

Seeing Through the Eighties



TELEVISION AND REAGANISM **Jane Feuer**

Seeing Through the Eighties

Console-ing

Passions

Television and

Cultural Power

Edited by

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Jane
Feuer

Television and
Reaganism

Duke
University
Press
Durham
and
London
1995

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Typeset in Minion by Marathon Typography, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
appears on the last printed page of this book.

To Kathie for seeing me through the eighties

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Acknowledgments

In the ten or so years I have worked on this book, I have accumulated a number of debts to a number of generous friends and colleagues.

I would like to thank the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University and its then-director, Jonathan Culler, for making me a part of the fabulous 1990–1991 mass culture year fellowships. I especially want to thank the saintly women who staff the A. D. White House—Mary Ahl, Aggie Sirrine, and Linda Allen—for help way beyond what was expected.

Of my fellow fellows who resided at Cornell that year, I need to single out Simon Frith, who put this project in order for me and helped me think of the title (and told me I *could not* use the word “postmodernism” in the title). I want to thank Constance Penley for telling me that what I was really talking about was modernism and Laura Mulvey for being shocked by her first exposure to American television. Alex Doty, Rachel Bowlby, and Bill Gibson all read my bad drafts and made suggestions. I would like to thank Karal Ann Marling for designing my fortieth birthday cake and Aggie for baking it. Finally, I would like to thank Jeff Stryker for his prodigious and massive accomplishments without which the year would have been just as stimulating but not as much fun.

I owe a great debt to Robert Thompson for opening his archive to me and visiting with me in Ithaca.

The A. C. Nielsen Company, Marissa Piesman, Leonard Heller, and Tony Costa all provided information to me directly and generously.

I want to thank Matthew Tinkcom, Amy Villarejo, and Joy Fuqua for reading the manuscript and telling me it was worth finishing (and for giving me an intellectual second wind during our years together in Pittsburgh).

My colleagues at Pitt, Jonathan Arac and Eric Clarke, made comments that allowed me to revise the manuscript a little bit more than I had intended.

Ken Wissoker, my editor at Duke, believed in the project from the beginning and waited patiently for the manuscript to be delivered. I'm glad to have him as a friend.

Finally, I need to acknowledge the contribution of my partner, Kathie Ferraro, without whom I never could have finished the footnotes and without whom I'm nothing.

Introduction:

The Relationship

between Politics and Television

in the Reagan Era

The year 1981 marked the inauguration of Ronald Reagan as president of the United States; it also marked the debuts of the television serial *Dynasty* and the cable tv service MTV. Looking back, one wonders: which was the cause and which was the effect? Were the new kinds of tv programs functions of Reaganist politics, or was Reagan's election a function of television's role in the "society of the spectacle"? This book will attempt to answer such questions, but the reader should be warned at the outset that the answer will not consist of a simple yes or no, a simple reaffirmation of some kind of unidirectional causal relationship between politics and television. Both *Dynasty* and MTV could be said to be symptoms of the Reagan age—the former in its obsession with the supply-side aristocracy, the latter with its transformation of U.S. network television's linear narrative structure into a postmodern concern with images as images. But neither was really a reflection of an eighties Zeitgeist in any simple way. We can't say that Reaganism as a politically dominant ideology caused the aesthetically superstructural phenomenon of *Dynasty* to happen or that a change in the technological "base" of television—the emergence of cable tv—directly caused MTV to emerge. One could equally well argue that the narrative form *Dynasty* epitomized—the prime-time continuing melodramatic serial—communicated the aura of the eighties as much as any political event, or that MTV and the other technological innovations of the 1980s were a function of deregulation and thus an offshoot of the hegemony of the Republican Party.

Reagan himself, as many have argued, was as much an image as anything else on tv during his presidency. In retrospect, it is clear that he was the ultimate media-constructed image of the times and that the fantasies of unlimited wealth and unlimited visual pleasure that came into office with him were, somehow, the realities of the era. Behind all the images lay only the economic bottom line for which all the images

were superstructures. One might say that 1980s culture was financed by imaginary money (junk bonds) in the same way that Reagan was an imaginary president. Even if the 1987 stock market crash and recession brought us out of this particular economic fantasy of the eighties, the era could not be said to have been fantastic in the sense of being unreal, for if watching tv in the eighties taught us anything, it was that the most ephemeral images are capable of real political effect.

Indeed, I will argue that leftists would have done as well to study tv as anything other ideological manifestation during the Reagan presidency if they wanted to understand the relationship between image and “reality” in the postmodern era. But most left intellectuals have yet to appreciate the ideological complexity and contradictory politics of U.S. television. They prefer to study films, because the cinema, as I shall show, remains more culturally respectable than television and not for the most politically correct reasons either. I would maintain, and this book will argue, that television was a more significant medium ideologically and a more artistic medium aesthetically during the 1980s than was Hollywood film. If the emblematic films of the period represented a masculine fantasy of hard bodies and a hard political line (Jeffords 1994), television in the eighties, I will argue, was both more feminized and more ideologically complex.

If the decade was populated by “fictionalized” figures—from Blake Carrington all the way to Ronald Reagan—these fictions had political effectivity in shaping the popular consciousness of the decade; however the relationship between image and reality was not one of simple cause and effect. I will argue that just as tv images could not be said to have caused the eighties, neither could the eighties be said to have produced the images as a simple reflection of the times. Rather, I hope to complicate a base/superstructure model according to which Reaganomics produced, say, the tv series *Dynasty* in a unidirectional manner with a more complex and bidirectional model in which Reaganomics and *Dynasty* are viewed as mutually causing and mutually effecting each other.

Mediating between the economy as a whole and its images of desire was an entire industry that we might call “U.S. network television,” an industry whose era was coming to an end during the period I am analyzing. Thus the eighties were both typical of the ongoing relationship between television and politics in America and atypical of that relationship. The period was typical in that politics and entertainment were deeply interwoven but atypical in that network television during the eighties entered into a crisis from which it has yet to emerge. The eighties could be said to have been the end of the era of American net-

work television as we had known it from the 1950s, and like many twilight periods in the history of art and entertainment forms, tv's greatest aesthetic achievements occurred during that crisis and as a result of that crisis.

According to a 1990 retrospective analysis of the television industry, "in the 1980s . . . the fragile foundation on which U.S. television had been constructed began to disintegrate," in terms of its "least common denominator" strategies and "centralized organization." The author of this study, J. Fred MacDonald (1990, p. 221), considers the following facts about the explosion of new technologies during the Reagan era:

- the videocassette recorder (time shifting) was present in 4 percent of U.S. households in 1982, 60 percent in early 1988
- according to Nielsen figures for the first quarter of 1988, each month the average vcr household made 14.1 recordings and watched 16.9 recordings
- the electronic remote control device allowed "zapping" or fast-forwarding through ads and "zipping" or "grazing"—jumping from one channel to another
- other new technologies included videodisc, camcorder, video games, and home computers
- PPV (pay per view) reached about one-fifth of all wired households by 1989
- cable penetration increased from 17.1 percent in 1978 to 57.1 percent in 1989
- the people meter was introduced in 1987
- deregulation (the notion that the marketplace should determine programming) was championed by Mark Fowler and Dennis Patrick, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) chairmen appointed by Reagan. (1990, p. 221)

What is being described here is a shift from a *broadcasting* strategy to one of *narrowcasting*, at least within certain audience segments. According to a *TV Guide* survey, "There's no question that the remote control switch revolutionized the way we watched tv in the '80s." The survey found that 75 percent of viewers had remote control, and of those 30 percent said they try to watch two or more shows at once—either occasionally or most of the time. Thirty-seven percent said they liked to flip around the dial rather than tune in for a specific program (Lachenbruch 1990, p. 13). At the same time that some viewers were being granted more control over the apparatus, advertisers were being given more control over the demographics they could target. By 1990,

then, the entire U.S. television apparatus had undergone a sea change. Technologically, at least for the upscale segments of the audience, television had been transformed. But an apparatus consists of both a technology and the viewing subjects of that technology. This book will argue that the eighties represented a transformation in subjectivity for television as well as a transformation of technology.

Neither John Fiske nor Jean Baudrillard

Such periodizing also resolves certain problems inherent in theories of the media seemingly as disparate as those of international television critic John Fiske and French social/media theorist Jean Baudrillard. I am thus opposed both to the ahistoricism of Jean Baudrillard's concept of resistance and to the totalizing endorsement of the subordinate resisting reader in John Fiske. Within cultural studies, Fiske's work on television reception was widely influential during the eighties in shifting the emphasis away from analyses of how texts position the viewer and toward what the viewer does with the text. Fiske championed the "subordinate" decoder of television images as a type of resisting reader. The conclusion to his book *Television Culture* provides us with a good summary of Fiske's position:

This brings us to the relationship between entertainment and politics. These are two separate cultural domains which, in Althusserian terms, are relatively autonomous though overdetermined. The resistive readings and pleasures of television do not translate directly into oppositional politics or social action. Relatively autonomous cultural domains do not relate to each other in simple cause and effect terms. But the absence of a direct political effect does not preclude a more general political effectivity. . . . Resistive reading practices that assert the power of the subordinate in the process of representation and its subsequent pleasure pose a direct challenge to the power of capitalism to produce its subjects-in-ideology. The way that people understand themselves and their social relations is part of the social system itself. Any set of social relations requires a set of meanings to hold it in place, and any set of social meanings has to be produced by, and in the interests of, a group or a formation of groups situated within a social system of power relations. (Fiske 1987, p. 326)

While I find little to object to here, and indeed in many ways see this book as an attempt to historicize Fiske's formulation of the relationship

between politics and entertainment, I do find one term of this formulation troubling. The term is not, as one might suspect, “resistive,” although I have a somewhat different sense of that term, but rather, it is “subordinate.” For under Reaganism, there is a sense in which just about every social group was “subordinate” to a dominant white conservative male power block. Given this hegemonic situation, whom should we include in the “subordinate” group that, in theory at least, offers resistive reading practices to the varying forms of Reaganite ideology delineated in this book? Since I intend to show that elements of critique emerge from yuppie culture and that almost all women may have proven to be resistive readers (and since in the United States almost all television is aimed at women), in what sense can we theorize these groups as “subordinate” without rendering the term so broad as to be meaningless? What happens when the interests of one subordinate group (say, gay men) conflict with the interests of another in a particular social formation (say, white working-class men)? In addition, I intend to show that not all “resistive readings” are necessarily pleasing to leftist media critics. Indeed, under the hegemony of Reaganism, many radically “resistive” readings may be said to veer toward the right. In that case, what kind of “political effectivity” do these readings have?

Although Baudrillard’s essays on the media were published earlier in France, he was taken up by U.S. media theorists as the 1980s pessimistic interpretation of the same data that McLuhan saw as the “global village” during happier times. Ironically (for he is totally lacking in Fiske’s populism), Baudrillard also popularized a theory of the resisting masses, but without the sense of social agency that Fiske’s subordinate decoder was said to possess. For Baudrillard the media are postmodern in their emblematic status for the “implosion” of meaning. Baudrillard’s whole concept of the silent majority and the masses depends on an older idea of the narcotizing effects of television consumption now articulated in terms of a fashionable postmodernism that defines resistance by the refusal of meaning on the part of the masses. Television is central for Baudrillard (1983a, p. 43) because he conceives of postmodernism (although he doesn’t use the term) as a global and totalizing “structure of feeling”—to use Raymond Williams’s term—characterized by the implosion of meaning in the masses.

I believe that both Baudrillard’s “silent majorities” intent on spectacle and Fiske’s resistant “subordinate” decoders can best be read as different attempts at theorizing the Reaganite cultural formation. Both theories deal with the relatively powerless position of the viewer vis-à-

vis the production of television texts in the United States. This ongoing fact when combined with the hegemony of the Right during the Reagan/Thatcher era produced theories of television that empowered readers either to make meanings from the television given them (Fiske) or to refuse to accept meanings in the television given them (Baudrillard). In either case, resistance takes the form of a generalized stance toward the reception of the image. The shift during the eighties from theories of the text to theories of the audience is symptomatic of an era in which left intellectuals felt helpless to influence ideology through production. But simply to assert that negotiated and oppositional decodings are always already being made will not transform an entire apparatus. Perhaps the quietism of the eighties, a period during which reading practices may well have been more resistive than mainstream politics, laid the groundwork for the (admittedly brief) turn to the left in the 1992 elections. But this formulation can only be valuable within a specific historical and cultural situation; it does not constitute a global, over-arching theory of the television apparatus for all time.

Television and Postmodern Art

In this way I hope to retain Fredric Jameson's sense of postmodernism as an historical period, while rendering it more specific and considering the possibility of an uneven development between postmodern tv and other forms of the postmodern. There may be no postmodernism in general, but there may be a postmodern television or a postmodern architecture.

Television presents a further problem for theorists of the postmodern in literature and architecture in that tv is not "post"-anything. There was no modernist tv. No T. S. Eliot, no Stravinsky, no Mies van der Rohe. Despite its prefix, postmodern tv is not something that came after modernist television; for television, once it had displaced film for the title, was the great "other" of modernism. It is difficult to conceive of broadcast television as a modernist art movement, because the conceptualization of television by intellectuals in the United States keeps it firmly within the boundaries of "commodified" mass culture. It was easier for theorists of postmodernism to view video art as the modernist art movement that deconstructs the language of television; in this way postmodern video art could be defined as a form of video that is critical of the language of broadcast video (television). Dara Birnbaum's video art provides the textbook example of this process.¹ In works consisting of looped images from tv shows such as *Wonder*

Woman and *General Hospital*, she takes absurd moments from television and repeats them over and over again against soundtracks that emphasize the incongruity of the context. Although apparently critical in intent, the work was criticized for its easy adaptability to tv commercials and digital graphics, a critique that can always be made if one begins from an assumption that television represents “commodification” but independent video represents “art.” But to cite the postmodernity of independent video does not answer the question of the postmodernity of the dominant form of broadcast television.

Both Jean Baudrillard and E. Ann Kaplan do take mainstream television as the model for postmodernism. But they do so on a formalist basis not correlated to any specific historical shifts in subjectivity, culture, or ideology. In her book on MTV, Kaplan considers MTV in general as postmodern, while using the term “postmodern” for a subcategory of music videos as well (1987). For her, postmodernity involves creating unstable subject positions that fall outside of the usual categories. Thus Devo’s “Whip It” becomes a text that destabilizes the male gaze rather than one falling solidly within this “sexist” category. Kaplan does not discuss whose reading this is. Nor is it clear how one gets from the formal instability of the video to the progressive reading of its politics, especially if, as Kaplan argues, the target audience for such videos are hip adolescent males. As Simon Frith and Howard Horne have argued, “What makes pop videos post-modern is not their ‘exploding signifiers’ but their equation of art and commerce: their aesthetic effect can’t be separated from their market effect; the desires they address can’t be realized except in exchange” (Frith and Horne 1987, p. 168).

By thus historicizing postmodern tv, we can see that its postmodernity correlates to the development of the Reaganite cultural formation, while its specific “artistic” products can be viewed as symptomatic of that formation, yet at the same time critical of it. For Linda Hutcheon the postmodern attitude is one of “complicitous critique,” a duality not shared by television, which she finds to be totally complicitous with neoconservatism and thus lacking the critical edge she locates in postmodern literature and photography (1989, p. 10). Yet, as I will argue throughout this book, Hutcheon’s “complicitous critique,” now re-emerges as a characteristic of certain forms of so-called neoconservative culture. This book will argue that in defining postmodern art as “complicitous critique,” theorists of the postmodern were inadvertently elevating certain television programs to art status. For the term “complicitous critique,” useful as I find it to my project, also needs to be historicized. In each chapter of the book I will be asking: critical of whom?

complicitous with what? In the final chapter, for example, I argue that, as a postmodern TV program, *Dynasty* challenges our received ideas about what an oppositional text might be and even of how opposition occurs in a seemingly hegemonic era. But *Dynasty* was not alone in this, as I will attempt to demonstrate.

Long before Raymond Williams tried to zap channels in a San Francisco hotel room and thus came up with the concept of “flow” (Williams 1974, p. 71), U.S. television narratives were characterized by interruption and fragmentation. While the term “flow” does capture the lack of closure of American television, it does not really describe its fragmented quality, the quality said to produce a postmodern attention span in our students. I earlier referred to this quality of broadcast TV—what Raymond Williams really observed when he noticed the “flow” of American television—as “segmentation without closure” (Feuer 1983, p. 15). With the technological advances of the 1980s, these qualities have been exacerbated in a form I will call “cable flow.” The penetration of cable, remote control, and multiple source input represented the economic and technological impetus for what one might refer to as “postmodern TV.” As an aesthetic category, postmodern TV does not represent a break with a prior category but rather an intensification of previous structures and practices. Broadcast flow becomes cable flow. Postmodern TV is a function of cable in terms of both the cable flow channels and the way cable forced the networks to offer more innovative programming in the later 1980s, geared to the yuppie, TV-literate baby boomers.² Cable flow thus represents an intensification of certain practices of broadcast flow. If U.S. broadcast TV is characterized by planned interruptions of programming, then cable channels have instituted a flow that denies the boundaries between commercial and program. If U.S. broadcast TV allowed for channel switching, then cable flow allows for zipping, zapping, and channel surfing. If certain network morning shows are designed for intermittent viewing, then cable flow gives us entire services designed for the grazing viewer.

Cable flow services are not critical in and of themselves, as certain notions of the flow of MTV have suggested. Simon Frith delivers a scathing critique of certain views of MTV as the ultimate postmodern artifact, arguing that, if one attempts to define the postmodernism of MTV by its formal features, one winds up citing its most commodified side—for the constant flow of MTV derives from top forty radio (1988, p. 206). Baudrillard follows McLuhan in assuming that the impact of the television medium is due entirely to its form, regardless of particular contents, so that, for example, it doesn’t matter if you watch *Miami*