TV Party, *New Wave Theatre*, and Subcultural Television in the 1970s and 1980s

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To Mom

Abstract

This dissertation offers a discursive and cultural history of subcultural television organized around detailed engagements with two television programs from the late 1970s and early 1980s, New York City's *TV Party* and Los Angeles' *New Wave Theatre*. Utilizing surviving episodes and promotional materials, interviews with creators and participants, reviews and articles from popular and underground publications, and other historical sources, I present these programs as inimitable experiments in both the theory and practice of subcultural television, a diverse set of aesthetic and cultural practices aimed at creating marginal forms of collectivity through televisual technology. To provide context, I locate these shows during a particularly charged moment of U.S. cultural history that saw the simultaneous emergence of alternative medium forums like cable access and subcultural social formations like punk. Conventionally, subcultures are conceived as oppositional constructs existing outside the co-opting grasp of the mainstream, inherently hostile to mass-cultural mediums like television. However, for a few fleeting years on the televisual frontiers of 1970s and 1980s cable, a small collection of artists, musicians, performers, punks, and weirdos set out to produce subculture both on and through TV.

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Introduction– Cable Television and Subculture as Social Technologies

> The history of media is never more than the history of their uses, which always lead us away from them to the social practices and conflicts they illuminate.
>
> - Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New*

> Each one of these bands is a world of its own with music, words, conception, and visual image. There are different and sometimes opposing factions in the New Wave community, but the point is they know each other, are aware of each other, and both resent and support each other. Each of them are acting out their aesthetics in their lives, living their clarity, their confusion, their love, their anger, and their destiny. They all exist, the light and the dark, under the same banner, the artistic revolution called "New Wave."
>
> - Ed Ochs, *Freedom Spy* (written as a monologue for *New Wave Theatre)*

Buried in the mounds of jumbled paper, cassette tapes, and other unorganized ephemera that fill the 19 file boxes of the Peter Ivers Papers stored at the Harvard University Archives is a pullout section of the *Los Angeles Times* from 1981 with the word "Save" written in red pen on both top corners. A bit yellowed and rumpled from sitting in storage for nearly 30 years, the special supplement describes itself as "a critical assessment of the cable/pay-TV services in southern California" (Koenenn 1). Dominating the cover is a black and white drawing of a muscular bare-chested man, pictured from the sternum up. With one hand, he inserts a cable into a socket in his ear. With the other, he adjusts a small knob on the television set that frames half of his face, a pixelated pattern appearing on that side as a series of numbers runs along his collarbone. Re-tuning and re-focusing his own body with this implanted technology, the drawing presents a generic subject produced through an active collaboration with the machine.

However, this anonymous cyborg is also figured as a stand-in for the larger social body. The top half of the man's head, likewise split into clear and pixelated halves, has been replaced by a rendering of the globe, the outline of North America rising from just above his left eyebrow. An image of the world transformed by technology, it accompanies an article about a coming revolution in television. Entitled "Cable Television—On the Road to the Wired Nation," the news feature by Connie Koenenn complements the cyborg drawing by opening with a narrative about a machine coming to life. Describing an ordinary scene of a blank TV set sitting harmlessly in a living room, "the mute box with the blank stare," Koenenn asks the reader to rethink their relationship to that "benign presence in the household" (1). She warns,

> don't be deceived by this off-hours passivity, because your television set is getting ready to change. Without so much as twitching an antenna, it's going to expand into a force that could change your home, your habits, and maybe your life. The catalyst for this metamorphosis? A cable hookup. (Koenenn 1)

In Koenenn's account, cable offers more than just a set of new channels or better picture quality, it harbors the capacity to animate the docile set with powers that go far beyond the realm of entertainment. As the drawing suggests, cable can bring the world "into focus" for subscribers, rewiring and remaking our relations with others as well as ourselves. Specifically, Koenenn mentions cable access, local noncommercial stations available to anyone who wants to produce programming, as an experimental forum where the new "relationship between people and their TV sets is already being explored" (1).

Alive with such revolutionary rhetoric about the transformative potential of cable technology, the article captures a euphoric mood not visible in the solemn expression of the cyborg in the drawing. Testing its new powers with a transfixed gaze, he represents the emerging social body altered by cable television, staring into an unknown but seemingly limitless future.

Ivers, the now-deceased host and co-creator of *New Wave Theatre*, a music and variety program that began on cable access in Los Angeles in 1979, carefully cut this article from the paper, stapled it together, and preserved it in a large manila envelope that also contains a special supplement to *The Soho News* from the same year entitled "Art and Politics on the Video Circuit." Notably, the piece of newsprint bears the evidence of Ivers' careful attention. Besides the reminders to save the article scrawled on the cover, the text is littered with red pen markings underlining phrases like "wired nation" and words like "videophiles," with little stars and dots next to key passages about the "multitude of channels" and "explosion" of alternative programming on cable (Koenenn 1; 3). These marked-up clippings are material evidence of how certain ideas about the power and potential of cable technology animated artistic and cultural projects during this time period. Conceptualizing cable as an emerging forum for experimentation in social communication, such discourses provided both impetus and legitimation for artists and activists working in video and television. Indeed, Ivers often directly echoed such rhetoric about cable and video technology on *New Wave Theatre*, explicitly charging the program with a social function beyond entertainment. For instance, on an episode from

1980, he exclaims, “The magnetic power of video is capable of planting in your brain tomorrow’s menu for a better world” (Vol.3, Ep.3). In the electric atmosphere surrounding the new technology, artists like Ivers presented their work as more than art or entertainment beamed through a novel medium. To many early cable producers, this was an opportunity to experiment with an interactive apparatus engaged in individual and group formation, remaking the very ways people related to one another and the world. Not just a forum for unique programming or a new method for distributing a message, cable television was a distinctly *social* technology.

In this historical moment abuzz with ideas about a televisually constructed social sphere, cable promised to provide space for different kinds of producers and audiences. No longer the exclusive province of corporate networks and mass audiences, cable had transformed television into an expansive landscape able to accommodate the esoteric, the challenging, the alternative, and even the unpopular. Principal amongst the enclaves and avenues opened up by the new technology was public access, a forum often described as radically democratic, egalitarian, and permissive. In Koenenn’s article, media activist Larry Kirkman asserts that access producers need not aim for “national networks, but for programs that meet local needs, often of disenfranchised groups” (3). Such ways of talking helped imagine cable access as a space for non-mainstream and noncommercial forms of communication as well as alternative modalities of social engagement and being. Like the mute box brought to life in Koenenn’s feature, these novel delivery systems claimed to convert a mass cultural, restrictive, and homogenizing space into a

public forum alive with a diversity of once excluded and marginalized voices. Previously addressing and representing one mass national community, cable access could now accommodate, and help construct, a constellation of competing subgroups, local formations, "electronic neighborhoods," undergrounds, countercultures, avant-gardes, fringes, counterpublics, factions, and subcultures. As a social technology, a site of individual and collective identity formation, cable television seemed to offer a whole new universe of possibilities for collective being. Writing in 1979, Ivers declared that the TV and video landscape "stretches out before us like Oklahoma Territory, ripe and yearning, while we, hearty pioneers, gird our wagons and venture forth to stake our claim" ("The Ivers Plan" 1). Populated by explorers and self-styled prophets like Ivers and animated by utopian notions about social transformation and communication, cable television in the late 1970s and early 1980s seemed to be an electronic Wild West of unlimited potential.

In my dissertation, I examine this charged moment in U.S. media and social history through two unique programs that sought to explore television's frontier areas in search of new technologically-mediated social forms: *TV Party* and *New Wave Theatre*. *TV Party*, a live music and talk program hosted by Glenn O'Brien, featured a revolving cast of characters drawn from the art and music underground of Downtown New York City. It appeared on the pioneering access stations of Manhattan Cable and Teleprompter Cable from 1978 to 1982. *New Wave Theatre* was a prerecorded ensemble of musical performances by local and regional punk and new wave bands accompanied by interviews, comedy sketches, monologues, and other clips. Created by host Ivers and

producer/director David Jove, it began airing on the Los Angeles-area access station Theta in 1979 and was later broadcast on a variety of UHF and cable stations until Ivers' death in March 1982. It is my contention that both shows can be understood as case studies in both the theory and practice of subcultural television, a diverse set of aesthetic and cultural strategies aimed at creating marginal forms of collectivity through televisual technology. Contrary to the conventional vision of television as a mass cultural medium hostile to creativity and controversy, subcultural television shows like *TVP* and *NWT* brought disruptive sounds, images, and social forms from their local punk undergrounds to the small screen. Moreover, they sought to use television as an interactive and participatory technology, constructing new and different types of collectivity through coaxial cable. Significantly, as a mode of marginal sociality and cultural production working in the dominant media of the mainstream, subcultural television challenges conventional ideas about subculture and media, rethinking the notion that subcultures are oppositional formations existing outside the co-opting grasp of the media and mass culture. Through an analysis of the distinctive practices and ideas circulating in the chaotic early days of cable access, a more nuanced and, perhaps, instructive understanding of technologically-mediated collectivity is possible.

As disorganized, local, and sometimes defiantly underground projects, most examples of subcultural television have been lost to historians of media and culture. Often lasting only one or two episodes and produced for independent cable systems scattered throughout the country, many of these programs were never recorded onto tape,

let alone preserved in public archives for future researchers. As long-running shows with multiple surviving episodes and available documents relating to their production and distribution, *TVP* and *NWT* are exceptions to this rule and provide a rare opportunity to examine the intersection of punk subculture and television during this tumultuous period. Their unique stories, found in archival materials ranging from photocopied fliers for taping sessions and reviews in underground fanzines to unpublished planning notes and scraps of fan mail, offer partial but detailed glimpses into this overlooked period in U.S. cultural and media history. Combining historical research with formal and discursive analysis of *TVP* and *NWT*, what follows is intended as a critical account of the distinctive features of subcultural television.

My engagement with subcultural television in the late 1970s and early 1980s uses *TVP* and *NWT* as focal points through which to glimpse the complexity and specificity of this moment. In order to capture the key qualities and implications of this marginal mode of television production, distribution, and reception, I utilize a variety of research methods and analytical approaches. For one, I consider the shows as discrete sites of discursive production and negotiation. Like the revolutionary rhetoric preserved in the Ivers archive, conventionalized and powerful ways of talking and thinking about TV technology, social identity, and aesthetic practice can be found throughout the programs themselves. In addition, these discourses are found in articles, songs, artworks, interviews, poems, videos, and other ephemera addressing the shows or produced by the key participants. As multifaceted and densely-packed platforms for innumerable

performers and commentators, *TVP* and *NWT* generated, reproduced, modified, and broadcasted a host of ways of talking about television, subculture, and art. Put differently, in their respective geographic and social contexts, both shows were active participants in specific and ongoing conversations about the social power and potential of TV technology, contributing to the unique discourse of subcultural television. In tracing the development and mutation of these discourses, I identify a host of influences ranging from the world of corporate communications to New Age spirituality to glam rock and point to patterns and conventions for talking about television and subculture that persist today. In addition to discursive analysis, I subject the surviving episodes of *TVP* and *NWT* to direct textual analysis. As distinct aesthetic objects with unique formal properties, the eight full episodes and wealth of clips from *TVP* and 24 full episodes and scattered clips from *NWT* in my possession provide evidence of subcultural television in action. Their use of image and sound, their operation as artworks, also provides implicit theories of aesthetics and the social function of televisual art. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in my dissertation, I am concerned with the subcultural practices that surrounded *NWT* and *TVP*. Since TV was regarded as a technology that shaped forms of social interaction, each show utilized the medium in distinctive ways to construct, represent, and perform subcultural modes of collective subjectivity. In fact, defining subculture itself as a kind of social technology, I argue that it routinely and creatively engaged mass media. Using episodes, advertisements, reviews, manifestos, and anecdotal evidence drawn from histories, interviews, biographies, memoirs, and other sources, I

attempt to reconstruct and interpret the novel ways that the producers, participants, and, to a lesser extent, viewers created subculture through television.

Before engaging these two programs directly, it is necessary to briefly outline the theoretical approach that guides my research and analysis. In this introduction, I present an expansive definition of the term "social technology" rooted in Michel Foucault's work on "practices of the self" or "technologies of the self." Including more than just hard-wired tools or equipment, social technologies include patterns of comportment, shared ideas, techniques and methods for human interaction, and material practices of self-shaping. Notably, I consider both cable television and punk subculture to be forms of social technology. As local experiments in subcultural television, *TVP* and *NWT* present unique opportunities to analyze how they were employed together.

"The creative youth of today are reacting through their art to an unwanted and undeserved social condition"

Before turning to my engagements with cable television and punk subculture on *TVP* and *NWT*, a piece of television footage from 1978 can help agitate some of the core concerns of the project. Recorded for a show called *At Night*, it features an unnamed reporter roaming around a concert by the LA punk band The Weirdos at the legendary underground venue The Masque (Bag "The Greatest"). Offering commentary and doing short interviews, he is, in his words, "trying to find out a little bit more about punk rock." Notably, this footage is now found, as far as I can tell, exclusively on YouTube. On a general level, by beginning with a clip hosted on the popular video-sharing website, I

mean to tacitly connect my history of alternative television to contemporary media practices. As a participatory, interactive, disorganized, amateur, and seemingly "democratic" media space, YouTube has often been described as a direct descendent of cable access (Churner 2009; Dollar 2011; Boylan 2015). Indeed, in a 2009 article on the origins of access in New York City, Leah Churner even refers to access as "a forum best known today as the freakshow forefather of YouTube" ("Out of"). Moreover, many early cable access programs, including *TVP* and *NWT*, have been given new life by being uploaded and shared on the site. More specifically, I also want to start with this particular YouTube clip because, like many of the bootleg VHS dubs, photocopied flyers, and undated fanzines used as historical sources in the rest of this project, it is a somewhat cryptic or unreliable historical object. Posted on YouTube in 2003 by Alice Bag, best known as the former lead singer of the 1970s LA punk band The Bags, the video is entitled "THE WEIRDOS - LIVE ON LOS ANGELES 'TV AT NIGHT' SHOW 1978." On her blog, Bag notes that she remembers being at the show, but knows nothing about where she got the tape or about the program ("The Greatest"). Although the title suggests it is being broadcast live, the clip seems to be uncut footage shot for the program and never aired. The reporter explicitly states, "I'm not live," and keeps a running dialogue with someone off-screen full of sarcastic comments and reminders about what to edit out. After some research, I cannot find any other information about the clip or the program on which it aired. While it lacks information about production context, reception, and a date

of broadcast, it offers a revealing glimpse of the relationship between television and the punk underground in Los Angeles in the late 1970s.

As a document of an encounter between the technology and institution of television (as represented by the reporter and his cameraman) and punk subculture, most of the clip follows the well-worn script of mainstream misunderstanding and underground resistance to exposure. Confronted by a crush of slam dancing punks with spiked hair and ripped clothing and assaulted by the loud, aggressive sound of the Weirdos, the reporter expresses mild shock and discomfort throughout. He consistently refers to the punks as "they," a group separate from the assumed "we" of the reporter and viewers. Effecting the tone of a foreign correspondent bewildered by the locals, he carefully describes their rituals like pogo dancing, "jumping up and down and rubbing against each other," and "translates" some of the shouted lyrics for the viewer. Calling the performers and assembled punks "very weird," he remarks, "It's hard, really, to comment on the whole thing." At some points, presumably not for broadcast, he sarcastically describes the songs as "mercifully short" and loudly insults his interview subjects. Members of the audience respond to his bewilderment and hostility in kind, yelling curse words or "shut up" into microphone when passing by or refusing to talk to him altogether. About halfway through the clip, the reporter is confronted by a woman and man inquiring about his motives. After explaining that he is a TV reporter looking to understand punk, the man dismisses the project, suggesting that punk "will be over" by the time the show is aired. After asking a few more questions, the woman becomes irate

and exclaims, “I really hate television. I think this is really rude because this is our environment and we don’t like people [coming] in here and taking pictures of us like that.” Presumably walking away, the reporter states, “I have to admit, I don’t like her.” In these antagonistic interactions, the clip plays out the conventional understanding of the relationship between punk subculture and mainstream television. The punks here seem to claim, in the words of LA’s The Germs, “What We Do is Secret.” This version of subculture operates in the shadows, resisting the exploitative and destructive eyes of the mainstream televised media, which could simply never “get it” anyway.

However, the video contains some more interesting and complex interactions between the reporter, the musicians, the audience, and the camera. For one, while many punks avoid the camera or yell obscenities that will surely be edited out, many others search out TV exposure. At times, members of the band direct their performances toward the camera, making goofy or grotesque faces into the lens or pointing at the presumed viewer. Some people from the crowd excitedly talk to the reporter, expressing their enjoyment of the music and dancing. But the most interesting moment comes when the reporter declares, “I’m gonna go shove,” and makes his way to the front of the stage during the Weirdos’ classic “We Got the Neutron Bomb.” Although he cannot be seen in the image, you can hear him pushing through the crowd, stopping to comment, “I just shoved a guy, I feel very good about that” and “they’re really having fun up here.” With the camera looking across the stage from behind, a sea of wildly jostling bodies comes into focus in front of the singer and guitar player. Up to this point, the viewer has the

impression that the reporter is standing just behind or next to the cameraman. He has not been visible, but his voice is loud and clear. However, as the song comes to a close, the reporter emerges from within the crowd of head-banging and slamming punks at the edge of the stage. Wearing a denim jacket and dress shirt, he is holding a microphone and wincing as he jockeys for position in the audience. With large earphones and a headset awkwardly resting above his receding hairline, he appears much older than most of the crowd and, in most senses, out of place. However, wedged in between the thrashing spectators, he drops his sarcastic and dismissive tone for a moment. Hunched over to protect the mic, he remarks, "What I like about this music is how the band relates… to the music, and to each other, and their audience, it's weird." As he finishes his statement, a young audience member darts into the frame from behind and lets out a high-pitched shriek, directly into the mic. With his laughter audible on the soundtrack, the reporter's image is briefly lost again as he is swept into the crowd and the singer passes in front of the camera.

While the straight-laced correspondent's brief moment of pleasure in the pit is amusing to watch, his comments about the "weird" relationships existing between the band, the crowd, and the music itself are significant. While he is unable to describe it specifically or give it a name, he identifies an alternative form of interaction or a different mode of social connection amongst the assembled punks. Using the same general terms earlier in the footage, the reporter explicitly states, "I can't relate to this and neither can my kids." This commentary on the form and feeling of social interaction at a LA punk

gig in 1978, in these vague or uncertain terms, provides a useful introduction to a central concern of my dissertation: subculture, in particular, punk subculture. Without providing a concrete definition or a detailed explanation, it is the ambiguous sense of difference, newness, or alterity felt by the reporter and experienced by some of the punks as something requiring protection from outside eyes that constitutes subculture here. Although it has no defining characteristics or universal structures, no rules of operation, punk subculture in this moment was experienced and practiced as a new and different way for people to relate to one another and themselves. Punk subculture refers to that "weird" form of interaction and cultural performance experienced as exclusive to that social space. Like the description of the new media forum of cable television in the news article above, the reporter describes the scene as harboring the potential for a "revolution." Although he is mostly offering a warning to parents about the possible corrupting influence it may have on their children, he highlights the transformative capacity of what could also be called a new form of social technology, a new set of techniques and practices for collective being: punk subculture.

I want to stress that the necessary ambiguity in my use of the term "punk." In this project, I am not interested in providing a definitive account of the phenomenon or any wholesale treatment of its characteristics. The desire to make universal claims about the nature of punk has been a problematic feature of many academic and journalistic engagements with the subculture. In a recent discussion about the field of "so-called 'punk studies,'" Mimi Thi Nguyen and Golnar Nikpour criticize the tendency to reduce

the object of study to a few essential features or to present its history as a linear or singular narrative (9). Using phrases like "extremely diffuse and schizophrenic" and "so general as to mean very little practically speaking," the authors describe punk as a "moving target" (Nguyen and Nikpour 7; 9). "When we talk about punk, we are really talking about many thousands of punk scenes, bands, zines, and individuals" (Nguyen and Nikpour 7). So, while many punk scenes or individuals may share certain properties or characteristics, "to speak of them in the abstract doesn't capture a sense of their actual unfolding" (Nguyen and Nikpour 9). My approach to punk subculture aims to follow these words of caution. Beginning in the late 1970s, punk emerged as a label for a multitude of different and local ways of being in the world. Often linked only by shared fashion choices, vaguely similar styles of music, and an undefined "attitude," underground communities throughout the world adopted the term to refer to themselves, their cultural productions, or their "lifestyles." By analyzing the practices and productions that are marked by the label, I am not attempting to produce a totalizing history or theory of punk. Instead, I hope to elucidate the particular deployments of punk as a social technology within and surrounding these two specific television programs.

By defining the set of cultural practices and relationships called punk subculture as a type of social *technology*, I am explicitly aligning it with a more traditional type of technology: television itself. That is, both the communications medium of television and the patterned practices that create subcultures involve recalibrating and orienting the self in relation to others. In fact, it is difficult to define the boundaries between these

technologies. This is evident in the footage of the Weirdos gig filmed for *At Night*, on both sides of the divide between subculture and mainstream. For instance, both the reporter and many of the punks work to define themselves through and in relation to the TV camera, as well as in relation to each other. The camera does not serve only to capture or represent the work of "being punk," as the reporter would have it. It is intimately involved in the simultaneous construction of what it is to be both a part of the subcultural formation and outside of it. Whether utilizing "hard" technologies like cameras and microphones or "soft" ones like slam dancing and spiking your hair, everyone in the clip is reworking and reformulating their social selves. Moreover, the very presence of the camera, and the expansion of social space that it implies, modifies, and conditions the identities of the individuals in the footage. This is apparent in the anger of the young woman who confronts the reporter for being "rude." Protecting the punk "environment" from certain forms of media (she is presumably okay with the many photographers, zine writers, and other representations of the alternative media at the show, and their technologies), she is recognizing the power of the camera to transform the meaning and shape of cultural practices. Or, as Carolyn Marvin argues, "Media are not fixed natural objects; they have no natural edges. They are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication" (8). This YouTube clip, and the interactions between subculture and television it contains, offers an implicit theory of social technology. The discussion of "weird" social relations and recognition of the enmeshed nature of cultural practices and media

technologies offer a useful guide for thinking and talking about subcultural television. As such, they help frame my approach to the case studies in this dissertation.

However, my inclusive use of the concept of social technology is also rooted in Michel Foucault's concepts of "practices of the self" or "technologies of the self." Foucault developed these terms to call attention to the work of the individual human subject on itself, the specific and discrete techniques and practices that subjects utilize to carve out a way of being in the world. These concepts emerge as part of the larger "ethical turn," or so-called "journey to Greece," that characterized Foucault's later scholarship (Milchman and Rosenberg 51; O'Leary 21). While most of his early work revolved around the way in which the subject was constituted by institutional structures, like the prison or the asylum, and by powerful discourses imposed from the outside, such as science or language, he turned his attention in his late writings to the work of the self on the self. Some earlier interpretations of this line of thought defined it as a departure from his earlier conceptions of the subject and power, a regression back to a version of the sovereign subject of free will. However, Lois McNay, in her book *Foucault and Feminism*, argues that this shift in focus does not invalidate his earlier work that relentlessly displaced such an understanding of the subject. Rather, the move towards practices of the self was the result of "a self-critique conducted by Foucault on his earlier account of the links between power and the body" (McNay 48). Or in his own words, "Perhaps I have insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies

of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of the self" (Foucault, "Technologies of" 18). Moreover, in the introduction to *The History of Sexuality Volume II: The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault describes his shift in focus as evolving from a recognition of practices of the self that take place alongside and together with the more widespread or institutional structures he had previously described. He notes that, in trying to come to terms with how sexuality was problematized within the culture of classical antiquity, he discovered that it was not just through institutionalized codes of conduct or interdictions transmitted through outside discourses. On the contrary, he found "forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject" (Foucault, *The History* 6). These practices were conceptualized as "an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one's self and to attain a certain mode of being" (Foucault, "The Ethic of the Concern" 282). Such an understanding of the subject aims to bring into focus the ways in which the subject operates on itself, practicing a certain mode of being in the world through deliberate and material actions.

The recognition of a type of self-activity does not, however, need to posit an already existing essence or ahistorical internal core. As Foucault remarked in an interview from 1984, "In the first place, I do indeed believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere…I believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection" ("An Aesthetics" 50). In keeping with the spirit of his earlier work, the subject is defined by historically

determined, concrete, material practices of self-shaping. These "practices of subjection" correspond to what Nikolas Rose, drawing on Foucault's later work, identifies as "subjectification" (128). In calling for a "genealogy of subjectification," Rose distinguishes these "practices of the self" from discourses or ideas about the self common in philosophical treatments of subjectivity. Unlike these ideals, proscriptions, or models constructed through universal or developmental concepts, technologies of selfhood emerge "out of a number of contingent and altogether less refined and dignified practices and processes" (Rose 129). In short, Rose asserts that one uses "the term 'subjectification' to designate all those heterogeneous processes and practices by means of which human beings come to relate to themselves and others as subjects of a certain type" (130-131). This conception of the subject or the self combines a theory of social or discursive construction with an acknowledgement of the active, material work of self-making.

As Rose points out, the subject created by these practices is necessarily a social subject or one in *relation* to oneself as well as others. These self-making processes are not solely internally oriented, but involve constant attention to how to be a self amongst others. While Foucault's reworked notion of the subject seeks to find a place for self-activity, social structures and discursive constructs originating outside or beyond the subject do not simply drop out of the equation. As he argues, "if I am now interested in how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not invented by the individual himself. They are models that he

finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" ("The Ethics of the Concern" 291). Here, Foucault provides a clear basis for a link between his conception of practices of the self and electronic media like television. Although Foucault focuses on the philosophical and spiritual writings that provided technical schemas for the development of subjectivities in Greek antiquity and early Christian society, the models and frameworks for selfhood circulating in electronic media culture can be seen to be as integral to modern techniques of self-fashioning. In applying Foucault's ideas to an era of mass media, Rose specifically discusses television and particular forms of programming.

> [A] whole new array of authorities of subjectivity have taken shape, in the form of broadcast images of dilemmas for the self, self-conduct and self-formation no longer in the realm of romance or adventure but in quotidian narratives of "everyday life." This public habitat of images and stories presupposes certain repertoires of personhood as the a priori of the forms of life they display. (Rose 146)

Television, in this understanding, operates to exhibit particular modes of being, guide or instruct the subject in certain forms of sociality, and to legitimate those practices in the public sphere. Moreover, the communicational linkages constructed by television open up new realms of social relation and make possible new practices of the social self. This theoretical approach to television focuses on its role in the creation and proliferation of subjectivities and attendant modes of sociality or collective being. Significantly, seeing

TV as a social technology in this vein elucidates its status as an interactive or participatory medium, calling for a range of particular responses and potential engagements, including the production of programs.

The brawny cyborg from *The Los Angeles Times* used to represent the new capacities of cable neatly encapsulates such an understanding of television. While the accompanying effusive rhetoric about the coming “revolution” announces the dawning of a new era, proclamations about the power of television as a social technology were not exclusive to this time period or the types of programming emerging at the time. In fact, TV has long been a rhetorical figure through which to address and negotiate modes of collective existence. Since its invention, the medium has been intimately linked with changing social relations and the transformation of individual and group identity. As Lynn Spigel argues in her pioneering work *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, the installation of TV sets in most U.S. homes in 1940s and 1950s was accompanied by a “mixture of utopian and dystopian expectations” (*Make Room* 3). These expectations and anxieties surrounding TV ran the gamut from concerns about turning children against their parents to worries about isolating suburban viewers from their communities to the creation of an “imaginary unity with ‘absent’ others” (Spigel, *Make Room* 116). Spigel describes how discussions about the medium functioned as important sites where changing gender roles, understandings of the public and private distinction, and modes of engagement with the larger cultural life of the nation were negotiated and contested. She also connects public dialogue about the social

impact of TV to a long tradition of ambivalent responses to new technologies (*Make Room* 3). These popular debates during the introduction of TV anticipated the work of Marshall McLuhan, whose widely-disseminated texts promoted further public consciousness about the role of television as a social technology. According to McLuhan, a series of technological mediums had "altered our relations to one another and to ourselves," revolutionizing the very "form of human association and action" ("The Medium" 107; 108). In the case of television, he suggested that the power of electronic image transmission would reverse the atomizing, fragmenting, and dehumanizing effects of the machine age. The immediate and interactive forms of communication offered by the TV would re-integrate the entire planet, resulting in a more "human" self and an interconnected and harmonious "global village."

Although regarding television as a social technology was not necessarily novel at the time, the advent of cable and access in the late 1970s and early 1980s did provide a unique occasion to challenge and rethink established social conventions, discourses, and practices. As Carolyn Marvin argues in *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*, the introduction of new communication technologies often produces widespread skepticism about the solidity and naturalness of dominant social patterns. Describing technologies like the telegraph, she observes that "new media embody the possibility that accustomed orders are in jeopardy" (Marvin 8). Recasting conceptions of social space and upsetting calcified modes of interaction, emerging media fundamentally transform the experience of communication

and collectivity. Furthermore, since “media give shape to the imaginative boundaries of modern communities, then the introduction of new media is a special historical occasion when the patterns anchored in older media that have provided the stable currency of social exchange are reexamined, challenged, and defended” (Marvin 4). This makes these moments unique objects of research for media historians, because it is “in the uncertainty of emerging and contested practices of communication that the struggle of groups to define and locate themselves is most easily observed” (Marvin 5). This does not mean that technologies determine the scope and quality of human interaction on their own. It merely recognizes that moments like the emergence of cable technology can be fecund sites for the analysis of culture.

The new practices and discourses that coalesced in both cable access and punk subculture were responsive to larger, more general contexts as well. By describing these phenomena as “technologies of the self,” I am articulating them to the larger category described by Foucault as well as its relationship to certain historical conditions. While he introduces the idea of “practices of the self” in a text about ancient Greek and early Christian societies, his “journey to Greece” is indelibly linked to its moment of publication, the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period described as one of disorientation and destabilization in common understandings of the self and the social body. Casting it in terms of a loss of the grounding foundation of morality, Foucault explains, “if I was interested in Antiquity it was because, for a whole series of reasons, the idea of morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared” (“An

Aesthetics" 49). Foucault's analysis of practices of the self, then, is tied to an era where, as of yet, nothing had replaced morality as the totalizing framework through which to understand the human self. As Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg summarize, "Foucault in the last third of the twentieth century responded to, and sought a way out of, a profound *cultural crisis*" (44, original emphasis). In a broader sense, this loss of bearings for the human subject corresponds to the changing cultural conditions associated with the transition to the postmodern, or late modern, era, where experiences of the self are conditioned by, and relatable to, globalized economic practices, technological advancements, expansive population flows, and proliferating virtual communication networks.

However, this "crisis" of the subject was not a universal phenomenon but the obsolescence of a particular mode of subjectivity for a specific population. Challenging universalizing claims about the postmodern condition, Chela Sandoval suggests that "what many called the 'cultural crisis' of the West—the "breakdown" of traditional institutions, values, beliefs, attitudes, morals, and so on — was symptomatic of the overwhelming recognition by many peoples that they were no longer capable of making sense of or giving meaning to the practices that life in 'advanced' industrialized societies required its members to observe" (9). Importantly, she further argues that these conditions of existence were not novel for subjugated populations. Under emerging conditions, "the first world subject enters the kind of psychic terrain formerly inhabited by the historically decentered citizen-subject: the colonized, the outsider, the queer, the

subaltern, the marginalized" (27). Denied the naturalness and certitude of stable and unitary selfhood, first world subjects were struck by a profound sense of "loss." In the more specific context of 1970s America, this loss has often been described as a wide-ranging malaise affecting the white middle class. As cultural historian Sam Binkley puts it, "the explosive predicament of the crisis decade" was experienced as a generalized "panic at the prospect of a world without moral foundations" for the relatively privileged sectors of American society (28). Noting the prevalence of ideas about fragmentation, "urban despair," "social atomization," being "alone in a crowd," living in an "age of diminishing expectations," and other grim diagnoses, a host of commentators have pointed to a prevailing sense of being unmoored in the collective consciousness of the middle class (Lasch 1979; Zaretsky 2007, Rodgers 2011). Under these emerging conditions of uncertainty and flux, the routinized and traditional practices of subjectivity and group being lose their feelings of naturalness or inevitability.

While this state can be described as a stupefying malaise or a nihilistic void, it also presented new possibilities or the potential for subjectivities and collectivities of an entirely different type. On the social level, "the experience of the new is often one of disaffiliation and rupture with previously consolidated groups, but also a regrouping, an investment, emulation (or even fetishization) of identity across the boundaries dividing previously competing groups" (Binkley 29). So, although this crisis revealed the constructed and precarious nature of traditional foundations, it "might also open up the space for humankind to experiment with new and daring modes of existence, fresh ways

of being” (Milchman and Rosenberg 44). Experiencing the social world in ways analogous to historically oppressed subjects, first world populations could now access and experiment with strategies or modes of being previously obscured by the “naturalness” of the conventional Western subject. Sandoval writes, “Among its other effects, this disavowal [of Western rationality] also galvanized whole new expressions of consciousness, politics, and aesthetic production” (6). While not guaranteeing more egalitarian or liberating social relations or subjectivities, this condition of destabilization opened the social field to original and previously unavailable potentialities. Considering this mutable and anxious state, Rose asks,

> are we witnessing a transformation in the ontology through which we think ourselves, a mutation in the techniques through which we conduct ourselves, a reconfiguration of the relations of authority by means of which we divide ourselves and identify ourselves as certain kinds of person, exercise certain kinds of concern in relations to ourselves, are governed and govern ourselves as human beings of a particular sort? (Rose 144)

Figured as a moment of transition or profound unsettlement, this time period in Western culture called for different frameworks through which to construct and experience life.

Significantly, the proliferating “practices of the self” or “technologies of the self” that emerge in this moment of crisis do not have the firmness and authority that characterized the systems of morality and rationality from previous eras. In response to these new conditions for self-formation, Foucault suggests reinvigorating the ancient

Greek notion of the "arts of existence." He defines these aesthetic practices as "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (Foucault, *History of* 11). Within this aesthetic approach to subjectivity, practices of the self would not be engaged for their truthfulness, their economic reasonableness, their authenticity or adherence to a preexisting essence, or their moral or religious righteousness. On the contrary, one's relation to one's self would be thought as a creative and ongoing process of formation. As Foucault said in an interview, "From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" ("On *The Genealogy*" 351). Moreover, without the grounding of traditional foundations, this self-making aesthetic project is necessarily fluid, experimental, and always unfinished. As a result, self-fashioning conceived as an artistic endeavor requires a level of reflexivity, a critical and abstracting work of self-engagement.

Connecting these "arts of existence" with the era of mass media and virtual togetherness, philosopher Félix Guattari offers an understanding of the aesthetics of existence that is directly applicable to television and other social technologies. In *The Three Ecologies*, he echoes Foucault's approach, arguing for the creation of new and multiple styles of selfhood and relationality. "It will be a question of literally reconstructing the modalities of 'group-being'… [through] effective practices of

experimentation, as much on a microsocial level as on a larger institutional scale" (Guattari, *The Three* 34-35). While Foucault focused on practices and frameworks developed in the age of the stone tablet, Guattari points to the operation of what he calls "social machines" or "collective apparatuses" in the contemporary moment ("Subjectivities" 194). Deeply enmeshed within our everyday lives, these technologies must be accounted for in our evolving understanding of individual and group identity.

> Must we keep the semiotic productions of the mass media, of computers, of telecommunications, robotics, etc., outside of psychological subjectivity? I don't think so. …technological machines for information and communication operate at the heart of human subjectivity—not only within its memories and intelligence, but also within its sensibilities, affects, and unconscious fantasies. (Guattari, "Subjectivities" 194)

Beyond transforming the ways we transmit and store images and knowledge, communication technologies have reworked the bodily experience of self and our physical relations with others. Part of this change has involved a radical restructuring of the social field. Technologies like television and computers, but also music and mathematics, offer alternate registers of experience and have created "new universes of reference" or "mutant centres of subjectivation" that make possible a "new art of living" (Guattari, "Subjectivities" 194; 200; 202). However, like Foucault, Guattari reminds us that "the machinic production of subjectivity can work for the better as for the worse" ("Subjectivities" 194). Explicitly conceptualizing the mass media as a site for

experimental practices of the self and social formation, Guattari argues for an ever expanding and dynamic conception of subjectivity. Moreover, his depiction of "social machines" and "collective apparatuses" accords with an expanded definition of technology that encompasses experiential practices as well as equipment or tools.

While Guattari and Rose provide theoretical grounding for analyzing television as a social technology, the writing of José Esteban Muñoz, in his essay "Pedro Zamora's *Real World* of Counterpublicity: Performing an Ethics of the Self," offers a model for understanding how the medium has been utilized to create such alternative or marginal identities. In this essay, he approaches television in way that recognizes its role as a public storehouse of practices of the self and a creative technology for social formation. He interprets the work of "televisual activist" Zamora, a queer Latino living with AIDS who appeared on the third season of MTV's pioneering reality program *The Real World*, as an ethical practice of the self tactically performed in order to open up alternative forms of subjectivity and sociality. In opposition to the majoritarian identities offered by most mainstream television, the forms of personhood and community broadcast within a homophobic and racist public sphere, Zamora's time on *The Real World* displayed and legitimated a viable way of being for historically marginalized social groups. As Muñoz writes, "the televisual dissemination of such performances allows for the *possibility of counterpublics*: communities and relational chains that contest the dominant public sphere" ("Pedro" 198, original emphasis). These counterpublics involve practices of the self and sociality constituted on grounds that directly challenge mainstream society.

Muñoz's method involves "unveiling moments in which the majoritarian public sphere's publicity—its public discourse and reproduction of that discourse—is challenged by performances of counterpublicity that defy its discriminatory ideology" ("Pedro" 200). Such performances assert the livability of marginal subjectivities and make visible the existence of types of collectivity that combat the static modes of subjectification on offer in mainstream society. Television, in this formulation, serves as a site of contestation and a representational space where political and ethical demands can be asserted. In addition, it acts to amplify and legitimate certain practices of the self. Conforming to the vision of aesthetics proposed in Foucault's work, these practices of the self function to expand and diversify the types of existence on offer. By revealing and modeling alternative forms of relationality, such performances constitute an art of living, mediated through television.

While Muñoz is concerned with the visibility of counterpublics in the mainstream public sphere, his approach for analyzing these televisual tactics can also be applied in more marginal media spaces, like public access. Thinking of access as one of the "mutant centres of subjectivation" suggested by Guattari, it is possible to consider how subcultural practices could develop there and take up other positions in relation to the mainstream or the newly-fractured public sphere. These subcultural "arts of living" do not directly challenge majoritarian identity or a hostile public sphere, but take a more askance position. Provisional, alternative, and creative, subculture takes shape in the fringe regions of the social and media landscape. Foucault himself, in an interview from 1982, uses the term subculture in this sense when discussing the S&M underground in

San Francisco. He describes it as one site where "relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation" were being forged as aesthetic practices of the self ("Sex, Power" 166). In these comments, he argued, "The practice of S&M is the creation of pleasure, and there is an identity with that creation. And that's why S&M is really a subculture. It's a process of invention" (Foucault, "Sex, Power" 169-170). Unlike the mainstream gay movement, where sexuality was posited as an internal essence, this subculture reflected the strategic, fluid, localized, and creative nature of subjectivity. Through distinct sexual practices, vocabularies, fashions, and experiences, this alternative social formation produced a subcultural mode of being that was often temporary and distinctly aesthetic.

"On behalf of our producer, All World Stage, this is your Sufi Sportscaster, Sandman Ivers, wishing you a narrow escape from No Tomorrow"

Throughout this dissertation, my approach to *TVP* and *NWT* combines this distinctive conception of subculture as an alternative, aesthetic, and self-reflexive model for individual and collective identity with a theory of social technology that recognizes the entangled character of material practices and media equipment. As a result, I avoid romanticized conceptions of punk subculture as an oppositional and "more real" force existing beyond the bounds of the mass media. Indeed, the routine and creative intermixing of punk subculture and television, the simultaneous deployment of both as forms of social technology, is my object of analysis throughout.

The first chapter, entitled "'What happens when you read Marshall McLuhan and smoke reefers': *TV Party* and the Social and Discursive Context of the 'Party Network,'" traces the figure of the "network" as an ambivalent model for social relations constructed through television. In the "information age," the "network" emerges as a dominant structure for understanding and enacting social relationships. Bringing to mind tech-savvy corporate maneuvers and political operators, the term is not typically applied to the subcultural practices of punks and underground artists. However, *TVP* promoted what they called the "Party Network" as the primary objective of the show. A type of live, loose hang-out connecting viewers and on-air participants through the technologies of cable television, telephones, music, humor, and drugs, the "Party Network" was a distinctively subcultural mode of social togetherness. *TVP* was simultaneously promoted as "anti-network" TV, formed in opposition to the commercial programming found elsewhere on the dial. However, unlike celebratory discourses about the "global village," *TVP*'s vision of the "Party Network" remained skeptical about these new modes of virtual connectivity. In order to contextualize this unique brand of subcultural television, the chapter describes some of the specific local artistic and activist movements, and attendant discourses, that laid the foundation for *TVP*. To this end, I trace relevant aspects of the emergence of the video art movement, the campaign for cable access in Manhattan, the formation of the Downtown art and music scene, and the experiments of the psychedelic counterculture animated by Marshall McLuhan's theories. The creators and participants of *TVP* borrowed heavily from these all these forbearers in the creation of

virtual networks at the same time that they reacted against them. This background is crucial in grasping the critical and reflexive "Party Network" promoted by the show, and the ambivalent nature of the "network" as model for social togetherness.

The following chapter, "'One Frame of Buttered Popcorn': The (Un)Popular Avant-Garde Tactics of *TV Party*," looks more closely at the particular techniques and strategies utilized on *TVP*. Using music historian Stephen Graham's concept of an "(un)popular avant-garde," I conceptualize the subcultural tactics of televisual production on *TVP* as self-conscious works of art and critical meditations on the social function of aesthetic practice. Experimenting with the patterned use of "dead air," continuous camera movement, disorienting live editing, televisual "graffiti," intentionally amateurish use of technology, and overloaded audio and video signals, *TVP* often looked and felt like high-brow video art. Indeed, the program was self-conscious and explicit about its status as "art television." At the same time, it adopted the format of a late night variety show, continually referenced mainstream programming, and was presented on the quintessential mass cultural medium of television (albeit on noncommercial and geographically-limited public access). In this sense, *TVP* developed an "(un)popular avant-garde" televisual practice, a type of artistic production that partakes in conventions and tactics of creation, distribution, and reception from both the institutions of classical high art and popular culture. Combining direct analysis of individual episodes with historical research regarding its production and social context, I conceptualize the subcultural tactics of

televisual production on *TV Party* as self-conscious (if chaotic) works of art and critical meditations on the social function of aesthetic practice.

In the second half of my dissertation, I turn my attention to *NWT* and to the context of Los Angeles in the early 1980s. In chapter three, "'A new negativity has been born in these culturally dark days': *New Wave Theatre*, Antagonistic Performance, and Queer Theory," I focus on the figure of the queer performer and the work of antisocial negativity in the performance tactics of the show, connecting these antagonistic practices revolving around sexuality to the "antirelational" dimension of queerness formulated by theorists like Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, and Tavia Nyong'o. Through an engagement with artistic, commercial, and subcultural antecedents in the local Los Angeles scene and in the works of host Ivers, the chapter traces the development of the unique performance and production techniques utilized by the program. Calling attention to the often-virulent homophobia of the punk scene in the early 1980s through these performance tactics, *NWT* challenged any easy invocation of an underground community or monolithic experience of subculture. This "antisocial" work glimpsed in the figure of the queer performer points to a key characteristic of these particular subcultural practices of the self.

The final chapter begins by considering the patterned and conventionalized ways scholars, journalists, and subcultural participants themselves have talked about the relationship between subcultures, the media, and mainstream society, focusing on the supposed "authenticity" of punk subculture. Entitled "We're Not Punks But We Play

Them on TV": *The Top*, Punksploitation, and the Performance of Authenticity," the chapter analyzes the story of *The Top*, the very short lived program produced for network TV in the aftermath of the death of *NWT* host Ivers, as an example of the pervasive discourses that conceptualize punk as an authentic and oppositional subculture existing outside of the commercial mainstream. Seen as an example of punksploitation, a trend in 1980s mainstream film and TV culture that represented punks as exaggerated, comical, and dangerous miscreants, the story of *The Top* presents a narrative about the cooptation and exploitation of subculture by commercial media. Such discourses, however, obscure a much more complicated set of subcultural practices that routinely engaged with mainstream media productions and institutions. The ambivalent and complex ways that LA punks interacted with television are found in fanzines, histories, interviews, films, and TV programs from the era and reflect a more critical and reflexive mode of underground subjectivity that challenges notions of authenticity and the boundaries between mainstream and subculture. Following the work of Sarah Thornton in *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* and Dick Hebdige in *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, I present a critique of this normative conception of subculture. Reviewing *The Top*, *NWT*, an episode of the mainstream police drama *CHiPs* featuring a criminal punk band, and other works that seem to misrepresent or capitalize on the images of punks in this light, an alternative history of punksploitation in LA begins to take shape.

None of these engagements with subcultural television provide uncomplicated stories of resistance or a guide to a fully liberated or redemptive mode of subjectivity or sociality. In fact, many of these stories reveal underground formations rife with conflict and miscommunication, marked by some of the same racist, sexist, homophobic, and violent forms of oppression found in dominant society. Punk subculture in the late 1970s and early 1980s was not a bastion of anti-oppression resistance and, through its engagements with cable access, did not achieve the types of connectivity and egalitarian togetherness promised by the utopian visions of cable activists and artists. However, there is evidence in these shows of distinct social technologies, experimental approaches to selfhood and collectivity produced, in part, through cable TV. These experiments in subcultural television function not only to challenge or trouble traditional conceptions of subjectivity and community, but also work to problematize powerful and pervasive discourses about authenticity, aesthetics, technology, communication, and television.

In an interview from 1981 discussing homosexual relationships, Foucault explains them as alternative practices of the self, offering new and different modes of sociality in that historical moment. Their value, though, is not to be found in the creation of specific identities or communities, but in their very existence as creative and alternative forms of social connection. “Homosexuality is a historic occasion to reopen affective and relational virtualities, not so much through the intrinsic qualities of the homosexual but because the ‘slantwise’ position of the latter, as it were, the diagonal lines he can lay out in the social fabric, allow these virtualities to come to light” (Foucault, “Friendship”

138). It is my hope that these investigations into subcultural television in the 1970s and 1980s perform a similar function. As unique, self-reflexive, and artistic modes of subjectivity and sociality produced through and with media technologies, they provide an occasion to think through routinized and established ideas about how to live and, hopefully, to think them differently.

Chapter 1 –"What happens when you read Marshall McLuhan and smoke reefers": *TV Party* and the Social and Discursive Context of the "Party Network"

> The world it transcends
> Understands - comprehends
> I hope it never ends
> This network of friends
> -Heresy "A Network of Friends"

When the British thrash band Heresy sang about the punk scene being "A Network of Friends" on their 1988 album *Face Up to It*, they were invoking an already well-established term for the interconnected bands, venues, record labels, distributors, zine writers, artists, record collectors, tape traders, show promoters, and other scene participants organized under the banner of punk and hardcore. According to this particular way of talking about the subcultural community, punk consists of more than just individual local or regional underground scenes. It also exists in the bonds and linkages between these localized phenomena, in those immaterial connections that span the globe. As the explanatory text included on the lyric sheet proclaims, "one of the greatest achievements of the HC development was/is its great ability to transcend national boundaries, cultural differences and overcome language barriers. People from all over the globe are bonded together through their mutual love of a musical form and the spirit and attitude it represents" (Heresy). Subcultural social relations and artistic productions are

represented here as progressive and politically powerful forces, overcoming "the barriers of ignorance" and "eroding the fear, ignorance and mistrust that our respective societies often thrust upon us" (Heresy). In this formulation, punk is a unifying force bridging such diverse locales as "the Philippines, Peru, the Canary Isles and many Eastern Bloc countries," to name only a few (Heresy). Significantly, this underground social formation does not just encompass physical or material activities such as trading and distributing recorded music, circulating printed zines, or bringing people together at shows and record stores, but is also found in the relations forged by communication. Through music, writing, fashion, art, and other media, punk creates a type of virtual communion among people who will never meet. In their somewhat silly, rhyming lyrics, Heresy celebrates the punk scene in abstract, as an "endless range to exchange… ideas, hopes, and fears" (Heresy). In the lyrics, this network is described as a singular entity with an efficacy or power of its own. On a level apart from the various productions, thoughts, and activities of individuals, "the network takes effect" (Heresy). Beyond the individual actions of the participants and the material processes and results involved, there exists the "network of friends."

In a subculture often marked by militant oppositional politics and an explicit rejection of the mainstream, the easy and even customary invocation of the word "network" seems a bit out of place. The term brings to mind boardroom conference calls and tech-savvy international sales divisions, not squatters trading tapes through the post or Xeroxed copies of fanzines being passed around at gigs. This commonplace way of

describing punk as a composite of relations and interactive links or a global forum of exchange is strikingly consonant with the rhetoric surrounding communications technology, computer development, and globalized corporate trade. While Heresy and other bands in the Do-It-Yourself hardcore scene of the 1980s disdained mainstream record labels, radio stations, distribution companies, and advertising, they notably conceptualized their alternative arrangements and practices using the same rhetoric utilized by multinational corporations, the conventional mass media, academic research institutions, and governmental bureaucracies. Heresy's celebratory description of punk as a network appears on the same record as songs that decry the "injustice of wealth" in a global context and rail against the military and corporate "machinery that helps to make up the system." However, in "Network of Friends," as in innumerable other examples from throughout punk subcultures, the inherently positive and even radical nature of international communication and exchange is uncritically invoked. Pointing out this incongruity or seeming contradiction is not meant to challenge the claims of punk bands like Heresy to an emancipatory alternative, but to illuminate an often-overlooked aspect of punk and its historical context. Like swapping business cards at power lunches, simulcast teleconferences, and speed dating, punk subculture is a social phenomenon of the information age. While many characterizations of punk subculture, academic and otherwise, emphasize the way bands and other scene participants challenged and resisted mainstream or corporate forms of technologically-mediated culture, they often fail to see the ways that punk also engaged, propagated, and produced social practices and

discourses that echoed mainstream information-age institutions (Duncombe 1997; Mullen 1999; O'Hara 2001; Moore 2004; Blush 2010). Thoroughly enmeshed in the vicissitudes of their time, punk subcultures were neither uncritical champions of the networked world nor pure forms of resistance to its instrumentality.

Beaming punk and other alternative music, art, and social practice through the quintessential mass medium of the early information age, subcultural television provides a unique and often-overlooked illustration of this historical coincidence. It is no surprise, then, that the figure of the network, with all its contradictory connotations, can be found throughout these productions. Indeed, long before Heresy described punk as a "network of friends," the Manhattan cable access program *TV Party* promoted what they called a "Party Network" and attempted to use cable access television as a distinctive subcultural social technology. The "*TV Party* Manifesto," published in 1980, described the show as "a medium for establishing a PARTY NETWORK" that would link together viewers at home with the show's participants in a loose, entertaining form of sociality (O'Brien "Manifesto" 23). Asserting that this would be "the first step in organizing society for mutual interests," the creators of *TVP* drew explicitly on a redemptive and political understanding of communicational networks (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 23). At the same time, however, the very first episode of the program begins with a monologue describing the show as "anti-network" television, using the term "network" as a metonymy for the homogenizing and corrupt mainstream media they opposed. Their manifesto, likewise, attacks national television and global communications as "the last and most reprehensible

phase of imperialism" (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 23). The polarized meanings found in *TVP*'s deployment of the term "network" illustrate the ambiguous and seemingly contradictory space inhabited by subcultural television as it attempted to utilize TV as a social technology. Moreover, the ambivalent figure of the network found here outlines a complex and critical vision of subcultural social relations. Utopian proclamations about the radical political power of the virtual communities created through cablecasting often masked much more complicated and nuanced approaches to the possibility of communicational collectivity. It is my contention that, in producing a program for cable broadcast, the creators of *TVP* critically engaged with the theory and practice of subcultural networking, exploring its utopian dimensions as well as its entanglement with capitalist instrumentality, unequal forms of global exchange, cultural homogenization, bureaucratic control, and technological dehumanization. Finding a space somewhere between the uncritical acceptance of a techno-utopian "global village" theory and a primitivist-inspired media blackout, *TVP* embraced the ambivalence of technological communication in the age of corporate globalization.

In this chapter, I engage with individual episodes of the program and outtakes, the published writings and artworks of several show participants, contemporaneous and more recent interviews with creators and frequent guests, as well as other ephemera related to its broadcast, to provide a glimpse of its unique practice of subcultural television. In particular, I analyze *TVP*'s "Party Network" as an example of what sociologist Andreas Wittel calls "network sociality," a theoretical mode and practice of technologically-

mediated collectivity found throughout the information age. In engaging with this program, I am more interested in tracing the specific contours of its idiosyncratic project of televisual communication than judging its radical credentials or status as a "true alternative" of some kind. Additionally, following Wittel, "I am neither concerned with networks themselves and with the mathematics of their formal properties, nor with the uncovering of models of social relations, but rather with the making of networks, with networking *as a practice*" (52, original emphasis). Using surviving footage, recollections, and other artifacts, this chapter attempts to reconstruct the material and communicational practices that utilized cable television to create alternative social arrangements. In addition, *TVP* provided explicit and implicit commentary about these practices, critical discourse about their aesthetic and social practice. As an experiment in alternative broadcasting that self-reflexively engaged its use of television as a social technology, *TVP* explored the connections between underground sociality, emerging communications technology, the unequal power relations structuring virtual interactions, and the attendant transformation of spatial relations in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Downtown New York City.

The "*TVP* Manifesto" also declares that "culture begins with LOCAL PROGRAMMING" (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 23). The local and specific character of *TVP*'s project demonstrates Wittel's assertion that, despite its use of global communications technology, "network sociality" is not a universal or static phenomenon. In fact, he insists that its emergence be understood as an uneven and disjointed process. While part of a

larger historical development, *TVP* represents a local and idiosyncratic manifestation of "network sociality." The objective of this chapter is to capture the particular character and detail of this local phenomenon. Moreover, Wittell writes, "this process has *historical roots* and it has *limitations* in terms of geography, class, and industrial sectors," as well as other axes of difference (52, original emphasis). While such limitations are crucial in understanding the forms of power at work in this developing mode of sociality, I focus on the historical roots of *TVP*'s network model of social relations. The show's deployment of "network sociality" and its attendant discourses did not spring fully formed from the creative minds of its producers. The program emerged out of particular social, geographic, cultural, institutional, and discursive contexts that ultimately shaped its approach to constructing an alternative form of collectivity through cablecasting. In order to map the co-ordinates of this example of subcultural television, I trace the development of specific and local practices and discourses about the utopian potential of communications imbedded within *TVP*'s "Party Network." Starting with the birth of the video art and guerrilla television movements in roughly the same parts of New York City that *TVP*'s broadcast would later reach, this chapter follows the emergence of a pervasive understanding of the potential of virtual, technologically-mediated social forms partially rooted in the utopian pronouncements of Marshall McLuhan. This transformative discourse about the power of the network permeated the particular institutional, social, and aesthetic contexts from which *TVP* emerged. In particular, I follow the deployment of this discourse and the development of these practices in some of the NYC spaces

where the psychedelic counterculture, video artists, the guerrilla television and public access movements, and the early punk scene overlapped. Taking into account these historical antecedents and forms of discursive context will help to make sense of *TVP* and its unique practice of subcultural networking.

"If you've heard of the global village theory of media, you know television is supposed to make the world one big culture. Well, we never believed it, did we?"

Before delving into my analysis of *TVP* and its localized "Party Network," it is necessary to define the larger periodizing claim that locates the emergence of punk subculture in the late 1970s within what is often called the "information age." According to Manuel Castells, author of a multi-history of the information age, this era begins with the "information technology revolution" of the early 1970s and is marked by transformations "throughout the whole realm of human activity" (Castells 5). New information technologies appeared alongside many of the economic developments of "late capitalism," such as instantaneous global communication technologies, an increase in international trade, the improved mobility of goods and populations across "free" borders, and the rise of a knowledge and information-based economy (Jameson 1991; Sandoval 2000). As Rosi Braidotti notes, "in-depth transformations of the system of economic production also alter traditional social structures" (5). Or, in Castells' words, "the emergence of a new electronic communication system characterized by global reach, its integration of all communication media, and its potential interactivity is changing and

will forever change our culture" (357). Indeed, this time period is often described as an era of "urban despair," "social atomization," and general alienation, marked by a profound disenchantment or pessimism about the possibilities for social consensus, harmony, or redemptive revolutionary change. Jean-Luc Nancy, in his text *The Inoperative Community*, acknowledges this widespread cynicism and attributes it partly to a loss of faith in the concept of community that had previously served as the basis for modern social formations. Under changing economic and cultural conditions, this basic structuring principle for how people related to each and the imagined social whole was suddenly regarded with suspicion and doubt. In her book, *Politics Out of History*, Wendy Brown asks, "When fundamental premises of an order begin to erode, or simply begin to be exposed as fundamental premises, what reactive political formations emerge—and what anxieties, tensions, and binds do they carry?" (3). In one version of this periodization, the network arises to replace community as the dominant model for social formation. Castells, observing the "emergence of a new social structure" at the end of the 1970s, describes it as "the rise of network society" (26).

Sociologist Andreas Wittel, in his essay "Toward a Network Sociality," echoes this description of the period and introduces "network sociality" as a new framework for understanding social relations in the information age. This term names the distinctive practices on the individual level that are proper to "network society" as a whole. Noting that it "can be used in contrast to community," he describes the concept as a type of "disembedded intersubjectivity" (Wittel 51). Instead of shared histories or common

experiences, bonds in an era of "network sociality" consist of "fleeting and transient, yet iterative social relations; of ephemeral but intense encounters" (Wittel 51). Wittel adds that these "encounters," whether face-to-face or mediated, are primarily "informational" and often "constructed on the grounds of communication and transport technology" (51). As opposed to stable, geographically defined, and preexisting communities, networks are fluid, temporary, delocalized, and self-reflexive about their constructed nature. These social arrangements do not respect traditional borders or divisions that previously limited interaction, using technology to minimize spatial dimensions. Responsive to the imperatives of late capitalism, "network sociality" is an "instrumentalizing" mode of connection that involves the "commodification of social relationships" (Wittel 56). It is no surprise that Wittel's scholarship is centered on business relationships and the rise of "networking events and culture" among aspiring young professionals in the corporate world. However, as noted above, this emerging form of collectivity was also taken up by subcultures like punk beginning in the late 1970s. Although punks utilized alternative communication channels like tape trading, DIY record distribution, small-run photocopied zines, and underground booking circles, their social formations were undoubtedly technologically-mediated, ephemeral, knowledge-based, iterative, and acknowledged as constructed.

Attaining a sort of cultural centrality, the figure of the network occurs throughout the social field with a range of connotations and associations. For critics of computer technology, technocratic rationality, or consumer society, networks are alienating,

instrumentalizing, and fundamentally dehumanizing social forms, characterized by a loss of physical intimacy and political accountability. In these discourses, the mass cultural medium of television is the quintessential network, linking people together in a commodified, one-way, passive form of communication. In Jerry Mander's 1978 text *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, he refers to "network television" as a "monolithic" and powerful "creature" that unifies people "within a system of conceptions and living patterns" (150; 152). "Because of it, our whole culture and the physical shape of the environment, no more or less than our minds and feelings, have been computerized, linearized, suburbanized, freewayized, and packaged for sale" (Mander 152). A symbol for the homogenization and general downfall of society as a whole, the network is figured here as an unnatural and exploitative imposition. However, the term is also often used to talk about forms of communication and relationality that are classless, interactive, and, paradoxically, more human. As communications theorist and historian Armand Mattelart notes, "Networks, a leading symbol of progress, have also made their way into utopian thinking. The communication network is an eternal promise symbolizing a world that is better because it is united" (*Networking* viii). In these discourses, networks can relieve the very symptoms of alienation they allegedly cause. Such narratives imply that the transformative social power of these communications technologies could be harnessed to create a more closely-knit and more egalitarian world.

Many utopian investments in a networked world have their roots in the work of Marshall McLuhan and his celebration of a coming "global village" created through

communications technology. According to McLuhan in his seminal work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* published in 1964, technology was effecting an implosion of social space. While the world was once thought of in terms of the expansion and exploration of outer limits, modern technology, from the railroad to the telegraph, was eradicating the significance of these great distances and the vast diversity of life. For instance, concerns with population figured as the "explosion" of great numbers of individuals missed the primary quality of technological life. "In fact, it is not the increase of numbers in the world that creates our concern with population. Rather, it is the fact that everybody in the world has to live in the utmost proximity created by our electronic involvement in one another's lives" (McLuhan 35). While some critics of technology saw this mediation and involvement as radically alienating people from one another, McLuhan regarded this new form of closeness as a type of intimacy and connection not unlike the preindustrial communities of centuries past. While he acknowledged a pervasive social anxiety about the dissolution of community at the time, his work presented technology as a potential avenue out of isolation and atomistic existence. He wrote, "the aspirations of our time for wholeness, empathy, and depth of awareness are a natural adjunct of electric technology" and such technologies should be invested with a "faith that concerns the ultimate harmony of all being" (McLuhan 5). Alluding to a lost communal golden age of familiarity, closeness and unity, McLuhan refers to this future, technologically maintained society as a "global village." Decentralized and "retribalized"

by an electronic network, human beings will be able to exist in common without concern for the old limitations of space and time.

For McLuhan, the new conditions of social proximity and increasing relationality marked by the term "global village" were primarily made possible by new communications technology. Looking back to the invention of the printing press, McLuhan notes that it acted as one of the "major shaping forces of community life" (139). Allowing for the transfer of thoughts, ideas, and affects, such technologies lead to radical transformations in society like the French and American revolutions. In essence, democracy and more egalitarian types of sociality were rooted in a particular form of communication, the mass-produced printed word. McLuhan suggests that understanding the shape and character of any type of social organization requires an engagement with the nature and structure of communication amongst its members. The technological form of communication determines the character of social, political, and cultural relations, or, as his well-known and much debated saying maintains, "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 7). In this vein, he directly addressed newer technologies like the telegraph, radios, the telephone, movies, and, significantly, television. According to his description in the chapter "TV: The Timid Giant," the emerging medium of television was transforming the world into a "mosaic" of "all-inclusive *nowness*" (McLuhan 335, original emphasis). The mechanical flow of images and sounds were "discontinuous, skew, and non-lineal," breaking away from the types of structure and interaction proper to the printed word (McLuhan 335). In contrast to the way of thinking exemplified by

critics of television like Mander, McLuhan regarded even the mass medium of television as a liberating tool for the creation of a more human form of interaction. Always in the background of any discussion linking communication, technology, and society, these ideas formed the basis of a prevailing discourse about the utopian potential of technologically-mediated networks.

In a broad sense, the figure of the network was the site of competing discourses about the changing social fabric of the 1970s. Vilified as a force for homogenization and centralized control and celebrated as a model for new types of universal harmony and egalitarian togetherness, the network was a powerful symbol of a particular modernity, located at the heart of a debate about the direction of the world in the wake of technological advancement and the demise of tradition. In this transitional and tumultuous moment, alternative modalities of "network sociality" began to emerge, offering creative practices and discourses adapted to the contours of a changing social world. Awash with references to networks and virtual connection, the subcultural television experiment of *TVP* offers a distinctive example of these mutating forms of relationality.

"We're going to teach you the real meaning of television, which is its just as much fun to be in front of the camera as it is to be in front of the tube"

The premiere episode of *TVP* demonstrates the contradictory meanings of the network circulating in the larger discourses described above and provides a sketch of the show's anti-network "Party Network." Originally broadcast live on December 18, 1978,

the episode begins with an indiscernible dark mass covering the entire screen. Several barely audible voices can be heard chatting in the background. As it backs away from the camera and exposes a set of empty chairs on a sound stage, the dark mass is revealed to be someone's armpit. Ten or so people then begin to file onto the stage and into the surrounding areas as music and incomprehensible talking rise to an almost grating volume. Smoke fills the air, someone is loudly tuning a guitar, and the camera focuses in and out as it pivots around the room. Peering out from under that armpit as people and noises swirl around them, the viewer is dropped into the middle of a lively social event with no particular center of focus or activity. The camera pans and then switches between two different angles. On screen, people are sipping beverages, dancing, and talking to each other (Figure 1-1). Although Kool and the Gang's "Funk Stuff" dominates the soundtrack, the buzz of conversation, laughter, and the movement of feet are clearly audible as well. Notably, viewers hear discussion about the placement of microphones and various other technical matters related to broadcast alongside casual exchanges more typical of a social gathering in this background murmur.

Before any message is delivered, any topic discussed, or any cast member introduced, the fundamental intent of the program is accomplished here. Viewers are at a party, just hanging out. Although this opening could be mistaken for brief technical difficulties or simple inexperience with broadcasting, it serves to establish the basic contours of the televisual experience produced by *TVP*. There are no scripted narratives, no moderated debates, and no central point or goal, only a loose structure, intermittent

performances, and spontaneous interruptions by various people on set or by viewers calling in on the telephone. Master of ceremonies O'Brien acts like more of a social host than a television personality, introducing guests to each other and providing a semblance of a schedule for the entertainment, often darting off screen or visibly distracted by various stimuli.

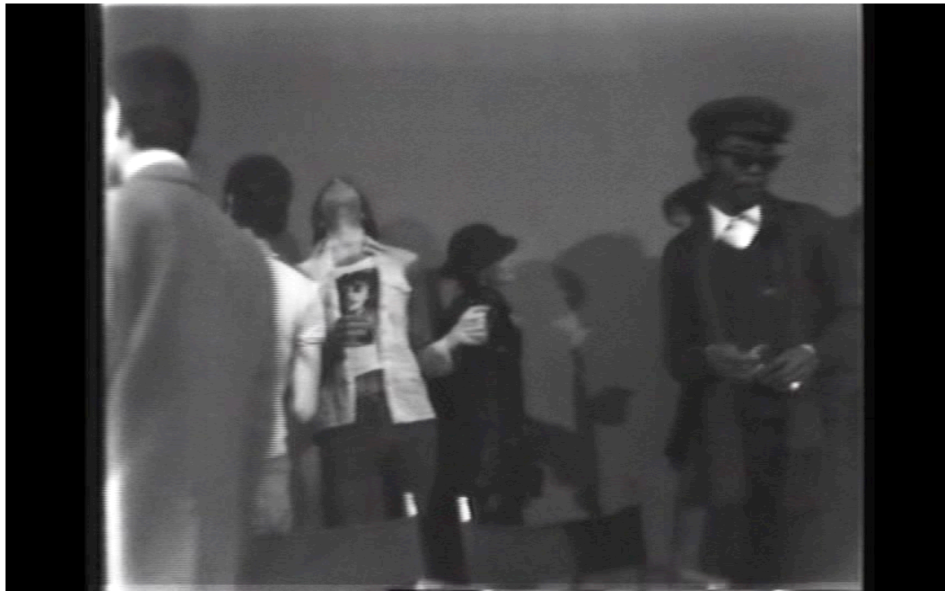


Figure 1-1 A still from *TV Party* "Premier Episode"

Apparent in these opening moments, the primary product of *TVP* is an atmosphere or environment. This involves the live broadcast of an extended hang out and jam session with a diverse group of friends and acquaintances, who, variously and often spontaneously, play music, read poetry, crack jokes, share stories, laugh, and talk about philosophy and politics, sometimes all at once and over each other. The camera operators, sound technicians, and other people involved in the production are engaged in the social

experience as well. Flipping between camera angles, playing with focus, using the character generator to write on the screen, constantly toying with the microphone levels, and talking from behind camera, the equipment operators are visibly and audibly part of the party as well. Finally, viewers at home are likewise engaged in the social event. As described above, the camera positions the viewer directly in the conversation, making their presence felt. And the telephone plays a key role in inviting and incorporating those at home, allowing them to participate in the gathering. In these ways, *TVP* reveals its primary function of creating social connections, bringing people's images and voices into contact, and doing so in a particularly loose and "fun" way. What the television does, in this instance, is act as a social technology, bringing people together to create the party that is the show. As their manifesto proclaims, "There is a party in every home where the TV PARTY is TURNED ON" (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 22). Linking together guests, participants, callers, and viewers, *TVP* constructs a network utilizing technological mediums, a live web of interactive connections spanning the tuned-in sets hardwired together by this specific stretch of coaxial cable.

Evident in these opening moments of the program, the construction of a social network was the explicitly stated intention of *TVP*. A few years after its launch, the creators of the show published their bombastic "*TV Party* Manifesto." Handed out as a leaflet at The Mudd Club, Danceteria, and other subcultural hang outs, the proclamation was also published both in the Summer 1980 issue of *The East Village Eye* and in the Spring 1981 issue of the NYC-based arts and literature magazine *BOMB*, co-edited by

O'Brien. The manifesto is structured as a platform for a political party that will run a full slate of candidates in the 1981 local elections, headlined by O'Brien's candidacy for mayor. From beginning to end, the statement of purpose is filled with utopian fervor about the power of communication, sociality, and connection promised by cable access television. While promoting the show and the semi-sarcastic political platform are its primary goals, the declaration is also aimed at something a bit larger.

> *TV PARTY* is a medium for establishing a PARTY NETWORK. THE PARTY is the highest expression of social activity—the co-operative production of fun. THE PARTY is the first step in organizing society for mutual interests. …*TV PARTY* believes that SOCIAL affinity groups will provide the foundation of effective political action… THE PARTY serves as an accelerator and co-ordinator of interpersonal relationships, and as a model for larger social and political networks based on positive social interaction, i.e. FUN. (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 23)

While there is more than a healthy dose of irony and humor in this announcement, it is clear that O'Brien and the other participants in producing the program understood this "Party Network" as a positive political force. The mediated relationships constructed through their cablecasting experiment were regarded as a significant and radical method for producing progressive social change. Although relaxed, spontaneous, and "FUN," the interpersonal connections constructed through technologically-mediated communication provide the basis for a new and better mode of collectivity. The utopian ideas of

McLuhan are more than evident in these pronouncements promising a redemptive mode of technological connectivity.

Returning to the first minutes of the premier episode, however, it is not long before the program explores the other meaning of “network.” After the unstructured hang out devolves into a stationary shot of the bow tie wearing host, O’Brien takes a microphone and introduces viewers to the program, repeating their slogan, “a TV show that’s a party, but which could be a political party.” In these introductory remarks, O’Brien goes on to explain that the show was started because “we were all bored by network TV shows and we had all read Marshall McLuhan.” The precise term he uses to describe the show in a later episode is “anti-network.” The tern “network” here no longer refers to the positive forms of information sharing and community building promoted by the manifesto and produced by the loose relations between viewers and the show. Here it stands in for the entire institution of mainstream broadcast television, a quite different web of virtual connections. While O’Brien does not go in-depth about the issue in this episode, it is clear that the types of bonds and communicational communities produced by mainstream TV are not the same as the “Party Network.” In the published manifesto, the critique of “network” television is fleshed out and elaborated. The proclamation asserts the program’s independence from the corporate broadcasting giants. These pernicious institutions are identified as, with obvious emphasis, “THE CONTINENTAL AND GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS MONOPOLIES” and “ENTERTAINMENT CARTELS,” or, as they are otherwise known, “the National Networks” (O’Brien,

"Manifesto" 23). The piece rifles through a veritable cornucopia of anti-network television, and by extension mass culture, criticisms and denunciations. The critique of conventional television programming paints these channels as bland consumer culture for the "lowest common denominator" that acts to create a type of "idiocy" known as the "TV MASS MIND" (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 23). TV is filled with "camp" and "dramatic programming" that appeals to "opinion and emotion" instead of intelligence and is not suited to the screening of "reality" (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 23). Furthermore, television's national character is assaulted as "the last and most reprehensible phase of imperialism," destroying local and idiosyncratic forms of culture (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 23). The cathode ray tube acts as a form of covert government or "the greatest modern instrument for control" (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 23). While the "Party Network" is a local force of revolutionary togetherness, "network television" is homogenizing, overly broad, indiscriminate, authoritarian, exploitative, and harmful to cultural diversity, individuality, intelligence, and free thinking.

The contradictory deployments of the "network" in just the premiere episode and manifesto highlight its centrality to the general project of the show. Furthermore, the explicit and critical engagement with its status as social technology, using cable television and telephones to link people together, reveals a notable self-awareness or self-reflexivity about this problematic amongst the participants. The references to McLuhan and half-serious presentation of the show's political agenda work against any outright dismissal of the program as mere entertainment or detached performance art. Even

through this brief glimpse into the show's early stages, its unique mode of subcultural televisual practice can be seen. As a program broadcast on cable access television, *TVP* was self-conscious and self-critical about its status as a form of communication, a transmission linking televisions within a circumscribed area, beamed through what was, at the time, the ultimate networking medium. In a sense, *TVP*'s experiment in using the mass medium of television for the "co-operative production" of a party stretched the very limits of "networking" to the point of revealing its impossibilities (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 23).

However, the show's self-reflexive endeavor to create "a TV party that's a cocktail but could be a political party" did not arise in a social and cultural vacuum. In order to grasp the details of its experiment in subcultural networking, it is necessary to link it to the rich cultural and discursive context of the Downtown New York City scene from which it arose. Indeed, the broad contours and specific qualities of *TVP*'s political and philosophical project show the direct influence of a variety of contemporaneous and local ways of thinking about technology, politics, aesthetics, entertainment, and communication. Given the sheer immensity of these local precursors, there are innumerable "beginnings" to any narrative about this television show that claimed to be "the first step in organizing society for mutual interests," an unending web of connections, influences, and impulses linking this televisual experiment to various movements, thinkers, social conditions, and shared dreams about a more connected and less oppressive world (O'Brien, "Manifesto" 23). According to the "*TV Party*

Manifesto," "CONTINENTAL PROGRAMMING is the enemy of culture, which is always local" (O'Brien "Manifesto" 23). *TVP*'s commitment to the local in the construction of a virtual network was one of the distinctive aspects of its experiment in subcultural cablecasting. This explicit challenge to the abstract and homogenizing tendencies of mainstream networks serves as a guide for my attempt to tell its story. Since this project aims to be a local history, focused on the distinctive practices and discourses that comprise subcultural production and activity, I want to triangulate this "beginning" spatially, looking to geography to help construct the story.

TVP's so-called anti-network "Party Network" was cablecast on Tuesday nights from 12:30am to 1:30am on both Manhattan Cable and Teleprompter Cable from 1978 to 1982. For the majority of its run, *TVP* was shown on public access Channel D on Manhattan Cable, sharing the channel with other voices pontificating on the political power and potential of televisual communication on shows like *If I Can't Dance, You Can Keep Your Revolution* and *Telecommunication and Information Revolution*. Like these other programs, *TVP* was produced live at the Experimental Television Center (E.T.C) Studios located at 10 East 23rd St. in Manhattan. The space was started by Jim Chladek in 1974 as one of the first studios dedicated to live public access programming, wired for the interactive use of telephones and cable technology (McClard 1982). While these spatial coordinates locate the show in the buzzing heart of NYC's alternative television and video scene at the time, I want to start the story a few miles away from those E.T.C. studios where the *TVP*'s signal originated, at the Liberty Music Store on

Madison Avenue. In 1965, this corporate electronics and media establishment was the setting for the almost mythic and sometimes disputed origin story of video art and alternative television in the United States. The artists and activists that comprised these broad movements were pioneers in exploring and elaborating on the ambivalent character of technologically-mediated networks. Their productions and discourses laid the groundwork for *TVP* and its ambivalent practice of subcultural, televisual networking. Significantly, these movements also developed some of the material institutions and practices utilized by the program. Before turning exclusively to the "TV party that's also a political party," it is necessary to take a detour through some of its direct antecedents.

According to a chorus of historical sources, video art and guerrilla television were born in October of 1965, when the Korea-born artist Nam June Paik visited the aforementioned department store on Madison Ave and used grant funds from the Rockefeller Foundation to purchase the first commercially available portable 1/2 –inch video camera and recorder, the Sony Portapak (Boyle 4; Mellencamp 41; Hanhardt 111; Meigh-Andrews 16). Stuck in traffic on his way home, Paik used the new technology to record a parade organized for the Pope's visit to the city. He showed the results that same night at Café a Go-Go at 152 Bleeker St in Greenwich Village, also passing around a quickly typed and mimeographed manifesto announcing the beginning of "a new decade of electronic television" (qtd. in Meigh-Andrews 18). While the actual content of the video is usually glossed over in the various retellings, the revolutionary nature of the spontaneous action and the utopian promise of this new technology are richly described.

While Paik had been using televisions in his interactive sculptures and performance pieces for nearly a decade prior, planting TV gardens and using magnets to stretch and mutate the images, the accessibility, immediacy, and manageability of the Portapak offered the potential for the wholesale transformation of television as a technological medium, a social institution, and an art form. Before the Portapak, video cameras were bulky and expensive, requiring extensive expertise and capital investment. The flier for Paik's brief video presentation explicitly mentioned the exorbitant cost of video recording machines, noting with "a bitter grin" that he had paid $25 for just an instructional booklet five years earlier (qtd. in Hanhardt 111). With this new piece of consumer electronics, called "the most basic means of the individual decentralization of TV technology," the full and true liberation and democratization of the medium suddenly seemed possible, even imminent (Meigh-Andrews 35). The envisioned results were not just an artist's alternative to mainstream television, but a networked utopia of televisual connectivity. In this event and its presentation, one can glimpse the seemingly paradoxical nature of the network as mode of bringing people together. There is already the implied critique of "network television" understood as an inaccessible, one-way medium for corporate content as well as a localized experiment, the screening itself, in utilizing the technology to bond people together differently.

If locating this version of the genesis of alternative television at a screening (not a broadcast) of a video shot on a hand-held camcorder seems confusing, it is partly because today we no longer see television and video as one interlinked medium. Before the

widespread dissemination of VCRs and home video, the technology of video was intimately associated with one of the only ways to view it, the television set. Placed in direct contrast to film and the cinema, video was indistinguishable to most people from its apparatus of display. The technology of rear projection, the limited screen dimensions, and degraded picture quality were all shared characteristics of the mediums. The television also displayed a unified audio-visual "signal," whether taped or broadcast, unlike the cinema that split the picture and sound information. Regardless of whether a video was broadcast, played live from the camera, or transferred to the screen in some other way, the medium of ½ inch tape was synonymous with the television set and the associated forms of programming and broadcasting that normally adorned its curved glass display. Thus, when portable and relatively inexpensive video technology first became available to the general public, it represented one of the first real challenges to the possibilities inherent in the television set. The early champions of video recorders saw their work as directly related to the institution of broadcast television, a critical commentary on its forms of representation, commercial structure, and social role. As Chris Meigh-Andrews remarks in his *A History of Video Art: The Development of Form and Function*, "since both shared a common technology, especially in terms of how the final images and sounds are presented and experienced, …many artists took up a position against [broadcast TV], sought to change it, or to challenge the cultural stereotypes and representations it depicted" (2). As reflected in Paik's flier quoted above, "many early video artists' statements read 'like political diatribes against the television institution',"

consistently articulating their work to corporate broadcast (Meigh-Andrews 56). While the majority of artistic videos produced in the wake of the introduction of the Portapak were never aired on network stations, they were created, viewed, critiqued, and discussed as directly linked to the limitations and potentials of broadcast television.

Not only did the linked project of alternative television and video art get its start there, but historian Deirdre Boyle notes in her work *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited* that "New York City was a major hub for early video activity," spawning one of the world's first video undergrounds (5). In the years following Paik's fabled shopping experience and encounter with the Pope's parade, the city would be the site of the world's first gallery exhibition of video art ("TV as a Creative Medium"), one of the first cooperatives of video producers (Commediation), the first studios for live cable access programming (E.T.C. Studios), and one of the first collectively published magazines committed to covering video art and guerrilla television (*Radical Software*). Video-based aesthetic production and activism served to bring together artists, political organizers, and thinkers associated with both the 1960s communalist counterculture and the experimental art scene. The latter group immediately took to video as a critical aesthetic practice able to set them apart from the staid and square institutions of the museum and the corporate gallery. While Paik's experiments with video served as a key spark, his work was part of a massive wave of artists looking for alternatives to the institutional art scene of the early 1960s. This oppositional faction was dissatisfied with the profit-oriented, individual forms of aesthetic production that produced marketable

objects for the museum and the auction house. The Happenings movement led by Allan Kaprow in the late 1950s and Fluxus, a loose configuration of artists including Paik, responded to this search for alternatives by producing spontaneous and participatory events instead of discrete aesthetic pieces. In an entirely different approach, graffiti artists were using abandoned buildings and subway cars as sites for non-saleable artworks. Describing the era beginning in the mid-60s, art historian Roselee Goldberg notes that "during this period artists focused on live actions, not on things, on an art of ideas, not of product" (97). In particular, she singles out an informal collection of artists working in the "distinct parcel of urban geography" of Downtown New York (Goldberg 99). United in a rejection of the mainstream art world, "performance was a key factor in the connectedness of the Downtown community" (Goldberg103). These same artists were part of what Goldberg refers to as the "media generation," the first to grow up with television as an integral part of the American cultural landscape (103).

This context helps explain the quick and exuberant adoption of video and television technology by the Downtown art scene. On one hand, these mediums became part of the attack on the museum and gallery world. Speaking to the television-saturated experiences of the "media generation," video allowed these artists to irreverently inject TV's low resolution images and low culture status into the elitist spaces of high art. Perhaps more significantly, the ephemeral nature, "ease, simultaneity and immateriality" of video appealed to artists working in performance (Mellencamp 42). Before the market for VHS and other home video consumer products, the technology was linked to

broadcast as a transitory and time-based medium, unable to be bought and sold like paintings and sculptures. This was especially true for early ½ inch magnetic tape that deteriorated quickly, degrading and eventually destroying itself through multiple viewings. Portapaks and TV screens also offered the possibility of “live” transmissions, disseminating a Happening or other transitory event beyond its space of performance, but not through a material commodity. As Meigh-Andrews notes, for early performance practitioners, “working 'live' was in itself a political and artistic statement” against the commercialism of the art market (5). Video technology presented an opportunity to explore the limits of this critique, further pushing at the boundaries of what constitutes an “art work.” This active transcending of boundaries can also be seen as an experiment in the production of aesthetic networks. New York-based artists like Paik, Dara Brinbaum, and Bruce Naiman utilized video technology to accentuate the mediating function of art. Either by bringing broadcast images into the gallery, or connecting the sanctified space of the museum with other locations, these artists used image networks to challenge the spatial confines of the art world. Although Boyle saw video’s role as simply “documenting the happenings of the late 60s” art movements, it is clear that in New York City, the networks created by video and broadcasting technology were integral parts of many aesthetic projects (4).

Outside the art scene, individuals affiliated with the communalist counterculture and radical political New Left also saw potential in the immediacy, accessibility, and interactive nature of handheld video camcorders. Like the art world fringe that frequented

many of the same areas, New Left activists and participants in the counterculture living on NYC's Lower East Side found groundbreaking possibility in this new technology's re-appropriation of television. For instance, Boyle describes how a former theater student named David Cort adopted video as an activist tool while living there and working for an anti-poverty outreach program in Bedford-Stuyvesant. He saw video as a potential antidote for the disconnection from culture and the media felt by the marginalized communities they organized in. Cort "recognized that video could involve people by making them active participants in the 'video environment' rather than passive viewers of network TV fare" (Boyle 6). Another community activist named Paul Ryan worked on mini-documentaries with high school students in Brooklyn, helping them to create experimental "video art environments" as well as more typical journalistic fare (Boyle 9). In these more political deployments of video technology, the ambivalent model of the network is again evident. In diagnosing the alienation, passivity, and disconnection of these communities as symptoms of the contemporaneous media environment, Cort and Ryan were explicitly critical of mainstream forms of technological communication. However, partially inspired by McLuhan, these activists sought a remedy in those same high-tech tools of human interaction.

Enthusiasm for this new practice of social organization was not reserved solely for artists and activists. The loosely defined counterculture of the 1960s also engaged with ideas and practices of "network sociality" through video technology and other means. In his history of linking the counterculture to cyberculture, Fred Turner notes that

"hippies from Manhattan to Haight-Ashbury read… Marshall McLuhan" and gravitated towards the promise of communal togetherness in his writing (4). McLuhan's description of a "global village" hewed closely to the types of intimacy and shared experience celebrated by much of the counterculture. In NYC, some participants in this scene explored the use of cameras and televisions in countercultural spaces and practices. In 1968, an itinerant painter and philosopher named Frank Gillette produced a "documentary" on street life in the East Village. Just hanging around outside a candy shop "that served as unofficial headquarters of the Eastern hippie community at the time," Gillette taped loose, free form interviews on a Portapak (Boyle 6). In an interview for Boyle's book, Gillette noted that he was careful of "imposing his structure on people," simply letting individuals "give their raps on videotape" (7). He also used the camera as a form of therapy for kids suffering "bad trips—teenagers burnt-out on LSD," allowing them to experience image "feedback" on a television monitor (7). Roaming spaces marked by "urban despair," Gillette and others attempted to reconstitute social relations through the use of technology. Bringing images and voices together for personal and communal exploration, the camcorder became a countercultural tool as well as a progressive political implement in NYC's East Village.

Even though many in the counterculture avoided high-tech gadgets like television, video cameras, and computers, they took a more encompassing approach to concepts of "technology" and "medium." As Turner writes, "New Communalists would deploy small-scale technologies—ranging from axes and hoes to amplifiers, strobe lights, slide

projectors, and LSD—to bring people together and allow them to experience their common humanity" (4). In these terms, the drug "trip," the free form musical "jam session," the aimless road trip, and other psychedelic experiences were technological means of self-exploration and community building. Just as McLuhan's ideas animated the work of video artists, counterculturalists were inspired by his utopian thinking to see their music festivals, light shows, and experiments with drugs as political actions helping to bring about a new and better society. In this context, "the work of expanding consciousness and increasing interpersonal intimacy was not an end in itself; it was a means by which to build alternative, egalitarian communities" (F. Turner 32). Taking a liberal approach to these ideas and infusing them with a raft of other philosophical, religious, and new age concepts, members of the counterculture expanded the "global village" of communications technology to a cosmic and spiritual vision of human togetherness. At the base of this ideal is the network model of ephemeral, transient, mediated, and instrumental connectivity. Significantly, McLuhan's ideas began to be taken up by some hippies around the same time that New Left politics became more militant and disciplined. With some activism against the Vietnam War moving away from pacifism and the more casual approach of, for example, the Love-In, elements of the counterculture were in search of an "ideological alternative" to the New Left (F. Turner 38). The work of McLuhan and others provided a haven for those who saw their individual lifestyles and ways of thinking as revolutionary activities in and of themselves. According to Turner, these elements were shunning confrontational protests and outward-

directed organizing and "turning to consciousness as a source of social change" (38). The "global village" theory advanced by McLuhan provided some of the intellectual backing for individuals looking to forge alternative communities through mediums like drug trips, jam band festivals, and light shows.

Coming from a wide range of sensibilities and with somewhat divergent social and political goals, these scattered experiments with newly accessible camera technology began to form into a loosely organized video underground in Manhattan. In the practices and productions circulating in this social formation, the outlines of a particular discourse about the way technologically-mediated communication had shaped the social world is evident. As Patricia Mellencamp notes, "Video entered the U.S. cultural vocabulary in the mid-sixties as a technology *and* a discourse" (199). The Portapak was accompanied by a fervent desire that its "simultaneity, feedback, delay, satellite capacity, and electronic visions would foster—like drugs and random sex—new states of consciousness, community, and artistic, political structures" (Mellencamp 199). The members of NYC's video underground were linked by a shared investment in the possibility of an interactive, accessible, and technologically-mediated, yet still "more human," network. A 1969 exhibition at the Howard Wise Gallery located at 50 West 57th Street in Manhattan entitled "TV as a Creative Medium" would serve as a coalescing point for some of the key members of this emerging scene of artists and activists and will here help to illuminate the particular mode of "networking" being developed. While it took place in the conventional setting of an uptown gallery, the exhibition connected art

world agitators like Paik and Charlotte Moorman with more counterculture-oriented video producers like Gillette and Ryan. As Boyle notes, it was a "pivotal event for the video underground… it functioned as information central for practitioners and would-be videomakers who until then had operated in relative obscurity" (10). Representative works included Paik's "Participation TV" that allowed visitors to speak into a microphone that stretched and blurred the image on a connected TV set. Breaking the "one-way" communication format of broadcast TV, such pieces directly challenged the standard use of the technology and explored interactivity. Likewise, Moorman and Paik's collaboration "TV Bra for Living Sculpture," a performance that involved Moorman playing an electric cello wearing only two small TV screens, self-reflexively pointed out the authoritarian nature of conventional network television. Showing live broadcast images, the TV sets were modulated by the sound waves from the attached cello, warping their dimensions (Portis). *Wipe Cycle*, produced by Gillette and collaborator Ira Schneider, utilized a bank of TV screens that displayed live images from around the gallery on a staggered time delay along with pre-recorded material. According to Meigh-Andrews, the two artists were "concerned to present an experience that would break the conventional single-screen TV perspective" (62). These implicit attacks on the form and content of mainstream broadcasting showcased the intimate connection between video art and the institution of national network television. At the same time, their participatory nature spoke to the promise of an interactive and connected network of human feedback.

However, perhaps more notable was the utilization of video in Ryan's piece entitled "Everyman's Mobius Strip" (Figure 1-2). In this work, the artist constructed a private video booth where visitors were "encouraged to project his or her true self through an empty TV frame" (Portis).

Figure 1-2 Paul Ryan setting up "Everyman's Mobius Strip" at Howard Wise Gallery in 1977 (Kane 486)

The videos were played back on a time delay and then immediately erased, preserving the privacy of the self-representation. As Ryan put it in the exhibition program, "When you see yourself watching yourself on tape, you are seeing your real self, your 'inside'" (Wise 4). This use of newly accessible technology for "authentic" self-representation and self-exploration charted the outlines of another emerging tendency in video art and alternative television. Like Gillette's interviews with LSD burn-outs, viewers were encouraged to take an electronic trip through video in order to find their true selves. The virtual and

explicitly ephemeral nature of such "video-identities" point to a novel mode of social formation. Here, not only is the face-to-face, material character of interaction eliminated and its temporal duration compressed, but there is nobody at the other end of the communicative act. In a way, by creating a video avatar, viewers could use the technology to mediate a social encounter with themselves. While curator Ben Portis notes that the work also "foreshadowed the democratic ethos and production methods practiced" by the media collectives that would coalesce from the connections made at this galvanizing event, pieces like "Everyman's Mobius Strip" radically rethought the way technology could play a role in social interactions.

The introduction to the exhibition, written by Howard Wise and published in the catalogue, pointed to the central role of McLuhan's ideas within the emerging video scene in New York City. Wise's foreword to the program begins, "Ever since Marshall McLuhan has become a household name, people have become aware of the tremendous force, both actual and potential, that TV is having and will have on their lives" (1). While local phenomena like early Happenings, Paik's pioneering videos, and, to an extent, Andy Warhol's Pop Art works shaped the productions and thinking of the NYC video underground, these early video practitioners were overwhelming influenced by this icon of communications theory in postwar America. In fact, at the time of the exhibition, Ryan was serving as a research assistant for McLuhan at Fordham University, a fact proudly proclaimed by the gallery's brochure (Wise 4). Gillette had facilitated a seminar on McLuhan's ideas at the Free University in 1967 (Meigh-Andrews 61). And Paik, whose

work had long been addressing the ideas of this Canadian media theorist, had recently produced “McLuhan Caged,” a video of McLuhan’s static face filling the screen and being stretched and manipulated by magnets and other image processers. Calling to mind his role as a cult-like deity in David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983), Paik’s “video sculpture” where McLuhan is both a singular, massive entity and being distorted by forces pulling him in multiple directions illustrates something about his presence in video art or any underground or alternative media-based project at this time. While his precise ideas and politics were not always easy to distinguish in the pronouncements and creations of video and alternative television producers, his presence was impossible to ignore. Gillette described McLuhan’s influence as reflecting a process of “indirect osmosis,” seeping in everywhere in hard-to-discern ways (quoted in Meigh-Andrews 107). In a general sense, “no theorist was more influential in shaping the video underground’s mission than Marshall McLuhan” (Boyle 12). For New York, in particular, where he lived and worked at Fordham University in the Bronx during this formative period, McLuhan acted as patron saint, messianic messenger, and soothsayer all at once for the video underground and their experiments in networking.

Moreover, McLuhan explicitly offered artists a special role in the exploration and integration of new technology in society. Reworking Ezra Pound’s description of artists as “the antennae of the race,” he called artists the “radars of the race,” noting that “the artist is indispensible in the shaping and analysis and understanding of the life of forms, and structures created by electric technology” (McLuhan 65). According to Boyle, this

allowed video practitioners to see "themselves thus glorified in McLuhan's vision as heroes of a new electric age" (13). Perhaps most significantly, the wholesale nature of his discussion of the transformation of consciousness and society wrought by emerging technologies gave serious political weight to the experimentations of video artists and media activists. Not only were their productions assaults on the institutionalized galleries of Uptown and on TV's corporate broadcasters, but they were part of an advance guard revolutionizing the very way we relate to one another and ourselves. In the words of Boyle, "McLuhan's optimism about television and its dynamic impact not just on communications but on contemporary consciousness was seized by the first generation raised on television, who found in his theories a euphoric explanation of themselves and their changing times" (13). Especially in a cultural climate marked by pessimism about the efficacy of traditional political action, such an alternative held powerful appeal.

On the streets of New York City, people started coming together to test McLuhan's theories about the revolutionary potential of communications technology. Organizations with names like People's Video Theater, Global Village video school and collective, and Videofreex dotted the urban landscape. In October 1969, a cohort of video enthusiasts, including Gillette, Schneider, Ryan, and a journalist named Michael Shamberg who had covered the "TV as a Creative Medium" exhibition, formed the Raindance Corporation, "an umbrella organization to promote and disseminate ideas about video as a radical alternative to centralized television broadcasting through the activities of production, publication, and distribution of alternative video work" (Meigh-

Andrews 62). Shamberg noted in an interview that it was conceived as a think-tank, "the countercultural equivalent of the Rand Corporation" (qtd. in Boyle 9). While the organization helped distribute funding, loaned out equipment, and published the scholarly-theoretical journal *Radical Software*, amongst other politically and technically-oriented activities, there was also a distinct countercultural vibe to their approach to video and television production. As one former member put it in an interview, "we sit stoned and dig each other's worldview. We rap and eat and fuck and watch tape" (qtd. in Boyle 11). This co-mingling of political organizing, artistic creativity, drug-infused hanging out, and experimentation with electronic technology coursed through the communities of Downtown New York as the 1970s began. It was an underground social formation using technological means to relate to one another, but there was an implicit challenge to the instrumentality and commodifying tendencies of traditional society. In addition, this loosely affiliated grouping was explicitly anti-mainstream, looking to create an alterative to the centralized, authoritarian, one-way, profit-oriented networks exemplified by broadcast television.

At this very moment, a new form of television was poised to enter the fray. New York City was in the middle of years-long negotiations to become the first major metropolitan area in the United States to be wired for cable television. Cable, which was originally known as Community Antennae Television (CATV), was developed in the late 1940s to bring network broadcasts to communities with reception problems (Mullen 2007). While such problems usually affected only geographically remote rural areas, the

tall skyscrapers of Manhattan interfered with the broadcast signal, especially the new color signal, leaving many urban residents without a clear picture. As Leah Churner describes in her history of NYC cable, “people living two blocks from the Rainbow Room couldn't make out the hues in NBC's peacock logo” (“Out of...”). Since this new form of television delivery would require that coaxial wire be buried under the streets and run through other public areas, cable companies had to secure agreements with the city. Sensing the market potential of serving the largest metropolitan area in the country, the bidding between at least four cable providers for two exclusive cable franchises, splitting the island in half, was competitive. Due to this unbalanced negotiating environment, the city held a considerable advantage and looked to ask for a variety of concessions. In order to explore the city's options in these contracts, the mayor appointed an Advisory Task Force on CATV and Telecommunications in 1967, choosing Fred W. Friendly, a former CBS news executive, as the head. The choice of a corporate broadcasting executive seems suspect given the intense competition between the established broadcasters and the upstart medium of cable. In fact, cable operators had faced a legal and public relations assault from the networks and motion picture distributors in New York City beginning as early as 1964 (Churner “Out of”). Several networks and film distributors had preemptively sued cable providers for distributing copyrighted programming and, using a front organization named the Citizens' Committee for Free TV, these powerful corporations “launched an anti-cable advertising campaign” across the city (Churner,

“Out of...”). One commercial featured a masked burglar stealing a TV set from an old women, ending with the exhortation, “Save Free TV” (Churner, “Out of...”).

However, as it turned out, Friendly was not a corporate stooge out to stifle the upstart medium on behalf of the networks. In fact, he had recently resigned in protest against the lack of serious journalism and general “low level of programming” at CBS News and become a professor of communications at Columbia (Light 198). In his very public resignation letter, Friendly objected to the airing of reruns of *I Love Lucy* instead of live Senate hearings about the Vietnam War (Gould 1). He asserted that, by serving commercial interests above all else, mainstream television had “reneged on its commitment to the public interest” (qtd. in Light 198). In this politically-oriented repudiation of the national broadcasters, Friendly, a one-time president of CBS, joined in the chorus of critics that included the video underground and the broader counterculture roaming New York's Lower East Side. Upon closer examination, this coalition is not as unlikely as it first seems. A pervasive discontent with television is often traced to FCC chairman Newton Minow's 1961 address to the National Association of Broadcaster in which he referred to TV as a “vast wasteland.” And, by the late 1960s, the civil rights movement and New Left political forces had successfully challenged network broadcasters' claims of “fair, balanced reporting.” As a result, there was a growing skepticism in American public consciousness about mass media and its role in obscuring minority opinions (Linder 71; Aufderheide 105-106). These same movements also called into question the idea that a private corporation would serve the broader public good

rather than the limited interests of its shareholders. Moreover, public criticism from the Republican Party also painted television news and the media in general as politically motivated and corrupt. Media historian William Boddy asserts that “by the late 1960s network hegemony began to be challenged not only by the manifestoes of the video guerillas, but by political attacks from the Nixon administration over purported liberal bias in network news” (93). General incredulity about the images and information broadcast on television existed on both sides of the polarized political landscape of the era. Coincidentally, this controversy can be traced, in part, to the way national network television was eroding traditional forms of local community, acting as a homogenizing majoritarian force that overpowered the local, particular, and time-honored. This pervasive discontent reveals a widespread understanding of the social or political dimension of television technology, its role in transforming modes of collectivity.

While this national mood set the stage for the introduction of cable in New York City, it would be impossible to discount the influence of the local video underground and its McLuhanite dreams of an interactive communications utopia on the negotiations and the subsequent implementation of cable service. Indeed, the emerging technology of cablecasting was explicitly invested with radical potential by the writers, thinkers, and producers of the video art and alternative television movements, both locally and nationally. While cable's general opposition to mainstream broadcasting piqued the interest of these producers and activists, the service had three specific qualities that attracted the video underground. For one, cable had the capacity to carry far more

channels than traditional broadcasting. At the time, most cable services could carry 40 channels compared to broadcast's meager 12. In the eyes of Raindance and other alternative media collectives, the envisioned stations offered endless possibilities for the presentation of art videos, public forums, alternative viewpoints, and minority opinions. As Thea Sklover wrote in the first issue of *Radical Software* in 1970, "the diversity so sadly lacking in over-the-air television could be theoretically accomplished through the multiplicity of channels" (2). Second, unlike the homogenizing and bland national networks, cable systems were circumscribed to a limited geographic area. The original name CATV (Community Antennae TV) speaks to its responsiveness and connection to a specific local community. In the splintering and conflict-ridden public sphere of the time, many people were looking for local production and control of media. Speaking to the communalist tendencies of the counterculture, video artists seized on this aspect of cable, investing it with revolutionary potential. Ryan, also writing in *Radical Software*, noted that "the role of the cable system is to increase the community's awareness of their existing cultural system, thereby giving them more control over its development: to cultivate the local culture" (12). This is a key distinction in the building of this particular concept of the network. While many contemporary technological networks, like global trade or telephones, eradicated the spatial dimension of human interaction, cable offered the possibility of a network that was both virtual *and* local. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, cable technology offered the possibility of interactive and participatory television, empowering viewers to be more than passive receptors of one-way

communication. This potential for an active viewer went beyond the expanded choice of more channels. Cable had the technological capacity for "two-way" or even "decentralized" systems of information sharing (Ryan 12). As Sklover wrote, "newspapers that roll off your television set, home retailing services, computer data available through push buttons in your living room, interconnection of municipal governments throughout the country, and opportunity to participate in national and local referendums via the television screen... cable television could well be the practical realization through which these concepts could become a reality" (2). The radical political potential of interlinked and interactive "electronic neighborhoods" made possible by cable seemed to bring McLuhan's visions alive (Vassi 18).

Notably, most members of the video underground seemed to understand that this was only one possible future for cable television, one that had to be fought for against the corporate interests of the cable companies and other hegemonic forces. Ryan warned that "new media like Cable TV mean opportunity, not inevitability" (12). In the pages of *Radical Software* and elsewhere, alternative media advocates exhorted individuals to take hold of this unique opportunity to shape emerging technology. In an impassioned plea, Sklover writes that "the need for the constructive development of this new form of communications is imperative" if we are to challenge the "growing extremism" in our society (2). "We can't afford to waste this new resource, we must find a way to utilize this technology to speak to some if not all of the ills of our grasping society" (Sklover 2). Organizations and individuals throughout New York responded to these calls for

engagement with the process of wiring the city. Some production-oriented cooperatives began to take part in local politics, like the Alternative Media Center at New York University that turned into “an important lobby for public access to cable TV” during this time (Boyle 34). An article in the *New York Times* describes

> a serious, if loosely connected counterestablishment media movement; it includes community activists and video enthusiasts who aim not only to challenge censorship, but to change the very way we think about television... They hope to transform television from a one-way to a two-way medium, to use it as a social and political catalyst. (Harrington 39).

In short, members of the video underground helped form a coalition calling for a cable service in New York that would be locally-oriented, publically-accountable, participatory, and able to offer more diverse programming than network television. In this political environment, the Mayor's task force issued its report in 1968 that recommended that cable companies set aside two channels for “lease by outside users who wish to present original programming” (qtd. in Harrington 35). These channels were to be non-commercial, available to anyone who wanted to produce a program, and aimed at enhancing “the public good.” In this brief suggestion from Friendly's task force report, public access cable was born.

The cable companies, trying to counter the attacks from the networks and differentiate themselves from their competitors, actually became advocates for access channels. As media historian Laura Linder notes, some providers “seized upon public

access television as a service that had public relations appeal and could help them portray their industry as more responsive to local concerns than networks" (8). In fact, they often couched this appeal in language that was directly responsive to the political and cultural context of the time period. Linder writes that the cable industry "promoted public access television to show it was a 'socially responsible' medium" (8). This corporate adoption of the countercultural discourse surrounding cable went even further. Boddy notes that, "echoing the language of the... video artists, cable entrepreneurs contrasted the traditional audience-subject of network television with one prophesized for interactive cable, where not only would viewers actively seek out and select from a myriad of programme choices, but would also accomplish information retrieval, shopping, and voting from their homes" (94). While the "rhetorical similarities between the technological visions of some video guerrillas and the entrepreneurs of the booming cable industry of the 1970s seem disquieting in retrospect," the synergy helped produce tangible results for the movement (Boddy 95). In August of 1970, New York City awarded two franchises, one to Teleprompter Cable and one to Sterling Cable, with agreements that required the companies to "reserve special channels for leasing to members of the public on a first-come, first-served basis and according to time allocations that would assure access to as many people as possible" (Harrington 35). The contracts also included a somewhat vague section about the cable providers offering the necessary equipment and services to produce programming for these channels. As a result, New York became the first U.S. city to establish public access channels. According to Churner, members of the

alternative TV movement, video artists, community organizers, and even *The New York Times* "hailed cable access as a landmark civic experiment with nationwide ramifications, and indeed, here was an opportunity to transform a mass medium of one-way communication into an electronic democracy" ("Out of..."). Although it took till July 1st, 1971 for the stations to get up and running, the burgeoning underground of video artists and activists now had a medium to broadcast their creations to a public, a forum to test their ideas about the revolutionary possibilities of electronic community formation.

In a recent oral history interview, Emily Armstrong, the first access coordinator for Sterling's Manhattan Cable TV, remembers the first few years of access in the city as "a real Wild West kind of thing" (qtd. in Churner, "Un-TV"). Indeed, Stephanie Harrington's ornate and chaotic description of public access in a 1973 *New York Times* article seems to confirm this memory and point to the participation of many members of the video underground described above. She writes that in the first two years of the service,

> community and special interest organizations, nonprofit video production groups, experimental video artists and film makers, an adult branch of the Boy Scouts and even a man who just wanted to share his enthusiasm for Shakespeare with the viewing public have provided about 1,500 hours of programming that has included school board meetings, block association events, traffic-light protests, discussions of tactics by Gay Liberation activists, abstract tapes, experimental films, ecology projects, children's stories, antiwar protests, information about real

estate, housing and business administration, feminist news, and even flying lessons." (Harrington 35)

At the time, both cable companies only accepted pre-recorded tapes for any of their access channels. Equipment was available at their headquarters or through various nonprofit organizations and cooperatives operating mostly on grant money. Harrington's article provided addresses and contact information for multiple places to borrow a free Portapak or have experts videotape your show (38). However, no one was providing a studio for live transmission. One of the drawbacks of pre-recorded programming was that cable company employees could pre-screen and potentially censor the material. Indeed, there had been a well-publicized incident where Sterling Cable had censored a sexually explicit soap opera called *The Anton Perich Show* (Carmack 2004; Churner, "Out of…"; Harrington 1973). In this notorious incident, television screens throughout the city went black just as a character "was about to relieve the pain of a visiting TV repairman by administering a unique home remedy for hemorrhoids—the insertion of a cylindrical light bulb in the afflicted area" (Harrington 38). As Perich recalls in a recent interview, "the TV went blank several times, muzak replaced the original soundtrack" and "we realized that we had witnessed the first time in American television history that a show was censored on the air. We celebrated" (qtd. in Churner "Un-TV"). Dubious historical claims aside, it was clear that NYC cable companies were reticent to offer live cablecasting to content providers like Perich and others.

Despite the concerns of the providers, a media activist and entrepreneur named Jim Chadlek set out to provide the public with “true access” to the airwaves. In late 1973, he opened a makeshift live television studio across the alley from Manhattan Cable's headquarters in a building he called the Experimental Television Center. Since cable was “the Wild West,” Chadlek simply ran a cord across the fire escapes to the MCTV studios. William Hohauser, a studio manager at E.T.C. recalls, “there wasn't any contract or permit. They just took the cables and plugged them in” (qtd. in Churner “Un-TV”). The studio did not provide free services. It cost a flat rate of $35 for an hour. This included use of the studio, cameras, microphones, phones, and character generator as well as a direct feed to the transmission center next door. With live cablecasting now a reality, some of the interactive possibilities prophesied by both video activists and the cable company started to materialize. According to Hohauser, “Chadlek came up with the live call-in format idea,” hosting a show where he played chess against the public who called in their moves on the telephone (qtd. in Churner “Un-TV”). Other shows used the interlinked telephone and cable wires to produce rudimentary game shows or engage in public dialogue. Playing simple games with the viewing public watching on the television and participating through the phone, E.T.C began to construct the types of “electronic neighborhoods” discussed in the pages of *Radical Software*.

“THE PARTY is the highest expression of social activity”

It was in these pioneering studios saturated with the utopian promise of McLuhanite connectivity, interactivity, and the possibility of a virtual yet localized network that *TVP* got its start. Its particular instantiation of “network sociality,” exemplified by the notion of an anti-network “Party Network,” is both a product of and a reaction to these local phenomena. In 1978, O’Brien was a freelance writer best known for his contributions to Andy Warhol’s *Interview* magazine and *High Times*. As these publications suggest, he was firmly implanted both in the drug-oriented counterculture and the NYC-centric modern art scene. Through his connections at *High Times*, O'Brien wound up as a guest on an access program produced at E.T.C. studios called *If I Can’t Dance, You Can Keep Your Revolution*. The show was hosted by Coca Crystal, a sometimes member of Abbie Hoffman's Yippies, and part-time employee at the studio. She described the show as “an hour of talk, telephone, and technical failure” that presented “anti-authoritarian politics, music, [and] humor,” as well as more than a little live toking (qtd. in Churner “Un-TV”). After his appearance on Crystal's freewheeling show, O'Brien received so many compliments he decided to produce his own program (“*TVP* Story”). O'Brien recalls being shocked by the looseness of public access. “They had to let amateurs have television shows. Amazingly, with no money, you could have a show with a potentially huge audience of Manhattan cable subscribers” (“*TVP* Story”). As described above, when *TVP* produced its inaugural episode, it was awash in the discourses about television’s role as a social technology that had animated the

establishment of E.T.C. Studios and Manhattan cable access in general. For instance, in just that first program there are five specific references to McLuhan and the "global village." While in some ways *TVP* was just another episode in the long line of NYC experiments in televisual community formation, their particular brand of bringing people together through cable used a unique technical format, absurdist performances tactics, and a healthy dose of humor to test the limits of these practices and expose cracks in the fundamental premises of the utopian discourse. The remaining portion of this chapter continues to analyze that premier episode, along with the "*TV Party* Manifesto" written by O'Brien, in order to explore the show's brand of "networking" and its connections to the discourses and practices developed by the interconnected movements of video art, guerrilla television, cable access, and the counterculture that spawned NYC's access stations.

Stepping into this televisual forum charged with McLuhanite utopian rhetoric and encased in an aura of countercultural togetherness, *TVP* pursued an "anti-network" alternative that was decentralized, local, unconventional, and challenging. In these ways, the show seemed to fall in line with the celebratory discourse about cable access and its revolutionary possibility. *TVP's* claim to be "anti-network TV" fit seamlessly with cable's supposed independence from mainstream television and promotion of diversity. In the "*TV Party* Manifesto," O'Brien wrote that the development of cable was opening up new possibilities in the previously impenetrable structure of network broadcasting, allowing for "local alternatives" ("Manifesto" 23). Like the members of Raindance and other video

cooperatives, O'Brien saw the project of cable television to be the cultivation of local culture and self-representation. Furthermore, many of the same ideas behind publications like *Radical Software* and exhibitions like “TV as a Creative Medium” also structured the new program. During the first episode, the host and one of the guests, the eccentric artist Robert Delford Brown, discuss McLuhan's depiction of artists as “radars of the race,” guiding humanity's incorporation of emerging technology and signaling future developments. In explaining the show in recent years, O'Brien wrote that the show was what happens when you “smoke reefers and read Marshall McLuhan... I think we were trying to inject a sort of tribal element into things” (“*TVP* Story”). An experiment in reconstructing village life through telecommunications technology, *TVP* was very much in dialogue with the same ideas popularized by the video underground, communalist counterculture, and independent media organizations that came before them.

This is exemplified most vividly in the discussion of “funk art” and the “funk network” throughout the premiere episode. In the interview with Delford Brown, O’Brien summarizes his comments about “funk art” by asserting, “Funk is the life force of the universe.” This draws laughter throughout the studio audience and someone off-screen whispers into the microphone, “And the word is funk.” O’Brien returns to this subject later in the episode when discussing the question, “Is President Carter trying to suppress the new wave?” In this brief segment, the host posits that the government is monitoring *TVP*’s broadcasts and preventing them from reaching the whole of Manhattan. O’Brien explains further, “This afternoon I tried to get this show hooked up to Teleprompter TV

which covers the 65,000 cable TV recipients north of 110th St. They were not in. …What this means is that the United States government, which controls cable TV, didn't want us to reach Harlem tonight." Railing against this imposition of authority blocking their broadcast, O'Brien asks, "Was it because of this show being a part of the funk network?" Although more than a little sarcastic in its delivery, this explicit claim to be part of an oppositional social formation under attack by the government marks the show's "Party Network" or "funk network" as a powerful political force. It is also clear that the references to Harlem and funk are connecting the show's networking project to the underrepresented African American communities denied access to the program by Teleprompter cable. This portrayal of a televisual network transcending social boundaries and governmental restrictions in order to bring people together echoes the discourses of the alternative TV movement and video artists that established access programming in the city.

However, even in the premier episode, it is clear that *TVP* was both a complex amalgam and complicated departure from its discursive and social roots. For example, a portion of the first episode pushes back against the eradication of space and traditional forms of local community inherent in technological networks. Many McLuhanite discourses regarded the global character of communications technology as a positive aspect of a networked world, eroding divisive borders and inequalities. In the first ten minutes of the show, O'Brien challenges this notion. While his introductory remarks mention the profound influence of McLuhan, they also bring up Zbigniew Brzezinski in

the same sentence. Brzezinski was a political scientist who was then serving as Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor. He had published a book in 1970 called *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technotronic Era* that critically engaged McLuhan, purportedly extending his arguments to the realm of realpolitik. Seemingly agreeing with the book, O'Brien counters McLuhan's "global village" by referring to the society constructed by contemporary communications technology as a "global ghetto, one big ghetto." In the book, Brzezinski uses the term "global city" and his description of "a nervous, agitated, tense, and fragmented web of interpersonal relations" guides O'Brien's critique (19). Refusing to see the show's project in a simplistic, utopian light, this denouncement of McLuhan works against some of the rhetoric established by the more idealistic elements of the NYC video underground and alternative media movement. In a sense, the juxtaposition of Brzezinski and McLuhan illuminates the tension inherent in "network sociality." In bringing people into virtual contact without regard to spatial disconnection, technological networks can corrode local relations. The "closeness" created by televisual encounters is simply not the same as traditional forms of community. Moreover, it often acts to reproduce and even intensify the inequalities and divisions that mark the social field.

To an extent, some guerrilla television advocates and video artists had long addressed this very concern. Discussing international communications technology in *Radical Software* in 1973, Juan Downey wrote, "The price of sustenance for these networks of exchange has also culminated in world-wide political madness" (2). As

already mentioned, there was a keen awareness of the significant distance between contemporary communications systems ("National Networks") and McLuhan's "global village." As a response, the networking project of many video activists was expressly local. Indeed, its local nature is part of what made cable access programming so attractive. O'Brien's criticism dovetails with these demands for a "local alternative" to national or international networks. However, within many of these discourses, there remained the promise of an international or even "intergalactic" network that could connect these various local projects of communicative social formation. Downey points to the ultimate goal of a "dematerialized city," an "electronic communication network on the "global, interconnective level" (3). Shamberg's widely-distributed manual *Guerrilla Television* argues that local networks like cable access are merely forums for training our minds in how to relate through technology, a step in our "techno-evolution" (7). The end goal is a delocalized "media environment," embedded in technological mediums not geographic spaces (Shamberg 7). Furthermore, according to Shamberg, this future network might even exhibit some of the aspects of mainstream broadcasting, like centralization. In his words, "an ideal network would be a biomorphic balance between centralization and decentralization" (Shamberg 67). In the use of pseudo-scientific rhetoric describing an "organic" network, Shamberg reveals the assumed universality underlying his project of social transformation through technology as well as its global intentions.

TVP, however, critically engaged this sometimes hidden tendency within these discourses on networking. For one, O'Brien asserted in the manifesto that culture is "always local" and a unified national society is "as impossible as it is undesirable" (23). This critique is implicit in the criticism of McLuhan offered during the first show. The "global ghetto" is far from the egalitarian "organism" or "electronic neighborhood" promised by the video vanguard. In this vein, O'Brien repeatedly jokes about the broadcasting reach of the show, ridiculing transnational media projects and their underlying political assumptions. Attempting a straight face, he announces that the show is "only being broadcast in Manhattan, … except its being donated to Radio Free Europe. Its possible that this show will be seen in New York City and behind the Iron Curtain." Given the low-budget look of the program and its appearance on a TV station reaching only half of the homes wired for cable in Manhattan, these comments are clearly marked as absurd. In the manifesto, O'Brien follows his condemnation of "national culture" by asserting, "the only cure is MASS LOCALIZATION" (23). While there is no concrete exploration of what this means, it is a provocative vision of another type of networking, a local or even subcultural alternative. If the show's format and content provide any indication, a constant critical orientation toward the project of communicative connectivity would be part of this project.

A later portion of the show illustrates this when O'Brien takes a series of phone calls from disgruntled and incomprehensible callers. Asking them if they would like to discuss Brzezinski's ideas, he repeatedly hangs up after only a few seconds. While most

callers are hurling curse words or looking for “hot gossip,” O'Brien even cuts off an older man talking thoughtfully about Brzezinski. Still taking calls, he begins to simply read from *Between Two Ages*, projecting his voice over the sound of various callers getting a few seconds of airtime before switching to someone new (Figure 1-3).

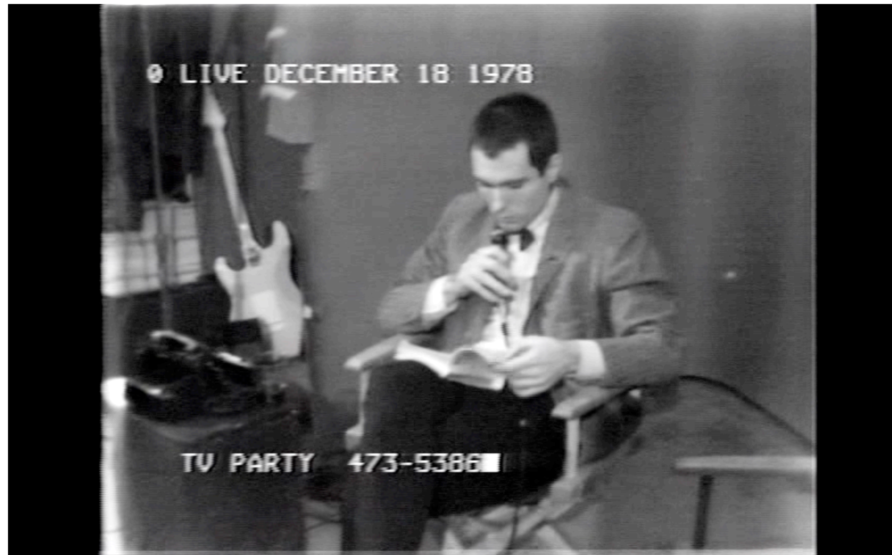


Figure 1-3 A still from *TV Party* "Premier Episode"

O'Brien works his way through a section entitled “Global Absorption.”

> But while our immediate reality is being fragmented, global reality increasingly absorbs the individual, involves him, and even occasionally overwhelms him. Communications are the obvious, already much discussed, immediate cause. The changes wrought by communications and computers make for an extraordinarily interwoven society whose members are in continuous and close audio-visual contact—constantly interacting, instantly sharing the most intense social experience, and prompted to increased personal involvement in even the most

> distant problems. The new generation no longer defines the world exclusively in on the basis of reading, either of ideologically structured analyses or of extensive descriptions; it also experiences and senses it vicariously through audio-visual communications. (Brzezinski 18)

Somewhere near the middle of this lengthy reading, the phone calls stop and the camera migrates away from the host seated with his book. Panning around the room, it shows the guests and other people in the studio alternately looking bored, chatting with each other, and listening intently. After finishing the last sentence, O'Brien takes one more call. A man on the line says “hello, how are you?” O'Brien rolls his eyes and responds, “fine.” After a few seconds of dead air, the host casts a knowing glance away from the camera to someone off-screen and hangs up with a smile.

Here, O’Brien is utilizing cable access’s premier technological advantage, its interactivity. In line with the euphoric rhetoric in the pages of *Radical Software* or McLuhan’s proclamations about the power of this new medium, *TVP* was expressly live and interactive. It gave viewers the opportunity to participate over the phone, come down to the studio, or offer ideas or criticism at after-parties hosted by the Mudd Club and advertised on air. “At TV PARTY even the home viewers can entertain the PARTY over the telephone” (O’Brien, “Manifesto” 23). However, as this discordant and contentious call-in session reveals, this is not a perfect or equal form of participation. A later segment in the same episode has co-creator and co-host Chis Stein, founder and guitarist of Blondie, calling the show form California, where he certainly cannot watch the show.

Instead, he is watching *Little House on the Prairie*, holding the phone to the television at times. They announce the significance of the exchange by talking about using technology to be on "both coasts at the same time." However, Stein interrupts O'Brien's enthusiasm by saying, "I'm getting off because I'm bored," and hangs up. Again, the technological triumph of televisual interactivity is engaged but criticized or dismissed. By hanging-up on callers, mocking them on the air, and variously impeding these acts of communication, O'Brien and those working the phone equipment are calling attention to the mediating technology itself. Unlike many of the utopian descriptions of such communication networks that treat the technology as an innocent or neutral medium for human contact, *TVP* takes McLuhan's famous phrase, "the medium is the message," to heart. In direct contrast with some elements of the guerrilla television movement, the show challenges the emancipatory or egalitarian nature of social "feedback" or interactivity in cable access. Like some video artists that utilized Portapaks and television screens to call attention to the mediating role of technology in acts of expression, *TVP* engages this interactive forum in ways that explicitly confront its limitations and unacknowledged power hierarchies. While the show's "Party Network" is loose, entertaining, and aimed at bringing people together through technology, it is self-reflexive about the very possibility of such a project. This implicit critique of Brzezinski's comments about "the most intense social experience" constructed through communications colors all of *TVP*'s radical rhetoric about creating a "Party Network." Using humor, irony, overstatement, and paradox, the show calls into question its own political relevance or role in constructing an

"alternative" social formation. Rejecting McLuhan's "global village," Brzezinski's "global city," and possibly even their own constructed "Party Network," *TVP* inaugurates a different kind of televisual experiment in networking.

Following their forbearers in the counterculture, *TVP* coupled this critique of technology by expanding the very definition of "medium" as well. Like hippie experiments with LSD trips and laser light shows, O'Brien and the other show participants sought to bring people together through "consciousness expanding" mediums or "technologies" like drugs, musical jam sessions, and psychedelic art. For instance, the premier episode includes a nearly 7 minutes long pre-recorded video of Stein, Blondie vocalist Debby Harry, experimental musician Robert Fripp, and filmmaker Amos Poe engaged in a very disorganized "jam session" of a sort. Using some of the methods of image processing and distortion developed by video artists, the frame is variously stretched and overexposed. The image contrast is elevated and shown in negative at times, turning the individual figures into indistinct blobs (Figure 1-4). Likewise, the sound is heavily distorted, with incomprehensible voices and an unplugged electric guitar competing for prominence on the soundtrack. In a nod to their psychedelic roots, the image contrast and focus appear to change with the relative volume and rhythm of the tinny music. Since the music has no lyrics and the sound is distorted to an excessive point, it is clearly focused on creating a particular and shared "experience" or "feeling" through the airwaves. Through this process of literally sharing "feedback," the audience and the performers are all participating in the "jam session." Like in "Everyman's

Mobius Strip," the participants are shown watching themselves on a live video and audio feed. At one point, someone off-screen comments, "This is really a different way to experience one's self."

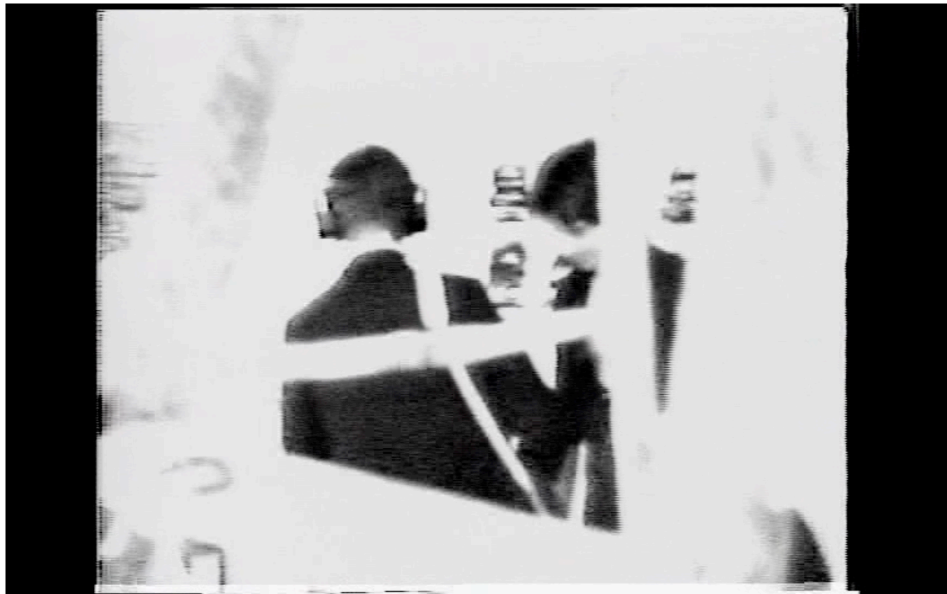


Figure 1-4 A still from *TV Party* "Premier Episode"

This experiment in broadcasting, rooted in the psychedelic jam and video art techniques, is part of the "Party Network," an interactive but loose and freeform type of social engagement. However, the images are prerecorded and expressly marked as "not live" by the show. Although O'Brien announces that the segment is "live via satellite from Alphaville," Stein calls from California later in the show. The transcendent act of televisual communion in the interactive jam is exposed as, at least partially, artificial. The implied "human" dimension of this collective production of a shared "feeling" is not allowed to exist without acknowledging its technical basis. This is mirrored by the

show's heavy use of marijuana as a "medium" of connection between guests, the audience, callers, and the show creators. In one example, O'Brien talks to the Patti Smith Group's pianist, Richard Sohl, about Rastafarianism as they take calls and smoke a joint on air. While they reference the "communal" aspect of drug use, they also talk about how much it costs ($150 an ounce). Alluding to the economic aspect of marijuana in the same breath as a discussion of its ability to affect a type of spiritual communion, O'Brien and Sohl cast its role as a "medium" in a more critical light. Like the treatment of the phones, cameras, and coaxial cable, *TVP* offers an ambivalent analysis of this countercultural form of mediated sociality.

In constructing its "Party Network," *TVP* embraced the ambivalence of the "network." Looking to link viewers at home with the show's participants in a live, interactive mode of sociality, they explored the use of technology in creating a social experience. However, there was a constant critical awareness of the fact that this act of communication was mediated through phones, cable, videotape, or even drugs. Furthermore, the show explored the "virtual" connections made possible by these mediums, expanding their party beyond the walls of the studio and the physical encounters there. Again, though, this was done self-reflexively. The insistence on the local character of culture and the real effects of material distance, especially evident in the cross-country phone call with Stein, worked against the expansion of the network or its homogenizing tendencies. In conclusion, it is clear that the local manifestations of the hippie counterculture, video art underground, media access institutions, and guerrilla

television movement laid the institutional, discursive, aesthetic, and political groundwork for *TVP* and its version of "network sociality." However, it is also clear that the show produced a networking practice that thoroughly challenged some the fundamental tenets of these previous experiments in creating a communicational utopia through technology.

In critiquing, adapting, and mutating these discourses and practices of televisual networking, *TVP* attempted to create a mode of social interaction that differed from the "electronic neighborhoods" envisioned by the alternative TV movement or the "intergalactic harmony" promised by the counterculture. Instead, in these self-critical and virtual yet local types of connectivity *TVP* produced what I would argue was something distinctly subcultural. In its vague oppositional nature, its anti-mainstream bent with populist aspirations, and its challenging but fun atmosphere, the show carved out a form of social space between the elitist sphere of high art and the mainstream of network TV. In the next chapter, I look more closely at this project of subcultural television and examine its consonance with the social work of an avant-garde art movement. By analyzing the particular production practices and formal aspects of individual episodes, I trace the creation of *TVP*'s self-reflexive and ambivalent "Party Network" in more detail.

Chapter 2 –"One Frame of Buttered Popcorn": The (Un)Popular Avant-Garde Tactics of *TV Party*

This is not a test. This is an actual show.
- Glenn O'Brien, *TV Party*

> It wants the media *as such* and *to no purpose*. This wish has been shared for decades and given symbolic expression by an artistic avant-garde whose program logically admits only the alternative of negative signals and amorphous noise.
> - Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents of a Theory of the Media"

While *TV Party* used the call-in format, direct address of the viewer, and other tactics to involve the audience watching from home, their methods for fostering interactivity did not end there. As an integral part of their self-reflexive networking practices, O'Brien and various guests on *TVP* regularly exhorted viewers to interact with the technological apparatus of the television itself. "Turn up your television all the way." "Make the TV louder." "Put the phone up to the television speaker." "Try flipping between channels as fast as you can." "TURN THE TV DOWN." "Touch your TV set at home now." "Turn the brightness control up as much as you can and still see the image." These commands were either spoken or appeared as text on the screen via the character generator. Not content with phone conversations or even inviting the general public down to the studio, the show asked spectators to physically engage the volume, brightness, and contrast controls of their TV sets. Occasionally, Chris Stein or others would tell callers and viewers to tune into something else, often mainstream programs such as *Kojak* or

Charlie's Angels. Along with random camera switching and refocusing, playful use of the character generator, and echo effects sometimes added to the microphone feeds, *TVP* recommended that viewers at home match the probing experimentation with technology happening in the studio. These suggested types of interactivity with the TV set paralleled the show's various jam sessions and feedback loops, working toward their goal of a participatory social interaction, maximizing audience engagement as well as awareness of the mediating apparatus.

"The Crusades Show," originally broadcast live on February 17, 1981, includes a segment that pushed *TVP*'s experiment in televisual interactivity to its extremes, combining technological interaction with something more "out there." While the implicit or virtual sharing of sensations or feelings through the live media of television was a common theme on the show, this episode extended these ideas to a more explicit and radical level, aiming to form a physical, sexual, and psychological connection between the show participants, the studio audience, and any viewers watching at home. Exploring the boundaries and possibilities of a virtual network, this segment humorously engages *TVP*'s own project of social connectivity. In what O'Brien refers to as a "mass television orgone link-up," the show attempts to use the televisual apparatus to connect and stimulate "orgone," a type of sexual life force or drive theorized by the Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. Reich was perhaps the most prominent proponent of the sexual revolution, a figure popularly associated in the 1960s with the "tantalizing suggestion that sexual emancipation would lead to positive social change" (C. Turner 6).

Central to his theory of sexual liberation was the "discovery" of orgone, a neo-Freudian, non-individualized sexual energy coursing throughout the atmosphere. Since dominant society and its repressive structures disturbed the free flow of orgone, contributing to a host of psychological and physical ailments, Reich advocated practices that could increase one's orgone flows and lead to more potent and healthful orgasms. In addition, he developed a piece of technology called the orgone energy accumulator, "a wooden cupboard about the size of a telephone booth, lined with metal and insulated with steel wool," that he asserted "could charge up the body with life force that circulated in the atmosphere" (C. Turner 5). A medium for the sharing and intensification of sexual energy, Reich's box was a quintessential 1960s type of technology, not unlike the drug trips, light shows, jam sessions, and feedback loops discussed in the previous chapter.

In the orgone segment from "The Crusades Show," *TVP* claims to harness the power of cable television and to use it as an orgone energy accumulator, creating an interactive psycho-sexual network. This is meant not only to connect viewers and the studio audience with "that mysterious life force of the universe," but also to amplify and stimulate this shared "cosmic energy" with the help of TV technology. Beyond creating circuits of noise and conversation or trading ideas and information through dialogic connectivity and jam sessions, this segment, albeit with a winking acknowledgement of its absurdity, promises an intensely physical, spiritual, and psychological act of communion through television. Through explicit reference to Reich's ideas, *TVP* both

reproduces pervasive utopian and revolutionary rhetoric about communication, connectivity, and community and uses humor and hyperbole to challenge it.

Midway through the episode, O'Brien proclaims, "We're going to try something now that has never been tried in the history of television… We're going to have the first mass television orgone link-up." Wearing a Tupperware hat, trademark aviator sunglasses, a backwards jean jacket, and what appears to be a curly blond wig dangling from his waist band, he rocks back and forth toward the camera, delivering the announcement with energy and a seriousness at odds with his costume. Standing in front a backdrop featuring posters of Abraham Lincoln, Vladimir Lenin, Friedrich Engels, Benito Mussolini, and the Three Stooges, O'Brien's movements are notably confined by the cramped studio, as he paces between several metal folding chairs, a drum set made of oatmeal canisters and magazines, and a camera on a tripod pointed toward the studio audience only a few feet in front of him. Much of the camera work intensifies this sense of claustrophobia by shooting the host in medium close-up or close-up with blocks of white text sometimes covering part of the screen. As members of the TV Party Orchestra file into the background to his left, O'Brien continues his introduction to the experiment. Briefly referencing some of Reich's ideas about a free-floating sexual life force or "bioplasm," the monologue addresses the audience as if they shared some basic knowledge of his theories. Over a clamor of bells, accordion, and cymbals, he then points directly into the camera and declares, "We have supercharged ourselves with television and now we turn the force around and make it work for you!" Engaging the audience in a

mock conversation, O'Brien continues, "How? How, you might ask, are we going to do this? (brief pause)… Through TV! We are going to complete the circuit!" While finishing this statement, he whips around and again looks into the camera, his eyes still covered by dark sunglasses as he makes the well-known hand gesture for sexual intercourse, inserting his pointer finger into his fist repeatedly. While the sexual nature of this televisual experiment was implied by the discussion of Reich, it is now made crudely apparent, tainting the vaguely edifying and scientific tone of the proceedings. Combining Reich's orgone energy and the system of wires, televisions, cameras, and signals that make up cable access, O'Brien asks the viewers to consider the shared transmissions on the screen as sexual stimulants. Or, as Kara Carmack puts it in her analysis of the scene, he "likens the performer-to-viewer-to-performer circuit to sex" (43). In this moment, *TVP* continues their self-aware and self-reflexive project of televisual communication by claiming to add a physical and sexual dimension to their virtual networking practice.

As O'Brien performs his adolescent gesture, the white text appearing on the screen above his head anticipates the next portion of the experiment. It reads "TURN OFF THE LIGHTS." In the following sequence, O'Brien guides the audience at home through this "mass television orgone link-up," variously asking them to perform certain actions on themselves, other people in the room, and, significantly, their television sets. However, he does not verbally ask the viewers to dim the lights for another couple seconds. This is notable because it suggests some degree of advance planning by O'Brien and whoever is operating the cameras and character generator in this segment. Usually,

the character generator displays the call-in phone number, the date, or, most often, random or seemingly unrelated words. Earlier in the show, the screen reads "CHEESE SANDWICH" and "2 BOXTOPS" during song sequences, phrases that seem to have nothing to do with the dialogue, music, lyrics, or performance. From time to time, the text generator will slowly put up words just spoken by the guests or the host, repeating or providing brief commentary on recent activity. For instance, there is a more than two second delay after O'Brien's use of the phrase before the screen reads "TELEVISION ORGONE," the words spelled out slowly letter by letter. Yet, in this segment, the text anticipates the spoken dialogue, awkwardly challenging the viewer's experience of *TVP*'s usual spontaneity and liveness. In the very moment the show is introducing a "live" sexual experience through the television, the character generator acts to deflate or problematize, however subtly, any simple utopian notions of connectivity or natural togetherness.

Officially beginning the historic "television orgone link-up," O'Brien asks the band for some "soothing" music. Now speaking softly at a measured pace, he instructs the audience to "just relax, turn off all of the appliances and all of the lights, just leave the TV on. Turn up your television all the way and turn the brightness control up as far as you can and still see the image." During these directions, the camera pans between a close-up of O'Brien's face and a shot of Chris Stein, dressed as a monk and playing the accordion, and Patrick Geoffrois, of the No Wave band the Contortions, playing slide guitar. This pan is accompanied by quick zooms and repeated unfocusing and refocusing.

The on-screen text again anticipates the host's words, reading "TURN OFF THE LIGHTS/ INCREASE VOLUME/ REMOVE C." By the time O'Brien finishes his instruction for the viewing audience to "take off your clothes," the generator has finished the last word. "Go ahead, we'll wait, take them all off." Following these words, the screen's black and white image is inverted for a few seconds as it zooms in on the host's face and someone from the studio audience can be heard yelling about breadsticks (Figure 2-1).

Figure 2-1 A still from *TV Party* "The Crusades Show"

During this brief moment, the members of the TV party sitting in the studio and in the control room assert their presence. After prodding the viewers at home to "strip down" again, O'Brien declares, "they are stripping down in the control room right now." To prove this, he turns around and gets behind a camera himself, aiming it toward the back of the studio and asking to "get a shot of this." However, perhaps having difficulty

finding the right camera feed, the image then moves between two camera angles on the stage, pausing awkwardly before finally showing a heavily blurred shot of someone taking their shirt off in the tiny ETC Studios control room. As evidenced by this scene, incorporating the images and voices of the camera and sound operators in the televised party required a fumbling experimentation with the cablecasting equipment. This disorienting sequence is representative of the way *TVP*'s inclusive production practices struggled against the architecture and technology of the cable station's studio and implicitly revealed its limits.

By this point, "PLACE HANDS ON GENTIAL/ S/ BLANK YOUR MINDS" has been added to the block of text that now covers the majority of the screen. As the camera scans the room showing a giggling *TVP* Orchestra and attentive audience, O'Brien crouches down in the middle of the room and directs everyone watching to "touch yourself, you know where." As "CONCENTRATE ON TV SCREE/N" is slowly typed across the bottom of the screen, the host continues, "Is everyone all hooked up? Now just make it feel good" (Figure 2-2). With the blonde wig hanging between his legs and dragging on the floor, O'Brien performs a series of slow, sexually suggestive motions. As he requests that the viewers "relax and breathe deeply," an echo effect is added to the microphone and the image is momentarily made much darker. O'Brien quickens the pace of his speech,

> Feel it now, everyone out there in TV land? Imagine hundreds, thousands, ten thousand, a hundred thousand people all over Manhattan right now are feeling

that same wonderful feeling of orgone infiltrating their being. Do you feel it? Can you feel that mass orgone out there?... Now you feel it, I just want you to look into your TV and make your mind a complete blank. Concentrate on the image on your screen and I just want you to think, just feel that force… feel it coming into your head and igniting all of those pleasure centers in your head. And mm, mmm what a feeling!

Figure 2-2 A still from *TV Party* "The Crusades Show"

The image alternates between a close-up of the dangling wig between O'Brien's legs and a medium close-up of Stein playing the accordion in an exaggerated, erotically suggestive style. An unseen participant in the studio begins breathing heavily into a microphone, helping to build this experiment toward its televisual "climax". Still crouching, O'Brien commands the viewers, "Now try to direct that feeling into your TV set." After pausing

for a beat, he then projects himself violently backwards onto the ground, presumably from the awesome pulse of orgone coming through the TV circuit. Lying on his back, he exclaims, “whoa what a rush.” Gathering himself and adjusting his Tupperware hat and glasses, O’Brien continues to direct this sexualized “link-up.” For another several minutes, rising and falling in intensity, the audience is instructed to point their orgone into the television and feel the simultaneous action and concentration of all the viewers. “ONE FRAME OF BUTTERED POPCORN,” the date, and the cable studio phone number appear on the screen, inviting viewers to call-in. At the end, O’Brien announces, “This is our crusade… Who can resist an empire made of dreams and pleasure and orgone for everyone?”

This unusual segment explores the extreme boundaries of *TVP*’s subcultural networking project and its implicit and explicit theory of technological communication. For one, it adds a psycho-sexual dimension to their televisual network, transforming the medium in the process. As Carmack explains in her thesis on the queer properties of early NYC access shows, “O’Brien was interested in the sexual possibilities of the medium of television” and, during the “orgone link-up” segment, “turns the television into a pleasurable extension of the human body” (42). As a result, “the television becomes a means through which these pleasures can circulate amongst viewers which, in turn, presents a queer condition in which human bodies and television can be connected through orgone and cables, blurring the distinctions between humans and technology” (Carmack 45). Such an experiment in networking expands the types of connectivity

offered by television, challenging normative ideas about virtual or technological togetherness as well as sexuality in general. In a similar vein, riffing on Reich's orgone energy accumulator, the show again engages with prevalent countercultural notions about the role of interactive technologies in the creation of communicational utopias. Journalist Christopher Hitchens claims that Reich's boxes and ideas were so popular, "especially among American intellectuals both of the Marxist stripe and of the do-it-yourself 'organic community' sort," because "he was able to propose an essentially mechanical and 'scientific' solution to a psychological problem, yet a mechanical solution that could be easily assembled and employed at home" (26). Like McLuhan's ideas about newly accessible video and TV technology championed by the guerrilla television and video art movement, this easy path beyond repression and to revolutionary togetherness is the object of critical laughter by the creators of *TVP*. The program parodies the often unexamined mixing of pseudo-scientific language about technology with utopian discourses about a personal, social, and sexual revolution while the unconventional camera and sound work constantly reminds the viewer of the mediating technology.

However, this lengthy account of the "mass television orgone linkup" is not included here just as further evidence of *TVP*'s self-reflexive networking practice and critical engagement with pervasive discourses about the potential of subcultural or countercultural connectivity through technology. While the show was undeniably an experiment in politicized communication and a set of practices aimed at exploring the boundaries of technologically-mediated sociality, it was also a performance and a work

of art. Its political rhetoric, critical theorizations, rational or irrational debates, virtual networking experiments, and social interactions all took place within the formal constraints of a (mostly) live public access television program. Although *TVP* consistently tested the limits of the interview/variety show and stretched the technological capabilities of the E.T.C. studios to the point of breaking, it was a performance molded to television and engaged in exploring the aesthetic possibilities of that particular form. The disorienting camera movements, creative use of the character generator, contrast and brightness level play, cluttered mise-en-scène, live image and sound switching, editing or mixing, absurd costuming, evident use of zoom and racking focus, prevalent reflective surfaces like O'Brien's sunglasses and the booth window, direct address of the audience, juxtaposition of image, sound, and text, highlighting of the televisual technology, awkward framing and reframing, overloading microphone feeds, unclear transitions, and hyperbolic performances are just some of the key formal features of *TVP* apparent in this segment. Sound and image manipulation were just as important to the program and its networking project as the manifestos, dialogues, and close readings of Brzezinski and McLuhan. In short, any attempt to understand the show and its significance requires a closer examination of the aesthetic and formal characteristics of actual episodes.

Additionally, I mean to assert *TVP*'s status as a work of art because the creators, participants, and guests clearly understood the program as an aesthetic production or performance. Although it was located somewhere between the rarified space of high art

and the commercialized industrial region of network television, the program nevertheless, in the words of O'Brien, “was meant to be art” (“*TVP* Story”). In the liner notes to the DVD release of “The Time and Make-Up Show,” he writes, “*TV Party* was cable TV as pop art.” As such, the program was not only produced as a self-conscious aesthetic work, but it also contained an implicit and explicit aesthetic theory, a set of ideas about the role of art in society and its formal potential. Thoroughly enmeshed within the tumultuous artistic atmosphere of the Downtown NYC scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the show exhibited a notable self-consciousness about its status as art, underscoring issues such as commodification, cooptation, autonomy, accountability, elitism, creativity, novelty, ephemerality, and accessibility. Attempting to produce a politically committed and formally innovative work through the mass cultural medium of television, *TVP* developed what could be called, using a phrase borrowed from music historian Stephen Graham, an “(un)popular avant-garde” form of televisual practice. Graham uses this term to discuss the productions and practices of underground noise music, looking for a way to describe a “third space, an interzone” of culture that “spectrally exists, spread across old theoretical, economic, and cultural categories of high and low” (13). This concept refers to a type of artistic production that partakes in conventions and tactics of creation, distribution, and reception from both the institutions of classical high art and popular culture. “Its theory, likewise, bubbles underneath the surface of the mainstream” (Graham 14). Rather than settling into the seams between traditional categories like commercialized mass culture and elite institutionalized art, *TVP* used irony, humor, and

constant experimentation to challenge the very solidity and coherence of these categories. The primary objective of this chapter will be to grasp this practice and theory of an "(un)popular avant-garde" and to think through its relationship to the subcultural virtual network constructed by the show.

As exemplified by the "mass orgone link-up" described above, *TVP* employed an abundance of formal techniques and strategies to construct its unique form of television art. Selecting from innumerable qualities, this chapter will focus on techniques of excess or overloading the audio and visual feeds, the patterned use of "dead air," intentionally amateurish or unprofessional use of technology, practices that could be called "televisual graffiti," live broadcasting, and the incorporation of formulas and conventions from popular television history, such as the vaudevillian variety format. Interpreting the systematic deployment of these techniques as an avant-garde practice, this chapter shows how they rethink the formal constraints of televisual production and critique the prevailing modes of art production, reception, and distribution. Such an analysis recognizes that an avant-garde is always tied to its historical moment, a critical practice defined by its relationship to the contemporaneous situation of art in society. As media theorist and musicologist Georgina Born argues, there is a danger in "reducing the politics of television production to negational aesthetic strategies alone, thereby neglecting to consider the politics of the institutions and social relations within which cultural producers operate and aesthetic decisions are made" (233). In order to avoid such a reductive treatment of the aesthetics of *TVP*, this section continues the historical work

of the last chapter, revealing the web of influences, connections, and contexts in which the show operated. Very much a part of the eclectic Downtown art and punk scenes in the late 1970s and early 1980s, *TVP* borrowed formal techniques and practical strategies and reacted against the work of these local contemporaries and co-conspirators in attempting to create a critical aesthetics of virtual networking.

"All This Isn't Chaos, Its Art"

In his article, "(Un)Popular Avant-Gardes: Underground Popular Music and the Avant-Garde," Stephen Graham takes notice of a "theoretical fuzziness that has developed around the concept of the avant-garde" (6). He observes several contradictory and imprecise uses of the term across disciplines and especially in the popular press in reference to contemporary music. At its most vague, avant-garde seems to signify little more than the general characteristics of "experimental" or "radical." This theoretical looseness is especially pronounced when it comes to discussions of punk music and culture in both academic and popular forums, where more than a few scholars link the two terms. Tricia Henry's early academic text on punk, *Break All Rules!: Punk Rock and the Making of a Style,* explores the connection between punk and the avant-garde by making the nebulous suggestion that "both describe active forces at the edge of change" (1). This vague similarity usually extends to the sharing of a common tendency to be "provocative" and "subversive," amongst other characteristics (Henry 2-3; Hurchalla 2006; Sinker 1999). Some further "fuzziness" comes from equivocal uses of the term

referring, on one hand, to direct historical links to particular avant-garde movements and, on the other, to a general attitude or series of tactics. Perhaps this can be traced to Greil Marcus' popular *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, which uses an elliptical and original historiographic style to connect punk to myriad historical avant-gardes, from heretical thinkers in the Middle Ages through Surrealists and Futurists of the early 20th century to the street protests of Paris 1968. As Thomas Miessgang notes, what Marcus identifies in punk is "a fundamental attitude of negation, whose historical traces and metaphoric change-energies can be pursued to the illegitimate avant-gardes of the 20th century (Dadaism, Lettrism, Situationism) and beyond as well" (10). However, as the more traditional historical work of Jon Savage and others have shown, many early punks had very real personal and material connections to some of these historical movements (Savage 1991; McNeil and McCain 1996; Heylin 2005). While these various sources point to a consensus about the potential of a concept like the avant-garde for explicating punk phenomenon, a more precise or solid theorization is required.

While adjectives like subversive, radical, challenging, innovative, and cutting-edge often accompany descriptions of avant-garde productions, the concept of the avant-garde involves more than rebellious formal experimentation, using strategies of negation, being "the latest thing" in the art world, or utilizing any particular set of aesthetic practices. Rather, as Peter Bürger argues in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, whatever various practices or forms taken on by a movement, the avant-garde in any era "criticizes art as an institution" through art (22). Continuing, he writes, "the concept of 'art as an

institution' refers to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works" (Bürger 22). Beyond providing a sense of shock or re-arranging the procedures of creation, the avant-garde involves a type of political or social work aimed at agitating the dominant role of art in society and the material system through which it is received and produced. As Bürger puts it, "the avant-garde turns against both—the distributive apparatus on which the work of art depends, and the status of art in bourgeois society defined by the concept of autonomy" (22). This can be conceptualized as a type of aesthetic work that forces a confrontation with art's indissoluble relationship with the world as it is. Always in conversation with its social and historical context, the avant-garde works against any understanding of art that walls it off from society, relegating aesthetic experience to elite or otherwise inaccessible spaces and detaching works from their connection with politics and the social. This tendency towards the negative and a rejection of the contemporaneous art world "adds an internal tension that corresponds closely to the avant-garde's inherent contradiction, namely, its desire to destroy art through the medium of art" (Graham 9). While authors like Henry want to delineate specific "revolutionary tactics" or strategies shared by punk with historical avant-garde movements, such as "unusual fashions; the blurring of boundaries between art and everyday life; juxtapositions of seemingly disparate objects and behaviors; intentional provocation of the audience; use of untrained performers; and drastic reorganization (or disorganization) of accepted performance styles and procedures," this obscures the defining relationship of

an avant-garde to its historical circumstances (116). Instead, the term avant-garde functions to illuminate the relationship of an aesthetic movement to a historically-specific critique of art's institutionalization and the attendant dominant modes of aesthetic experience or interpretation.

If such a definition of avant-garde fits any of the early punk scenes, then New York City offers a most compelling case. While punk scenes in cities like London emerged out of working class youth cultures with a general antipathy towards the arts and a distrust of older generations, the early New York punk underground of the late 1970s took root in neighborhoods and illicit performance spaces already written off by the mainstream and home to a host of local artistic subcultures. Art historian Thomas Miessgang notes that NYC, unlike London and Berlin in his account, "had a long tradition of ill-adjusted, illegitimate jazz and rock avant-gardes" (21). As such, punk's rebellion was not primarily against the prevailing local art world, but actually dovetailed in some ways with these pre-existing movements and mimicked their marginal practices, including a critical self-consciousness about being artists.

> As a blueprint for an aesthetics of transgression and border-crossing, New York had the Warhol factory of the sixties, where creative people, drug addicts, transsexuals, and simply hangers-on were constantly re-arranging themselves into new forms of a social sculpture. There was always a connection with art, even if it was articulated as a rejection of the art system and preferred off spaces, lofts, or no-budget micro-galleries to the established gallery scene. (Miessgang 23)

Many of the early punk bands and scene participants came from this underground space where their new aggressive music co-existed with also-not-yet-mainstream hip hop, funk, noise, electronic music, and ska. The Downtown scene that included punk was a crucible of productive energies directed towards a slew of self-consciously aesthetic projects, including graffiti, performance art, political actions, conceptual work, and video art, as noted in the previous chapter. Tracing a line from The Velvet Underground, who were managed by Andy Warhol, through the New York Dolls, connected to one-time Situationist and art school student Malcolm McLaren, to Suicide, fronted by semi-successful sculptor and member of the Art Workers' Council Alan Vega, can illuminate the deep connections between the early New York scene and local art institutions and movements (McNeil and McCain 1996; Heylin 2005). The interconnected art scene emerging in Soho, the East Village, Times Square, and other then-seedy areas of Manhattan, according to curator and historian Lynn Gumpert, was characterized by a "desire to break out of the framework of the established art world" (11). "What so many Downtown artists of this era did share is that they conceived their work as alternative, if not outright subversive, vis-à-vis traditional curatorial and exhibition practices. Incorrigibly and resolutely defiant, Downtown artists interrogated systems of accreditation, broke down generic disciplines, and directly engaged with political issues" (Gumpert 14). Moving into the late 1970s, NYC punk continued to mix and interact with these cultural producers on the fringes of the art world, fostering a connection to such spaces, practices, and ideas.

Following this historical trajectory to *TVP*, a narrative can be constructed showing its deep entanglement with the larger avant-garde of the Downtown scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Such a story starts with O'Brien's work for *Interview* and Walter Steding's position as the "janitor" at Warhol's factory. While Pop Art's time had come and gone by then, O'Brien, Steding, and *TVP* "director" Amos Poe were directly inspired by Warhol's later video and television work. Poe was also part of the No Wave or New Cinema movement, an experimental branch of the larger video art faction in the area. As detailed in the last chapter, this work served as a challenge to traditional art forms by incorporating "advanced" technology and interactive feedback mechanisms. Likewise, artists like Klaus Nomi, David Walter McDermott, and others from the New Wave Vaudeville who took part in *TVP* sprang from the performance art scene that developed its ephemeral and confrontational methods as direct attacks on the commodification of art objects and their "sanctified" spaces of reception. Jean-Michel Basquiat and Freddy Brathwaite (Fab Five Freddy), both camera operators and regular on-screen participants, were, at the time, emerging graffiti artists just starting to get widespread recognition for their work that eschewed gallery spaces and established techniques in favor of illegal and public practices. While their spray-painted messages were protests against urban decay, racialized poverty, and an apathetic public, they were also condemnations of an inaccessible, safe, racist, and elitist art world confined to museums and the walls of the rich. Although this is only a very partial list of the contributing artists to *TVP* and their various aesthetic practices that could be considered avant-garde, it is more than clear that

the show was intimately linked to a "generation of experimental, outsider, and avant-garde artists working in Downtown New York during the seminal decade 1974-84" (McCormick 21).

The actual look, sound, and feel of the program reflected these historical connections and help confirm its status as an avant-garde production. The first key feature of *TVP* that both tested the formal limits of TV and simultaneously criticized the prevailing institutionalization of art was the use of excessive and overloaded audio and visual signals. As dramatized in the climatic "blowback" during the "orgone link-up," the show utilized a variety of tactics to stretch the capacity of their cameras, microphones, mixers, amplifiers, monitors, telephones, and the TV set itself to the point of breaking. Counseling the audience to maximize the volume and brightness levels of their televisions during the "orgone link-up" was only one example of this recurrent practice. Whether it was the result of amateurish mistakes or an intentional agenda, there is a consistent sense that the outer limits of the technological and artistic apparatus are being explored. On the level of the image, this refers to the patterned use of extreme close-ups, fast-paced switching between video feeds, ultra-quick pans, superimposition of multiple images, and a host of herky-jerky or otherwise disorienting camera movements. These visual techniques are matched on the soundtrack by persistent feedback, pops and scratches from overloaded microphone feeds, constant shouting over each other, saturating reverb and echo, regularly having more than a few live audio feeds, and routine clanks and abrasive scuffs from careless handling of the microphones. Discussing the

legacy of psychedelic art, O'Brien points to "a psychological wow element combined with an aesthetic of maximalist sensory overload to blow minds en masse" that emerged from this 1960s drug-fueled scene ("Psychedelicacies" 355). Adapting this strategy to access TV production, *TVP* worked to "blow minds" in a more critical aesthetic context.

In particular, "The Heavy Metal Show" encapsulates this technique for defying the boundaries of the television equipment. Featuring a version of the *TVP* orchestra that incorporated five electric guitars playing incomprehensible chords drenched in distortion and reverb and at least two or three people shouting into the microphone at any given time, this episode was essentially one long jam session of feedback. Of course, "Doc" Steding instructs the audience to "turn up your TV set all the way" in order to feel the "full power" through "this electrical grid." Hilariously, the simultaneous use of so many amplifiers at maximum volume actually overloaded the studio's circuits twice during the show, resulting in some unexpectedly quiet portions. The image re-enacts these forms of auditory excess by spinning wildly within the studio audience at times, offering blurry and fleeting glimpses of their dancing and clapping to the music. The wide range of the panning camera captures the director's booth, two illuminated exit signs, the attending audience, and the back walls of the studio behind the white set (on which Basquiat has written "MOCK PENIS ENVY" in marker). Piercing the typical confines of the generic access studio set, the camera explores the edges of what it can capture. Near the beginning of the episode, the image shows musician Lenny Ferrari, centered in medium close-up, rapidly tuning and un-tuning his guitar. Although the frame remains unusually

static here, the image focuses in and out at a disorienting pace, matching the wildly fluctuating tones of the guitar. Further stretching the limits of the image is the subsequent use of superimposition. Poe, live-mixing this show from the booth, layers a camera feed of Stein fiddling with his amp with a slightly askew angle pointed at Ferrari, who is standing next to Stein. Since they are both in each shot, their images are doubled (Figure 2-3).

Figure 2-3 A still from *TV Party* "The Heavy Metal Show"

The constant movement of both camera feeds adds to the surfeit of visual stimulation on the screen, leading to a psychedelic effect. Just as the maxed sound levels overload the audio playback and the amplifiers short-circuit the studio's electrical feed, these visual techniques overburden the image, challenging any easy comprehension of the action.

This mode of experimenting with TV's form to the point of excess recurs in almost every episode presently available. "The Halloween Show" features a call-in

portion where the host and other participants attempt (and fail) to take three calls at once. On “The Crusades Show,” the entire screen is filled with text by the character generator, cutting off a listing of food products in the middle of a word when the apparent limit is reached. “The Everything for Sale Show,” one of the first cablecast in color, uses a newly discovered wipe effect for transitioning between camera angles, filling the screen with green and yellow bars over and again (Figure 2-4).

Figure 2-4 A Still from *TV Party* "The Everything for Sale Show"

This is only a small sample of *TVP*’s persistent testing of the limits of their chosen aesthetic and technological form. While it is obvious that this technique reflects the type of innovation and experimentation with form associated with the avant-garde, there is also an underlying critique of the dominant modes of artistic production and reception here. In pushing their instruments of production past the point of optimal functioning,

resulting in a disorienting audio and visual squall, *TVP* implicitly rejected traditional high art decorum and challenged the notion of the skilled "artistic genius" who honed their craft to perfection. To any observer, it seemed as if O'Brien and the others were "simply 'mucking about' in front of the camera" (Harper 62). Art historian Sharon Harper, in documenting the Downtown scene, notes a widespread use of this type of "deliberate amateurism" that is exemplified by a "lack of any polished finesse" on *TVP* (62). Discussing the scene in general, she writes,

> Their programme choices, then, did not demonstrate the 'professional' attitude of chic SoHo galleries appealing to the urban corporate crowd with slickly mounted exhibitions. Instead, the shows of Downtown artists were openly amateur and even deliberately shoddy in their production. And rather than calm, contemplative spaces with concentration on one artist or even one work, the desired effect was a chaotic, free-for-all in which artistic reputation based on skill meant little. (Harper 63)

Although many of the show's participants deny any strategic or organized attempt to do anything like subvert the professionalism of art or the cult of the technical genius, *TVP* was very much a part of this local avant-garde in this respect.

While pushing the audio-visual levels beyond their limits subverted the respectability and precision associated with art galleries or museums, it also challenged the forms of programming usually available on television. Flouting all the rules of broadcasting, *TVP* consistently produced muddled images, confusing spatial

arrangements, unclear or discontinuous transitions, and unintelligible dialogue. While conventional programs utilized close-ups to offer a comprehensible or clear image on the limited dimensions of the TV screen, *TVP* crammed the space with characters, smoke, superimpositions, and poorly lit faces. Likewise, show participants regularly tested the restricted capacity of TV speakers with busy soundtracks. Instead of using background music to punctuate dialogue or parallel the content, *TVP* often presented layers of sound that conflicted and challenged understanding. A comment offered by Chris Stein during "The Sublimely Intolerable Show" suggests this technique was at least partially intended as a critique of mainstream programming. Arguing with a caller who suggests the show is difficult to follow, he responds, "Most TV is so slow that any idiot can follow it, like *Kojack*. When we all talk over each other, you exactly understand, it just takes more effort." This extra "effort" hints at its simultaneous critique of the contemporary art world and the institution of network television.

Speaking in 2005, Ferrari remarks, "It wasn't like they said, 'let's have the camera do this or that, …so we will disorient the viewer. It was more like, 'ehhhh, it will be fun or whatever'" (*TVP: The Documentary*). O'Brien explains that the show had "a rough, do-it-yourself style technically… akin to punk in that way" (*TVP: The Documentary*). "We were anti-technique, anti-format, anti-establishment, and anti-anti-establishment. We liked to break all the rules of good broadcasting. Sometimes we would sit around and say, 'Well, what should we do now?'" ("*TVP* Story"). However inexperienced, intoxicated, and spontaneous the sound mixers and camera operators may

have been, the show clearly drew on local fringe art influences to create a program that pushed all the levels into the red. In the retrospective documentary, O'Brien talks specifically about the work of director Poe, saying he "tried to screw up the show by making it a cubist event" and introduced "a psychedelic effect, pushing [live mixing] buttons as fast as he could." Likewise, Poe asserts that "we had a kind of experimental look, it looked like underground film" (*TVP: The Documentary*). The question of intention aside, *TVP* visibly and audibly exceeded its formal limits in a routine fashion, joining a larger local avant-garde in challenging the prevailing image of the skilled, singular artist-genius operating in the quiet, organized, and scholarly space of the gallery or museum.

TVP also borrowed specific tactics from other Downtown-based art movements in developing their unique, critical style, often drawing on the diverse skills and interests of whoever was involved in a given program. For instance, with Braithwaite and Basquiat manning the character generator, cameras, and mixing equipment, the show produced what might be called "televisual graffiti." On a visual level, the character generator is the most obvious and clear manifestation of this technique. While typical programs used it to identify speakers, flash call-in numbers, display titles, or simply roll the credits, *TVP* often employed the generator in more creative and unusual ways. Limited to only a few words at a time, this device projects short, text-based statements onto the screen in all capital letters. Akin to graffiti, it allows the user to mark a space with a message and, to a limited degree, fit the words into the visual structure or architecture of the frame. The text

is opaque, so it partially covers, mars, or otherwise defaces the picture. Since the text is added to the video feed before it is broadcast, it also retains the temporality of graffiti by coming "after" its unsuspecting canvas is already built. Basquiat, in particular, utilized the character generator as a type of televisual graffiti. Sometimes this took the simple form of "tagging" the screen with "SAMO," just as he did on subway cars, mailboxes, and bathroom stalls throughout the city. During "The Nile Rodgers Call-in" segment, the tag is inserted into a list of "political" figures featured on the posters hung around the set, as the screen reads "MUSSOLINI/ ABE LINCOLN/ SAMO/ 3 STOOGES" (Figure 2-5).

Figure 2-5 A still from *TV Party* "Nile Rodgers Call-in"

This mimics the way street graffiti allows artists to sign their names or pseudonyms alongside the names of celebrities, politicians, businesses, and others typically allowed to occupy public space. Basquiat also sometimes recycled phrases from his outdoor pieces or tried out slogans or word combinations that were eventually used on his canvasses.

These were often vaguely political but also seemingly random word combinations, such as “DEATH IS ROLAIDS” or “GAMMA RAYED PROSTITUTES LOOKING TO A CROWD ON BEING A FISH.” Seen as a cross between advertising slogans and experimental poetry, such phrases functioned on the television screen to call out the cheapening of language in the medium. Sometimes, this took the form of strings of random characters or “123456789” flashing across the image. Just as graffiti implicitly criticized billboards, neon signs, and other forms of commercial public communication, the character generator on *TVP* often used word play to critique the instrumentalization of language on television.

Basquiat and others also used the character generator as a critical artistic tool in less subtle ways. On multiple episodes, the text appearing on the screen commented directly on the immediate words and actions on the show. For example, during the “Nile Rodgers Call-in” segment, the on-screen text keeps up with the interactive dialogue in multiple creative and critical ways. When a caller sarcastically applauds the show for being “intellectual,” the screen responds with the ironic “TOO HEAVY FOR TV.” When someone’s phone feeds back, it instructs “TURN TV DOWN.” When O’Brien tells the audience to get together with their friends and start their own cable access show, the text asks sardonically “WHY GLEN??? WHY???” However, as the segment goes on, there is a litany of irate callers screaming racist, sexist, and homophobic slurs or being generally verbally abusive. While this was not uncommon on *TVP*’s call-ins, because three black men had been on this particular episode, including Nile Rodgers who is taking most of

the calls, the violent racist language is especially prevalent in this segment. At the end of a string of such calls, a caller asks to speak to the “colored fellow” and then asserts, “I’m not a racist like these others.” While Rodgers talks to the caller politely, “YES YOU ARE RACIST SILLY” appears letter-by-letter across the top of the screen (Figure 2-6).

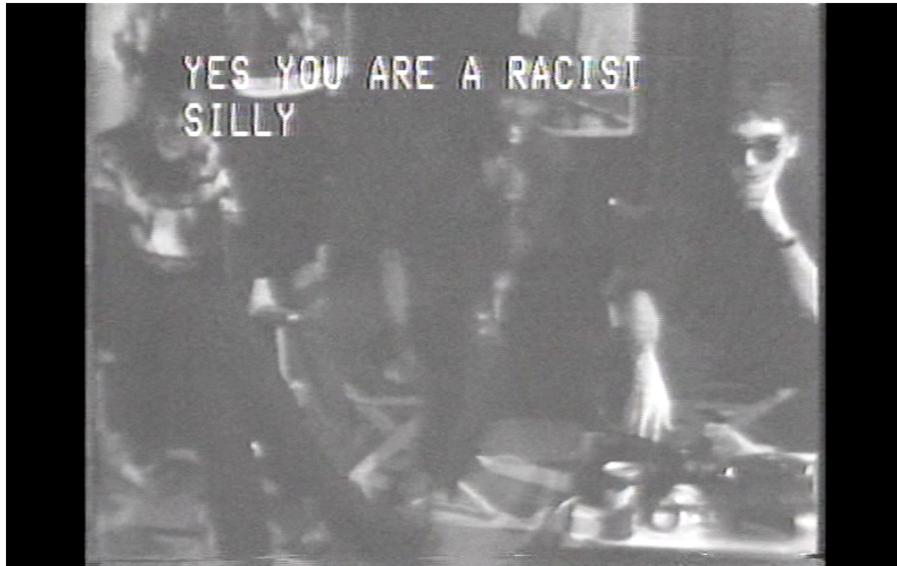


Figure 2-6 A still from *TV Party* "Nile Rodgers Call-in"

Unlike the chaotic dialogue that ends with some incomprehensible slurs from the caller, the text silently comments on the proceedings. Just as graffiti can offer a space or different register for marginalized social voices to respond to oppressive language, the character generator offers such a possibility on *TVP*. Mirroring some of Basquiat’s street graffiti and framed art, these responses also took the form of intentional misspellings and uses of dialect that subtly critiqued racist notions of primitivity through irony. These instances include “PREEETEEEEE PEOPLE” flashing across a black reggae band and

“RUSSKY SYBULLLISM” accompanying someone speaking in a fake Russian accent about poetry.

If graffiti is understood as an art practice that rejects privatized, elitist, or otherwise inaccessible institutions of artistic reception or experience, such as the gallery or museum, a direct challenge to the dominant reception of artworks, part of the reason is because it is public, illegal, noncommercial, and unsanctioned by any legitimating institution. Likewise, the “televisual graffiti” on *TVP* is certainly more accessible and public than the walls of an exclusive gallery or a collector’s home. Further, the transitory nature of TV images, especially in an era before widespread VCR ownership, likewise resists commodification or the creation of salable art objects. Additionally, the text gives the impression of being “unsanctioned” by O’Brien or any other on-camera personality. Since these primary figures cannot see it, respond to it, or censor the words, they come across as a type of illicit marking. However, this similarity only extends so far, given the physical, long-lasting, illegal, and site-specific nature of street graffiti. The privatized reception of TV images also limits the public nature of such “tags” on the screen. However, reflecting a type of popular avant-gardism associated with graffiti, the show ignored generic boundaries in its experimentation with TV form and technology. Displaying the influence of the local art scene and its tireless critique of art’s institutionalization, the “televisual graffiti” on *TVP* reflects the general aesthetic character of the program.

While *TVP* was usually a jumbled mess of text-defaced and rapidly switching images, squeaking and buzzing through sound equipment "malfunctions" at maximum volume, it also played with the other televisual extreme: "dead air." Recalling avant-garde antecedents like John Cage's silent music performance *4'33"* or the Warhol films *Sleep* and *Empire*, both static single shots that go on for hours, these "empty" or "boring" fragments force the viewer to become aware of the viewing situation and the structuring conventions of the medium. Although complete blackness and matching silence were rare on the show, there are multiple examples of extended pauses, unexplained blank screens, inaudible portions or sections missing sound entirely, whispered discussions between participants before transitions, live set changes, and even a "silent meditation" scene (Figure 2-7).

Figure 2-7 A still from *TV Party* "The Everything for Sale Show"

As O'Brien explains, "Sometimes we sat there and did nothing. They say 'dead air' is the kiss of death in broadcasting, but we liked it. Sometimes we would sit perfectly still like a tape on pause, but it was live" ("*TVP* Story"). By thwarting viewer expectations and, in a way, refusing to fulfill the typical function of a television program, "dead air" can force a rethinking of the relationship established between the TV artist, producer, or program and the audience watching at home. In the case of *TVP*, *s*ome of these blank portions seem to be the result of *TVP*'s amateurish misuse of the technology, whether deliberate or not. The first four full minutes of "The Sublimely Intolerable Show," for instance, are completely without sound. In fact, the first thirty seconds or so, no one seems to be aware that cameras are on while they simply mill about the studio, half the frame covered by unidentifiable object. O'Brien eventually comes on screen and begins talking, but the soundtrack remains silent. Viewers presumably wondered about the proper functioning of their TV sets during this portion since the televised image appears to be a normal. As the show progresses, however, the camera operators and other technicians acknowledge awareness of the lack of sound. "NO SOUND" appears on the screen via the character generator, followed by innumerable exclamation points. Loud scratches and buzzing follow, doubtless from frantic attempts to fix the issue. "UNBEKNOWST TO GLENN/ THERE IS STILL NO SOUND!!!!" follows a bit later, covering the middle of the image while O'Brien gestures and speaks normally into the microphone (Figure 2-8). Highlighting the show's live broadcast and improvisational nature and implying a lack of professionalism and skill, this breakdown of the audio equipment works as part of *TVP*'s

avant-garde practice. Additionally, showing the creators to be at the whims of faulty technology, the "dead air" highlights the mediating apparatus and its structuring role in the viewer's experience.

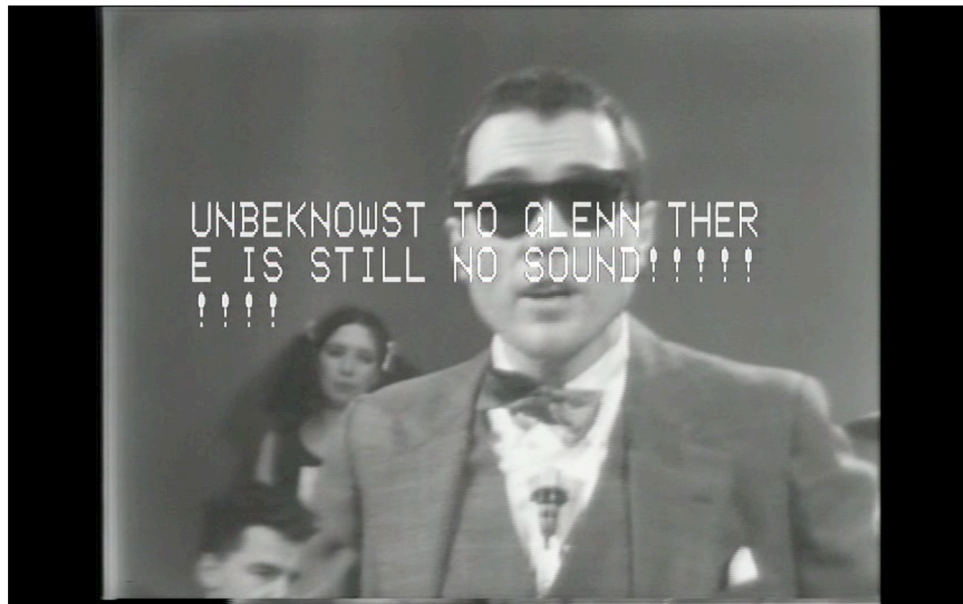


Figure 2-8 A still from *TV Party* "The Sublimely Intolerable Show"

In the procession of outrageous, prurient, shocking, and exotic images that emanate from the television set, a truly boring and uneventful scene with almost no auditory or visual stimuli stands out. Similarly, technical difficulties or poor planning that results in "dead air" or halting confusion are jarring and memorable disruptions of the seamlessly edited, choreographed, and polished flow of network programming. While it is impossible to know if anyone watching attempted to "fix" their TV sets or engaged them at all, many viewers did call the show to vent their frustration with this episode and others like. Whether berating the show for its inability to control the equipment or

“wasting their time,” the surge of angry callers seems to suggest the powerful effect of such “empty” broadcasts. Indeed, some of *TVP*'s moments of “dead air” seem planned and calculated to engender precisely this type of angry viewer response. Purposively frustrating viewer expectations and denying them either facile entertainment or enlightening intellectual engagement, the show antagonized audiences at home by airing the TV equivalent of an empty canvas or silent musical performance. This strategy can be traced to the Happening phenomenon that sprung up around New York in the previous decade. In the words of Susan Sontag, most Happenings were “designed to stir the modern audience from its cozy emotional anesthesia” (273). Starting with the “professed aim to assault” spectators, these events “tease and abuse the audience,” trying to “arouse a reaction” through “terrorization” (Sontag 273; 265; 273). As she explains, these extreme acts of aggression against viewers result from a “taste for the fantastic, the outré,” and “shock” that is harder and harder to produce in modern audiences (Sontag 273). Performance artists adopted these strategies of “terrorization,” finding new and novel ways to evoke a reaction from their spectators. Writing much later, O’Brien describes Robert Wilson’s 1973 performance piece *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* as an “embrace of ‘dead air,’ silence, and real time” (“Psychedelicacies” 361). According to O’Brien’s account, Wilson “presented the theatrical equivalent of a psychedelic experience of time, violating the conventions of time and plot, but creating experiences that sharpened the sensibilities of the audience through those amusing violations, and delightfully betrayed expectations of storytelling” (O’Brien, “Psychedelicacies” 361). As

these descriptions suggests, *TVP* mined these performance works for strategies that could be usefully applied within the medium of television.

It is an understatement to assert that *TVP* had an antagonistic relationship with its viewers. The regular call-in segments, for example, were often little more than shouting and name-calling matches, filled with vindictive hanging-up and cruel jokes played on both sides of the telephone line. The stretches of "dead air" continue this hostile relationship and take it to the level of form. As Stein shouts at a caller complaining about these empty stretches, "That's our prerogative. We get to do a fucking boring show if we want and everyone has to sit there and suffer through it" ("Nile Rodgers Call-In"). While not always explicitly violent or abusive, the instances of "dead air" can be considered, in the words of O'Brien, acts of "aggressive boredom." This is perhaps most evident on "The Time and Makeup Show," which begins with an excruciatingly long still shot of a poster of Friedrich Engels adorned with a pin of the LA punk band The Screamers. As O'Brien's describes in the liner notes included with the DVD, "Just when you're ready to go nuts, a voice reassures: 'There is nothing wrong with your television set.'" Taking the audience to the point of senselessness, this introductory scene is conceptualized as a sort of punishment for the viewer. However, this "aggressive boredom" or visual punishment could potentially break through the numbing barrage of TV images and momentarily cast the viewing situation into a type of critical doubt.

In avant-garde fashion, these "empty" or "boring" parts of the show revealed underlying assumptions about TV's role in society and worked to expose its commercial

structure, even on the mostly non-commercial forum of cable access. Although access is essentially available free on a first-come, first-served basis, access producers at E.T.C. studios had to pay an hourly fee for live broadcasting (about $20 an hour). By "wasting time" transmitting static images or bumbling with the equipment, *TVP* presented the viewer at home with a nonchalant attitude about their very presence on television. As a result, some of those aforementioned angry calls asked explicitly why O'Brien and the other creators of the show "waste their money" putting it on. In these responses, viewers are making implicit connections between the images on the screen and the industrial and technological structure that make them possible. As O'Brien remarks on the "The Time and Makeup Show," "time is money" and this especially true on TV. An even more extreme act of critical "dead air" production or "aggressive boredom," "The TV Party at Home Episode" consisted mostly of a prerecorded tape of O'Brien and a few others simply watching television for an hour. Sitting on a couch and watching the flickering light of a TV set facing away from the camera in the foreground, O'Brien introduces the show by stating, "this is a special show to show you what you look like when you're watching *TV Party*... The show is going to be extra boring tonight." Although O'Brien encourages the bored viewer to come down to the Mudd Club for a "live version of *TV Party*" happening at that very time, the rest of the show was "just" sitting around and watching an unseen TV. Producing a critical awareness of the viewing situation and rooted in local performance art practices and video work like Warhol's, *TVP*'s patterned use of "dead air" formed a crucial part of their avant-garde practice.

“This is my idea of TV. You know, Guerilla TV, anarchy *Howdy Doody*”

Like the various performance artists, conceptualists, graffiti writers, noise performers, and other art makers that shared the same parcel of Downtown geography, *TVP* produced an aesthetic practice that was not only formally challenging but also “oriented toward an alteration of the institutional commerce of art” (Graham 8). Using “dead air,” televisual graffiti, overloaded signals, irony, and a generally antagonist relationship with its audience, the show made art that consistently critically engaged its own reception and typical modes of understanding. However, *TVP* can be distinguished from these other projects of the 70s/80s NYC avant-garde by one key feature. What makes *TVP* unique is the primary fact that it was on television, a mass cultural medium defined by commercialism, formal homogeneity, and a perceived allergy to radical politics or aesthetic practices. Not only was it on TV, but it was on the marginal space of cable access, an institution straddling the line between the cult or underground and the popular. Although it appeared on this non-commercial forum of access, it actively associated with popular and commercial cultural forms, drawing on diverse periods of television's history to construct its format. In an effort to christen their music avant-garde, seminal rock writer Susan Willis once called The Velvet Underground “anti-art made by anti-elite elitists” (114). Their heady mix of free-form jamming and formulaic pop songs carved out a space between high art and popular culture. *TVP,* with its cast of art world dropouts, rising stars, and malcontents practicing “deliberate amateurism” in the access

studio, seems cut from a similar cloth of self-conscious aesthetic experimentation melded with popular (and populist) aspirations and formulas. Graham describes this type of cultural production that sits at the nexus of artistic categories as "a sort of popular avant-gardism where mass culture is mined for material and inspiration, but where avant-garde sensibility adopted from the Dadaists—egalitarian, yet destructive and challenging—places much of the work beyond the ken of the general public" (13-14). *TVP* occupies just such a "third space," although their relationship to a public may be more complicated still (Graham 14). While Graham develops this term to describe underground music, a television program presented on the marginal televisual forum of access presents a compelling and unique case of an "(un)popular avant-garde." Given the complex and often misunderstood relationship between art and television and the status of TV as the quintessential mass cultural medium, the aesthetic tactics of a show like *TVP* exist in a particularly charged forum.

As a way into this problematic, it is instructive to breakdown a short sequence from *TVP* featuring Queensites Graffiti, a group of artists including John Fekner that made politically oriented, site-specific stencil projects in Queens. At the beginning of this segment, O'Brien introduces "the heavy part of the show," where presumably serious and consequential material will be discussed. As the segment progresses a close-up of a sign with the stenciled word "TV" crossed out fills the screen. The subsequent image is a shot of a television screen with some of the dials and the antennae visible near the edges of the frame. Taped to the screen is what looks like a print advertisement with a smiling female

model. After some discussion, someone flips the TV on and plays with the dial, unintelligible images and static flit by behind and at the margins of the paper ad (Figure 2-9).

Figure 2-9 A still from *TV Party* "Queensites Graffiti"

O'Brien continues asking the artists about their work. However, as the camera leaves the modified TV set and points toward the artists sitting on folding chairs with the host, they abruptly request that the camera operator focus on some photographs in their laps and not their faces. These photographs show more of their graffiti work, including massive stencils of the word "decay" on several abandoned buildings. After some general discussion, O'Brien asks about their work revolving around television. "It's a de-emphasize TV project, a de-emphasize advertising work." The camera quickly switches between two angles on the photographs before panning around to show the studio

audience. Several people are not paying attention and two appear to be trading cassette tapes. They go on to explain their critique and the purpose of the TV art object shown before, saying, “it doesn’t matter what the image is, it’s all selling the same thing, which is the commercial.” Laughing, O’Brien directs his reply to the audience, “Like I’ve told you before, after the show, just turn off your TV.” Returning to the TV set artwork, the image shows someone pulling the paper off the screen to reveal another stencil of the word “TV” crossed out (Figure 2-10).

Figure 2-10 A still from *TV Party* "Queensites Graffiti"

This awkward and halting interaction points to a potential disconnect between *TVP*’s televisual project and the larger Downtown avant-garde it existed within. Additionally, it hints at powerful and pervasive discourses and histories that underpin any bringing together of art and television.

Encapsulated in the work and statements of the Queensites artists is the commonplace idea that TV is hostile to art. Their wholesale rejection of the medium, only partially qualified by O'Brien, reflects the perceived antagonism between "true" aesthetic practice, on one hand, and the popular and commercial "wasteland" of TV, on the other. This widely held notion seems to persevere no matter the work done to invalidate it. Video artists like Nam June Paik and others mentioned in the last chapter challenged the notion that the technological apparatus itself was responsible for this antipathy to art, making TV sculptures and formally innovative videos. Additionally, some of their work played with broadcast images in order to repurpose them for art, revealing cracks in the discursive edifice that holds these two realms apart. As critic Peter Walsh interprets a seminal piece by Paik, "the enormous magnet [manipulating the image on the screen] appears as one of Paik's anarcho-Dada attacks on the closed bureaucracy of commercial television, a rude, conceptual gesture declaring that he can break through television's bland, corporate barriers to create art" (4). While video art may have established the aesthetic potential of TV technology, broadcast or popular television was still often thought of as irredeemably averse to art, in particular challenging or properly avant-garde work. As O'Brien's reference to the "heavy" or serious segment and instructions to "turn the TV off" after the show reflect, the normative forms and economic or institutional structures of popular television are perceived as impassable impediments to art. Summarizing this view, the theater historian Martin Puchner remarks, "An avant-garde practice in broadcast television seems beyond the bounds of

contemplation, not because it is impossible at the level of form, but because it seems mildly absurd within the institution of television and its mode of circulation" (quoted in Mount 46). As a result, video art or any truly creative practice is relegated to galleries, museums, underground spaces, or, at best, the marginal televisual spaces of cable access, educational forums like PBS, or guerrilla screens. In fact, as Lynn Spigel argues, the rise of video art in the late 60s and early 70s ironically resulted in a strengthening of the division between art and television. Although it shared a set of technologies with TV, "video's reliance on the museum went hand and hand with its evacuation from the public airwaves so that video and television came to occupy two separate cultural spaces, replicating the great divide between the avant-garde and mass culture that had underpinned the history of modernism" (Spigel 285).

However, historical works like Spigel's *TV By Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* tell a different story about the multifaceted and complex relationship between art and television in the post war period, one marked by mutual contact as much as hostility or avoidance. While her account focuses on visual artists from the modern period, mostly painters and designers, there are more than a few examples of what could be called avant-garde practices appearing on broadcast television, including a 1966 appearance by longtime Paik collaborator and participant in the "TV as a Creative Medium" exhibit Charlotte Moorman on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* (Mount 36). Another notable example is the performance of experimental music composer John Cage on the CBS game show *I've Got a Secret* in September of

1960, which is analyzed by musicologist Andre Mount in his article "Testing Art with a Live Studio Audience: John Cage at the Intersection of Popular Television and the Avant-Garde." Taking advantage of the show's live broadcast, Cage performed a partially improvised musical piece entitled *Water Walk*, using, "among other things, an electric mixer, a rubber duck, a sprinkling can, and a mechanical fish" (Mount 36). This challenging and innovative piece worked against the traditional formal constraints of orchestral music with its nonstandard instrumentation, reliance on the visual, and loose structure. Additionally, the work implicitly critiqued the dominant institutions of art music, such as the stuffy concert hall, university performance, and the elitist gallery by appearing on the popular medium of television.

At first, there were outward signs that Cage's avant-garde sensibility clashed with its televisual host, *I've Got a Secret*. For one, the entire format of the show was suspended for just this one episode. The popular CBS program was usually structured as a game show where a panel of celebrities tried to guess a secret about the featured guest known by the audience, akin to *What's My Line?*. In this case, though, the host simply informs the audience that there will be no game show portion and announces the "secret" immediately after it is whispered in his ear. Secondly, while Cage intended to plug in a few radios during his piece, there was a union dispute with the production crew that prevented him from doing so (Paolini "John Cage's Secret"). Both the change of format and issue with the radios require some awkward explaining from the host before getting to the performance. Clashing with the institutional and formal structure of the mainstream

TV However, this initial awkwardness was not necessarily a sign that television was an unsuitable forum for Cage's avant-garde performance. Despite these alterations, Cage jokes with host and the audience responds to the musical piece with laughter and applause. Noting the short, fast-paced, improvised, and highly visual nature of Cage's work, as well as its reliance on ephemeral liveness, Mount asserts that such practices were "remarkably well suited to the vaudeville-cum-variety show landscape of American popular television in the early 1960s" (48).

Furthermore, it was not just the formal possibilities of the TV setting that enticed artists like Cage, but the implicit critique of high art associated with the medium itself. As Mount describes, "Cage's challenging of the Western canon and its traditions offers a potential point of contact with pop audiences similarly disenchanted with highbrow culture" (48). As the antithesis of the gallery, academia, and the concert hall, television offered artists a space that favored laughter over sedate seriousness, visceral engagement over intellectual contemplation, and spontaneity over precision or "skill." As Spigel describes, TV valued liveness and the "related ideals of immediacy, presence, spontaneity, and kinesis" over the stale atmosphere of traditional aesthetic spaces that treated art as a series of historic masterpieces to be revered (46). Fully within the domain of commercial, corporate broadcasting, isolated appearances such as Cage's *Water Walk* point to both the possibility and the precedent of an avant-garde practice on television.

Although *TVP* transmitted its televisual artwork on public access channels, it can be seen to represent a continuation of these experiments in melding challenging artistic

work with television. With video art retreating to the gallery, public interest in modernism in the postwar period fading, and networks turning away from live broadcasting and other formats that had enticed artists like Cage and Moorman, it would seem that the window for mutual contact had closed. As Mount observes in concluding his article on Cage's *Water Walk*, “by the 1970s, such performances had become rare on popular television” (48). However, *TVP* can be understood as an attempt to forge a new version of avant-garde TV, a production that defied the impermeable categories that structure most accounts of the art-TV relationship. In continuing this experimentation, they were, in part, following their NYC avant-garde predecessor and O’Brien’s sometime boss, Andy Warhol. As Spigel notes, “rather than abandoning TV for video art, or dismissing it as ‘wasteland’ pap, Warhol engaged commercial television as a viewer, producer, and also as a layman critic and fan” well into the 1970s and 80s (252). In fact, he even produced a program for Manhattan Cable beginning the same year as *TVP*. Entitled *Fashion*, the taped show presented a mixture of runway models, drag queens, and everyday people, exploring the “boundaries between fine art, haute couture, and drag” (Spigel 279). Although O’Brien and company would utilize the same televisual forum and some of the stylistic codes of experimental video production employed by Warhol’s programs, *TVP* offered a more formally challenging program rooted in defiantly underground personalities and sensibilities rather than the celebrity fashion and art world. Refusing the high art road of video as well as full incorporation into dominant network television, the show utilized the non-commercial venue of access to carve out a

new cultural and aesthetic space that was not exactly the popular, the underground, or the elite.

As an integral part of this "(un)popular avant-garde" televisual practice, *TVP* drew on the history of television, repurposing formulas, conventions, formats, and even technologies from earlier eras that were more conducive to their challenging aesthetic creations. While Cage's performance took place on a game show in 1960, there exists a long and productive connection between forward-thinking art and another of early TV's stock formats: the variety show. As Spigel notes, "Quite paradoxically it was television's oldest and most populist form—vaudeville—that turned out to be the ideal showcase for modern art" (44). *TVP* drew on the vaudevillian variety show and its many televisual offspring as key predecessors and influences. Some of these borrowings were explicit and intentional. For instance, in discussing the origins and influences on the show, O'Brien names early TV vaudeville stats Henry Youngman and Milton Berle as inspirations for his humor. Likewise, allusions to *The Tonight Show* were also common. O'Brien referred to Steding as "our Doc Severinsen" and Stein as Ed McMahon, discussed Johnny Carson as a more suitable president than Jimmy Carter, and proclaimed that *TVP* was "the underground *Tonight Show*" ("*TVP* Story"; *TVP: The Documentary*). Although the show took some cues from these popular programs, O'Brien claims to have borrowed most heavily from another variety and interview programming source, Hugh Hefner's two short-lived series, *Playboy's Penthouse* (1959-1961) and *Playboy After Dark* (1969-1970). In his words, "The format of both shows was a sophisticated cocktail party, not a

desk and sofa set up. It was a fantasy of being at a super-hip, super exclusive jet set party… I loved the concept, compared to the stiff format of *The Tonight Show*" (O'Brien, "*TVP* Story"). He even mentioned this inspiration on a live episode from 1981, explaining that *Playboy After Dark* was "the first show that was a party and erased the distinction between the performers and the audience" (*TV Party: The Documentary*). All these variety shows allowed for the free mixing of personalities, ideas, and forms of entertainment. Like these programs, *TVP* would put comedians, magicians, dancers, musicians, and even animals all on the same stage as artists working on graffiti, conceptual art, performance art, poetry, opera, or any other creative pursuit not typically presented as just one in a litany of entertainers. Adapting formats and conventions from popular sources on the non-commercial space of access, the show navigated between cultural distinctions in looking to make room for avant-garde TV. Like the network programs that featured abstract impressionists and experimental composers in decades past, *TVP* utilized the variety format to provide space for challenging art on television and contested cultural boundaries in the process.

The creators of the program also drew on another element of popular TV's past as a critical component of their avant-garde practice: live broadcasting. A relatively new feature of the local public access station, O'Brien notes that he and Stein were drawn to the possibility of live cablecasting offered by Manhattan Cable. While "liveness" was a defining feature of video art and the guerrilla TV movement, O'Brien articulates his interest in the technology by referencing the by-gone era of live network programming.

> Live television. That's the way TV was when I was a kid. It was exciting. Anything could happen. I remember watching *Playhouse 90* and the *U.S. Steel Hour* in the fifties and a set might fall over, or someone would blow a line badly or a stagehand would accidentally walk in front of the camera with a ladder. I saw prizefighter Benny "Kid" Paret killed in the ring live on TV on April 3, 1962 when I was fifteen years old and Lee Harvey Oswald shot and killed live on TV on November 24th, 1963. I knew live was where it's at. (O'Brien, "*TVP* Story")

The disturbing connections to witnessing live deaths aside, these comments suggest that *TVP* both valued the spontaneity and potential for "accidents" made possible by live television and saw themselves as resurrecting a format from popular TV's past, not a technique made possible by the cutting edge technology of cable or portable cameras. In these explicit pronouncements of influence and the implicit references in the format, *TVP* again challenged the dominant historical narrative that walls off artistic practice from the domain of popular television. This was a story strengthened on a micro-level by the manifestos of video artists and its celebrators. Spigel explains that such documents and ways of talking "helped to establish the mythic tale of avant-garde exceptionalism in which video artists appear to stand outside of history as a unique set of luminaries somehow able to infiltrate what [video art historian John] Hanhardt referred to as the 'seamless hegemonic tool' of the TV industry" (291). Rather than reinforcing these understandings of television as a "closed" corporate system, *TVP*, by drawing on

elements from popular cultural, offered the possibility for a rethinking of the medium and its relationship to art.

Unafraid to establish direct connections with the commercialized realm of popular culture and borrow its formulas, *TVP* was again acting as part of the larger Downtown art scene. Harper observes that, in this era, "the group of artists based in Downtown New York… was singled out as particularly problematic in terms of a collapse of commercialism and art" (9). As punk and new wave music, hip hop, graffiti, and breakdancing broke into popular culture and many experimental designers and video makers began making advertisements, the boundaries between art and commodity production became blurry. Harper notes, "commercialism, in many opinions, had now fully co-opted the radical force of art, particularly in New York, leading to… the death of the avant-garde" (14). While these expressions of alarm were partially in reference to the massive sums paid for works by Basquiat, Keith Haring, and others in the mid-80s, the boundary-crossing practices of NYC's avant-garde had straddled the line for years by then. As techniques like the use of "dead air" reveal, this was an aspect of art and its social role that *TVP* regularly drew attention to. A critical part of their "(un)popular avant-garde" project, the show agitated ideas about commercialization and autonomy, resisting a complete condemnation of art as business while calling attention to the role of profit, capital, and economics in the production, distribution, and reception of all artwork. In fact, stepping even further into this fray, *TVP* began broadcasting live in color on Channel J, Manhattan Cable's public access "commercial station." This channel sold time

slots for a few hundred dollars but allowed for advertisements, unlike the typical not-for-profit access stations. Again drawing on a format from television history, *TVP* sold sponsorships and had the host do direct product pitches, rather than running discrete ads. According to O'Brien, this transition to a commercial format was not successful. Beginning with the general statement, "I wasn't a good salesman," he also noted that collecting money from record labels, bookstores, and nightclubs was a "thankless task" (O'Brien "*TVP* Story"). Moreover, the pitches disturbed the natural flow and relaxed atmosphere that defined the program. As O'Brien describes, "it would take too long and I would wind up making fun of the advertiser" (O'Brien "*TVP* Story"). One surviving episode from this era, "The Everything for Sale Show," originally broadcast on June 13, 1982, reveals this issue. After a short period of technical difficulties, O'Brien tries to cram seven or eight different sponsor statements into the show. Uncomfortable and hurried, these pitches for RIOR cassette tapes and Soho's New Morning Bookstore seem out of place next to a distorted accordion jam session and winding discussion with Japanese synth-rockers Eel Dogs. On this episode, the participants directly and comically engaged commercialization and the economics of their broadcast. After reading an ad for Danceteria nightclub, O'Brien remarks, "You know, we always wanted to sell out, and to us selling out meant selling everything we had to sell." He then goes through his wallet and offers to sell items such as his press pass and Sak's Fifth Avenue card to anyone who calls in. Earlier in the episode, O'Brien claims to have lured his guest, comedian and actor Charlie Rocket, from "channel 4 to channel J," with an undisclosed sum. In reality,

Rocket had just been fired by *Saturday Night Live* and its parent company NBC for cursing on their live broadcast. As profane language is thrown around without concern, *TVP* again highlights its own televisual forum and its distinction from network television.

However well this episode thematizes and critically engages commercialization, the move to Channel J spelled the end of *TVP*. Stein, O'Brien, Poe, and various other participants attribute the show's demise to a combination of factors including Stein's prolonged illness, O'Brien's marriage, Poe's commercial success, and the general dissolution of the Downtown scene in mid-1980s (*TVP: The Documentary*). According to O'Brien, "The whole Downtown scene was falling apart because of money and too much drugs" (*TVP: The Documentary*). Another contributing factor was the lengthy production of the film *Downtown 81*, written and produced by O'Brien and starring many *TVP* regulars like Basquiat, Debbie Harry, Fab Five Freddy, and Steding. Working on the film required the show to be put on hold for almost all of 1980, returning with diminished enthusiasm in early 1981.

"SEE YA NEXT TIME/ SAME BAT TIME"

As the inability of *TVP* to survive the early 80s suggests, any avant-garde practice is thoroughly historical, utilizing techniques specific to the social, historical, institutional, and economic context of artistic production in its particular moment. Georgina Born notices a tendency in academic analyses of cultural production to isolate formal techniques or aesthetic practices and attempt to judge their individual social or political

value. Approaching either alternative productions or works of popular culture, many commentators seek to locate instances of "avant-garde negation" like parody, irony, or excess, and suggest that these tactics hold potentially progressive or radical value, offering a blueprint of sorts for revolutionary art (Born 231). However, as Born notes, "negation always rapidly itself becomes a form of repetition and variation… parody itself becomes standard" (231). Any attempt to pick out such inherently revolutionary practices or strategies would be dangerously ahistorical. Although I have identified certain key aspects of *TVP*'s aesthetic project that challenged normative TV structures and artistic conventions, such as overloading signals, awareness of the mediating technology, televisual graffiti, deliberate amateurism, problematized liveness, and the use of "dead air," it should be clear that these were intimately tied to the show's time and place. In order to understand the social, political, or even theoretical value of any "cultural production," it is necessary "to analyze [it] as a constellation of simultaneous social, institutional, technological, aesthetic, and discursive forms—as a complex, multitextual, and intertextual composite" (Born 224-225). Implanted in the Downtown art scene, the emerging punk subculture, and the semi-commercial realm of the underground and working within the institutional structure of public access television, *TVP*'s aesthetic strategies were developed out of, mediated by, and always directly tied to this context.

As a self-conscious artistic creation, *TVP* utilized these contextual strategies to agitate against the prevailing conditions of art production, distribution, and reception. Properly avant-garde in this sense, the show's explicit connections to popular commercial

culture combined with its challenging formal features to remain antagonistic to either mode of artistic consumption. Existing in the "liminal space" of "(un)popular culture," *TVP* found an "interzone" within its era's social, discursive, and institutional field for an avant-garde practice (Graham 14). Bürger argues that the avant-garde aims to "reintegrate art into the praxis of life" (22). Explaining further, he notes, "when avant-gardists demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works art should be socially significant… Rather, [the avant-garde] directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effects that works have as does the particular content" (Bürger 49). *TVP* produced such an effect in their experiment in network sociality. The project was not merely an academic deconstruction of McLuhan's theories or a political protest against the role of technological in mediating social relationships; by producing a self-reflexive and properly avant-garde television program, the show called attention to new social conditions defined by virtuality, technological mediation, and commercialization. *TVP* responded by finding the cultural and institutional space somewhere between the underground, the elite, and the popular to demand that art engage this new social context. The avant-garde of any era endeavors "to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art," making art relevant to social practice (Bürger 49). Pointing towards what could be called a "critical art of network sociality," where social relations are continually and self-consciously remade and reworked, *TVP* utilized public access television to explore the possibility of reintegrating art and life in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Chapter 3 –"A new negativity has been born in these culturally dark days": *New Wave Theatre*, Antagonistic Performance, and Queer Theory

> The New Wave movement is growing in leaps and bounds despite the fact that its major lyrical thrust is expressing anxiety and discontent, its image reflecting a society run amok.
>
> -Peter Ivers, *New Wave Theatre*

> Queer theory's bad attitude is a secret sharer of the immature, kitschy, and revolting behavior of punks and other uppity antisocial types.
>
> - Tavia Nyong'o, "Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)?"

"Hey Glenn, you hemorrhoid." "Why isn't the show better?" "You're all fags." "You're too loud, I hear you all the way over here your party's so loud." "You've given us 45 minutes of sludge." "The cameraman is making me dizzy, tell them to stop." "Well, don't watch then." Besides being riddled with feedback, loud dial tones, faulty connections, unintelligible dialogue, and other technical issues, the call-in segments on *TV Party* were regularly marked by abusive language, antagonism, and mutual contempt. Many callers rang up the studio simply to scream expletives at the show participants, point out the technical "flaws" of the show, or otherwise express their general dislike for the people on screen. During a representative segment, musician Nile Rodgers and co-hosts O'Brien and Stein explain their reasoning behind the call-in feature, describing its role in the show's larger project of underground televisual sociality. "We are trying to develop some sort of conversation or rapport in the creative communications forum for people to call up and tell their ideas." However, in this same episode, this noble endeavor of communicational connectivity is quickly shown to produce quite different results. The

very next caller begins by stating, “I was watching commercial TV and I turned over to cable and you guys are a worse collection of assholes.” Subsequent callers berate O’Brien for stuttering, label the show “stupid,” and describe it as a waste of time and “television resources.” Additionally, the majority of these belligerent calls utilize a plethora of racist and homophobic approaches to attack Rodgers, an African American, running the gamut from accusing him of theft to lengthy strings of racial slurs. In the most innocuous example, one caller asks, “Is that guy sitting there really black or is he just submitting to peer group pressure?” Notably, this barrage of racist insults and derogatory behavior coming over the telephone was not uncommon. Indeed, *TVP*’s regular call-in segments were usually marked by racist, sexist, or homophobic cruelty towards the guests, the host, or other show participants. From vicious misogynist threats and sexual innuendo directed at Debbie Harry (an overwhelming number of callers ask her to take her clothes off, or something more explicit) to racist epithets shouted at regular contributors Braithwaite, Basquiat, and any other people of color on screen, these call-in sessions painted an image of *TVP*’s viewing audience as violent and particularly hostile to individuals already marginalized by their social position. And, as shown in the last chapter, *TVP* participants responded by mocking, challenging, insulting, and attacking the viewers on the other end of the phone line. Judging from these segments, *TVP* addressed a community of local viewers who regarded them with disdain and sought to reinforce the racism, sexism, and homophobia of the mainstream within the “”Party Network” constructed by the program.

Marred by conflict, dissonance, frustrated attempts at communication, and bigoted, intolerant treatment of women, queers, and racial minorities, the alternative televisual network created by *TVP* would seem to be the furthest thing from the collaborative and egalitarian utopia promised by their community media forum of cable access. These interactive portions of the show, central to its project in alternative sociality, seem to fracture or disrupt social connections rather than create subcultural linkages and relations through TV technology. In fact, this mutual hostility even extended to callers who identified, implicitly or explicitly, as members of the punk subculture or the local art underground in NYC. These members of the viewing audience utilized the call-in segments to contest *TVP*'s status as part of an "authentic" subculture and critique its legitimacy. These challenges often took the form of questioning whether certain musicians or other performers were really "new wave" or punk. Some callers referred to O'Brien and others as "junkies" who did not care about the "real" art and music of the NYC underground. Others addressed Stein and Harry, members of the successful band Blondie, as "sell outs" in their attempts to impugn the subcultural credibility of the show. The host and on-air guests often responded in-kind, mocking or arguing with the callers. For instance, in the premiere episode, a caller bluntly asserts, "I think you're killing punk rock." O'Brien responds by saying, "We killed punk rock, that's what we've been trying to do," later suggesting that "the CIA gave us the $60 to put the show on" for just this purpose. At this point, the studio audience erupts into laughter and applause. Earlier in the same episode, a caller challenges O'Brien's subcultural credentials by asking, "Can

you define new wave?" The host, wearing sunglasses and smoking a joint, immediately responds with "no" as he hangs up the phone and smiles. In these examples, the show's creation of an interactive, subcultural "Party Network," offering a relaxed atmosphere for underground social interaction through the technological medium of television, is shown to be a paradoxical project. *TVP* harnessed the power of telephones, cameras, microphones, teleprompters, coaxial cable, and the institutional edifice of access television to bring people together, but often in ways that bred subcultural confusion and contempt.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, *TVP* was not alone in using cable television and access to produce, as well as represent, an underground subculture characterized by conflict and antagonism. On the other side of the country, *New Wave Theatre* painted a picture of the Los Angeles area punk and new wave scene as rife with discord, hostility, and even violence. Created by the eccentric artistic duo of host Peter Ivers and director/producer David Jove, the program began broadcasting on Los Angeles-area public access channel Theta in late 1979. *NWT* described itself in the opening credits as "an underground series dedicated to the changing role and responsibility of music as an art form currently existing under the banner 'new wave'." While episodes of *NWT* centered on several live-in-the-studio performances by punk and new wave bands from the Los Angeles area and subsequent interviews with those musicians, the program was formatted as a chaotic variety show that also included philosophical monologues, performance art, poetry, dance routines, sketch comedy, commercial parodies, puppet

shows, and video montages. As a televisual experiment in subcultural production and aesthetics, this program offered a glimpse into a thriving and unique local underground of musicians, artists, comedians, activists, and actors and functioned as a networking link between disparate elements scattered throughout southern California, and beyond.

While the show promoted itself as a conduit for subcultural art and music that aimed to "lessen confusion" and "bring humankind closer," *NWT* offered a chaotic and conflict-laden vision of the underground scene in LA (Vol.2, Ep.4). Like those featured on *TVP*, the social interactions presented on screen were marked by miscommunication, antagonism, and, at times, abuse. Also akin to *TVP*, some of these moments of conflict involved racist, sexist, and homophobic insults and hostility, revealing a local punk subculture marked by forms of oppression found throughout mainstream society. Antagonism surrounding sexuality was especially prominent on *NWT*, as bands responded in a multitude of homophobic ways to the flamboyant and effeminate host Ivers. Looking closer at the program and its history, it is clear that Ivers and others on the show intentionally provoked these outbursts of violence and homophobic reaction, using a host of strategies to produce such discord and chaos. Notably, these practices worked to disrupt any easy invocations or experiences of community, connectivity, consensus, or wholeness in the subcultural networks produced on and through the show. While the explicit ideas offered by the creators often conceptualized *NWT* as a reparative televisual project oriented toward a more cohesive and harmonious social future, the performances of the bands, host, artists, and audiences, as well as the formal qualities of the program,

persistently complicated and denied these discourses. If *NWT* promised an "intergalactic harmony" between alienated late-night TV viewers throughout the country and even "beyond the people of Earth" through new wave music, experimental art, video technology, and cable television, it consistently shattered that utopian vision with its formal and cultural practices of negation.

Using the theoretical work of Tavia Nyong'o, Lee Edelman, and José Esteban Muñoz to guide my analysis, this chapter conceptualizes the specific performance practices and formal aesthetic strategies of *NWT* as an antagonist performance style based in queer antisocial negativity. Thinking of queerness as a practice aimed at disrupting normative forms of individual and collective identity, I highlight the productive similarity between the figure of the queer and the punk, as suggested by Nyong'o in his theoretical account of punk/queer social practices. Here, I use *NWT* as an occasion to explore "the subterranean linkages between punk and queer," locating "antisocial negativity" as a key feature of *NWT*'s project of subcultural television and a defining element of what could be called a specifically "punk" televisual practice (Nyong'o, "Do You Want" 107). To this end, this chapter traces the program's use of a type of confrontational or disruptive theatrical performance, a unique formal style including fast-paced image montages, editing and effects that disrupted "liveness" and spatial and temporal continuity, color manipulation, disorienting camera movements, messy sound mixing, and other unprofessional techniques, and the production of images of the "dysfunctional" or fractured family and home. In direct connection to television's status as a domestic

medium, *NWT*'s "antirelational" or disruptive cultural work sometimes involved "queering" the image of the nuclear family and its part in reproducing dominant American social roles and formations.

Analyzing these techniques of critical negativity requires some understanding of the historical, geographic, social, and cultural context of *NWT* and the local punk and new wave scene it featured. In particular, the show emerged amongst a host of performance and video projects in the LA area in the late 1970s that blurred the boundaries between the conventional gallery art world, underground music scene, entertainment industry, and theater. These various local art and music movements provided the show with changing understandings of performance, visuality or theatricality in music, the audience-artist relationship, and the role of technological mediums like television and video in art. The confrontational, antagonistic, and specifically queer strategies of performance utilized on *NWT* have their roots in these distinctive forms of practice developed on the fringes between glam rock, performance art, video art, the punk scene, and Hollywood. In particular, my account of these influences is organized around the work of *NWT* host Ivers, tracing his experiences with specific artistic, political, and musical antecedents. Utilizing research materials such as unpublished planning documents, proposals, and production notes contained in the Peter Ivers Papers housed at the Harvard University Archives, I follow his experiments in early music video production, the use of provocative and combative performance tactics, and the planned development of a unique media production company. In particular, I draw on

a document from 1979 entitled "The Ivers Plan" that lays out his vision of a music video production company that "packages" underground cultural productions for mainstream audiences. The ideas found there and elsewhere in connection to Ivers help to provide insight into the philosophy and strategy behind *NWT* and its project of subcultural broadcasting.

Finally, I explore another aspect of the *NWT*'s historical and social context. The show emerged during a moment of transition in the LA punk scene, when many of the first-wave, art and glam-oriented bands were coming into conflict with younger, more aggressive "hardcore" acts hailing from the suburbs. This transitional period provided a fertile ground for the types of antagonism *NWT* put on display. Examining the work of queer antisociality embedded in *NWT* within this context provides a glimpse into the contours of its subcultural networking project. While echoes of the self-reflexivity of *TVP* and its "(un)popular avant-garde" strategies are evident in *NWT* and its local influences, its production of a riotous and antagonistic underground program in LA in the early 1980s represents a different way to make subcultural television. In using antagonistic performance tactics rooted in a queer sensibility as a central part of its televisual subcultural project, *NWT* highlights the critical connection between punk productions and queerness. As Nyong'o argues, "Punk may be literally impossible to imagine without gender and sexual dissidence" ("Do You Want" 107). Broadcasting from the homophobic and hostile setting of the early 1980s LA hardcore punk scene, *NWT* provides a glimpse into the troubled and troubling connection between punk and queer.

"One of the good things coming out of the new music scene is more total confusion about who we are and where we are going"

Like *TVP* and its utopian rhetoric of the "Party Network," *NWT* explicitly promoted itself as a project in building an alternative social formation through communicational and aesthetic links. Each half-hour program began with an opening monologue written by director Jove and his longtime collaborator, music writer Ed Ochs. This dramatized reading served as a half-serious mediation on the social role of the performers featured on the show and, to a certain extent, as commentary on the program itself as a televisual work of art interested in social responsibility. In the words of Ochs, "The monologues we wrote were designed to kick off the show with a dramatic 60- to 90-second wake-up call of concentrated word power that punched the viewers in the face and made them want to jump off the sofa and yell at their TVs for revolution now. At the same time, they were thoughtful, perhaps even profound mini-lectures on the meaning of art and music and New Wave Music's place and purpose as an art form" (177-178). Usually sitting in front of a painted backdrop of spiral galaxies, purple planets, and spaceships and wearing an outrageous sparkling costume and sunglasses (Figure 3-1), host Ivers delivered speeches in a linguistic mash-up of new-age technospeak, hipster jive, beat poetry, academic jargon, and stand-up comedy that commented on the role and meaning of the show. Acting as "statements of purpose," these monologues often attributed utopian potential to communications technology, proclaiming that "the

magnetic power of video is capable of planting in your brain tomorrow's menu for a better world" (Vol.3, Ep.3).

Figure 3-1 A still from *New Wave Theatre* (Vol 4, Ep 2)

Furthermore, the monologues promoted *NWT* as a social, aesthetic, and political project producing potent connections through the mediums of television and music, offering "a glimpse into what hopefully the direction of television and film could [sic] take in the 80s" (Vol.1, Ep.1). In a representative example, Ivers pontificates on the show's power as a collectively experienced form of art and communication.

> A *New Wave Theatre* hearsay bulletin says the hand weapons of a certain unnamed alien nation actually shoot a debilitating form of music… the music of the new wave. That is one of the reasons for this show, *New Wave Theatre*, because we are presenting and will continue to present modern bands under new

> wave's banner that exemplify the real meaning of the music's experience, even in its embryonic state. Music has necessarily become a potential forum for social expression, from rebellion to release, and we hope to lead people back to the understanding that perfect music has its cause rising out of balance and harmony. If better music was allowed to be heard, things could only get better. (Ochs 290-291)

Although cloaked in characteristically mystifying language, such poetic offerings cast the show as a conduit for a redemptive and harmonious sociality realized through the technological medium of television.

However, like the contentious call-in segments on *TVP*, the majority of each episode of *NWT* was characterized by a very different quality of social interaction: discordant, confusing, and hostile. In fact, contrary to the project outlined in the monologues, *NWT* seemed to be designed to produce antagonistic and awkward encounters between the host, featured performers, studio audience, camera operators, and, by extension, the viewers watching at home. For instance, most episodes consisted of four or five musical performances followed by short interviews of the band by the host Ivers. These interview segments, however, produced far more quarrels and misunderstanding than dialogue or consensus. In these portions, Ivers pummeled the musicians with confusing questions about the meaning of life and then talked over their responses. From behind the camera, Jove would interrupt Ivers or the band members with more vexing or incomprehensible questions or instructions. Band members responded by

offering sarcastic responses, refusing to answer, or simply berating the host. At their most extreme, these awkward verbal sparring sessions devolved into actual physical altercations. In concert with these antagonistic interviews, during the performances, Jove's camera work and editing ran against the grain of the music, producing disorientation in the viewer. Instead of punctuating the songs with complementary or corresponding images or rhythmic movements, Jove disrupted the ostensibly "live" performance with unrelated found images, usually short snippets of grainy newscasts, kinetic color blobs, or infomercials, and used other distracting effects like freeze frames and slow motion. Mirroring the confrontational and difficult interview sections, the camera work and editing interrupted the flow of information and served as a critical challenge to the professed function of the show in constructing community.

In a characteristic example, an episode filmed in 1980 features a performance by the well-known LA punk band The Angry Samoans riddled with tense interactions and befuddling formal elements (Vol.6, Ep.3). After a version of their song "The Todd Killings" marked by numerous disorienting whip pans and extraneous images of a baby doll being strangled by someone wearing oversized yellow gloves, Ivers immediately tries to ask the guitarist P.J. Galligan a question. Before he can finish, the host is wrestled to the floor by the singer, "Metal" Mike Saunders. When the host turns to engage Galligan once more, Saunders briefly chokes and drags him from behind with his forearm (Figure 3-2). Turning his attention to Saunders, Ivers asks, "What is the meaning of life?" In reply, the singer burps loudly into the microphone and laughs. Another member of the

band interrupts to make a suggestion, "Wouldn't you like to ask him about Rodney?" This is a reference to LA radio DJ and scene personality Rodney Bingenheimer, who had a long running feud with the band, refusing to play their songs and banning them from local clubs. They had recently released a song that trashed his show and referred to him as a "pathetic male queer." Perhaps attempting to stoke a homophobic confrontation between the singer and Ivers, who is decked out in a purple sequined sash, blue jacket, unbuttoned dress shirt, and purple heart-shaped sunglasses, the audience claps and cheers for this line of questioning. A voice from off-screen, possibly Jove from behind the camera, declares, "Yes!," signaling more approval for this topic. However, Ivers refuses to ask about the controversy and continues to badger the singer about the meaning of life.

Figure 3-2 A still from *New Wave Theatre* (Vol 6, Ep 2)

As the camera pulls in on the two, Ivers whirls around and sticks the microphone in his face. "You don't want to make any true statement to people about how they can change

their lives and turn things around?" With his eyes darting around, the singer uncomfortably responds, "No, I think everyone should be like you, Peter." The sarcasm in his response is more than obvious. After a few seconds of awkward silence, the camera drifts downward and the screen fades to black. Avoiding high drama and affable conversation, the interview is edgy, awkward, and contentious throughout. This low-level state of conflict and discord, matched by the camera work, sound mixing, and editing, is representative of the majority of social interactions on the show.

These moments of antagonism, discomfort, and messiness point to a key feature of *NWT*'s experiment in subcultural television or networking. This seemingly deleterious and acrimonious representation and practice of underground subculture can be seen as a central element of its cultural function, its strategic antisociality or critical negativity. Akin to the diagnostic or nullifying work of avant-garde practices in relation to dominant modes of aesthetic work, punk has often been associated with persistent and recalcitrant negation and a tendency towards disruption, destruction, and undoing of the social field, both on the level of representation and beyond. Cultural critic, historian, and performance theorist Tavia Nyong'o asserts that the "challenge of abiding negativism… is a core feature of punk performance" ("Do You Want" 110). In his article "Do You Want Queer Theory (Or Do You Want the Truth)? Intersections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s," Nyong'o traces a history of the word "punk," extending back before it referenced a particular subcultural musical style and identity, aiming to isolate its association with this form of negative cultural work. Central to this conceptualization of punk performance or

behavior is an etymological and cultural connection to the figure of the queer. As Nyong'o points out, both terms have been used as homophobic insults in reference to gay or feminized men or boys since the early 20th century. In illuminating this connection, Nyong'o expands on their historic, linguistic linkage by exploring their common usage as "figure[s] through which the dismantling of the social world is narrated" ("Do You Want" 106). Such a theoretical synthesis stems from a strand of queer theory based around the "antirelational thesis" that "locates the power of sexuality in its negativity rather than in any alternative community it may give rise to" (Nyong'o, "Do You Want" 104). The "antirelational thesis," in part, draws inspiration from homophobic discourses that paint queer sexuality as "anti-family" and deviant because it is non-reproductive. Instead of rejecting these heteronormative formulations, theorists like Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant, among others, have argued that they usefully identify an important function of queer sexuality, its fundamental negation of the social field (Edelman 2004; Edelman 2007; Berlant 1997). As queer theorist Judith Halberstam puts it, "Obviously nothing essentially connects gay and lesbian and trans people to these forms of unbeing and unbecoming, but the social and symbolic systems that tether queerness to loss and failure cannot be wished away; some would say, nor should they be" (98). Or in Edelman's words, "queerness" is properly understood through "its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure" (*No Future* 3). Nyong'o's work, along with the scholarship of theorists like Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, argues that this form of

cultural politics or critique is not exclusive to queer sexuality and can also be located in punk productions, amongst other places (Halberstam 2011; Caserio et al. 2006; Muñoz 1999; Muñoz 2009; Drew 2013). In fact, Nyong'o writes, "it strikes me that 1970s punk represents the moment at which those specifically male homosexual associations lose their exclusivity and punk becomes a role and an affect accessible to people within a range of gendered embodiments who deploy punk for a variety of erotic, aesthetic, and political purposes" ("Do You Want" 110).

NWT provides a unique case study through which to explore this connection. In this sense, although "queer/punk" cultural work is not restricted to performances of sexuality, it is telling that many of the most incendiary moments of conflict on the show did revolve around sexuality. Playing his confrontational host role, Ivers tailored his performances to provoke homophobic cruelty and discomfort in his interview subjects and, presumably, the audience. In his biography of Ivers, music writer Joshua Frank describes the host character as "an equal opportunity provocateur" that "saw it as [his] task to poke and prod the *New Wave Theatre* bands (most of whom were teenagers)" (211). However, for Ivers, the figure of the cross-dressing, flamboyant queer performer was a preferred and repeated formula. He used an ambiguous and theatrical performance of gender identity and sexuality to directly challenge these bands and make them uncomfortable. As Frank describes, "Decked out in an ever-revolving wardrobe of sequined jackets and leopard wraps, shower caps and feathered headbands, flower-print dresses and Spandex pants; speaking in a vaguely effeminate, hipster patter rife with

new-agey insights and hippie ideals—everything about Peter's *New Wave Theatre* persona was designed to dig at punk's own assumptions about what was cool (hypermasculinity, homophobia, nihilism, violence, an emphatic rejection of flamboyance); to piss them off" (212). In interactions with aggressive hardcore bands like the Angry Samoans and Fear, Ivers baited them into violent or hateful displays and exposed their homophobic tendencies. Rather than seeing such conflicts, muddled interactions, and homophobia as failures of the show's social or political project, using Nyong'o's lens, they can be seen as aesthetic and cultural tactics that activated the cultural work linking punk and queerness. Moreover, they represent a key aspect of the program's form of subcultural television, one that challenged typical understandings of underground community and disrupted static forms of identity.

"Entertainment politicians who squander their talents on dog food and toothpaste"

While Nyong'o presents the link between punk and queer in a general historical frame, the particular performance and production practices adopted by Ivers and *NWT* derived, in part, from local antecedents in the LA area. In order to more fully investigate the challenging cultural practices of *NWT*, it is necessary to situate the program in its social, historical, and cultural context. Southern California in the late 1970s and early 1980s was home to an emerging artistic and subcultural underground that produced unique variants of performance art and performance-oriented music and video. Unlike NYC with its compressed geography and closely-knit communities located in particular neighborhoods, the underground formations of the LA area were spread out across the

urban and suburban expanses. Dispersed and centrifugal, the varied forces that eventually gave rise to *NWT* cannot be considered a singular or cohesive underground. However, the particular brand of confrontational performance art, chaotic formal style, troubled connection to queer sexuality, and unique televisual practice found in *NWT* had its roots in the overlapping margins between the LA art world and alternative music scenes, where nascent forms of video art, punk music, and performance art mingled with the remnants of glam rock, the hippie counterculture, self-promoting Hollywood show business personalities, and New Age gurus and transcendentalists. Within this cultural and social mélange, artists were promoting discourses about the utopian social potential of video and television akin to those discussed in Chapter One. At the same time, however, and in these same spaces, a set of practices of negation began to coalesce as well. *NWT* reveals the marks of several of these local artistic and cultural phenomena. These forms of art-making offered new ways of combining communications technology with aesthetic practice and challenged traditional distinctions between "commercial art" or mass culture and the gallery or museum-oriented art world. As a whole, these sundry influences formed the foundation for *NWT*'s televisual practice of cultural negativity.

One way to examine the influences and antecedents to *NWT*'s antagonistic performance practices and aesthetics is to follow the circuitous creative history of the host and key contributor, Ivers. To begin, it is necessary to note that, although *NWT* featured punk and hardcore bands and borrowed from their styles in many ways, its two principal creators, Ivers and David Jove, were, in fact, not punks at all. Their affinity with

the subculture and involvement there reflects the porous and experimental nature of the region's underground. In particular, the eclectic oeuvre of Ivers offers a partial outline of the blurred boundaries between performance art, glam, punk music, video art, and queer theatricality that existed in LA during this era. In the late 1970s, Ivers was a musician and performer with a few show business connections and a reputation for boundless creative energy and experimentation. He also had an unusual pedigree for an artist that would eventually become associated with the punk and new wave scene. While attending Harvard in the late 1960s as a Classics and Theater major, he had been a part of a circle of actors and comedians including filmmaker and actor Harold Ramis, experimental theater director Tim Mayer, and *National Lampoon* magazine co-founder Doug Kenney. In addition, Ivers had released a few records of avant-garde jazz on which he played the harmonica or blues harp. His first record, a collaboration with vocalist Yolande Bavan entitled *Knight of the Blue Communion* (1969), was an unconventional mixture of jazz, classical, and pop influences marked by virtuosic harmonica solos. Although this record was panned by the press and did not sell well, Warner Bros released two follow-up solo records, *Terminal Love* (1974) and a self-titled full-length (1976) that featured Ivers' own high-pitched, nasally vocals. While these musical endeavors did not translate into commercial success, despite some opportunities to open for high profile acts, they did serve as testing grounds for Ivers' unique performance style. As described by journalist Samantha Cornwell, "Unfortunately, his oddball sensibility, which drew everywhere from barber shop quartets to free jazz, did not jibe with that of the average mid-70s rock

fan (most notably resulting in him being booed off the stage while opening for *Rumours*-era Fleetwood Mac in a diaper).” Such provocative performances, according to a memorial piece in *New York Magazine* by Tony Schwartz, expressed Ivers’ ambivalent relationship with “commercial” or mainstream music and its audience. “A squeaky voice, complex arrangements, and whimsically ironic lyrics were more than Fleetwood Mac fans had bargained for. Nor did [Ivers] make any attempt to meet the audience on a middle ground” (Schwartz 27). Combining musical non-conformity and perplexing performance tactics, Ivers flirted with antagonizing spectators at his shows and challenging the conventional patterns of mainstream cultural experience in these early works.

According to *In Heaven Everything is Fine: The Unsolved Life of Peter Ivers and the Lost History of New Wave Theatre* by Joshua Frank, Ivers moved to California in the early 1970s not just to pursue his musical career, but to work on “finding new ways of combining music and film” (95). His interest in this broad project began with creating the score for a televised presentation of *Jesus: A Passion Play*, a theater piece written and directed by Harvard friend Tim Mayer. Mayer and Ivers shared a vision, roughly modeled on Mercury Theatre, for “a new movement in American theatre, with a reach that would alter the national discussion and broadly influence cultural trends” (Frank 80). Airing the play on WGBH and WNET, PBS-affiliates in Boston and New York, they hoped to harness the power of television in the service of this new challenging and socially engaged type of theater. Although this collaborative TV project was short-lived,

it sparked Ivers to experiment with emerging video and television technology as a way to meld his interests in music and visual performance. After relocating to California, he sought out artists who were pushing the boundaries of their media. Through his long-time romantic partner, film producer Lucy Fisher, and his day job building sets for *The Tonight Show*, he connected with a group of cutting edge directors and video producers working at the Center for Advanced Film Studies at the American Film Institute or AFI (Frank 84; 99). These filmmakers, including David Lynch, Tim Hunter, and Howard E. Smith, gave him the opportunity to score some of their innovative films. Notably, one of his songs, "In Heaven (The Lady in the Radiator Song)," was featured on the soundtrack for Lynch's 1977 full-length directorial debut *Eraserhead*. An atmospheric and haunting track, Ivers' nasally vocals and experimental approach to song writing matched the visually disruptive nature of Lynch's film. Inhabiting the boundary between art cinema and Hollywood, *Eraserhead* gained a cult following on the outskirts of the mainstream.

This successful combination of music and film spurred Ivers towards more experimentation mixing the mediums. In fact, directly through Lynch's *Eraserhead*, he would meet a group of artists that would further stimulate his interest in comingling video and music: the proto-punk band, Devo. The band was an early pioneer in producing music videos and merging art world sensibilities with fringe pop music, including their short film *In the Beginning was the End: The Truth About De-Evolution* that premiered at the Akron Art Institute in 1977 (Smith 143). The video explicitly engaged television, beginning with rapid-fire editing and static meant to simulate switching between channels

at a manic pace along with the music. This film and other videos presented the band not just as musicians but also as performers in their mutant version of a 50s television show set in a post-nuclear apocalypse world. For instance, the singer Mark Mothersbaugh often appeared as Booji Boy, an overgrown child in an orange haz-mat suit with an eerie high-pitched voice, who would come home from a day's work in the factory to various shenanigans. The other band members sometimes played his family in an unsettling and, to some extent, queer version of the "made for TV" nuclear family. Besides screening these videos independently in gallery settings, Devo also projected them during their disorienting and visually packed live shows. Devo saw themselves as artists that were intentionally blurring the boundaries between music, video, television, pop, and the avant-garde. They envisioned a future where "its not going to be some guy sitting over there with a band in a bar, and its not going to be somebody on a hill painting a landscape, its going to be somebody that works in the pop media of our time. They're going to be doing stuff that goes on television and its going to be music and pictures together… a new art form" (Mothersbaugh qtd. in Smith 119-120). Devo combined their multimedia presentations with an alienating performance style in the live setting, resisting any comfortable or conventional patterns of audience-performer interaction. According to Frank, "their performances were often controversial, playing the same monotonous licks for up to a half hour… until the audience became hostile, screaming and attacking the stage" (138).

After seeing Lynch's *Eraserhead* and finding common ground in its experimental visual style, bassist Gerry Casale and Mothersbaugh approached the director and Ivers about covering his song from the soundtrack during their 1978 world tour (Frank 139). During their short meeting discussing this plan, Devo saw in Ivers "a kindred spirit… an electric bundle of manic mental energy: a kind of new wave shaman, a trickster, an imp" (Frank 139). Likewise, Ivers found a group of fellow travellers and began to follow the video and performance practices of the group. He collected press clippings about the band, highlighting descriptions of their use of video technology, and used them to explain his approach to music to people in the industry. In an unpublished document describing his vision for a new form of video entertainment written in 1979, Ivers cites "Devo's experimental style, which actually has its roots in theatrical tradition" as a "good example" ("The Ivers Plan" 3). Devo's musical ingenuity and inventive approach to new visual technologies, as well as their willingness to antagonize their crowds and present fractured images of the nuclear family, offered new avenues for the creative presentation of music and also served as Ivers' first introduction to the new wave or punk musical style.

This chance run-in with Devo coincided with Ivers' dabbling in the more reputable world of galleries, museums, and art schools in Los Angeles. As his *Los Angeles Times* obituary notes, after his work on *Eraserhead* in 1977, Ivers became "increasingly active in avant-garde video circles" (London S4). According to Frank, he had been introduced to these artists by curator Nancy Drew, who at the time ran a

performance art initiative called Some Serious Business (141-142). “The organization produced ‘art performances,’ importing New York’s late-70s performance art to LA where few people west of Alphabet City had even heard the term” (Frank 142). The NYC-based projects being “imported” by Drew and her organization were some of the same types of Happenings that had influenced *TVP*. Described by Susan Sontag as acts of “terrorization” meant to “tease and abuse the audience,” these emerging modes of performance were reformulating the relationship between the artist and spectators (273). However, Drew also specifically supported video art and performance works utilizing televisions and cameras. When Drew became the curator of the Long Beach Museum of Art in 1978, she pushed Ivers further into these art circles and encouraged him to conceptualize his work as performance art. As Frank describes it,

> while Peter had been exposed to audio-visual experimentation by his AFI friends…, the video-performance art nexus was a new animal altogether. The music-film work being done was for the most part a form of montage, editing together existing footage… Drew, a maven in the field, was not familiar with anyone in the experimental video-performance art world who created song-inspired theatre for video. To her, it seemed to be what Peter was grasping toward without knowing the medium existed. To Nancy, Peter was not a musician. He was a performance artist. (Frank 142)

In this new role as video and performance artist, Ivers took part in a 1979 project sponsored by the Long Beach Museum of Art to create 30-second videos to be broadcast

on network television. This initiative paid “$1,500 for a 30-second slot” to “air experimental work by serious artists like commercials between shows” (Frank 142). An early flirtation with alternative modes of televisual practice, Ivers used this opportunity to produce a variant of what would become the standard music video. As Schwartz describes it, this video, entitled “Fan Club,” featured a “self-parody in which Peter was chased by hordes of adoring women as he sang, ‘I can’t stand the fans’” (29). The video itself displayed “exuberance, raw energy, stylish visual effects, and a sense of humor” (Schwartz 29). In this sense, it can be seen as a direct precursor to the visual style of *NWT* as well as a commentary of the changing relationship between artist and audience.

While Frank describes LA’s performance art scene as an East Coast import, other historians of the 1970s southern California art world describe a vibrant and distinctive local tradition (Crow 2011; Donis 2011; Lacy and Sternad 2012; Phelan 2012; Schimmel 2011). The work being experienced by Ivers and supported by the Long Beach Museum of Art, Some Serious Business, and other LA institutions was influenced by far more than NYC-centric Happenings. The work of pioneering performance artist Allen Kaprow, for instance, sought to create “un-art” and train “un-artists” beginning in 1969. Although he had been involved in the Happenings movement on the East Coast, Kaprow developed his own variation, called Activities, while living and teaching in California in the late 60s and early 70s (Holte 55-56). These Activities dissolved the boundary between artist and audience and utilized public streets and forests as stages. Additionally, supported by Drew’s work at the Long Beach Museum of Art and other institutions, LA performance

artists were forerunners in employing emerging media such as TV and video in their work. In their retrospective of the era entitled "Voices, Variations, and Deviations," art historians Suzanne Lacy and Jennifer Flores Sternad describe a fluid and contentious amalgam of stimuli and ambitions.

> Performance art in southern California between 1967 and 1983 was eclectic: the work traversed media and disciplines that included avant-garde dance, sound, ritual, Fluxus, punk music, street performance, and social sculpture... Performance art was informed by opposition to the Vietnam War and attraction to the principles of Zen Buddhism, and realized through new technologies that ranged from the fax machine to the portapak. Practitioners engaged and clashed with one another to build a diverse field of experimentation that was simultaneously indebted to avant-garde artistic traditions and immune to the historical past. (Lacy and Sternad 62)

Artistic work in this period was also oriented around a critique of prevailing ideas about the art object and its commercialization. Performance as an aesthetic strategy was "motivated by a desire to resist the commodification of the art object... especially interested in creating actions rather than objects" (Phelan 12). Attempting to break down the conventions and strictures defining the art marketplace and its attendant modes of production, these "actions" were often confrontational or intentionally alienating as well. Summarizing the mood, art historian Peter Schimmel writes that "new art proliferated as the political and social role of artists, the power of institutions and the art-historical

canon, and the very necessity of the art object were questioned" (20-21). The unconventional aesthetic practices developed in this atmosphere sought out new audiences and spaces of exhibition in a further attempt to transfigure the dominant art world. As art historian and curator Peggy Phelan puts it, "a broad conception of community and audience was one of the hallmarks of California performance art in this period" (22). This meant staging performance art outside of museums and galleries and incorporating "non-artists" in a variety of creative ways. The endless spread of the LA area provided the ideal geography for this dispersion of performance art beyond its traditional boundaries, producing a distinct setting for aesthetic production. "When discussing performance art in the 1970s, many artists comment on the openness and lack of professional constraints in southern California in comparison with New York, where performance art was taking form in the context of Happenings and dance" (Lacy and Sternad 70). Eschewing the solemnity and traditional decorum of those codified aesthetic spaces, performance in LA expanded to encompass a wide array of practices and modes of engagement.

In this vein, the early adoption of media technology was a hallmark of the southern California performance art community and helped shape its unique contours. Like NYC video artists, the ephemeral and live nature of camcorders and closed circuit TVs seemed a perfect compliment to performance's desire to resist the commodified art object. Art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson records that, since the early 70s, "alternative artists in California have looked to experimental uses of screen technology—including

video, television, digital/computer media, and satellites—in order to create new kinds of practices, form alliances, rethink human and machine interfaces, and ask probing questions about media representations and their exclusions" (71). While the Long Beach Museum of Art was instrumental in supporting and exhibiting video art in the area, there were a host of independent collectives and individual artists who looked to incorporate these technologies into their aesthetic practices. Although LA is often associated with the monolithic entertainment industry of film and TV, many performance artists "exploited the fissures and seams within the actually quite fractured and at times wildly unconsolidated media landscape, one that included upstart television channels, rogue videographers, and guerrilla electronic interventions" (Bryan-Wilson 73). In particular, Bryan-Wilson notes that women and gay men in the LA area engaged with video cameras and screens in order to explore issues of representation, identity, and visibility. Groups like EZTV, who organized public screenings of video art made by gay men, and Ariadne: A Social Art Network, who organized feminist media interventions out of the pioneering art-making space Woman's Building, were key components of a local political art movement that utilized video technology as an integral part of their work. These myriad organizations, collectives, spaces, and practices helped forge a unique media environment outside popular networks and traditional art institutions at the same time that they helped rethink the relationship between art and video technology.

While it produced such alternative modes, the general search for new spaces and forms of aesthetic practice was instrumental in another distinctive aspect of LA art during

this period: the blurring of established boundaries between art and entertainment. Moving beyond the museum and the gallery, artists experimented with television, film, theater, and other typically commercial forms. By purposively inhabiting the denigrated spaces of popular culture, such works sought to undermine the division between high and low culture, serious art and commercial kitsch. Working in the shadow of the Hollywood sign, LA artists could scarcely avoid the industrial and commercial nature of all artistic production. As Phelan notes, although "the outsized role of Hollywood in all discussions of southern California" can overemphasize such contexts, they were an integral influence on the region's distinctive aesthetic work (4). While some artists experimented with popular forums of exhibition such as malls and corporate television stations, even oppositional or marginal producers plumbed popular film and television for content and formal inspiration. As explained by Lacy and Sternad, "the phenomenon of having an ex-actor as president, combined with proximity to Hollywood and other mass culture industries, may have meant that it was only a matter of time before performance art in southern California turned toward entertainment" (78-79). Simultaneously resisting the commodification of art through performance and challenging its traditional confines by experimenting with commercialized culture, the avant-garde practices of these various artists built an untidy space for this paradoxical type of cultural production on the fringes between mass culture and high art.

Significantly, this boundary region was the site of multiple collisions between performance artists and the emerging local punk scene in the late 1970s. These

encounters resulted in conflict, mutual influence, collaboration, uneasy alliance, mutant offspring, and at least one or two completely destroyed gallery spaces. As music and art journalist Kristen McKenna describes, this intermixing of cultural zones was nearly unavoidable at the time. Recounting her personal experience, she writes, "In immersing myself in punk, I thought I'd left the art world behind, but in fact, a huge amount of cross-pollination went on between these two worlds… there's loads of crummy art and precious little great art, and when the great stuff does come along it tends to lurk on the very outer fringes of the culture. This is where punk lived, too, in its infancy, and these two extremist factions found themselves in fairly short order" (McKenna 43). The very nature of that "fringe" or extremist edge was evolving as performance artists and punk bands intentionally tested the dividing lines between commercial entertainment aimed at popular audiences, the art world, and the underground. Art critic and historian Thomas Crow, in "The Art of the Fugitive in 1970s Los Angeles: Runaway Self-Consciousness," traces several of these messy crossovers between punk and performance art. As an example, he analyzes a handbill for a 1978 gallery opening for the local performance and graffiti artists Giuglo Nicando (known as Gronk) and Jerry Dreva, both members of the east-LA Chicano political art collective Asco. The artists were known for performance works that involved dressing in drag, throwing glitter at audiences, donning Mexican wrestling masks, and displaying crosses made of razorblades. The flyer invited people "to get down with the artists (or get trampled by the crowd)… Make headlines with Dreva and Gronk as they tear down the gallery walls and take art to the streets. Be on hand

when Art meets Punk at the opening of this important exhibition" (quoted in Crow 55). The event would also feature local punk bands X and the Bags. Notably, this handbill was distributed at punk shows as well as art galleries and even appeared as an advertisement in the punk fanzine *Slash* (Crow 55). According to Crow, the artists "had conceded in advance that most of the work would not survive this meeting of the normally separate tribes of East Los Angeles, punk Hollywood, drag cabaret, and the art world" (56). Indeed, most of the work was smashed or stolen while the bands played (reportedly sometimes two at time in a cacophonous display). The gallery itself was nearly destroyed before the police arrived and shut the event down (Crow 56). Rather than resulting in further organized dialogue or collaboration, this was a one-off event producing an antagonist and ultimately destructive encounter between artists and punk bands, performers and audiences, artworks and performance. Not conceived as constructive or oriented toward producing a future community of artists, such events point to a kernel of negativity within these emerging performance practices on the fringes between punk and art.

Further investigating the muddled boundary zones of cultural production in southern California at the time, Crow identifies the music clubs of Sunset Strip as unique sites of crossover between performance art and punk with a distinctly queer sensibility. In fact, Dreva, Gronk, and the other members of Asco who had organized the "Art meets Punk" event had gotten their start in these venues sharing the stage with glitter and glam rock bands in the early 1970s. Emerging out of the East LA Chicano art and queer drag

scene, “Asco’s way with theatrical makeup and cross-dressing had always owed a debt to the glitter and glam of David Bowie and the English pop world of the 1970s” (Crow 50). Increasingly dissatisfied by gallery spaces and Chicano-only activist sites, these artists “migrated to venues like Rodney [Bingerheimer]’s English Disco on the Sunset Strip, where cultivation of flamboyant artifice and celebration of social deviance were the order of the day” (Crow 51). These seedy bars and dance clubs were seen as oppositional alternatives to the white-walled galleries and austere theaters of the art world. According to Crow, this “informal network of temporary Hollywood clubs” offered an “intentionally low brow aesthetic” and a potential for spontaneity, violence, and destruction (52). There was also an indelible link to drag cabaret, cross-dressing, and the androgynous figures of glam and glitter rock. According to Ron Asheton of The Stooges, “Los Angeles was the glam capital of America” in the 1970s, but it had a dark underside (qtd. in Mullen and Spitz 21). Instead of the euphoria and commercial success associated with glam in England, LA’s glam in this era existed on the margins of the music industry and flirted with nihilistic self-abuse and heavy drug use. It was this element of the proto-punk music scene that merged with performance art in these Hollywood clubs.

Perhaps the most well known figure roaming those stages was Iggy Pop. While a member of the Stooges in the late 1960s and early 1970s, he had gained a national reputation for his self-destructive and chaotic stage shows. By 1974, however, Pop’s career had reached a low point. Instead of headlining arena concerts, he was living in LA and performing various solo acts to disinterested crowds in the bars on Sunset Strip. One

of these performances took place at Rodney's English Disco and was attended by many of the luminaries of the southern California performance art world and several key figures in the later emergence of punk. That piece, entitled *Murder of the Virgin*, involved a near-naked Pop moaning over a single droning guitar riff while being whipped by a man wearing a Nazi military uniform. The show ended with him slicing his chest with a razorblade and being dragged out of the club by the police. Crow describes the event as an amalgam of glam androgyny, Warhol pop art, proto-punk self-destructiveness, and Hollywood's cult of celebrity (52). It also signaled the emergence of new modes of art making and exhibition.

> Whatever the merits of this particular exercise, which came at perhaps the lowest physical and psychological ebb in the singer's career, it points to an expanded fluidity of what might count as an art space and art event, as well as who might make up the audience. It is hardly surprising that Iggy should be the focus for such a breakdown of the wall between the designated art world and 'the runaway self-consciousness" of Hollywood and the Sunset Strip. Indeed, he hardly needed the honorific label of performance art… His actions broke down the barrier between celebrity performer and an audience that had otherwise been forced to settle for the role of passive consumers. (Crow 51)

Taking place in the marginal entertainment venue of Bingenheimer's Hollywood club, Pop's act of audience assault and self-mutilation was instrumental in paving the way for both aspiring punks and disaffected members of the art community. Pop would return to

LA in 1977 after releasing *The Idiot*, a glam-oriented album produced and co-written with Bowie. These later performances brought together the artists of Asco, early art-punk bands The Weirdos and the Screamers, and the remnants of the Sunset Strip glitter scene (Crow 53). As a result of this series of near-legendary shows, the influential nature of Pop's performance practices for LA punks and artists could hardly be overstated. As Crow asserts, "It would have been difficult for any remotely attentive observer of the culture to go down the path of extreme performance without some awareness of Iggy Pop," especially in LA (51).

Indeed, Ivers had crossed paths with Pop during both of his stints in Hollywood. They had first met when Ivers' solo group opened for the glam pioneers the New York Dolls at The Palladium in 1974, around the time of Pop's *Murder of the Virgin* show at Rodney's. Although this concert took place in a much larger and more reputable venue, Ivers used it as a chance to experiment further with his unruly child performance act. Again donning a diaper and little else, he brandished a rubber dildo with a squirt gun inside of it. Peppering the audience with milk while singing and playing harmonica, Ivers again drew jeers and some gobs of spit from the crowd in return (Frank 112). Even his band mates Paul Lenart and Alice de Buhr were bothered by the flippant and outrageous antics. To them, "it all seemed a little too Hollywood" (Frank 112). In the context of a New York Dolls gig, however, Ivers' androgynous "wild child" that pestered the audience and flaunted rock music norms was not entirely unappreciated. Some members of the crowd gleefully engaged him in play fighting and repeatedly tried to take his

microphone. Backstage, Ivers mingled with Pop and found some common ground in being routinely heckled and, at times, forcibly escorted off stage for his disruptive behavior (Frank 112). Pop's gender-bending and self-destructive tactics performed in the marginal entertainment venues of these Hollywood clubs laid the groundwork for the confrontational and antagonistic host persona Ivers would develop years later on *NWT*.

Following the explosion of the LA punk underground in 1977, examples of the mutual contact between performance art and punk could be found nearly everywhere. In general, as McKenna remarks, many early southern California punk bands were "virtually indistinguishable from performance art in [their] use of irony, overkill, aggression, and humor" (44). In addition, many of these bands drew directly on the legacy of Pop and glam style by incorporating camp, androgyny, and flamboyant costuming into their provocative and confrontational performance practices. Inhabiting many of the same clubs as their glitter forbearers, acts like the Germs, Black Randy and the Metrosquad, the Weirdos, and the Screamers combined cross-dressing with aggressive, pounding music and extreme confrontational tactics. These tactics included everything from encouraging audiences to interrupt their sets by attacking them or their musical gear to playing the same songs over and over again. Darby Crash of the Germs, for instance, regularly cut himself on stage and once jammed the mic into a jar of peanut butter in a direct reference to the antics of Iggy and the Stooges. Black Randy, in particular, exemplified this new punk fusion of antagonistic performance art, glam androgyny, and underground "celebrity." In a nod to the glam influence on his act, he

titled his 1979 full length with the Metrosquad "Pass the Dust… I Think I'm Bowie." In the words of X guitarist John Doe, "Randy romanticized the whole street-hustler, drug-culture, criminal dark side of LA… he totally embraced it, saw it as something that was pure and countercultural. It was antigovernment, anti-society, anti-everything" (qtd. in Mullen and Spitz 105). Proclaiming himself a proud street hustler and deviant, he explicitly utilized sexuality as part of his challenging performances that included smearing himself with excrement, physically fighting the audience, and calling the police on his own shows. His stage persona, which often blended into daily life according to many histories of the scene, explicitly tapped into the history of the word punk, which was originally used as derogatory term for male prostitutes on the streets, men who had sex with men in prison, or gay men in general (Nyong'o, "Punk'd Theory" 22). The figure of the street hustler in these performances represented a threat to social stability and, importantly, was reviled and rejected even within the underground music scene. In an interview, Black Randy remarked, "My record 'Trouble at the Cup' is about this fantasy I had that all the male prostitutes in Hollywood would become punks and overthrow the LAPD" (qtd in Mullen and Spitz 149). While Black Randy may be an extreme example of the shocking performance tactics and queer sensibility of many early LA punk bands, he highlights the strain of queer antisocialty running through the scene and its practices on the margins between art and underground music.

Additionally, many punk bands mimicked some LA performance artists and national acts like Devo by incorporating television screens, video, and other multimedia

elements into their performances. Writing about developments in 1977-78, music writers Peter Belsito and Bob Davis describe how punk shows migrated to underground spaces like The Masque, a basement rehearsal space, and more off-the-beaten-path bars like the Whiskey. These venues allowed for even more freedom to experiment with disorderly performances and, significantly, new technologies (19-20). For instance, in 1977 "the Screamers were headlining the Whiskey with exciting shows using visual props in addition to the band's increasingly sophisticated and bizarre techno-shock music" (Belsito and Davis 20). Although some bands merely smashed TV sets during their shows, others screened original videos or projected live camera feeds as part of their performances. While it originated in San Francisco, the punk media collective Target Video helped LA bands like the Screamers produce videos that combined music with short narratives, image collages, or other visual aspects. Somewhere between documentaries, promotional videos or commercials for the band, and video art pieces, these productions complicated traditional cultural distinctions between art and commercial entertainment and were direct precursors to the music video. Moreover, they reflected the general significance given to visuality in this particular music scene. Crow writes, "the art-crowd component of the new punk scene, along with its penchant for competitive dressing-up, made the visual projection of events nearly if not just as important as the music produced by the bands" (52). As is evident in these many examples, the LA underground was home to multiple projects that combined music with performances that were both stylized spectacles and negative or antagonistic phenomena.

“Tonight as we put the great ear of *New Wave Theatre* to the ground, we hear blanket distortion and the sound of millions of shopping feet”

Already experimenting with combining music, video, and combative performance art, rubbing elbows with glam rockers and Iggy Pop, and acquainted with new wave or punk style through his fascination with Devo, Ivers would soon come into direct contact with the local punk underground and its caustic version of performance. In 1979, he met his collaborator on *NWT*, David Jove, through Jove’s wife Lotus Weinstock, a comedian who had been engaged to Lenny Bruce when he died. While Ivers had a complicated history of artistic experimentation, Jove and his work is even more difficult to describe or categorize. In a passage from Ivers’ biography, Jove is defined as “if nothing else, a character: an acid-guru cokehead with a fierce creative streak; a devoted father and gun freak; a snake-oil huckster and video prophet with intuitive mastery of camerawork and editing; a new world cosmic hippie and paranoid narcissist” (Frank 172). A folk musician, writer, and artist originally from Toronto, by the late 70s he was hiding out in California from some legal trouble involving psychedelic drugs in Canada (he reportedly tried to spike a public water supply with LSD) (Frank 172). Jove had already changed his last name from Schneiderman after he had been arrested in 1967 in Redlands, UK along with the Rolling Stones, charged with possession of LSD (Ochs 2-3). Due to this incident, he had been labeled the “Acid King” by the press and, because he had wriggled free of any consequences, accused of being a police informant or agent provocateur by

many Stones supporters (Ochs 2; 4). Whatever the reasons behind his legal trouble, he was then holed up in an apartment in LA writing psychedelic folk music, theorizing about alien encounters and cosmic togetherness, and generally causing trouble. It was there that he befriended Ed Ochs, a music writer for *Billboard* magazine and PR writer for Warner Bros Records. Ochs, in his biography of Jove written in 2012, claims that he sent him to videotape punk and new wave bands as part of his ploy to "banish him to a quadrant of the planet I wasn't working in" after their collaborative music project had failed due to Jove's destructive personality (170). He recalls telling him, "LA punk and hardcore are very big right now, go to the clubs, shoot video of some of the hottest new bands" (171). After a brief foray into these underground venues with his new camera, Jove was hooked both on the new music phenomenon and shooting live bands on video. Tapping Ivers to be his collaborator, the idea for a television program was born. Ochs recalls Jove pitching a "multi-dimensional theatrical experience" with camera work "as untamed as the bands' music" (172; 174). He described it as a ""downbeat, brain-numbing show of blunt-force musical trauma" (175). These visions of a chaotic and high-speed program complimented some of Ivers' ideas for marrying music with video and performance art.

Around the time of meeting and collaborating with Jove, Ivers wrote "The Ivers Plan," laying out his vision for a transformative video and music project. Frank notes that this plan was the product of "thinking about the intersection of video, live performance, and audience response" (231). Somewhere between a manifesto and a business plan, the text combines the sensibilities that had long guided his artist creations with a bit of Jove's

New Age countercultural leanings. Referencing Karl Marx, *I Love Lucy*, and the video game Space Invaders in one paragraph, it begins by identifying television and video as new and powerful cultural frontiers, “the fastest and clearest method of transmitting ideas” (Ivers 1). It also points to a unique underground of “high energy, raw talent artists” and “low-budget” aesthetics, dubbing the scene “off-Hollywood” (Ivers 1). The document also describes “folk video, which includes video artists and real people” with “visceral organic styles” (Ivers 2). Ivers sets this scene in order to propose a new company, Warner Art, that would produce videos in various forms for all types of exhibition including theatrical, “demo-style,” gallery, “interplanetary cassette,” and on cable and network television. These videos would be aimed at a “fragmented and regionalized” group of viewers who “want the energized and idiosyncratic” instead of the “lowest common denominator” (Ivers 5). Devo and Robert Fripp are mentioned as specific trailblazers in this type of music video production. The document uses the term “narrowcasting” to talk about reaching the international “New Wave Movement” on various platforms (Ivers 5). To give a sense of its tone and ambition, it ends by mixing a common hippie sentiment with exploitative corporate boardroom talk. “Let us pray, brothers and sisters, for peace; a large piece” (Ivers 7). An encapsulation of the ambivalent nature of the networking discourse described in Chapter One of this dissertation, it situates Ivers’ artistic goals in a unique, if problematic, light.

“The Ivers Plan” offers a partial glimpse into the ideas that animated *NWT*, although it is clear that the show was not a full realization of its ambitions. For one, the

use of the term "off-Hollywood" highlights an awareness of a distinctive local cultural and artistic space existing on the boundaries between mass culture, high art, and the underground. The document claims that the "New Music Underground is centered in Los Angeles" and has produced an inimitable form of production (Ivers 7). Offering it as a site ripe for exploitation or capitalization, it also illuminates the fact that such forces had thus far ignored it or have been unable to capture its potential. The manifesto's discussion of narrowcasting also envisions an audience that exists on the fringes of popular culture. These potential video consumers would not be fully independent of mainstream sources and venues, but they are looking for products not suitable for mass viewership. Such an audience would be accepting of low-budget or amateur aesthetics, experimental forms, and challenging or controversial content. Invoking the terms "art" and "video art" alongside talk of "mass-marketability" and profit, Ivers' blueprint for a company releasing audio/visual products sought to present works previously relegated to galleries and museums through commercial entertainment mediums (5). Like many of the performance and video artists in LA, Ivers pursued a project that did not fit within conventional cultural categories and embraced the culture industry in an attempt to transform it rather than take an oppositional stance. This proposal makes evident the many marks of the local environment on Ivers' thinking and the early stages of *NWT*.

Although it was not an international distribution company for artisanal video works, *NWT* did produce challenging works highlighting the "off-Hollywood" scene for a fringe audience. As described above, the scattered and wide-ranging artistic and media

landscape of southern California provided a plethora of idiosyncratic and marginal forums for video/performance works. In late 1979, Jove and Ivers settled on a new access station on the Theta cable system based in Hollywood. Already acquainted with marginal forms of televisual practice and exhibition, Ivers had identified access as a potential space for challenging art aimed at an audience of "non-artists." According to Frank, he saw the "regulations on the new phenomenon of cable television that certain channels be made available for public access" as an opportunity "to combine his interests in independent music, experimental video, and performance art" (175; 177). Since the show was not going to be cablecast live, these two eccentric producers also sought out a distinctive setting for capturing the bands, comedians, actors, and artists they wanted to showcase. Perhaps recognizing the distinctive and informal character of Hollywood's bar venues, they chose the Florentine Gardens nightclub on Hollywood Boulevard for many of their early episodes. Typically, these taping events would be advertised with flyers and attract a rowdy crowd that filtered in and out until three or four in the morning (Figure 3-3). Writing in a 1983 issue of the LA punk zine *Flipside*, John Bryant remarks, "The marathon 10 hour sessions gave you a chance to check out at least 10 or 15 bands for only $1" (56). Frank notes that crowds were typically a "convergence of loud punks lured by the promise of good music, free beer, and something to do after most of LA closed down," assembled strategically as part of Jove's "barely contained chaos" (219). Journalist and photographer Michael Dare recalls that "the audience was everywhere.

Behind the band, in front of the band, to the left of the band, to the right of the band… It was like being at a party, and not at the shooting of a show" (qtd. in Frank 237).

Figure 3-3 A flyer for a *New Wave Theatre* taping session in 1981

Producing the show in a club, *NWT* was drawing on other local projects that had utilized nontraditional spaces to merge performance art, video, and underground music. Additionally, unlike a television studio or theater, Florentine Gardens offered a location where audiences regularly clashed with bands in antagonistic spectacles. It was unsurprising, then, that the resulting performances were often marked by conflict and hostility.

“Is it true that you have contempt for many of the other bands on the new wave music scene?”

Drawing on this history of local confrontational performance and the idiosyncratic contours of the local scene, *NWT* was constructed to produce maximum antagonism. Frank describes that “the entire show was essentially a staging area for Jove and Peter's guerrilla theatre” (212). At the center was “Peter's gender-bending persona as host” (Frank 212). Dressing in absurd costumes, asking confounding intellectual questions, darting in and out of the camera’s view, talking down to the bands, mocking and insulting some, Ivers amped up the intensity of his previous musical performances meant to alienate or bewilder the audience. He scoffed at the singer of Showdog and remarked, “You’re wearing a Harvard T-shirt… yet you appear to be a moron” (Frank 213). He spoke French to a confused LA band named The American Martyrs (Vol.6, Ep.1) and asked another if they would be willing to die for their country (Vol.6, Ep.2). He accosted a member of the band The Model about working in a record store and selling music “not aimed at the future” (Vol.3, Ep.2). He talked over the band Church as they tried to explain their opposition to Dow chemical company, later asking “If you have a true message… why do you clothe it in music that might be difficult for some people to tolerate and understand?” (Vol.2, Ep.1). In all these examples, Ivers uses an adversarial performance style cultivated to produce anger and frustration rather than dialogue or communication. Todd Homer of the Angry Samoans recalls, “It wasn’t too chummy, the bands weren’t always getting along anyway” and “there seemed to be hostility between

bands" and Ivers (qtd. in Frank 242). Frank notes that Ivers was proud of the "ludicrous character he had created—this outrageous impresario of ambiguous sexuality; maddening foil for the punk subconscious; lightning rod for all the hostility of LA's disgruntled, grunting youth; nurturing, needling patron of new wave" (Frank 219-220). He explicitly tailored his routines to elicit scorn and confusion in the punk and new wave acts he introduced and cross-examined. In an interview for *The Los Angeles Times* entertainment section, he remarked,

> My role is to be a provocateur… That's why I wear glitter all the time. I know the punks hate it. That's part of my job, to be the object of scorn—to bring out the absolute worst in every band. That's how you create great theater, by testing the boundaries. (Ivers qtd. in Goldstein G6)

Implicitly referencing punk's troubled relationship with glam rock and the sexual and gender ambiguity of its performers and noting the effectiveness of such performances in producing antagonism, Ivers acknowledged the figure of the queer performer and its disruptive effect on social relations.

A 1982 *NWT* episode featuring the provocative LA punk band Fear reveals the contours of this adversarial style and its links to sexuality. The segment opens with a close-up of a woman wearing a t-shirt advertising band (Vol.4, Ep.2). As the camera shakily zooms out, it reveals a crowded stage (Figure 3-4). A man wearing a tuxedo and a toothy grin holds up a microphone and proclaims, "Ladies and gentlemen, your host, Peter Ivers." Standing next to him in a sparkling orange jacket, pink dress shirt, and

sequined purple tie, Ivers takes the mic and looks directly into the camera, which zooms in again quickly.

Figure 3-4 A still from *New Wave Theatre* (Vol 4, Ep 2)

Shouting loudly, he proclaims, “Here's a band that needs no introduction. Four fags: Fear!” The image cuts to a close-up of Lee Ving, the singer of the band. Looking around angrily, he asks, “Where are those four faggots he refers to?” The drums kick in and the band launches into their song “New York's Alright If You Like Saxophones.” The chaotic editing switches among multiple cameras, alternating between contrasting angles and panning between each of the musicians along with the frenetic pace of the song. Near the beginning, Ving looks directly into the camera and smiles as he sings, “New York's alright if you like art and jazz, New York's alright if you're a homosexual.” The initial back and forth between the band and host Ivers is a continuation of a history of tense interactions on *NWT*. While the show regularly featured confrontations, there had been

multiple incidents featuring Fear in the show's two-year history. As one of the show's informal “talent scouts” Tequila Mockingbird remembers, “Peter and Fear had a real vendetta towards each other” (qtd. in Frank 242). Previous appearances of the band had ended in hostile exchanges between Ving and Ivers. In an episode from 1981, Ving responded to a question about the meaning of life by mockingly saying, “stay gay all the way” (Vol.7, Ep.3). The quip was paired with a direct look at the host, who was wearing a leopard-print dress and flashy hat. Ivers' next question, “Does God exist?,” was met with a similar response. “Yes, God exists but he's gay. He lives in a Jaguar on Santa Monica Boulevard.” Ving's stoic masculinity and violent temperament were easily antagonized by the flamboyant performance put on by the host, and the show seemed to purposefully exacerbate the conflagrations. Fear drummer Spit Stix recalls, “Lee's homophobia was just unleashed on Peter and I think David Jove got a kick out of that, and he just encouraged us to let loose on Peter... We gave him wedgies and did mock beat-ups” (qtd. in Frank 243). This particular episode, however, did not devolve into pretend or real violence. As the song comes to a close, random images of office buildings and traffic-filled streets at night interrupt the flow of the performance. Perhaps trying to avoid a confrontation, Ving immediately retreats to his bass amp with his back to the camera. However, Ivers chases after him, asking, “How many years do you give the planet?” He responds, “Six months and a day,” without turning around. From behind the camera, Jove repeats his answer over something inaudible from Ivers and then asks, “Lee, is Fear a rich man's pleasure?” The host restates the question, aggressively sticking the

microphone in Ving's face. Refusing the opportunity for dialogue, he scoffs and says, "Ask me something I can answer." At that point, he simply walks away. Ivers turns to the camera and signs off, "Fear, a very cooperative bunch of guys."

Whether read as playful banter or actual hostility, the antagonism and awkwardness of this scene is representative of *NWT*'s atmosphere of conflict. The conventional interview or conversation between host and performer recognizable to any TV viewer of late night variety programming or *The Ed Sullivan Show* is shot through with friction and combativeness. With questions coming from an unseen source behind the camera and the image focusing in and out in a disorienting fashion, the show matches the clashing performers on the formal level as well. If *NWT* can be thought of as an "antisocial" form of subcultural broadcasting, its presentation of social enmity and discord is central to that project. Additionally, the tension surrounding sexuality is particularly notable here. Both Ving and Ivers modify their performances to instigate each other, presenting homophobic, masculine, and "authentic" punk, on one hand, and flamboyant, effeminate, and theatrical instigator in drag on the other. Although punk and new wave are underground subcultures for "outsiders" and "misfits," interactions like this one suggest they are not fully inclusive or safe for everyone. The figure of the queer, either being played by Ivers or used as an insult by both performers at times, remains an unincorporated element, a target for hostility and violence rather than acceptance. Lacking any closure in this individual episode and repeated across Fear's return

performances and other episodes, the conflict surrounding sexuality in these representations of subcultural remains perpetually unresolved.

NWT further challenged conventional forms of togetherness and commonality by playing against the norms of its medium, television. In connection with TV's association with the domestic and the familial, *NWT* produced images of decidedly non-normative and dysfunctional families and homes. For one, like Devo's mutant babies and "nuclear" family, the show utilized icons of the traditional family, such as the dinner table, the crib, the couple watching TV in bed, and the baby doll, in unexpected and critical ways. Many episodes were randomly peppered with disturbing images of a baby doll being strangled by big yellow gloves (Figure 3-5) or a husband and wife lying in bed covered in so much garbage and rotting food they cannot see the TV set blaring static in front of them.

Figure 3-5 A still from *New Wave Theatre* (Vol 6, Ep 2)

One episode includes a short performance piece where a family sits around a dinner table wearing full radiation suits and attempting to suck up plates of money through tubes. Splicing these images throughout the show, director and editor Jove offered a dissonant experience of these symbols of the American family familiar to any viewer. The dialogue often commented on the domestic as well. In one episode, Ivers proclaims that the all-women band Castration Squad, performing in corpse paint, are offering a "daring family portrait, she looks at she looks at she" (Vol.3, Ep.4). Moreover, the interview portions of the program sometimes broached topics of family and child-rearing in a perplexing or troubling manner. Following the "family portrait" announcement, Ivers asks Castration Squad, "Do you want to hurt others?" The singer replies, "Sometimes, and sometimes is now." In another example, after he talks about idolizing the Hillside Strangler, Ivers asks the bassist for the Angry Samoans, "Can you ever see yourself raising a family? Can you see rocking a baby at 2am?" Finally, as part of his challenging performance style linked to his days on stage in diapers, Ivers would often play the role of the disobedient child, looking to the band members for guidance or discipline. Conversely, he also played the part of patronizing and overbearing parent to younger bands. In a representative example, Ivers begins his interview with The Clique, who featured a 14-year-old singer, by stating "I gather from your material that you hate authority. Am I an authority figure?" (Vol.3, Ep.1). Trying to turn the tables, the singer responds, "What is reality?" Ivers simply tilts his head with feigned concern and asks, "Are you an unruly child?" She mutters, "you don't know shit," as the host grins smugly. In all these examples, *NWT* engaged directly

with that primary social unit for the medium of television, the nuclear family. The American family is both the structuring element of innumerable sitcoms and other shows and the assumed consumer of TV images, so these transfigurations implicitly disrupt its hegemonic role in the media landscape.

This effect is particularly evident in an interaction from a 1980 episode that again utilized the "family portrait" (Vol.2, Ep.2). However, in this instance, rather than labeling a non-normative set of performers as a family unit, Ivers mocks an image that does conform to traditional standards of the family. In this episode, the band Carl Stewart and the Connectors perform a rather formulaic rock anthem entitled "Twisted Steel and the American Dream." With shaggy hair, toned muscles, and surfer duds, the band does not resemble most of the dyed and shaved punks that usually appeared on the program. In the interview after the song, the band members are accompanied by their girlfriends wearing bell-bottoms and colorful striped shirts. In a dry tone, Ivers takes note of their normative appearance. "A bunch of guys who put their muscles where their mouths are and they came with their girlfriends." Instead of asking them any questions, he merely turns around to look at them arranged on the stage, taking in the visual (Figure 3-6). After a few seconds of silence, he spins toward the camera and proclaims, "A family portrait with Carl Stewart and the Connectors and their wives. A first for us." By calling attention to the appearance of three attractive heterosexual couples on the show as abnormal, Ivers humorously points to the unquestioned norm of the television world. The members of the

band are made visibly uncomfortable by the awkward interaction and simply smile nervously into the camera.

Figure 3-6 A still from *New Wave Theatre* (Vol 2, Ep 2)

Here, *NWT* further problematizes the typical image of the family that forms the cultural basis of the medium of television. Calling into question these heteronormative images, the show effectively "queers" the family medium of television. By implication, such scenes suggest the possibility of nontraditional living arrangements, alternative modes of socialty, and, significantly, an assortment of non-reproductive sexualities lurking underneath the over-produced images of most broadcasts, unsettling television's social function.

Matched with Ivers' sexually ambiguous host persona, these challenges to the traditional domestic role of the family form the basis of the show's queer sensibility. In

presenting community as perpetually unsettled, *NWT* works “to expose within the social something inherently unrecognizable, something radically nonidentical, that functions to negate whatever is, whatever is allowed to be by the various regimes of normativity,” including in its alternative or subcultural variants (Edelman, “Ever After” 473). While Edelman reserves this function for non-productive experiences of pleasure and non-reproductive sexual acts, it is clear that this form of negative cultural work is accomplished, in part, by the performance tactics and televisual practices of *NWT*. These examples from the program provide an occasion to examine the figure of the queer or queer sensibilities and their role within punk subculture. Especially in the context of an LA scene that grew out of glam rock and produced so many forms of challenging performance that engaged sexuality, an outline of the tumultuous and formative significance of queer sexuality for punk can be seen.

While the terms punk and queer, to some extent, both index a form of negation or antisociality, there is a more complicated and uneasy relationship between them, as evidenced by multiple examples on *NWT*, in particular the disconcerting use of homophobic slurs in the exchange between Ivers and Fear. As Nyong’o notes, there is a long history of both “affinities and discontinuities between punk and queer feelings” (“Do You Want” 105). As mentioned above, the words themselves and their changing usage highlight this ambivalent and unsettled connection. The pejorative sense of the word “punk,” even before the emergence of punk music or subculture, was closely connected to “queer,” referring to effeminate or weak men, or specifically to homosexual

men. Nyong'o points out that to be "punked" means "getting scapegoated within an erotic or masculinized economy of scarcity" ("Punk'd Theory" 22). In reclaiming this moniker as a marker of subcultural identity, the punk underground paralleled various queer communities who have adopted previously denigrated or maligned names as political acts of reappropriation. Additionally, Nyong'o writes, "the antisociality of punk subculture, while not identical to the antisociality of deviant sexuality, nonetheless emerged within a context in which punk and queer were continuously and productively confused and conflated by both outsiders and participants" ("Do You Want" 107). Indeed, throughout this time period, people often used punk and queer epithets interchangeably to insult anyone not conforming to mainstream standards. In the specific context of LA, the names of the most popular new wave bands were used in ways that drew on this conflation of punk and queer. Discussing the late 70s, many punks specifically remembered the phenomenon of "getting devo-ed" while walking the streets of LA (Mullen and Spitz 91).

> People knew Devo for some reason, so that's what the hicks would yell out of their pickups to slag you: "De-e-e-v-o!" or "F-a-ag!" You could elicit that response just by wearing tight black jeans and a leather jacket with a regular haircut. Here we were in Hollywood, where you're supposed to be able to do anything and not faze people, and the general public was offended by this style. (John Doe qtd. in Mullen and Spitz 92)

Through fashion or behavior, punks were categorized with queers or other "weirdos" and often proudly or defiantly inhabited that identity. In an effort to antagonize the

mainstream or reject their norms, many punks explicitly drew on this connection and played up their ambiguous or queer presentation of gender or sexuality.

However, this correspondence obscures a much more ambivalent and troubled affiliation. From the very beginnings of punk subculture, the reappropriation of the term has often come at the expense of its shared history with homosexuality or gender ambiguity. This is especially evident in punk's relation to glam rock. As shown above, punk evolved, in part, out of glam or glitter rock, especially in the context of southern California. Yet, perhaps because of this situation, punk music had a prickly relationship with the cross-dressing, effeminate, and flamboyant nature of glam performers like David Bowie, The New York Dolls, and T.Rex. In part, as Dick Hebdige in his seminal *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* argues, "the scruffiness and earthiness of punk ran directly counter to the arrogance, elegance, and verbosity of the glam rock superstars" (63). This repudiation of glam through the rejection of "the new sexually ambiguous of image" of Bowie and others revealed an undercurrent of homophobia and a misogynist reclaiming of traditional masculinity in punk (Hebdige, *Subculture* 25). Nonetheless, glam musical tropes and performance tactics formed the basis of early punk style and certain types of cross-dressing and flamboyance were adopted as part of punk's controversial or "shocking" fashion and art (Waksman 73-74). As Nyong'o notes, addressing Hebdige's reading that sets up punk and glam as opposites, this "eliding of queer affect" and strategies in punk style misses the real complexity of their historical relationship ("Punk'd Theory" 25). Furthermore, it misses an opportunity to recognize, in

this unsettled and antagonistic relationship, a defining characteristic of punk style and subculture. Again referencing the usage of punk as a pejorative term for homosexual prostitutes or feminized men, Nyong'o argues that "the asymmetric, hostile, and desirous relations preserved in punk from the dynamics of rough trade do not always produce an open, inclusive punk community" ("Do You Want" 110). In a sense, the difficult and contradictory relationship of punk and queer sexuality is formative of punk's emergence as a subcultural construct or style always marked by antagonism, inequality, hostility, and negativity on the social level. The slippage and tension between these two terms, as Nyong'o asserts, presents an opportunity to explore their shared work of cultural negativity and its problematics. The antagonistic and theatrical performances on *NWT*, as exemplified by the conflagration between Ivers and Fear described above, offer just such an example of the productive confusion of punk and queerness, a microcosm of their inextricable and contentious relationship.

In fact, while *NWT* was being produced and broadcast, the LA punk scene was undergoing a general period of expansion and transformation that resulted in a host of emerging conflicts, many crystalizing around sexuality. By this, I mean to locate the show at a particular historical juncture in the punk subculture of southern California, a moment of transition in musical styles, dress, crowd involvement, and overall identity. As evidenced above, the early local punk scene had grown out of the Hollywood clubs and other alternative spaces that performance artists, feminist and queer-oriented projects, drag cabarets, and glam rockers all called home. Groups like X, The Bags, The

Screamers, The Weirdos, Black Randy and the Metrosquad, and The Alley Cats, to name only a few, all utilized highly stylized stage shows, non-standard rock instrumentation like synthesizers and saxophones, and incorporated other elements explicitly recognized as experimental and artistic. As Dewar MacLeod notes in his history of punk in southern California, "combining the poetics, artiness, showbiz cool, and goofy naughtiness of the New York bands with the theatricality, rebel politics, and anarchic rage of the British punks, a small group of artists, musicians, and ne'er-do-wells gathered together in Hollywood and called themselves punks in 1977" (2). Along with record labels like Dangerhouse Records and local fanzines like *Slash* that often incorporated theoretical and even academic writings, these bands hailing from LA constructed a scene that acknowledged its status as a musical and subcultural avant-garde with a distinct queer sensibility.

Beginning in late 1979, this subcultural formation began to change. Various bands from the suburbs, playing more aggressive and simplistic styles of punk, began to filter into the scene. For a few years before punk became a truly national phenomenon and lost some of its localized, communal character, these two groups shared stages, record labels, fanzines, and other underground cultural spaces. Unsurprisingly, the result was not always a completely serene and harmonious subcultural community. The political sensibilities of a band like The Screamers, who used over-the-top performances to discuss high-minded content like Baudelaire poetry, clashed with the aggressive simplicity of bands like Fear, whose masculine and self-described "bone-headed" music

most often touched on subjects like “Beef Baloney.” In particular, there were contrasting styles of community formation around issues of gender and sexuality. To some extent, the first wave of LA bands addressed gender and sexuality with a more critical and open approach. The Screamers, Black Randy, 45 Grave, and many other bands prominently featured queer performers that did not hide their sexuality. In addition, as a result of the heavy influence of glam rock, many of these early acts incorporated cross dressing, performances of same sex desire, and other forms of play with gender identity and sexuality meant to challenge mainstream heteronormative music from heavy metal to pop.

The contingent of younger, suburban bands that flooded the scene beginning in 1979, however, did not incorporate this type of openness and playfulness around gender and sexuality (Macleod, *Kids* 132-133; Mullen and Spitz 192-200). In general, bands associated with the “hardcore” subset emanating from the suburbs eschewed aesthetics, theatricality, explicitly subversive identity politics, or any supposedly “high-minded” content. This translated into a stripped down, more aggressive musical style and, at best, a vague hostility towards marginalized identities besides the now-standardized “punk,” read now as white, suburban kids with shaved heads who slammed danced. Writing in 1983, Belsito and Davis recall,

> Many kids who were eager to get into this new music felt rejected by the Hollywood 50 [original LA punks]… It was a private party and if your hair was too long, or you wore flairs, or you liked the wrong bands, you were not invited…

> Hippies that dared to go in the Masque might find their hair "accidentally" burned off. Polyester? Forget it. Disco fags? Laughed back to West Hollywood. Though some early punks were gay, they kept it to themselves. (17)

In addition, the deliberating shocking and offensive elements of punk were no longer carefully constructed in opposition to dominant society's normative restrictions. Specifically, as MacLeod notes, "bands like the Angry Samoans and Fear relished explicit misogyny and homophobia, even as they claimed that it was all part of their joke-punk shtick" (*Kids* 133). "The trend of the movement was extremely anti-homosexual" (Penelope Spheeris qtd. in Mullen, Lexicon 227). The transition from an art-based, ironic, and stylized urban movement to an underground, suburban scene characterized by violence and purposively apolitical anti-intellectualism created a far more hostile space for women, queers, and other groups already marginalized by a discriminatory public sphere.

This short historical detour aims to locate the broadcast of *NWT* within this transitional moment in the local subculture. While the ages, artistic sensibilities, and personal relationships of producers Jove and Ivers clearly associated the show with the older, more theatrical wing of the scene, the show brought in performers from across the regional spectrum. In fact, the show often placed bands on the same program that represented conflicting factions. Playing his confrontational host role, Ivers keyed in on these local conflicts and divisions during those shows, exposing the enmity toward non-normative sexualities amongst the hardcore subset. This tactic is more than evident in the

interviews with Fear and Angry Samoans described above. However, due to the growing popularity of the show, some bands came to tapings ready to incite conflict around sexuality themselves. For instance, in a 1980 episode, the singer of the band Benedict Arnold and the Traitors from Huntington Beach turns the interview around and ask Ivers, "How do you feel about gay rights?" (Vol.2, Ep.3). Ivers responds, "I totally support them." Looking directly at the host, the teenage singer with a shaved head uses a serious tone, "Well, I don't." While the singer could be simply playing a provocative role in the style of Ivers himself, the interaction illuminates the way sexuality served as a terrain of conflict between generations of LA punks. In another example from 1980, Ivers asks the band The Stepmothers, "What's at the root of all this violence and hostility?" They respond instantly by stating collectively, "homosexuality" (Vol.2, Ep.1). An incident from still another 1980 episode puts the conflict around queer sexuality at the heart of punk's aesthetic project (Vol.2, Ep.2). Talking to Brendan Mullen, the proprietor of the Masque and local fanzine writer, Ivers asks, "As one of the prime forces of the LA new music scene, do you think art should fulfill a role and social function?" Laughing, Mullen remarks in the third person, "Maybe as a way of averting homosexuality. Art makes Brendan nervous. Why does it make me nervous?" This conversation with a member of the original LA art-punk crowd uses humor to highlight the homophobia that was then fracturing the scene. Rather than protest these discriminatory attitudes or call for unity and tolerance, however, *NWT* merely exacerbated the conflict.

In displaying and inciting these moments of homophobic hostility and abuse, *NWT* was not directly challenging the prejudicial ideas or actions that were rampant within some parts of the local punk scene. Instead of producing a vision of a punk underground that could serve as a refuge for outcasts from mainstream society, it represented the scene as a site of antagonism and difficulty. In a sense, this strategy directly challenged the program's work as a medium for the creation of a collective subcultural identity. However, through the prism of queer antisocial negativity, it could be said that such performance and televisual production practices served to imagine a mode of social being that did not rely on uncomplicated acts of identification or experiences of belonging and consensus. Describing the conventional approach to understanding alternative social formations, José Esteban Muñoz argues in his book *Disidentifications*, "Readings that posit subordinate groups as unified entities fail to enact a multivalent and intersectional understanding of the various contingencies and divergences within a class or group" (115). In fact, not only do these types of analysis fail to understand the divisions within any group, they act reductively to posit consensus where there is conflict and envision equality where there are hierarchical relations of power. To combat these tendencies in subcultural and minoritarian community representation, Muñoz argues for "a critique of a sanitized and heteronormativized community" and a recognition of "the claustrophobic confines of 'community,' a construct that often deploys rhetorics of normativity and normalization" (*Disidentifications* 34). In producing subculture on television for a fringe audience, *NWT*

rejected an uncomplicated and egalitarian vision of community. Without celebrating the homophobia and violence represented and produced through *NWT*, these moments offer a glimpse of a different mode of sociality, a type of subcultural togetherness not reliant on normative understandings of community.

"What are we as *New Wave Theatre* viewers supposed to do with explanations that explain nothing?"

With its alternative model of social relations combining aspects of punk subculture, an avant-garde art movement, a fringe audience, and an abiding sense of negativity, *NWT* would appear on multiple media platforms throughout its three-year run. From cable access on Theta, it would move to a local UHF station, KSCI, partially funded and operated by the Transcendental Meditation movement, an international group following the teaching of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Then, beginning in 1981, a half-hour segment from the show appeared as part of USA Network's late-night compilation program *Night Flight*. Never airing before 10pm, *NWT* connected the "off-Hollywood" music scene of LA with late night or fringe audiences throughout the country. Outside of the mainstream but still within the commercial medium of TV, the show provided marginal viewers with a common point of contact. However, maintaining its negative cultural function, *NWT* problematized any easy or uncomplicated potential for community in these media margins.

The end of *NWT* would come unexpectedly and provide an unsettling coda to the antagonistic and occasionally violent program. On March 3, 1983, Ivers was found brutally murdered in his downtown LA apartment. The LAPD never solved the crime. Given the hostility and animosity produced by Ivers' host persona, it is perhaps not surprising that many people have suggested a disgruntled NWT performer killed him. Others have accused his co-producer Jove of the crime. This information is included not to speculate on the actual events surrounding Ivers' death, but to point to the very real nature of the hostility mined by *NWT*'s performance tactics and modes of presentation. In a sense, his death that brought an end to the show can be seen as the ultimate example of the antagonism indexed by the figure of the queer performer. Just as Edelman describes non-reproductive sexuality as signifying a futureless void or a negation of historical continuity and potentiality, Ivers' death has elicited responses that point to the irreconcilable conflict within every social formation, even those marked as alternative or utopian ("Ever After" 470). This is especially evident in the few attempts to preserve his memory as part of the larger punk community. In a memorial piece from *Flipside* written in 1983, John Bryant calls Ivers "one of the most misunderstood" characters in punk (56). Implicitly acknowledging his homophobic reception, Bryant asserts, "First, he was not gay, he just had a high voice. Second, he was not a wimp, but a strong bodied karate expert" (56). While there is some humor in the words as they appear, this act of rememberance tries to incorporate Ivers within a heteronormative conception of the punk subculture, assuring readers of the fanzine that it was all an act. However, the dissonance

and ambiguity of Ivers' performance tactics on *NWT* resist such homophobic attempts at cooptation and meaning-making. In the short interview reprinted with the obituary, Bryant asks Ivers, "how does it feel when punk bands make fun of you? How about when the Angry Samoans did [sic] some song about 'fucking queers, fucking fags'?" (56). Refusing to settle the question of his sexuality, Ivers discusses these interactions as "part of [his] job." He goes on to say, "I like the unruly assholes myself" (Bryant 56). Then, when asked about the meaning of life, he concludes, "to embrace the universe in perfect harmony while being imperfect and not caring" (Bryant 56). While cloaked in New Age mysticism, this meditation on "being imperfect" without attempting to resolve it hints at the type of cultural work associated with the overlap between punk and queer. In defiance of the memorial that functions to provide his art with heteronormative coherence and manageability, Ivers' words promote a reading that would resist any such resolution.

Summarizing the relationship between the terms punk and queer, Nyong'o argues that both terms "express creative discontent with settled categories" ("Punk'd Theory" 20). Instead of attempting to synthesize or resolve the tension between them, it would be proper to leave them in a state of conflict or antagonism. In this vein, Nyong'o describes "the intersection of punk and queer as an encounter between concepts both lacking in fixed identitarian referent" ("Punk'd Theory" 20). The televisual work of *NWT* in presenting and producing a fractured punk subculture performs this queer cultural function of negativity, refusing to reconcile the warring factions of the LA underground and, in fact, constantly calling attention to the hostile and violent schisms within punk.

This negative cultural work can be seen as a distinctive and defining aspect of the show’s experiment in subcultural television.

Chapter 4 –"We're Not Punks But We Play Them on TV'': *The Top*, Punksploitation, and the Performance of Authenticity

> Said hey this punk stuff's the way to go
> Yeah I saw it on that *Quincy* show
> But I wanna dance and I wanna dress just like them
> Cuz those guys on TV are the real men
>
> - SNFU, "Real Men Don't Watch Quincy" (1983)

> Subcultures are both a play for attention and a refusal, once attention has been granted, to be read according to the Book.
>
> - Dick Hebdige, *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*

Seen from a particular perspective, the story of *New Wave Theatre* fits into a well-worn narrative about the relationship between alternative culture and mainstream media. It is a story about the attempted cooptation and exploitation of an underground movement by predatory agents of mass culture only out to make a buck. Indeed, it is undeniable that *NWT*'s creators, Ivers and Jove, were not members of the punk scene and that they sought to harness its energy and creativity to catapult themselves to mainstream commercial success. These motives are in evidence throughout "The Ivers Plan," for instance. The strategic proposal unambiguously plots to incorporate underground music and videos into the corporate structure of Hollywood and transform them into profitable products, "to translate and package these works for overground consumers" (1, original emphasis). Using the language of the entertainment industry, the document talks of "drawing in the 'cult' audience, and using them as a power base" to build towards mass viewership (Ivers 4-5). "If we can gain a 2 share, and collect on it, we can show profit" (Ivers 5). Rather

than looking to respect the autonomy and originality of the punk underground, *NWT* aimed to sell the bands and artists to the highest bidder in the TV marketplace. In fact, Jove's longtime collaborator Ed Ochs, in recalling the origins of the program, describes the choice of punk and new wave as a focus in purely business terms. His advice to Jove painted the underground scene as an untapped source of profitability. "LA punk and hardcore are very big right now… That's your ticket" (Ochs 171). Stated even more bluntly, Ochs asserted in a recent personal interview, "*NWT* was not an exercise in producing non-commercial art for a few. We wanted to produce a hit show… We didn't believe in time-consuming alternative distribution and avoiding the commercial mainstream." Throughout its short history, the show consistently demonstrated this drive towards commercial success and mass-marketability, moving from non-commercial access channel Theta in Los Angeles to local UHF station KSCI and ultimately to the nationally syndicated USA Network on cable. And they aimed at still larger audiences and bigger productions. Although it was never produced, Ivers and Jove had planned and pitched a feature film based on *NWT* to multiple studios. In this project, they not only intended to sell subcultural music to a mass audience, but to explicitly transform underground viewers into an identifiable target market. In the development notes, they write, "We already know this particular audience exists, we've identified it as a market for this material and the expansion of other product out to it" (Ivers and Jove "New Wave Theater- The Movie"). Furthermore, *NWT*'s focus on violence and conflict as well as the use of confrontational performance tactics amplified the sensational and stereotyped

image of the punk underground in popular culture, crafting an exciting and distorted spectacle ready-made for mainstream consumption.

This reading of the show's history and intent aligns it with an identifiable trend throughout mass culture in the early 1980s. At the time, *NWT* was hardly unique in trying to package punk subculture for the mainstream viewer. Beginning with alarmist news coverage of violent shows and rebellious youth from England in the late 70s, representations of punk began sprouting up in a multitude of popular forums in the United States. In Los Angeles, in particular, "a minor media panic developed" after an *LA Times* article "describing a hardcore scene rife with violence, vandalism, self-mutilation, and clashes with police" was published in June 1980 (MacLeod, *Kids* 111). Soon enough, TV producers and Hollywood directors began introducing characters with mohawks and leather jackets or new plots that involved attending riotous underground gigs. A letter published in a 1983 issue of the punk zine *Maximumrocknroll* remarks, "PUNK IS ON TV MORE THAN I SEE IT LIVE THESE DAYS! Looks like the media has FULL ON grabbed ahold of punk rock, and is writing it into EVERY SCRIPT. You can't watch *Facts of Life* even, without punk being mentioned" ("H.C. on TV"). Network television programs like *C.P.O. Sharkey* ("Punk Rock Sharkey," 1978), *CHiPs* ("Battle of the Bands," 1982), and *Quincy M.E.* ("Next Stop, Nowhere," 1982), to name only a few, rolled out "punk" episodes that included outrageous and violent bands. A slew of films featuring rebellious rockers decked out in studded collars and scenes of dangerous slam dancing like *Rock 'N Roll High School* (1979), *Valley Girl* (1983), and *Class of 1984*

(1982) were likewise rushed into production. At the same time, dozens of bands on major labels churned out records that adopted some identifiable marker of punk or new wave visual style, like spray painted letters or safety pins, with little other sonic or social connection to the underground scene. In a related phenomenon, afterschool specials like ABC's *The Day My Kid Went Punk* (1987) and daytime talk shows like *The Phil Donahue Show* counseled parents on how to react if their children dyed their hair green or pierced their noses. As punk historian Dewar MacLeod writes, "on TV, hardcore punk made ideal fodder for newsmagazines, audience participation talk shows, and cop shows" (*Kids* 111). Framed by some sources as a cause for moral or social panic and others as something merely comedic or outrageous, "punk" became a topic of concern and a recognizable character-type throughout popular media.

This initial explosion of punk characters and caricatures throughout the 1980s mainstream has been labeled "punksploitation" or "punxpoloitation" (Holmstrom 1983; Ali 1997; Barber 2006; Carlson and Connolly 2013). Although its origin is unclear, it appeared as early as 1983 in an article by renowned punk cartoonist John Holstrom about *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior*, amongst other films (Figure 4-1). Drawing on the concept of the "exploitation film" that refers to "both a certain genre of disreputable films and a form of low-budget, independent production," the term attempts to capture the way punk was represented through these sources as a taboo subject or a dangerous or prurient social group (Luckett, Sconce, and Smith 1). However, rather than necessarily denoting a particular set of production practices or genre conventions, the meaning of

punksploitation relies more on the common definition of exploitation, suggesting a category of works that misuse, corrupt, or otherwise feed off a trend or social group for a financial gain.

Figure 4-1 Cover of *Stop! Magazine* with "Punxploitation" article by John Holmstrom (1983)

As film historian Eric Schaefer notes, “exploitation films are usually thought of as ethically dubious, industrially marginal, and aesthetically bankrupt” (17). Keeping some of the connotations of bad taste and the lurid or sensational, punksploitation as a category implies a hackneyed and profit-oriented relationship between these popular productions and their distasteful and marginal subject matter.

Punksploitation is more than just a category of media texts, however. It is also a persistent and powerful discourse. The concept of punksploitation, as it is usually employed, relies on a certain understanding of the relationship between the media and

alternative subcultures. At its core, the term suggests that these representations are fundamentally inaccurate, distorted, or inauthentic. As Lorraine Ali notes in her article "Punxploitation," shows like *Quincy M.E.*'s punk episode are "completely uninformed (or misinformed) takes on youth culture" emanating from a "clueless and exploitative" establishment. In most uses of the term, the works of punksploitation are described as reducing the diverse and creative underground subculture of punk to a few exaggerated symbols of rebellion like neon-colored hair, studded collars, ripped clothes, and aggressive dancing. Relying on over-the-top stereotypes and sensationalized images, these depictions aim to shock or offend the audience rather than inform or educate. Writing about movies featuring punks from the early 1980s in *Destroy All Movies!!!: The Complete Guide to Punks on Film*, Zack Carlson writes, "Of all [punk's] shell-shocked witnesses, the least prepared was Hollywood, who mistook the movement for a walking epidemic of self-abusive, garbage-eating, candy-colored manimals ripe for marketable stereotyping" (ix). As this description suggests, representations labeled as punksploitation are seen as getting it wrong. They involve a process of misrepresentation, a sense of the inauthentic and the false, and a disconnection from, or even willful ignorance of, the group being represented. In describing mainstream treatments of punk in his book *Going Underground: American Punk 1979-1992*, historian George Hurchalla juxtaposes objective or more respectable forms of representation with the works of punksploitation. "Unfortunately there was very little documentary filmmaking done on the punk lifestyle, and instead punk was primarily represented by the lurid and farcical imaginations of

Hollywood screenwriters" (Hurchalla 231). In a more explicit example, the most recent in a series of compilation records documenting punksploitation songs bills itself as "all UK fake punk from the 80s" (*Who's a Punk?: The Very Best of British Punksploitation*). In the discourse of punksploitation, the images and narratives circulating through the mass media problematically distort or misrepresent an authentic or real form of culture existing in the punk underground. Seen through this lens, *NWT* was just one more program produced by greedy outsiders that presented a warped or stereotypical image of punk to a clueless mass audience.

The purpose of this chapter is not to argue against a characterization of *NWT* as punksploitation. On the contrary, analyzing the show and its immediate spin-off *The Top* as examples of punksploitation will provide a key to understanding the discourse of punksploitation and how it has shaped discussions about punk and television. Looking at the few extant sources that tell the story of *The Top* in particular provides an outline of the constellation of ideas imbricated with the term punksploitation. By portraying the mass media and subculture as distinct and opposed entities, with the mainstream as a rapacious external force producing ersatz and hyperbolic images wholly disconnected from the uncontaminated, creative, and authentic underground it claims to represent, narratives like those surrounding *The Top* crystallize a certain resilient and widespread conceptualization of subculture. In this dense discursive construct, television is also hypostatized as a monolithic, homogenizing, and commercial medium. In fact, this particular understanding has shaped and codified a whole history of the relationship

between punks and TV. In this conventional version, punks are simply "too real" for television and can only be captured as exaggerated, inauthentic stereotypes.

However, as this chapter demonstrates, these orthodox accounts of punksploitation obscure a much more complicated and entangled relationship between subcultural practices and the mainstream media. The example of LA punk in the early 1980s, in particular, reveals innumerable and complex ways that such subculture engaged with television. Analyzing editorials and letters in local fanzines, song lyrics, poster artwork, contemporaneous and more recent interviews, and other sources, it becomes clear that the mainstream media was not completely ignored or met with blanket condemnation by LA punks. And shows like *NWT* and *The Top* themselves stand as clear signs that punks actively worked with the mass medium of television. Taken together, these sources provide anecdotal evidence of how participants in this local subculture routinely engaged with television in a variety of forms. Moreover, such historical sources reveal how LA punks responded to and understood punksploitation as a media phenomenon, both as audiences and producers. Indeed, although partial and mediated, they offer insight into an implicit theory of punksploitation that challenges the conventional version. Although many LA punks groused in local fanzines about the travesty of "fake" or "poser" punks distorting and misrepresenting their "true" subculture on television, many others engaged with the shows in more complicated ways. Offering detailed and multifaceted commentary on these representations, punks exhibited a sophisticated critique of the relationship between media and culture. Additionally, some

found pleasure and humor in these images, partially identifying with them even as they decried their exaggerations. Others actively participated by performing on shows like *NWT* or *The Top*, working as extras throughout Hollywood, or even signing up with Contemporary Artists Space of Hollywood (CASH), a specialized casting company that provided alternative-looking actors and extras to a variety of film and TV productions. Rather than seeing these punks as blindly participating in their own exploitation and misrepresentation, this chapter suggests that many actively engaged in an ambivalent form of play with the process of mainstream exposure and its discourses about authenticity.

In short, while the creators of *NWT* and *The Top* may have seen the underground scene in LA as an untouched source of marketable styles and sounds, there is much more to the story. On the whole, by looking beyond pernicious binary oppositions like mainstream/ subculture, coopted/ radical, authentic/ artificial, and commercial/ autonomous, an alternative history of punks on TV can begin to take shape. As media theorist Sarah Thornton notes, “there is, in fact, no opposition between subcultures and the media, except for a dogged ideological one” (116). The various ways that LA punks engaged with television, recorded in fanzines, histories, interviews, and the shows themselves, paint a picture of a subculture that negotiated its identity not just in opposition to media images, but also along with them. Looking at *NWT* and *The Top* as examples of punksploitation in Los Angeles in the early 1980s, the conceptual framework for understanding these mainstream forays into the underground shifts away from simple

notions of exploitation, cooptation, or misrepresentation. The sundry and ambivalent ways that underground identity or practice and the media interacted and functioned together in southern California in this time period may, in some partial way, point toward a new understanding of subculture in general.

"No idea how to be a proper TV audience"

In an interview about film representations of punks, Ian MacKaye, co-founder of Dischord Records and vocalist of the Washington D.C. hardcore band Minor Threat, offers a representative reaction to these images found in predominantly mainstream productions.

> It just seems in most movies, punks are portrayed as these hyper nihilists with ridiculous self-destructive behaviors: like they're crushing beer cans on their heads or frat boy crap, but with spiky hair or a shaved head or a mohawk. It just has to do with this deeply confused impression that straight society has about punk rock, and this largely has to do with what has traction in our media, and that's violence and sex and sensationalism. So, those are the kind of cartoony elements of punk rock that are often central identifiers in terms of punk rock characters in film. (MacKaye 19)

In this explanation, because external observers in the media must trade in hyperbolic spectacle and stereotypes that sell to mass audiences, the real or authentic practices and people in the underground are either completely ignored or grossly distorted. The

superficial visual style of punk ("spiky hair or a shaved head or a mohawk") is used as cheap window dressing to sell the same content ("violence and sex and sensationalism") already available throughout the mainstream. These "cartoony elements," MacKaye elaborates, are "illusionary" fictions that don't allow anyone to see the "brilliant, creative, loving people" in the real underground (19). Taking the argument one step further, MacKaye dismisses even documentary treatments of punk and suggests that subcultural identity itself was somehow more real or pure before the media arrived to document it. In the early days of the scene, "people were not quite as self-conscious about what they were doing being punk. They weren't talking about being punks: they were *being* punks" (MacKaye 20, original emphasis).

Embedded in comments like these are several intersecting narratives about the nature of subculture and its relationship to the media and mainstream or "straight society." In an incisive passage in her book *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital*, Sarah Thornton summarizes this particular discursive construction, noting both its prevalence and persistence in discussions of subculture. "The idea that authentic culture is somehow outside the media and commerce is a resilient one. In its full-blown romantic form, the belief suggests that grassroots cultures resist and struggle with a colonizing mass-mediated corporate world" (Thornton 116). As she goes on to note, these types of claims rely on "three principal, overarching distinctions": "the authentic versus the phony, the 'hip' versus the 'mainstream', and the 'underground' versus the 'media'" (4). By reiterating these divisions, discourses about media exploitation of

subculture imagine a social world marked by clear boundaries and hierarchies. In fact, this understanding of subculture as an autonomous social formation struggling against a hostile majority has dominated academic treatments of alternative culture. According to Thornton, "theorists and researchers of music and youth culture are among the most tenacious holders of the idea" (116). Relying on the distinction between the mainstream and subculture to define their objects of study and clarify their conclusions, most traditional academic and journalistic treatments of subculture reproduce the notion that media, along with themselves, are positioned outside and "after" subcultural practices and identities. In "Defending Ski-Jumpers: A Critique of Theories of Youth Subcultures," Gary Clarke notes, "This dichotomy between subcultures and an undifferentiated 'general public' lies at the heart of subcultural theory" (84). In addition, as demonstrated by MacKaye's comments, the only other group as devoted and attached to these distinctions might be the subcultural participants themselves. Thornton notes that "dichotomies like mainstream/ subculture and commercial/ alternative… [are] the means by which youth cultures imagine their social world" and serve as crucial tools in the construction of subcultural identities (96). The very viability of subcultural identity often rests on this oppositional relationship, so most of the rhetoric for discussing mainstream media is framed by this central dichotomy. In a fundamental way, underground communities "see themselves as renegade cultures opposed to, and continually in flight from, the colonizing co-opting media" (Thornton 6). This opposition between an inauthentic mass culture and a resistant subculture orders the social imagination from a subcultural perspective.

Due to these investments in the alternative/mainstream binary by both subcultural actors and those who study them, accounts of representations like those labeled punksploitation often reproduce and reinforce these ideas (see Thornton 92-98; Clarke 91-93). Discussions about *NWT* and *The Top* have been no exception. Nearly all of the journalistic and subcultural engagements with the shows reveal the structuring influence of these ideas. Indeed, examining the way that these shows have been talked about in a variety of sources offers a blueprint to the wider set of discourses through which subcultures are understood.

Even the rhetoric espoused on *NWT* itself, in both the monologues and the interviews, often reflected these same discursive constructions and constitutive binaries. For instance, in an episode from 1980, host Ivers remarks, “We are focusing on an important subject rarely shown or discussed in depth anywhere on television short of this program. The subject is reality, what it is and what it really means” (Vol.3, Ep.1). This “reality” can be found in the bands of the “new music renaissance in LA.” Working against the flow of most other TV programs, *NWT* “is the spearhead of a truth-push” (Vol.3, Ep.1). Associating the show and its performers with the true, the genuine, or the authentic, such statements describe an underground culture either ignored or not taken seriously by the media. Others monologues explicitly referred to the mainstream realm as “big buck consciousness,” “the entertainment industry,” or “mart-art, spawned in the malls and aisles of Plazaland” (Vol.3, Ep.3; Ochs 301). Throughout the program's history, the comedic pitchman played by Robert Roll and Ivers spoke derisively of

“gherkins,” using the term as a synonym for the average Joe or a conventional TV viewer. These were the people addressed by the fake ads, mindless consumers of unnecessary products. As the terminology was deployed by the show, the distinction between *NWT* performers and “gherkins” paralleled the alternative/ mainstream binary, painting one side as sheep blindly living a fantasy life disconnected from reality. For instance, one monologue explains that “a gherkin doesn't know that before you can wake up, you have to know you're dreaming” (Vol.6, Ep. 4). On the other hand, watching the show was promoted as the only way “we can tell *real* truth from gherkin's truth” (Vol.6, Ep.3).

Continually reproduced by the rhetoric of the show itself, it is no surprise that most commentary about the show relied on similar notions about subculture and the media. One particularly telling example is the story of the first pilot taping session for *The Top*, the immediate successor to *NWT*. Recounted in various sources, most notably Joshua Frank's biography of Ivers, *In Heaven Everything is Fine*, Michael Dare’s online essay “Andy Kaufman’s Last Performance,” and Ed Ochs' biography of Jove, *Freedom Spy*, the cumulative story of this taping session illuminates the contours of punksploitation rhetoric. Since there is no surviving footage from this shoot, its reconstruction through these historical sources reveals the power of such narratives in shaping the way the event is understood or remembered. Compiling these scattered documents describing *The Top*, a consensus narrative begins to form that elucidates the shape and complexity of punksploitation discourse.

While *NWT* went off the air immediately following the death of host Ivers in 1983, the show's experiment in subcultural television continued in another, somewhat perplexing form for a brief but chaotic few months. Later in that same year, inspired by his personal friendship with Ivers, the comedy writer, actor, and director Harold Ramis, best known for his work on *Caddyshack*, *National Lampoon's Vacation*, and *Animal House*, pitched a new music-variety show modeled on *NWT* to KTLA Channel 5 in Los Angeles, an independent station carried throughout North America (Ochs 189; Frank 1). According to Michael Dare, a co-writer for the new show and infamous drug-dealer to the stars also known as "Captain Preemo," Ramis "wanted to see the spirit of *New Wave Theatre* live on" and get "mainstream exposure" on a network station ("Andy Kaufman's Last Performance"). Echoing the exploitative rhetoric of "The Ivers' Plan," Frank notes that "Ramis seemed to feel [punk] was an untapped high-energy trend in culture, and to package it for the mainstream would be huge" (3). As executive producer, Ramis enlisted the help of *NWT* mastermind Jove as director, the aforementioned Dare as a writer, innovative music video director Paul Flattery as a writer and consultant, punk cartoonist and *Slash* contributor Gary Panter as a graphic designer, and comedy superstar Chevy Chase as the host. Entitled *The Top*, the program would be filmed in KTLA's professional studios on Sunset Boulevard. Sakunthala Panditharatne, writing on the *Network Awesome* blog, describes it as a "more polished show" with "a real production staff" ("What is the Meaning"). Ochs, who attended some of the planning meetings and was credited as a "creative consultant" on the show, recalls, "conceived as a one-hour

mainstream sequel to the underground *New Wave Theatre*, with some of the same crew, *The Top*'s expanded marquee included big-name Hollywood stars and a variety of non-punk performances" (189). Besides Chase and Ramis, the pilot would feature pre-recorded guest appearances by Rodney Dangerfield, Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd, who were filming *Ghostbusters* with Ramis at a nearby studio, music videos by Randy Newman, George Clinton, and ZZ Top, and live performances by Cyndi Lauper, the Hollies, and the Romantics. In addition, *NWT* regulars Roll, as the demented pitchman for invented products, and Zachary Gertzman, as the tuxedo-clad announcer, would reprise their roles. As Frank describes it, this was to be "a punk rock variety show, a video hit parade interspersed with subversive comedy, the snarling LA punk aesthetic packaged and polished and made just palatable enough for a youthful mainstream demographic looking for a dose of danger in the comfort of their living rooms" (1).

However, from the very beginning, there was conflict between Jove and Ramis over the format and look of the new program. As Dare describes it, "Jove, who worked well with his underground crew and punk bands, editing in his own private bay in his cave-like home, was totally out of his league in the real world of TV" ("Andy Kaufman's Last Performance"). Ochs recalls Jove waging an "epic Hollywood struggle" for artistic control of the show with "straight-ahead, mild-mannered KTLA, home of news legends Hal Fishman and Stan Chambers and the annual Rose Bowl Parade" (190). Unfamiliar with show business in this form, Jove "found himself paralyzed by the stifling normalcy of the big-lot studio environment and personnel with whom he felt no connection" (Ochs

191). Various creative differences eventually culminated in Jove threatening Dare and the other writers with a revolver during a planning meeting (Dare, "Andy Kaufman's Last Performance"). Despite the animosity behind the scenes, and since so much money was already committed to pre-production, a taping session in front of a studio audience was planned for late January 1984. As was the ritual on *NWT*, a rowdy crew of punk scene members looking to dance and to interact with the bands was assembled for the taping. In Frank's words, "Jove, who by this point is well networked in the punk scene, has managed to pack both rooms with original *New Wave Theatre* fans who know how to party, know how to dance, and have no idea how to be a proper television 'audience'" (5). Similarly, Ochs writes, "some punk rockers, who didn't think much of the show going uptown, appeared expecting more *New Wave Theatre*" (191). Much like Jove's tense relationship with the entertainment industry insiders producing the show, this audience of underground denizens fit awkwardly within the professional environs of the KTLA studio. According to Frank, the glitzy lights, high-tech camera equipment and orderly proceedings conducted by the dozens of teamsters on set were quite different from the usual *NWT* session, "catching off-guard the assembled mulling audience of mohawks and spikes and full-body tattoos" (1). Waiting for the bands to start, the studio audience stood awkwardly around tables stocked with catered snacks and sparkling water.

At the same time, backstage, Jove scrapped Chase's approved monologue and demanded he don "a black leather jacket and spiked Mohawk wig" and go out there and

wing it (Frank 4). The host, now wearing "his punk costume," walks onto stage to a recording of a Cyndi Lauper song, "looking pretty uncomfortable" (Dare, "Andy Kaufman's Last Performance"). Before he can say a word, the crowd begins heckling him and slam dancing to the music. Attempting to fit in with the crowd, Chase yells back at the audience and challenges them to come up on stage and insult him to his face. Responding to the challenge, one of the kids from the audience hops up onto the stage. According to Frank, this sets off a chain reaction.

> A bunch of others jump up onto the stage with him and start windmilling, slam dancing, caroming violently off each other and off Chevy. Unfamiliar with the slam-dancing ritual, Chevy seems annoyed and confused. He seems to take it literally: as an attack, a provocation towards a fistfight… Meanwhile, pushing his way to the stage, Derf Scratch [the bassist of Fear] starts screaming maniacally at Chevy: 'YOU HOMO!'... Derf is just playing around. Chevy does not know that… 'COME UP HERE AND SAY THAT!' Derf prances and slams around Chevy, thinking that they are working in cahoots to create good, memorable television. (Frank 7-8)

As the fighting on stage begins to escalate, the rest of crowd joins in. People charge the stage, cameras are knocked over, and food from the buffet table is launched into the air. With the host bouncing around like "a pinball in a punk arcade," it was "bedlam" (Ochs 191). In the chaos, Chase takes a beating. In Dare's account, "Chevy got cold-cocked and knocked off the stage. He got up, walked to his dressing room, and didn't come out. The

show was over after a full thirty seconds of production" ("Andy Kaufman's Last Performance"). According to Frank, an audience member "puts Chevy in a headlock, the other punks on the stage pile on, and the teamsters start maneuvering the cameras out of harm's way" (8). As security rushes the room, most of the punks scatter and Chase heads to the parking lot, never to return.

The story of *The Top*, as it is rendered in these sources, describes the KTLA studios as an inhospitable space for true underground art and culture. When these separate spheres were brought together, it led only to an unmitigated disaster. First, Jove and the other original producers of *NWT* are portrayed as independent artists with too much integrity and too many rough edges to conform to the strictures of a mainstream production. Suitable for cable access or marginal late-night programming, their sensibilities were simply too radical to "fit" on network television. In Ochs' words, Jove "had conquered rented halls, small clubs and punk bands, but he was a fish out of water in the straight world of staid Hollywood television studios" (189). Like Chase dressed in the ill-fitting punk costume, the underground renegade artist packing a pistol was a square peg in a round hole at KTLA. Ochs even suggests that Jove "sabotaged" *The Top* because "he didn't want success in the straight world on their terms" (personal interview). According to Dare, "Jove blamed the system for not letting him be on stage where he could have stopped it from happening instead of cooped up in the booth" ("Andy Kaufman's Last Performance"). In this explanation, it was the restrictive physical organization of the TV studio and its confining division of labor that led to the

conflagration. Exemplifying the recurrent distinction between autonomous, original, and authentic culture, on one hand, and a homogenous, formulaic, industrial, and commercial mainstream, on the other, Ochs' account takes the spatial description to an even more explicit extreme. "As soon as *NWT* reared its head above ground in the daylight, in the art-killing arms of the studio, it was all over… it would have to be watered down like 'Dick Clark's Bandstand' to be accepted" (Ochs personal interview). Imagined as an attempted mixture of "opposites," "a volatile blend of true punk anti-commercialism with global media exploitation," *The Top* was doomed from the start (Ochs personal interview). According to Frank, "Jove had done everything he could to re-create the raw, aggressive underground ambiance he had cultivated with *New Wave Theatre*," but this was simply an impossible endeavor on network TV (5). All of these accounts are premised on a clear and static opposition between a "true" and original subculture and an inauthentic and profit-oriented mainstream, narrating the show's failure as the result of mixing these fundamentally hostile camps. In this understanding, punk is simply unfit for a mass cultural medium like TV.

Furthermore, the rhetoric of authenticity at work in these histories of *The Top* points to this same conceptualization of the relationship between media and subculture. Looking closer, these stories rely on a particular understanding of television as an inherently homogenizing and exploitative medium. While the new show was described as "packaged and polished" and the studios inhospitable to true creativity and originality, several of the accounts refer to "real television" as something alien and hostile for the

people who had worked on *NWT*. They could not deal with “a real production staff,” delegate tasks to workers in an “actual” studio, or behave like a “proper television audience” (Panditharatne; Dare; Frank 5). In a tellingly awkward turn of phrase, Dare refers to “the real world of TV” in which Jove did not fit. While seemingly inverting the binary distinction between the phony mainstream and authentic underground, such rhetoric makes a specific claim about the nature of TV as a cultural medium. Even though *NWT* had been produced for the small screen and gained a foothold on a nationally syndicated cable station, in the eyes of these journalists, historians, and participants, it could not be considered “real television.” At its core, TV is a technology, industry, and medium defined by commercialism, superficiality, and a static and formulaic approach. In this framework, there is no such thing as non-mainstream TV. By maintaining a distinction between the cult or underground types of televisual practice utilized by the producers of *NWT* and television proper, these authors actually reinforce the idea that genuine subculture is fundamentally opposed to a distorted and artificial mainstream. Ironically, “true” or “authentic” culture cannot survive in “the real world of TV.” In a particularly telling example, Frank juxtaposes the type of studio audience expected for *The Top* by the network with the people who had attended the filming sessions for *NWT*. According to Frank, for the underground cable show, “there was… no audience, just a bunch of local punks invited by word of mouth to party with hot bands and free beer” (4-5). Not only do punks not know how to behave like a “proper television audience,” but even when they are attending a taping session for a television show, they cannot be

considered a studio audience. Such word choice gymnastics reveal how these accounts are guided by resilient notions about television, mass culture, and the subcultures that supposedly exist somewhere outside these forums.

The retrospective or historical accounts of *The Top* considered here demonstrate the conventional manner in which the relationship between the media and subculture is envisioned. There is no doubt that these retellings offer a perspective limited by the structuring dichotomies and conventional narratives that understand the media and subculture as mutually exclusive realms. The discourse of punksploitation revealed in these retellings has played an integral role in the way the general history of punk engagement with television has been recorded. The particular constellation of ideas that imagines *The Top* as combining incompatible modes of cultural production has helped construct an oft-repeated story about punks on TV. In most versions, authentic punk culture has never appeared on television without an exploitative aim or exaggerating stereotypes. For instance, in his chapter on punk in the book *TV-A-Go-Go: Rock on TV from American Bandstand to American Idol*, Jake Austen organizes his comprehensive history of punk on TV around an event much like the taping session of *The Top*, an event he calls “one of the most real moments in TV history” (184). While punks were often “villains on TV dramas or topics of concern on talk shows,” representations indicative of a “clueless mainstream,” the most telling incident that describes the relationship between television and punk was Fear’s notorious appearance on *Saturday Night Live* in 1981 (Austen 171). According to Austen, “on its own terms hardcore celebrated only one

remarkable moment of small-screen prominence, a triumph of authenticity that was a gob of spit in the face of the artifice that usually marked the best rock ’n’ roll TV” (168). Invoking the distinction between authentic subculture and the fabricated images found in popular media, this statement frames the story as one of struggle between the underground and mainstream forces of cooptation. In this and many other accounts, Fear’s performance on *SNL* shares much with the story of *The Top*. Recruited to play on the show by John Belushi, who coincidentally had been introduced to the LA punk scene in part by Peter Ivers, Fear had brought along a small audience of punks for the live broadcast (Frank 246). The band is first described as looking uncomfortable on the large stage before their performance, then everyone goes “ape-shit, giving TV viewers their first real view of slam dancing” (Austen 186). As cameras were jostled and the audience invaded the stage, “what was broadcast that night felt exactly like a real hardcore show,” including the dead time between songs (Austen 188). However, just a few seconds into the second song, *SNL* producers cut to a pre-recorded video, taking Fear and their slamming crowd off the air. If the descriptive words quoted above weren’t already clear enough (he calls the performance “gloriously real” and “a triumph of authenticity” elsewhere), Austen goes on to assert that because it was pulled off the air, “this event ended up being solely about realness” (186; 190). Precisely because the event was a “failure,” it perfectly sums up the relationship between punks and television (190). In Austen’s words, “That short segment demonstrated both the power of the genre and how ill a fit hardcore was with mainstream TV” (183). Other engagements with punk on

television also focus on Fear's appearance, constructing it in a similar manner. Doug Woods, writing in the introduction to a recent book collection of punk flyers, describes the segment as "our televised revenge" on the networks for their "propaganda" (5). Offering an exaggerated account of the damage to the studio, he concludes, "Punk had overwhelmed what was then the most subversive show on television… Even *SNL* couldn't handle that much reality" (Woods 5). Like the small-scale riot that shut down KTLA studios, Fear's appearance on *SNL* is interpreted to mean that this subculture is simply too real for TV.

Most other accounts of the relationship between punk and television have followed this script. For instance, Stephen Blush, in his *American Hardcore: A Tribal History*, writes, "the mass media had no clue as to what was going with Hardcore, though reporters and producers soon realized it made for great copy" (284). Mainstream producers "treated [punk] as a troubling cultural epidemic, airing nightmare parodies on TV sitcoms and dramas" (Blush 284). Others describe how TV "got it horribly wrong" or "brought not only distortion, but unwanted exposure" (Duncombe 120; MacLeod, "Social Distortion" 130). In recounting this history, many commentators have focused on what Austen calls the "two holy grails of media representation," the 1982 punksploitation episodes of *CHiPs* and *Quincy M.E.* (177). The episode of *Quincy M.E.*, entitled "Next Stop, Nowhere" is perhaps the most famous and representative example of punksploitation from network television. At the time of its release, it was the subject of innumerable denunciations and criticisms from punk commentators. Since then, it has

remained a prominent example of how mainstream dramatic television represented punks in this era. As such, the episode provides an outline of the conventions and discourses that define punksploitation. Moreover, it has served as a model for those recording the history of punks on TV.

Originally broadcast December 1, 1982 on NBC, the show chronicles the work of Los Angeles County medical examiner, Dr. Quincy played by Jack Klugman, as he investigates a murder that has taken place at a local punk rock gig headlined by the fictional band Mayhem. The episode begins inside an invented underground punk club called Ground Zero, pictured as the seedy underbelly of LA's teenage music scene. As the credits roll, viewers are treated to a cavalcade of punks decked out in leather jackets, studded colors, chains, and ripped denim and sporting rainbow colored mohawks and spiked hair (Figure 4-2). With excessive make-up, a preponderance of leopard print fabric, and snarling facial expressions, they are depicted as a terrifying group disconnected from normal society. In excruciatingly expositive dialogue, the unnamed punk characters discuss their heavy drug use and fervent desire to engage in violent slam dancing. As the band starts up, spewing nihilistic lyrics about welcoming death and "garbage like the human race," the crowd is whipped into a frenzy, flailing into each other and throwing punches randomly. Although it is not shown on screen, a young punk is stabbed to death in the tumult. Through the objective and concerned perspective of Dr. Quincy and a counselor assisting him in the investigation, we are introduced to this "violence-oriented punk music" and the hapless kids that get caught up in the emerging

scene. After observing a punk concert at the same underground club, Quincy comes to the conclusion that punk itself, the music and the lifestyle, was a contributing factor in this particular death.

Figure 4-2 A still from *Quincy M.E.* "Next Stop, Nowhere"

Appearing on a daytime talk show to discuss his conclusions, he proclaims, "I believe that the music I heard is a killer… The music I heard said that life was cheap, that murder and suicide was OK" (Figure 4-3). Facing opposition from a motley assembly of punks, Quincy celebrates the work of previous countercultures in rebelling in more constructive ways, calling punks lazy nihilists. Although members of Mayhem defend their subculture, explaining, "just because we don't wear polyester and carry credit cards that doesn't make us criminals… we're artists," the concern of the assembled parents and authority figures dominates the scene.

The rest of the episode centers on Abby, the victim's girlfriend who has long blond hair, a torn sweatshirt with "Destroy" emblazoned across the top, and classic

Hollywood good looks, as her parents try to pry her away from the clutches of this evil punk subculture. While she is originally considered a suspect in the murder, the culprit turns out to be one of her new punk friends, who is also secretly poisoning her and plotting for her to take the fall.

Figure 4-3 A still from *Quincy M.E.* "Next Stop, Nowhere"

Unlike Abby who is confused about her feelings, this example of a "real" punk reviles mainstream society and wants to see it burn. Trying to convince Abby not to talk to the police, see asserts, "we don't just look different, we are different." In the end, Abby makes a tearful return home to her mother. As the episode concludes, Quincy is shown dancing with his wife in a nightclub. Before the screen turns to black, he ponders, "Why would anyone want to listen to music that makes you hate, when you could listen to music that makes you love?"

“Next Stop, Nowhere” has all the hallmarks of punksploitation. Throughout the episode, punks are presented as violent creatures defined by their outrageous fashion choices and abrasive music. Their only concerns are getting loaded and slam dancing, explicitly announcing their nihilistic worldview. Notably, they present a moral and social threat to middle class youth, luring them outside of the strictures of respectable society towards a life of crime. While the majority of the program projects serious concern, punks are also used as comic fodder. Their shocking behavior and appearance elicit more than a few laughs from the main characters and other surrogate spectators. During the talk show scene, the audience chuckles when the host describes punks as “so bizarre, so alien, you wonder if they stepped off of a UFO or the set of a Fellini movie.” Throughout the episode, punk is also depicted as cult that uses music and fashion to brainwash kids and turn them against society. Once freed from their drug and music-induced stupor, the conclusion suggests, these punks will quickly return to the fold.

Since its release, this stilted and panic-inducing narrative has been a touchstone in explaining the relationship between punk and TV. As Austen summarizes, “one reason” shows like “Next Stop, Nowhere” are “so memorable to punk fans is that… ‘the man’ got *everything* wrong” (179, original emphasis). The notion of an exploitative and counterfeit mainstream clumsily representing a real and original form of culture underlies such comments. This discourse is reproduced in Mark Athitakis’ “So Wrong Its Right: *Quincy* Kitch,” which describes the kind of “diluted” images or “overblown PSAs” that are produced “whenever television ventures out into the real world.” In his account, “the

episode [of *Quincy*] came up with what might be the most radical, incorrect, and unintentionally hilarious lesson television ever taught: punk rock will kill you" (Athitakis "So Wrong").

This understanding of the general relationship between punks and TV is paralleled by academic engagements with the subculture that see a clear process of mass media cooptation in these stories. A preponderance of scholarly treatments of punk offer a narrative that starts with authentic forms of creativity or resistance on the margins of society and ends with assimilation into the mainstream, spelling the death of the subculture. Social anthropologist Dylan Clark identifies what he calls "a discourse of subculture, one that is recognized by academics and youth alike," in which subcultures "become commodified and typecast" as they are turned into "the discursive object of the mass media" (230). In this regard, television representations are regarded as part of a process by which "punk was caught, caged, and placed in the subcultural zoo for all to see" (Clark 223). While Clark claims this narrative is misleading, he goes on to describe more radical or "hardcore" subcultures that "choose to avoid spectacle-based interaction with dominant culture" (232). Such arguments reinforce the notion that some subcultures remain more "real" or politically resistant by avoiding interaction with the media. Sociologist Ryan Moore reproduces this same distinction by detailing how hardcore punks created a "culture of authenticity" in an attempt "to insulate themselves from the culture industry and consumer lifestyles in their search for expressive sincerity and anticommercial purity" (323). Both of these texts imagine a social world marked by clear

lines between the mainstream and the underground, a vision sustained by narratives of a punk media blackout or TV screens that could not possibly handle authentic subcultural expression.

Embedded in these historical, academic, and journalistic sources is a conception of punk as an autonomous and embattled underground preyed upon by a static and sensationalizing popular medium, television. This structuring vision of television as a fixed and homogenizing corporate force ignores the complexity and diversity of forms of televisual production and representation. The story of shows like *Quincy M.E.* and even *The Top* get reduced to mere cartoonish misrepresentations created by boardroom stiffs. Programs like *NWT* get written out of "the real world of TV" altogether. Furthermore, such accounts that "position the media in opposition to and after the fact of subculture" can obscure or dismiss as illegitimate forms of subcultural practice that deviate from this script (Thornton 9). As Thornton notes, "the binary thinking which accompanies references to the mainstream is entangled in a series of value judgments, political associations, and journalistic clichés which hardly do justice to the youth cultures in questions" (114). "Doing justice" to the actual complexity of this relationship between subculture and media, however, involves a host of seeming contradictions and uncertain evidence found in scattered anecdotes. It is my contention, though, that an alternative history of punks on TV or punk television can be glimpsed by focusing on how some punks actually engaged with television and talked about their experiences. Although quantitative or direct studies of subcultural reception of punksploitation in Los Angeles

do not exist, there are bits and pieces of the story scattered throughout fanzines, flyers, interviews, some mainstream publications, biographies, and the TV shows themselves. While this account is not meant to provide "the real or true story" behind the "lies," it does offer an alternative version. And, significantly, this version makes possible a different understanding of the relationship between subculture and the media, one that directly challenges the conventional discourse of punksploitation and its embedded schema of authenticity.

"Quincy Punks" and "Authentic, Experienced Extras"

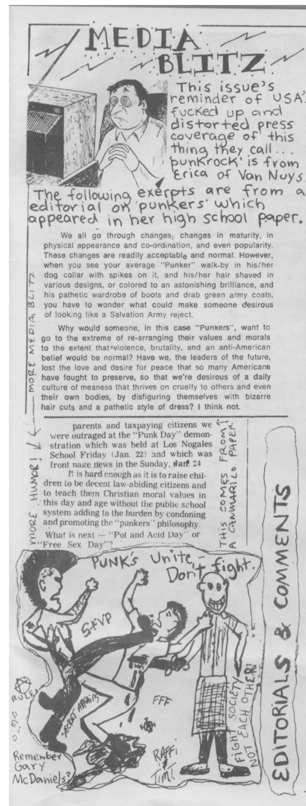
When stories about punk began appearing in U.S. newspapers, popular magazines, network television programs, and Hollywood films in the early 1980s, they were not simply ignored or dismissed by members of the subculture. In fact, a veritable explosion of subcultural discourse about the phenomenon followed in underground fanzines, song lyrics, liner notes, and flyers. In reference to television in particular, discussions about the 1982 episodes of *Quincy M.E.* and *CHiPs* that portrayed punks as violent threats to impressionable youths and the comparable episode of *The Phil Donahue Show* from the same year dominated letters sections and editorials in a number of prominent national zines, including *Maximumrocknroll* and *Touch and Go*, for months on end. Songs like SNFU's "Real Men Don't Watch Quincy" (1983) and Sacred Order's "Erik Estrada" (1982), amongst countless others, lyrically engaged with the phenomenon of national television coverage of punk. Throughout the nation, it was clear that punks

took notice of their status as a “hot topic” in the media. Living in the entertainment capital of the country, LA-area punks paid particularly close attention to these treatments of their subculture in the media and felt specifically implicated by those representations. Besides innumerable discussions in zines and other publications, local punks adorned flyers with newspaper headlines, *TV Guide* clippings, and other references to their new found role as a public menace (Figure 4-4, for example).

Figure 4-4 Flyer with *TV Guide* clippings from southern California (1982)

A host of local bands referenced mainstream media coverage in their songs, exemplified by Peace Corpse’s 1983 record *Quincy’s Lament* that included not one but two songs directly discussing the TV show, the title track and “Jocko Macho (Quincy Punks).” Several underground publications in southern California even tracked images or engagements with punk across a variety of popular platforms. *We Got Power*, a zine

published between 1981-1984 in Santa Monica, had a regular feature named after the Germs song "Media Blitz" (Figure 4-5, Figure 4-6).



MEDIA BLITZ

This issue's reminder of USA's fucked up and distorted press coverage of this thing they call... punkrock' is from Erica of Van Nuys.

The following exerpts are from a editorial on 'punkers' which appeared in her high school paper.

We all go through changes; changes in maturity, in physical appearance and co-ordination, and even popularity. These changes are readily acceptable and normal. However, when you see your average "Punker" walk-by in his/her dog collar with spikes on it, and his/her hair shaved in various designs, or colored to an astonishing brilliance, and his pathetic wardrobe of boots and drab green army coats, you have to wonder what could make someone desirous of looking like a Salvation Army reject.

Why would someone, in this case "Punkers", want to go to the extreme of re-arranging their values and morals to the extent that violence, brutality, and an anti-American belief would be normal? Have we, the leaders of the future, lost the love and desire for peace that so many Americans have fought to preserve, so that we're desirous of a daily culture of meaness that thrives on cruelty to others and even their own bodies, by disfiguring themselves with bizarre hair cuts and a pathetic style of dress? I think not.

MORE MEDIA BLITZ

MORE HUMOR!

parents and taxpaying citizens we were outraged at the "Punk Day" demonstration which was held at Los Nogales School Friday (Jan. 22) and which was front page news in the Sunday, Jan. 24

It is hard enough as it is to raise children to be decent law-abiding citizens and to teach them Christian moral values in this day and age without the public school system adding to the burden by condoning and promoting the "punkers" philosophy.

What is next — "Pot and Acid Day" or "Free Sex Day"?

THIS COMES FROM A CAMARILLO PAPER!

EDITORIALS & COMMENTS

Figure 4-5 "Media Blitz" section from *We Got Power!* #3 (May 1982)

This section consisted of a collage of newspaper articles, TV guide clippings, magazine snippets, church bulletins, handbills, and hand-written accounts of other productions that all referenced punks in some form or fashion. Sometimes sent in by readers, these clippings were often introduced with critical commentary ("This month's reminder of distorted media coverage of punk is another big laugh") or defaced with crude pen drawings (Markey and Schwartz 232). Writing in 1983 about their experiences in the LA

punk scene, Craig Lee and Shreader recall that by “late 1980… media misrepresentation became a weekly event to be explained to disbelieving parents and authorities” (50).

Figure 4-6 "Media Blitz" section from *We Got Power* #5 (May 1983)

Looking at surviving ephemera from the LA-area punk scene of the early 1980s, it is clear that punksploitation, in all its guises, was a dominant concern.

At first glance, the overwhelming majority of references to these representations fit the conventional narrative about punksploitation, describing them as illegitimate, distorted, exaggerated, stereotypical, exploitative, inauthentic, and potentially damaging or harmful to the scene. As Dewar MacLeod asserts, “Hardcore punks in southern California had strong opinions about their portrayal by the media” (*Kids* 111). And a preponderance of these strong opinions was negative, invoking many of the same

structuring binaries common in other discourses about subculture and the media. As a regular bi-monthly publication with a large local circulation in LA and a lengthy letters section in every issue, *Flipside* provided an expansive forum for discussions of media coverage. Their yearly poll from 1983 lists "Punk Rock on TV" as one of the items under "What pissed you off the most in 1983" ("Polls: 1983"). Columnist Susan Buckner writes in issue #37, "It seems that all of a sudden there's been a rash of films and TV shows about punk rock. And they've all got one thing in common—all of them do their best to slag off punk rock as a vicious, violent quasi-cult, out to warp and corrupt today's innocent youth." A letter from "Linda Culver City" in issue #38 explains, "It's obvious that a quick way to boost faltering TV ratings is to stick an explosive, sardonic punk episode on a show." In a very direct example, a letter from "Jeff Violent Deeds" in *We Got Power* #3 published in May 1982 announces, "Today I saw *The Phil Donahue Show* with Parents against Punkers. I feel that punks were not represented right" (Markey and Schwartz 237). Taken together, these comments express an explicit and implicit critique of mainstream media images as illegitimate and sensationalizing. Additionally, although LA punks had long dismissed or vilified television as a homogenizing tool of the mainstream, a manifestation of Big Brother in your living room, the phenomenon of punksploitation crystalized many of these critiques and focused them on TV's fraudulent and damaging misrepresentations of their underground sphere. Derisive remarks about punksploitation dovetailed with a general disparagement of television as a stand-in for a bland and oppressive mass culture that was common throughout the local scene. An

editorial from *Flipside* #38 by Al Flipside calls out "MTV burnouts, who just soak up the fast moving images and nothing else," for instance. A letter in issue #41 argues, "the new toys you must have bring Big Brother right into your living room (Computer Telex's. Cable T.V.)" ("A Comfortable Prison…"). These ideas were echoed in song lyrics by a number of prominent LA bands, most famously by Black Flag in "TV Party" (1982). These lyrics sarcastically exclaim, "We've got nothing better to do/ Than watch TV and have a couple of brews… I wouldn't be without my TV for a day/ Or even a minute/ Don't even bother to use my brain/ There's nothing left in it." Even earlier, the Germs sang "I've got television/ I've got supervision/ No decisions for you" in their 1979 track "Media Blitz." This repeated image of the mindless TV viewer helped shape the idea that the medium was fundamentally superficial and only capable of producing artificial entertainment for social pawns.

Moreover, while they were regarded as disconnected and false, many LA punks also saw punksploitation works as directly damaging to their subculture. As punk art historian David Ensminger writes, "blaming the media for violence in the punk scene has a long legacy, dating back to the earliest days of coverage" (231). Writing about LA in particular, MacLeod notes, "Punks accused the media of spreading the wrong word, of instigating violence, bringing in violent types and inciting the wrath of the police and other authorities… inducing violence-prone lunkheads to become punks" (*Kids* 112). The notion that media exposure invited unwanted police attention and drew mainstream TV viewers into the scene runs throughout commentary on punksploitation. A letter from Jay

Toxic Shocks in *Flipside* #39 reads, "I'm sick to death of clubs closing down because 'concerned' citizens don't want 'destructive, suicidal, and murderous' punks in the area. The public is intimidated by punks because of such shows as *Quincy*." In a more extreme example, Jack Trikes from Orange County, citing *Quincy M.E.* and *CHiPs* specifically, remarks in a letter to *Flipside*, "television has helped ruin many of our lives." Getting more specific about these negative effects in a more recent interview, Mike Ness, the singer and guitarist of LA band Social Distortion remarks, "the media… stereotyped us so we'd get those kind of people coming to our shows thinking we were about just 'fuck everything and everyone up' and that violence was cool" (qtd. in Mullen 214). By linking media images to such problems, punks called attention to the material power of representations, implicitly explaining how images and mediated discourses shape the social world. Rather than merely dismissing these TV shows as phony and weightless entertainment, LA punks described a host of harmful results that followed in the wake of *Quincy M.E.*, *CHiPs*, and the various daytime talk programs that discussed punk as a cause for moral panic.

In fact, many people started using the term "Quincy punk" to refer to violent and sensational newcomers supposedly drawn to the scene by television portrayals. A letter from Ronald Thatcher in *Maximumrocknroll* decries this "new media-trained phenomenon known as 'Quincy Punks'" as a menace, routinely starting fights at shows and getting venues closed down. In *Flipside* #41, a cartoon stick figure was described as "more true to life than a Quincy, a Quincy being the lowest life form in society today"

(“Polls: 1983”). While offering an alternative moniker for “Quincy punks,” another letter published in *Maximumrocknroll* about violent punks at shows summarizes this understanding of the effect of media images. Detailing a recent violent incident at a concert, the letter continues:

> These wasted assholes had the strong urge to be real “punk,” because they saw it on TV that’s how punkers acted… My name for these people is “video punks.” These are the people who were watching *Quincy* one week and slam dancing the next. They got all of these violent ideas from television and other media outlets. (Taylor, “Southern California Scene Report”)

This notion that negative and violent elements in the punk scene were the result of exaggerated and sensationalizing TV images challenges the neutrality or irrelevance of media images, regarding them as having very real effects. However, such comments reproduce the notion that there are two distinct kinds of people, “real” punks and Quincy punks or “posers.” These phony puppets of the media are seen as threats to the authentic underground culture, bolstering the idea that media images are disconnected from authentic subculture and solely sensationalizing.

Indeed, the threats posed by TV representations were sometimes described as part of a conspiracy on the part of the mainstream to neutralize the political power of an emerging youth movement. As the Hayward, California band Social Unrest proclaims in an interview in *Maximumrocknroll*, “If the masses would get to know some punks, if they read some lyrics or something, they might realize what the punks are trying to do… [but]

the portrayals are twisted." Again, media images here serve to hide the truth or distort it, intentionally defusing the political message of the scene. Exemplifying this argument, Jonathan Formula wrote in 1983, "The liberal press, on the other hand, tried to defang the beast, ignore the political and cultural cries for change… absorb an angry fury of ferment and transform it into a nice, safe, consumable fad based on nothing more weighty than hairdos, fashion, and the revival of various retro musical styles" (6). In this comment, punksploitation acts as a clear force of cooptation, counteracting the radical nature of the movement by turning it into just another spectacle for the consumer marketplace. Recognizing it as a threat to dominant social and political institutions, a nameless and faceless mainstream intervenes through its emissaries in the media. Such discussions anticipate later academic texts that regard media representations as part of the process by which subcultures are turned into harmless "lifestyle choices."

Understanding punksploitation as a concerted attack on their subculture, there is evidence that punks in southern California and elsewhere struggled against these perceived misrepresentations by the media. For one, they clearly utilized pubic forums like local zines to critique the exaggerations of television and their damaging effects, sparking discussion and awareness. In many of these screeds, LA punks labored to call attention to the positive sides of their scene, attempting to combat these portrayals offered by the mainstream. Buckner's column "A Punk Rock Poll to Show Your Mom" from *Flipside* #37 illustrates this technique. After denouncing most TV shows about punks as "excessively violent," the author attempts to disprove this "punk stereotype" by charting

the number of times violence is mentioned in the lyrics found in her personal record collection (Buckner, "A Punk Rock"). At the end of the study, she asserts, "Obviously the writers of those TV shows never stopped to listen carefully to the music… Punk is a totally positive, life-affirming brand of music" (Buckner, "A Punk Rock"). Interestingly, Buckner utilizes a type of quantitative or semi-scientific study to build her case, invoking the discourse of objectivity to push her claim. Implicit in this writing is a demand for accurate representation from media institutions. Other commentators called for more direct and traditional forms of protest against punksploitation. A short editorial note in *Flipside* #39 following a letter about *Quincy* asks, "How many of you out there wrote to the network and bitched? What? I can't hear you." A number of zines, including *Maximumrocknroll* carried a letter addressed to NBC executive Brandon Tartikoff about the distorted image of punks presented by that network. Written by an interviewee from the "Parents of Punkers" episode of *The Phil Donahue Show*, this lengthy letter reproaches the network, "why not portray punk authentically, rather than taking some cheap shot. The more dumb things you show on TV, the more dumb ideas you're giving to the kids" ("A Letter to NBC"). As the reference to a possible authentic representation reveals, these calls for fairness and accuracy in showing the positive side of the scene continue to rely on the distinction between the images on TV and the underlying "real" culture.

In his article "Social Distortion: The Rise of Suburban Punk Rock in Los Angles," MacLeod catalogs many similar complaints and protests about being "misunderstood and

exploited" by the media (131). According to MacLeod, counter-intuitively, these references to the media reveal, not an autonomous underground zone at war with the mainstream, but a subculture preoccupied with mass culture. He argues that LA punks were concerned with these supposed misrepresentations because they served a key function in the production of their subcultural identity. "Punks cared so much how the dominant media represented them that hardcore punk became thoroughly suffused with the mass media and mass culture which became the base line opposition" (MacLeod, "Social Distortion" 131-132). By depicting these images as false and critiquing their distortions, punks were actually laying claim to a special form of authentic identity. In MacLeod's words, "The media coverage, while issuing a threat to exclusivity, also placed 'real' hardcore punks in a very exclusive and authoritative position… Distancing oneself from the various mass media depictions of hardcore qualified one as an authentic hardcore punk rocker" ("Social Distortion" 135). This type of identification through negation or counteridentification against the mainstream media is a key feature of subculture, according to MacLeod and others, and serves as evidence that they do not exist "outside" or "before" the media. Subcultural identities require constant reference to the imagined conventional and majoritarian lifestyle they reject. Talking about dance club culture in England, Thornton observes that members of the subculture "were fascinated with their own representation and, however much they condemned the tabloids, they reveled in the attention and boasted about sensational excess" (120). This enthusiasm for their own misrepresentation reveals the necessity of the negative image of the mainstream

for envisioning their place in the social world. As Thornton argues, the image a hostile mainstream is "central to the process of subcultural formation" (117). Writing specifically about punk, Moore asserts that underground scenes that see themselves as autonomous sites of resistance are actually "formed in oppositional relation to commercial media and consumer culture" (317). Indeed, the denunciations of bogus "Quincy punks" and "video punks", the assertions of a "life-affirming" musical style to counteract media stereotypes, and the vehement protests against misrepresentation all function to draw clear social boundaries between an authentic subculture and the mainstream.

These critical indictments of network television also served to portray punks as being mistreated, oppressed, and vilified by society as a whole. Being depicted as pariah by the press was seen as evidence that punks were an identifiable group singled out by the mainstream for exploitation and maltreatment. This is especially evident in comments like those of Linda from Culver City in *Flipside* #37 who proclaims, "Yes, the media's finally found a new scapegoat." This rhetoric is echoed in the letter to NBC published in *Maximumrocknroll* that depicts punk as a convenient "scapegoat for every problem, ignoring of course, the real causes" ("A Letter to NBC"). Claiming to be targeted by the powerful institutions of the corporate media, these accounts offer punks a grandiose sense of their own status as a threat to the status quo and a narrative that understands their existence itself as an act of defiance. In fact, Thornton argues in reference to other subcultures, "mass media misunderstanding is often a goal, not just an effect of youth

culture's pursuits" (120). Seeking out evidence of their own oppression by the media and even perhaps attempting to spark it, LA punks were utilizing what media theorist Daniel Traber calls tactics of "self-marginalization." These material and symbolic acts attempt to construct an alternative subjectivity by taking up a marginal or oppressed physical and social position. Traber argues that LA punks, in particular, "pursued a life based on [the racialized] inner-city underclass denied access to the American dream... In doing this they hoped to tap into a more 'authentic' lifestyle—equivalent to 'real,' 'hard,' 'tough,' all those qualities associated with a life on city streets" (31). While he specifically discusses symbolic and material practices like tattooing, moving into communal squats, and dumpster-diving, claims that envision media images as oppressive assaults on their subculture can also be understood in this context. By denouncing "media lies" and utilizing the vocabulary of oppression and rights violations, punks implicitly aligned themselves with a long line of historically marginalized Others that have suffered at the hands of the media. The problem, of course, is that the members of this subculture were predominately white and middle class, choosing to dress and act a certain way that garnered media attention. Even more problematically, these acts of self-marginalization rely on fantasies about the authenticity of racialized Others, who are portrayed as living "more real" lives in the inner-city than those found in the suburbs. Rather than any kind of solidarity or radical transgression of boundaries, "what is revealed is the way LA punks rely on the center's discourses for their sense of marginality" (Traber 47). Discussions of punksploitation that depicted punks as besieged by an oppressive and

manipulative mass media served as key tools of identity formation, helping construct a more "authentic" and "hard" sense of self, one that relied upon problematic ideas about marginalized Others.

In addition, these denunciations of the mass media worked to construct a particular understanding of the history of the LA punk scene. The rampant attacks on "Quincy punks" brought into the scene by mainstream media coverage produce another key binary in the discourse of subculture, what Gary Clarke calls the "original/hangers-on distinction" (87). By distinguishing themselves from phony TV images, "the original authentic members of a subculture" emerge as "before" and "under" the media (Clarke 91). MacLeod contends that this form of counteridentification works to define a limiting form of subcultural identity and a static narrative moving from "real" subculture to cooptation or incorporation in the mainstream. "By developing a mythology of the mass media conversion of subcultural signs into 'mass-produced objects,' punks and their first chroniclers have attempted to freeze a moment of pure punk, of true punk identity or experience" (MacLeod, "Social Distortion" 123). By classifying some people as posers, marking some bands and scenes as "original," and imagining a subculture's timeline as divided between "before mainstream coverage" and "after," the possibility of a pure and authentic social formation can be imagined. In LA, this "original/ hangers-on distinction" often paralleled the division between the so-called "original" scene, which was art-oriented, primarily located in Hollywood, open to a diversity of musical styles, and more theatrical and the violent, homogenous, suburban hardcore scene that took over starting in

1980. In a seeming contradiction, this distinction seems to cut both ways. On one hand, *Quincy M.E.* and other shows were seen as responsible for bringing in the hardcore kids who "are just pushing cliché violence that they see on TV," as one commentator in *Flipside* put it ("Penelope Spheeris"). Acting out media stereotypes, these phony posers killed off the "original" scene and its true creativity or political potential. On the other hand, the development of the hardcore subset in the scene is often seen as a reaction to media hype and exploitation. While early LA punk is regarded as spectacle-based, revolving around theatrical displays and superficial fashions, hardcore is portrayed as an attempt to build a scene that "would be untouchable, undesirable, unmanageable" (Clark 225). Ratcheting up the speed, intensity, and ugliness of the music, hardcore tried to find a style that would be unpalatable to mass audiences. Moreover, DIY culture and a network of alternative zines and record labels provided an autonomous site of cultural production, away from mainstream eyes. As Clark puts it, "Against the threatening purview of mass media and its capacity to usurp and commodify style, punk subcultures steer away form symbolic encounters with the System and create a basis in experience" (233). These reactionary hardcore scenes, in Clark's framework, constructed "cultures of authenticity" that policed their boundaries and continually rooted out anything that could be labeled "sell-out," "poser," or "mainstream." Put more simply, as Austen writes in his history of punks on TV, "the only punk rock that couldn't envision itself on a TV screen was hardcore" (167).

These negative assessments of punksploitation do suggest that LA punks engaged with such representations rather than simply dismissing or ignoring them. However, looking only at denunciations and counter-identificatory reactions obscures a much richer and more complex practice of subculture. While these discussions of TV images in LA zines and throughout the underground reflect a "battle over meaning and authenticity," often conforming to the static, anti-media vision of subculture charted by punksploitation discourse, there is a host of evidence of more complicated engagements and negotiations of the mass media by members of the LA scene (MacLeod, "Social Distortion" 134). For instance, although acknowledging its drawbacks, many people expressed ambivalent feelings about the role of the media in the changing and growing scene. As Stephen Blush remarks, "Paradoxically, it was through such shrill coverage that many kids first heard about Hardcore. A TV show featured some shocking story on it; the next week thousands of kids would dress like what they saw on the tube" (285). These demographic changes were not universally understood as bringing homogeneity and violence or replacing the "original" members with illegitimate "posers." In an interview published in *Maximumrocknroll* in 1983, the members of the LA band RF7 note, "I bet the majority of kids into punk now got into it through TV." While this younger, suburban generation might have a "narrower" set of ideas about the world, there is a greater possibility to "widen the territory of what can be discussed" (RF7). Another comment from a *Maximumrocknroll* columnist suggests that punksploitation has lead to greater scene unity. "*CHiPs* or *Quincy*, despite their distortions, identify those SoCal kids as punks—

they have something to rally around—whether its their misrepresentation or not" (Bondi, "Live Like Bill Holden"). Although still relying on a type of counteridentification, comments like these suggest a critical awareness of the function of mainstream images amongst punks in LA. Furthermore, they point out how these images can draw kids into the scene, where they then become part of the subculture in a more comprehensive and complicated way. The distinction between the "pre-media coverage" or "original" scene and these new "Quincy punks" is not so clear or fixed in these examples.

Another somewhat common response to punksploitation was humor. Instead of reacting incredulously or with vehement rejections, many punks found shows like *Quincy M.E.* to be sources of amusement and laughter. As historian Hurchalla recounts, punks throughout the country actively sought out punksploitation shows and watched them communally. Discussing *CHiPs*, he recalls, "the dialogue had punks watching the show doubled up with laughter… For people who didn't have parents who believed in this sort of thing, this was funny" (Hurchalla 232-233). Discussions in many LA fanzines offered similar reactions. A letter in *Flipside* #38 typifies these sorts of responses:

> This is to all you who are crying about *Quincy* and shows that put punks in them… I think its funny as hell to watch them shows... Sure they exploit us and make us look bad but who gives a shit? ...Who cares as long as we know better? …Just laugh at these show! Its fun to be hated or feared by people who you don't like anyway! (Dave Dog)

Engaged in the running dialogue happening in the letters section of *Flipside* over several issues, this writer is directly challenging the long line of voices enraged by punksploitation. While this laughter could be read as a mere celebration of misrepresentation, it also points to the possibility of a more sophisticated engagement with mainstream images. Finding pleasure in being hated, the author implicitly acknowledges the performativity of punk, its roots in spectacle. Rather than confirming the existence of an authentic subculture beneath the stereotypes circulating in the media, such an understanding recognizes that punks are, at least in part, playing a role or performing an identity based in media tropes or conventions.

Commentary about a 1977 NBC News Report about the British punk scene offers a similar perspective. According to MacLeod, the news report entitled "The New Elizabethans," presented London punk as "a violent and nihilistic threat to civilization" and served as a key tool in the founding of punk in California ("Social Distortion" 125). "Participants in both the L.A. and San Francisco scenes cite the NBC report as influential in bringing like-minded people together and giving them a sense that they could be in fact be a 'scene'" (MacLeod, "Social Distortion" 125). As LA musician and organizer Hal Negro recalls the show,

> there used to a magazine TV show in the 70s called *Weekend* hosted by this pock-faced guy. One weekend, probably around June of '77, he did a show about the punk rock phenomenon in England… that show aired snippets of early pogoing with kids doing all that mock violence, dressed up with safety pins in their

> heads… boom, the very next weekend the L.A. kids were it at the Starwood. (qtd. in Mullen and Spitz 113)

Actively engaging with a mass mediated image to build their subcultural identity, these punks recognized the role of punksploitation even in the "original" subculture. There is no denunciation or counteridentification at work here, but the images were not received and copied uncritically either. As some accounts attest, there was an underlying cognizance of the artificiality or sensationalism of the images. Shreader writes in *Hardcore California*, discussing the documentary, "the NBC executives will probably never realize what a crucial role they inadvertently played in the development of the California Punk scene. Suddenly kids were strangle-dancing and madly pogoing into each other at shows. It was done with a sense of self-deprecating humor" (14). By directly translating TV representations into subcultural practices, punks were not attempting to produce a "culture of authenticity" or identifying solely against the sensationalized images on these news reports. There seems to be evidence that some LA scene members were well aware that this new style of dance and dress was borrowed from an exaggerated television program aimed at producing moral panic. The "self-deprecating humor" that accompanied this mimicking suggests self-conscious ambivalence about the role of the media in the genesis of subcultural practices. In the words of another scene historian, Welly from *Artcore* fanzine, the new scene was characterized by a "self-mocking irony," recreating exaggerated scenes from the television news, "all with a sense of fun" (49). Producing a "real" subculture by aping a media stereotype, punks laughed at

themselves, acknowledging the contradiction. Rather than hiding their roots in the media or simply bemoaning their misrepresentation, some punks relished playing the role of pariah and "media scapegoat."

While finding pleasure in their own media exploitation or humor in being portrayed as villains could be read as an act of "self-marginalization" aimed at a more "real" identity, there is another interpretation possible. Although "mass media misunderstanding is often a goal, not just an effect of youth culture's pursuits," perhaps there is more to soliciting this type of attention than the production of an alternative identity imagined as autonomous and oppositional (Thornton 120). The self-conscious humor found in many responses to punksploitation, in fact, points to such an alternative reading. Dick Hebdige, in his book *Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things*, argues that British subcultures, including punks and skinheads, conceptualized their appearance in the media as a source of pleasure. Identifying certain "spectacular youth cultures" where "outrageous displays" are common, he suggests that they "convert the fact of being under surveillance into the pleasure of being watched" (Hebdige, *Hiding* 8). In response to "the exploitative, supervisory, and voyeuristic attention which has been lavished upon them by a variety of interested parties," some subcultures engage in a type of play with being on display (Hebdige, *Hiding* 8). By enjoying their misrepresentation and self-consciously utilizing TV images as guides or templates for subcultural practices, many LA-area punks responded to media attention in just this way. While understanding such attention as exploitative, exaggerated, and stereotypical, many scene participants

nevertheless followed it closely and regarded it as more than a manifestation of what they were rebelling against. As Hebdige explains this approach, it "is neither simply affirmation nor refusal, neither 'commercial exploitation' nor 'genuine revolt.' It is neither simply resistance against some external order nor straightforward conformity with the parent culture" (*Hiding* 35). Rather than being coopted or incorporated into the mainstream, these self-critical or mocking tactics actually incorporate mass media images or tropes into the subculture. Instead of a pure or authentic underground of resistance, such small-scale negotiations with the mainstream project authenticity as simply another role to be played with a "self-deprecating" grin.

For many LA punks, the television and film studios dotting the local landscape provided a unique locale for self-critically playing the role of "authentic" punk. Seemingly turning the process of punksploitation on its head, many scene participants sold their subcultural credentials to a variety of popular productions by working as extras or actors. As Austen puts it, instead of avoiding mainstream exposure, "media-savvy early L.A. punkers… were gainfully employed as colorful TV extras" (167). In fact, the practice was so common that a local underground art gallery, show space, and general hang-out spot known as Contemporary Artists Space of Hollywood (C.A.S.H.) turned itself into a full time casting company providing punk and other "alternative-looking" actors and extras throughout the entertainment industry. The company provided "human background" for many of TV's punksploitation classics, including *Quincy M.E.*'s "Next Stop, Nowhere" (Gehman 1997; Cunningham 2013). Austen asserts that, in these shows

and other film productions, “the authenticity of the crowd can be attributed to Janet Cunningham’s C.A.S.H. talent agency. C.A.S.H. provided colorful extras for TV and film productions, and Cunningham realized that rather than have studios waste money on Mohawk wigs and fake tattoos they might as well tap directly into the large, cash-strapped L.A. punk population” (174). While Austen’s account describes authenticity as a quality inscribed in the physical bodies of these extras, it is clear that punk spectators and those working as extras understood this phenomenon quite differently.

For some members of the subculture, this was a blatant example of “selling out” and participating in the exploitation of the underground. Some commentators defending the integrity and “authenticity” of the scene raged against this practice of working as extras in punksploitation productions. In his rant against *Quincy* published in *Maximumrocknroll*, regular columnist Tom Tonooka censures the punks providing the background.

> But in between all the punk caricatures, it was apparent that part of the crowd in the show consisted of people from within the actual punk scene who were paid as extras. I would like to believe that at least the people who read this mag would have more strength of conviction than to sell out their scene for a few quick bucks. It’s easy to talk about taking a stand against the system. I’d like to see more people actually live up to those ideals when confronted with a situation like this. (Tonooka, “Guns Don’t Kill People”)

Interestingly, Tonooka suggests that a trained eye can distinguish between actors playing "punk caricatures" and real punks. These "sell-outs," then, are not posers, but dupes of the industry out to make a quick buck by lending their authenticity to a production bereft of it. This critique portrays these extras as traitors participating in the cooptation of the scene by the greedy mainstream. Expressing the conventional discourse of punksploitation, attacks like this assume clear dividing lines between subcultural identities and TV performances.

Despite these assaults aimed at policing the radical purity or "realness" of the underground, the punks working as extras approached their roles with a more critical take on the notion of authenticity. Describing her time in the business in the article "I was a Teenage Punk-Rock Extra," Pleasant Gehman puts the word in quotation marks when remarking that "Janet Cunningham and her C.A.S.H. agency… specializ[ed] in casting 'authentic' movie extras." Gehman quotes a friend that responded to *Quincy M.E.*'s call for "a real punk band" for their show about the menace of punk rock who recalls, "we were just laughing!" ("I was a Teenage"). Acknowledging the absurdity and ridiculousness of the representations, these extras found a sense of pleasure in participating in punksploitation. The laughter here can be read as a rejection of the whole schema of authenticity, ridiculing the notion that subcultural identities must make a claim to "realness." While "sometimes you had to do really dumb things that made you cringe, and caused everyone to make fun of you" or "suffer through take after take of slam-pit sequences (usually with no extra pay for stunt work)," it was "a job that paid well, and

actually encouraged you to look outrageous" (Gehman, "I was a Teenage"). Instead of feeling guilt for "selling out" or betraying their subcultural identity, most punk extras described it as fun and a way to "get over" on the entertainment industry.

The case of punk rock extras in LA reveals other complex negotiations of authenticity. For instance, Cunningham often advertised her stable of performers to studios and directors as "real" punks that could enhance the genuineness of their productions. They would not be just actors donning mohawk wigs or phony bondage gear, but legitimate members of the subculture actually living the life on the mean streets. A promotional poster for C.A.S.H. features a black and white photo of people wearing leather jackets and sporting spiked hair with the tagline, "Authentic, Experienced" (Figure 4-7). According to Gehman, some productions would match C.A.S.H extras with "central casting punks," only for the directors to send home the phony actors with "one safety pin on acid-washed jeans" in favor of the real deal ("Writer, Vocalist"). However, while relying on this notion of authenticity to promote the extras, Cunningham also had to assure directors and producers that these punks would not be disruptive, drunk, or overly violent. In other words, they wouldn't act like "authentic" punks as they were typically portrayed in punksploitation works. In an article about C.A.S.H. published in *People* in 1985 entitled "A Finder of Lost-Looking Souls Turns Hollywood Street Punks into Human Scenery for Videos and Films," Cunningham complains about having to struggle against "misconceptions of punks" held by people in the studios (Dougherty 111).

Figure 4-7 Poster advertising the C.A.S.H. Agency

"Some of these people might look like criminals and bums, but they're not… Punks are not what they are portrayed to be on TV" (Cunningham qtd in Dougherty 111). In a seeming contradiction, punk extras had to look like rebellious outsiders who were inherently violent and outrageous, but they had to "act" like professional performers on set. As an answer to this riddle, Cunningham asserts, is that "punk is an art" (Dougherty 111). As an art form, this subcultural identity is self-conscious about its performativity. Playing with the notion of authenticity, these performances point to a critical take on the very notion of a "real" identity.

Indeed, those working as extras described their jobs providing alternative "atmosphere" for mainstream productions as a form of identity play. Even before the

C.A.S.H. started, LA punks used their unique access to an “authentic” identity in order to make some money and toy with media stereotypes. When local punk band the Dickies appeared on an episode of Don Rickles’ comedy *C.P.O. Sharkey* in 1978, the band and the extras they brought along recognized that “it was just like in those ‘50s-style teen exploitation quickies… totally hokey” (Hal Negro qtd. in Mullen and Spitz 120). So, the band played up “their air-head novelty act” as the accompanying punks were “mingling with movie punk extras” who were “obviously way too old to be real kids” (Hal Negro qtd. in Mullen and Spitz 120). Instead of rejecting the exploitative and distorting spectacle, these members of the subculture joined in the fun. Another early use of alternative-looking extras in Hollywood provides a more extreme example of this type of play. In 1977, members of seminal bands The Germs and X worked on the set of *Cheech and Chong’s Up in Smoke*. Recollecting the experience, Michelle Bell (known as Gerber) states, “the whole *Up in Smoke* thing turned into one of those take-down-the-walls moments. I just remember being very fucked up and roarin’ out, ‘O-o-o-kay, it’s time to fight!” (qtd. in Mullen and Spitz 116). Recognizing that they were assumed to be violent miscreants, several extras took pleasure in assuming that role. The Germs, in particular, hammed it up while filming a Battle of the Bands scene for the film, trashing the stage and throwing equipment around. As another extra named Andy Seven recalls, “Maybe [lead singer Darby Crash] knew that the joke was on them, but that was the way they played anyway” (qtd. in Mullen and Spitz 116). Seven continues, “the stagehands freaked out ‘cause they realized it wasn’t a joke, it was the real thing” (qtd. in Mullen and Spitz

116). Here, Seven's narrative recognizes several intersecting levels of authenticity, all constructed by various assumptions and modes of performance. While the members of the band were self-consciously performing an outrageous role as a source of comedy, their act was read as crossing the line into too much realness by the technical staff, who presumably employed them to perform as their "true" selves. However, instead of seeing this event as a sign of punk's realness being unfit for an entertainment industry only capable of artifice, this particular recollection paints it as joke. Unlike the descriptions of Fear's appearance on *SNL* or the failed taping of *The Top* cited above, these recollections portray the conflict between the studio and the punk performers without relying on a narrative about subculture's authenticity opposing the mass media's artificial stereotypes.

Furthermore, some punks working as extras engaged in small-scale tactics that challenged the realism of the films or TV shows they appeared in. Although Cunningham assured producers that her extras would be professional, counter to their portrayal by the media, not all of them followed the rules of studio production. For instance, one key function of extras is to maintain their position between shots, providing a static background across shots so that editing can create the semblance of a linear time and continuous space. However, according to Gehman, "a favorite game was to wreck the continuity of the shot: Punk extras would gleefully change clothes or positions so there'd be glaring errors in the same scene" ("I was a Teenage"). By purposefully working against the creation of a continuous and coherent diegetic world, punk extras were implicitly challenging the authenticity of the production. In direct opposition to their

alleged role as "authentic, experienced" extras, these games reflect a creative and critical approach to "being punks." In reference to the production assistants who were "going ballistic because the 'background' wasn't cooperating," Gehman exclaims, "we delighted in driving them crazy" ("I was a Teenage"). Far from being unwitting dupes exploited by the industry or "sell outs" trading the integrity of the scene for a few dollars, many punk extras in LA were critically engaging with what it meant to be a "real" punk. Their small-scale games and negotiations acknowledged the performative and image-based nature of subcultural identity. As such, they challenged the discourse of authenticity operative both in the productions they appeared in as well as in the denunciations of punksploitation within the scene.

Significantly, many individuals with experience working for C.A.S.H. or through other agencies as "authentic, experienced" subcultural representatives appeared both in *NWT* and *The Top*. Tequila Mockingbird, who helped book some of the bands for *NWT* and sometimes performed on stage with Ivers, appeared in the mainstream film *Valley Girl* (1983). She recalls her experience as an extra as "always fun" (qtd. in Gehman "I was a Teenage"). Janet Cunningham from C.A.S.H. worked with Ivers and Jove on planning for their movie project based on *NWT*. The members of Fear, like Lee Ving, had long careers playing buffoonish punk villains in a variety of productions. He provided the model for a character in the *NWT*-based film (Ivers and Jove). Fear's bassist Derf Scratch, who fought with Chevy Chase during the failed taping of *The Top* pilot, also appeared in a host of Hollywood films, including *Get Crazy* (1983) and *Dudes* (1987).

With a more ambivalent understanding of punksploitation, Scratch's dust-up with Chase takes on a different tone. While the historical accounts of Ochs, Frank, and Dare portrayed punks as "unfit" for television and implied that the authentic subculture existed somewhere outside the studios of KTLA, the conflict between Scratch and the host, or the crowd and the camera operators, may have been a playful engagement with the process of mainstream exposure. The slam dancing violence and homophobic outbursts of the crowd could be interpreted as self-mocking performances, winking acknowledgements of the punk stereotypes circulating throughout television. While bending the rules of studio production, the punk participants, like Scratch, were "thinking they were working in cahoots to create good, memorable television," not attempting to overload an artificial medium with their inherent realness (Frank 8). Hoping to have a laugh themselves and provide some comedy for any punk viewers, the various scene participants at KTLA studios understood punksploitation in a more complex way. Rather than a seamless and unitary form of inauthentic representation, the show offered a space to enact a subcultural identity that was self-conscious about its mediated and performative nature.

This alternative and self-critical version of punksploitation reframes the story of *The Top* and is partially reflected in the final version of the pilot. While the taping session featuring Chase and the small riot would never see the light of day, *The Top* did end up producing a full pilot that was broadcast on KTLA in early 1984. Andy Kaufman, in his last public performance before his death from cancer in May 1984, filled in for Chase as host using a script rewritten by Ramis. According to Dare, "Ramis took charge" and "got

a pair of handcuffs to keep [Jove] in his seat in the production room during taping" ("Andy Kaufman's Last Performance"). The next session was "much more controlled. No punks allowed" ("Andy Kaufman's Last Performance"). The resulting program had some of the classic hallmarks of punksploitation. The name of the show was spelled out in neon colors using a phony spray-paint font (Figure 4-8).

Figure 4-8 A still from *The Top* "Pilot" (January 26, 1984)

At one point, an old woman wearing a multi-colored, spiky wig provides some comic relief. There are scattered references to "crazy kids" and Kaufman plays up his outsider's perspective, an everyman looking in on an exotic youth culture. But, for the most part, the program is indistinguishable from an MTV line-up from the same era. There are pre-produced music videos by ZZ Top and Randy Newman, plus "live" performances by popular new wave acts like Cyndi Lauper and the Romantics. At first glance, the show is

a bland and over-produced piece of corporate schlock. However, in the formal qualities of the program, there are a few clues to the type of critical, self-aware performances found on *NWT* and in LA punk's engagements with punksploitation. For instance, there are innumerable self-reflexive moments, references to the process of televisual production. Dan Akroyd starts the show by addressing the audience from in front of the same backdrop of planets and stars used for the monologues on *NWT*. He advises, "Under no circumstances attempt to watch this show without a working television set." Immediately, the image cuts to a TV control room populated by people wearing comically oversized horse heads. A voice can be heard muttering, "someone get those cameras out of the control room." The next image shows a crowded couch filled with more masked animals and a bug-like alien watching a TV screen with the show's logo (Figure 4-9).

Figure 4-9 A still form *The Top* "Pilot" (January 26, 1984)

By giving a view from behind the cameras and on the other side of the broadcast, *The Top* reminds the viewer of the televisual medium. While easily dismissed as cheap comedy, these images could be interpreted as markers of the show's subcultural project. Like the playful punk extras fooling around on set or the ones at home laughing at the "misrepresentation" of their scene, these costumed animals have a special or different relationship to the show than your average mainstream viewer. These looks behind the scenes and in front of the tube act as winking reminders of the show's artifice and the ambivalent role of subculture in some network productions.

"Don Rickles, a true punk himself, is the tube's prophet"

Any use of the term subculture invokes a conceptual edifice with concomitant ideas about subculture's opposite, the mainstream. As the quintessential medium of commercial popular culture, television often occupies that other side, a metonym for the profit-oriented, homogenous, apolitical, voracious, and mass-produced. Thornton notes that almost all discourses surrounding subcultures involve such a "chimera of a negative mainstream" (93). Without these imagined social boundaries, marking distinct and opposed cultural zones, it can be difficult to define or locate something that could be called "subculture." However, somewhat paradoxically, when attending to the specifics of subcultural practice and discourse, such borders and divisions can be hard to maintain. Claims to purity or authenticity seem to be cloaked in irony or playfully contradicted in

the same breath. In reference to the LA punk scene, MacLeod notes that, given the participation of so many punks in TV and film industry, "the boundary lines between real punks and video punks and actors as punks were increasingly difficult to maintain" (136). He goes on to argue that punks stubbornly held on to notions of authenticity in the face of these contradictions, continuing to distinguish between "real punks" and posers. However, as the subcultural practices and discourses from LA quoted above suggest, there was always a segment of the scene that put forward these claims to authenticity with a wink and a laugh.

Nonetheless, extending his critique of subcultural authenticity, MacLeod asserts that "the problem is compounded when critics and historians desire to get to the 'real' punk as much as any 'real' hardcore punk does" (137). In the realm of subcultural studies and the history of punks on TV, this "problem" has been paramount. However, with careful attention to individual practices and discourses, cracks begin to appear in the narrative of punksploitation. Reflecting on his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* that codified the dominant conception of subculture for academics, Hebdige acknowledges that "many of the structuring oppositions around which the book is organized," including "authentic culture versus commerce, street versus market, resistance versus incorporation, event versus media representation," fail to accurately capture subcultural work ("Contemporizing" 410). While these distinctions are still valuable and operative, they cannot be thought of as fixed or self-evident. As Hebdige explains, when analyzing underground practice, one cannot "segregate art from

subculture or… from everyday life for that matter" ("Contemporizing" 409). Echoing Cunningham's comments to her employers in Hollywood about punk being an art, he suggests that subcultural identity must be thought of as an aesthetic practice. Rather than reading claims to authenticity or "tactics of self-marginalization" in a straight-forward manner, it is necessary to see them as self-consciously performative, a litany of self-critical poses and postures. The gleeful and humorous participation of so many LA punks in the phenomenon of punksploitation provides a key to such an understanding.

Writing about the 1978 punksploitation episode of *C.P.O. Sharkey* featuring LA band the Dickies and a complement of extras culled from the local scene in his landmark article "Punxploitation," John Holmstrom proclaims, "Don Rickles, a true punk himself, is the tube's prophet" (12). Explaining this quote, punk chronicler Nick Rombes suggests that Holmstrom was "recognizing the secret truth that punk is, above all, a stance, a way of carrying yourself in the world, a performance" (55). This performance of subcultural identity, like Rickles' comedy that often broke the fourth wall and involved the audience, is one that "recognized the artifice" of its act (Rombes 56). Rethinking the history of punksploitation in this way, it can no longer be easily read as the story of a rapacious mainstream distorting and exaggerating the authentic practices of an autonomous underground. Instead, punksploitation works, including *NWT* and *The Top*, point to the poverty of authenticity as a concept for understanding subcultural practices. Looking closer, however, one can read an even more incisive critique of assumptions about authenticity in these same works. Actively engaging with the process of mainstream

exposure and representation, LA punks articulated a vision of subcultural identity that eschewed clear narratives of resistance, autonomy, and purity. Instead, they engaged in practices that eluded such static conceptions of identity, implicitly denying the very possibility of an authentic social formation existing “before” or “beyond” its engagement with media like television.

Epilogue—Subcultural Television and the Prehistory of Social Media

In 1980, *New Wave Theatre* was like what YouTube is now. You could get on and do your thing, and nobody was going to put you down.
- Steve Martin, quoted in *In Heaven Everything is Fine*

When finally we erase the difference between art and entertainment—as we must to survive—we shall find that our community is no longer a community, and we shall begin to understand radical evolution.
- Nam June Paik "La Vie, Satellites, One Meeting- One Life"

In the introduction to *Fucked Up and Photocopied: Instant Art of the Rock Movement*, long time LA punk scene participant and chronicler Brendan Mullen reproduces some familiar rhetoric for discussing the relationship between subculture and mainstream media. Referring to the collection of flyers and ephemera in the book, he declares, "What you're clutching in your paws is actual anthropological evidence that 20th century America's last pre-MTV, pre-cyber, last organically incubated and developed 'oppositional youth' movement ever even existed" (Mullen, "Introductory Rant" 62). While the usual connotations of authenticity and autonomy are obvious in his words, there is another dimension to Mullen's claim that punk enjoys a special status as the "last" truly underground American subculture. In casting his assertion in historical terms, he relegates punk subculture to a by-gone era, one that has been replaced or superseded by the post-MTV, post-cyber world that we now inhabit. And, implicitly, he defines the present moment as artificial or compromised, where social relations and

works of art are tainted by their necessary involvement with certain technologies, cultural conditions, and modes of distribution. Consigning the subcultural media practices found in this collection of Xeroxed and hand-drawn flyers to a pre-internet past, Mullen provokes nostalgia for the lost days of face-to-face communication, genuine underground community, and steadfast resistance to commercialism. Consequently, it would seem that the practices and discourses developed in the scenes documented in the book have nothing to tell us about a social world transformed by virtual connectivity, decentralized mass culture, technologically-mediated communication, and social networking.

Other contemporary commentators on punk have echoed this notion that the subcultural activities of the late 1970s and early 1980s have little to offer the present age of instantaneous interconnection and omnipresent digital media. For instance, in a *New York Times* article from 2013, culture reporter Melena Ryzik reviews two photography books documenting underground music and art scenes, one with photos from the early 1980s and the other covering the last 15 years. Contrasting their content, she notes the singular and transformative effect of "social media," which has turned "what were niche events into potential spectacles" and disrupted the foundations of subcultural productions (Ryzik "Sidestepping"). Today, the lines that once divided cultural zones are no longer operative. "The boundary around the mainstream is more porous now, changing the very definition of being underground" (Ryzik "Sidestepping"). Quoting sociology professor Ross Haenfler, the article continues by observing that subcultural productions are now universally "available on YouTube and eBay. It really changes the dynamic" (Ryzik

“Sidestepping”). Although the argument is a bit more restrained than Mullen’s exaggerated pronouncement, it presents early punk subculture as part of a media environment completely foreign to the one defined by the speed, expansiveness, and omnipresence of today’s technology. Theorist and critic Nicholas Rombes offers a similar assertion about punk’s place in media history. He writes, “Punk emerged in the pre-New Media era when signals from the frontiers and outposts of culture still traveled a bit slowly; it had time to evolve before coming under broader public scrutiny” (Rombes 316). While there is no doubt that contemporary media technologies have reshaped the social landscape and redefined the way subcultures function, these historical distinctions suggest a decisive break or paradigm shift. Troublingly, such narratives can have the effect of obscuring the dimensions of subcultural discourses and practices from the late 1970s and early 1980s that have much to tell us about “social media,” a decentralized mass cultural environment, and the entangled role of technology in cultural life.

The case studies in subcultural television examined throughout my dissertation reveal that such assertions of discontinuity and nostalgia for the “pre-cyber” past fail to recognize a host of deep and complex connections to the media practices of the present. As self-reflexive experiments in technologically-mediated sociality, the subcultural practices and discourses surrounding *TVP* and *NWT* are, in many ways, direct precursors to the social phenomena of the internet age. *TVP*’s “Party Network” directly engaged with the implications of virtual connectivity, offering critical commentary on the reshaping of social worlds by communications technologies and their new forms of

togetherness. By drawing explicit and ambivalent connections with antecedents in the New Left, hippie counterculture, McLuhanite video art movement, and other formations, the program also exposed an encompassing and complicated history of social technology that stretches back even further. Likewise, *NWT* articulated and practiced a mode of televisual subculture that critically embraced its technological mediation. Specifically, the show utilized the virtual connections produced by video and TV to challenge the authenticity and normalizing procedures of alternative or marginal identities and communities. In addition, through its connections with the discourse of punksploitation that erects a conceptual barrier between subculture and mainstream media, *NWT* prefigured the cultural environment of the contemporary era, where the proliferation of media platforms and access to publicity has invalidated traditional cultural distinctions and, as a result, reconfigured the work of artistic production and identity creation. These general examples clearly demonstrate that the story of subcultural television in the late 1970s and early 1980s should not be isolated from the present and consigned to the dustbin of media history.

Indeed, the current internet presence of *TVP* and *NWT* seems to suggest that these connections are not lost on everyone. Over the last decade or so, both shows have been uploaded to YouTube, made the subject of innumerable blog posts and discussion forums, and transformed into .gif's for Tumblr. Most notably, *TVP* has been revived as web-only video series produced by Vice media, producing four new episodes in 2014 (Duray "Vice"). Still hosted by O'Brien, the show is now filmed on location at art

galleries and other spaces and edited instead of live. It also now sports a slew of corporate sponsors like Red Bull, Absolut Vodka, and J.Crew. The show's website announces that the re-launch moves *TVP* into "a new digital era," one where "the internet is the new public access" (O'Brien "About"). Additionally, Vice is hosting all the available episodes of the show from its original run. While there hasn't been a comparable resurgence of interest in *NWT*, full episodes and clips are scattered across the internet. Simultaneous posts on *The Onion's AV Club* and media-aggregator site *Dangerous Minds* from May 2015 announced that the series was fully available on *YouTube*, but the videos were almost immediately taken down (Vanderbilt "*New Wave*"; Schneider "All"). Additionally, there are other signs of internet life like a public Facebook group where people in southern California reminisce about watching *NWT* and a podcast with former guest Don Bolles discussing his experiences on the show (Fogelnest "Episode 61").

Significantly, the productive online afterlives of both shows speak to how they "fit" in the contemporary media environment, and many current engagements with the programs present these "relics" as implicit commentary on social media or other internet phenomena. They sometimes serve as catalysts for thinking critically or more complexly about the present moment. For instance, an *Art News* piece on the *TVP* re-launch devolves into a discussion of Instagram and being "engaged in the world" (Duray "TV Party Does Miami"). Samantha Cornwell's tribute to *NWT* and Ivers on the music site AdHoc references "viral video" and contemplates current spaces for "unconventional

programming with relatively low production costs" ("A Mysterious Journey"). Some comments take the form of speculation on how *NWT* would fare into today's media environment. A 2013 article about Ivers' life from *The Tucson Weekly* praises YouTube for making *NWT* available again. It goes on to predict how Ivers might feel about the forum.

> If Ivers were still alive today, he'd be thrilled at the vast technology at our fingertips and the incredible power of storing information on the internet. Like he said in one moving monologue, "There's not a moment to waste on anything that prevents us from the richness of our own foreverness." I'd like to think he'd be on the cusp of new and inventive ways to perform and interact with each other via tomorrow's technology. (Dewey "Peter Ivers")

While I might not agree with such an uncomplicated celebratory vision of Ivers' views on media technology, such comparative reflections are quite common in writings about *NWT*. Contemporary engagements like these with both programs suggest their usefulness in provoking thinking about the role of social technologies, even in the era of YouTube.

While most of the connections between my treatments of *TVP* and *NWT* and contemporary "social media" or New Media will have to remain implicit here, I want to briefly sketch a broad ways in which these examples of subcultural television speak to our present moment in more academic language. By surveying some key works on the social consequences of current social technologies, the outline of a productive dialogue between them and the discourses and practices of subcultural television emerges. In her

work *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*, Italian theorist Tiziana Terranova observes the way that informational networks constructed by computers and other communications technologies have reshaped political and social life in the 21st century. Her diagnoses of the current era have been influential in reimagining political power and social activism in a "global culture as it unfolds across a multiplicity of communication channels but within a single informational milieu" (Terranova 1). This "neo-imperial electronic space" produced by virtual connections and proliferating avenues for expression is a system defined "openness" and a "tendency to expansion" (Terranova 3). As such, it has fundamentally transformed the process of communication and cultural production. For one, under the always shifting and expanding conditions of the information age, according to Terranova, there is no more "mass culture" as we have known it. She writes, "We are not living, that is, in a pure mass culture, but in a configuration of communication where a pure mass perception clashes and interacts with a fractured and microsegmented informational milieu" (Terranova 144). No longer able to identify a central dominant culture, the "public sphere" explodes into a dizzying array of subgroups and temporary identities.

While Terranova points to online discussion forums and contemporary anti-globalization movements as key sites to observe these social conditions, they are also visible in the practices and discourses of subculture television from decades past. The "(un)popular avant-garde" work of *TVP*, for one, is predicated on the disappearance of traditional boundaries separating popular culture and high art, mass culture and

underground activities. Through techniques that recycled and repurposed mainstream tropes and content as well as conventions and codes from the gallery world, putting them all on cable access television, *TVP* practiced a form of cultural production that called attention to the obsolescence of "mass culture." Moreover, through the self-reflexive and critical "Party Network," the show constructed a temporary, episodic, and virtual social formation in the model of the "fractured and microsegmented" ones described by Terranova. Explicitly exploring the power of television to bring people together without face-to-face communication, the "Party Network" not only recognized the changing shape of cultural production, it also engaged with the political nature of these revamped relationships. By appearing on local cable access but addressing anyone willing to tune in, call them up, sit in the studio audience, or operate a camera, the model of networking presented on *TVP* was constantly fluid, multi-layered, unstable, and chaotic. In this way, the aesthetic and self-critical televisual practices utilized in the creation of the "Party Network" might offer insight into contemporary cultural practices that take place across and between the boundaries that once separated mass culture from the margins.

Moreover, both *TVP* and *NWT* utilized the social technology of subcultural television to challenge traditional conceptions of community that continue to define the politics and discourses in and on contemporary social media. As noted throughout my project, discourses surrounding the emergence of cable access marked it as a media space uniquely charged with ideas about social togetherness. As media historians have noted, access was presented as a salve for a fractured society, a participatory forum for

marginalized and voiceless communities to some together and practice self-representation (Boddy 1990; Streeter 1997; Aufderheide 2000). As Eric Freedman writes, "public access programs are products of a particular community, physical signifiers of a particular community (both in their content and by virtue of their very existence), and potential tools for extending the boundaries of a particular community" (185). These ideas about the social power and potential of access echo many popular conceptions about the internet or other aspects of contemporary network culture. In these contemporary utopian visions, according to Terranova, "a networked multitude, possessing its own means of communication, freed from the tyranny of broadcasting, would rise to challenge the phony public sphere of television and the press" (135). However, in the era of access, *TVP* and *NWT* were suspicious about communities defined as organic, authentic, or monolithic, even alternative formations like the subcultures and undergrounds they participated in. As José Esteban Muñoz, Miranda Joseph, and other have argued, the rhetoric of community has often worked to "sanitize" and police marginalized social formations, performing a normalizing function. While the virtual connections and experiences created by producing, distributing, and viewing these shows worked to forge social networks and relationships, they also acted to break them apart or reveal their hostile and exclusionary nature. The homophobia exposed by Peter Ivers' performance practices on *NWT* and the antagonism and miscommunication that marked the call-in segments on *TVP*, for instance, worked against assumptions of consensus and commonality and called attention to this problematic dimension of community. In this

way, both shows provided models for the disruption and critique of community as such, pointing to the possibility of intervention in comparable discourses in the present.

Moreover, Terranova argues that contemporary media technologies in general have threatened traditional notions of community, leading to retrenchment and conservatism. In her words, "The emergence of a global and differentiated communications matrix has also foregrounded the power of communication to undo bonds, rather than simply reinforce them—a feature that is particularly troubling for the modern association between communication and community" (Terranova 145). While Terranova seems to be lamenting the disappearance of community here, she goes on to contends that communication in the information age is an ambivalent project, working to remake the quality of social relationships as it both splinters groups and generates new affinities.

> This scattering, this tendency to diverge and separate, coupled with that of converging and joining, presents different possible lines of actualization: it can reproduce the rigid segments of the social and hence its ghettos, solipsisms, and rigid territorialities. And it also offers the potential for a political experimentation, where the overall dynamics of a capillary communication milieu can be used productively as a kind of common ground. (Terranova 156)

The simultaneous actions of dispersion and unification performed by communication under the conditions of network culture do not inherently lead to more egalitarian, free, or less oppressive social formations. They merely multiply the possible configurations and

the pace of change. Such an ambivalent vision of social relationships can be found on and through the subcultural television projects of *TVP* and *NWT*. In fact, the self-critical and self-consciously aesthetic nature of both programs consistently called attention to the ambivalence of collectivity, especially in its technologically-mediated form.

Finally, in her book *Blog Theory*, Jodi Dean describes how "contemporary communications media capture their users in intensive and extensive networks of enjoyment, production, and surveillance" (3-4). Like Terranova, she stresses the material practices and affective dimensions that attend virtually-produced communities in participatory spaces like YouTube, Twitter, and other social media forums. In discussing the formation of individual and social identity through such simultaneously affective and immaterial practices, she points to the "performance of authenticity" in shared digital spaces (36). Here, identities become provisional tactics performed for an always changing and unknown audience. Authenticity, then, becomes unmoored, no longer referring to adherence to a preexisting, inner core. A similar relationship to authenticity can be seen in the version of subcultural identity found in the practices of punks interacting with punksploitation works like *NWT* and *The Top*. Rather than seeing these representations as mere distortions or inauthentic portrayals, many punks in LA actively engaged in forms of identity play that incorporated these characters, laughing both at and with them. Such self-critical and tactical approaches to subcultural identity formed alongside and through media anticipate the "performance of authenticity" described by Dean as a key aspect of social media.

These general connections represent only a superficial investigation of the contemporary relevance of *TVP* and *NWT*. While my examinations of subcultural television throughout this dissertation do not hold the key to understanding social relations within network culture or suggest an easy way out of its seemingly totalizing grasp, as engagements with historical antecedents to our present moment of decentralized mass culture and technologically-mediated social relations, they present opportunities to rethink dominant and calcified ideas about media culture. In her history of the guerrilla television movement, Deirdre Boyle introduces these stories from the 1960s and 70s as potential lessons for the internet revolution underway in the late 90s. She remarks that since many current discourses have “promised that the Information Superhighway will take us to a utopia where electronic democracy will be ours, we may want to consider what happened to the last pilgrims to venture down that rocky road” (xvi). I want to echo her sentiment here. In looking back on these examples of subcultural television from the early days of cable access, I hope to critically reframe and rethink our perspective on contemporary media practices.

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