

Television and the Unconscious

Donald Kuspit: An Interview

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Donald Kuspit proposes that television is a technology that involves a certain self-hypnosis by the viewer. Television is disintegrative if for no other reason than that the image is inherently broken up much like a mosaic. The image we see is only virtually unified; in fact, it consists of a delicate interplay of atomized bits that are not integrated. The unconscious, Kuspit argues, receives or picks up these monads independently of the unifying horizon that makes up the integrity of the virtual television image. Central to this view is the understanding that television exploits a gap between sensing and understanding an image. Particularly in the case of television, the viewer's libidinal investments are involved, because the image itself has an ersatz unconscious made up of suggestive fragments which are resonating at a level that the eye does not register. Television allows for conditions approximating Freud's depiction of memory in which objectified experiences are made up of smaller fragments whose logic obeys a different law during sleep, namely, that of "drives" as opposed to that of the "real." Watching television, then, is much like dreaming in that the viewer encounters a free flowing of highly charged semiotic fragments that are libidinally connected. What makes the image hypnotic, however, is that the image as a totalizing field has the authority of the real behind it which directs or dictates something to the viewer to structure unconscious perception. How this dictation from without is inscribed into the narcissistic relation we have with the televised scene was a major point Kuspit elaborated and certainly marks a very original and profound insight in the study of video.

Kohut relates the question of narrative to the stage in child development where the child's absence from the mother is punctuated by the mother's "refueling" of the child upon her return. The mother's absences encourage the child to discover a separate sense of self. If one is engaged in a primary process world of the video image, one is not involved in this separation and reunion. How then does one develop this separate sense of self and how can narcissistic injury be healed? One carries the video image with one all the time; the irreproachment is done by the fact that the image is constantly there. One can no longer make that distinction between absence and presence, and the kind of narcissism I have described is the creation of a mosaic mirror which is itself internalized. There is no longer a sense of an autonomous self, except for that supplied by the mirror we carry within us. The new narcissism is defined by its lack of separation. It may be another disfunction, but it is the only way of ending the narcissistic injury Heinz Kohut describes — that is, by internalize the authoritative video image. Of course, one can adjust or refit this image to suit one's self, but the vibrating mosaic field is constant. Image splitting, by the way, has been very successful recently on television. Not only does this make more images possible, it also creates simultaneity within the image field.

Video is a prosthetic narcissistic device. It is a mental crutch. It is an artificial self, an artificial imagining tool which repeats rapprochement without separation, because separation no longer exists. The old idea of being stranded no longer exists. The old idea of being stranded on a desert island with one's favorite book has been replaced: one would not take a book anymore — one would take a television.

Rudolf Arnheim describes video as having effects which are both specific to the medium and necessary for any use of the medium. In your lecture you describe video as creating a dependency in the viewer on the television set, an effect which I inferred to be negative. If video has intrinsic negative effects, how can you point to the positive effects of the medium? I may have been ironic, but I did not intend to characterize these effects as negative. Indeed, video is the analyst. It is impossible to live today without some analytic "other" — not necessarily a tabula rasa — but video does function in this capacity. The positive effects of video allow one to function in the world, somewhat as in this analogy: In *The Ugly American*, the "Ugly American"

becomes a nuisance for trying to force the French Consul into giving up his cocaine habit. Albeit an idealized description of cocaine, I would argue that video is a mass cocaine or opiate. Baudelaire deems a good work of art one that allows the viewer to see the world as if one were on opium. It is as though the world were hyper-real, hyper-sensory, hallucinatory. But at the same time, one is fully "with it" in this world of vibrating sensations. Marx said

that religion is the opiate of the masses, and I submit that video is another kind of opiate of the masses. It satisfies their need for feeling and for having a sense of narcissistic unity. This is the positive effect of video. A world without video would be impossible now, just as a world without opium would have been impossible for Baudelaire.

Why this addiction to video? George Broom, a psychologist who treats addictive behavior, argues that particular addictions, such as alcoholism, are hereditary. Apparently tests can determine whether the child of an alcoholic will also become addicted to alcohol. There is a social addiction to television, which is necessary in order to make up for the narcissistic crippling resulting from our upbringing. Television is a reparational device, and as such, it is much more complicated than telling stories around the so-called campfire.

On the other hand you argue that the mosaic television image produces this libidinal charge, while on the other hand you discuss the effects of different types of narratives. What kind of distinction do you make between the need for romantic and technical fiction, both of which are fulfilled in television serials?

In the beginning of my talk I addressed the inherent quality of the television image as an iconic mosaic within a vibrating luminous field. I also pointed out that television was not being used properly, that it could be reduced to a mechanical means of documentation. In the recording of the senate debates, for example, television becomes another demystification device for presenting information. On television, characters are experienced more as unconscious images than as figures standing in the space of the Senate Rotunda amphitheater and so on. Even though I consciously know that this figure has to do with this issue, I convert the narrative into an internal, unconscious event. The figure becomes an unconscious form of articulation. A good television romance presents its characters to us not only as introjectible and identifiable to our narcissistic selves, but it also activates this libidinous energy instantaneously and spontaneously. When we read a book or see a film, on the other hand, there is a discursive mediation through the printed word or the projection apparatus. Despite the presence of characters, this mediation undermines narcissistic identification psychology. I can still tell myself, "It is just a book." I can leave a movie and say "It is just a film." One cannot say this about video. Thomas Mann was once said to have left a movie in tears. He said to his friends, "Oh, but it's not art — with art you don't cry." In video there is neither laughter nor tears. Instead one introjects both the image and the narrative to a primary process level. The two fuse together in a stream of fantasy whose ultimate purpose is narcissistic completion. The

danger of being made infantile by television arises from the fact that we may never exit this so-called primary process level. Whereas with the movies we are aware of the medium (i.e., the projection apparatus) it is the opposite with video. Video has become a fixture in our homes. Like a wristwatch it is an “internal device.”

You base your inquiry on the subject and its internal objects, but you do not place any emphasis outside the subject. Post-Freudian psychoanalytic theorists, such as Baudrillard, discuss the subject as part of an objective social or cultural group. Could you comment on that? This is a difficult question, but at the heart of these arguments is the theory that schizophrenia has become a social structure. I believe that these theories present an overdeterministic view of our present social structure, and they also assume that the unconscious is not an inherently critical or receptive apparatus. The unconscious, in its bisections, in its restructuring of appearance, and in its working through association, is critical as well as assimilative. The theorists you mention turn the self into a mere reflection of social relations and social reality. They ignore the mystery of “upbringing” — that is, the fact that relatively similar experiences produce different responses. In Baudrillard’s schizophrenic network society, one is not a victim, simply because each individual will network in this society in a different way. That difference, which Deleuze would argue is socially produced, is actually the result of subjective unconscious processes. These theorists are trying to override the uniqueness of subjective unconscious processes in favor of social determination. Freud, for example, in his discussion of hysterics argues that a childhood seduction would lead to hysteria if it occurred up to the age of three or four. By age seven or eight such an episode would be traumatic, but it would not result in the same severe neurosis. The outcome of the seduction for the most part, however, is not entirely predictable from the external event, and this variance is due to subjective unconscious processes. Perhaps society is schizophrenic and disjunctive, but I would argue that speaking of the self, a certain methodological distinction must be made. First, the self is not a coherent structure.

Second, we cannot function unless we act as if the self were a coherent structure on an individual basis. The latter distinction is omitted in certain post-Freudian studies.

What difference do you see between a televised recording of a string quartet performance, and the experience of seeing it in the auditorium? In the auditorium the performers are physically present. One senses the rest of the audience stirring or remaining still. In short, there is a sense of contingency to the event: the performer may make a mistake or something might go wrong. (I might add that this is characteristic of the film image as well.) In the television image of the string quartet, whatever happens is all right. There is no right or wrong about the image: it is simply a flowing fantasy. The television image becomes like a John Cage silence in that we have an interesting noise — the object image, the players, the music — breaking through a consistently flickering iconic mosaic. If on the other hand, you watch a concert on television and you are tuned in on the music, your conscious mind refuses to let your self be hypnotized. You are rejecting the television experience and using it simply as a medium for information. You are not immersing yourself in the medium.

It seems to me that every age has its art form which does exactly what television is doing now. Decades ago, my grandparents would have been shocked by someone going to the movies, because the movies were highly criticized then as television is now for catering to the "masses," but not to the "educated." I do not see any difference between what television finally achieves and what sitting around a campfire once did. Each provides its spectators the same kind of emotional narcissistic experience, just as public statuary provided to the society of fifteenth century Florentine Italy. I accept what you are saying with the following qualifications: You point to narcissistic problems through the ages, which I am willing to accept as a larger problem. But television is also a medium with a specificity of its own. When I look at art television in universities, not just average television

shows, I do not think that the medium's full potential has been released. Suppose people had decided that the potential of nature painting had been exhausted after Giotto? Giotto only started something which was completed in the nineteenth century by the impressionists. Television too, has started something and I hate to see it ended by what passes as television now. In order to point to possible new directions for television, we have to talk about the medium in a different way. Just as Giotto's painting brought us new insights about nature, a subject which everyone had taken for granted, so video could offer us new insights about the unconscious processes.

I am always disturbed by the interference of the camera when I watch television. That is your consciousness
That is why I would prefer seeing a live recital to watching one on television. operating, not your narcissism.
There I can select what I want to look at and listen to, whereas television is dictated to me by someone else's point of view. I cannot see the violin if they are showing me the saxophone. Your intelligence is whatever you see through. The image by its very nature turns into a narcissistic thing in the concert environment, so it does not really matter if you focus on a violin or some other instrument. What matters is the quality of the psychological transformation taking place. When I focus on an instrument on television, I see it both as a violin and as a partial internal object. I am partly hypnotized by it. Perhaps television's task is to combine both conscious focusing on the object with the hypnotic effect. In addition I would add that each age since the Renaissance has tried to make the invisible visible within its own particular art medium.

In our age — that is, the last century and a half — extraordinary symbolic codes have been developed which seek to externalize the invisible. During the Renaissance, portraiture attempted to create a likeness that revealed inner character. This is not to suggest that all Renaissance portraiture succeeded in revealing the inner self the way that Rembrandt did. Many other Renaissance portraits with the same format and the same style did not achieve that character or sense of self that we see in Rembrandt's work. In our age, the concept of the "inner" or the "invisible" has become much more sophisticated. I think that television could give a truly free seeing and free representation by experimenting with the layering effects, types of density and could offer us the potential to explore this latter day inner self. I do not believe that a "high video art" will establish itself just as a "high film art" has; we cannot leave video up to the mass media people. In Meyer Shapiro's famous essay on abstract art, Shapiro argues against Alfred Barr's assertion that abstract art was exhausted. According to Barr, now both types of art are exhausted and some other mode should arrive. Shapiro contends that representation is far from exhausted. Art does not operate according to the principle of a mechanical pendulum. There must be certain conditions such as intellectual awareness and theoretical development in order to effect any change in artistic production. I can see television going completely to hell, to mass media, just as radio has. There is no such thing as high radio. My opinion about television is based upon the expectation of people who are involved in the medium itself.

I would like to propose that television viewing is a performance of the unconscious done by the superego rather than a dream in which the id rules over the unconscious. What happens in the viewing experience when the inhibitions are lifted by the id, versus when the inhibitions are lifted by the superego masking of the id? That's a wonderful argument. Certainly this seems to be the case with the unconscious versions of id, libido, energy, love and death that we see on mass television. I would hope that "high television," if I may continue using that term, would give a truly free seeing and free representation by experimenting with the layering effects, types of density and light structures one can achieve by working with that two dimensional mosaic. Presumably, these would not be performed by the superego; however, as you know, there is never any complete freedom from the superego. One might say that television must discover its own discontentiveness.

My question concerns the methodology you use when you are looking at a piece of video work. Since you are talking about primary process in the unconscious, would your criticism stimulate the imitation of dream analysis or would psycholanalysis have to be reinterpreted in order to fit in this new class of representation? This is a type of dream interpretation in the sense that it deals with the old symbolist problem, but it would have to be extended to include problems such as why a weeping willow is seen as a weeping willow.

The question becomes not one of pathetic fallacy, but rather of why we invest emotion in certain forms. Why do certain video images engage us in a particular way or seem more interesting than others? This would be the starting point of video criticism — an examination of the texture of the medium itself. On a more practical level the next step would involve looking at the kind of symbolic structures articulated in the narrative. This type of psycho-formal analysis would require the synthesis of Greenberg's division between the literal order of effects and the preconscious/unconscious order of effects. Video offers the critic

a special opportunity to unite this division because of the internalization situation which is operational in the medium from the start. the great appeal of video on the popular level is its anaesthetic and hypnotic effects. One flicks on the television, one knows it is there and these are reminders of its power.

What happens to your argument if, through technological developments, the mosaic quality or definition of the grain in the video became imperceptible? I have seen a certain type of high resolution video image which is already being produced in Japan, yet even in that image a certain flickering intensity remains. If there were such a thing as total resolution in the video image, then we would have something like film, and that would be a different problem. I would still maintain, however, that the vibrant sensation within the iconic mode is specific to television, even if its presence seems to become subliminal through higher image quality. In addition, no matter how high the resolution of the image, it still emanates from the apparatus. Perhaps, with the VCR, the division between television and film is becoming narrower, but watching a film on television is still a televisual experience. It is possible that someday there may be a convergence of film, photography and video into a universal medium. I imagine that in the future, receivers will be available where one can stop the action as it is happening, play back the images and splice them right on the set. That would present an interesting opportunity for creating one's own narcissistic resolution. Yet this does not take into account what will happen to the scale of the image. I do not know how television would respond to the issue of scale. I have watched large screen television, and in my opinion, it looks like a bad film.

Perhaps film, photography and video, each have a limited life in terms of use value for our narcissistic purposes, eventually will fuse and become multimedia. The major issue that remains is the reparative function of art. Since Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in the nineteenth century, we have a theory which posits art as a means of recuperating from the nausea of existence. This function of art has been revived by certain psychoanalytic theorists who see in art a potential healing device for the injured self. Perhaps society is becoming so administrative that we need not worry if we are injured or repaired. The conscious perception of ourselves as neurotic may be an elite privilege. Just as in 1984 there was, on the one hand, this wonderful world of well-adjusted hard-working people, and on the other hand, there was the slum filled with people who wanted to have sex outside. Our world may one day be divided between those who work for a giant corporation and the shabby people who turn to art or to universities. Perhaps art is simply an elitist way of treating elitist problems. After all, the majority of people in the West seem to solve their problems with Oil of Olay — and watching a lot of television.



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