Wanders' *The 'Good' Love* [*Die Wa(h)re Liebe*] (VOX) or *Playboy Late Night* (RTL). Sexually oriented programming now has a firm spot in the electronic kiosk. Even if they are gradually running out of topics, and even if the talk of sex is nowhere as clinical and unerotic as it is in the "cold medium of television," they can still hook into that primal motivator of sensual viewing, voyeurism.⁶ Even in sex programs viewers are increasingly taking the microphone or are drawn in via telephone counseling. Five times a week the NBC-superchannel has shown *Real Personal*, an advice program about sexual problems with host Bob Berkowitz and a varying roundtable of experts. The title itself encapsulates the message of 'B-TV': real people and their 'real' (!) problems are the focus here.

Advertising campaigns anchor viewer loyalties by frequently inserting advertising spots throughout the day as well as by using celebrities – conditions which the commercial formats can fill splendidly. They produce continuity via daily program slots as well as the enhanced marketing of the moderator's personality. Five times a week Ilona Christen, Hans Meier and Arabella Kiesbauer look in on us in the commercial channels – in the meantime, the public station ARD has caught up with this trend in *Fliege* or *Schimpf*. The anchors create a parasocial recognition effect. Personality-driven shows that last more than two hours like *Schreinemakers Live* combine what were once disparate genres such as advice shows, talk shows, entertainment and counseling shows. The dissolution of generic boundaries and the hybridization of program formats produce an effect that is surely welcome to the commercial program providers. It improves the seamless transition from program to advertisement and vice versa. Both the daily time slots and the evening performances linked to a well-known name guarantee that efforts to keep viewers watching succeed amidst the overall channel chaos. The host's personality, to which one gradually becomes accustomed, embodies a certain prototype, and since one sees him or her daily — just as one does one's life partner — he or she becomes a constitutive part of our daily habits, spreading not only inanity, but also a sense of security. The highly successful and likewise daily entertainment programs of David Letterman and Jay Leno provided the model which Thomas Gottschalk and Harald Schmidt at

6. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

SAT1 initially sought to imitate. Along with one's daily soap, one's daily infotainment show or the daily game show, television as 'B-TV' also provides fixed portions of our daily routines. Whereas in the past viewers could only be relied upon to tune into *The National News* [*Die Tagesschau*] day after day, these new genres have in the meantime become the spaces in which people assemble for their daily televisual gatherings.

The commercial stations' viewer loyalties are secured with material temptations, with promises of real gains in the form of lucrative winnings. Product placement series that unabashedly display the whisky bottle, the cigarette brand or the facial cream and which are written and produced according to product placement priorities are the overt expression of a kind of television refunctionalized as a supermarket.

Appeals to viewer emotions and the active participation of the consumer enhance 'B-TV's ability to exploit this supermarket. Critical media studies should ask to what extent such formats determine the structure of overall programming and how viewers can be empowered to see through such strategies.

Translated by Karin Schoen and Michelle Mattson

*Tatort: The Generation of Public Identity in a German Crime Series**

Michelle Mattson

The academic study of television, as a subdivision of the study of popular culture, is rife with dissension over both television's character and its impact. Is it merely the epitome of manipulative mass culture? Is it the locus of subversive reception strategies?¹ Or is it somehow a combination of the above: the contested site for the formation of public consciousness?² No matter where critics place television, it seems no one feels completely comfortable dealing with the subject, and virtually all of them are mired explicitly or implicitly in the struggle to legitimize their area of study. The expression of such discomfort can assume myriad aspects: from the wholesale condemnation of television production and reception as the pernicious vehicle of mass subjugation and disempowerment, to overly eager readings of television (and/or all venues of

* I am grateful both to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for funding my research in Germany on this topic, and to the Institute for Theater and Television Studies at the Free University of Berlin for access to their extensive television archives.

1. See e.g., John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978) and Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), as well as Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

2. See e.g., the article by Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum," *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Newcomb (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 455-70.

popular culture) as the “stuff” out of which the public selects and creates its own formative narratives of social reality.

This article assumes the more moderate position that television is one factor among many in the formation of public consciousness. The issue here is not *if*, but *how* television production incorporates and mediates political reality. Whether it is exploitative or liberating, interpretively restrictive or fraught with the inner contradictions that create the spaces through which (subversive) readings are possible, television is probably the major source of imaging in western industrial societies today — including Germany. As such it behooves those of us interested in the social distribution of meaning to address the mechanics of television at its many levels.

My inquiry focuses on one particular genre of German television — crime shows — and, for the time being, on one particular series: *Tatort*, a long-running, well-established, and popular detective series. Given the limitations of a circumscribed study, *Tatort* is an ideal subject for such a study, in part because of some unusual features of the show’s production. The “series” is actually a collection of series, as each regional network of the ARD (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalt Deutschlands*) produces a limited number of episodes yearly. Regional productions focus on criminal investigations carried out by particular detectives in large urban centers of the various networks’ domains: Munich, Duisburg, Berlin, Hamburg, Leipzig, or Vienna, for instance. The networks may submit only a limited number of episodes per year, with the number contributed dependent on the size of the specific regional affiliates. Thus, the WDR (*Westdeutscher Rundfunk*), as the largest, was the major contributor — at least in the 1980s. Recently the scope of the program has been expanded to include Switzerland and Austria and the new east German networks, so production quota distribution has surely changed. Because it is not a monolithic production with a steady team of writers and producers (or actors for that matter), the program offers a diversity otherwise non-existent in German series television programming.

My engagement with the series grows out of a long-standing interest in questions of political aesthetics and aesthetic strategies, and in particular in aesthetic objects accessible to large-scale audiences. *Tatort* has been one of the longest-running and most popular crime series in the German context: in 1994 the show celebrated its 300th episode, which

means that it has been on the air for roughly 30 years. Before cable television made its way to Germany, *Tatort* could claim that 70 percent of television viewers tuned in to the monthly production. Even after cable expansion, it continues to draw substantial segments of the viewing public. According to *Der Spiegel*, *Tatort*'s audience percentage lay around 20 percent as of October 1994.³ And in addition to its audience share and the spectrum of material the show offers, *Tatort* is significant because of what I would call a re-evaluation and restructuring of the WDR-*Tatort* in the late 1970s and early 1980s,⁴ which resulted in its thematic turn to topics of current political relevance. This tendency has since spread to the other regional networks involved in the production of *Tatort*, and in fact to German television series generally.

One advantage of the *Tatort* production structure is that regional productions can grapple with political and social issues of particular relevance to their region, heightening the diversity of perspectives the series as a whole offers the television audience. Thus, MDR (*Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk*), one of the new eastern German networks, for example, has repeatedly treated issues arising from the unification process and the confrontation with the history of the East German state. In the early 1980s the popular Detective Schimanski from Duisburg introduced German audiences to the industrial flavor of the Ruhr region. The show's producers accomplished this through visual means, with repeated shots of huge factories spewing forth clouds of grey smoke, and by means of a whole host of characters from Schimanski's working-class background. One could also safely say that pre-Schimanski cop shows seldom probed the city's seamier underside and back alleys so exhaustively. The Hamburg-based *Tatort* of the late 1980s and early 1990s, as a final example, often thematized ethnic conflicts in the region, which has a large Kurdish population. Each program develops and highlights in various ways the regional characteristics of its focus city. Furthermore, the series as a whole also reflects the regional structure of the ARD, which is constituted of several local broadcasting stations, each of which has a specific and independent regional identity in addition to being part of the larger national network. At least to some extent, then, the series fulfills German public broadcasting's task of equal representation.

3. *Der Spiegel* (24 Oct. 1994): 238.

4. This was particularly true of the WDR-*Tatort* in this period, when Götz George was still playing the role of the exceedingly popular Kommissar Horst Schimanski.

Although “cultural” programs designed to cover more intellectually challenging issues have long addressed political questions, German television series intended to reach a wider audience and to offer palatable amusement have only relatively recently begun to focus on important current issues in public discourse. The trend toward a greater integration of explicitly political material in generic programming is both encouraging and intriguing. At the very least, this development has made the programs more interesting (a counter-example during the period covered here would be the dreadfully dull crime series “Derrick,” which seems to have been created and produced in a historical vacuum). But it raises numerous larger questions, too, about the character of political representation within mainstream German television programming.

This article analyzes two aspects of the *Tatort* series, both of which relate to the televisual mediation of political reality to the German public. The first part of the article advances a limited historical argument with regard to the series’ portrayal of “the foreigner” in German society from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, and how the changing role of immigrants in Germany reflected a concomitant change in German television producers’ awareness of different ethnic and national groups over the last two decades. The second part represents an initial attempt to describe in more theoretical terms how *Tatort* represents political reality, and what the consequences of such representation are or could be.

I. The Foreign Presence in Tatort

Although fluctuating throughout the centuries, the numbers of immigrants in Germany have always been great enough to create a “*foreign*” presence in “German” society. Currently more than seven million non-citizens live within the German borders. By far the majority of foreign nationals has legal-residence status. Their presence in Germany has resulted from historical developments in the postwar German economy.

From the mid- to late 1950s, West Germany actively recruited workers from various countries to its south (Greece, Turkey, Italy). Tremendous labor shortages in a booming West German economy made immigrant labor essential to Germany’s continued productivity (even today immigrants contribute at least 10 percent to the German gross national product). With the oil crisis of the early 1970s, and the growing threat of recession, the German government put a stop to the import of foreign labor in 1973. From this point on the only means for a worker from out-

side the European Union to gain entry into the German labor market was through the asylum process. The late 1970s marked the gradual and then rapid increase in the number of people seeking asylum in Germany.

The late 1970s also witnessed the first large migration waves into Germany by refugees from third world countries. Until then, the right to asylum had mainly been claimed by people fleeing the states of the communist bloc, i.e., fellow Europeans or, at the very least, fellow *whites*. These new *masses* of refugees, however, no longer *racially*, politically or culturally resembled the *native* German population.

The inadequate and insecure integration of the immigrant labor population and the reality of increasingly obvious ethnic differences in German society ignited what one could call a fast-burning fire. Although the incoming Kohl administration made some very well-publicized efforts to rid Germany of the growing refugee population, it was not until 1993 that the administration found a means to make at least the problem of refugees go away. The CDU government did not seriously attempt to create an environment in which the remaining and highly diverse ethnic and national groups could approach one another and potentially work toward establishing a common living space.⁵ Recent efforts in 1998 and 1999 by the new ruling coalition to ease dual-citizenship restrictions have been thwarted again by conservative fears of immigration.

However, beyond government policies and programs directed at the problems of the immigrant community, there have also been many attempts within the sphere of cultural production to come to terms with the changing character of German society, in a sense to co-create a public consciousness of Germany's *foreigners*. These efforts have not been limited to the realm of so-called high culture. The ARD's *Tatort* has run a number of episodes that incorporate and thematize issues relating to the position(ing) of the immigrant population.

Several *Tatort*-episodes from the early 1980s reflect the perceived increase in the numbers of immigrants in Germany, but I will comment only on a particular episode of the WDR-*Tatort*, before discussing how this facet of socio-political reality is mediated in the early 1990s. The 1984 episode entitled "Zweierlei Blut"⁶ ["Two Kinds of Blood"] offers us the opportunity to examine both the apparent level of awareness and

5. See for example Heiko Körner and Ursula Mehrländer, eds., *Die neue Ausländerpolitik in Europa* (Bonn: neue Gesellschaft, 1986), and Ursula Münch, *Asylpolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1992).

integration of immigrants in West Germany in the period immediately after the *Tendenzwende*⁷ in Bonn politics, as well as to discuss what could be at stake in the aesthetic strategies of the production itself.

The basic story is as follows. Detective Schimanski⁸ and his partner Thanner are assigned to investigate the death of an Italian immigrant, who was apparently murdered at a stadium during a soccer match. Initially, the prime suspect is a young man who is the son of the Italian's German lover and a member of a "Rocker" group, primarily characterized as violent fans of the MSV-Duisburg, the local soccer team. The suspect goes into hiding, which gives the detectives enough air time to discover that the murderer was actually the manager of the stadium. The Italian, who had been channeling illegal foreign labor for German industry through the stadium manager, had tried to use his knowledge to blackmail the stadium manager and apparently other Germans involved in this black market as well.

Although the plot is set in motion by the murder of an Italian immigrant, and the motive for the murder is the illegal import of foreign labor into the Germany economy, the writers chose not to endow a single foreign character in the episode with a speaking part. In addition to the body of the dead Italian, the audience sees groups of male foreign laborers collecting garbage at the stadium, and another group, primarily women with the now familiar head scarves,⁹ tending fires, laundry, and minute garden plots behind a dismally large industrial complex. These characters receive little more than curious or distracted glances from the German policemen; they seem to function as *props*, mere objects within the scenery.

6. "Zweierlei Blut," written by Felix Huby and Fred Breinersdorfer and directed by Hajo Gies. I am grateful to the WDR archives for allowing me access to a production copy of this episode.

7. In this context this term denotes a political swing to the right in the Federal Republic in the early 1980s.

8. Schimanski was probably the most loved, or at least most popular detective in the entire *Tatort* series. The character of the anti-intellectual, disheveled, rebellious, working-class detective and his investigations into the lower reaches of Duisburg's society added a whole new array of themes and characters to the show. After reviewing *Tatort* episodes from a 25-year time span, the conclusion is almost unavoidable that this particular character, portrayed by this particular actor radically changed the content and form of *Tatort* productions.

9. The head scarves were part of the cliché of how *foreigners* in Germany looked at the time. The head scarf became a symbol for Turkish nationals living in Europe, but is not necessarily a part of the ethnic image of Italian women in Germany. On television's rather unique ability to take a specific iconic sign and generalize it to produce a broader significance, see Fiske and Hartley 52.

The viewers' impression of the *foreigner* as stage prop is heightened by the episode's clear attempts to put a discreet distance between the German *good guys*, Schimanski and Thanner, and the few figures who actually have, or did have a relationship to the dead man or to other immigrants. Thanner expresses a certain amount of disbelief and disapproval toward the Italian's German lover, when he finds out that she actually lived with Tonio. Later, when asked by the stadium manager if he has had any contact with Turkish laborers, Thanner responds "Nein, mir reichen die Holländer" ["No, the Dutch are enough for me"]. Although Thanner makes this remark with an apparent, but dry self-irony, the overall tone of the episode lends credibility to the assumption that he not only does not want any contact with foreigners from Mediterranean and Near Eastern countries, he seems to find even fellow northern Europeans irksome.

One final example of how the writers actively sought to create a respectable distance between the officers and Germany's immigrant population is a scene in which Schimanski, who has spent the afternoon babysitting the daughter of an Asian friend, takes the little girl with him to the criminal courts building to speak to a state prosecutor from the division of economic crimes. The prosecutor asks Schimanski if the girl is his daughter, and Schimanski responds in a surprised and slightly annoyed tone: "Nein, sehe ich so aus?!" (Although the phrase can be a relatively harmless "No, do I look like that?!" it is also often used in an indignant way: "No, what do you take me for?!") It is one thing to lend a helping hand occasionally, but quite another to have familial ties to *foreigners*.

In what would seem an effort to ensure that the public not confuse the loyalties of this crime-solving team, the writers designed the plot to focus primarily on Schimanski's problematic personal and professional relationship with the band of violent German soccer fans. In their dress, language, and behavior these youth clearly display right-wing extremist tendencies, and yet the main force of the case is directed toward proving that they are not in fact the guilty ones, but rather just an overly zealous group of young German soccer fans.

Schimanski, who is revealed to be an enthusiastic soccer fan himself, infiltrates the group as just a "regular guy." Although the club eventually beats him almost to death and leaves him lying naked and bleeding in the center of the soccer field, one of the gang members, the younger

brother of the prime suspect, manages to give Schimanski an earnest lecture on the values of fairness and loyalty, revealing the “civilized” core of the decidedly uncivil rowdies.¹⁰ And, in fact, the conclusion is compelling in that the only reason Schimanski is beaten by the club members is for his deception. Although perhaps entirely unintentional, the structure of the plot and the description and position of this character constellation (i.e., the soccer rowdies) within it in effect manages to redeem a socio-politically very problematic group.

The title of the episode reinforces this conclusion. “Zweierlei Blut” literally refers to the fact that the blood found on the murder victim is not his own. This leads Thanner to suspect the young soccer fan, Kurti, of murder, as the latter is first seen in a bar with a conspicuous bandage on his arm. The issue of two blood types of course turns out to be a red herring. Even though Kurti and the Italian fought at the stadium, it was Tonio who wounded Kurti. The stadium manager then seizes the initiative and uses the cover of the fight to make sure that Tonio does not survive a fall down the stairs. Thus, even though the title superficially refers simply to another clue in the case, the combination of the episode’s portrayal of immigrants and the soccer fans, as well as the ideological and physical distance established between the police and the community of foreign laborers opens up the possibility of a different reading.

In the final moments of the story, Thanner manages to locate Kurti’s hiding place, only to discover that the boy is seriously ill from an infection caused by neglect of the knife wound. While he still stubbornly insists that Kurti is the murderer and on this basis tries to bully a confession from the boy, Schimanski has already figured out the stadium manager’s role in the crime. Ultimately the audience comes to perceive Kurti as three-fold victim: the victim of the intrusive Italian, the victim of the German who has illegally been consorting with foreign immigrants, and of the German police, who have taken a full 90 minutes to realize the innocence of the young soccer fan. On a subtextual level, then, the title underscores the dissimilarities between the blood of the

10. This is a revealing scene. After Thanner and Schimanski have an argument at the opening of the episode, Schimanski storms off. The audience next sees Thanner dawdling about the apartment distractedly whistling the German national anthem, when he suddenly sees Schimanski’s face on the television screen exuberantly cheering on the MSV. The scene gives the viewer absolutely no reason to question critically the juxtaposition of the two men’s activities, and given the outcome of the episode, viewers could certainly reach the conclusion that there is nothing negative in the combination to criticize.

criminal foreigner, along with those who fraternize with him, and that of the true victim of the foreigner's presence – the patriotic, if somewhat aggressive, German soccer fan.

It seems highly unlikely to me that this reading would be sanctioned by either the show's authors or its producers, so one must ask oneself why such an interpretation is so tantalizingly obvious. It is this question that I will address in the final section of the paper. At this point I am more interested in examining the differences between the portrayal of the *foreigner* as a somewhat malicious backdrop in 1984 and the integration of the immigrant in 1991. These differences reveal the remarkable changes in the general public's awareness of ethnic and national diversity in German society that have occurred in such a short time-span.

In January 1991, a BR (*Bayerischer Rundfunk*) episode of *Tatort* entitled "Animals"¹¹ launched the careers of two new Munich Detectives, Ivo Batic and Franz Leitmayr. The episode's more explicitly political moves are twofold: one is marginally, the other manifestly intentional. The first is the program's attempt to create a broader portrayal of German society, to incorporate otherwise peripheral societal groups, while at the same time attempting to maintain its current audience. The most overt of these elements is Batic himself, a former Yugoslavian national. The second is the issue of experiments on and cruelty to animals for the sake of consumer culture. I will return to this aspect of the program in the second half of the paper.

The production background of the episode is as follows. Bavarian television studios had recently had little success with their detectives and the new crime-solving duo of Ivo Batic (played by Miroslav Nemec) and Franz Leitmayr (portrayed by Udo Wachtveitl) represented the efforts of the ARD to salvage Munich as a haven for television justice. In choosing to bestow the city of Munich with German television's first Yugoslavian detective, the producers would seem to have made a bold and impressive programming decision, and one should definitely not underestimate the importance of this move.¹²

11. "Animals," written by Max Zihlmann and Veith von Fürstenberg and directed by Walter Bannert.

12. Fiske and Hartley offer a somewhat different explanation for such efforts to insure that the television community includes as many people as possible. They refer to this as *claw back*, which they see as part of television's "bardic" role: "It is to draw into its own central position both the audience with which it communicates and the reality to which it refers." Fiske and Hartley 86f.

Before I proceed with my arguments, let me briefly describe the story in question. A certain Herr Pelzer owns a cosmetics manufacturing company which performs ghastly experiments on animals, supposedly in order to determine the safety of the firm's products for use on humans. One of the company's former models, a passionate animal rights activist, cannot abide the company's practices. She goes to Batic to engage his assistance on the advice of another model, who happens to be Batic's former lover and the current lover of Pelzer. When Detectives Batic and Leitmayr inform her that the problem lies outside their jurisdiction, she decides to take justice into her own hands. She and a photographer break into the cosmetics plant at night to release the animals being held captive there and to document the inhumane conditions in which the animals are kept. Pelzer, who is still at work, walks from his office to his car with his attack dog. When he hears someone inside the plant, he releases the dog and sends it off to find the intruder. Naturally, he is much dismayed a few moments later to find that the dog has actually killed his former model. Meanwhile, the photographer takes pictures of Pelzer kneeling over the body with the dog at his side. Pelzer shoots the dog and dumps the woman's body at a secluded spot along the Isar.

While Batic and Leitmayr try to unravel the murder, the photographer and the model's last lover attempt to blackmail Pelzer with the photographs. This all culminates in a final showdown in a rural area near Munich in which the photographer is beaten, the model's lover killed, and Pelzer wounded. As the show ends, Pelzer and his lover are sped off in an ambulance, Leitmayr leaves for a ski-weekend with his girlfriend, and Batic is left to gaze philosophically at the dissipating chaos of the crime scene.

Aside from the familiar trappings of most crime series (a high-ranking policeman, a murder, an array of colorful characters, a chase scene and confrontation), the Munich *Tatort* introduces new elements that are clearly designed to expand the show's constituency. Perhaps the most notable innovation is the fact that Detective Batic is Yugoslavian (Croatian specifically). My reading of the show is that Batic's national origin is an acknowledgment of the ethnic and national plurality in contemporary German society, and thus represents an effort to address the changing character of that society.

However, the program also pursues other strategies in order to create and broaden its constituency. It attempts to reach the German yuppie

audience through the two stylish and hip leading men, but it also takes the occasional swipe at Munich's extremely wealthy circles (most readily apparent in Leitmayr's problematic relationship to his very wealthy girlfriend and her friends) so as not to alienate any of its less conspicuously well-to-do constituent groups. At all of the appropriate moments (car chase, close-ups of the detective in an emotionally trying situation, etc.), popular rock music accompanies the video, and the show ends not with the familiar, but dated, *Tatort* theme, but with a slick, melancholy love ballad. The slightly disheveled, Croatian-German detective in his tastefully and eclectically decorated apartment was likely to be a success with German television viewers.

While "Zweierlei Blut" indicates a burgeoning awareness of the increased ethnic diversity on the part of the show's producers, the portrayal of *foreign* elements does not extend further than mere visual citation. In the creation of the Yugoslav detective, the Munich *Tatort* has gone well beyond the work of their WDR predecessors. Although the problems of the *Gastarbeiter* in Germany have most certainly been thematized in various cultural media, it was exceptional when Batic was introduced to see an individual of *foreign*, indeed, of Slavic origin portrayed in a position of such importance in German bureaucracy.

Such acknowledgment and acceptance of ethnic diversity in popular culture, however, goes only so far, and the new *Tatort* is no exception. Batic may have been born in Yugoslavia, but he is now a German citizen. His blue eyes and his impeccable German — with his equally impeccable Bavarian accent — clearly distinguish him from the greater number of foreign nationals in Germany who are, of course, busy committing the crimes Batic must then solve. The conventional wisdom of *Tatort*'s producers seems to be that the German public will tolerate social plurality only insofar as the *foreigner* has successfully completed the process of social integration or is actively attempting to do so.¹³

In fact, in a 1993 episode entitled "Kainsmale" ["The Mark of Cain"], a secondary plot line involves the visit of Batic's two aunts from the former Yugoslavia. The portrayal of the two women clearly distinguishes between the Slav who is already *civilized* by German culture and the socially and culturally *inferior* Slavs who are in Germany to

13. I must note that as this character has developed since his first appearances as the Bavarian detective, more extensive and nuanced use has been made of his ethnic and cultural background than was initially the case, although always under the premise that his *Germanness* overrides his *Slavicness*.

escape — if only briefly — the terrors of civil war. One of the aunts is overweight, tackily dressed, oddly coifed and over made-up. The audience sees her eating a greasy *Wurst*, dishing out home-spun folklore to Leitmayr, and, finally, displaying — at least judging by Batic's reaction — excessive emotion in a public place. The other aunt is a cowed and dowdy figure who is not allowed to speak at all. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that — family ties or no family ties — Batic is relieved to put his now very distant relatives back on the bus and return to his circle of familiar German faces.

Another relevant episode has Batic and Leitmayr attempting to smoke out the Chinese underworld from Munich's streets. This not only calls attention to a segment of the city's population of which most of its citizens are probably unaware, it also underscores the image of Batic as the *good* foreigner who will rid Munich of the much more numerous and more dangerous *bad* foreigners.¹⁴ Again, the character of Batic may be a tribute to the producers' willingness to acknowledge the ethnic diversity of today's Germany, but it comes at the price of reducing the non-German aspects of this character to secondary, albeit colorful personal quirks. "Ethnicity" (however, problematic the term) is allowed only insofar as it does not go beyond this secondary, well-circumscribed limit.

A Viennese *Tatort*-production will be my final example of how the program's various branches address the reality of social diversity. The episode in question is from 1992 and is entitled "Kinderspiel" ["Child's Play"].¹⁵ In this episode Detectives Fichtl and Susi Kern are thrust into a story very reminiscent of Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. While showing the Prater to an American police investigator, who just happens to specialize in youth criminality, Detective Kern is attacked by a band of very young Hungarian pickpockets. When she grabs hold of one of the boys, another stabs her with what he claims is an AIDS-infected syringe. For the rest of the episode, Kern is placed on sick leave and so strikes off on her own rather unconventional investigation to find this boy, while Fichtl and the American carry on the official investigation.

14. "Die chinesische Methode," written by Volker Maria Arend and Andreas Missler-Morell, directed by Maria Knilli. An interesting aside here is that press reviews of this episode varied tremendously over the potentially xenophobic overtones of the plot. See for example Peter Hoff, "China-Town an der Isar-Metropole," *Neues Deutschland* 12 Nov. 1991; *Die Welt* 12 Nov. 1991; Uta-Maria Heim, *Tagesspiegel* 12 Nov. 1991; Rosemarie Böls, *Frankfurter Rundschau* 12 Nov. 1991; and Manfred Riepe, "Zierfisch Mafia" *die tageszeitung* 11 Nov. 1991.

15. "Kinderspiel," written by Peter Zingler and directed by Oliver Hischbiegel.

Eventually Kern essentially kidnaps one of the boys, who is also the best friend of the one who stabbed her. With “tough love” she wins over this hardened delinquent, and he agrees to take her to the orphanage in Budapest to which the other, Istvan, has been returned as punishment for threatening to expose the Austrian boss of the thievery operation. During the course of the trip, as Susi learns the hardships these young boys have had to face in their short lives, she grows very fond of the boy in her charge, Jule, and even hints that she may wish to adopt him.

In the final dramatic scene, Jule, Susi Kern, Fichtl and the American race frantically to reach Istvan before one of the Austrian’s hired henchmen silences him. Istvan literally slips through Fichtl’s hands and falls to his death. Naturally, before he actually dies, Istvan says to Kern: “Don’t worry, the needle was clean.” Detective Kern and Jule walk off to be alone with their grief, while the others tend to the remaining details.

Although the program obviously tries to humanize the bands of Eastern European and gypsy youth that were causing a great stir in Vienna in the early 1990s, the portrayal of the gypsies and the Hungarian youth is throughout at cross-purposes with such a humanizing intent. Both the gang’s aged gypsy boss as well as the Hungarian “priest” who supposedly runs the orphanage in Budapest are portrayed as nothing but the crassest clichés. The gypsy boss is colorfully dressed, disheveled, and unkempt, while his wife (or companion) appears wrapped in long flowing scarves, and other garments stereotypically associated with gypsy culture. The “priest” is perpetually drunk, often shown passed out with his pants zipper open, a pornographic magazine on his lap, and dozens of empty beer bottles scattered around him on the floor.

Even though the episode reveals the desperate circumstances that led these boys to a life of crime, they too remain in their group identity a roving, *foreign* threat to the staid and civilized old-world ambiance of Vienna. This image of the boys is particularly tenacious, inasmuch as the viewing audience is aware that such groups do in fact exist, and do in fact disturb the quiet of many European streets. Moreover, the opening story line of the AIDS-infected syringe, whether intentional or not, must on some level conflate two issues in the public consciousness, increasing the threat these *foreigners* pose: not only are they vicious little thieves, they also carry the plague — and this, naturally, from east to west. Given the political rhetoric and general public frenzy over the presence of immigrants in western Europe of the early 1990s, especially

the proposed measures to contain the migration of gypsy populations, this conflation becomes even more pernicious.

Despite the fact that those actually responsible for the activities of the gang depicted in the episode are Austrians, the latter are not the central focus of the program. In addition, the Austrian ring-leader is portrayed by an actor who is not only obese, but marked as *slimy* – right down to his slick-backed hair. In choosing these characteristics for this figure, the show's writers and director have made it ultimately apparent to the audience that even the Austrian criminal has something odd, excessive, or *abnormal* about him.

The script's suggestion that the Austrian policewoman will adopt Jule, rescuing him from the harrowing ordeal of his Hungarian past, and thus also redeeming him from a life of crime, supports my opening assertion that this particular *Tatort* episode allows for divergent ethnic identity effectively only to the extent that the hegemonic culture can erase it. Whereas Detective Batic of Munich is allowed to retain elements of his non-German identity as long as they do not interfere with his assumed German identity, ethnicity in this production is acceptable only after it has been completely reconfigured for the Austrian *Tatort* cast. As German-ness has historically been determined primarily through the mother, the only female detective in the group has to be the one to suffer from the theft-related attack and then to raise the issue of adoption. As a mother, she would re-naturalize the Hungarian youth she is considering adopting. Only that separation from his previous *foreign* identity can insure that he does not remain entangled in the criminal underworld. Istvan, with no one to sponsor him, has to die to be redeemed, and the other boys are locked within the confines of their Eastern European criminality as the Austrian police have no jurisdiction in Budapest, and hence, essentially cannot touch the operation. What is left of multi-culturalism, then, is a de-nationalized, de-ethnicized image of global childhood innocence.

When read together or against each other, the three episodes evince different levels in the perception of the *foreign* presence in German (and Austrian) society, and imply different ways of addressing this presence. Social awareness of ethnic and national diversity in Germany in the early 1980s, that is to say, in the early Kohl years, was nothing more than an awareness; immigrant laborers were there and thus had to be part of a realist depiction of the urban landscape. After almost a decade

of increasing and at times passionate public debate on the issue of asylum seekers and other immigrants in Germany and, for that matter, in Austria, the two episodes from 1991 and 1992 demonstrate not only a heightened awareness of ethnic diversity, but also different efforts to come to terms with that diversity. That these efforts are extremely problematic in their political implications brings me to the question of aesthetic strategies in television production.

II. Aesthetic Strategy and the Mediation of the Political

The representation of the *foreigner* in the three examples I have discussed would tend to affirm the popular thesis that television does nothing but regurgitate and manufacture hegemonic ideology. And, ultimately, that may be exactly what these programs do. Of more immediate interest for the present investigation, however, is the question of how this can happen, given the obvious efforts of *Tatort*'s writers and producers precisely to avoid perpetuating oppressive readings of social reality.

One can certainly see the liberal or even left-leaning intentions in the stories of the three episodes. In "Zweierlei Blut" the writers set out to expose the illegal use of immigrant labor in the German economy, and they are, after all, intent on solving the murder of a foreign national. In "Animals," and more generally in the BR's choice of a Yugoslavian detective, the producers advance the proposition that there are individuals of *foreign* descent in Germany who not only warrant respect, but who are also capable of protecting and serving German society. Finally, the Austrian production "Kinderspiel" makes a real effort to create a more nuanced picture of gypsy and Eastern European youth, with the obvious intent of reducing the public's perception of an Eastern European threat to Viennese (and/or western European) society.

It is, however, just as apparent that there are elements within the production of these programs that not only thwart such *progressive* efforts, but in fact negate them. John Fiske and John Hartley would assert that such inner contradictions are part and parcel of a medium that is torn between its *oral* character and the *literate* conditioning of the writers and producers. For Fiske and Hartley, such contradictions appear as a logical consequence of television's attempts both to "assure the culture at large of its practical adequacy in the world by affirming and confirming its ideologies" and to "expose . . . any practical inadequacies in the culture's sense of itself which might result from changed conditions in the world out-there, or from pressure within the culture for a reorientation in

favour of a new ideological stance.”¹⁶ Although I run the risk of falling prey myself to evaluating television according to “literate” versus “oral” criteria, my theoretical suspicions at this point are that this confusion is ultimately an aesthetic issue, and more specifically a question of certain strategic composition choices. They may be inextricably linked to the nature of television production, but they are not necessarily inevitable.

There have been manifold attempts to theorize and to practice a political aesthetic throughout the last 150 years. Upon recently re-reading Peter Bürger’s *Theorie der Avantgarde*, this text’s implications for the question of politically engaged aesthetic practices struck me as particularly intriguing. My interest owed not so much to Bürger’s description of avant-garde art, but rather to his willingness to look at art from a functional, analytical perspective, rather than from a proscriptive interpretive framework that would dismiss television production out of hand as aesthetically regressive.¹⁷ In his conclusion to the book, Bürger argues, on the one hand, that the political engagement of an “organic” work of art must form its unifying principle in order not to destroy the structure and coherence of the work as a whole. He sees, on the other hand, “non-organic” (or non-representational) works of art, whose structure is determined by the strategy of montage, as opening up possibilities of political expression that do not require the subordination of the political to the work as a whole. The structure of such artworks allows discrete elements within the work to function singly as well as mediated through the work as a whole.

Bürger speaks of montage as a principle inherent to film, which either “recreates” realist or naturalist images, or which can be used consciously to disturb such realist images or to create ones that are contrary to empirical perception.¹⁸ Whichever strategy is chosen, however, it does not alter the fact that the filmic medium has no choice but to work through montage. This obviously applies to television as well, since it too is essentially a filmic medium.¹⁹ The inevitability of television production as “*montiert*” raises a whole wealth of other questions pertinent to the topic of a political aesthetic.

I will try to flesh out this problem by turning back to the other plot

16. Fiske and Hartley 88. See also 124f and 159-70.

17. Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974) 117-33, in particular 125-27. Other theorists would, of course, also be pertinent here, but my own ideas arose from thinking through Bürger’s work in this context.

18. Bürger 99.

19. With certain fundamental differences, which Fiske and Hartley point out repeatedly. See for instance Fiske and Hartley 123f.

line in the *Tatort* episode "Animals." What intrigued me initially in this story was not just the choice of an immigrant for police detective, but also the show's incorporation of a contemporary political topic. The question is what function these issues assume in the program. It is my contention that the political debate on the necessity of live animal experiments as well as the presence of a *foreign* character in the episode serve two purposes. In terms of this specific production they become merely one more tool with which to expand and cement the viewer base and to create a visual and ideological space within which the new detective can establish a television identity. In terms of cultural production as a whole they serve the purpose of defusing political activism and conflict and of promoting social stability.

The very limited scope of the issue at hand is itself revealing. The script writers chose not to address the issue of *medical* research on animals, but rather to restrict the topic to animal experiments in the cosmetics industry, an issue area in which a larger number of viewers would certainly be willing to question the necessity of such experiments. A graphic video showing the torture of animals at the hands of researchers provides just the sensationalist documentary material needed to appeal to the sentiments of the hypothetical average television viewer. Whenever the writers could legitimately do so, they show Batic holding an animal, petting it, comforting it. This rather minor descriptive device functions to convey visually to the audience that Batic is a *good guy*, that he too loves animals and would be loathe to see them needlessly tortured.

And yet, the program never exceeds the boundaries of general public acceptance. It never challenges the audience, nor does it assert a determined position on the issue itself. At one point in the show Batic forces his former lover, the one who is now involved with Pelzer, to view the above-mentioned video tape (and thus forces the *Tatort* audience to do so as well). She is so moved by what she sees that she quite literally collapses in front of the television screen. It is, however, only a fleeting moment of compassion. The very next day she returns to Pelzer to pursue her goal of becoming the company's next model.

This should, one would think, incense both the detective and the audience, but Batic, the epitome of social tolerance, virtually pleads with this woman at the end of the show — as she is climbing into the ambulance to be with Pelzer — to turn to him if she should need anything at all. Detective Batic demonstrates that compassion for one's fellow human beings overrides any political position an individual might have.

Ultimately he functions to reconcile the opposing factions, a role he can assume because his potentially threatening ethnic *otherness* has been neutralized. This last conciliatory move exposes the political conflict at the center of the plot to be itself only an integrative device. The show's position on the subject of animal experiments goes only as far as most of its constituents would and abandons even that position in the name of avoiding any disruptive social friction.

Fiske and Hartley's concept of "claw back" casts an intriguing light on this movement. In *Reading Television* they write:

If a subject *cannot* be clawed back into a socio-central position the audience is left with the conclusion that some point in their culture's response to reality is inadequate. The effect is to show, by means of this observed inadequacy, that some modification in attitudes or ideology will be required to meet the changed circumstances.²⁰

In this episode, however, everything and just about everyone is "clawed back" into the communal fold. I would in fact argue that Batic's refusal to push this woman away emphasizes his ability as a character to bring things and people together, to fill in whatever spaces might have opened up for socio-critical self-reflection. Rather than drawing the audience's attention to an inadequacy in this society's treatment of animals, the episode can easily function merely to reassure viewers with the fact that no one is "left out."

Conceivably, the writers of "Animals" could have written an episode that was predominantly about the topic of live animal experiments in scientific research. Instead, the political issue here — as in the other episodes examined above — becomes merely another tool within an integrative, synthetic production strategy. Repeatedly, facets of current political topics which could antagonize the audience and perhaps serve a socially critical function are generally either bypassed for less divisive topics or are restricted to such a great extent that their portrayal in the public media could not possibly alienate any member of the viewing audience. This is not to say that these particular shows or even television in general are not and never can be socially critical. However, particularly given the characteristic institutional constraints on this kind of television production, political topics, especially ones which lend themselves to sensationalism, are easily defused as *political* issues and

20. Fiske and Hartley 87.

thus reduced to the status of aesthetic means.

The very fact that television — to a certain extent in contradistinction to cinema — is so dependent upon both audience approval and audience popularity would seem to necessitate a restriction of overtly partisan material. One could even venture to say that television production is subject to the same dialectic of tolerance as are representative democracies. That having been said, should television producers or writers of popular television programs wish to make their work participate consciously in public, political discourse, they have to take into consideration various aesthetic questions.²¹

Neither the *Tatort* series in general, nor the “Animals” episode in particular are *about* the abuse of animals in the culture industry. What they are is entertainment. There is, of course, nothing “politically incorrect” about entertainment per se. Even Bertolt Brecht, the champion of a politically engaged and activist aesthetic practice, believed that the primary function of his medium, the theater, was entertainment.²² Furthermore, if, as Bürger suggests, individual elements of a montage can function in some sense independently of the work in its entirety, then a television program would not have to focus exclusively on its political expression in order for that moment to be politically effective.²³

However, the fact that they *can* function individually ignores the fact that they are also always mediated through the work as a whole. It is, I believe, due to this circumstance that the overtly liberal political elements of the *Tatort* episodes discussed here and their attempts to generate a more nuanced, even positive public image of Germany’s *foreigners* ultimately only serve to engrain prejudice. Perhaps because of the time

21. Fiske and Hartley would disagree here with the assertion that “producers” of television “products” can play such a conscious role in the structuring of public consciousness. They write, also citing S. Hall: “The people who are responsible for what we call ‘production’ of output mediate the messages but they do not *originate* them. They ‘draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, ‘definitions of the situation’ from the wider socio-cultural and political system, and so they cannot constitute a ‘closed system.’ . . . Thus we can say that there is not single ‘authorial’ identity for the television communicator.” The way they operationalize the term “authorial” here would imply that there is ultimately no such thing as “authorial” identity, for why should the work of a novelist who mediates the culturally recognizable form of language in a novel be so vastly different from a television script writer? When they argue that “culture communicates *with itself*” via the mediation of television, they run the risk of taking television “producers” out of the circle of communicators. Fiske and Hartley 82f.

22. Bertolt Brecht, “Das Kleine Organon,” *Gesammelte Werke* 16 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1967) 663.

23. What exactly being “politically effective” would entail is a different question.

constraints inherent to open-ended series television production,²⁴ the producers rarely seem either to see their work as a whole or to be aware of the possible ramifications of the mediation of the individual elements with and through each other. (For instance, in the “Animals” scene discussed above, strategies of figure characterization seem to conflict with the political position the episode moves to take.) For this reason, the political elements of these shows are either reduced to being only one more means with which to create characters and stories, or they subvert themselves in their interaction with the whole.

Perhaps it would be useful to return to Bürger’s comments on the political in organic (or realist) works of art. He maintains that if an organic work of art is meant to be a political work, then the political must inform every facet of the work, rather than be just one of its many elements.²⁵ Given that most television series productions are created with a realist aesthetic strategy, Bürger’s comments could pertain to them as well. Applied to a fictional television program this would mean that the show’s producers would have to view the expressly political component of their work as its central moment and position the various (re)presentational elements around it.

A 1994 Munich *Tatort*-episode entitled “Klassenkampf” [“Class Wars”]²⁶ provides a solid example of how this can work. “Klassenkampf” follows the developments surrounding the death of a young student who had ties to right-wing extremist circles. As it turns out, he has actually been killed by a mild-mannered, anti-authoritarian teacher, who simply lost control when the student refused to stop taunting him. In the meantime, however, the student’s death has set in motion an escalating conflict between the right-wing extremists and a band of so-called *foreign* youths that the neo-Nazis suspect of having killed their comrade.

Conflicts and tensions in Germany caused by anti-*foreigner* sentiments in the population structure every aspect of the episode. The writers explore how far-reaching such xenophobic tendencies are, and how they

24. This is different from the mini-series, where the run is pre-determined, thus allowing the producers and writers to see each episode as part of a whole. I should stress at this point that I am referring only to mainstream television shows and not to the many multi-faceted and aesthetically ambitious German series that have sought and had considerable public impact. See Michael Geisler’s references in the introduction to this issue.

25. Bürger 125.

26. “Class Struggle” would be the traditional translation of this term from Marxist philosophy, but given the context of the episode, “warfare” seems a more apt metaphor. “Klassenkampf” was written and directed by Friedemann Fromm.

manifest themselves in the lives of individuals, even the lives of people who would seem to have no connection to these conflicts. They touch on the sources of xenophobia, on its effects on individual self-esteem, on the often unconscious recycling of xenophobic rhetoric by individuals who do not think of themselves as prejudiced, and on the construction of *foreign-ness* itself. Although the episode represents an ambitious attempt to shed light on these numerous constellations of issues, the writers never stray from the topic at hand, and do not attempt to address other problems current in public debate. In this way they have avoided the conflation of issues that can, as in "Kinderspiel," lead to a confusion or subversion of an episode's thrust. "Klassenkampf" makes an unambiguous statement about anti-*foreigner* sentiment and violence in Germany.

In contrast, when political expression is reduced to the status of tool or means within an overall strategy of integration and synthesis, the political itself is effectively neutralized. In this way, whatever the *Tatort* episodes "Zweierlei Blut," "Animals," and "Kinderspiel" might have contributed to public discourse on the questions they raise is overshadowed either by moments of self-contradiction, or by an expressly conciliatory stance. In other words, the way television mediates the political to the public is determined not solely by the homogenizing forces of the culture industry, but also by the aesthetic strategy of the work in question.²⁷

27. This does not rule out tendentiousness. Politically tendentious art – from anywhere on the political spectrum – can be effective, to the degree that institutional constraints allow. In fact, my entire presentation of the various treatments of both political issues and issues of national identity presupposes a certain kind of liberal or left-leaning ideology on the part of television producers. While the episodes I treat in the body of this article in themselves offer ample support for this assumption, there are other possible scenarios. For instance, the series writers and producers may in fact hold such political views, but not be interested in making a political statement in their programming, and are, instead, solely interested in using currently hot topics to draw in as broad a public as possible.

An alternative situation would be one in which an episode's writers or directors take a position on an issue that is more representative of conservative, even right-wing political agendas. This would be at least a plausible reading of a *Tatort* episode from 1998 called "Bildersturm," written by Robert Schwentke and Jan Hinter and directed by Niki Stein. It dealt with "Verbrannte Erde," the photo exhibit on crimes of the Wehrmacht which toured central Europe in 1998. Such episodes can be internally cohesive and potentially very persuasive. While this might lead to a modification of this article's central thesis, it would not change the fact that the thematization of political topics in television shows is much more effective when these topics constitute the central and centering focus of the program in question. The use of such a strategy does not, however, determine the political perspective from which a particular topic is presented.

Lukács and the Essay Form

Tom Huhn

There is a curious disjointedness between the first and last paragraphs of Lukács's introductory piece for the collection *Soul and Form*. It is a further curiosity that this "essay" on the essay, entitled "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" attempts, cunningly, to protect itself from further reflection and critique by having itself described not as an essay but as a letter to Leo Popper. What I want to explore is the nature of this disjoint. And what I hope to suggest is that the trajectory, so to speak, of this disjoint in Lukács's essay, recapitulates the disjoint trajectory of European aesthetics between Kant and Adorno. Lukács figures then as a crucial, though disjointed, link between Kant and Adorno, and this linkage, and its disjointedness, is clearly performed within "On the Nature and Form of the Essay."

Lukács writes in the opening paragraph of his essay:

For the point at issue for us now is not what these essays can offer as 'studies in literary history,' but whether there is something in them that makes them a new literary form of its own, and whether the principle that makes them such is the same in each one. What is this unity — if unity there is? . . . The question before us is a more important, more general one. It is the question whether such a unity is possible.¹

And Lukács concludes his essay with the following sentence: "The critique of this book is contained, in all possible sharpness and entirety,

1. Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1974) 1. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

in the very approach from which it sprang" (18). In short then, the disjoint of the essay consists of an opening search for unity conjoined with a concluding assertion that the totality of the book — all of the impulses of the book along with their critique — is already contained in the originary approach out of which the book sprang. Unity is prefigured not merely in the quest for — or critique of — unity but in whatever precedes that quest and critique. But the totality and unity asserted by Lukács here is importantly not Hegelian. It is instead the particular, idiosyncratic unity specific to the aesthetic. And it is in regard to the exact nature of this unity that I am concerned here.

Lukács's opening quest for unity is very quickly transformed into a question of identity. Lukács now asks after not what sort of unity the collected critical essays might have — indeed this is a question he considers relevant only to the misguided search for determining whether criticism is an art or science. He instead asserts that the "real question" is "what is an essay? What is its intended form of expression, and what are the ways and means whereby this expression is accomplished?" (1-2). Lukács's essay is no longer about the status of criticism but instead concerns the nature of the form in and according to which criticism appears. And further, by placing an emphasis on expression — what might be termed the dynamic aspect of critique — Lukács thereby continues his implicit critique of the static aspect of form.

But the essay takes yet another interesting turn at the end of its second paragraph:

But if I speak here of criticism as a form of art, I do so in the name of order (i.e., almost purely symbolically and non-essentially), and solely on the strength of my feeling that the essay has a form which separates it, with the rigour of a law, from all other art forms. I want to try and define the essay as strictly as possible, precisely by describing it as an art form. (2)

First let me comment on the curiosity of the qualifications offered by Lukács: he "speaks" "in the name of order" of criticism as a form of art. His further, parenthetical qualification is to write that this speaking of his in the name of order is symbolic and non-essential. Further still, he writes that he "speaks" of the essay as a form separate from all other art forms based "solely on the strength of my feeling." A Freudian might well describe this abundance of qualifications as over-determined. And

what, we might well ask, determines this over-determination?

It is perhaps Lukács himself who best answers this question two paragraphs later: "We are not concerned here with replacing something by something else, but with something essentially new, something that remains untouched by the complete or approximate attainment of scientific goals"(3).² In short, what concerns us is a particular breed of particularity, and it is the nature of this aesthetic particularity that determines Lukács's qualifications. That is, Lukács is searching here for some new figure or cipher of what might stand for aesthetic particularity.

The force of this particularity expresses itself in his determination to ceaselessly and repeatedly qualify his own assertions about the aesthetic, about the form of art. He cannot, for example, rest with merely having described the essay as an art form; he must instead repeat this particularizing gesture by differentiating the essay yet again from all other forms of art. So too his gesture toward his own "feeling" as the basis for his assertions about the essay is likewise a repetition of a particularizing dynamic. And Lukács points to himself, via this feeling of his, not so much out of the conviction that his particularity is some legitimating engine, but rather as an analogy in attempting to describe aesthetic form. That is, his particularity as an individual is the most ready-to-hand example of something that cannot be exchanged for something else, separate from everything else, but nonetheless has "the rigour of law."

This brings us, in two regards, directly back to Kant's efforts to characterize the aesthetic. That is, Lukács's looking toward himself for an allegory of the aesthetic form of the essay, of something outside himself, is a reiteration of Kant's claim that aesthetic judgment is both subjective and universal. The subjective universality of Kant's aesthetics is reiterated in Lukács's assertion of the "strength" and quasi-lawfulness of his own "feeling". But there is a further affinity between Lukács and Kant's gestures toward the aesthetic. And this affinity has to do with a particular mistake, indeed, a mistakenness so fundamental as to in fact be the originating moment of aesthetic judgment. I am referring to what in Kant's aesthetics is termed "objective subreption." And I want to suggest that objective subreption is the crucial, defining moment of the aesthetic and that it has too often been dismissed or ignored by Kant's

2. This sentiment is strikingly akin to Adorno's statement that "Since in reality everything stands under the spell of equality, of absolute interchangeability, everything in art must appear to be absolutely individual." Theodor W. Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia, Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992) 114.

commentators and by writers on the aesthetic in general. To Lukács's credit, his "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" appears precisely as an encounter with the problem of objective subreption, and further that this is what Adorno finds so valuable in the essay.

What then is objective subreption? It is deceptively simple, though its implications have yet to be fully grasped. Simply put: it is the misrecognition of some subjective state or quality as an object. That is, it is the moment in aesthetic judgment when something is judged beautiful. And according to Kant, this moment is characterized by mistaking some object for something subjective. Recall that aesthetic experience for Kant is the inner harmony of the faculties, and yet that harmony can only occur when the subject of it instead locates it outside herself. The constitutive moment of the aesthetic is thus a mistake, indeed a necessary mistake, for without this mistake there is no aesthetic judgment whatsoever.

If human beings were completely transparent to themselves, what they would say, according to Kant, in front of some artwork or landscape is something like the following: I am now experiencing a harmony of my inner faculties. But that experience can't be had nor that statement made, unless it is instead mistakenly taken to be an experience of an object. The human being thus says not "I am beautiful" but "That is beautiful." A perfectly lucid, transparent and self-knowledgeable human being would of course iterate the former. But it is precisely the opacity of human beings toward themselves which requires that the experience of that which is most human (or subjective) instead be displaced onto an object. It is thus no accident that things sometimes are beautiful. No accident, yet nonetheless thoroughly mistaken. In short, the constitutive moment of aesthetic experience — and might we not also say aesthetic judgment? — is misrecognition, the objective subreption whereby subjectivity loses (and sort of recovers) itself in something other. Finally, this experience is of course for Kant something universally subjective. This moment is after all also premised upon the possibility of a preexisting *sensus communis*, which is to say that this moment of mistaken subjectivity is at the same time a profoundly social moment.

Human subjectivity is thus in the aesthetic doubly mistaken: it mistakes an object for itself and it mistakes something social for something individual, particular, and personal. I believe that the gist of Kant's project in the third Critique is to reveal the constitutive nature of the concealment of both the subjective and the social in aesthetic judgment.

But to have successfully revealed these in the third Critique would thereby have been something like an impossible undoing of the entire dynamic of aesthetic judgment, indeed it would signal the undoing of aesthetic culture altogether.

It is in Kant's account of the sublime that we find evidence of the impossibility of laying bare and revealing the mistakenness central to aesthetic judgment. It is in the sublime that he gives what is in effect a diagram of the genesis of subjectivity, of human coming-into-being out of the experience of extracting pleasure from the internal domination of (the fear of) nature. Without offering a detailed account of the Kantian sublime, suffice it to say that for Kant the sublime presents the possibility of a self-generating subjectivity, a kind of vitalism that necessitates a certain concealment and opacity at its core such that a program of self-generation might be set in motion. (One might recall in this context Kant's remarks in his account of the sublime in regard to the distinction between civilization and barbarism, or his comment on the necessity of war for a healthy civilization).

And what relevance does this digression into Kant's aesthetics possibly have for what could be called Lukács's aesthetics of the essay? The answer, I believe, lies in the continuity between Kant and Lukács with regard to the shape of the failure within each of their aesthetics. I also want to argue, however, that Lukács puts forth the form of the essay as an attempted resolution to Kant's aesthetics. I will further try to show that it is in Adorno's response to Lukács that we find an important formulation of the nature of the failed aesthetic in Kant and Lukács.

First then, let us return to the opening impulse in Kant and Lukács: both begin with a quest for the unity of the aesthetic. And this quest might also be characterized as a search for the boundaries of the aesthetic, as a search for those principles which would produce the realm of the aesthetic as a unified totality, as something identifiable by dint of its having an identity. This characterization of the aesthetic next becomes for each of them the product of opposition and exclusion. For Kant aesthetic taste acquires its traits only in opposition to physical pleasure and/or intellectual interest. (Recall what Kant takes to be the dangers of charm and emotion for taste.) Aesthetic taste is not so much posited by Kant as it is rather the residue remaining after his having described all that it cannot be or take part in. Likewise, for Lukács the form of the essay cannot be like anything else, even other forms of art. While Kant

named those things and tendencies against which aesthetic taste is to be identified, Lukács dispenses altogether with the naming of particulars and instead simply insists on the dynamic of defining the essay form as necessarily in opposition to everything. He is thus a far more thorough — perhaps even too thorough — Kantian in his aesthetics of the essay.

Lukács's Kantianism is so thorough that it fails to provide him with the comfort Kant allowed himself in his own aesthetics: the comfort of judgment completing its circuit. Let me explain: Kant claims that it was his discovery, in 1787, of a faculty of judgment that propelled the writing of a third Critique. And what was perhaps most crucial about that discovery is that it allowed Kant to distinguish between two sorts of judgment: determinant and reflective. The former of course being judgment determined in cognition either by sensation or the concepts of the understanding, or more likely some combination thereof. Reflective judgment, however, is not determined at all. Indeed, we might instead say that it is self-determining, insofar as a reflective aesthetic judgment "determines" some object to be beautiful. In short, reflective judgment works in a direction opposite that of determinant judgment; it is an active, positing judgment rather than the vast majority of our judgments which are the passive judgments determined by cognition. Kant, in his aesthetics, was content to outline the dynamic of reflective judgment; so too can we imagine him satisfied with reflective judgment expressing and completing itself in the form of an objective subreption. That is, reflective judgment completes its circuit by "determining" a beautiful object.

But we cannot imagine a similar satisfaction for Lukács because the place from which he seeks the unity of the aesthetic is not simply, as it was in the case of Kant, the place of reflective judgment. It is instead the place in which reflective judgment is unsatisfied with itself — it is the place in which the judgments made by reflection are once again submitted to reflection. Kant's concern was judgments of taste, Lukács's concern, we might say, is making judgments upon taste; his reflective judgment is directed against reflective judgment. The comfort and solace Kant accords himself by locating the unity of aesthetic judgment within the determining, constituting act of reflection is simply not available to Lukács because the aesthetic form under scrutiny by Lukács is precisely judgment itself. Put differently: Kant succumbed to the comfort of subreption, even in the midst of diagnosing its dangers. Lukács, on the other hand, would like to succumb except that the form of the

essay prohibits him from allowing reflective judgment to forget itself in the determination of an object. The form of the essay is precisely a dialectical interchange with subreption. Put differently: the essay form is the locale where the post-Kantian subject/object dialectic exercises itself. Or, still differently: the technique of the essay makes it the most advanced form of contemporary subjectivity.

Lukács writes: “But in really profound criticism there is no life of things, no image, only transparency, only something that no image would be capable of expressing completely. An ‘imagelessness of all images’ is the aim of all mystics. . . .” (5) How tempting the fluidity and immediacy of transparency, and yet the irony of such a desire is that its fulfillment depends upon the obliteration of just those judgments which, to recall E. M. Forster’s great shibboleth, only connect. Lukács continues:

I shall go further: the separation of image and significance is itself an abstraction, for the significance is always wrapped in images and the reflection of a glow from beyond the image shines through every image. Every image belongs to our world and the joy of being in the world shines in its countenance; yet it also reminds us of something that was once there, at some time or another, a somewhere, its home, the only thing that, in the last analysis, has meaning and significance for the soul. Yes, in their naked purity they are merely abstractions, those two limits of human feeling, but only with the help of such abstractions can I define the two poles of possible literary expression. And the writings which most resolutely reject the image, which reach out most passionately for what lies behind the image, are the writings of the critics, the Platonists and the mystics. (5-6)

The essay, what we might well call the form of criticism, diligently remains dissatisfied with every image and bit of significance put forth as impediment to its restlessness. And yet the essay itself, insofar as it is the form of criticism, has already succumbed in some degree to just that complaisance with stasis, the comfort and distraction of image and meaning. The irony of the essay is its own dissatisfaction with itself. The essay not only “passionately” reaches for whatever may be behind the image, the essay is also passionately ambivalent about images, for those images are not only impediments but also just that which goads the search for imagelessness and transcendence. What Lukács calls the “countenance” of the image displays a reflection of the face of the world, and yet at the same time something from beyond that very world

“shines through every image.” Perhaps the essay is something like the intellectual’s vision of that too shiny countenance. The problem with the image, and perhaps likewise with the essay, is that they reflect too much. The problem for the essayist of the essay is how to distribute and dispose of the abundance of reflection.

The “form” of the essay is the tentative solution to this over-abundant reflection. The form is meant to contain and hold still the reflective judgment whose abundance has turned upon itself. The essay itself, if I may be allowed this locution, is something like rampant reflection, while its form is the equivalent of objective subreption — of the subjective dynamism of pure reflection momentarily halted in the misrecognition of itself as an object, in this case form — indeed, the form of reflection.

Lukács reformulates this dilemma regarding the form of reflection according now to the temporal figure of destiny:³

All writings represent the world in the symbolic terms of a destiny relationship; everywhere, the problem of destiny determines the problem of form. . . Therefore the separation which I am trying to accomplish here appears, in practice, merely as a shift of emphasis: poetry receives its profile and its form from destiny, and form in poetry appears always only as destiny; but in the works of the essayists form becomes destiny, it is the destiny-creating principle. (7)

It is, I want to argue, precisely here where the disjoint in the trajectory of aesthetic theory from Kant to Adorno is most apparent, for what Lukács attempts to accomplish with the temporal figure of destiny is a unification and totalization that aesthetic judgment ought to avoid:

The critic’s moment of destiny, therefore, is that moment at which things become forms — the moment when all feelings and experiences on the near or the far side of form receive form, are melted down and condensed into form. It is the mystical moment of union between the outer and the inner, between soul and form. (8)

With more time I would argue that what Lukács describes here as a moment of mystical union is best compared with what Kant calls the

3. For the argument regarding the figural nature of time, see Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd rev. ed. Intr. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983) 187-228.

“sacred thrill” in the experience of the sublime. But more important than the figures according to which pleasure is characterized in aesthetic judgment is the tendency of judgment itself. For Lukács that tendency, now described as destiny, points directly toward redemption and salvation: “This has shown, however, that salvation is necessary and is therefore becoming possible and real. The essayist must now become conscious of his own self, must find himself and build something of his own out of himself”(15). The disjoint is as follows: Lukács has lost completely just that aspect of aesthetic judgment which in Kant constituted these peculiar judgments: that they are made from the assumed though concealed — position of everyman. That is, precisely what distinguishes liking something from judging it beautiful is the presumption of a universal, disinterested liking. But Lukács discards this foundational, constitutive element and instead prescribes the self-discovery of the individual essayist. And from this salvation is to follow? It is thus no accident that Lukács fails to say just who or what is to receive salvation. In short, Lukács embraces the closure of aesthetic judgment in just that form — the essay — which also attempts to resist it. Near the end of his essay he seems poised to retract his embrace: “The essay is a judgement, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judging” (18).

Adorno’s strategy, if we might call it that, is to argue that central to the essay is just that disjointedness within aesthetic judgment that Lukács would have the essay redeem through a mystical union. The temporality of the essay, for Adorno, is not a trajectory that finds its goal and redemption in some sort of destiny, but rather seeks the opposite: to cut short and break off its continuity. The essay seeks self-effacement, not mystical resolution: “[The essay’s] self-relativization is inherent in its form: it has to be constructed as though it could always break off at any point. . . . Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its subject matter is always a conflict brought to a standstill.”⁴ The essay insists upon temporality: for Lukács it is an insistence upon the totality and unity of temporality as expressed by and in the notion of destiny; for Adorno the essay’s insistence upon temporality is instead in the direction of particularity and mediation: “For the essay all levels of

4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 16.

mediation are immediate until it begins to reflect.”⁵ That is, the essay, as the form of judgment, is reflective of the particularity of mediation. It is thought directed against itself, or, as Adorno has it: “the essay’s innermost formal law is heresy.”⁶ I want to suggest that Lukács was in fact aware of the heretical nature of the form of the essay and that a certain discomfort with it led him to try, though only half-heartedly, to ameliorate its fragmented nature. And the best evidence that Lukács fully appreciated the fragmentary and non-redemptive character of the essay lies in the passage Adorno quotes from him:

Perhaps the great *Sieur de Montaigne* felt something like this when he gave his writings the wonderfully elegant and apt title of “*Essay*.” The simple modesty of this word is an arrogant courtesy. The essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate: he has, after all, no more to offer than explanations of the poems of others, or at best of his own ideas. But he ironically adapts himself to this smallness - the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in face of life — and even emphasizes it with ironic modesty (9-10).

This ironic adaptation to smallness, to particularity, might also be considered mimesis (imitation), just that notion so central to aesthetics since Plato. In this light, Lukács’s conclusion — “The critique of this book is contained, in all possible sharpness and entirety, in the very approach from which it sprang” (18) — might now be construed less as a desire for unity and totality and rather as an attempt to retreat, mimetically, back into whatever smallness from which our desires for unity, identity and wholeness are given shape.

5. Adorno 11.

6. Adorno 23.

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