The History of American Video Art

and the Future of European Television

This paper is a revised version of a paper presented at a symposium on The Politics, Sociology and Aesthetics of Audio Visual Media, chaired by Dr. Rolf Kloepfer at the XXI Romanistentag, in Aachen, Germany, 1989.

In this talk, I will offer some suggestions about the future of European television based on the history of North American video art. Specifically, I am speaking to Europeans concerned with their local cultures who object to the Americanization of European television as the common market becomes a reality. In fact, video in North America began in opposition to American commercial television but was domesticated as "video art." This discussion is based on my involvement with American video since 1968. I will begin with a very brief account of the history of video art in America.

The video movement in America began in 1968 as part of a resistance to the American military-industrial complex that was fighting the war in Vietnam. Since broadcast television was the major means of maintaining the ideology of American industrial culture (Gerbner 1976: 370ff.), it was fitting that those resisting this ideology should begin to use the small inexpensive portable video systems arriving from Japan to facilitate and document the creation of a counterculture. Countercultural video production became known as "guerrilla television" (Shamberg: 1971). Though the historic circumstances are different, the spontaneous richness of guerrilla television in America during the late

sixties finds parallels in the current use of television by video guerrillas in the Middle East, Poland, and Russia.

One striking example of American guerrilla television activity was "Lanesville TV." During the early seventies "Lanesville TV" was an outlaw television station that functioned in upstate New York as the smallest TV station in the world. The station was run by a group that called themselves the Videofreex. The group used their television channel to cultivate local culture. In insisting on using television to support the culture proper to the place of production they were resisting broadcast television's tendency to annihilate any sense of place (Meyrowitz: 1985). The Videofreex were not interested in producing material for broadcasting anywhere and everywhere, but thought of their channel as a way to enrich the life of their specific community.

As the Vietnam War ended and countercultural resistance faded in the late seventies, the art world in America distilled art out of the video movement. In elevating some video works from the video movement to the status of art, the art world in America stripped this work of its relation to living culture in a manner similar to the way tribal artifacts have been appropriated into museum taxonomies. In effect, during the late seventies and eighties, video underwent a mutation from countercultural gesture to art genre. For the most part however, this new "art genre" has failed to successfully grapple with either the nature of art itself or the nature of television. In a rush to legitimate video in the art work, video was attached to standard art disciplines and shown as "landscape video" or "video sculpture."

To suggest directions for the future of European television based on this history of American video art, I will discuss three questions that address the nature of television and the nature of art:

What does television do that no other medium does?
What does art do?
How can art be made using the medium of television?

In addressing these questions, I speak in broad terms in an attempt to say something useful about a very broad topic, the future of European television. The ideas expressed here are not common to American video artists but come out of my own work as an artist using video to address the ecological crisis.

I begin with the question "What does television do that no other medium does?" My answer to this question is based largely on an article by philosopher Stanley Cavell called "The Fact of Television" (1982). Cavell argues that what television does is allow us to monitor events simultaneously with others. The event can be of any sort: sports, a state funeral, a rocket launch, an earthquake, and so on. The mode of perception proper to television is monitoring. A security guard watching multiple television screens that monitor the various entrances to a large building can be taken as an icon of the sort of perception that is unique to television.

We watch events on television. Television alerts us to unusual events. By contrast, we view film. Film projects a world view, whether it's *Gone with The Wind* with its romantic view of the post Civil War period in the South, or *Star Wars* with its technological universe of good against evil. In film, just like in painting, there are individual works that can be considered masterpieces. With television, the real aesthetic achievement is in the format, not in any particular episode that exemplifies the format. It is not any specific show or episode of the American weekly dramatic series "Hill Street Blues" that the audience values, but the ongoing series of events conveyed through a consistent format.

The format is successful because it acknowledges the condition of monitoring proper to television. Using a format constructed for television, the audience monitors an unending series of dangerous events through a complex web of strained relationships among officers in an inner city police station. "Be careful out there" is the daily admonition. "Out there" events happen. Television monitors, and allows its audience to monitor, events.

What does the term "monitoring" mean? Etymologically, it comes from the Latin verb *monere* meaning "to warn." Technically, television provides an early warning system for events that might prove dangerous. Please note the parallel between this understanding of television and the traditional function of the avant garde artist, i.e., to provide advanced warning about cultural change. Certainly, broadcast television in the United States has not fulfilled the function of the avant garde. It is an open question whether current American video art, severed from its countercultural roots, is genuinely avante garde.

Now let me move on to the question "What does art do?" I will begin by summarizing an argument I make elsewhere (pp. 474ff.). My argument proceeds from an understanding of the central core of our nervous system. This is the part of our nervous system that governs our gross behaviors, that is, behaviors that require the commitment of the entire organism. Examples are fighting or fleeing, having sex or sleeping. In my view, the practice of art can be understood as an exercise in survival behavior removed from actual survival commitments. Though not necessary for the hunt itself, early cave painting transformed hunter intelligence. Drama thrives on combat and courtship and provides insights into these patterns of behavior. Art can exercise survival behavior for groups as well as individuals. Temples, cathedrals and mosques can all be taken as fortresses, though seldom used as such. Art is created *as if our lives depend on it.* Art cultivates perceptions and behaviors useful for

survival. Art enhances our ability to survive just as training enhances our ability to fight. Indeed, it can be said that without art, human survival would not be possible.

It is interesting to think about the connection between art and immortality in the Western world in relation to this connection between art and survival. The artist produces art as if the life of the artist depended on it. The artist aspires to immortality by encoding in his or her art a pattern of understanding that somehow reckons with mortality. The work enlivens perception and provides critical insights. The work produced, for example a Rodin sculpture or a Cezanne painting, becomes important for people who live beyond the life cycle of the artist. However, immortality for the artist, encoded in traditional genres such as sculpture and landscape, may become a moot question as humans endanger their species by proliferating an industrial culture that is destroying our rainforests, seas, ozone, rivers, soils, and oceans. The species that destroys its environment destroys itself. Television is the monitoring device on which we are seeing our species destroy its environment in living color. The Chernoybol nuclear accident, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the burning of oil fields in Kuwait, satellite images of the ozone hole — images of devastation go on and on.

Regarding television and environmental destruction Stanley Cavell makes an interesting point. In trying to explain the disapproval and fear of television that is evident in certain educated circles, he points to highly literate people who claim they don't watch television and severely restrict their children's TV diet. He argues that this is clearly a case of “kill the messenger," a displacement of the fear of what is being monitored onto the monitor itself. Cavell points out that what is actually being monitored is the increasing “uninhabitability of the world."

In answer to the question "What does television do?," I said that television enables us to monitor events simultaneously with others.. In answer to the question "What does art do?" I have said that art quickens our capacity for survival behaviors. Now to the question of how to make art using television. To rephrase the question based on the above discussion, "How can we activate survival behavior for the human species using a medium that enables us to monitor events simultaneously with others?"

My answer to this question is direct but not simple: use television as a tool of reinhabitation. Let me explain. I began this talk by indicating that video in America was originally part of a countercultural movement against the destructiveness of industrial culture. Video art resulted from what has been called by some videomakers the "museumification" of the video movement. One part of the counterculture in North America which I have been involved in that has avoided integration into the taxonomy of industrial culture is the bioregional movement.

Briefly, the bioregional movement recognizes that, on the North American Continent, there were indigenous cultures supplanted by an invader culture from Europe. This invader culture then became industrialized. Bioregionalists argue that what is required now is to resist further destruction by industrialization, restore ecosystems, and learn to reinhabit the land on a long-term basis. The land is understood not according to the territory claims of different human jurisdictions, but according to the natural ecosystems: watersheds, woodlands, prairies, coastlines, and mountain ranges.

Bioregionalists are redrawing the maps of industrial nation states in terms of bioregions that require reinhabitation. For example, California may be one state but it is two bioregions, or life places: a wet Mediterranean climate in the north

and a dry desert in the south. There are bioregional reinhabitants who have spent the last twelve years in Northern California developing a new culture of place, doing everything from restoring salmon runs to creating a dance company whose choreography is based on the lives of the non-human species inhabiting the area.

Since the early 1970's, the bioregional movement has grown from a small group in San Francisco called Planet Drum to include over one hundred and fifty groups on the North American continent. The movement has authentic alliances with Native Americans, ties with like-minded people on other continents including Europe, and is presently doing seminal work on how to green the cities of North America.

The bioregional movement is important to my discussion because it has effectively transformed the fear Cavell associates with television, the fear that what we are monitoring is the irreversible destruction of earth as a human habitat, into a very promising, albeit still fledgling culture of reinhabitation. This movement is not paralyzed by the specter of "irreversible pollution" but has formulated a genuine response that redefines the human as part of a thriving planet. The bioregional movement suggests the possibility that art can be made with television by shaping the medium into a tool of reinhabitation.

To conclude this paper I will address three topics in order to tie together art, television, and the reinhabitation of Europe. These topics are: American video art; the question of art, propaganda, and advertising; and the question of language and video perception.

American Video Art

Given that American video art has been developed apart from any culture of reinhabition, has, in a sense, failed to monitor what it should have been monitoring, what possible connection is there between American video art and European reinhabitory television? I return to Cavell's insistence that the genuine aesthetic achievement in television is its format, not the individual "masterpiece." Obviously, in arguing for a reinhabitory television, I am downplaying the value of individual video art works presented in a museum context. However, in generating formats for reinhabitory television, much can be learned from more than twenty years of experimentation with video art in America. A sample of the appropriate questions for a given video art piece from the position of reinhabitory television might include:

> Is there a unique style of monitoring in this use of video?
> Is there a method of monitoring exhibited by this videotape?
> Can this method be used by others to interpret ecological systems?
> Does this video installation suggest an intelligent configuration for monitoring ?
> What kind of intelligence about events is encoded in this work?

Art, Propaganda and Advertising

To answer the question about how to make art using television, as I have above, by recommending using television as a tool of reinhabitation raises the related question of how to distinguish between art and propaganda. If the television being exported from America is really propaganda for a destructive

industrialization, is it not also undermining the role art may play in survival and opting for mere propaganda to urge the use of television as a tool of reinhabitation? Am I simply substituting “ads” for reinhabitation for “ads” for industrialization and calling it art?

I don't think so. In answer, let me briefly take up the issue of ads and then propaganda. There are those in the art world who claim that advertising agencies are, in fact, now producing high quality art. They claim the commercialization of European television will result in a proliferation of this kind of art and that this is a cause for rejoicing. However, in the context of art activating survival behavior for the human species, this is nonsense. Those who make this claim fail to understand that on commercial television ads are part of a good news/bad news cycle that has nothing to do with solutions to the bad news. The good news on American commercial television is that some members of our species are able to afford stunning items such as a Mercedes-Benz car, ocean cruises, and expensive perfumes. The bad news is that in order to be able to produce such items for some members of our species we are destroying the life support system of the entire species. Commercial television is addicted to this good new/bad news cycle, even at the level of inexpensive items for mass consumption. The good news is that we can go to McDonald's or Burger King and have a happy time eating cheap beef. The bad news is that, in order to have such a happy time, we have been cutting down the rainforest. While individual ads might be, in themselves, stunning icons for industrial/consumer culture, to focus on these icons extracted from the continuous current of television's monitoring of events is to misread the context entirely. It is analogous to celebrating the fact that a desperate alcoholic is drinking the very best cognac.

Regarding the suspicion of reinhabitory propaganda, let me respond as follows. Television enables us to monitor events. Ecologies are ensembles of recurring events: the cycle of a fresh water lake, the falling leaf forest, the migration of birds, etc. Using television to monitor an ensemble of ecological events, simultaneously with others whose life is sustained by these events, would provide the grounding for any serious reinhabitory use of television. A community that grounded its reinhabitory activity in a formally-constructed, shared perception of their ecosystem would not be generating propaganda for particular interests. They would be grounding their perception in the place they lived in. In effect, with television we can systematize what the impressionist painters sweated blood to do, see the world without words (Waddington: 1970). Besides monitoring dangerous hot spots in the ecosystem, reinhabitory television can be used to unconceal the beauty of ecosystems. Such a system of shared perception could provide a common reinhabitory referent for the different language families of Europe. Television could facilitate developing consensus about long-term policies and practices for living-in-place across Europe.

Language and Video Perception

As communications theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out, the primary medium for shaping the different language families of Europe into national cultures was the printing press (McLuhan: 1962). The printing press was the forerunner of industrialization. Obviously, industrialization cannot be summarily condemned and jettisoned. It needs to be rethought in reinhabitory terms. But the point I want to insist on here is simply that the television medium is not print. Any serious strategy for reinhabiting Europe must think through the difference

between print and television. It is not inconceivable that the nations of Europe could come up with ways of using both print and television as tools for reinhabiting the diverse ecologies of the European continent, avoiding Americanization.

I don't think moving in a reinhabitory direction will leave the national language cultures of Europe unchanged. The flexibility of communications possible with electronic technologies such as television and computers goes far beyond what has been possible with the printing press. In principle, more flexible communications means cultures that may accommodate more diversity without losing coherence. I think it is possible to support the reactivation of the diverse cultures of place proper to Europe while at the same time using television and other electronic technologies to maintain a coherence proper to the intent of the common market. The diverse cultures of place in Europe that I am talking about have some articulation in natural bioregional boundaries such as the Pyrenee, and further articulation in indigenous groups such as the Basques, the Bretons, the Catalonians, the Cornish, the Welsh , and so forth. In short, Europeans could use reinhabitory television to structure a complex pan-European coherence out of a richer diversity than that provided by their tradition of nation states without capitulating to the global monoculture being promulgated by American television.

In the scenario I am presenting, enormous creativity will be released in the interface between nation-states with a rightful pride in distinct languages and literatures and a reinhabitory television that unconceals the bioregions of Europe. Television forces us to consider the relation between perception and the multilinguistic groupings in Europe. The questions are numerous and tantalizing. If electronic perception frees language from some of the functions it has habitually performed, such as symbolizing perception in words or providing

a common reference through images that need no translation from one language to another, then what becomes possible for literature? What is post-television language like? If traditional myth and story encode the shared perceptions of a community, what happens to myth and stories of individual cultures when television provides an electronic *sensus communis?*

In this post-industrial period, humanity has become an endangered species. As an endangered species, we must shift our mode of perception to reckon with the dangers of environmental devastation if we are to survive. Television presents the possibility of shifting to a mode of shared human perception that monitors the dangers and cultivates strategies of reinhabitation. The role of art vis-à-vis television is to quicken this shift. American video art has not assumed that role. With careful examination of the pitfalls, a reinhabitory television art could mature in Europe. In the context of humanity as an endangered species, it is impossible to think about the European Common Market without also thinking about the European Common Ecology. The cultures that built cathedrals for eternity must learn to use television to build "electronic cathedrals" which are grounded in shared perception of sustainable European ecosystems.

References:

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ISBN: 0-8204-1871-4