Preface

Holling is tormented by Koyaanisqatsi dreams until he goes out and does the wild thing with a young stag. . . .

—Synopsis from production company "bible," Northern Exposure¹

The collision of cineastic taste and streetwise sexuality, auteurism and rap—couched by primetime producers in this industrial document—was actually rather commonplace in television by the early 1990s. In fact, for at least a decade American television had exploited the programming potential of visual style in episodes like the one described above. Scripts, especially in prestige dramatic offerings like Northern Exposure, made a weekly practice of engineering their narratives around highly coded aesthetic and cultural fragments. This was no longer simply ensemble drama, a form with a long generic history in television. It was also a kind of ensemble iconography and a highly publicized ritual of aesthetic facility. This book aims to interrogate the nature of such performance, and to do so from three perspectives: as a historical phenomenon, as an aesthetic and industrial practice, and as a socially symbolic act.² In ways that I hope to make clearer later, the self-conscious performance of style is not adequately posed nor fully explained by reference to postmodernism. Furthermore, the industrial practice of x Preface

televisuality challenges several other dominant variants of academic media theory and suggests that a reexamination of high theory is in order. A coalition of very strange intellectual bedfellows—from across a wide range of theoretical and institutional commitments—now posit the very status of the image as a problem. The inability of this intellectual coalition to fully engage contemporary television suggests that a desegregation of theory and production practice is very much in order.

Interrogating the status of the image in recent American television brings with it several inevitable tasks: coming to grips with fundamental changes in the ways that television is made and addressing the ways that production practice problematizes theory. The route that I took to writing this book meant navigating both issues. I recall, for example, while working in online video postproduction suites in the early 1980s, that practitioners in this environment utilized theoretical frameworks that were utterly alien to the accounts of television dominant in academic film and television theory. Of course, I never expected practitioners to use the same lingo as academics, but the fundamental paradigms upon which the digital video effects (DVE) artists worked, sound designers mixed, and the editors cut bore no resemblance to the explanations about television spun out by theorists. Of course these practitioners might be "dupes," as radical critical theory always seemed to imply, ideologically enmeshed as they were in the dominant media. Yet, they were certainly not stupid about what they were doing. Far from it. There was a semiotic and stylistic capability here that had to be taken seriously. Working with cinematographers underscored the same lesson. Even those doing video industrials could bring to productions an aesthetic facility with film historical and lighting styles, a consciousness that provided clients a de facto menu of styles-ondemand. What had happened to the video production industry since the early 1970s, when an orthodox stylistic canon ruled and the unions and guilds had little interest in aspirants with theoretical understandings and academic degrees?³ Clearly, television had changed: practice itself was actively theorizing television. Critical Preface xi

theory surely needed to look at videographic evidence a bit more closely.

In addition, the rise of what academics would later label postmodernism had an immediate impact on the trajectory of the avantgarde. I had cut my educational teeth, so to speak, on the tenets of artistic modernism and independent media practice. By the mid-1970s, "guerrilla video" and "alternative television" provided "progressive" working models for production. Radical Software and Enzensberger provided instigating texts and calls-to-arms for progressive media theory. 4 Visionary video and video art seemed plausible institutional concepts, with both activist and aesthetic potential. Something happened, however, that began to problematize the notion of oppositionality. In the years around 1980, the dominant media began to announce ownership of the very tactics of radicality once thought to be defining properties of the avantgarde.⁵ Commercial spots shot on Panavision took formalist compositional ideals to new heights. Computerized frame-accurate editing allowed broadcast television a dynamic and rapid editing style impossible to achieve with the low-band control-track editing equipment available in media access and production centers. Digital video graphics devices, and their high-resolution images, made the analog graphics of the Paik-Abe video synthesizer on which I had been trained seem like video burlap or electronic noise. For those who thought oppositional art could come from aggressive word-and-image appropriations and recombinations, CNN mastered the art of collaging endless visual images and verbal text. Their performance of recombinant reality-art aired around the clock and around the globe. At the same time, MTV marshaled many of the looks and tactics of the avant-garde—the appropriation of mass-culture images, intertextuality, fractured subjectivity, and yes, even irony.

Even the attitude of the avant-garde, then, could be mass marketed.⁶ Was nothing sacred? Given the ostensible radicalization of the mainstream, what was left for independents, for film/video art, apart from catalog and museum apologetics? Ideologies of genius?

xii Preface

Certainly the technological gulf began to widen between mainstream television and its opposition, a factor that raised other issues. In what ways, for example, were the much-heralded Infiniti automotive ads, with their zen-like cross-culture air and minimalist atmospheric style, different from the important and influential works of Bill Viola? Would Tom Wolfe soon strike against the theoretically subsidized institutions of the media arts world with a corollary version of The Painted Word diatribe? Surely not. The game of radicality had rapidly shifted to the commercial world. Even pop-culture tabloid programs like Entertainment Tonight showed that they could deconstruct both celebrities (with insider back-stories) and production simulations (through mini "makingofs") in ways that would make Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, and Jean Baudrillard proud.⁷ Certainly every previous framework for the avant-garde—whether formalist, Brechtian, Godardian, or dadaist—had become highly visible in some form in the corporate world of the new television.

This was a key moment, then, in the history of both American broadcast television and in the history of independent film and video, a time of redefinition for both. Creativity for many independents increasingly meant trying to figure out how to cover the astronomical hourly rates charged for the ever newer state-of-theart production technologies—apparati that provided the very looks that the new television demanded. In some ways these new looks, codified by music videos, became a visual burden that not only independents, but also commercials, primetime dramas, and even local news would eventually be measured against. 8 Yet, despite such pressures, despite the contradictions that came with assimilation, the mythologies of the "opposition" and the notion of the "independent" would live on, even if they did so out of habit. The political exigencies of the Reagan-Bush era, military intervention in Latin America, the spread of AIDS, and the highly vocal rise of the right wing all provided public conditions by which the avant-garde redefined the very terms of opposition. Within this climate of political crisis, and shadowed by a highly styled primetime, cooperative Preface xiii

and oppositional groups like Paper-Tiger Television, Deep-Dish Satellite Network, and the grass-roots, camcorder-activist PBS series *The Nineties* showed a renewed kind of oppositional power—one that came when video activists elided the aura of the sensitive artist-producer entirely and recast the cutting-edge as low-tech, grainy, and socially topical. It is no irony, then, that even as mainstream television aestheticized itself, its opposition survived by renouncing aesthetic pretense.

During the period of this inversion, I began to critically analyze the operations of the new mainstream televisual forms, and to try to come to grips with the ideological implications of those forms. The book at hand is a result of that analysis. As I have revised and prepared this manuscript over the past few years, several trends have caused me to rethink the pessimism that originally drove me to try to understand mainstream television in the first place. The symbolic appropriation of the avant-garde that characterized the period following 1980—dramatized by its rapid assimilation into mass culture—now appears historically inaccurate. 9 Although the prestige genres of performance and video art may have been cloned by television and MTV, many vernacular forms were not. Communityaccess video, media cooperatives, educational and development video, and small-format camcorder activism have all survived and somehow prospered under the shadow of the new mass-market television. 10 The moment of broadcast television that I examine in this book—an institutional and presentational crisis fueled by the emergence of cable—then, also roughly fits within another historical trough, one formed by the mass-market cloning of the avant-garde in 1980 and the reemergence of an activist small-format camcorder revolution at the end of the Reagan-Bush-Gates era in the early 1990s. Although their ideological blueprints could not be more antithetical, the institutional trajectories of American broadcasting and the avant-garde are also in some ways very much interrelated.

For any critical theory of television, coming to grips with the complexity, scale, and operations of the televisual industry can be debilitating. If all of the aesthetic pretense that I describe above is

xiv Preface

now a property of national media corporations, critical accounts are prone to either celebrate its dominance or to withdraw from it in cynicism and defeat. Given the capital-intensive nature of the new televisuality, what options are left for independents, academics, and alternative producers? If the globally constructed image is a product of the multinational enemy, then the proprietary discourse of the image is also to be attacked and abhorred. This was precisely the tactic many academics used in response to Gulf War coverage. Yet this form of critical separatism was shortsighted. I plan to revisit a case very much related to Gulf War coverage, the L.A. rebellion, in the final chapters of this book, in a section that more completely examines political and cultural aspects of crisis televisuality. More than any other recent event, the rebellion in Los Angeles and its aftermath demonstrated three important lessons: (1) that televisual stylization continues to be a favored and operative mode in television, (2) that televisual abilities extend far away from the prestige producers of mass-market television, and (3) that outsiders can marshal televisual skills to counterprogram and resist the dominant media. The renewed optimism that I referred to earlier is based on the fact that youths in urban multiracial environments can and have used televisual tactics to give voice to the unheard and image to the invisible. Televisuality is not just manufactured by CNN, commercial production companies, and the Pentagon. It is, rather, a new and emerging mode of communication, well suited even for those written off as marginal. As a means of expression with a bite and an attitude, televisuality can also enable "outsiders" to survive in contemporary American urban culture. Children of almost any class or culture seem to take to televisuality like fish to water or like virtual-combatants to Nintendo.

The chapters that follow combine three different levels of analysis, three perspectives not normally conjoined in a field that seems hopelessly split between those that reify context and those that celebrate the text. Three chapters—3, 5, and 10—look at the industrial basis for televisual style. Although television's mode of production seldom plays an important enough role in either critical

Preface xv

theory or empirical research, its consequences are far-ranging. Three additional chapters are structured as broader historical surveys. Chapter 2 examines television's penchant for aesthetic posturing in the decades preceding 1980. It demonstrates how American television worked through the cultural and ideological conditions—the cultural appetite, if you will—that would eventually allow for the celebration of stylistic exhibitionism. Chapter 9 includes a survey of the historical development and televisual consequences of two alternative modes of liveness—the live remote and portable tape. The economic and programming bases for recent developments in televisuality are examined in chapter 10, while chapter 9 focuses on the televisual audience. The five remaining chapters— 4 through 8—comprise the center of the book and elaborate recurrent formal modes and aesthetic guises that make up televisual style. Each of these chapters includes a contextualizing survey of stylistically related shows, along with an in-depth case study and close analysis of individual—but symptomatic—program texts: the epic miniseries, the auteurist signature show, trash television, and the televisual documentary.

Even a cursory look at one of these guises—the signature show demonstrates that their appeals to the audience are indeed richly coded. When on-camera cineaste Orson Welles addressed primetime Moonlighting viewers in 1985, he was laying out the conditions of distinctive viewing even as ABC was teaching critics how to spin must-see status in the press: "Nothing is wrong with your set. Tonight's episode is an experiment. So gather the kids, the dog, the popcorn, and grandma...lock them in another room...and enjoy tonight's show."11 Eight years later, the networks no longer apparently even needed such wraparounds as primetime aesthetic buffers. In one episode of Northern Exposure in 1993, for example, film director Peter Bogdanovich came to Cicely to help establish an international film festival with the works of Orson Welles at its center, while Dances with Wolves actor Graham Greene, playing Native American shaman Leonard, simultaneously sought to "locate the white collective unconscious."12 Bogdanovich speculated around

xvi Preface

the table at Maurice's and afterward about film aesthetics and industry, even as Greene reminisced on Cicely's backwoods streets about high-stakes public debates in film criticism: "What do [I] think about Pauline Kael? We but heads over Bertolucci."

Blink, however, and you'd miss these fleeting, clockwork doses of auteurism. Bogdanovich's psychobiography of Welles, Greene's speculations on literature and film, and Ed's frame-by-frame visual deconstruction of Greg Toland's cinematography in Citizen Kane simply evaporated into the phosphorescence. When aired, such theorizations came across as little more than throw-away lines, lost within a formally complicated episode that combined critiques of anthropology, oral histories, the cultural clash between Caucasian and Native American cultures, the psychological function of myths and rituals, and the tension between self-centeredness and community. The hybridized aesthetic that fused Bogdanovich/Welles/Toland/Greene with producers Joshua Brand and John Falsey, however, also dissolved into a much broader institutional flow—into a channel-rich sweeps evening populated by countless exhibitions of sensationalism and stylistic knowingness. By 1993 the viewer was being flooded by cinematic ecstasies, electronic flourishes, and artspeak alike. In less than twenty years, the flow had been overhauled. How and why this happened is worth considering.