



REVISIONING EUROPE: THE FILMS OF JOHN BERGER AND ALAIN TANNER

by Jerry White

ISBN 978-1-55238-552-4

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“TÉLÉ-APHORISMES”

by Alain Tanner

Translation Note: This text was originally published in the Swiss film annual *Cinema* (1980), in a special issue devoted to television called “Sieht das Fernsehen?” It appeared in both French and German (it was translated into German by Martin Schaub) but has never appeared in English. Because it was organized alphabetically, I have retained the French versions of each heading.

My desire to translate and reprint this essay was yet another part of this book that Tanner thought was a little strange, and, although he was happy to grant permission for my work, he was at pains to point out that he considers this essay a historical document of little relevance today. I want to present it here because it represents the high-point of his thinking about television, an intellectual process that began in the 1960s with extraordinary television films like *Docteur B., médecin de campagne* (1968) and went right on through to his contribution to the experimental television series *Ecoutez voir*, which aired in 1978, two years before this essay was published. Tanner’s radical work in television (often done alongside Berger) is very much of a piece with that of his compatriots Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville. Godard and Miéville’s massive experimental series *Six fois deux : sur et sous la communication* and *France/Tour/Détour/Deux/Enfants* aired on French television in 1976 and 1980, respectively, and Miéville also contributed a Super 8 film (on family violence) to *Ecoutez voir*. Similarly radical work was going on, with varying degrees of success, all over the North Atlantic, at roughly the same time. Ireland of the 1960s and 70s

would be an especially fruitful point of comparison; the key text there is Jack Dowling, Leila Doolan, and Bob Quinn's 1969 book *Sit Down and Be Counted*, which had a preface by Raymond Williams. This was written shortly after the three authors had resigned from the Republic of Ireland's state-owned television service RTÉ; their reasons for resigning had a lot to do with the station's increasing obsession with technical perfection, and their argument that this constituted an ideologically motivated form of censorship and social control is very close indeed to what Tanner is arguing in this essay. Television may have moved on from these sorts of debates and experiments, but the medium is much poorer for it.

Arme / Gun: As an armament, television is essentially a weapon of dissuasion.

Bouche / Mouth: When a politician speaks on television, cover his mouth with your hand and while still listening to what he says, look at his eyes. Oftentimes they'll be saying the opposite. Television is an art of the mouth, and it's not always very appetizing.

Consumation / Consumption: Television basically belongs to the sphere of consumption, and not the sphere of communication. In order to have communication, you need an exchange, some speech that circulates, asking for and obtaining a response. "Thus, all of contemporary media architecture is built on this last definition: *they are things that never allow a response*. That makes any process of exchange impossible (other than as *simulations* of a response, themselves integrated into the process of the broadcast, which doesn't change the uni-linearity of communication in any way). That is their real abstraction. And it is on that abstraction that the system of social control and power is built." (Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique le l'économie politique du signe*)

Démocratie / Democracy: In order to please everyone – and to displease no one – television cuts [*fait un découpe*] horizontally across the public, that is to say that it breaks things into categories according to other people's requirements; sportscasts, international politics, game shows, sing-alongs, etc. But all of these categories express themselves in the same way, in the same fashion. Instead the cut should be *vertical*, between those who want *this* type of televisual expression and those who want *that* other type.

Dialectique / Dialectic: In its terrible homogeneity, television is the antithesis of all dialectic thought.

Différence / Difference: Electronic dots or photographic image. The geometry of the gaze in comparison with the screen and their dimensions. Magic and fascination and indifferent consumption. Empty or full movie theatre and living room with its “related” activity. Cold image and hot image. State control or commercial control, with its gaps. Often-radical differences. Put an image of a TV presenter on a movie screen. Estrangement and comical effects guaranteed.

Dimanche / Sunday: Try (because it seems a lot of people do it) to spend an entire Sunday in front of the television. It’s a fairly dreadful experience.

Dire / Say: Almost nobody wants to “say” cinema anymore. Nobody ever “said” television.

Disputes / Disputes: The groups that struggle here for the “democratization” of television, on the left and the right, have not for a second thought that the stage they’re fighting on, or rather the stage (the place) that they’re trying to be so invested in, is already *marked* in advance. And that a few minutes in the air knocked from a leftist or rightist MP won’t change much: no more than a spot on the boards that govern TV. They’ve got to know that the content of television is television itself, within its system of signs (see **Message / Message**). They must also know that there’s little or no difference between the image of a left-wing MP’s mouth and a right-wing MP’s mouth (see **Bouche / Mouth**).

Dormir / Sleep: Audience selection that operates on the basis of social standing (people who go to bed early or late, according to their profession and the hour their alarm-clock rings) proceeds from a curious vision of “workers” and “intellectuals.” Do we really believe that intellectuals watch television late at night? And if so, why? For a Mozart quartet, lit up all candy-pink?

Doute / Doubt: Profound expression of doubt is fundamental in our system of thought today, whatever form you give it. Television, though, has no right to doubt. It has to know, because of its power-monopoly. Hence its boring speeches, its platitudes, and its sense of not being very truthful.

Durée / Length: One of modern cinema’s major conquests is its work on duration, on the length of its shots, on dead time,¹ on time that is not systematically “filled up.” This acquisition, even if it’s been severely

demolished in cinema, has always been inhibited in television as well as in fiction and documentary. You must always fill things up, pull the spectator along, so that he doesn't have time to get bored, and suddenly "move on to something else." These old Hollywood methods are now forever perpetuated by television's diktat.

Economie / Economy: Two totally contradictory propositions. One: television must be free (including the TV set, which will be provided by the state). Two: you have to pay every time you turn it on (by dropping some coins into a slot for that purpose). The result is the same: you watch a lot less. A certain re-valorization of images must come from that.

Entrée (Port d') / Entry (Port of): Working for television can be, in some cases, a passport, an "open sesame!" (it's the voice of power that's going inside). The reverse can also be true: that this voice of power stays at the door. For example, one of the most interesting recent shows on TV *Romande*² was done by an Italian feminist group which obtained authorization, as part of its standing, to re-enact a rape trial. Using lightweight gear and in black and white. Will "great" TV enter into the courtroom?

Etalon / Standard: The standard TV image is the presenter seated next to some flowers. All of the techie ideology of "quality" images, another form of censorship, develops from that.

Etat d'âme / Scruples: When the author of a TV show or a film is told to check his scruples at the door in order to hide entirely behind the all-powerful "good subject" and honestly serve the "average viewer," there is a gap. And this gap, created by the absence of *one* voice (judged too private and not anonymous enough to interest the audience – see **Spectateur / Viewer**) is also filled not by a little extra happiness from a "big audience," but by all the signals emitted by power.

Evènement / Event: It's harder and harder for television to "create an event." In the domain of information it can still try to do that by fictionalizing reality a bit (i.e., French TV's attempts to create an obsession with war at the beginning of the year). In the domain of fiction, this doesn't happen anymore, at least inasmuch as fiction stomps on the flowers of historical documents. In order to create a TV event, you must do nothing less than go to the grounds of the Nazi death camps (*Holocaust*: see **Mémoire / Memory**). But *Holocaust* was never anything other than a TV event, and in no way shape or form a historical event, as they wanted us to believe.

Farine / Flour: At the end of the week, the Geneva dailies publish a TV grid called “What’s on for Six Days.” It’s a bit like how they used to reassure people by saying “there’s enough flour for six days.”

Fiction / Fiction: On television, fiction “fictionalizes” badly. The electronic image, deprived of its powers of fascination, of myth, tends to erase the border between fiction and documentary, and in order to make an image, the border between “a lie” and “the truth.” This is why on television, documentary is much stronger than fiction. But just as fiction loses a lot of its powers, diluted bits of information that are, in the cinema, pulled apart from the fictional texture, come floating back to surface on television. Thus it occurs to some people with a weak cultural background to mix fiction and documentary, to take the “information” gleaned from fiction as money in the bank and to make stuff up for the news broadcasts. And as the voice that comes out of the little box is “them,” “they,” power, then the one who tells the truth and can’t be fooled, well you see how this amalgamation could be a lie. This informative quality of fiction also stands for a kind of “retro” vision of the world, backward-looking inasmuch as overall, public TV is fed essentially by fictions that come from cinema and are finally broadcast, quite a while after their production.

Garanties / Guarantees: TV films cost a lot of money today, even when they’re given a leg up, than do fiction films made for cinemas (at least in our country). It’s a question of “guarantees.” Guarantees for the script, for a “good subject” that will lead to a “classical” form of shooting, with a big crew (a guarantee of employment) that will guarantee the technical “quality.” Guarantee of the means to get it all together substitutes for the idea and the work. Guarantee against that *madness* which is, in some part, filmmaking.

Godard (Jean-Luc): “If nothing happens on television, it’s because everything is happening.”

Grille / Grid: The organization of programs, for some years (!) called, with a ghastly accuracy: the program grid [*grille des programmes*].

Habitude / Habit: You get used to it. You get used to everything.

Histoires / Stories: Stories, stories, still more stories. Lives lived by procurement.

Idéologie / Ideology: Look elsewhere.

Imaginaire / Imaginary: “We must talk about the cold light of television, about why it’s so offensive to the imagination (including that of children), for the reason that it does not animate any imagery, and for the simple reason that *it is no longer an image*. Cinema, on the other hand, is still endowed with an intense imagination, because cinema *is* an image. That is to say not only a screen and a form, but *a myth*, something that still has a double, a ghost, a mirror, a dream. None of this is in a TV image, which suggests nothing, which magnetizes, which is only a screen, and not even that: a miniature terminal that, in fact, immediately finds its way into your head – you’re the screen, and TV is watching you – as it transistorizes all of your neurons and goes by like a magnetic tape. A tape, not an image” (Jean Baudrillard, *Cahiers du cinéma*).

Information / Information: Television has tried – in vain – to invent a language and form. All of that was very quickly abandoned when we understood that television is not a matter of forms but instead of signs – and of content. Television only works on the level of information itself, and at the second degree it goes back to the socio-political. Nothing else. This is the source of TV’s obsession with the subject, of *what* it speaks about and never with *how* it speaks. Information overflows everywhere on television, which is still solidly in the grip of the dominant ideology. It’s omnipresent; in series, commercials, TV films. To a Radical³ MP who complained to me once day about the excessive influence of the left in political debates, I replied that his group already had 95 per cent of the airtime. Did they want 100 per cent?

Investissement / Investment: “Everything that is invested by the spectator in the image, with the look, the brain, and the body as well, isn’t invested elsewhere. That is to say it’s not invested in social relations without images, not invested in communication” (Serge Toubiana, *Cahiers du cinéma*).

Liberté / Freedom: Television’s freedom, the spectator’s freedom, is simply being able to switch off the show. Miserable.

Mandat / Mandate: Who charged the state, one sunny day, with the task of, in the words of the SSR’s statutes, “Educating, informing, entertaining” the people, through this enormous, “dominant school” that is television? As a citizen, I have no memory of being consulted.

Mémoire / Memory: Memory is the centre, the base of all creative work. Television's methods, where everything winds up as part of an endless and homogenous chain, only to finally erase itself, represents memory's liquidation. It is forgetting. Nothing better than serializing the great historical events only to expel them from human memory. (Best example: *Holocaust*.)

Message / Message: "The medium is the message." McLuhan understood the inner workings of television very early on. What this means is that the real message transmitted by television isn't the content of this or that broadcast, but the phenomenon of "television" itself, in the sense that it transforms social habits, modes of perception and relating, as it imposes a standard and homogenous vision of things through a completely confused language that neutralizes all content and transforms it into signs that only refer back to themselves. There is little to no cross-referencing or feedback. TV's signs exhaust themselves as quickly as they are absorbed. To again cite Baudrillard (*La Société de la consommation*, Gallimard): "what is received, assimilated, consumed is less a spectacle than the virtuality of all spectacles." "Thus the truth of the mass media is this: their function is to neutralize the living character, eventually of the world, and replace it with an alternate media universe that homogenizes one form after another, each one only signifying the others. In the end, they become each others' reciprocal content, and this is the *totalitarian 'message' of a society of consumption*." "What animates TV, by way of its technical organization, is the idea (the ideology) of a world visualize-able at will, arrange-able at will, and readable as images. It animates the ideology of *the total power of a system that reads a world that has become a sign system*. TV images try to be the metalanguage of an absent world..." "... and it's the substance of the world – broken up, filtered, reinterpreted according to its code [...] that we 'consume.' All value as a cultural or political event has faded from all the world's material, all industrially treated, finished, sign-laden cultural products."

Olympiades / Olympics: Somewhere between Brezhnev, Carter, and Afghanistan, there is television, worldvision. If the Moscow Olympics' only spectators were the people sitting in the bleachers of Lenin Stadium, Carter never would have sabotaged the games, which only exist on television, like the rest of the Olympic industry (exclusive contracts with Coca Cola, athletic wear, all of the enormous PR impact that results from an association

with the TV-Games). What this does is punish the majority of TV viewers and advertisers involved by pointing the finger at Russia. It's the great universal mediator (TV) that allows him to take this position. Maybe one day there will be no wars, if there is no space on the grid to show them.

Paradoxe / Paradox: Television, or rather the television-effect, functions mostly on paradox. The first, and the most important, is the transformation of news [*information*] into fiction. We've already seen (see **Information / Information**) how fiction threatens to take on the status of TV news. But the final, overall effect is that the mass is constituted by a qualitative change that resembles a chemical process: at the moment that the overflow occurs – and it occurs very quickly – all news [*information*] changes to fiction. This is where the real status of fiction on television is to be found, in this turnaround that winds up as a sort of fictionalizing of the world. A fictional world.

Patron / Boss: It's not true that television's bosses are bosses, banks, capitalism, political parties, or what have you. Television's boss is the overall consensus that also includes all of the people, whose tastes and ideas television follows rather than precedes. Thus, because of a near-total refusal to think about images and sounds, we have a middling rather than democratic expression coming out of the box. Power is thus exerted through a sort of circulation, a vicious circle, that dissolves the responsibility for alienation into a magma that everyone winds up in. Television is a sort of national brotherhood. A sophist might say that it's the beginning of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Phases / Phases: There have been three phases in the development of television, three ways to look at it. The first was a period of creativity, of work, and of a bit of belief. The second was the discovery of what television really is, accompanied by a perverse gorging on codes and signs, and a sort of third-degree joy in those codes and signs, a joy that goes right on up to understanding, and then to the quick exhaustion of that understanding. The third phase is now: a piece of furniture, with a bit of soccer and some old movies late at night.

Politiciens / Politicians: Swiss politicians are fairly shrewd: they aren't on television much. It's probably an old peasant contemptuousness that makes them do that. In France, the political program has wound up totally

ruining any credibility that politicians might have had, and is finally doing this for politics itself as well.

Pourcentage / Percentage: During the debates of the 1960s, about the right way to use the *Loi sur le cinéma*, some groups were worried about soon seeing signs of an “official art” and “official cinema.” Today, nobody worries that 90 per cent of the images people see are state images, television images.

Prix / Price: Televisions are enormous, very expensive machines. The cost-value ratio is a bit imbalanced. If the same ratio were applied, for instance, to the vegetable trade, a kilo of potatoes would cost around 100 francs.

Publicité / Advertising: Commercials have a double function: simply commercial on one hand (selling things) but just as powerfully ideological on the other (selling a lifestyle, a behaviour appropriate to the sale). In a commercially logical way, ads ask for, and easily get, the best spots in the broadcast. They ask for privilege and they get it. Thus, its mixture with news-time brings it into a network that is strongly marked by ideology. To be democratic, we should give the same amount of airtime that the “dominant ideology” gets over to *silence*, or to very simple images, if possible still, but in any case *mute*.

Question / Question: Why read the news in the same voice that we hear in commercials: a lively, wily, sexy voice, soft like an airline hostess’s? What is the source of this special power that a commercial’s voice seems to have?

Reflét / Reflection: Now within its final and definitive phase, and created by a lanky bureaucratic machine, television (in all countries) has a harder and harder time creating its own original material. Work on TV today is a lot better than in the past. But the “moral” conditions of its creation are clearly degraded. This is why it must borrow from other fields of creative activity in order to make a televisual event, such as a soccer game, or something from Milan’s La Scala. More and more, television reflects, borrows, distracts, ceremonializes. Harsher tongues say it steals or pillages. Or that it kills. Via its monopoly it enacts a process of *dispossession*, “thus, a song isn’t really popular until the medium gives it a means to be via its buzz and hit-parades. Radio and TV sing for us, which is to say they sing instead of us” (Pierre Baudry, *Cahiers du cinéma*⁴). And still more: the makers of

pop, disco or rock albums also make their own videos, videos of a distinctly promotional quality, which TV takes right up, all too happy not to have to make such things itself. In all of its programming, TV is happier and happier with advertising put in place by agents, press people, and other salesmen. The more television becomes “big,” the more blubber it develops and the more it gives the sense of being powerless.

Règles (du jeu) / Rules (of the game): The television viewer is all-powerful (see **Patron / Boss**) but at the same time, the viewer’s power is practically annulled by the rules of the game, which are the rules of the media (see **Message / Message**).

Réduction / Reduction: Television is an essentially reductive phenomenon.

Regard / Look: The direction of the look in television is a matter for experts. There are only two categories of people who know that they have to look into the lens, so they can address the viewer directly (which they completely fail to do; there is not the least amount of communication between the look and myself, who is looking at the look). The first group is made up of television people: journalists, presenters, newscasters. The second group is made up of politicians, who respond to a profession question from a journalist next to them by turning towards the camera (as they were so badly taught to do), in order to address the voters. This never fails to produce discomfort, in that it’s tremendously rude to the journalist who asked you the question and who you then abandon to his fate as a simple foil. What’s more, when the newscaster looks at *me* and says “now it’s time for your show” (that’s *my* show, which belongs to me), I feel diminished sitting there in my chair, and get the sense that the prefab smile that accompanies the address is semi-obscene.

Rentabilité / Profitability: I don’t know why television is so preoccupied with the profitability of its programs, why it conceives of the 10:30 p.m. time slot as needing to be for a “big audience” (that is to say, the lowest common denominator). Television is performing the same calculation here that a film director makes when shooting a movie destined to turn a profit. Where is television’s profit? Neither economic nor cultural in this case. So? In what rulebook do we find this obligation to pander to a “majority” at the expense of others? On TV Romande, we’ve recently descended to abysmal depths in the name of this policy.

Santé / Health: Television makes anyone who watches it for a long time hungry. This may seem strange at first, but it's easily proven psychologically. Whoever eats also drinks. An entire night in front of the TV leads to excessive drinking. This is not healthy.

Simulacre / Simulacrum: Television is the *site* of the simulacrum.

Solitude / Solitude: Not only is there no response to television's speech, but it deprives people of any communication they might have between themselves; you don't talk when the set is on. On one hand, it produces a fantastic unification of the social group; on the other, it atomizes everyone. We are more similar and more alone.

Son / Sound: On television, the entire message is conveyed through sound. Images, because of their overflowingness and their saturation, have their potential impact terribly devalued. Moreover, because of the laziness of those who make them and the strict censorship exercised upon signs, they end up by looking all alike, as though they were "taken" from the same material. Thus you're not really tied to the images; you look at them because they're there, but what really moves things along is sound. This is why the number one enemy of television is silence, a hole. A breakdown of the image is OK; you put up a card and play some music. But a breakdown of the sound creates a feeling of panic. Television is thus a sort of radio, but a radio where you have to be *here*, and not somewhere else. A big part of television's conditioning happens through this *here*, this couch in the family room. But when you say sound, you are necessarily saying speech, words. Television is a river of words more than images. Fear of silence, river of words: listen to the intolerable babble of soccer commentators, who supplant the sound of the players and the crowd, which can be quite lovely. The imagining of images no longer exists on television; sound has replaced it. And that sound is entirely made up of words. When you see a movie in the theatre, it's the story or the images that dance in your head. After an evening of TV, you surprise yourself by responding to an imaginary interview.

Spectateur / Viewer: *The* viewer, the *viewers*: doesn't exist. It's a massive, completely demagogic entity, which snuffs out any political conception of the audience. *The* audience: doesn't exist. It's everybody and nobody at the same time. You must say *a* viewer. Him, individual, compatriot, brother (who knows?), and then another and another and another, separately giving you, finally, the only audience possible: some (not *the*) viewers.

Sport / Sport: Everyone agrees that what “works” best on television is sport. There are two clear reasons for this. The first is that sport has no content. (It has some, sure, but only at the second degree, as a bit of “opium of the masses” and in terms of the extraordinary futility of sports reporting). But in the moment, during the actual sporting act, there is no content. The second reason is that it has a form, a there-ness, that even the worst productions can’t miss. A runner who gets from point *A* to point *B* is a nearly definitive form. This lack of form and easily rendered content together mean that sport is less susceptible to censorship of the linguistic codes that it’s always tripping over, since it has to disengage from content and fabricate forms.

Télespectateur / TV Viewer: They say, “hey pal, have you thought of the average TV viewer?” Who is that, exactly? “It’s the guy who works hard all day, doesn’t like his job much, and, at night, plops down on his sofa and wants to be entertained.” The state (TV) is charged with this responsibility, and the discourse of entertainment that it produces takes up more time than even the working day (while being part of the same ideological tissue).

Tonalité / Tone: Everyone who talks on television is obliged to adopt the tone of the average bourgeois. And his vocabulary.

Troubles (de la vue) / Troubles (with seeing): One day, working as a stadium assistant during a soccer match, I marvelled at the idea – just for a second, but in all sincerity – that when one of the teams scored, the players didn’t right away replay it in slow motion.

Utopie / Utopia: Today television has fully replaced the sector of cinema that produces little B movies. Instead of these grim shows we have now, you dream of making little detective movies for TV: shot quickly and cheaply, violent, in black and white, in a system where you’re always working. A guy can dream....

Valeur / Value: “My remark comes back to Baudrillard’s thesis: this profitability of tuning in is no doubt solicited by the medium itself, which proposes that its spectator appropriate the imaginary value of the discourse. Nevertheless, while at the cinema, for example, you pay for your ticket to get two hours of spectacle, and if you leave the theatre in the middle of the screening, you really lose something. When you do or don’t tune into the TV [*écoute la télé ou pas*], it’s the same price, as they say. Furthermore, speech on TV is being devalued, dethroned (the proof of this dethroning can be

found in the frequent disengagement of TV viewers; you walk around, you talk about something else....). In other words, we could suppose that this thesis also functions in another way: there's nothing to lose by not tuning into TV [*écouter la TV*]. Just as TV is an imaginary driver of value, and even *becomes* value, at the same time its value 'falls' (Pierre Baudry, *Cahiers du cinéma*⁵).

Vidéo / Video: There has always been a "plot" against communication, and more particularly against the image. Even more so against video, sequestered by television's monopoly and smothered by all its potential. Just as the little black and white Sony is struggling to become usable, everyone in TV declares that you have to use colour and sets technical norms that require heavier gear and bigger crews than 35 mm films. So what will TV do with the extraordinary potential of video? With its lightness, its ease of handling, its infinite adaptability? Everything interesting being done in video is being done outside of television (Armand Gatti, Godard, etc.), and when television shoots these swanky events in a big studio and on video, you feel like you're in a bakery. On the other hand, our corporations are starting to use video essentially as a means of surveillance (policing department stores and street corners), or now to sell pornography (videocassettes are coming....).

Voix / Voice: We've seen (see **Son / Sound** and **Bouche / Mouth**) that television is a medium of speech, of the voice – or the voice-over. The voice-over, omnipresent in documentaries and news, indicates (for television) that images are insufficient, that they don't say everything, or even, and often, that they say nothing at all and you can make them say whatever you want. Here's a story. As I was making a news clip for TV Romande, the journalist working with me said: "I'm going back to the hotel to write my script; get some shots that I can put between two interviews." What shots? "Doesn't matter, whatever you find. Shots." "Voice-over is a matter of double-grafting: graft a stronger sound onto other sounds, and onto images in a way that the first one becomes the general equivalent of live sound, the sound that gives the others value, by adding one of more sign less. Put in place a hierarchy of sounds, of voices that line up in a recorder that questions what the spectator hears, that wins over his engaged conscience. The other grafting: voice-over discourse presents the cinema as a mimetic practice and offers it a stage on which to speak. And a powerful voice-over in a film may

very well be refused all power over the real. The power it has in a film (over the gaze of a spectator) is really the belief in being taken along the rails of power itself, in that it's not barred from representation" (Serge Toubiana, *Cahiers du cinéma*).

Yeux (Voir avec ses) / Eyes (See with one's own): The ideology of the visual, which in our society is confined to a sort of voyeuristic hysteria, has turned into a disbelief in what you see. It's almost as grave for a country that commits an act of violence to hold back the images of the act itself. A crestfallen-looking French newscaster at the beginning of the Afghanistan situation: he apologizes for not having *good* images to show us, and that we have to trust the words. The *proof* arrives a few days later, in the form of Russian soldiers in Kabul. Phew!

Zèbre (c'est la fin de l'alphabet, c'est pour conclure) / Zebra (it's the end of the alphabet, so this is to wrap up): After all that, what can you do? Adapting a slightly distant attitude surely won't do. Work from the inside? That would be absurd, given the solidity of the structures in place. In any event, the machine is heavy and its connections to power give it a sort of "negativity potential" [*« potentiel de négativité »*] that's difficult to avoid. But looking at it a bit more closely (which I've tried to do over these last few pages), you can see that it may still have something to ask of us and in a way we can answer, but by (when possible) putting an end to it. Except in very specific, and rare, socio-political circumstances, I think it's useless to give in to the temptation to go along, at whatever price, with TV's "message," however humanist it might be. It will be absorbed into the overall din and dissolve. So? Co-productions between film and TV? Sure, if the images break away from the habitual naturalism and bring a bit of "edginess" to television as it acts as a kind of financial support system for cinema. But what seems to me in the end most interesting is to realize that images made for television *do not have to address themselves* directly to *the spectator*, but to the medium itself, because the medium is the message.

Television functions by the continuous, infinite quality of its discourse, by its massive and always smooth quality, regardless of nature of the broadcast. And equally by the completely "frozen," stilted quality of its arrangement

of the shot, its arrangement of the grid, its technique. That's why it's most surprising – and most interesting, or funniest – when the machine comes off the tracks, stumbles on an incident along the way. It's the newscaster who's baffled, the surprised and worried look of the presenter of a film that won't get underway, a guest who won't play the game of politeness or who's just straight-out drunk and is dragged out on a stretcher (Bukowski⁶ – the American writer – on French TV). From a distance you can see – because elsewhere it's so compact – that the TV image is actually extremely fragile and that nothing must disturb it. That's why the images it creates must be about *television itself* (the little box) more than about the spectator. They must be made so that when they appear on the screen, they constitute an interrogation of television itself, as they infiltrate the ectoplasmic televisual tissue and make it vibrate. Of course you think here of the spots that Bob Wilson⁷ produced for television.

You can thus imagine filmmakers producing an enormous quantity (365 per year) of very short little films (3 minutes maximum) on whatever subject, films that also take on *silence*, have no title, no credits, no author's name, and are never announced in the listings but are broadcast in prime time. That's a concrete proposition. That sort of TV would finally allow for some slips. And we'd see some little air bubbles float up.

Notes

- 1 "... sur les temps morts" in the original. "Temps mort" was the title of Tanner's contribution to the experimental television series *Ecoutez voir*.
- 2 Télévision Suisse Romande, formerly part of SSR (Société Suisse de la Radiodiffusion), headquartered in Geneva. The term "Suisse Romande," is shorthand for French-speaking Switzerland. Switzerland's broadcasters are split along linguistic lines, with limited amounts of Romansh-language programming appearing on the German-language television network Schweizer Fernsehen 1 (headquartered in Zurich).
- 3 Tanner is referring here to the Parti radical-démocratique (which, after a merger with the Parti libéral, became the Parti libéral-radical in 2009). Despite its name, this is a centre-right Swiss political party. It is descended from the Radicals, the political faction who triumphed over the conservatives to create the 1848 constitution and its federal structure; this constitution is, basically, the blueprint of modern Switzerland.
- 4 Pierre Baudry, "Economiques sur les médias : Remarques sur la télévision, la radio et le cinéma, 1," *Cahiers du cinéma* 274 (1977): 51.
- 5 Pierre Baudry, "Economiques sur les médias : Remarques sur la télévision, la radio et le cinéma, 2," *Cahiers du cinéma* 277 (1977): 27.
- 6 Charles Bukowski (1920-1994), the American poet and novelist famous for his hard-drinking ways and much beloved in France.
- 7 The American opera and theatre artist Robert Wilson (b.1941), who has worked in video since the 1970s. His 1978 work *Video 50* is made up of 100 mini "episodes" supposedly meant for television; each episode is 30 seconds long. Renato Berta, who was cinematographer on *La Salamandre*, *Le Milieu du monde* and *Jonas*, as well as on Tanner's *Retour d'Afrique*, is credited with lighting on the *Video 50* piece.