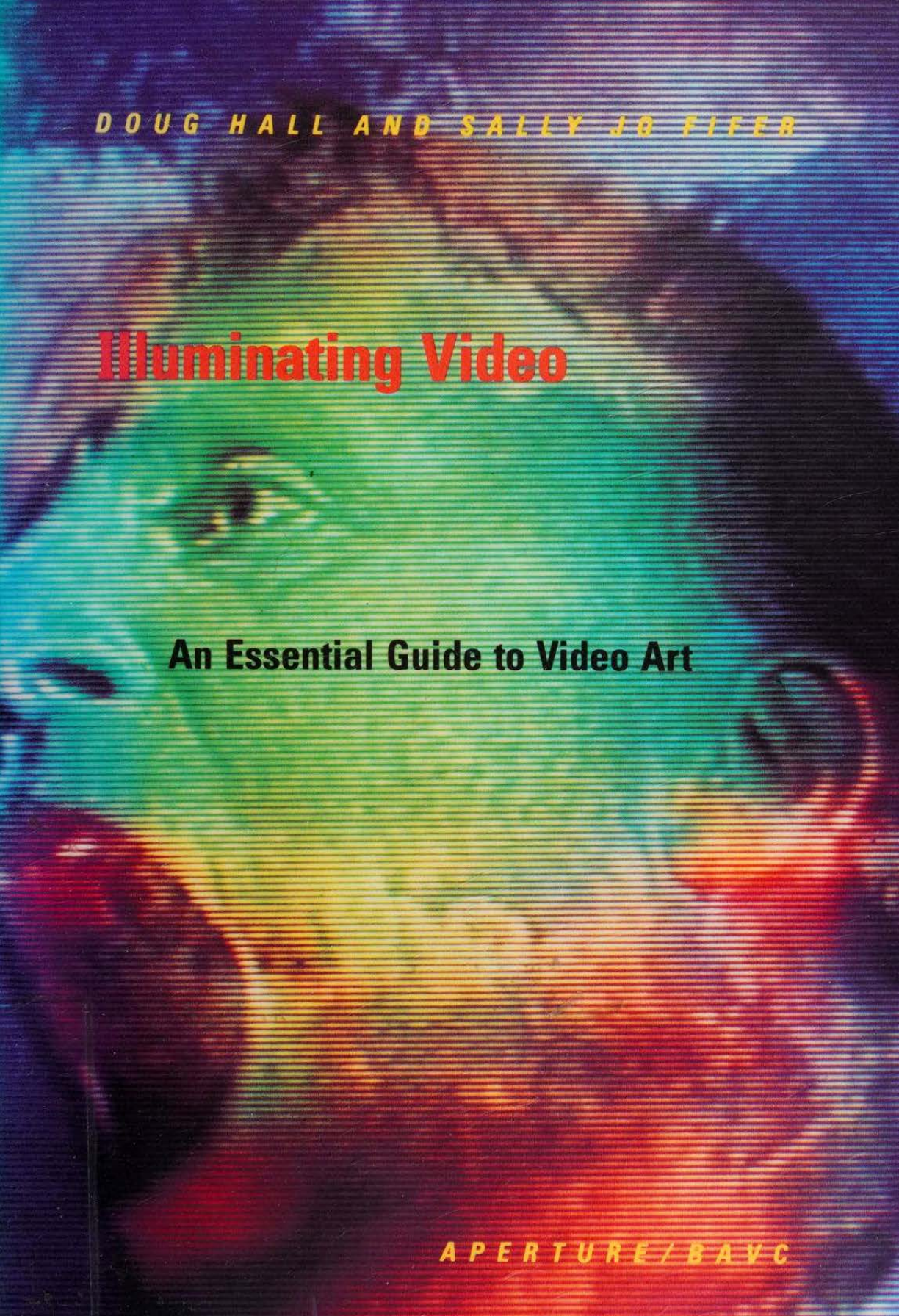
DOUG HALL AND SALLY JO FIFER
Illuminating Video
An Essential Guide to Video Art
APERTURE/BAVC

This Is Not a Paradox

JUDITH BARRY

Recently, I attended a conference on television and the media where there were no people from the media giving presentations. The participants, many of whom were converts to mass culture from film theory and related discourses, gave papers that applied the methods of textual analysis, with a sprinkling of Jacques Lacan and Jean Baudrillard, to the practice of television genres. As I listened to arguments developed fifteen or so years ago in relation to literary texts and classical HW film, reworked to fit with television, I realized that perhaps textual analysis with its endless discursive meanderings was peculiarly suited to the "flow" of television itself.

In describing television as a flow rather than a discrete narrative, as is the case with the classical HW film, TV analysts have identified the continuous nature of television's structure, the way in which it is the desire for plentitude, insatiable by definition, and endlessly deferred, that holds the viewer's attention. Textual analysis is a method in which the reader becomes an active participant, rather than a passive consumer, of the meanings of a text, such that the reader, through reading, becomes, in effect, the writer of the text. Through this process the reader often experiences the thrill of discovery combined with the sensation that the text itself is actually being transformed. But, for the listener (in the audience), this is rarely the case. . . . A critical point about textual analysis in relationship to practice is this: As an analytical method, it does not seem to lend itself *to* or to be productive *of* transformation, particularly vis-à-vis the text it is querying. Instead, that text serves as a kind of wellspring out of which meanings flow. This is not an attack on textual analysis, but more a question of the efficacy of its impact.

In Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay, "The Politics of Interpretation," she wonders if Julia Kristeva was quoting Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach when she said, "Of course, no political discourse can pass into non-meaning. Its goal, Marx stated explicitly, is to reach the goal of interpretation: interpreting the world in order to transform it according to our needs and desires."[1] Although Spivak was concerned with the ideological implications of Kristeva's "wishful thinking," her misuse of Marx in relation to her privileging of the analyst/analysand dyad against the "vastly multitudinous, multiracial, and multinational political arena" struck me as the way in which textual analysis as an ideology has become indistinguishable from its methodological uses in the arguments of both writers. Identifying a politics in relation to analytic strategies has been a question that has circulated around many con-

temporary discourses. Defining a practice for that politic has been problematic, particularly in relation to television/media because it has not been tied to an oppositional movement or struggle per se.

In the dismantling of modernism and its turn to strategies and textual systems, the ability to posit "constructions" that embody specific programs seems to be temporarily paralyzed. Could this be because of the overvaluation of signification and its workings at the expense of an equally meticulous interrogation of the working of the referrent as it is manifested in lived social practice—the "multitudinous, multiracial, and multinational"? Or could it be that the hoped for union between Marxisms and other post-1968 theories of subjectivity including psychoanalysis, literary theory, and feminism, to mention but a few, were failures, leaving us beyond alienation in the "post" stage—postmodern, postfeminist, and the rest? Or could it be that the social circumstances surrounding present conditions in the West under George Bush and Margaret Thatcher have made ideas about social progress seem implausibly naive, so much so that we turn to so-called emerging cultures where the stakes are seemingly more real, and the horizon is less clouded by discursive formations, to see how we might begin to empower ourselves. Is there something amiss when the colonizer looks to the colonist for liberation?

Edward Said, in a recent lecture on the culture of resistance, noted that before a territory can be taken over, its culture must be controlled and that this is a strategy that must be recognized by both the oppressor and the oppressed; for example, the situation of western Europe and Asia from 1750 to 1850, which corresponds to romanticism. He argued that culture prepares societies for domination just as it also prepares them to relinquish domination through a process of resistance. One of the first stages in the development of this resistance is the recuperation by the oppressed of forms already carved out by the dominate cultures.[2]

It is interesting to think about this concept as it might apply to broadcast television and its relation to video artists/producers working in alternative media. For example, the terms *elitist* and *populist* might take on new meaning if we considered the artist/producer as a populist in the sense of attempting to recontextualize a dominant media form, and simultaneously we might consider broadcast television elitist for excluding alternative ideological positions. This is nothing new, but it does somewhat undermine the way art history tends to look at artist-media production, even though there is an art history that calls into question the notion that art making is an elitist activity. This is a history that traces its legacy from the work of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein in the 1920s through dada and surrealism in the 1930s, from the Bauhaus and its legacy in the 1940s to pop art of the 1950s, from situationalist activities of the 1960s to conceptual and feminist art of the 1970s—and to now. I am mentioning these moments not to imply that there is a kind of inevitable con-

tinuum in which video art is to be located—on the contrary, each moment, was historically specific—but rather to stress how in each of these examples there was the possibility of cohering a social momentum that extended the reach of cultural discourse into the domain of the political discourse. In each instance, a culturally specific place was constituted that was "different" from dominant discourse, yet simultaneously able to engage with that discourse. Certainly, one reason for this had to do with the way in which critical practice was reflected in the strategies of the above interventions.

The video maker/artist working in dominant media risks internalizing the psychic positions of the oppressor (dominant media) within the materiality of his or her practice as she or he is forced to negotiate the difficult terrain in which the television-flow context determines the readings that an audience constructs around the work. This is particularly true for those artists who incorporate video effects into their production as MTV and rock video has transformed the ways audiences view short-format works. In a market where money buys effects and the technology allows for few shortcuts, the "art" on MTV is virtually indistinguishable from other programming produced by other artists.

In considering oppositional practices or strategies of resistance, it is important to emphasize that it is *how* these strategies work to produce a collective space for oppositional practice to occur that is important. In the absence of a clearly defined oppositional sphere, attempts to focus on the artwork's ability to question, to contest, or to denaturalize the very terms in which it is produced, received, and circulated must be located in the work's ability to contain within its boundaries the possibility of its own metacritique; as well as constantly to address those economic and social forces that perpetually threaten to eradicate its critical differences. A look at the relationship between art/video and art/photography may illustrate this.

In March 1985 Lucinda Furlong published one of the first essays on "New Television."[3] In this essay she notes that many proponents of New Television believe that they can buy into the industry's system of production and distribution without necessarily replicating the commercial product. Video art and television art were increasingly polarized in conferences across the United States. Video art was identified with the contaminated museum structure, seen as elitist and in need of institutional support; while television art was seen as populist and hence more radical, because it might possibly reach a larger audience. One of the problems that Furlong saw in relation to "new" television's ability to maintain a critical stance and actually change television was her fear that programming produced by art-world artists for broadcast TV would be indistinguishable from other broadcast programming. She recognized that by 1985 the idea had taken hold that it was impossible to make a good videotape unless you were using state-of-the-art effects. This has progressed to the point where, instead of the commercial broadcast sector looking to the art world for

new ideas, we have a reverse situation in 1988 where artists in video or "new" television are looking to the commercial sector, in particular to ads and rock videos, to see what effects are most recently available.

Abigail Solomon-Godeau charts in "Living with Contradictions" and in discussing the appropriation practices of "oppositional postmodernism" (to cite Hal Foster's notion of a critical postmodernism) the seamless and rapid recuperation of this strategy into advertising and television media and finally its re-canonization as part of art photography—the practice it initially set out to counter. This assault was bound up with modernist orthodoxies of immanence, autonomy, presence, originality, authorship and its engagement with the simulacra; and its recuperation has been so rapid that it might be characterized as a sort of deconstruction in reverse.[4] Douglas Crimp, in a catalog essay called appropriately "Appropriating Appropriation," asks how this operational mode can articulate a specific reflection upon the culture if all aspects of the culture use this same mode.[5]

Within the practice of video art as it elided into "new" television, it does not seem to me that strategies of opposition to dominant television were identified; similarly no critical discourse describing this movement developed beyond one or two articles.[6] Are video art-identified producers who work for broadcast television and who lack a theoretical discourse just waiting to be quietly absorbed into the mainstream? With the absence of a defined movement, who will notice?

Remember the early 1970s when anyone with a half-inch portapack camera and deck was considered an artist? Looking at the articles and books that have been produced about this period, it is hard not to see in the manifestos and writings a genuinely revolutionary impetus, a reflection of the social currents that seemed to be transforming daily life as well as cultural life to such an extent that anyone with a video camera could be an artist. Working collectively, sharing equipment and authorship, such groups as Videofreex, TVTV, Video Free America, AntFarm, and others set out to transform the way television was used. Dissatisfied with the one-way direction of broadcast and eager to include a heterogeneous group of people from a number of disciplines, these groups and others like them produced tapes on a variety of subjects that were meant to be broadcast on cable networks or shared via the mail. Many of their ideas seemed to come directly from an analysis of the "info-revolution"; in particular, they dealt with the way decentralization and economies of scale in computer production were making the computer smaller and less expensive. They saw that these economies would make it possible for everyone to become a video producer and that new modes of distribution would have to be put into place, notably cable. Well, they were correct, but it didn't work out in quite the way they had imagined. Home video, despite mail clubs, will never

take the place of dominant media in the daily lives of most people. And as for cable, with the exception of local-access programming, it is as monolithic and as dominated by corporations as the networks.

As Michael Shamberg has stated, "what we're attempting to do is to put together a network that replaces the network. . . . They go out with five man crews. They sit above the crowd. If they want to talk to someone, they drag him of the crowd, and they make sure you don't get in their way while they talk to him. . . . We don't go out of the crowd—we're part of the crowd. The experience of being part of an event has never been considered news on broadcast television. So that the whole system is deaf. There is no way to get into it.

What we want to replace it with is like the most interactive system possible, which is basically a two-way system. Not only are you a passive consumer, which is what the culture is trying to be, but you can also produce for it. Basically, it's a process rather than a product notion. . . . What we are banking on is that what people {will} pay for is access to this process . . . If I send a tape out, anybody is welcome to copy it. What you're paying for is access to that tape originally."[7]

How did we get from there to "new" television? It might be interesting to reconsider Peter Wollen's essay from 1975, "The Two Avantgardes." This essay addressed the ways in which a structuralist film practice over the decade 1965 to 1975 represented a displacement of concerns from the art world to the film world, rather than an extension of filmic questions. This displacement is one in which the filmmakers, here Peter Gidal and Malcolm Le Grice, shared concerns with mainstream painters and other visual artists; they transposed, in a sense, the concerns of visual arts into film "such that the tendency for the visual arts to be self-reflexive has been translated into specifically cinematic terms, pushing them into a position of extreme purism or essentialism."[8] In the case of Le Grice and Gidal, this took the form of work on the picture track so that there was an ever-increasing tendency to deal with film as pure film: a "dissolution of signification into objecthood or tautology."[9]

This argument could also be appled to "new" television, particularly work that relies upon video special effects. It could be argued that this work has internalized this tendency toward self-reflexiveness replacing questions about changing the medium with a desire to be accepted. Self-reflexive video art might be characterized as being all dressed up with nowhere to go.[10] Wollen's article is also about another avant-garde, the avant-garde of the Soviet directors of the 1920s. Within this avant-garde practice it was the signified, content in the conventional sense, not the signifier (as in the structuralist film) which was always dominant. He found in the Soviet filmmakers a recognition of a new type of content, a new realm of signified, which demanded a new signifier for its expression. Eisenstein developed an aesthetically derived content—radically

transformed through montage theory, which itself was dialectical and which allowed the signifier to slip from bondage from the signified. In a similar way, Jean-Luc Godard forty years later worked with the theory of dialectical montage, pushing the disjuncture between signifier and signified. He was able to move beyond the boundaries of naturalism, to which Eisenstein had confined himself, so that *Le Gai Savoir* represents not just another world view, but a methodology for investigating the whole process of signification out of which a world view (read ideology) is constructed. Godard was considered political (at the time of the making of this film, 1975), while the structuralist filmmakers are not, even though, as Wollen pointed out, they do claim a political stance for their work. But claiming a political stance is not enough, there must be a break with bourgeois diegesis and a subversion of the cultural codes they embody. And, Wollen cautioned that if this break is not theoretically constructed within a deconstructive/subversive politic it leads right back to the problems of the pure signifier, i.e., excessive work on the image track.[11]

Where are television's historical avant-gardes? To a certain extent the early history of portapak TV implied a radical break with the signifying systems of bourgeois ideology. *Guerrilla television,* to use Paul Ryan's term, didn't want to be accepted by broadcast television; it wanted to change the entire apparatus—from production through distribution and reception. But guerrilla television was predominantly documentary and, as the 1960s changed to the 1970s, there was the sense that this approach could not generate signifying systems that would recover the radical implications of montage theory. This was especially clear as questions of gender and its representations were articulated within feminism and film theory. Feminist video and film strategies collapsed the separation between mediums, replacing what Wollen called the self-reflexiveness of filmic codes and their emphasis on the materiality of the signifier with an understanding of *how* the plane of expression is embedded in the ideological through complex discourses that set a place for the consuming and reproduced subject.[12] However, in narrative terms, these strategies have been absorbed by the broadcasters eager to attract the female audience.[13] And it could be argued that the feminist analysis of ideological positions inscribed within bourgeois subjectivity never constituted itself as critique powerful enough to resist co-optation. This has left feminist film/video producers in a quandary: if alternative video/film practices reproduce the same subject-positions for the viewer to inhabit as dominant media (this dominance is not homogeneous, but specific to the demographics it serves), then what kinds of differences can film/video makers posit? Valorizing deviance as a kind of outlaw subjectivity?

In the unlikely event that the work is broadcast, how do these videotapes construct a rupture with mainstream subject-positions if they are simply *better* television or in many cases *worse* television. By *better,* I mean more nuanced

characterization, higher production values, quality stories (not "junk"), and by *worse,* I mean not productive of enough pleasure to be watchable, too difficult for a mainstream audience, or too ideologically overt for such an audience.

To a certain extent this is a problem faced by both MTV and Deep Dish (DD), to mention two diametrically opposed approaches to the possibilities of another kind of television. Just as video artists are people who say they are artists, so Deep Dish can be a network if it is willing to present itself in that way. That it is more closely related to a syndicated series is perhaps a question of being too reliant on the immateriality of the referent. Ideologically speaking, that it would make that claim is hopeful, not cause for despair. Both DD and MTV present alternatives to mainstream media for the viewer as well as for the producer of video and film productions. Both networks embody in their avowed philosophies oppositional strategies that seek to undermine and anarchistically upset the boring sameness embedded in the dogged flow of television. Both of their aesthetic styles—DD's low-tech antitech and MTV's special effects emphasis—might be seen as a "form of refusal," which initially might elevate what is shocking into art, to borrow a phrase from Dick Hebdige.[14]

There are a number of factors that make this a ridiculous comparison, of course. DD is available sporadically and at the whim of local cable programmers, whereas MTV runs in seventeen countries for as many hours a day as TV is on the air. Ideologically, MTV represents the triumph of advertising over art as the art programming is indistinguishable from the ads (and often not as interesting) and from the station IDs that surround it. It is rarely as long as the rock videos, so there is little chance of confusing the two. Recently, MTV dropped the "art-break" lead-in to their artist sequences, going instead for name recognition for artists such as Robert Longo and Randi of the Redwoods, to mention two. This has effectively fed the consumer orientation of the network as it functions to turn the artists into star commodities, similar to bands. Ultimately, the art on MTV functions as just another type of programming, not even distinguishable as a genre except in those rare instances where the work is able to contain within its structure its own metacritique. One example is an art-break where the artist is seen in a number of situations destroying his MTV, saying, "I hate it, I hate it," then in the end, saying, "Only Kidding."[15] Another example is Julian Temple's recent Neil Young video, which innercuts Young's antiproduct endorsement song with sequences showing well-known stars' look-alikes endorsing the same products. Initially, MTV refused to air this tape, which generated a lot of negative publicity for MTV as well as guaranteeing airplay on other music shows.

DD, the network brainchild of Paper Tiger producers, is mandated to attack the ideologically contaminated consumer/marketing base of the mass media through the syndication of program series produced by a wide range of people, some of whom identify at some times as artists, but many of whom are

in other fields including sociology, psychology, economics, and academia. DD attempts to counter the ways in which the dominant media distort information on a wide variety of subjects from South American/South African relations, information technology, the U.S. government, and so on. And in keeping with its mandate, DD allows no advertising, although there are occasional public service announcements. As a network, it has benefited because other syndicated series running on public television seem uninterested in any programming that is even remotely political. But the inability to pay producers, coupled with the eventual depletion of available politically correct programs, plus the lack of funds to generate many new programs, may make it difficult for DD to live up to the network part of its name.

In the case of both networks, these are problems of reception and should not be taken as necessarily constituting a dismissal of individual tapes—as screenings in other, nonnetwork contexts have shown.[16] Often these tapes can more than adequately live up to their promise of rupture.

Independent video's inability to theorize a coherently inclusive position has often seemed to pit proponents of "image-track investigation" against those who are more obviously interested in content. Surely the old form/content debate need not be reiterated now after twenty years of semiotics and analyses of how the ideological is embedded within the structures of representational practices. Both Deep Dish and MTV challenge media makers to produce works that intersect with their prevailing contexts in such a way as to create a difference. As producers they ask us to construct a different mode of address, to use the tools that we have to question what Jean Baudrillard called in his early article, "Requiem for the Mass Media," the structural communication grid. But in trying to preserve this grid, one obviates the possibility of a fundamental change and risks condemning oneself simply to manipulating the structure. For Baudrillard, what is strategic in this sense is *only* that which radically checkmates the dominant form. This is an impossible position for an independent producer to be in—even if his analysis is correct—that it is the entire apparatus that is contaminated because of the inherent properties of the media. I bring up Baudrillard because it seemed for a while that he would be able to provide what media producers need: a theory of the ways in which mass media cultures function that goes beyond the Frankfurt school and film theory. Unfortunately, such an analysis has not been forthcoming, and his writing has become for many pessimistically tautological or cleverly postmodern.[17]

One interim strategy that might be more appropriate is Homi Bhabha's concept of colonial discourse based in ambivalence. Through mimicry, the colonized receives the message and appropriates the meaning. "In order to be effective mimicry must continuously produce its slippages, its excesses, its differences. Mimicry is a strategy of resistance available to the colonized subject. For instance when the colonist uses the word 'master,' it may signify to him:

protector/civilizer/cultivator. When used by the colonized, the same word may signify 'oppressor/exploiter/genocide.' "[18] This is interesting not only in terms of strategies of appropriation, mimicry, parody, or pastiche (to mention but a few of the ways in which this strategy has been viewed), but also in terms of how audiences are positioned and how identificatory subject positions are taken up. Both MTV and DD sometimes use parody or pastiche. For instance, Frederic Jameson distinguished parody as a modernist position that still maintains a critical, historical style, which is subversive; whereas, for Jameson, pastiche is a neutral practice of mimicry lacking in the sense that there exists something normal "out there" to which it bears some relation.[19] For Jameson, pastiche signifies the end of a historically grounded cultural position—the loss of a place from which culture can be evaluated using the modernist models. Yet, I think in the dynamic play between these two positions something else is at stake, and that is the potential to develop new signifying relations—relations that would challenge the way we receive media information.

In his recent discussion of colonial discourses, Edward Said developed the concept that the relation between discourses of oppression and discourses of resistance is a parasitic relation; for it is through the discourse of oppression and its reworking through the practices of literature and cultural inscription that a resistance develops into an oppositional strategy, then into a culturally empowering form of address and possibly a strategy of liberation. Said noted that one stage in the development of a postcolonial discourse is the shift in terms from nationalism to the dialectics of liberation.[20] In a milieu as diverse as the United States, this involves reframing these terms through forms that address contradictions expressed through cultural hegemony as well as locating a terrain in which differences among representational cultures can be explored.

In terms of alternative media practices, this might take the form of recognizing how the construction of *networks*, to return to the examples of MTV and DD, might allow for the generation of oppositional spheres—arenas in which the contradictions of the U.S. experiences might be explored. In a culture as diverse and bifurcated as the United States and with many potential (and competing) oppositions, it seems important to recognize the power in the notion of a collective, even if they are as diverse in ideological intent and practice as MTV and DD. Television reduces all individual programming to the medium that it is; in its endless flow, context is everything. If we as video artists/producers look at our practice as a form of colonial discourse, a discourse that speaks to us much more than we are able to transform it, we cannot fail to acknowledge our position vis-à-vis the terrain that Said mapped. The organization of networks would begin to effectively change the way we receive (perceive) the media. Networks could define contexts in which strategies of opposition would be foregrounded, and practices in which individual tapes might have an effect.

Members of the Paper Tiger crew prepare for DEEP DISH TV, the first public access satellite network scheduled to begin in April, 1988.