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7 Trash TV

Thrift-Shop Video/More s More

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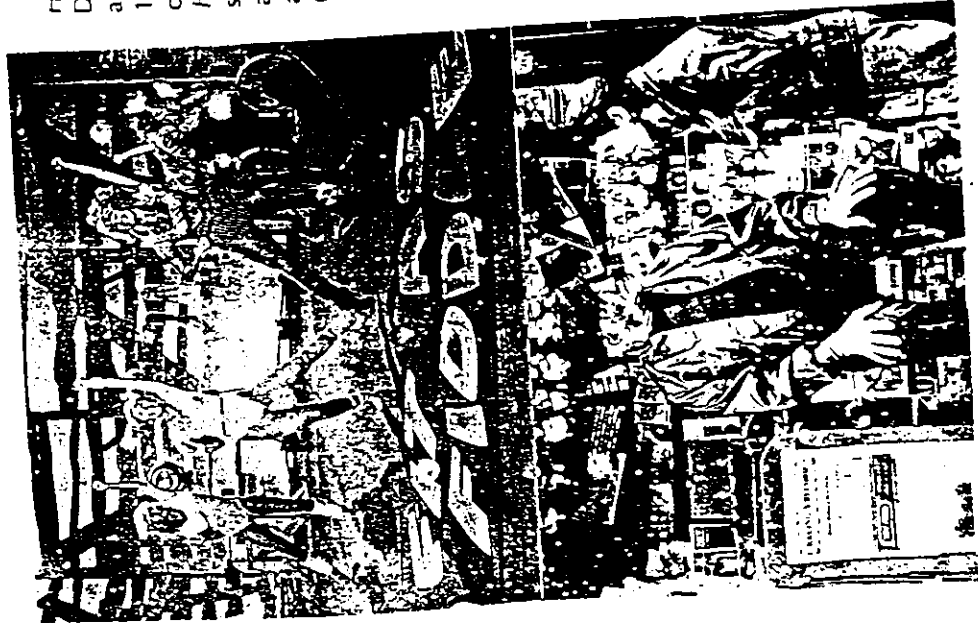
And now for something completely different—a man with three buttocks.
—Monty Python's *Flying Circus*

We've tried not to talk down to children. [Many] Saturday morning cartoons . . . assume kids aren't intelligent and won't notice if [they] are inconsistent, illogical and poorly made. We respect kids—their intelligence, their humor. . . . We're trying to make a better product.
—The producers of *Rugrats*¹

Trash has always gotten a bum rap from television critics. I would like to salvage the designation "trash," for it offers one of the best ways to describe and understand televisual excess. If we dispense once and for all with the notion that trash is a moral judgment and consider it an art historical and iconographic tool, then one of television's favored guises makes more sense as a historical phenomenon. Peter Jennings notwithstanding, trash television did not begin with *Rock-and-Rollergames*, *Thunder and Mud*, or *American Gladiators*. These were merely manifestations of television's increasing penchant for loading up the space in front of the camera with as much clutter and cast-off material as could be mustered. The white-trash country-and-western spectacle *Hee-Haw* in the 1960s, Monty Python's imported *Flying Circus*, and *Sanford and Son* in the 1970s were but three early examples of the same televisual mode that would be later celebrated by academics as cutting-edge in *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* in the 1980s. If signature television exaggerates authorial intent and loss-leader television exaggerates history and narrative, then trash television baits the viewer by exaggerating space into overwhelming proportions. Its exhibitionist mantra? "Let's get physical." Its aesthetic maxim? "One man's bohemia is another man's garbage dump."

In the sensitive boutique of the designer, the domineering marquee of the spectacle, and the mass-market packaging of digital franchising, we must admit, once and for all, to the importance of an additional televisual paradigm: thrift-shop video. Within this guise, the power of a show is directly proportional to the sheer number of objects, items, surfaces, and bodies that a producer can stuff into the studio space. Liberating trash from its moral definition also reveals that the thrift-shop paradigm is free from the bias bound in traditional notions of high and low culture. Seen from a semiotic point of view, then, *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* is little different from low-culture schlock like *Hee-Haw*, *WWF Professional Wrestling*, *Ruts All-Stars*, and *Knights and Warriors*. They all seek to overwhelm the viewer not with narrative or history, but with physical stuff and frenetic action. From a systems theory point of view, this kind of communication is dominated by informational noise. There simply is no background. Everything is channeled up front. Seen from the perspective of the garage-sale aesthetic mastered by many discriminating viewers, however, this kind of spatial overload is one of the chief pleasures that comes from the televisual tube. As any weekend warrior will tell you,

trash precursor Hee-Haw (its "Fit as a Fiddle Dancers" shown here) and Sanford and Son (its 1986 Redd Foxx Show clone here) cashed in on horror-vacui—excessively loaded space and unabashed "clutter aesthetic." (Terrence O'Flaherty Collection, Arts Library—Special Collections, UCLA)



garage-sale foraging demands as much cultural distinction and buyer discrimination as any form of televisual auteurism.

In terms of mode of production, trash television privileges techniques deprecated by the higher televisual guises. Whereas cinematic forms of spectacle depend on sensitive photographic imaging and subtle transfers to electronic stock, and videographic televisual forms create virtual electronic worlds, trash television merely collects foraged things. If cinematographers, directors, and DVE artists rule the other worlds, then the lower production crafts rule the trash television guise: art directors, set decorators, costume designers, claymation artists, and model builders. Trash excesses have as much to do with carpentry, sawdust, clay, and paint, as they do with electronics or photochemistry. With shows like *Fraggle Rock*, *The Jim Henson Hour*, *Pee-wee's Playhouse* in the mid-1980s, and MTV's *Remote Control*, sets took on an importance they had not been given before.² Their complicated physical surfaces, clashing colors,³ disjointed angles all provided an experience not seen since *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* ruled the expressionist cinema. This fascination with space as an

Hustling hyperactivity off-primetime. *The Electric Company* on PBS and the *Solid Gold Dancers*. (Terrence O'Flaherty Collection, Arts Library—Special Collections, UCLA)



expressive vehicle, even if they did not ape trash's preoccupation with splattered paint and latex molds. The game-show genre, never one to shy away from its own importance, evolved a studio style also meant to overwhelm the audience. *Wheel of Fortune*, one of the most popular shows in the 1980s, proved that audiences would pay to lose themselves in an interior world of flashing lights, bright colors, and artificial surfaces. Overweight visitors from the "midwest" stumbled over their primary-colored and bannistered confines to heave the enameled wheel—even as the ever-mute and vogueing Vanna surfaced her abdomen with metallic sequins of teal and aqua.³

While Vanna and Pat Sajak enceed soundstage electric conglomerations modeled on Las Vegas and automall showrooms, the MTV network continued its defacto role as R&D for trash television's neoboheemian excesses. Their never-ending succession of bumper and station material proved an endless mine for uglier but hipper versions of trash television. MTV's haste to spin out ever newer physical looks throughout the season meant that the paint and the clay digitally crunched into their spinning graphics never seemed to be around long enough to dry. As with all of the major visual guises, trash television seldom comes to the viewer clean—its painterly, architectural, and sculptural ecstasies are frequently combined

and infiltrated with other modes: videographics, motion photography, animation, and filmed clips.

As the fashion of postmodernism passed through academic circles, shows like *Max Headroom* and *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* faded from the theoretical spotlight. Yet this transience is illusory for the trashy visual excesses of both shows lives on in a variety of ways across the broadcast and cable spectrum. Even economic downsizing and the recession have not ended the programming viability of trash TV. *Dinosaurs*, a Henson clone on ABC, weekly brings to primetime a rubbery and sculpted virtual sitcom world, and a nuclear family that is both paleolithic and postmodern. *Beakman's World* resuscitates Pee-Wee's junk-ridden plastic world and combines it with educational and scientific lessons for network consumption on CBS. *Sea Monkeys* turns comedian Howie Mandel into a performance artist, ricocheting through a fantasy world of crowded technosets, assemblage, fish-eye lenses, and characters disguised as lower nautical life-forms. For the younger post-X generation set, Nickelodeon's *Roundhouse*, staffed by a large ensemble of frenetic adolescent performers, hybridizes the discarded sets and props of trash television, together with street-culture hip-hop, and the amphetamine-driven pace of *Laugh-In*.

Far from dead, trash television continues to hybridize itself and infiltrate other forms. The handmade look of trash television became a part of Arsenio Hall's opening in 1993. The sequence boasted "seventy-five cuts in twenty-five seconds," for a mind-numbing subliminal pace of one-third of a second per shot. Each image was hand-painted, pixilated, and animated with wet paint. Like experts on art historical hybridity, the producers argued that the jagged edges that dominated the *Arsenio* sequence were both modernist and African.⁴ Even Fox's *Roc*, touted as a renaissance in live ensemble drama, invoked the aggressive violence of trash physicality. It's opening collaged images created from jagged and contrasty lineum cuts—one of the lowest and crudest forms of the printmaker's art, a technique frequently explored in elementary schools. In *Living Color* mastered trash physicality as well. As its opening sped through a sequence of frenetic shots, performers threw cans of paint at the lens of the camera, an abstract expressionist gesture that invoked both Jackson Pollack's action painting and street-smart graffiti tagging.⁵

Many of these trash shows defy conventional demographic categories. Even those intended for adult audiences, like *American Gladiators*, exploit remedial appeals more typical of children's programming. Many shows, like *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* and *Dinosaurs*, crossed-over in attempts to work both adult and child audiences, a trait that left theorists wondering if children got the loaded and ironic adult references. Such a question could now be directed at almost any trash or children's show on television. An afternoon episode in 1993 of the Amblin/Stephen Spielberg/Warner's series *Tiny Toon Adventures*, for example, masqueraded from start to finish as a *Citizen Kane* clone on Fox.⁶ Do kids get the reference to Welles? The producers of the animated series *Rugrats*—having announced their commitment to high artistic standards and to not speaking down to the audience—suggested that children can indeed interpret these references.

By 1992, the apparent emptiness evident in infantile trash programming began to change. The FCC began to measure the networks to



Warped architecture, carpenters and set decorators on acid in early, pre-Rubens 1980s. *Trivia Trap* (ABC) and *Out of Control* (Nickelodeon). (Terrence O'Flaherty Collection, Arts Library—Special Collections, UCLA)

insure that a certain percentage of children's programming provided educational value. The official responses of some broadcasters cynically reported that the *Flintstones* and the *Jetsons*, because of their interpersonal dramatizations, were indeed educational programs. Even acting FCC chairman James H. Quello reacted with skepticism by counseling such apologists that if he had to choose which program to air, he'd pick a show that was specifically meant to be educational.⁶ Worried about the continued emptiness of children's fare, then, the FCC delivered only an innocuous warning—one that still clearly tied educational status to broadcaster intent and interpretation. In many ways, this ambivalent regulatory incursion was really a smokescreen, for many of the new animated series (*Tiny Toon Adventures*, *Disney's Ducktales*, *Rugrats*, *The Simpsons*) and iconographically trashy shows (*Ren and Stimpy*, *Beavis and Butt-head*, *Liquid Television*) were packed with smart cultural references, ironies, parodies, and intertextual paradoxes. Intellectually loaded, yes. Educationally valuable, who knows? With trash television, education is in the eye of the beholder. One lesson, however, is obvious. The spatial and temporal excesses that define trash television, also inevitably flood the viewer with knowing references. The accumulation of junk and gestural marks swirling around the perform in these shows is matched only by the thickened flood of smart cultural codes given off by the very same objects.

The best indication of the continued financial clout of the trash television guise can be found at NBC. The network banked on the look for its corporate image in 1993–1994, when it announced to the public that it was commissioning an array of “important artists” to redo and reinterpret the NBC Peacock, a corporate symbol first created in 1956. Among those artists showcased to “draw attention to the new fall schedule”: multimedia director David Daniels (from *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse* and Peter Gabriel music videos fame), computer animator Mark Malmborg (MTV’s *Liquid Television* and the film *The Lawnmower Man*), animator Joan Gratz (creator of the clay-painting technique), Pop artist Peter Max, caricaturist Al Hirschfeld, *Beavis and Butt-head* animator J. J. Sedelmaier, and *Ren and Stimpy Show* animator John Kricfalusi. NBC claimed that the “new logos express the [network’s] new spirit of rebirth, revitalization and, above all, fun.”⁷ The hallucinogenic and hyperactive look of trash was publicly positioned as a key to this network’s personality overhaul. Even as Paul Rubens’s public image was only slowly rehabilitating from his indecency indictment and acquittal, his creative people—and the excessive look he helped popularize in *Pee-Wee*—were being brokered for much broader corporate and network interests.

Case Study: Pee-Wee’s Bourgeois Bombshelter Modernism Meets the Mass Media

In the fall of 1993, Fox premiered *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, a show that was hyped by the network as a “live action—science fiction—comedy.” Combining “elements of *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Transformers*, *The Monkees*, and toy commercials,” the new series packed as many different presentational modes as possible within each weekly episode: live action, animation, martial arts, videographics, “interplanetary sorceress Rita Repulsa,” and motion-effects robot models.⁸ By simultaneously assaulting the viewer through so many stylistic channels and by directly tying-in the experience to the robot-toys hawked during ads in the show, *Power Rangers* was merely the latest in a line of hyperactive trash programs that followed the success of *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*. Shows in this genre are defined by throwing as much radical-looking form at the viewer as possible, even as they unabashedly promote specific consumer products. This hybrid stylistic and consumerist flurry raises some important issues about the cultural implications of televisuality. On the one hand, the genre bears all the marks of radicality proposed by twentieth-century avant-garde polemicists. Yet the same shows do not wear well the revolutionary mantle woven by prescriptive theorists and aestheticians. In fact, the continued success of *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse* on commercial network CBS from 1986–1991 suggests that this particular exercise in avant-gardism was exactly what the mass audience and, one assumes, the dominant culture wanted.

In addition to its mass television viewership, the Pee-Wee phenomenon also worked over ancillary markets. A line of Pee-Wee fashions was introduced and marketed by retail heavyweight J.C. Penney. Other companies sold miniatures of Pee-Wee directly to Americans in a manner previously successful only for dolls with less confusing gender traits (like Barbie and Ken). The series also had a direct

The production company for the series, Broadcast Arts, simultaneously produced nonprogram form. As that surrounded and were interspersed throughout the show. Clearly derivative of the series in look and technique was an entire genre of rapid and frenetic thirty-second commercial spots for breakfast cereals and junk food. Many of these spots and transitional devices depended upon the same pictorial overload and semiotic abundance that characterized *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*. Pee-Wee had taken the narrative pace and visual density of Saturday morning network programming and cranked them up several notches.

Theorists did not wait long to embrace *Pee-Wee* as quintessentially postmodern. *Camera Obscura*, a film journal with a history of engagement with Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, devoted most of one issue to the psychosexual significance of the show. In the “Cabinet of Dr. Pee-Wee: Consumerism and Sexual Terror,” Constance Penley argued that “the interest of this show lies in the way it represents masculinity and male homosexuality” around the problematic and off-limits terrain of infantile sexuality.⁹ Gay camp, male hysteria, and sexual inquiry were argued to be keys to the meaning of *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*. Other essays in the journal repeated many of the very same examples to critically justify a Freudian reading of *Pee-Wee*.¹⁰ While industry trade magazines focused on special effects and production technology in the show, other academic journals isolated explicitly homosexual themes within the show.¹¹ The delimited approach that these articles take to the show (that the *Playhouse* is an allegory of sexual inquiry) and the broader issues that they overlook or downplay (political and cultural issues, the play of semiosis and consumerism) suggest that more is at stake in the new genre than a crisis of heterosexuality. To argue that spoken lines and actions in the program fit, say, a Freudian paradigm for sexuality is to engage in a type of criticism that may be inappropriate for the televisual experience that actually unfolds for the viewer of *Pee-Wee*. This kind of reductive interpretation works well with classical television and cinema, precisely because those forms intentionally conceal their formal and stylistic elements in order to privilege plot and narrative. Plot and narrative elements are precisely the kind of verbal and allegorical components that the *Camera Obscura* critics target, isolate, and extract. *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*, by contrast, barrages and engages the viewer with multiple and simultaneous image, sound, and graphic signs. Viewers face, then, not plot or narrative, but excessive composite signs comprised of sensory elements that otherwise seem unrelated or contradictory. Many of the show’s formal combinations are, in addition, explicitly cultural and political rather than psychoanalytic in nature. Rather than acknowledging the overt density of the text that the viewer of *Pee-Wee* actually confronts—a density that is both stylistic and ideological—reductivist and psycho-allegorical analyses verge on the kind of content analysis one associates with empiricist broadcasting studies.¹² In its hyperactive formal and narrative construction, *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse* presented a new and different kind of perceptual relationship between the viewer and the television box, one that placed heavy non-narrative demands on the thrift-shop spectator.

The analysis that follows suggests how the perceptual demands of *Pee-Wee* complicate the ways that a television viewer constructs meaning. Such demands result from the program’s active occupation with visual style, a tendency evident in many presentational aspects of the series. As much as any other show during

the decade, *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* establish a fundame pictorial and iconographic dynamic as an essential part of its engagement with viewers. The analysts that follows will show, first, how the program can be simultaneously seen as both modernist and postmodernist. This confused status thus makes problematic a fashionable critical dichotomy and categorical distinction popular in post-structural theory. Second, the analysis will attempt to describe the peculiar ideological dynamic involved in this excessive form of pictorial engagement. Such an engagement depends not only upon the symbolic nature of the character of Pee-Wee, but also on his commodity-filled domestic environment. The analysis suggests, among other things, that the designation postmodernism incompletely explains the net effect of *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*. A closer and in-depth look at the formal components of this series helps clarify both the continuing pleasures and the ideological stakes that typify the genre as a whole.

Formal Components of the (Play)House That Brecht and Godard Built

Even a cursory application to *Pee-Wee* of the seven tendencies of radical modernism articulated by Peter Wollen shows that this children's daytime genre is an outright act of "counter-cinema."¹³ It is immediately clear in analysis that the form of the show strikingly illustrates the progressive norms laid down by avant-garde patriarchy Brecht and Godard.¹⁴ Before considering the show's significance in the 1980s and 1990s, it is essential to show how the program arms itself with the stylistic weapons of radical modernism. The following examples follow Wollen's seven canonized principles of radicality.

Narrative intransitivity. Classical narrative depends upon cause and effect, or what Wollen terms transitivity. With narrative causality, one action, scene, or event seems to justify, lead to, or to motivate subsequent events in the fiction. *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, on the other hand, dramatically ignores and avoids causality in favor of textual fragmentation. Like other broadcast forms and genres, the program's narrative is necessarily ruptured by commercial breaks and advertisements. But unlike many other broadcast forms, the fragmentation is not limited to the tension between program and commercial. Rather, the process of intransitivity and randomness is intratextual as well. Loaded with a variety of elements, each show is characterized by an extremely unmotivated and loose linkage between individual stories, segments, and program parts. The frantic intra-episodic flow and mix of various skits and performances (the King of Cartoons, Jamb, Cowboy Curtis, Penny's claymation narratives) imply that there is no underlying narrative causality at work—nor is one apparently needed for the show to work.

Estrangement. The Pee-Wee character is not cast or postured as empathetic. Since empathy or pathos are requisite parts of classical drama, the reasons for Pee-Wee's presence as a plastic and infantile child-man are worth considering. Whether Pee-Wee's performance evokes childish hyperactivity or the performance art of Russian futurism, the net result is the same. Both hyperactivity and futurist performance are based on forms of estrangement and viewer identification. Neither are behaviors that allow for easy engagement and viewer identification. In each epi-



Stylistic fragmentation (neoprimativism, Art Deco, 1950s linoleum, and classical statuary) mirrors the show's disruption-driven narrative form. Pee-Wee, a human projectile, flies past the camera and toys with cooking show conventions. (CBS)

filming, Pee-Wee is also repeatedly filmed in wide angle. Such a lens further distorts his face by magnifying facial features close to the lens (like his nose), while stretching the rest of his cranial ovoid back into the distance. Aggressive blocking of the actor in the opening segment shown each week causes Pee-Wee to fly and orbit the camera. The camera can only frantically pan in an attempt to follow this hunt. projectile.

Secondary actors in the series, like Miss Yvonne and Cowboy Curtis, are also

objectified and caricatured through over-simplification, caricature, and gaudiness. They function in the playhouse less as sites of consciousness and feeling, than as caricatures and one-dimensional stock types. This performance demeanor, then, is the antithesis of either depth psychology or Stanislavsky method acting. There is no emotional center and little potential for the subjective identification one associates with empathetic and caring daytime hosts like Mr. Rogers. Personalities are reduced to mere surfaces and types. Relationships are subordinate to a textual logic that is more plastic and sculptural than interpersonal. Invariably, these types physically clash, rather than relate, when they make contact with each other. Both in relationships with the other characters and with the audience, Pee-Wee brings new meaning to the ideal of estrangement.

Foregrounding. While more traditional styles work to serve and emphasize content, modernism has come to be associated with foregrounding and an explicit emphasis on form. As much as any other tendency, the inversion of the hierarchy of content and form that dominated the arts from the classical period on has become a hallmark of modernism. While for Clement Greenberg this foregrounding norm involved a reduction to essential formal elements and self-referentiality, others, like Godard, utilize foregrounding as a ritual of reflexivity and self-critique. *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* works on both levels. First, there is no background. Pee-Wee's person is comprised of a world of props, sets, and electronic graphics. Content or subject matter is no longer a meaningful distinction because the formal stuff of television is also the subject of this show. Second, Pee-Wee's foregrounding also provides a ritual of self-reference and critique.

At one point, the actor looks directly overhead and into a ceiling-mounted camera. The viewer is given a bird's-eye view of Pee-Wee's faux-gourmet skills in a clear parody of PBS-type cooking shows. This direct address in no way shatters the filmic illusion. Rather, Pee-Wee's knowing look suggests that generic play is at the root of the playhouse experience. In addition, videographic devices and funky electronic effects are used throughout the program, like the keyed electronic halation effect glowing around Jambi in his box. Even the repeated transitions to commercial breaks foreground form. To get to and from commercial breaks and advertising spots viewers must pass through a television control room replete with preview monitors and images of the show itself. Artifice is front and center and self-reference is pervasive in the Playhouse.

Multiple diegesis. Whether or not most classical works have a *singular* narrative world, they typically have a single *dominant* world that underlies and organizes various subplots. In *Pee-Wee*, however, the entire experience is comprised of subplots and secondary tellings. In one of the three episodes analyzed here (the "missed invitation to the party" episode), there are thirty different parts and segments within the show itself, plus an additional twelve commercial spots. This means that the viewer faces forty-two discrete narrative events within a thirty-minute period. Each diegetic segment or part, then, is less than a minute in length. In addition to the flux and transition caused by these competing diegetic worlds, there are multiple narrators. Magic-Screen narrates lessons in the text, the animated Penny, Jambi, and the King of Cartoons do so as well. Narrating responsibilities are shuffled from a multiple, rather than an alienating and relations are an integral and regular part of the series, rather than an alienating and



Jambi's funky video graphics, splintered shards of resolution-less 1930s cartoons, and audience address that reifies sight. (CBS)

Aperture. Along with narrative causality and motivation, final resolution is a fundamental component in the orthodox wisdom on narrative. Works that do not fully and finally resolve themselves fail according to such standards. By contrast, irresolution and openness, termed "aperture" by Wollen, are touted as viable counter-aesthetics for radical media makers. Significantly, narrative closure and resolution are not a part of the world of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*. One episode orbits around the issue of alienation by making the viewer guess whether or not Pee-

Wee will be invited to a party. Ironically, the question is never fully answered, since Pee-Wee does not finally make it to the party at the end of the episode. More traditional shows, even on recent television, work hard to answer any underlying fictional questions or premises once they are raised. This obligation to tie-up loose ends is an important part of screenwriting orthodoxy. The *Playhouse*, however, is satisfied to raise central questions, and to move on without fully resolving them. Even the cartoons screened within the show each week are merely random *fragments* of primitive 1930s cartoons—never complete or resolved productions.

In the spirit of the *Playhouse*, the cartoons are shown without narrative beginnings or endings. One can assume that such things, along with many other aspects of narrative thought to be obligatory, are no longer necessary in this form of trash television. Finally, like American television in general, the program switches to commercial breaks only at points of greatest aperture or irresolution. The number of commercial spots, then, also guarantees many secondary points of irresolution. As Sandy Flitterman has argued, this pervasive trait—the cliff-hanging segue to commercial spots—works according to its own devious logic.¹⁵ The constant irresolution of the text, and the viewer's corresponding anxiety, are only answered in the falsely resolved world of the commercials. Because resolution is only available in the ads, the agent of resolution is always extratextual, and the power that comes with resolution is always assigned to the ads. The connection between the world of the fiction and the world of the product is systematically exploited in trash televisuality.

Displeasure. In what must be ranked as one of the great achievements in recent sophistry, the Brecht-Godard-Wollen tradition suggests that pain is an essential part of viable and progressive art. Good and emancipatory works do not pander to the easy sensual appetites of bourgeois consumer/viewers. It is important to note, however, that this brand of politically motivated asceticism was promoted by the theorists before the televisual age. Obviously, a mass market show like *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* would not be on the air if there were no pleasure for large numbers of viewers. Even Brecht recognized the need for some emotional engagement along with instruction. Nevertheless, this show is filled with distancing and painful elements. Pee-Wee throws at least two major tantrums in the alienation episode. At one point in the tirade, even the floor yells at Pee-Wee to stop the noise! Pee-Wee also goes ballistic in a later scene, when struggling to write a letter to the Advice Lady. The viewer is, notably, never allowed to see the contents of the letter being written, even though such access would normally be deemed appropriate from a director's perspective. Instead, the shot lingers on Pee-Wee in medium close-up and forces the viewer instead to deal with the emotional trauma (his high-volume vocal outbreak and protest) rather than with the subject of the scene (his formal request for advice). Finally, one recurrent event disrupts these episodes as it does every other installment in the series. On a weekly basis, Pee-Wee tells the children at home to scream at the top of their voices when key theme words appear in the show.¹⁶ As if their displeasure about child viewers inflict upon parents early on Saturday mornings were not enough, all of the cast and props within the diorama also join in the behavior by emitting on screen in a fashion

of screams a tantrum. Mimesis's device of promoting displeasure to achieve distancing here becomes more mainstream and celebratory—modeled less on Brecht than on primal scream therapy.

Reality. Like Godard, Pee-Wee makes repeated use of direct address by facing the camera and speaking to the audience. In conventional terms this sort of address should disrupt both fiction and mindless consumption by showing the televised event to be a concrete act of communication or exchange. Here, however, the device does anything but disrupt or shatter the illusion of viewing. Continued viewership suggests that the mass audience is not apparently threatened or challenged by such confrontations with reality. Other examples of the show's penchant for reality therapy and explicitness abound. In one scene, Pee-Wee is criticized and defensively responds by retorting that he "has a million [TV] friends." One weapon, then, in Pee-Wee's textual arsenal is his ability to acknowledge and exploit the reality of his star persona.

Ruptures and manipulations of reality are also found in more subtle examples throughout the show. Many of Pee-Wee's reaction shots and comments exist clearly for adult consumption. More mature viewers get it, of course, when Pee-Wee calls Ms. Yvonne "real busy."¹⁷ Throughout the episode, Pee-Wee also enacts sophisticated and sometimes subtle ironic facial reactions. These ironic gazes and reactions are directed variously at the characters and the camera. Knowing looks like these suggest that such guises exist for the benefit of learned viewers who know the realities of the media and of the depicted issues. These overtly signaled mannerisms are really a method of acting more related to David Letterman and five stand-up comedy than to fictional film and television acting. Like the aggression operative in much comedy, such references work at the expense of a third party. In Pee-Wee's case the *victim* of the reference is the mock show itself. Ruptures of reality like these, then, are less counteractive and disruptive than they are tactics intended to seal an alliance with the viewer-consumer.

Pictorial Aspects of Postmodernism

In examining two episodes of *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, my analysis so far has focused on two questions. First, what are the favored pictorial and stylistic components of televisuality; and second, how do these modernist strategies promote or resist viewer oppositionality? Given the fact that *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* so comprehensively fulfills the aberrant ideals of avant-garde radicality, it is worth examining why such shows fail to threaten or disrupt dominant culture. How and why do these kinds of avant-garde strategies survive on network television?

Periodization in arts history can be a trap, as this example clearly indicates. One solution to understanding televisual exhibitionism may be to resist compartmentalizing such works under discrete stylistic categories in order to shift the analysis to the logic or signification process that governs stylistic choice. Much can be gained by considering postmodernism according to its *ideological* rather than *formal* logic. Postmodernism as characterized by Baudrillard, Jameson, Hal Foster, and others gains much of its power by dissolving traditional distinctions between subject and object/public and private and between different historical

periods.¹⁸ One common thread among such theorists recognizes the catholic taste and pluralism of postmodernist culture. Postmodern institutions like television seem ever eager to assimilate even oppositional or antagonistic forces and recast them within a new dynamic of consumerism. Counter-cinematic strategies then, do not guarantee oppositionality, at least under the shadow of postmodernism.

Trash television, and the *Playhouse* in particular, can be further understood by applying the four categories that Jameson describes as central to postmodernism. According to this view: postmodernism turns reality into images; it reduces time to a series of perpetual presents; it utilizes and favors pastiche or blank parody; and finally, postmodernism employs a schizophrenic form of communication and cultural behavior. Consider, then, *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* as a stylistic exercise in postmodernism instead of modernism.

Reality into images. All of Pee-Wee's world is artificial. The excessive visuality and artifice of the *Playhouse* makes German expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* pale by comparison. The sweeping introduction to each episode is filmed with an optical snorkel camera that roams wildly across Pee-Wee's miniature world. The technique works to present his world as an abundant visual spectacle, so excessive that the viewer must fly over it. In addition, the lighting in each episode is high key and flat. As a result, two-dimensional surfaces are emphasized—rather than the three-dimensional depth and modeling one associates with more directional or expressive forms of lighting. Highly chromatic images are composed of bright pastels or primary colors. Even foods—merely objects of physical sustenance in the "real" world—are seen here as circuitlike performers that dance before the spectator. The refrigerator, for Pee-Wee and the viewer, is framed as a proscenium. The food becomes a kinetic spectacle that the audience must look passively into and onto. The lighting, color, sets, camerawork, and performance all present the fictional world not as a world, but as pictures. *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* introduced and exploited visual artifice to an extent only hinted at by earlier shows on network television. The *Playhouse* is a spectacle.

Perpetual presents. Time is only slightly less important in the *Playhouse* than visual artifice. The character Pee-Wee is served up to the audience by the show as someone with no readily available history. Pee-Wee has no parents, no siblings, no pedigree, no personal background. Furthermore, Pee-Wee is a walking contradiction of bodily time. He is a boy-man, a person difficult to categorize in terms of normal developmental stages: he has the personality of a child in the body of a man. Time, though, is not simply twisted biographically or developmentally. Sets and props also complicate and problematize the desire for a coherent sense of time. Pee-Wee's room is loaded with various items from the past. Toys from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s are all pulled out of their historical context and recombined in the *Playhouse* present. In addition, Pee-Wee is shown on or before each station/identification spot, frozen on a *preview monitor*. The character is always as if were, on hold, never over or away from the place and time. Without past or future, Pee-Wee either uses the present for his excessive performance or is depicted in limbo, waiting for the present. Significantly, the room clock in the main set frame wildly out of control, suggesting that the playhouse is out of sync from



The visual spectacle of carnival devours food behind the refrigerator door. The studio clock spins wildly in a perpetual present, and Pee-Wee is frozen perpetually in CBS switcher's preview mode. (CBS)

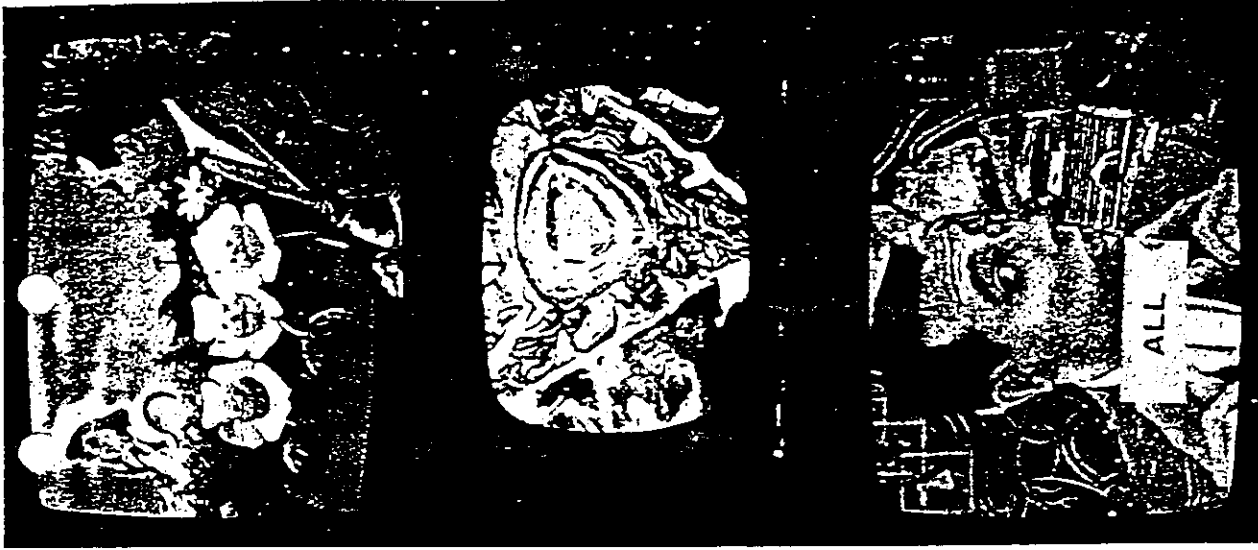
ity, a person without natural time, and the playhouse is no less atemporal, for any and all references to time are simultaneously denied, appropriated, and paraded in the perpetual present of Rubens's performance art. Pee-Wee's dramatized atemporality stands in stark contrast to the linkage broadcasting inevitably makes to consumer time—to the program's thirty-minute weekly airing each Saturday

atemporality of the *Playhouse* fuels the unconscious temporality of consumer time and vice versa.

Pastiche. As Jameson points out, even high modernist works utilized parody. Pastiche, by contrast, is argued to be a blank or disinterested form of parody that typifies postmodern culture. Pastiche operates in contemporary works of mass culture that base their form on retrospective styling. That is, many contemporary works style themselves after earlier periods without any regard for the original intent, logic, or significance of those styles. Retrostyling is also a fundamental semiotic part of *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*. Scores of distinct artistic styles are ripped out of their meaningful contexts and placed in the playhouse environment. A leveling process occurs that decontextualizes all iconographic components of the mix: a surrealist collage is offered to Ms. Yvonne as a portrait; a Greek Ionic column supports a classical portico next to the barber's pole on the playhouse; an aboriginal totem is juxtaposed with a 1950s tear-drop lamp; a red Naugahyde-padded art door—a castoff from the bowling alley subculture—exists in the same room as Gainsborough's classical paintings. All of this overt and self-satisfied aestheticism pervades a room filled with three decades of postwar consumer toys. *Pee-Wee's* environment, then, uses art history (all of it) and low culture in combination. The result is, to use Jameson's term, an extreme example of "historical amnesia." Historical styles are merely toys that humor *Pee-Wee* and his friends. In the playhouse, art history gives way to antiquarianism, and style is valued because it can be collected and accumulated. The aura of the playhouse is based less on an artistic world aesthetic, than it is on the antique store, the garage sale, and the swap meet.

Schizophrenia. Jameson means by this term a kind of disorder wherein signifiers are no longer coherent or continuous, a view that he bases on Lacan's theory of language. *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* is certainly worth considering in this regard, since it is preoccupied with the play and manipulation of signifiers. Signs and objects are transformed and given new meanings as an automatic and regular part of the show. Signs, inevitably, no longer function as they were intended to. A sculpted Greek discus thrower, for instance, becomes a mere door handle in the Playhouse. By this act, the signifier for classicism is transformed into an item one might purchase at a hardware store. In like manner, one episode taught children how to make "ice-cream soup." Such a "lesson" creates a recombinant sign that disavows the difference between hot and cold food products and that disrupts the designations that regiment cuisine.

Words as well as objects are part of the schizophrenic game of signs. In the dinosaur family vacuum cleaner episode, *Pee-Wee* teaches everyone to add an "o" automatically to the end of their names. This is clearly reminiscent of word-salad games actually played by schizophrenics, where words are merely spoken and linked based on their sounds and physical characteristics. Other rituals in the series are centered around verbal re-creation and play with language. Children and objects convulse frenetically and gongs go off when nearly meaningless secret words are spoken. Eruptions of behavior based on coded stimuli constantly raise the specter of Pavlov in the playhouse. These weekly word-instigated convulsions might be seen in other contexts as pathological. Here, however, they indicate that the meaning of the behavior is based not just on the violation of social decorum but on

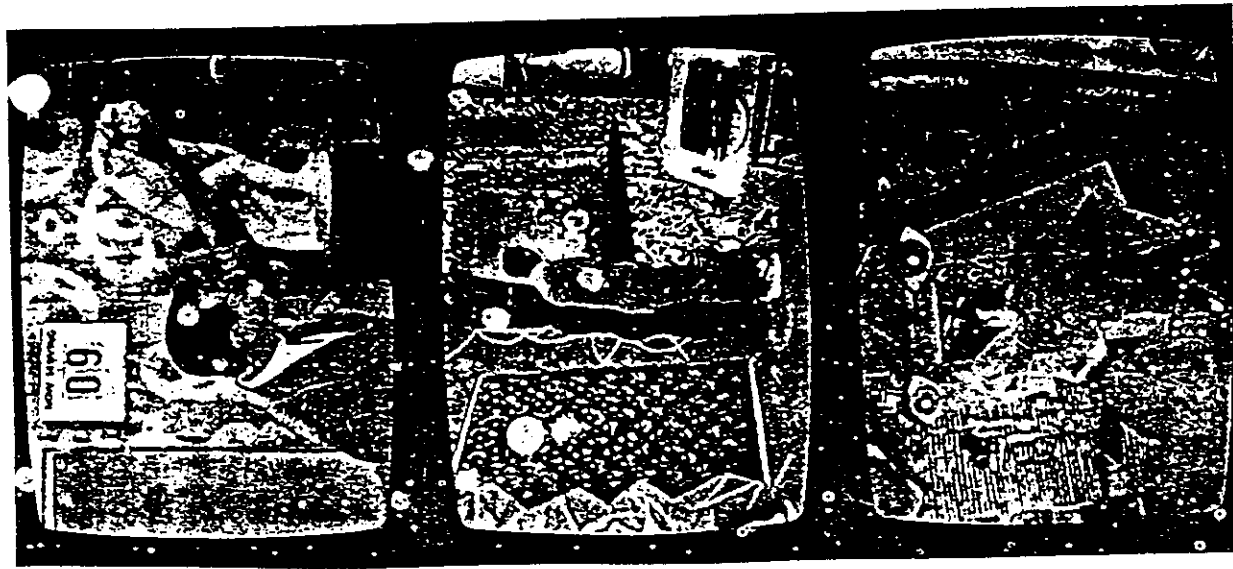


Ms. Renee's departure for a retro-1960s "groovy shindig," collides with undulating abstract expressionism and meaningless Pavlovian word lessons that send the kids at home into sleep-wrecking convulsions. (CBS)

violations of language—its rules, conventions, and meanings.

Another indication of the power of the show's play with language comes in the form of the playhouse "gang," a group that combines emblematic names from mass culture. For example, the real Bud Melman, from *Late Night with David Letterman*, is teamed with child characters named Cher and Elvis. This combination of names is an eclectic hybrid of pop culture itself, one that makes

Greg's statuery as garage
do, pener. Pee-Wee is
forever locked on the
inside looking out, and
retreats even further into
his mediated womb at
the moment of greatest
alienation. (CBS)



blank reference to the 1950s, 1960s, and 1980s. On whom, one might ask, is this
name game played? Do four year olds get the reference to David Letterman or
Cher? In any case, the name gang, the word-salad skit, and the Pavlovian verbal
convulsions all show forcefully how any one thing or sign can stand for any other
thing in this show. Signifiers are ceaselessly appropriated, shifted, and toyed with
in the schizophrenic world of the playth

Thematics: Pee-Wee's Specular Womb

Stylistic analysis alone, then, is a trap. This is especially the case if analysis does
not try to articulate the reasoning and logic behind the choice of specific formal
codes and stylistic displays. If one function of stylistic analysis is to categorize
and periodize, then *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* presents an interpretive problem. Its pic-
torial roots and formal devices are essentially modernist, while its attitudes and
organizing principles are postmodernist. The show performs its style, then, in con-
tradictory ways. Its *look* is oppositional, but its *attitude*, if one follows recent
theory, is mainstream.

Stepping back from the show's explicit formal make-up allows us to consider
it in a psychological and anthropological sense—that is, as a problem-solving op-
eration. In other words, the process of making formal choices within the show—
not merely the traits themselves or the story—reveals an alternative world, a
possible way of being, that viewers can engage and identify with. The process of
stylizing is a very active and overt phenomenon, a ritual that presupposes and
suggests an agent or persona responsible for the acts of stylization. Thus, the work-
ings over of text and object can be taken by viewers as a paradigm for dealing
with lived situations, as a model for resolving certain social and psychological
problems. This perspective, of viewing the process of stylization in a way that
structuralist anthropologists view myth making, makes two things possible: first,
Pee-Wee can be seen by his style and (life)style choices as emblematic of a male
figure dealing with gender/racial/cultural traumas. Style and artifice, then are not
just distractions for Pee-Wee, nor should they be considered ornamental obstacles
to be cut through and discarded by the critic and analyst obsessed with plot and
narrative content. Such things are instead crucial parts of lifestyle. Secondly, and
perhaps more importantly, the narrative evidences a mythic and ritual conflation
of the social into the psychological. To show how this ideology of conflation op-
erates, I will describe eight characteristics that work as explicit oppositions and
repetitions in the show. Viewed through these textual relationships, analysis shows
that the artifice of *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* is also socially symbolic.

Interior versus Exterior

Problems are repeatedly articulated in this show by opposing key terms and posi-
tions. The oppositions inside versus outside, interior versus exterior, and personal
versus social are inscribed in various ways throughout the show. In many ways,
the home is a refuge and a shelter for Pee-Wee. Because all of the other charac-
ters are represented only by their irregular incursions into the home-playhouse,
they are always identified and set up for the audience as outsiders. Pee-Wee ap-
parently has no family, only acquaintances who may or may not choose to enter
his single-unit dwelling. The series positions not only friends, but also threats and
enemies, as outsiders who impinge upon Pee-Wee's personal space. Messages also
regularly come in from the outside in various forms. Therapeutic advice comes
in. Invitations come in. Even aliens from outerspace threaten to violate the secure
and woml e space of F Wee's playroom in the "Zyzyballubah-Alien" episode.
Evil also lurks on the outside in less fantastic forms. Door-to-door salesmen are

frequently and abusively warded off by Pee-Wee in many episodes. The implication is clear. Evil operates outside the walls of his home, while the inside offers security, reflection, respite, and defense. The walls of the home are symbolic psychological barriers. Even the things that lurk behind and inside the walls are dangerous and dark. In each episode a middle-class dinosaur family unfolds its violent traumas within the abscesses of the homeowner's walls. The unknown is out there, while the known and comfortable is inside. Pee-Wee is fortified within his private property by a wealth of middle-class accumulations. Home-owning here depends more on psychological fortification than economic ability.

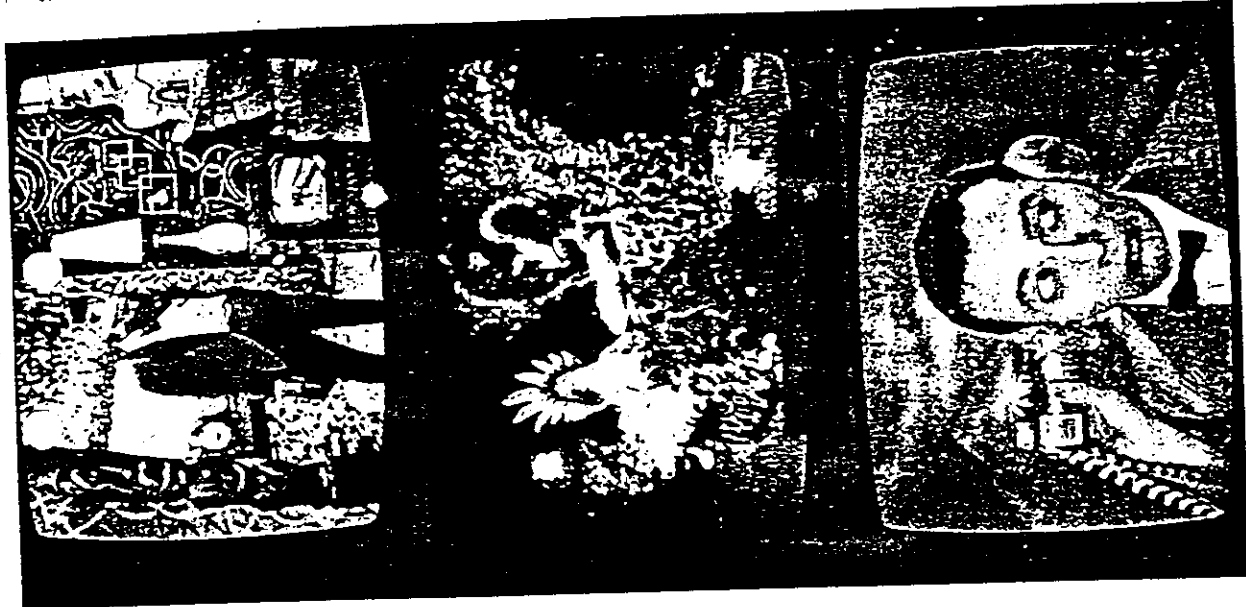
Extreme Specularity

Given the marked spatial and symbolic gulf that exists between inside and outside, the show compensates for this heightened distance by overemphasizing sight. This gambit is logical, since the relative power of sight mitigates against spatial distance, especially when aided by optical devices. The privileging of sight is underscored throughout the series by formal tactics that emphasize sight or by scenes that are about the act of seeing. Specularity, then, plays an important part in the narrative as well as the mise-en-scène of Pee-Wee's playhouse. Many of the subordinate narratives and skits center on the act of seeing. Throughout the show the viewer sees numerous screens within screens and televised people watching screens. Spectating, then, is the behavior of choice. The King of Cartoon's performance, for instance, consists merely of announcing and presenting the screening of a film. The Magic Screen provides its own television show, actually a lesson, within each of the televised episodes. The Penny cartoons are viewed by the actors as well as by the viewers. All of these segments firmly elevate sight and viewership as the most fundamental behaviors in the playhouse. The weekly dinosaur installments also center on scenes that refer to spectatorship. In the "alienation" episode of Pee-Wee and the series as a whole, the dinosaur group is pictured as a popcorn-munching, couch-sitting nuclear family. Pee-Wee stoops to a rodent's eye view in order to watch the dinosaur family's spectacle unfold in the stagelike space inside the playhouse wall. Chaos then rains upon the television-watching dino family, as an out of control wind-up robot creates havoc within the domestic sphere. In another episode, the apron-clad mother dinosaur barely avoids violent disaster by wrestling an out-of-control domestic machine—her vacuum cleaner—to a halt. The net result of these erupting spectacles is that the viewer, along with Pee-Wee, assumes an ideal position inside the house, looking out onto any and all "realities." By intensifying and dramatizing sight, *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* teaches and reinforces good spectatorship.

Extremely Mediated Communications

A second dynamic, the pervasive use of extremely mediated communications, also compensates for the heightened spatial distance between interior and exterior. Very little communication occurs on an interpersonal or face-to-face level in the series since characters frequently only interact with each other via electronic devices and reinforced good spectatorship.

The show is a parade of specular texts: guests unsee special screenings and rodent-sized dinosaur families gaze at the television screen in the walls of the playhouse. Mediated communication makes Pee-Wee the perpetually distant listener-subject. (CBS)



person to person. Instead, characters in the playhouse use message balloons, picture-phones, letters, and mail. Such devices mediate between sender and receiver, addressor and addressee—in a recurrent ritual that substitutes for direct communication.

This reported privileging of distance and the need for secondary codification in communication suggest that information management is an ideal and privileged skill for the generation that watches this show. Mediation rather than personal

Reverberations of Race, Class, and Gender

Since this series clearly takes place within the domestic sphere, it is worth considering—regardless of how far Pee-Wee bends his gender—why the main character is a male. It may be difficult, for example, to accept Pee-Wee in conventional adult male terms, since he talks in a genderless whine. The array of people who come into the space are either people of color (the King of Cartoons, Cowboy Curtis) or women (Reba, Ms. Yvonne) and also challenge traditional roles. Vocational roles repeatedly suggest gender and ethnic ambivalence and ambiguity. Cowboy Curtis is black, but has the mannerisms of the white, western cowboy archetype. The cab-driver is actually a tough, jazz-playing female trumpeter. The closest thing one has to the traditional white middle-class nuclear family much popularized by television, is the dinosaur family, who are forever lurking behind the wall. The dinosaur mother, father, and two kids are always shown within the TV environment of a subterranean living room. Death threatens in many of their episodes, but not from outside. Typically some middle-class commodity goes haywire (a toy robot, a vacuum cleaner) and threatens the very lives of the family unit. Dark in humor, these cynical claymation sketches do anything but support middle-class suburban notions of the family or America.

Pointed depictions of gender and racial roles are also regularly found in the Penny claymation cartoons. In the duck episode Penny describes "girl" ducks as having to stay and watch their eggs while "boy" ducks make a lot of noise. The images that accompany this description show that the boys (ducks) get to listen to boom boxes, and sit by the pool. The girls (ducks) get to mother their young. On one level, that of explicit plot, these representations of family and gender are regressive, since they restate the gender ideals of the status quo. But there is also a great deal of ambiguity lurking under the surface. Do children understand the cultural rigidity and lack of conviction depicted in these jokes, or do they go along with the norms that the jokes voice? Whether or not one can deduce the effect of this ambiguity on the spectator, the trait certainly helps construct an emotional and ideologically ambivalent world in *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*.

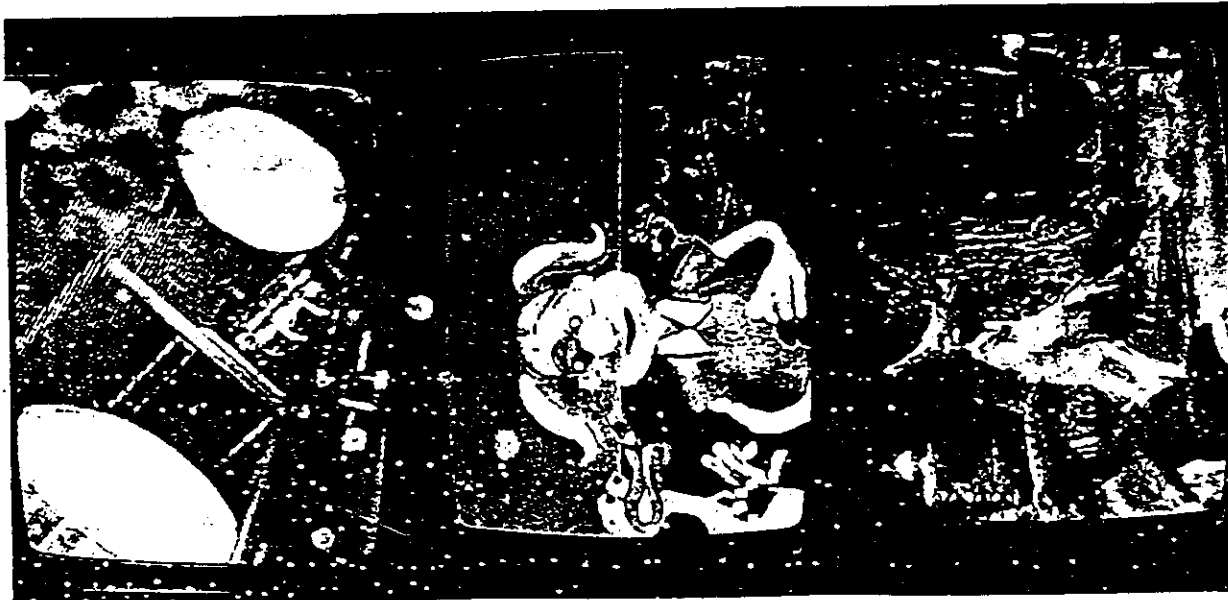
In one sense, Pee-Wee defines himself by the constant parade of threats from the outside. The threats are, in effect, incursions from forces outside his control. Women, people of color, and domestic items give Pee-Wee a frantic sense of always trying to cope with new things. If the audience has anything to identify with in traditional dramatic terms here, it is Pee-Wee's perpetual *anxiety*—an anxiety created by the constant incursion of others, of outsiders, and of people defined by difference. Pee-Wee is the emasculated male of the house, posing unconvincingly as its patriarch. At one point even the vacuum cleaner nearly sucks his head off in an attempt to pull him into the dinosaurs' living room. *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, in the final analysis, takes no partisan stand on race, class, and gender; it simply indulges in an atmosphere and aesthetic of male anxiety, induced by a flood of unstable "others."

Commodities, Consumption

If *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* takes a pointed cultural stance with ambivalence and anxiety, the same cannot be said for its attitude toward objects and property. Without

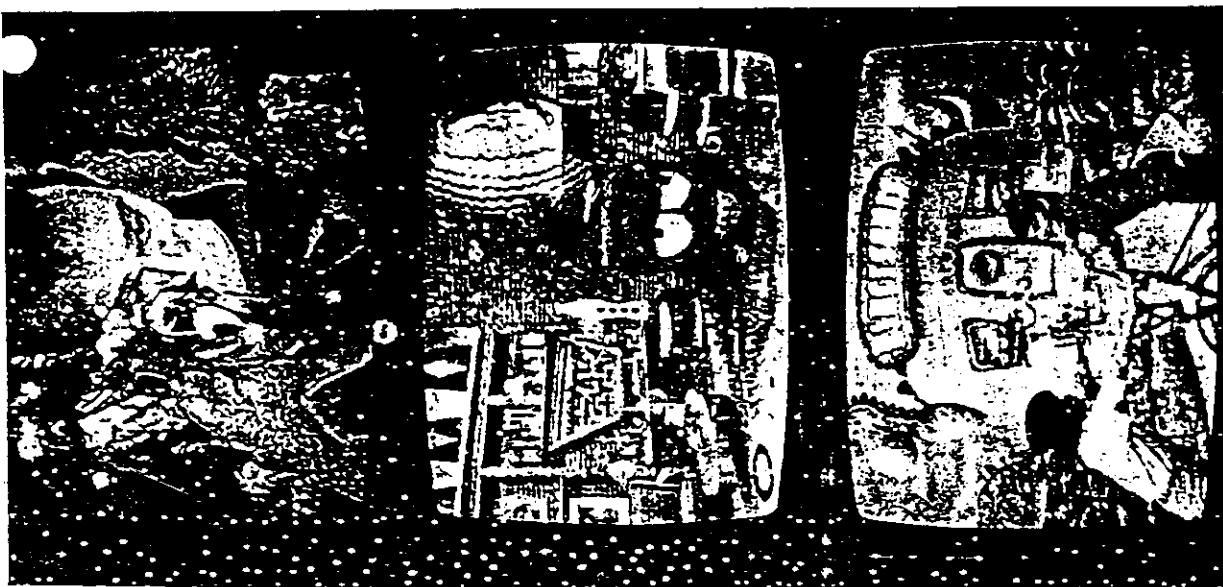
Human and interpersonal contact is only made here through a video camera.

Claymation Penny plays out regressive mothering roles, and the dinosaur family feigns domestic bliss in its suburban paleolithic living room. (CBS)



contact is dramatized as the fundamental way by which people deal with the outside world and other persons. Good viewers, and perhaps good children, know how to translate and send their messages and impulses via the media. Skills at codifying speech through secondary sign systems are highly valued in Pee-Wee's television universe. This penchant for consumerist codification and information management provides one implicit message: *Children should learn how to package*

Pee-Wee nearly gets his head sucked off by a runaway domestic appliance. The playhouse is a commodity ark, celebrating and anticipating the same kind of consumption that is highlighted in ads embedded in the broadcast. (CBS)



question, the textual foundation for this program is built on commodities, toys and the act of consumption. Pee-Wee exists in a playroom that has *everything*. There are toys from many decades: Indian tee-pees, pirate flags, mechanical horses, robots. Along with these thrift shop finds, there are domestic notables including touristy souvenir china, lava lamps, and highway roadsigns. Pee-Wee communicates with worker ants in his toy ant farm. The program communicates back with a hip

written message says, "Dig! Commodities are everywhere. Significantly, the alienation episode opens with Pee-Wee frantically looking through his toybox for something important—"a real cool toy." Also emblematic of the issues involved in this preadolescent culture of consumption is the Penny segment. Situated here within the "Playhouse Gang" segment that sets it up, Penny describes and defines the entire Chinese race on the basis of its relationship to china—the tableware, that is, the middle-class commodity, not the country. This ethnocentric displacement of signifieds shifts the meaning of household objects to the new and exciting world of xenophobia.

What is the net effect of all of this stuff, of this endless accumulation of manufactured goods? Consider Susan Stewart's explanation of the cultural meaning of "collections":

We might therefore say . . . that the archetypal collection is Noah's Ark, a world which is representative yet which erases its context of origin. The world of the ark is a world not of nostalgia but of anticipation.¹⁹ Here we find the qualities involved in the apprehension of the miniature: the distanced and "over-seeing" viewer, the transcendence of the upper-classes, the reduction of labor to the toylike, and the reification of interiority.²⁰

The playhouse is not a museum, where objects are entombed, and codified, nor is it an archive where time-place origins are clarified and made explicit. No, the playhouse is more like Stewart's symbolic ark and collection of miniatures—a showcased assortment of representative objects stripped of their context and brought along for some as yet unknown future use. Pee-Wee clearly betrays no nostalgia about the toys of the 1950s and 1960s. As a person without time, he seems little interested in either the past or historical consciousness. Rather, Pee-Wee invariably wants to know what this collection of toys can do for him—*now*.

Effective consumerism, in a culture based upon mass consumption, depends upon one pervasive attitude and sensibility—the *désire* to consume more goods. Desire, in turn, is predicated upon the recognition (or illusion) of need or lack and is constantly triggered by the planned obsolescence of manufactured goods. With the mountain of consumer detritus in the playhouse constantly signaling its obsolescence, the viewer is trained and encouraged to anticipate the acquisition and accumulation of more goods, more stuff. In a market economy, the anticipation that Stewart refers to is evident not in any disembarkation from a representative ark or in the propagation of species. Rather, anticipation shows itself in the endless process of accumulation, obsolescence, and consumption. Lack and desire fuel this process. Shows like *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, along with television advertising in general, work to reinforce this lack and to construct this desire in viewers. By way of summary, then, the series does several things: it celebrates Pee-Wee's masterful accumulation of goods; it reinforces lack with endless visual signs evoking obsolescence; and it structures desire in viewers by skillfully performing and valuing consumption. *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* is not just about infantile excess. . . . it's also a kind of boot-camp training in consumerism.

Pee-Wee as Recombinant Bricoleur

If sheer accumulation structures consumer desire, then bricolage shows viewers how to manage and utilize manufactured goods in a personally fulfilling way. Since commodities form the concrete textual base of the show, Pee-Wee's privileged national place is to animate, orchestrate, and recombine those objects. By doing so, Pee-Wee becomes what Lévi-Strauss or Barthes would term a bricoleur. In its original designation, *bricolage* referred to the creative process by which members of tribal cultures synthesize new objects and functions from existing, even discarded, objects. Bricolage was contrasted to engineering, the process by which technological cultures invent and fabricate new objects and machines according to rational and functional rules. Pee-Wee, although himself a product (or castoff) of technological culture, is also very much an intuitive expert at the thrift-shop aesthetic and a bricoleur of postindustrial junk. Each episode shows him accumulating discarded toys and possessions, and mastering their re-presentation or hybridization.

Bricolage, a kind of semiotic mixing and matching, makes possible endless meanings for existing objects. The history of the various domestic objects, toys, and knock-knacks in the playhouse fights the very logic and depersonalization of consumer culture typically reinforced through the process of accumulation. Consumer culture, to reiterate, is based on the idea that anything one purchases is already obsolete once the commodity changes hands. Pee-Wee's bricolage counters this logic by dehistoricizing discarded objects, personalizing them, and giving them new value. Bricolage, then, *should be an oppositional practice*, for it resists the logic of commodity culture. Unfortunately, like car customizers or art-clothes fashion designers that mix and match past styles, Pee-Wee's bricolage actually functions to celebrate mass culture. It is a game to be played well and inventively, rather than a game based on disrupting and antagonizing mass culture. Pee-Wee seems less of a shaman, therefore, than a resale and performance artist. He catalogues and transforms groups of inanimate objects into new functions. By doing so, he also markets and promotes himself and his mastery of commodity culture. In addition to privileging mediated communication, the program gives premier status to the person who can maximize meaning by managing the material of consumption.²¹ Commodity bricolage and creative consumption are skills that the viewers of Pee-Wee are practiced in and rewarded for. Such things are not skills that can be acquired through cultural separatism or asceticism, for such lifestyles mitigate against the direct experience of shopping and its many and diverse pleasures.

Site of Extreme Intertextuality

The concept of pastiche discussed earlier is part of a more general process termed *intertextuality*. This is because pastiche appropriates styles and looks from other periods and times for its own textual use. In addition, specularly, or texts that are about spectating, also prove to be intertextual, since they make reference to, and enact, formats and audience relations. As found in other arts—film, theater, sculpture and painting. But these two tendencies suggest only part of the

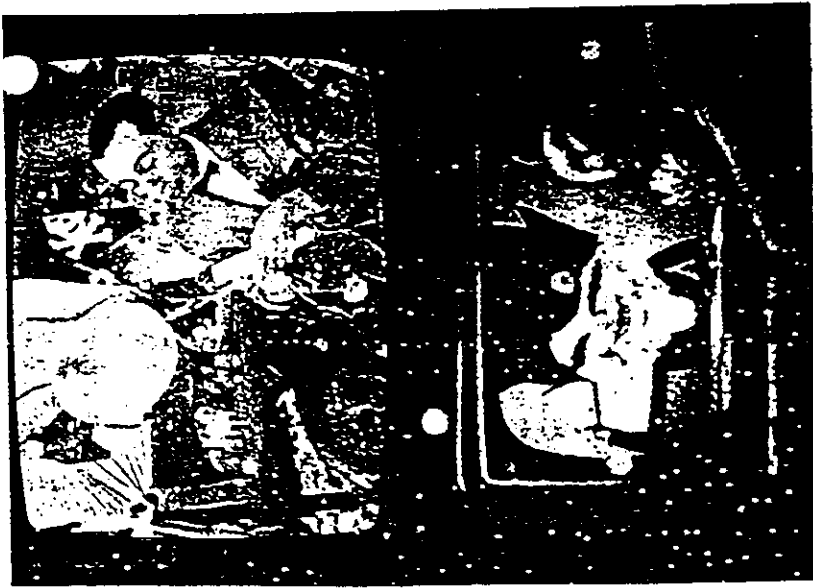
Playhouse's utilization of intertextuality. The character Pee-Wee exploits numerous and sometimes esoteric intertexts, including the performance and demeanor of the child-man archetype and convention of Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and Jerry Lewis. Consider also in this episode the mixture of high-art world styles in set construction, along with Mrs. Renée's pop culture promotion of 1960s "groovy shindigs." There is also a collaging and collapsing of mixed performance styles and generic references—the conventional stand-up comedic approach along with *Late Night* irony, the soundtrack parody from *Jaws* over the vacuum cleaner attack; the parody of *Oz* during the playhouse abduction in the "Zyzyballubab" episode. These references are wide-ranging and eclectic. Pee-Wee appropriates texts from classical Hollywood, the art museum, and the club scene alike.

The density and complexity of this intertext raises questions as to whom Pee-Wee's *Playhouse* is directed. The level of engagement demanded by the complex aesthetic origins of the show assumes a kind of familiarity and cultural capital that few children would possess. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has argued that aesthetic sophistication and awareness are required by this kind of complicated intertext. Obscure aesthetic references demand a somewhat privileged class-based education in the arts. It follows that works that utilize such references are by nature elitist, since few viewers have the skills to decipher such works. But since young children watch and enjoy the show, this explanation seems implausible. A reading based on the notion of aesthetic demands is only one possible explanation, for children of many ages watched the show. There are in fact a number of possible ways to read *Pee-Wee*, since it combines multiple discursive and semiotic levels, and it does so for an audience that is anything but homogeneous. This then demonstrates the trap of sociological interpretations that try to reduce such shows to singular ideological readings. After all, the audience inevitably engages in multiple, and even contradictory, readings. The hip, art world chic and intertextuality of this program are not necessarily the only pleasures of viewership, as any child can attest. Such tactics are, however, incessant parts of the show's performance of style.

Social-to-Psychological: Pee-Wee as a Therapeutic Discourse

Underlying the spectacle of *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* is a ritual that conflates the social and the psychological. The recurring textual oppositions between inside and outside reinforce this polarity. So do the mediating factors that bridge the poles between the social/public and the psychological/private world. Consider, for example, how extreme specularly intensifies the sense of distance by constantly requiring that the viewer look; or how the incessant mediation of all forms of communication actually emphasizes the separation of individuals from others. The irony is that while both traits—incessant looking and mediated communication—are presented as devices by which to bring the social/public other closer to the private, the artificial way that they do so betrays a great and significant distance. To summarize the premise this show in its most simple terms: Pee-Wee is forever, socially alienated. His acquaintances literally do not invite him to the party,

Eng' rring a communi-
que from the detritus of
Western culture. Pee-
Wee's concrete social
problem is couched
only in therapeutic and
privatistic terms as he
"tunes-in" for profes-
sional help. (CBS)



and the show expends great energy pondering the significance of this traumatic alienation.

Pee-Wee's repeated, cathartic tantrums appear to be but one way of countering separation and isolation at home. Pee-Wee also attempts various diversionary therapies.²² At one point he prepares food and binges. At another point he tries to solve his problem by escape, by watching images. All of his efforts at self-therapy are to no avail. Ultimately, he seeks professional advice from the Advice Lady, whom he dials up on the picture-phone. Pee-Wee, in effect, is told by the therapist to be honest and to "get your feelings out." This he immediately does in an outburst over the phone to the host. His resulting agitation offers only further alienation. Pee-Wee's dilemma is a social one. He is cut off from other persons, alone in his room, fortified and surrounded by his commodities and spectacular fantasies. The solution offered by the episodic narrative is that he should seek professional advice, professional help.

Significantly, Pee-Wee can only enter the therapeutic relationship through a situation involving extreme mediation and isolation. He cannot personally interact with the professional. Instead, Pee-Wee is strapped into the claustrophobic picture-box and forced to communicate to the therapist through vintage garage-sale audio and video apparatus. The therapeutic hook-up—in what should be a deeply intimate relationship with the therapist—ends up having the technical quality of

a distant satellite hook-up. "Tuning in" means visually wading through animated abstract expressions...against painting, listening through a tin can, and yelling through a picture phone. Alone in his media box, preoccupied with himself and his needs, there can be no better image of Christopher Lasch's *Culture of Narcissism* than this.²³ Although the show has established that Pee-Wee's basic problem is a social one—he is cut off from the social/public group—the episode transforms and reduces Pee-Wee's dilemma to a private, psychological, and self-centered issue. In short, the episode is a ritual that psychologizes what is otherwise a concrete social and communal problem.

Consider the origins of Pee-Wee's hysteria. First, it involves the almost psychotic practice of personalizing and anthropomorphizing objects and commodities from the outside world. Second, Pee-Wee is traumatized by the ambivalent cultural depictions of race and gender that invade his home from the outside. Given these threats and mental operations, it is easy to see how the conflation of the social and psychological works. Pee-Wee's problem is not answered in any cooperative, practical, or communal way. Rather, he goes outside himself, not to make contact with other persons, but only to find a professional, an expert who can inform him of proper notions regarding selfhood. A professional therapist, à la Dr. Joyce Brothers, gives Pee-Wee emotional solutions for his social problems. This episode only resolves itself, in a narrative sense, by deference to outside therapeutic expertise. In the final analysis, even this therapeutic gesture turns out to be woefully incomplete. Pee-Wee frantically escapes from the playhouse—as he does at the end of every episode—on his customized scooter. Although this exit is preceded by discussion suggesting that he may finally go to the party, his escape at the end really goes nowhere. It turns out to be the same stock end-title sequence that is used week after week. Pee-Wee is, in short, in an endless loop of retreat. Pee-Wee never really makes any human contact after all. Pee-Wee never leaves the extreme mediation and artifice of his world.

It is possible to view the show's artifice and Pee-Wee's excessive manipulations of style and commodity as his frustrated attempts to deal with and make sense out of the world. The irresolution at the end of the episode suggests that the kind of personal therapy enacted here is without end. Nothing is changed, nothing is gained. Pee-Wee will simply act out his hysteria and psychosis next week in an endless play of embellishment, style-consciousness, and excessive visuality.

This televisual transformation of the social into the psychological, of style into lifestyle, may be the key to Pee-Wee. If media practitioners interested in change are ever to get past the kind of televisuality popularized by series like *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*, it is unlikely that they will do so in a purely formal sense. *Pee-Wee* is an extremely complex operation of style and embellishment, one that makes a mockery out of the notion that radical innovation is possible in formal terms. The networks, in short, have mastered a favored tactic of the avant-garde. Given this fact, alternative producers might consider resisting the dominant media system by reversing the ideological dynamic and logic that drives this brand of televisuality onward. Instead of locking people into sheltered and specular wombs defined by material consumption and therapeutic discourse—that is, into media worlds where the social is made psycho, .cal—alternative media makers could attack the very site of this conflation and contradiction.

Styled Live/Ontological Stripmall

By symbolically and narratively rupturing the psychological and forcing or reappropriating it into the domain of the social—that is, by depicting psychological problems and giving them social solutions—alternative television productions might recast and regain control of the terms in the cultural equation. If one looks at television narratives as cultural problem-solving operations, then the institutions that get to dramatize and enact the terms of the problem, also delimit potential solutions. In this sense, the new televisuality is also a political issue. By questioning and challenging the aesthetic paradigms that we operate under, even production practice can be seen as political. As long as excessive televisuality embellishes and pervades television, the sort of contradictory, ideological dynamic at work in *Pee-Wee* also provides a site that is open to engagement by producers. Excessive visibility and formal radicality are now legitimate properties of the dominant media, even in its trash variants, not the avant-garde. Independents have at least two choices. They can either continue theorizing alternative looks and different ways of seeing, or they can embrace the new and excessive televisuality while at the same time sabotaging the therapeutic logic that drives television toward its self-conscious performance of style—and its trashy pleasures.

You cannot, in search of news and profit, break into people's houses this way. It is simply intolerable.

—U.S. District Court Judge Jack Weinstein, ruling against CBS *Street Stories*¹

I think there's an opportunity in the marketplace for a user-friendly magazine show, but we've got a lot of work to do.

—Derk Zimmerman, president, Group W Productions²

Lock your doors. When breaking and entering and user-friendliness are considered parts of the same documentary genre, then no one is safe from stylistic exhibitionism. Even live and documentary television forms now bear the scars of televisuality. During the February sweeps in 1993, the *Geraldo* show lead with a story about men who murder their wives. The program began by televising the assassination of a woman by her estranged husband. The spousal execution had been recorded "live-on-videotape."³ Gathered on-stage were other victims of point-blank assassination attempts. The announcer's hype and the number of victims collected on stage suggested that this particular matrimonial ritual was not uncommon. The first on-camera question was directed to a woman who survived "five gun blasts" to the face and abdomen. Ever the sensitive host, Geraldo asked her not about her own experience as a victim, but about how she felt when viewing the televised camcorder tape.

The videotape, then, was clearly the real showcase—a bloody videographic artifact bought and appropriated from a local station. Although the participants on stage were primarily there as witnesses and confessors—to muse on the status and nature of the videotaped icon—the show also punished them. By forcing the first interviewee-victim to view a televisual execution—one that the producers had helpfully conflated with her own—the show locked the woman into a Pavlovian reprogramming vise reminiscent of Kubrick's anarchist victim in *Clockwork Orange*. Although such shows typically feign therapeutic value, they also exploit and manipulate liveness in important ways. Videotaped liveness has become a charged apparatus by which personal behaviors converge in public spectacle. Portable tape in contemporary television does not really function like the personal, epistemological pilgrimages in Antonioni's *Blowup* or Coppola's *Conversation with a Woman* either. The narrative brackets that set aside taped imagery as a special mode of modernist experience are gone. Tape, masquerading as liveness, is now the recurrent mode by which the public intervenes in the private.

Yes, even liveness and reality are televisual constructs. Having stepped through the higher televisual modes—the signature boutique, the loss-leader marquee, and the videographic franchise—we arrive finally at the one form of television that promises most to resist the long-arm of artifice: reality programming. Along with

the observation "March 20" briefly earlier in the late 1990s, the national and international