

— 1 —

Video Icons & Values: An Overview

Alan M. Olson

The broadcast industry recently celebrated 50 Years of Television, and the half-century mark is accurate, given the medium's commercial inception in 1939. Accounting, however, for a decade of disruption in the flow of consumer products during World War II and Korea, the time span is closer to 40 years. One would think that nearly a half century of virtual saturation by this medium should be sufficient to assess its cultural effects. Strangely enough, this does not seem to be the case; the values and disvalues of the medium remain as evasive as ever.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this imprecision has to do with the fact that the psychological disjunction between the world *before* and the world *after* television is so vast that critical issues regarding the nature and meaning of the medium are difficult to identify, much less address and resolve. Indeed, we are rapidly approaching a time in which there will be no living memory of a world before this medium; hence, we are not able to see the forest for the trees with respect to the task of criticism. We suspect that the criticism of culture generally rests on the criticism of television, so awesome and overwhelming is its power at the end of the twentieth century.

Thus while the industry congratulates itself on its amazing success story, others lament its vast intrusion into public and private life, an in-

trusion that not only has dramatically changed public and private values but that has itself become synonymous with the process by which values are formulated. Not surprisingly, this lamentation is particularly intense in academia where the conflict between book and video culture is most pronounced. In the past, when print held sway as the embodiment of high culture, such tensions were more containable by dint of being less visible. One could blissfully ignore low print culture, but video culture is another matter because it is everywhere. Hence scholars remain divided regarding the meaning and proper educational use, if any, of this medium. Such perplexity is informed by human interest, of course, as it is the bounden duty of academics, especially in the humanities, to preserve and, if possible, to extend the orbit of the classic by way of the print medium, which itself has enjoyed iconic status for about 5,000 years. We are, *pace* the prophet Muhammad, "people of the book" in more ways than one!

Many, perhaps most, intellectuals therefore tend to regard television with a certain disdain. And this disdain is easily vented in the case of television since, as the ever-present conduit of ready-made popular culture, it is the perfectly impassive object against which one may confidently direct one's contempt and derision without fear of backlash. Is it not true that television, even when viewed intermittently, instantly confirms one's sense of intellectual superiority? One thinks, for example, of the cartoonish image of a disgruntled viewer throwing an accessible projectile at a TV screen as if, by this emotive act, the power of the medium itself might thereby be negated. We are amused knowing that something analogous to this comic situation has probably happened many times. On second reflection, however, we may also be somewhat frightened in the realization that the indignant viewer will probably go out and buy a new and better video apparatus, indeed, feel compelled to do so. Thus we find ourselves in the somewhat curious situation where, on the one hand, intellectuals find it possible, even chic, to say nasty things about television anywhere, anytime, without fear of reprisal. One may even be congratulated for attacking something as allegedly banal as the pop culture television both spews out and stimulates with abandon. On the other hand, indignant critics of the medium will usually appear on television at a moment's notice if asked to do so. For in being popular culture's *raison d'être*, television is also identical with power.

TV-bashing, therefore, is a manifestly unconstructive and frequently dishonest activity, particularly in the academy where both the as-

sets and liabilities of the medium and its messages have such far-reaching consequences. It used to be the case, in the earlier days of the medium, that conscientious parents willfully rejected television and banished it from the household, on the notion that its very presence would be deleterious to the educational development and overall mental health of their offspring. Some probably still do, but the valiant parents and individuals who eschew the medium by sheer acts of will are fewer and farther between. Video addiction today is a cultural fact, as evidenced by the recent appearance of bumper stickers enjoining us to "Just Say NO to Television" and as Marle Winn already observed in 1977.¹ It is highly unlikely, however, that any individual or group, private or governmental, can or even should be able to curtail the power and presence of the "electronic golden calf," as Gregor Goethals puts it (with a nod to Malcolm Muggeridge). Hence it behooves concerned individuals to investigate the nature and meaning of the new technological narcosis as carefully as possible. And if one is to deal critically and constructively with the matter of what we here term *video icons & values* one has to begin by acknowledging the video fact and then proceed to a consideration of the separate but interrelated questions of the nature of the medium and the messages purveyed through it. That is what the essays in this collection do by way of the theme of iconicity since, with respect to questions of value, it is of the very nature of an icon and the iconic to be nearly identical with what it means. A great deal of criticism, in fact, has been devoted to scrutinizing *what* the medium communicates; far less has been devoted to *how* this is done in terms of what television is as an instrument of consciousness and, in many ways, its substitute.

That such an inquiry is necessary should be evident from the now well-established fact that increasing numbers of undergraduate students simply do not enjoy reading very much any more. As a consequence, students nowadays do not know very much about the subject matter once considered to be a kind of baseline for entry-level college and university courses in the humanities. Invitations to "the adventure of reading," as library associations used to put it, seem now far more likely to be identified with "adventures in video." Obviously such a shift has tremendous educational implications, as it has been the traditional task of education to produce literacy and to facilitate what today is sometimes called "critical thinking" by way of intense involvement with printed texts. Such efforts become doubly difficult when students no longer regard serious, challenging reading as a pleasurable activity or even a labor

of love but rather as a kind of drudgery to be endured and, if possible, to be minimized or avoided altogether. What critical thinking means in the absence of sustained exposure to the substantive content once identified with books is by no means clear. For if it is true that many students nowadays (students who have never known a time B.T., that is, "Before Television") have a tendency to regard the reading of books as some kind of unnatural act (which it probably once was, at least in the Rousseauian sense, and seems to be becoming once again), then we are certainly being confronted by a situation affecting not only the bookish professional denizens of academia but society as a whole.

It is precisely with respect to this larger social implication that the shift from print to the video culture, as Jeremy Murray-Brown reminds us, has something very basic to do with the growing and highly disturbing problem of aliteracy. There is mounting evidence, he points out, that increasing numbers of people today—even "educated" people—are simply disinclined to read even though they are entirely capable of doing so. This disinclination syndrome, fueling the problem of aliteracy, is precisely what makes it far more perplexing than the problem of illiteracy as such. One can do something about illiteracy, at least when illiteracy is viewed as a tactical rather than as a strategic problem: One targets those who need and who want help, and one marshals the necessary resources for the development and delivery of programs designed to improve necessary skills. People are thereby moved, at least statistically, into the ranks of the literate.

But aliteracy is the willful act of anti-literacy, whereby people decide that reading is no longer worth the time and trouble. And, as the evidence clearly shows, watching television is what people want to do the most. Indeed, viewing television is the activity most engaged in, Jeremy Murray-Brown reminds us, with the possible exceptions of sleeping and working. And, considering that many people are accustomed to sleeping with the television on, working with a television monitor joined with a computer or, given the growing ranks of the retired, not working at all, we must acknowledge that tremendous numbers of individuals are continuously in the presence of television. Given this astonishing scenario, the broadcast industry obviously has every reason to congratulate itself on a half-century of television, since within this modest temporal span the medium has moved from being an alternative presence in our lives (in the early days, it was a luxury that represented an investment equivalent to about 30% of the cost of a new car) to a presence now wholly

taken for granted. Many students, it seems, no longer pause even to consider the value or disvalue of including a television set with personal belongings as they move into their college residences; indeed, it seems far more likely to be the case that students may ponder the feasibility of "lugging" along a modest library—assuming that it is not a video library!

It is important to determine, then, whether the unconscious acceptance of television may not be rendering people unconscious, that is uncritical, in more insidious ways. In the recent, somewhat spirited, criticism of public education, however, little sustained attention has been given to assessing the effects of television addiction on study habits and academic achievement of students. Perhaps the issue has been avoided since parents, by their own viewing habits, have already defaulted on the matter of control. After all, such a line of critique implies that fault lies more in the home and in culture generally than with teachers and schools—the perennially convenient targets of an offended public, but the "offended nature" of which usually lasts for about as long as they have children in school. Former secretary of education, William Bennett, softened the suspicion of television as the cause of low performance by reminding us that Japanese children watch as much if not more television than American children. By this raw statistic we are to conclude, it seems, that watching television is OK, as Japanese children tend to be regarded as the global standard of academic achievement. But by such resignation, we effectively relinquish responsibility for finding out what precisely is going on when the offspring of an allegedly sapient species have watched in excess of 30,000 hours of television by the time they graduate from high school. Needless to say, passing over such an astonishing statistic obviously absolves a very large, powerful, and largely unregulated industry from accountability regarding the inculcation of values, whether by addiction to the form or the content of television or both.

The problem of aliteracy, then, is exceedingly complex and involves much more than a mere skills adjustment, as both Lenore Langsdorf and Renee Hobbs remind us in their essays. One of the most consequential theoretical implications of our new state of affairs has to do with recognizing that the vaunted reader-text relation (so long considered as being value-foundational by literate print-cultures) no longer is fundamental to many people. What is increasingly fundamental is the viewer-monitor relation as the primary and, for many, the only mode in which information is received. Of course, it may be that what is viewed

on-screen is a text as is the case with word-processing on a computer. Even so, one still has to ask serious questions regarding the nature and meaning of this new kind of textuality and the effects of the video text on perception, consciousness, and value formation. What is happening, for example, when one begins to feel more comfortable with the soft video text than with so-called "hard copy" printed on paper? Does this mean that hard-copy is also becoming hard kinesthetically, that is, more difficult? If so, does such a shift signal changes in perception, changes in the act of cognition itself, that we are only beginning to understand? After all, many people in the past, even those who couldn't read, worshipped books simply because they were books. Some still do, unenlightened and enlightened individuals alike; in other words, some people are fundamentalists in the sense of being constitutionally incapable of distinguishing between medium and message. Is televangelism and the transition from bibliolatry to TV-olatry the harbinger of a new kind of fundamentalism in the wider kinesthetic sense?

Marshall McLuhan troubled greatly over such matters a quarter-century ago when the medium was relatively new and, by today's standards, still rather primitive. Yet it is very much in the spirit of McLuhan that Jeremy Murray-Brown explores, by way of his contemporary gloss on the Parmenidian and Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*, what he terms *video ergo sum* ("I view, therefore I am"). By this notion, Murray-Brown argues that the viewer-monitor relation signals a revolution at least as far-reaching in its implications and consequences as the previous revolutions in alphabetic writing and the mass production of printed texts. The respective axioms of Parmenides and Descartes, of course, were roughly contemporary with these earlier revolutions and probably presupposed the power of writing and printing. But if it is now the case that we are in the midst of a transition from writing and reading to recording and viewing as the primary evidence for the nature and quality of our existence, what does this mean with respect to the relationship between seeing and thinking? Are thinking and seeing related in more than an archaic metaphorical sense, seeing being a metaphor for understanding as it is in English and several languages? Is there such a thing as visual thinking, in Rudolf Arnheim's phrase,² and does it have anything to do with watching television, television being commonly regarded as a visual medium? Many artists, including some of those represented here, have their doubts; that is, many artists argue that neither the medium, given its technical limitations, nor its content, given the format of most com-

mercial programming, can be regarded as being visual in the truly creative sense and may even be regarded as being anti-visual. How do we identify, Gregor Goethals asks, the kind of thinking that goes on both in the production and in the viewing of what is on television? To what sources of authority and value, Rebecca Abbott queries, is this medium actually transparent? The authorship of books is usually direct, but the authorship of television is highly anonymous. But if it is true, as Murray-Brown contends, that more and more viewers are of the a priori notion that what exists, exists on television, where is this new and increasingly axiomatic *video ergo sum* leading us?

Why, indeed, is it "so easy," as Renee Hobbs asks, to watch television? In order to answer this question one must, she argues, first obtain a better comprehension of the formal structures of the medium itself irrespective of any particular content that happens to be purveyed over or through it. The formal structure of the medium, she contends, constitutes both its power and its promise. Indeed, Hobbs's research demonstrates that even people who have never watched television before can instantly appreciate and comprehend highly complex formats. Thus she agrees with Murray-Brown's contention "that whatever television is, it is *sui generis*" and that the act of viewing both presupposes certain structural features of consciousness and also effects changes in consciousness with respect to value formation as one begins to view television habitually. Her position is not far from the view of Hans-Georg Gadamer who, arguing against instrumentalistic conceptions of language, asserts that "language uses us far more than we use it";³ language, as a social reality, does not exist apart from specific contexts of mediation whether they be the context of living discourse, a printed text, or more complex technological contexts of the mass media. Hence we are faced with the task not only of understanding the functional properties of language conceived as an abstract system of signs, but of understanding how language works, as Lenore Langsdorf reminds us, within the specific life-worlds of culturally specific viewer-monitor relationships.

Like the other contributors to this volume, Renee Hobbs acknowledges the inevitability of television and its growing domination of the media—all media, even print. But this does not mean, she argues, that we have to accept the dominant commercial format of television, as resistant as it might be to change. She turns her attention to close scrutiny of the conventional formats in broadcast television. Her findings are fascinating since they suggest, on the one hand and given the sheer bulk of

viewing time by the average American, that we are faced with a WYSWYW ("what you see is what you want") phenomenon. This, at least, is how the industry's quantity-based argument runs, namely, that if the viewing public were not basically satisfied with what is being broadcast, they wouldn't watch so much television as they do. But this argument, according to Hobbs, is based on the erroneous identification of content with format. In other words, while it may be that "what you see is what you want" is true with respect to content, it is not true with respect to format for the simple reason that commercial format has completely dominated television from its inception. Because most people don't know any other format, they don't seem to mind the subordination of content to the commercials that interrupt the flow of information every six to eight minutes in order to sell the products of sponsors. More disturbing is the realization that because the general viewing public does not expect any other format, because the public does not anticipate encountering any information that cannot be subsumed to this format, people begin to believe that *all* content can be contained within the three- or four-minute format. Needless to say, unconditional acceptance of conventional format strongly reinforces, and even renders normative, the fragmentation of meaning.

Hobbs's critical distinction between format and content also implies that the development of a critical consciousness is not, as some contend, precluded by the medium itself. In her view, the development of critical consciousness is precluded only by the conventional format that presently dominates broadcast television; a format which, while providing tremendous variety, provides little or no diversity. Network television is unwilling to experiment with format as such experimentations will result in reduced revenues through the loss of market share. There is little incentive to have it any other way, the economic motive being rather to keep things the way they are. If one really insists upon diversity, one pays for cable or one pays extra for additional channel subscriptions but even then, with some 50-100 channels, there is still very little diversity.

It might then seem, Hobbs muses, that there is little we can do about this situation given the fact that most people, owing to their habituation to conventional format, simply will not look very long at experimental television ("television that makes you think," as she puts it). This problem is documented rather dramatically in Rebecca Abbott's account of the commercialized domestication of "Max Headroom" by network

television. The American adaptation of this British program is a classic case, Abbott contends, of what critical theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse have described as the dialectical inversion and sublation of anti-establishment cultural forms by dominant, establishment cultural media. Other aspects of the same problem are developed at length in David Thorp's imaginative meditation on engravings by Albrecht Dürer wherein *Melencolia* is depicted as a pioneering video artist having neither the confidence of the political Knight nor the serenity of the religious Saint (lacking the support of both state and church). Hence the video artist finds himself or herself increasingly consigned to the status of a computer peripheral or, given the dominant commercial format, to the status of the commercial peripheral, the function of which is to provide more zip for the sales pitch so that it won't be zapped by the now-standard remote control. We are so conditioned by the prevailing commercial format, Hobbs argues, that we resist all changes in the way material is presented; and because we resist changes in the presentation of material or in format, we resist any changes in the viewer-monitor relationship—especially changes in the way we see things, which might demand movement from being a merely passive or uncritical viewer to becoming an active or critical one.

If we are concerned, however, about making television and video into a more productive cultural and educational instrument, that is, if we are concerned about the development of a critical consciousness through rather than in spite of the viewer-monitor relationship that increasingly dominates our lives, then changes in format must be encouraged and made. Some would argue that technological advances (especially the advent of HDTV and/or fiber-optics telecommunications) will automatically bring about innovations in format; others are not so optimistic, believing that the tail will continue to wag the dog, so to speak, as long as the medium remains almost entirely commercial. An unregulated or deregulated industry, skeptics argue, means that it remains regulated *de facto* by strictly marketshare considerations, hence dominated by commercial format.

Our contributors are largely agreed that the primary critical-cognitive consequence of the dominant conventional format, is the fragmentation of meaning that results from a steady diet of television viewing. More specifically, this fragmentation of meaning follows as the inevitable consequence of what Neil Postman has identified as the “. . . and now this . . .” syndrome in which the conjunction *and* effectively functions,

in conventional broadcast television, as a disjunction or the *disjunction* that interrupts the stream of information bits which are the fodder of commercial television.⁴ For by the editorial use of the “. . . and now this . . .” disjunction (whether spoken by an announcer or unspoken in the automatic commercial pause) practically all information, whether important or unimportant, sublime or ridiculous, consequential or trivial, is conveyed in the 30-60-second snippet with little, if any, logical connection between snippets. And while it may be the case that certain sequences of snippets contain some modest rational judgment, the values implicit in such judgments are entirely subordinate to a supervening editorial logic regarding the necessary patterns of commercial messages. Thus the viewer may, at one moment, find him or herself startled by the horrendous news of a major airline disaster, and in the very next moment be confronted by an airline commercial enjoining us to “fly away” to some island paradise. And since there may be as many cuts or edit points in the slick, incredibly expensive commercial as there are seconds of broadcast, such *non sequiturs* are usually far superior aesthetically to what is shown between them. In such situations, one may discover that many, especially children, are captured more by the alleged reality of the commercial than what is being reported, the consequence being that the actual world becomes, in contrast to commercials, rather boring.

To have it any other way would negate the purpose of commercial format; but to have it the way it is virtually guarantees the fragmentation of meaning. It is rare when a major network suspends the “. . . and now this . . .” fragmentation syndrome in order to provide live, sustained coverage without commentary or further interruption. Nor is there ever a time, during the live coverage of a sporting event, a political convention, or a congressional hearing (“C-Span” being a notable exception), when one is ever free of a continuous voice-over by some allegedly omniscient commentator telling the viewer what to think about what he or she is seeing. In fact, the primary function of the voice-over is not to provide authoritative or insightful commentary but rather to convey an illusory community for the otherwise solitary viewer. Such a function is best served by sticking with the voice-overs of celebrities whom viewers think they know and like to have in their homes. To recruit individuals with intellectual incisiveness on a given topic would make the average person uneasy and many intellectuals are frequently difficult to control. It goes without saying that commercial television, as Hobbs, Abbott, and Goethals indicate, is itself very uneasy when it fails to control the mean-

ing of what is being broadcast since failures to do so may have drastic economic consequences. But exercising this control, whether by the tried-and-true celebrity intellectual on live broadcasting, or by the routine commercial editing of "non news" broadcasting and LOP ("least objectionable programming"), obviously fosters and promotes the illusion that *all* the meanings and values worth having are immediate and can be paced, so to speak, as easily as the selling of hamburgers and toothpaste.

Is it any wonder, then, that so many students, after eighteen years of continuous habituation to this kind of fragmentation, should develop a kind of K-byte consciousness or mentality that seems able to tolerate no more than a few minutes of focused attention and concentration? Is it any wonder that after being continuously wired for the commercial sounds of the local rock-and-roll music station students should find it difficult to follow an argument that lasts longer than three minutes? Lenore Langsdorf thinks it is not surprising at all and attributes the inability of many students to recognize and develop any kind of sustained argument in what they read and write directly to the domination of consciousness by the mass media. The critical analysis of information by way of discernment and sustained evaluation simply cannot be accomplished, she argues, by a mind entirely conditioned by the discontinuous 30-second-information-bit. Continuous bombardment by such bits, in fact, negates altogether the possibility of sustained critical reflection. It might be argued, somewhat ironically, that as major sections of the SAT and GRE are also modeled on the disjunctive information bit, they also encourage this process of fractionation. Software designers are increasingly adept nowadays at showing how one can beat such instruments by teaching students to process information more effectively in order to avoid getting stuck with problems of comprehension, since too much attention to comprehension will "slow you down!"

The effect of the ". . . and now this . . ." fragmentation syndrome, then, seems to be direct encouragement of the diastatic, disjointed consciousness in which people are taught, as Hobbs puts it, to encode certain kinds of information for which they have preexisting schemas (e.g., health, sports, entertainment, etc.), and to overlook or ignore data for which they have none (e.g., international affairs, geography, economics, philosophy, science, art, etc.). One obtains schemata for the former mundane type of information simply by being a sentient consumer. But complex schemata cannot be provided simply by being a consumer—at least not by being an ordinary consumer. Again, it is not

that television, by its very nature, is incapable of being used to develop critical schemata. It is rather the case that commercial television chooses not to do so for strictly economic reasons. Hence critical schemas of the type prized in higher education have to be obtained elsewhere. But the obtaining of such schemas—geographic knowledge, for example, or philosophy and politics—is virtually impossible for people who will not spend some considerable time with books or with “life” in the larger sense. And since reading, as mentioned previously, is no longer identified by many as an immediately pleasurable activity but with the slow *work* of critical mediation and reflection, it is not readily evident, given the influence of popular television, how this situation can be improved.

It seems reasonable to conclude with Lenore Langsdorf, then, that the disjunctive, fragmentary, conventional format which dominates broadcast television is a major contributing factor in what she identifies as the inability of many students to see any difference between explanatory and interpretive modes of understanding. Langsdorf develops this distinction by way of pointing out that many students fail to discern any difference between an author’s opinions and the text’s position as that position has been developed through an argument. While the notion that “everyone’s entitled to his/her own opinion” may signal what some might regard as the definitive rise of value egalitarianism, she thinks that this is highly unlikely. A more plausible explanation, given the utilization of opinion polls *ad nauseum* as indices of reality, follows from what she identifies as the *linearnarrative* character of most programming on the mass media. This is evidenced, she points out, by the almost exclusive reliance on simple plots in sitcoms, soaps, action dramas and the even more simplified and/or compressed linear plots in ads and news stories organized, as they are, by what Jeremy Murray-Brown refers to as the “conflict-resolution” model of meaning and value. The simple linear plot is made necessary, of course, by the conventional, commercial format in which the meaning of the message must come across within eight minutes or, in the case of commercials, within 30 seconds. But these format-imposed temporal constraints obviously preclude, Langsdorf argues, the possibility of nonlinear, noncausal analyses of the meaning of what is being broadcast, as viewers always expect automatic resolutions of meaning in the conclusion. Obviously this configuration of format and content means that it is virtually impossible for the viewer to encounter, much less consider, the meaning of values that are critical or transcendental (except, perhaps, on PBS). But lest we take comfort in

the availability of educational television, we are reminded by Renee Hobbs that only about 5-10% of the viewing public ever come into any kind of sustained contact with noncommercial broadcasting. Indeed, educational or public stations have themselves been forced to emulate commercial networks in order to attract viewers and sustain contributors.

Langsdorf is not saying that it is possible to develop transcendental values, critical values, only by way of print media. Her argument is informed, rather, by distinctions having to do with the kind of critical mediation most likely to occur in print versus video media. In short, there is a basic difference between *mediated* experiences which are controlled altogether in terms of being designed as vicarious substitutes for actual experiences, and those experiences that may be termed *lived* or that encourage one to go beyond the agent of mediation. While video experience, like all experience, is lived, there is a fundamental difference between experiencing what is being presented and/or represented by way of second- and third-order mediations (whether in word or image), and the actual experience of what is being mediated. Hence we are forced to confront the larger question having to do with the nature and meaning of what might be termed the new *media dependency* and whether this dependency may not be altering the focal plane of consciousness in such a way that mediation-in-itself becomes a substitute for actual experience, especially for critical questions of whether a given mediation is accurate and therefore true. Such questions force one "beyond" the medium. The cynical adage, "Don't believe what you read in the newspapers," simply does not extend, for most people, to what one "sees on television." One of the more astonishing examples of this, as Murray-Brown indicates, is the growing number of individuals who rent travel videos as a substitute for actually taking the trip.

If it is the case that transcendental values or values of critical substance are best developed in and through lived experience, does this mean that young people in our hypermediated culture are necessarily bereft of such values? Without having a clear answer to this question, Langsdorf has suspicions regarding reliance on the increasingly dominant viewer-monitor relation since it minimizes, far more than the reader-text relation, the need for lived experience in the more immediate sense. The concept of lived experience today, given the domination of video, has the character of being a substitute for all experience, given the tendency of viewers to conclude that everything is like everything else simply because we have instant access to everything—just like on television.

There is every reason to believe, however, that this hypermediated, wired world will become ever more mediated and wired as time goes by. The truly challenging questions facing us have to do with the creative and constructive educational use of this technology, realizing that we can ignore its power only at our own risk. Several of our contributors, especially those with sustained visual media experience, provide creative and challenging indications as to how this might be accomplished or how, at the very least, we might begin to regard video technology as the servant rather than the master of meaning. Robert Scholes's new theory of rhetoric is especially germane in this regard as it is a theory expressly aimed at the analysis and critique of the videos (whether entertainment or commercial videos) that dominate all aspects of popular culture. Such a theory of rhetoric, he explains, is quite different from the views we find expressed in Plato, Aristotle, and the "modernist inheritors of Romanticism" such as Yeats and Joyce. In these cases, he argues, we have a theory of rhetoric informed by what he terms the binary opposites of popular or *low* art, on the one hand, and literary *high* art, on the other. This distinction originates, he believes, in the semi-dualistic configuration of traditional virtues such as action and contemplation, the impure and the pure, of persuasion versus truth. Given the gradual erosion of these oppositions in the modern world, it has been the tendency of the modernist to contemplate the pure aesthetic object as the substitute for knowledge of the allegedly discredited metaphysical and/or supernatural truths of philosophy and religion. Alas, this aesthetical remainder is inadequate for all except the aesthete because, as Hegel was one of the first to observe, "while Enlightenment has the power to empty the wine-skins of belief, it has nothing new to substitute."⁵ As such, the romantic-modernist view of aesthetics might be viewed, it seems, as the final stage in the secular denouncement of the post-Enlightenment pietistic, anikonic religious traditions of the West: These traditions, Dick Hebdige indicates, hold the notion that "God can be apprehended only through the Word" and not through the image. But with the absence of external reference, only subjective feeling remains, and it is feeling doomed to remain subjective apart from any agreement regarding value or, as in Alasdair MacIntyre's view, any consensus regarding the nature of virtue.⁶ Hence it tends to be assumed (perhaps today more than ever, given the tensions between print and video culture), that rhetoric, as Scholes puts it quoting Aristotle, is uniquely suited to "those who cannot follow a long chain of reasoning" (namely,

television viewers) and who, therefore, rely on the emotions (namely, visual immediacy) from which values and/or disvalues follow willy-nilly.

Nevertheless, Scholes argues that this distinction is informed, at bottom, by a false distinction between high and low culture, and that we must begin to recognize that the difference between the world of television and the world of books is one of degree rather than kind. To this end, he commences the task of developing his new theory of rhetoric by way of the notion of *textual economy*, a notion broad enough to include all sorts of texts including video texts, yet narrow enough to address basic questions of value.⁷ Within his notion of textual economy, exchanges of value take place with texts as the media of transfer. In textual economies as in markets of exchange generally, we are dealing with the purchase of something with power for the sake of pleasurable consumption. In such transactions one "surrenders" for a moment, as Scholes cites T.S. Eliot, to the medium of exchange, that is, surrenders to the text. The second and really decisive moment in this transaction, of course, is what he terms "recovery" from this surrender; a recovery that involves or, more accurately, depends upon distantiation whereby one can critically evaluate the "beliefs" one has, in the first moment, entertained.

But from where does one receive the power of "critical distantiation," especially if one's sole source of information is the television video? This is a hotly debated issue and another aspect of the questions raised by Langsdorf. On the one hand there are those who would contend that the power of critical response can only come by way of the printed text (namely, that the "pause" button on one's VCR is not the same as "pausing" to consider the meaning of print), especially the celebrated, canonical texts of high culture. This is the case for the continuation of the classical critical education against whatever odds. Others, like Hobbs, Scholes, and Goethals, take issue with this position: Hobbs by way of arguing that it is a position that presupposes a specific kind of format convention in television; Scholes by way of arguing that the advocates of traditional, classical print-culture tend to overlook differences in the way people actually live their lives, that is, tend to disregard the values and virtues already present in the lives of ordinary folk; and Goethals by her analysis of the mythic structures of ordinary television narratives.⁸ The disregard Scholes alerts us to may be informed by a cultural elitism that simply refuses to recognize the positive values that have developed as the result of mass communication. Nevertheless, such val-

ues are present, Scholes and Goethals argue, in the universally human ability to share the simple aesthetic pleasures of a commercial or sitcom by way of bearing witness to the fact that we are, in fact, alike at deeper levels of meaning and value. And it is a likeness or similarity both formal and material: By paying attention to the images of popular culture, we begin to discover how commercials and videos with iconic or near-iconic status both depend upon and articulate in extremely powerful ways the complex structure of the basic human values they presuppose. In this regard the rhetorical processes informing the operations of television production are no different, Scholes argues, from the processes through which great poets, such as Sophocles and Aeschylus, produced their tragic plays. In both instances, successful production depends upon having creative access to the values the viewers of such productions already possess, to the structures of particular life-worlds, and to the symbolical and valuational elements whereby a given narrative makes sense.

This is why today's videos must be taken seriously and why, according to Scholes, the criticism of videos must be taught in school. After all, it has been the case in print-culture for generations that the task of educators is not merely to get students to read, but to read and appreciate certain books: the so-called Great Books. It follows, then, that central to the task of educators responsive to today's video-culture is the fashioning of an interactive hermeneutics of the video text—a task no more or less difficult than a hermeneutics of the conventional text.

Without question, the present revolution in central and eastern Europe should provide impetus to this challenge. There are many who argue that this revolution, especially its speed and momentum, is fueled by Western television more than any other single medium of communication. While we do not, in this volume, deal directly with this phenomenon, the issues raised with respect to the meaning of video icons & values in the larger international setting clearly suggests another stage of research and, indeed, a sequel to the present study.