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# “Virulent Madness”: *Network*, *Videodrome*, and the Tropes of Twentieth Century Television Anxiety

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**ABSTRACT**

Television, in this second decade of the twenty-first century, is hardly the object of much significant protest. After almost one hundred years in existence, television is a medium which has had its potential for hysteria at the hands of cultural critics rendered inert; in fact, one might even argue that television is a celebrated medium, one that is beginning to approach the high cultural status of literature and film with the rise of so-called prestige television programs like *The Sopranos, Breaking Bad,* or *Mad Men.* This continues to appear true as budgets and production values for television programming continue to rise.

For many decades, however, television was the object of spectacular critical focus. Like many other communications technologies, its integration into society as a medium was met with strong reactions of deeply polarized valances. For some viewers, the growth and development of television was a net good, and the medium itself represented a bounty of information that was now accessible to the average American – a democratization of leisure that symbolized and enshrined a kind of freedom to enjoy oneself into our culture.

For other segments of viewership, however, television began to seem like a locus of simmering anxieties over the trajectory of society. To critics, the changes it rendered to entertainment media seemed to symbolize, if not single-handedly bring into being, significant and profoundly negative changes to humanity as a whole. Throughout the decades of the 1970s and 1980s, cultural critics voiced a number of concerns about the role of television in daily life. Was television making children stupider, or worse, more violent? Was it overtaking such established, esteemed media as film, the novel, the print newspaper – forms which were assumed to be *a prioi* better for the mind? Was it going to render the cultural works of the previous

generations obsolete? Most concerning of all: was it going to be so persuasive in its ability to produce images that it would make us lose touch with reality altogether?

For the most part, we see these instances of moral panic cropping up primarily in non-fiction sources like media theory, government policy, and the news media during the late 20th century. In this thesis, I seek to examine how these views and perceptions of television crop up in fiction sources through the analysis of two films – *Network* (1976, written by Paddy Chayefsky) and *Videodrome* (1983, written by David Cronenberg). Within these films, one can see a profound preoccupation with the dangers and risks of television's pervasion in society in a manner that clearly reflects the fears of the time in obvious as well as subtle ways. Themes such as sexual deviance and violence, youth and obsolescence, and psychosis individually flesh out complicated beliefs about the power, influence, and phenomenology of television viewership in the 1970s and 1980s.

By analyzing these films against one another and against a wider context of historical anxiety about the role of television in moral and social life, we can see embedded themes regarding our culture's beliefs about mass communications technologies – and ourselves – more clearly. Additionally, given the nature of the media panic as "sisyphean," as sociologist Amy Orben puts it ("The Sisyphean Cycles"), these insights can play a role in how we critically examine our relationship to contemporary mass media technologies like the Internet and social media. When critiques are leveled at these newer mediums, it can be valuable to remember past debates in order to more accurately assess the role these technologies ought to be granted in mainstream life.

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# Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION: MEDIA PANICS (AND OTHER WAYS TO FEAR THE TUBE)

The term “moral panic” was coined by the sociologist Stanley Cohen in 1972 in an attempt to succinctly describe a sociological phenomenon in which acute moral concern over a specific deviant behavior, media, or subculture (whether imagined or real) would rise seemingly out of thin air. Traditionally, the panic would be perpetuated or entirely manufactured by the news media, who might sensationalize the rare occurrences of the feared event as frequent or sensationalize fictionalized occurrences as very real. Some familiar examples of this include the news panic over the subcultural feuding between the Mods and the Rockers of the 1960s, who inspired Cohen’s canonical foray into the subject, but also the Satanic Panic, the Red Scare, and more. More recent examples of moral panics may include unfounded social media scares about fake or sensationalized sex trafficking tactics, discussions around the existence and persistence of the pedophilic cabals fabled by QAnon believers, claims about the dangers of new educational concepts like critical race theory, and more.

A particular subtype of moral panic called the “media panic” concerns itself less with a spontaneous social phenomenon and instead focuses more on the potential dangers of an entire mass communication medium as a whole. These eruptions of concern have existed for the entire length of mass communication history. In the late 1930s and 40s, anxiety abounded about the potential impact of radio on the health and mental well-being of children (Orben) – one social scientist described radio as an all-pervading evil, fearing that “no locks will keep this intruder out, nor can parents shift their children away from it” (Gruenberg, as cited in Orben). Popular print fiction also received this treatment from time to time.

Involved in this repetitive criticism of media is a forgetfulness about the fears that now inert mediums once invoked; for the modern reader, it can feel quite ridiculous to imagine a time where radio was considered a producer of deviance. And yet, this is the exact history of all media theory – at first, a new medium for art or information is hotly contested before being integrated and generally celebrated. Kirsten Drotner mentions this "amnesia" about the past as a typifying feature of most media panics:

> This amnesia is closely related to another common characteristic of the panics: their historical incorporation. The intense preoccupation with the latest media fad, immediately relegates older media to the shadows of acceptance. Thus, the trends towards cultural democratisation are chiefly seen with media that we have grown accustomed to, media that have proved their innocence, so to speak. ("Dangerous Media?" 610)

Via this process, as Drotner indicates, formerly contentious mediums become accepted as relatively innocent in terms of whatever given social consequence it has been accused of creating, whether that be instigating violence or ruining high art, and integrated as an equal part of the cultural and artistic landscape. Film, which was initially considered to be a lesser form of art compared to literature, is now arguably the prime landscape for great works of modern art, with works of contemporary digital art and literature less often exalted in the mainstream culture of artistic criticism.

There may even be transference of fears about past mediums from one medium to another; consider the themes listed above, as well as the ones written about below that are discussed in the two texts that appear in discussions of the internet. Fears surrounding violence, sex, and debauchery are perennial in all cultural critique, but in the 21st century, they abound in discussions of the Internet in particular. Drotner describes an Internet panic that occurred in 1998

after two 18-year-olds claimed that they were going to transmit their first time having sex together over the Internet on a website called ourfirsttime.com, resulting in huge public outcry ("Dangerous Media?" 600). There are also pervasive anxieties about the easy access the Internet provides to extreme images of violence, similar to the anxieties present in *Videodrome* about images of violence and sex on the television. Fears that access to technology will "deform" people, especially children, abound in most examples of media anxiety.

When it comes to the television, the fears and critiques leveled against it throughout the late 20th century stayed relatively consistent in terms of character and argument. Often, television fears focused on the idea that the depiction of violence itself would cause violence, with social psychologists at first erroneously labeling the link between viewing violence and enacting violence as one-to-one – crudely put, they proposed a sort of monkey-see, monkey-do theory of human behavior. As sociologist Stanley Cohen writes:

> The crude model of 'media effects' has hardly been modified: exposure to violence on this or that medium causes, stimulates or triggers off violent behaviour. The continued fuzziness of the evidence for such links is overcompensated by confident appeals to common sense and intuition. When such appeals come from voices of authority (such as judges) or authoritative voices (experts, professionals, government inquiries) the moral panic is easier to sustain, if only by sheer repetition. The prohibitionist model of the 'slippery slope' is common: if 'horror videos' are allowed, then why not 'video nasties?' Child pornography will be next and finally the legendary 'snuff movies.' (*Folk Devils* 16)

Indeed, as Cohen argues here, many of the arguments against television spring forth not from extremely rigorous scientific scholarship. Instead, they come from an intuitive sense that seeing violence *ought* to trigger more violence. This is paired with a similar but distinct intuition that

viewing fictional depictions of violence opens us up to viewing more objectionable forms of media, including media that is not just unethical to view because it *may* inspire viewers to act similarly, but rather media that is intrinsically and inherently immoral such child pornography or snuff films.

Closer historical evaluation seems to bear out this characterization of television criticism as excessively preoccupied with the risk of violence. In 1972, the Surgeon General would deem television a public health risk based on flawed data regarding causation between violence viewership and actual violence (United States Surgeon General…). The FCC would discourage the airing of violent or otherwise inappropriate material during daytime slots, a choice which would result in legal action from networks (Thompson). Plenty of stakeholders – cultural critics, parents, interest groups looking out for public health – would voice their concerns about television violence over and over again, sometimes often enough to trigger parody (one thinks of *the Simpsons* episode in which Marge protests the cartoon “Itchy and Scratchy”). Over the course of the two decades, a wide body of scholarship would emerge questioning the impact of television violence on children, often concluding their research with complicated or even non-correlative results.

In the 1980s, “video nasties,” or excessively violent or sexual films distributed on VHS became the source of fear for many British citizens, leading to mass censorship of scores of horror movies and general news media hysteria. The issue of violence continued to be raised. In 1983, an article appeared in the New York Times column *TV View* which acutely articulated the fears of many Americans (as well as their origins in something other than pure rationality):

> Granted that the television networks are an easy target, that violence has many causes, and that when it first was argued that television contributed to the rise in violence the

> argument was made more from instinct than from data. Grant all these things; it is still depressing when the networks now insist that a viewer who has seen, say, 18,000 simulated murders by the time he is 17 has not had his psyche altered. (Corry)

Once again, just as Cohen articulates, the belief that television intuitively *must* change our brains is presumably the driving force behind the many thousands of studies that attempt to study the impact of television violence on viewers. Even the acknowledgement of the argument's primarily emotional drive isn't even enough to dissuade the aforementioned columnist, and critics continue to fail to be persuaded. Worries about media violence continue to pervade all media criticism, and act as the motivation behind later panics like those that surrounded violent video games in the wake of Columbine, or more general fears about the Internet and social media.

This is certainly not to argue that there is no value to limiting the amount of media that depicts violence – the scholarship is complicated, and it seems that there is research that supports both positions. Instead, I am attempting to illustrate the dominant preoccupation with television as one that fears the potential for violence deeply, and one which sees television (and other forms of media) as a potential trigger for profound social violence. However, critics throughout the decades have also needled other qualities about television as harmful, including the common belief that it degrades cognition and that it supplants social connection.

All of this is to say that when both *Network* and *Videodrome* were created, arguments about the dangers of television dominated the media landscape, and the result of this debate seems to be two films that are highly attuned to these worries. They are manifestly both interested in the relative "goodness" and "badness" of the medium, in addition to being concerned with the role of fiction and violence in our moral and social lives. They are also, more

subtly, interested in the “psychotic” nature of television, in its rhetorical dimensions, and in its role in influencing youth and shaping society for future generations.

## *Chapter 2* PSYCHOSIS, RHETORIC and PERCEPTION in *Network*

Both *Videodrome* and *Network* seem keyed into all of these feelings of anxiety regarding the negative impacts of television on individuals and society. *Network* centers around the psychotic break of a newscaster named Howard Beale (Peter Finch), who threatens to kill himself live on the air following a significant decline in his ratings. Though Beale and his friend Max Schumacher (William Holden), head of the news division, believe this will get Beale sacked, it instead creates a major media stir. Head of programming Diana Christensen (Faye Dunaway) proposes that Beale get put back on the air as a sooth-saying personality, with his act now rife with plenty of pseudo-mystical set dressing to sell the illusion. Christensen's plan works – Beale's program becomes the biggest show on television, but it comes at the cost of truth and compassion for the suffering Beale, especially as he grows more and more delusional. Beale is eventually killed by Christensen and others at the network once his assassination becomes politically and financially expedient for them.

*Videodrome* also centers around a television producer looking for his next best thing, although the protagonist of this film does not experience the same fall from news show prestige experienced by the characters in *Network;* Max Renn (James Wood) runs a sleazy television station called Civic-TV, which broadcasts violent films and softcore pornography, and he's searching for harder material. He encounters a television signal from Malaysia called "videodrome" that appears to broadcast torture porn and snuff videos. Renn subsequently becomes fixated on this signal, believing it to be what his station needs to succeed and bring in viewers. As he attempts to track down the signal and find out more about it, he learns that watching it induces the development of a brain tumor that creates violent and strange hallucinations that only continue to progress over time.

*Network* and *Videodrome* are both concerned at a narrative level with psychosis and changes to perception as central critiques of television. The reason for this is somewhat intuitive – the television is a box into which we stare to alter our perception – though it also seems strange as a critique of television in particular, given the fact that these are both filmic works. After all, film changes your perception in much the same ways as television. Of course, there is a difference between television and film in terms of persistence, immersion, and access, and the fact that television is more pervasively accessible to viewers might augment how it changes perception. Perhaps television is to film as hallucinations are to dreams – the difference is in duration and immersion.

Newer media technologies do often find themselves artistically linked to psychosis and other lapses in sanity, likely because they are capable of producing some pretty pronounced changes to perception in the same ways as hallucinations. For instance, scholar Sheila Kunkle writes about the dimensions of unreality that new media technology can exacerbate in psychosis and arouse unreality in people who do not experience psychosis:

> With the introduction of certain technologies and the advent of the computer as the primary machine in the last decade of 20th century, it is my contention that we are witnessing new and more peculiar psychotic and pre-psychotic dimensions of what William Gibson termed in his 1984 novel, *Neuromancer*, our "cyberspace" age. It is a case not only of identifying with the machine, but also of the identification of the biological being with the "Thing" that underlies the machine itself: the digital bytes, the pulsing fibers of wire, and the metallic chips of encrypted codes. As in the psychosis described by Lacan, there is a complete lack of consistency and opacity in cyberspace to connect (through the space of a distance) the imagined "materiality" of one's self to

> others, for the body itself becomes the real, the horrific void now filled with delusional phantasms of replicant others. (“Psychosis in the Cyberspace Age”)

Though Kunkle is writing about the Internet and its influence over the phenomenology of psychosis, the overall argument is the same – the perceptual changes created by telecommunications media are significant enough to alter the character of delusion. In fact, the perceptual changes of technology even alter the reality of those who are “sane,” making the line between delusion and reality more difficult to evaluate, even at a clinical level. As Jeffery Sconce writes in his book *The Technical Delusion: Electronics, Power, Insanity, “*The ability of electronic media to provide ever more sophisticated simulations of voice and vision, often detached and disembodied from any discernible source, has only made the positivity of these symptoms more difficult to evaluate” (34). That is to say, in a fairly literal sense, it may be more difficult to determine which individuals are experiencing true and pathological psychosis when the character of this technological world is much more “psychotic” than it ever has been in the past. After all, we are all constantly looking at disembodied and sometimes disfigured replications of real objects through our screens and hearing voices with no physical body from which they are spoken. At the risk of being literal and somewhat trite, it is extremely commonplace now to witness an individual speaking aloud to themselves, having a conversation that only they can hear, because of the advent of new communications technologies. It is no surprise, then, that the idea of a universal psychosis may be invoked in critiques of new communications technologies.

In *Network,* Howard Beale’s psychosis certainly acts as a critique of television, though unlike psychosis as depicted in *Videodrome,* his psychosis is not a perceptual experience that is made accessible to the audience; it is something that the viewer is a witness to. There are no

aberrations from the very straight-forward and narrative-driven structure of plot, nor any dream sequences, visual hallucinations, or experimental shots meant to represent the experience of psychosis. Any points where Beale may be hallucinating take place purely in Beale's head. This outsider's view of Beale's psychosis seems to serve the purpose of rendering Beale a helpless victim of the television industry. It also serves the function of critiquing the extremes of human suffering and deviance that supposedly drive and innovate television entertainment. If we, the audience, were to participate in the feeling of being out of touch with reality, the impact would not be such an acute sense of perversion at the television industry's exploitation of a mentally ill man, and it would instead be a sense of disorientation in *ourselves* at the hands of mass communications media. While the argument being made would be similar, the rhetorical effect would be much different.

Beale's literal mental condition is not the only place in which the idea of "madness" appears in the narrative of *Network* – madness is not only used to demonstrate a real, pathological condition exploited by television production, but rather acts also as a representation of the blending of reality and fiction television facilitates, warping images of the real world beyond recognition. There's a reason why television and its adherents are frequently described in terms that invoke the idea of mass psychosis, as when Schumacher tells Diana that she is "television incarnate… virulent madness" (*Network* 1:50:21) or when Beale insists that the current state of television viewership is "mass madness, you maniacs!" (1:06:36-1:06:38). In much the same way that Max Renn believes that the future of television is snuff films and torture porn in *Videodrome* is going to be the next new thig, Diana Christensen and the rest of the UBS gang seem to literally believe that pure psychosis and spiritual delusion are the future of

entertainment in *Network,* conditions which are created by bending the truth in supposedly non-fictional television programming.

Diana is guilty of blending truth into fiction more than any other character, which accurately reflects her stated role as "virulent madness." She does not outright fabricate, but instead creates a blend of the truthful and the fictional which might be described as a state of "hyperreality" in Baudrillardian terms. She seeks to use real footage of the Eccumenical Liberation Army combined with reenactments of their crimes and defanged, up-close engagement with their very radical and fringe ideologies. She also never feeds Beale anything to talk about, never scripts his outbursts or deters him from telling his "truth" – his rants on the show are, by the way, fairly lucid, correct, and well-articulated critiques of culture as far as the film's main arguments are concerned, far from the raving psychosis we see when he's off the air – but instead offers fictional set-dressings, including 4 segments of charlatans at over-the-top revolving correspondents' desks, from "Sybil the Soothsayer" to "Vox Populae." Of course, as one might expect from a character who represents "virulent madness," Diana's effect on others proliferates as a virus in the body: this line between fiction and reality grows and grows until Diana's subjects lose touch with their initial perceptions of reality. As the film continues, Beale becomes more frantic, harried, less lucid in between filmings until his eventual assassination. Radical leftist Laureen Hobbes and the ELA have become so spiritually debauched in Diana's wake that they are screaming at each other over the financial details of their contracts in spite of their supposedly firm allegiances to Marxism. In this way, Diana's blending of truth and reality stands in for the perceptual ability of television to show us representations of true and false events with equal fidelity, rendering everything we see on it somewhat false.

In addition to the blending of truth and falsehood, two important conceptual features of psychosis are a sense of disembodiment or displacement of the mind – as in delusions that another being is thinking through the sufferer or that an external force is controlling the thoughts of the sufferer, or delusions that one is not "real" – and a sense of oneness with separate or discrete entities. *Network's* account of television viewership does certainly square with this, as Howard Beale proclaims: "You're beginning to think that the tube is reality, and that your own lives are unreal. You do whatever the tube tells you! You dress like the tube, you eat like the tube, you raise your children like the tube, you even *think* like the tube!" (1:06:25). If we are to take Beale's claim at face value, he is arguing that viewers have so identified with their televisions that they begin to believe that they are one with their televisions. Even more, he claims that viewers are so delusional as to believe they are not real and the television is real. While he may not be speaking literally nor explicitly invoking psychosis, it's clear that the metaphor of psychosis is one that the text of the film is incredibly attached to as a way of critiquing television viewership.

While Beale's psychosis acts, in many ways, as a fairly straight-forward critique of television and its reality-altering qualities for individuals, it's worth mentioning that Beale's specific manifestation of psychosis somewhat complicates the argument of "television as psychosis," given the fact that much of what Beale says about television seems to be *true,* at least according to the perspective of an anti-television film like this one. Yes, it is undeniable that Beale shows the hallmarks of suffering from psychosis despite his claims that what is happening to him "isn't mensurate in psychiatric terms." He hears disembodied voices, as when he wakes in the middle of the night to a voice speaking to him. He also experiences what sounds like a common technological delusion, describing the feeling as "a shocking eruption of great electrical

energy" (*Network* 45:35). He continues, "I feel vivid and flashing as if suddenly I had been plugged into some great cosmic electromagnetic field" (*Network* 45:40-45:49). Beale certainly experiences delusions of grandeur that are specifically religious, as he tells Max, "I must make my witness. I must lead the people from the waters. I must stay their stampede to the sea," in reference to Moses. He is clearly meant to be a character who is suffering from psychosis.

And yet, all of Beale's stated beliefs on his show segment are demonstrably true, or at least relatively cogent arguments that the film seems to agree with. At least in terms of the narrative, it is factually true that "television is not the truth (...) [it is the] boredom-killing business," (*Network* 1:05:13-1:05:29) considering the fact that the narrative centers around the efforts of Diana to turn news into pure entertainment. The narrator even acknowledges that, shortly before Beale death, Beale makes a perfectly admissible argument about lack of value for the human life that exists now. This raises the question – if Beale's psychosis is a representation of television's ability to alter perception, why is he able to be a truly clear-eyed soothsayer about the dangers of television and capitalism during his ranting and raving?

The text, on that level, resolves this conflict with a more common (and perhaps somewhat trite) trope of television as part of a "mass psychosis" – the idea that an entire culture is so fundamentally out of touch with reality that the only people who can see beyond that are the mentally ill. This idea is reinforced through the boardroom scene towards the end of the film. In this scene, a would-be conspiracy theorist comes face-to-face with a shady corporate elite, Arthur Jensen, who is the head of the massive conglomerate parent company CCA. Jensen confirms to Beale that all of politics, culture, economics, media, war, money and more are the machinations of a global cabal who are secretly united in the amassing of money. Jensen tells him:

> You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and peoples. There are no nations! There are no peoples! There are no Russians. There are no Arabs! There are no third worlds! There is no West! There is only one holistic system of systems, one vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multi-variate, multi-national dominion of dollars! Petro-dollars, electro-dollars, multi-dollars! Reichmarks, rins, rubles, pounds and shekels! (*Network* 1:33:52-1:34:21)

The implication here is that Beale's conspiratorial rantings about the dangers of the CCA, capitalism, and television are completely correct, and that, in an ironic way, his insane ravings are the closest thing to the truth that anyone has seen on television during the entire film. Beale responds to Jensen's diatribe by whimpering out: "I have seen the face of God," and, as if confirming the notion of Howard's true lucidity, Jensen responds, "You just might be right, Mr. Beale" (*Network* 1:37:40-1:37:40).

Still, if we're to take psychosis as a conceptual symbol of television's impact – an interpretation which I believe still stands in spite of the minor symbolic messiness of it – it bears some significant differences to the psychosis that we see in *Videodrome.* In *Network,* psychosis takes on a strongly rhetorical dimension. It is not something that significantly alters perception of time, self, or the other for the viewing audience, nor does it disrupt speech, behavior, motor control, emotional regulation for Beale. Instead, psychosis alters a person on the level of ideology. Beale can bathe and dress himself, walk, talk, and sometimes appear completely lucid. He is not prone to violence and his understanding of his environment remains extremely intact the entire way through.

The only thing that we see as proof of an alteration in Beale is a change in belief of his own significance in the world and his on-screen change from composed news reporter to

impassioned, fanatical orator. When he becomes a "mad prophet of the airwaves," his form of madness comes in the making of arguments about what the ills of the world are – television, corporate greed, the instrumentalization of human beings, ignorance – and transmitting these beliefs to others. On a meta level, too, we see this. *Network* is written and directed in a straight-forward narrative style with no attempts to manipulate the audience's perceptions, acting only as a rhetorical tool. When extrapolated out to television as a medium, this critique implies a belief in television not as an utter perception-altering tool but as an information-altering tool used by powerful people to manipulate their audiences.

## *Chapter 3* PSYCHOSIS, RHETORIC and PERCEPTION in *Videodrome*

*Videodrome*, by contrast, offers an argument about television that is much more far-gone – which makes sense, given the fact that these two critiques were created nearly a decade apart from one another. In *Videodrome,* television, as represented by the transmissible hallucination-causing tumor borne to our protagonist via the Videodrome signal, alters perception in such an extremely perceptual way rather than simply manipulating ideology or perception. In fact, the Videodrome signal is almost the anti-rhetorical model of television – the signal is affective rather than narrative, as captured by this exchange between Harlan and Renn when they are watching a nonsensical torture video on the Videodrome signal:

> Max: When is the plot going to unravel here? I mean, who's this black guy? Is he a political prisoner?
>
> Harlan: There's no plot. This goes on like that for an hour.
>
> Max: Goes on like what?
>
> Harlan: Like that. Torture, murder, mutilation.
>
> Max: We never leave that room?
>
> Harlan: Nope. It's a real sicko. For perverts only. (*Videodrome* 12:18-12:41)

There is no plot, no story, no meaning to the signal that changes your ideological views on reality, only the affective extremes of sex and violence. All you see is violence, and yet, the signal still has enough "pull" to convince you of something, whether that be to convince you that watching it is okay, or to change the way you *literally* perceive the rest of the world, since it causes brain tumors that invoke hallucinations. This can be read as a fairly obvious and straightforward critique of television's ability to pull you in with meaningless visions of sex and violence.

This idea of television's influence as being something beyond rhetoric is also furthered by the progress of Max's susceptibility to influence during his psychosis throughout the film. In the film, there are two warring forces for influence over Videodrome (and for influence over Max). The first of these are the media theorist Brian O'blivion and his daughter Bianca, who have a pro-television agenda as well as a pro-Videodrome agenda. O'blivion helped to create Videodrome and believes that the brain tumor and hallucinations it induces are benefits to perception that improve human experience. Barry Convex, the other antagonistic force in the movie, believes that Videodrome should be used as a tool through which to eradicate those who are depraved enough (and influenced by media enough) to watch snuff films. The film does not represent either force as being more rhetorically, morally, or ideologically valuable than the other. They use the same tools for their ends – the Videodrome signal – and the effect is exactly the same, demonstrating that the two forces might as well be identical in terms of their content.

All that it takes for Convex and Harlan to convince Max to kill his partners at Civic-TV is the insertion of a videotape into a vagina-like slit in his chest, the contents of which we never see. From there, Max has his first hallucinations which offer cogent orders for him to kill – before, his hallucinations were scattered, revolving around familiar images and themes like flesh, Nicki, and the television, but never with any particular telos behind them. Now, Max literally hears the voice of Convex telling him to kill. Here, we have an extremely literal media effects model of the hypodermic needle theory. All Harlan needed to do to convince Max to kill was insert the tape, just as, to a hysterical television critic, the only thing the television needs to do to cause violence is depict violence. No words are needed, and certainly no ideas are needed.

This notion that the "content" of a message is essentially irrelevant while the medium itself is still able to exert tremendous and specific influence seems like obvious homage to

Marshall McLuhan's notion of "the medium is the message" (*Understanding Media,* 1). Among the most canonical theories of communication in recent history, it posits that the actual words or meanings broadcasted via a medium matters much less (or perhaps not at all) compared with the medium itself and its ability to create a "new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves" (McLuhan 1).

In the same text, McLuhan casts aspersions upon the cliche of casting communication media as neutral vessels for meaning in the same way that bad faith actors will cast weapons technologies as value neutral before they're used for evil. In the same way, media will never not be what it is, regardless of the content put upon it – sarcastically, he states, "if the TV tube fires the right ammunition at the right people it is good" (McLuhan 4). Interestingly, McLuhan brings up the idea of attempting to cast smallpox in a neutral light and arguing that it is only what one does with it that makes it good or bad (4). In many ways, *Videodrome* symbolizes the strangeness of such an attempt, given the fact that O'blivion and Convex are engaged mostly in the hermeneutics of what the Videodrome means. They both have the same end goal initially, which is to spread the Videodrome signal to others. Regardless of whether they believe the tumor is a perceptual blessing or a spiritual rot, they're still just effectively implanting a tumor in this man's mind.

## *Chapter 4* YOUTH and OBSOLESCENCE in *Network*

The idea that a culture's anxieties about new media technologies might tie together with beliefs and anxieties about young people, as well as the idea of an older generation's obsolescence, seems obvious on a literal level. Youth and novelty almost by default indicate an indifference towards what is older and established, and new technologies can heighten this sense of indifference. For one thing, new telecommunications technologies often require a level of cognitive flexibility to learn how to use them that older generations might not have as readily – consider the phenomenon of older people being unable to do simple functions on their phones, while young children who are "naturalized" users of smart technology have a sort of acute fluency in the new technology's usage. On a cultural level, too, they create shared cultural experiences for young people that automatically alienate older generations. The experience of a teenager in 2022 cannot always be mapped easily onto the youth experiences of people in their 50s and 60s.

Thus, the result of this exclusion and alienation is fear. As media theorist and sociologist Kirsten Drotner articulates, media panics serve as a reaction of anxiety about the shifting of economic and cultural power into the hands of a new generation as they come of age and enter into the world of work and commercial leisure ("Dangerous Media?" 614). These new telecommunications technologies which may inspire ideas about information access, new perceptual experiences, and social change for younger people symbolize the march of time, cultural obsolescence, negative change, and death for older ones.

However, the symbolization of these fears are not always direct, and texts that raise the flag of concern about television often approach it not from a place of concern for those who feel left behind by culture but instead concern for those who are active participants in the new

culture: teenagers and children. Concern for the wellbeing of children is a typifying feature of most moral panics, to the point that some sociologists with narrower definition criteria for the term "moral panic" might claim it as requisite to any instance of panic.

On a surface level, children are manifestly good objects for anxious fixation – they are helpless relative to adults. Our culture has a didactic model for parenthood in which the onus of moral edification rests on adults, who must tell children what they should and shouldn't do (as opposed to a model which is primarily based on experiences of trial and error). Children are naive to the dangers of this world, with relatively poor critical thinking skills compared to adults. They are also physically weaker than adults, making them also extremely vulnerable to the existential dangers that are claimed by many moral panics. Consider the number of moral panics that deal not just with deviance, violence and moral aberration in general, but also the number of moral panics that focus around pedophilia and children as the explicit targets of sexual and physical abuse.

However, on the level of culture, children also serve as a manifestation of character development for society as a whole, according to media theorist Kirsten Drotner ("Dangerous Media?" 611). As culture changes in a way that feels uncomfortable and uncontrollable to adults of the time, precepts like tabula rasa and simple-minded media effects theories like the hypodermic needle model would have you believe that they soak this messaging up in its entirety with little critical examination. Combine this with the fact that children are quite literally the future of the world – soon, they will be responsible for structuring the hegemony of society and keeping moral order. Thus, the formation of a child's character provides a mirror which places what "we" thought were harmless features of pop culture and entertainment media into a moral context, and suddenly what was pure pleasure (namely, sex and violence on television) becomes

a frightening premonition of the future, channeling a culture's anxieties about the degradation of morals, character, intellect, resilience, health, and even the oblivion of a culture.

While neither *Network* nor *Videodrome* involves literal children, both films engage with a kind of character cultivation done by television well into adulthood that channels similar anxieties. *Network* involves the transformation of an adult man from a well-respected, Cronkitean figure of daily consistency and wisdom into a raving lunatic through the machinations of the television industry, a degradation of character that is as extreme as any television critic could imagine. *Videodrome* takes this notion of transformation a step farther – television does not just cause the kind of nervous breakdown that could happen to anyone, but it fundamentally and irreversibly augments the physical structure of the brain in a way that completely divorces the sufferer from reality and induces unbelievably violent behavior (more on this later).

Though *Network* does not deal with the effects of media consumption on young audiences or audiences at all, beyond the few scenes in which we witness the phenom that the Beale show has become, it does have a character who acts as a helpless victim through which we can gauge the morality of our cast: Howard Beale himself. Though he oscillates between lucid, raving, or suffering from acute hallucinations throughout the film, we see him instrumentalized by the UBS staff from start to finish. Indeed, no one advocates for Beale at all except for Schumacher, the old-school moral core of the film, who not only fights to keep Beale off the air in the wake of his psychotic episode but also houses Beale and tracks him down when he wanders off.

However, the greater emblem of fears about youth and youth culture in this film exists not in the characters who embody the helplessness of childhood but instead in characters who

embody the feared end result of moral cultivation. In *Network,* the character of Diana Christensen serves as the locus of all of these anxieties about the new generation. She is the young, ambitious, independent head of programming who, being in her 30s, has had her character molded by the existence of television since her youth – "she's the television generation. She learned life from Bugs Bunny," as Max describes (*Network* 1:18:32-1:18:35). Of course, in service of the acerbic critique of television production, Christensen is not the helpless child but the corrupted young adult; presumably once helpless when she was growing up on a television diet, now aggressive, perpetuating her television ideology wherever she can.

Christensen is demonstrated to be a thoroughly unscrupulous woman to the point of comedy. When shown footage of a communist terrorist cell holding up a bank, she exclaims in joy; she knows full well that Beale is sick, and insists he be put on television; and finally, when Beale stops being profitable and puts UBS in financial danger, she has him knocked off. After their break up, Schumacher articulates her level of evil quite succinctly:

> Like everything you and the institution of television touch is destroyed. You're television incarnate, Diana: Indifferent to suffering; insensitive to joy. All of life is reduced to the common rubble of banality. War, murder, death are all the same to you as bottles of beer. And the daily business of life is a corrupt comedy. (*Network* 1:50:15-1:50:51)

That is to say, Diana is the utter representation of youth corrupted, and the contrast between young and old is very plainly demonstrated through her affair with Max Shumacher, who is the moral core of this film. Schumacher is comparatively virtuous, and at times, a perfect foil to Diana's ruthless cynicism. In the opening of the film, Schumacher is mocking television in an attempt to cheer up Beale, who is about to be fired. He offers a litany of ridiculous show concepts to make Beale laugh (and to point out to him the impersonal ruthlessness of the

industry), such as, “execution of the week,” and “suicides, assassinations, mad bombers, Mafia hitmen, murder in the barbershop, human sacrifices in witches' covens, automobile smashups (...)” (*Network* 02:55-03:18). Little does Schumacher know that he will soon become involved with Diana, who *does* make a show out of not only Beale’s personal break from reality, but also out of a terrorist group called the Eccumenical Liberation Army, whom she hopes will “take movies of themselves kidnapping heiresses, hijacking 747's, bombing bridges, assassinating ambassadors” for her programming block (*Network* 14:23-14:30). Schumacher mirrors her words almost exactly, though he does so with ironic vitriol directed towards the idea of profiting off of the spectacle of tragedy.

Christensen also threatens Schumacher with obsolescence in an extremely literal sense – when she goes to his office to propose both that Beale be turned into a television prophet with a “soothsayer” segment in his show and also that the two of them begin an affair, she explains her reasoning by telling Schumacher that “sooner or later, with or without you, I’m going to take over your network news show” (*Network* 38:22). And she is right – she subsumes Schumacher’s news segment into the entertainment division, implying, of course, a single-handed destruction of the reality of truth on television.

## *Chapter 5* YOUTH and OBSOLESCENCE in *Videodrome*

*Videodrome* has much less to say about the contrast and relationships between young and old individuals than *Network* does. The only "older" adults we see as major characters in this film are Masha, the softcore pornographer who warns Max away from engaging with Videodrome, and Brian O'blivion, the presumed stand-in for media theorist of the time Marshall McLuhan. Their relationships with Max are not so stark as the ones depicted in *Network,* as they are generally in the same world of media extremity as him.

Perhaps this lack of interplay between young and old individuals makes sense – after all, if *Network* depicted a transitory phase in which television was just settling into its place as the primary telecommunications technology of the time, the anxieties of this change would be felt much more personally. *Videodrome,* by contrast, was written at a time of total television entrenchment, in which the medium had reigned supreme for long enough that media technologies of the past provoked comparatively less side-by-side analysis.

However, that does not mean that feelings of obsolescence are nowhere to be found in this film – in fact, they are absolutely central to any coherent reading of it. Below the surface – beneath the more manifest questions of how media effects actually work on viewers – exists the question of how media changes the human being on a fundamental and structural level, and asks whether or not the "old" model of humanity is fit to live, as demonstrated by the maxim, "long live the new flesh."

The changes done to the brain and body by the Videodrome signal are explicitly physical, structural, and transformative. The narrative does not simply leave the hallucinations as something ineffable or transitory. Instead, the audience knows exactly what has happened to change Max's perception: he has a large tumor growing on his brain, and it will continue to grow

until he dies, presumably. There is a strain of totalizing post-humanism in the visual imagery of Max's hallucinations – a merging of flesh and technology, as he envisions that the television is his dead lover Nicki, imagines that the television is flesh, imagines that *he* is the television and it's also flesh, and imagines that his hand is beginning to merge with the gun he is using to kill his partners at Civic television. Everything, human and technology, threatens to merge into one fleshy being to create an augmented version of humanity with a completely different physicality.

The way that this post-humanist tumor operates in this film seems to demonstrate the two conflicting fears involved in discussions of youth, obsolescence, and television. On the one hand, one reading symbolizes the fear *for* children in which new technologies are deforming (morally or otherwise) and will lead to a world occupied by a deformed generation; this is the anti-O'blivion reading, where a tumor is a tumor, brain-deforming and death-causing. However, there is also a fair representation of the anxieties of obsolescence for the older generation – if the hallucinations are truly the next step in human evolution, a "new organ" as O'blivion claims, those who do not convert to the "new flesh" are left behind to die in a perceptually plain world with no prospect for ascending to the post-human afterlife that Max attempts to ascend to at the end of the film.

This desire to improve upon humanity that is shared by both O'blivion and Convex – O'blivion through transhumanist improvements to the body, and Convex through eugenicist eradication of the morally depraved – also points to an anxiety of improvement that permeates the film beyond the literal transformation of the body. Twice, the idea of needing to become "tougher" rather than "softer" is invoked, and both instances point to a Cold War Era sense of fear about America's potential obsolescence in the face of a rapidly developing Third World and the rise of the East.

The first mention of "softness" and "toughness" is when Max is reviewing the Japanese pornography with his two other managers. He turns the offer down, claiming that the tapes are "too soft," and that he's looking for something "tough" (*Videodrome* 06:15-06:24). Immediately after this scene, Max finds his "something tough" when Harlan tunes into Videodrome. Max's ambition to be increasingly competitive, cutting edge, and "tough" in this realm points to an anxiety about the desirability of his product under capitalism and a need to keep finding the most stimulating product on the market.

The second instance is when Convex and Harlan are explaining to Max their reasons for inducing the tumor in him. Harlan tells Max,

> North America is getting soft, patron, and the rest of the world is getting tough. Very, very tough. We're entering savage new times and we're going to have to be pure and direct… and strong… if we're going to survive them. Now, you and this… cesspool you call a television station… and your people who wallow around in it and your viewers… who watch you do it… you're rotting us away from the inside. We intend to stop that rot. (*Videodrome* 1:00:54-1:01:41)

This, along with the other scene, generate a sense that North Americans were grappling with the potential unraveling of their ideologies and systems in the future, and that the purported solution was to avoid obsolescence at all costs through optimization, strengthening, toughening. Television was simply another locus for this fear.

## Chapter 6 CONCLUSION

It is worth pointing out that *Network* and *Videodrome* are attempting fundamentally different things in terms of their relationship to debates over the value or vice of television. While *Network* is offering a simple and clean argument against the television news industry, *Videodrome* seems to be attempting a much more holistic account of the debate between pro-television voices and anti-television voices, given the fact that both highly polarized voices, O'blivion and Convex, essentially amount to the same thing in the end. To claim that these two pieces accurately represent either "pole" of the television debate would be inaccurate. *Network* represents a normative anti-television view that seeks to convince viewers of television's all-consuming manipulativeness. *Videodrome* seems content to simply describe what it sees as the truth of the current landscape of television: that it is the focus of spectacular and potentially pointless cultural debate, that it is powerfully attractive and affective in an imagistic, irrational way, that it may be a conduit for our most base and amoral pleasures, that it may be good or bad or neutral but it is certainly here to stay.

Perhaps it may have been a cleaner argument to compare and contrast a pro-television film against an anti-television film, but there are few (if any) films that feel the need to defend the status of television. Perhaps because it is an existentially threatening industry to the film industry; perhaps because the merits of television speak for themselves in television programing, that their attractiveness and pleasure hardly needs to be argued any more than the attractiveness of food or sex.

But also, these two films work extremely well in tandem to highlight the contours of television anxieties. Their preoccupation with psychosis, rhetoric, and youth all point to more underlying conceptual underpinnings to the cultural fears of television that may not be

thoroughly captured by more sociological descriptions of the media panic phenomenon. Further, they represent two points apart not just on a scale of opposing viewpoints, but rather points apart on a linear progression of the cultural debate around television. *Network* may be seen as an earlier and simpler stop in television's journey to benign, inert, and celebrated, while *Videodrome* may represent the beginning of an integration point for television despite its extremely intense and disturbing imagery and content.

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# ACADEMIC VITA

**Phroth Humor Publication**

Member: 2019-present

Editor-in-chief: 2020-present

- Oversee both organizational and editorial decision-making for the Pennsylvania State University's hundred-year-old humor publication; set deadlines for our writers and designers.
- Represent the club and its publications when meeting with University administration, Associated Student Activities, the University Park Allocation Committee, and other similar entities.
- Coordinate weekly general meetings and executive meetings, including writing meeting agendas, reserving meeting rooms, scheduling meeting times, and often running weekly meetings.
- Communicate with vendors and other professionals when coordinating the printing and delivery of physical publications.
- Develop and oversee the creative vision for each publication, including coordinating photoshoots in tandem with our Art Director, helping to guide page designs with our Production Manager, omitting and editing written content in order to maintain the publication's stylistic vision.

**Full Ammo Improv**

Member: 2019-present

Treasurer: 2020-present

- Itemize and defend show budgets for University Park Allocation Committee overview; represent the club to administrative committees.
- Log expenses, dues, and payments in comprehensive spreadsheets in case of club audit.
- Organize and collect receipts for purchases in order to receive allocated refunds when budget includes them.
- Navigate complicated guidelines for money management within the PSU system.

Vice president: 2022-2023

- Responsible for organizing Full Ammo's annual RAWR Improv Festival; responsible for communicating with, contracting with, scheduling for, and providing amenities for professional improv comedians in attendance in addition to student groups and indie teams.

**SE2.0**

Content writer and SEO expert (2020-2021)

- Performed sub-contracted writing work for an online writing agency called SE2.0
- Planned, structured, and wrote high-quality online content for a wide variety of industries and niches.
- Line-edited, proofread, and optimized articles for other writers within the agency.
- Successfully executed search engine optimization and other digital marketing strategies to clients' satisfaction.

**Freelance content writer and SEO editor**

Content writer and SEO expert (2020-present)

- Performed freelance writing work for clients' online platforms.
- Planned, structured, and wrote high-quality online content for a wide variety of industries and niches.
- Successfully executed search engine optimization and other digital marketing strategies to clients' satisfaction.
- Maintain UpWork's "Top-Rated" freelancer badge by delivering excellent results and maintaining consistent communication with clients.