3

VIDEO AS ALTERNATIVE

Beginning in the later 1950s, a new technology of moving image recording emerged. Magnetic tape had already been in use for recording sound during World War II, and innovations in magnetic recording led to the production of videotape recorders or VTRs, the first of which were brought to market for industrial use by the Ampex Corporation of California in 1956.[1] Television production in the 1950s used kinescopes to film the video image off a monitor for archiving and for delaying or repeating broadcasts. Kinescopes had several disadvantages in comparison to the new videotape when used in broadcasting. Their image quality was noticeably degraded compared with live television pictures, passing from "electricity to optics to chemicals to optics and back to electricity again."[2] Kinescopes were many times more expensive than videotape, and films required time and chemicals to process in a laboratory before

they could be used. Tape could be reused many times but not films. And videotape when broadcast would look identical to live television. It was described in the press as a "miraculous ribbon," and its effects were described as a "revolution, technical and artistic, in the industry"[3] (fig 3.1). American television networks had a particular need for videotape as a solution to the problem of a national audience dispersed across four time zones. Live programming at eight in the evening in New York would be airing at five in Los Angeles. Videotape would solve this issue and allow for the delay of broadcasts to reach the prime time audiences in all markets without the need for "hot kine" broadcasts using hastily processed strips of film, 35mm for picture and 16mm for sound synced in playback, which could be destroyed by a single use.[4] CBS used tape for delayed programming in some instances in 1956, and beginning in 1957, NBC's West Coast broadcasts were entirely tape delayed in prime time.[5] The audience might not even know about the delay and assume it was seeing a live image.[6]

Between the later 1950s and the emergence of digital video as a mass market format in the late 1990s, video shifted its meaning from being synonymous with television to denoting an alternative to conventional television transmission and reception using its technology against the purpose of live broadcasting. This usage encompassed video cameras and recorders, whether employed by artists creating video art or by ordinary people making home videos. It also encompassed video games and video recordings of TV shows to be watched at the user's

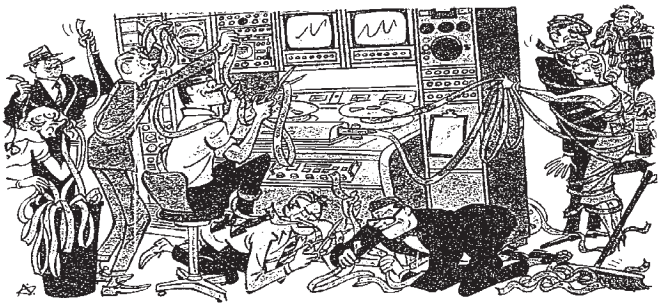

FIGURE 3.1 The novel medium of videotape, a "Miraculous Ribbon of TV," as described and illustrated by Abner Dean in the *New York Times*, June 18, 1959.

convenience, often skipping commercials, or commercially released movies to be viewed on TV sets. In this second phase, new usages of the term emerged. *To video* meant to make a video recording. A video was a recording on tape. At times there was some overlap and confusion about terminology, for instance when a headline in *Broadcasting* asked, "Is TV Tape Live or Film?"[7] To this day, people will refer to recording in any kind of moving image format as "filming." But filming and taping were technologically distinct, and film and video were considered two different, though related, media, each one having not only its own qualities of image and techniques of production and distribution but also cultural associations and shifting connotations of realism and quality. Each one had its own aesthetics and style. An advertisement for Ampex products in the trade journal *Sponsor* in July, 1958, insisted that "videotape is a new medium" but also "an extension of live television," seeking distinction from film. Over several decades these distinctions

would endure and adapt, as video was understood by affinity and contrast to these neighboring media.

(As movies and television began their convergence, the relation of video to radio was largely lost, however, and video came to be seen more as a recording and playback and less as a transmitting and receiving medium. At one moment, however, radio resurfaced as a frame for understanding video: when MTV was seen to be at once borrowing from and threatening radio, with its video jockeys and its "format" in place of the conventional TV schedule. The historical significance of "Video Killed the Radio Star" as the first music video aired on MTV speaks to this ambivalent remediation.)

The new meanings for video in phase two included ideas about the media audience's relationship to technologies and institutions. Video promised to liberate and empower viewers and to democratize mass media. These meanings would have as much to do with prevailing conceptions of the commercial broadcasting industry as with the actual uses and needs of television and video's users. Following the golden age period, the early sense of television's aesthetic promise was largely lost. Its cultural status as a vast wasteland, as FCC Chairman Newton Minow famously called it in a speech given in 1961, was solidified following the quiz show scandals of the late 1950s and the decline of the live anthology dramas as commercialism was seen to triumph over art. In 1959 Walter Lippmann called the television industry fraudulent and evil not only for the deception practiced on quiz shows but for betraying the public

interest by pursing profit before all else and thereby debasing public taste.[8] Television in these years was widely derided for pandering to a mass audience and serving commercial rather than civic interests. Its detractors feared that television was becoming not just a waste of time and technology but a source of individual and social problems. One of a number of anti-TV books published at the time was called *The Great Time-Killer: A Documented Indictment and Constructive Study of Television, the Mind-Seduction Machine*. In popular imagination, video was figured as the revolutionary solution to many of the perceived problems of television, in particular to the sense of television's economic and ideological power over its audience and the society it was understood to be shaping. Video might save the medium and reverse its decline.[9]

Today some might think of the history of home video beginning with the release of the Sony Betamax in the mid-1970s, but broadcasters, artists, and many others had been making use of videotape for almost two decades by this point. The general public was aware of videotape long before it became a widely adopted consumer product for the home. Innovations in electronics and communications were regularly described and reported on in the popular press and demonstrated in public. Hundreds of news items described videotape in the later 1950s and its use by television networks and stations around the United States, explaining the advantages of the new technology and its likely uses. Ampex exhibited its wares in Grand Central Terminal in New York in 1958, attracting the notice of

the press.[10] It also advertised its brand and product in revolutionary terms, in one instance comparing the invention of videotape to Einstein's theory of relativity.

Before it was a consumer technology, videotape was in use in a variety of contexts other than television production, where many people outside of the broadcasting industry might come in contact with it. In the later 1960s, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that videotape was widely used in "education, industry, sports, business, medicine, and even the military." By 1968 there were more than 20,000 VTRs in use in the United States, compared with 5,000 being used in the TV business.[11] The National Education Association published a how-to book in 1968 entitled *Portable Video Tape Recorder: A Guide for Teachers*, detailing myriad uses and techniques including enhancing demonstrations, overcoming distance, repetition of materials, and producing creative work, as well as advantages in comparison to educational film.[12] Often tape complemented or replaced closed-circuit television in industrial, medical, or government use for training and communications. A California retail chain used a videotaped sales presentation to demonstrate its new lines of products to salespeople in sixteen stores, while a gas company in Ohio used videotapes to train its customer service force of 800 employees.[13] The Iowa appliance firm Maytag used videotape to record its sales personnel practicing their pitches for instant review and improvement, among other training purposes.[14] Even consumer-grade video was often used in industry. Sony's U-matic videocassette recorder was first sold

to consumers in 1971 (earlier formats used open reels), but like most such ventures before Betamax did not catch on with the public. However, the technology was adopted in institutional settings. The Ford Motor Co. bought 4,000 U-matic machines in 1972 to use in training automobile dealers.[15] As a new technology, video recording emerged as the solution to problems of earlier technologies such as film, or as an improvement over doing things without the benefit of any electronic technology.

But the public was particularly familiar with the value and potential of videotape from television. Broadcasters would often reference the medium on air, as in the voice-over preceding programs such as *All in the Family* announcing that the show had been recorded to tape before a live studio audience. Some television production using videotape might hide the technology and its function to substitute recordings for live transmissions. The usage was no secret, however, coming up in news stories covering broadcasting such as one in *The Cedar Rapids Gazette* that warned: "So good is tape that you probably don't even realize the shows aren't live."[16] In some genres of live TV the employment of tape could also be flaunted, making the audience aware of the potential for recording technologies to manipulate the temporality of the broadcast transmission. News was one of these genres. Audiences were familiar with the repetition of recordings of significant events, such as President Eisenhower's oath of office upon his 1957 inauguration, which at the time was considered astonishing in its novelty.[17] But a more prominent usage of videotape in

television production was in sportscasts. Beginning in the mid-1960s, live sporting events were regularly employing attention-grabbing new techniques. Most prominent among these forms of electronic gimcrackery were the isolated camera (on an individual athlete), instant replay, and slow motion, often used together.[18] These were represented in popular discourses as mediated improvements over live sports, offering the television viewer an added value in comparison to the spectator present at the event.[19] The television viewer might or might not recognize that videotape makes possible the slow motion instant replay, though broadcasters called attention to the technique, explaining for instance that the broadcast replay of a touchdown in a football game didn't mean that the team had scored again. Roone Arledge, the ABC Sports producer, believed that the audience should be "aware of production" in sportscasts and appreciate, for instance, the benefit of watching a golf tournament with cameras simultaneously capturing play at many holes on the course.[20]

To those paying attention these video techniques would have offered novel forms of defamiliarization of the live television broadcast transmission. The sports pages of the later 1960s featured gee-whiz accounts of instant replay that marveled at the ability of electronic media to highlight and repeat moments of the broadcast, recognizing that the manipulation of live temporality was in some ways an improvement on the immediacy and directness of television broadcasting. The notion of liveness and simultaneity being video's essence was being challenged by

innovation-minded network producers long before academic writers identified its mythical qualities. By encouraging the television audience to appreciate videotape's importance and value, the pre-VCR television industry was already instigating a video revolution.

Home Video Fantasies

Video was an important term in discussions in many institutional and popular sites in the later 1960s and early 1970s about prospects for the improvement of commercial media. As Thomas Streeter has shown, in this period a techno-utopian discourse of the new technology around cable television represented the future of media in terms of a blue-skies scenario of improved choice and quality and a breakdown of the hegemony of the networks and their sponsors.[21] Video was often positioned similarly to cable in this period as a liberating, culturally uplifting, and democratizing medium. It promised to be a kind of Robin Hood of media, redistributing power in communication from corporations and institutions to individuals. Home video, *Life* magazine promised in 1970, was going to "rescue the [television] medium and the viewer from the wilderness of mass programming," making for a "revolution in quality."[22] Thanks to video, media audiences would now have a newfound agency to program their own cultural experiences rather than merely choosing from among a small set of culturally degraded options offered through the limited commercial channels.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, several home video products were released to limited, if any, commercial success, but their presence sparked considerable publicity and commentary in the popular press. Ampex and Sony both brought consumer products to market in the 1960s, but they were quite expensive (Ampex's, sold through luxury department store Neiman-Marcus, had a price tag of $30,000).[23] Formats multiplied, with magnetic tape, film, and holographic disc all competing for consumers' attention and business.[24] Some, such as CBS's EVR and RCA's SelectaVision, were sold as play-only cartridges or discs (respectively), and would not permit the usage that would help sell Betamax a few years later: making recordings of television programs for time-shifted viewing.

Jack Gould was one of many popular writers who expressed excitement and hope about the video future during these years. In a September 3, 1967, column he compared home video, which had not yet found a significant market, with sound recording, a frequent reference point in explanations of video's prospective value. The headline was "Soon You'll Collect TV Reels, Like LPs," and the agenda was to position videotape as a revolutionary force for the liberation of the television audience. Like long-playing records, which Gould called "by far the most democratic" medium, videotapes would give their user the gift of a "selectivity" lacking from broadcast TV. The viewer would no longer be at the mercy of the broadcast programmer, and the TV set would replace the TV transmitter as the most valuable piece in the

ensemble of communication electronics. The discussion did not touch on the viewer's potential for recording programs off air, but rather assumed that videotapes would be sold prerecorded, like records. Classic films by the likes of W.C. Fields and Charlie Chaplin might be savored and kept in a "visual library." But as Max Dawson has shown, representatives of RCA and other firms bringing consumer VTRs to market as well as elite critics of this time did not believe that viewers would typically have reason to save recordings of television programs.[25] When the promise of video was hyped in the popular press during these years, examples of its potential offerings spoke more of its champions' tastes than of the mass market potential of a new medium. An RCA vice president quoted in a 1970 article offered these examples of ideal videocassette content: classical music, opera, ballet, moon landings, music, Hollywood films, and children's programs. Videocassettes would combine the markets for "movies, books, records, audio cassettes, adult courses, encyclopedias, business magazines and fairy tales," but not for television. The video audience had to be offered something that they weren't already getting "for free" over the airwaves. The RCA VP predicted that video recordings would be "bigger than television." [26] The new technology was being imagined as an alternative to TV. This marked a 180-degree turn from the years in which RCA's David Sarnoff touted video *as* television—in contrast to cinema's illegitimate mass culture identity—as the great new art form of the twentieth century.

In describing a future of video as a recording medium for home use, popular discourses of the late 1960s and early 1970s sometimes adopted a rhetoric of religious redemption from the enslavement of the audience to television networks and their sponsors familiar from later discourses around digital media such as TiVo.[27] In this mode of utopian fantasy, television's unfulfilled promise would finally be realized by video as a recording (not transmitting/receiving) medium. Television's viewer, long held captive by the networks, would be free to exercise choice and to be entertained or edified at his or her convenience. The issue was presented according to this rhetoric as one of empowerment: the hegemony of the networks would be stopped and the viewer newly installed as master of his or her own leisure experience. A former CBS Labs president proclaimed in 1970 that home video would be "not just another tool in our audiovisual kit; it is a new medium . . . the greatest revolution since print."[28] As George Movshon promised in a *Saturday Review* column from 1970, "The Video Revolution": "You are no longer to be merely a televisual receptacle, fit to be programmed from headquarters. Your will can be in command."[29] The consumer electronics industry tapped into this revolution talk in positioning its products in relation to the debased standard uses of the TV set. RCA's choice of the name SelectaVision for its home video product indicates the centrality of the consumer's agency in the identity of video. In discussing the logic of Sony's videotape recorders, Akio Morita explained: "I noticed how the TV networks had total control

over people's lives and I felt that people should have the option of seeing a program when they choose."[30]

The emergence of home video games at the same time as videotape was framed in many of the same terms, drawing on the same cultural tropes about TV as a problem in need of technological solutions. Home videotape decks and video games were often paired as "new TV toys," disruptive innovations changing television for the better.[31] Both videotape players and video game consoles were draining prime time audiences away from network programs in the later 1970s, which worried the broadcast industry but might have pleased a general public supposedly suffering under the broadcasters' hegemony.[32] The launch of video game systems for the home such as Magnavox Odyssey and Pong and its many ball-and-paddle imitations was routinely discussed in newspapers and magazines in terms of passivity and activity, aligning video technology with the liberated audience finally enabled to give input to the TV set. Similar to the contemporaneous theory of Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who criticized electronic mass media for their failure to be more than mere transmission from powerful institutions to the masses, popular press discourses introduced a dichotomy of one-way versus more truly communicative media permitting "talking back" to TV.[33] General reader publications such as the *New York Times Magazine* and *Time*, as well as more hobbyist-oriented publications like *Radio-Electronics* and *Mechanix Illustrated*, drew on this discourse of broadcasting as passive and video games as active,

and identified the installation of the game console as an act of transformation from passivity to activity. A key term in this discourse was *participation*, which would describe the activity of the game player in contrast to the lack of active involvement characteristic of television viewing.[34] Video games were called by many names in their earliest years, including TV games and tele-games, and their identity was very much entwined with their usage of the home television set.[35] The fact that they came to be known not as TV or tele-games but as video games suggests that they were understood not just as extensions of television but perhaps more importantly as superior alternatives to television, auguring revolution along the same lines as videotape. Video in this usage stood for two-way and participatory media, with the television audience made active, talking back to the TV set, a bold distinction from the typical use of the TV set for watching network broadcasts.

Video Art against Television

Another connection between early games and video as a new medium can be made not in relation to home recordings but rather to artists' video. Video art emerged in the 1960s in the same cultural context as other uses of video technology and has always been understood by practitioners and critics in relation to commercial television. As Jason Wilson has argued, early video game and video art discourses were premised on many of the same conceptual terms. Both artists and video game innovators understood their work in distinction to

television broadcasting, and both practices were founded on a notion of productive spectatorship.[36] Nam June Paik's 1963 video artwork *Participation TV*, for instance, offers a use of television technology that is contrary to the general tendency of broadcast media. It involves the user in the production of a video image. The spectator's interactions with a microphone and sound frequency amplifier produce the image on a CRT set. Viewer participation and manipulation of the TV image was a possibility of video art that ordinary uses of the TV set would never permit.

Video art's emergence is often linked to the release of new videotape recording technologies such as Sony's CV-2000, a camera-recorder unit for field use that went on the market in the United States in 1965, and its more portable successor the DV-2400, released in 1967.[37] Like amateur-gauge film cameras, portable video recording technology often known as the Sony Portapak made for a more flexible and mobile mode of media production and made possible videotape usage outside of television studios and institutions. Like Super 8 movies, camcorders, and camera-equipped smartphones, portable video recording was regarded as a democratizing technology. As Ben Keen describes its impact: "for the first time a non-expert individual was able to carry around the complete means of televisual production . . . the user could be entirely independent."[38] Its champions in video art communities regarded the Portapak in opposition to television as "decentralized, anarchic, two-way, and portable."[39] Just as important as technological innovation,

however, was a cultural context in which ideas about television's profound effects circulated widely, particularly among educated elites. The growing fame of Marshall McLuhan's ideas about television was a particularly strong force, alongside the more everyday notions of TV's low-culture reputation and its domination by three commercial networks beholden to commercial sponsors eager to reach their audiences. Video art was widely publicized in the popular and alternative press, and it emerged with a reputation for being an expressive, artistic use of television technology. For instance, a famous early exhibition of video art was called "TV as a Creative Medium." A *Newsweek* story on "Television's Avant-Garde," comparing video art to off-off-Broadway theater and *cinéma vérité*, described this movement as a "pioneering corps" of innovative experimenters bent on opening up staid network programming to more "sensual and cerebral" forms of expression.[40]

McLuhan's formulation of the medium as a central concept, not just in understanding media but also modern society, influenced video artists, even if many of them had quite different concerns than McLuhan's, whether personal or political. In theorizing that each medium has distinct sensory qualities that are direct products of its materiality and technology, his writing produced an approach to thinking about television in particular that emphasized its formal qualities and their effects. As the dominant mass medium of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, TV attracted much critical attention focused on appreciating its social effects and expressive potential. As practitioners in

a postwar art movement, video artists of the 1960s and after were also products of an aesthetic context in which modernist ideas about art often emphasized formal explorations of the conditions and possibilities of a medium. Bill Viola argued that avant-garde film and video artists were not concerned with making works that would be "*about* anything at all." Rather, he argued, "they actually *were* the thing."[41] Video art could reject the realist orientation of traditional art, explore the properties of its medium, and in the words of Deirdre Boyle, concern itself with the "deconstruction of the television set as material object and the re-presentation of the TV signal as material."[42] Another camp of video artists, sometimes known as "Guerrilla Television," had a different agenda of intervention into politics and social movements, but like the formalist camp this group was also thinking of its role in contrast and distinction to ordinary TV as mass medium.[43] In the essay "One-Gun Video Art," Les Levine draws a stark contrast: "Television is mass media. Video art applies only to those interested in art . . . Video art in the long run is not television. It's the medium of television being used by artists to express conceptual ideas and also to express ideas about time and space."[44] Whether formalist or not, video art was premised, in William Boddy's words, on a "revolt against the by-then hegemonic place of commercial broadcasting in defining the television apparatus."[45]

David Antin's famous essay "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium" is the clearest articulation of the identity of video art in relation to TV as it was understood to function in

the 1960s and 1970s. Antin's essay was published in the catalog for the 1975 Video Art exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, a significant moment in the history of video as an avant-garde art form bringing together the work of dozens of prominent artists and collectives. Antin, himself an artist and poet as well as a critic, drew on many of the exhibited works in his discussion of video art as a practice distinct from commercial broadcast television.

"Television," Antin argues, "haunts all exhibitions of video art."[46] His argument centers on the uses of video by artists to reveal not only the medium's properties but also the failure of commercial TV broadcasting to satisfactorily exploit them. He faults the institutional structures of broadcasting, for instance, for failing to make TV a two-way medium and to involve the audience's participation. Video art, by contrast, would make these functions possible and recuperate the medium's potential. The television audience would be liberated by video art, which would replace the mere transmission of video signals with true communication. Video art's critique of television is emblematic of a wider critique of contemporary culture.

One of Antin's most trenchant points has to do with the abandonment by the TV networks of the live aesthetic that was so central to its claims in the 1950s to cultural legitimacy. In the spirit of the golden age rhetoric, he faults the TV networks for pursuing profit ahead of cultural value by substituting a mannered, deceptive (because not live) unrealism for the live transmission of events: "The medium maintains a continual

assertion that it can and does provide an adequate representation of reality, while everyone's experience actually denies it."[47] By contrast to the close-up, fast-paced style of commercial television, Antin suggested, artists' videos had a distinctive approach to representation and time (their works being boring, and often celebrated for this quality). Unlike commercial TV, artists were trying to employ the medium in a way that would make use of—if not explore critically—its most distinctive formal features of liveness, intimacy, and immediacy, and its potential for participatory communication.

In reporting on video art exhibitions, press items would routinely draw similar contrasts between television as a mass medium and video as an art form. A *New Yorker* profile of Paik by Calvin Tomkins referred to video artists "trying to turn the cathode-ray tube into an art medium."[48] A 1975 story on Frank Gillette compared his video artworks with "the sort of thing that's geared toward selling soap." The headline was, "Videotape Replaces Canvas for Artists Who Use TV Technology in New Way."[49] Here video and TV are used interchangeably but in a way that makes clear that videotape, like a painter's canvas, is a medium of expression and that TV technology can be used either for commercial or for artistic purposes. During the 1970s many high-culture institutions such as museums and galleries exhibited video collections and initiated video departments, and the contrast between commercial broadcasting and the art world made clear the distance between video in an art exhibit and video as broadcasts. The language in a *New York Times* story

on a museum exhibit of video art speaks to the difference: "Like a number of other cultural institutions, the Whitney Museum of American Art is discovering television, or at least video." Whether video was a use of TV or a practice in opposition to it was not entirely clear, but the relationship between the two was hardly one of redundancy. In describing some of the work on display, the *Times* expanded on this contrast: "The point in each case is to create a dramatic contrast to standard video or TV, which is almost overwhelming in its openness, its determination to be impersonal and inoffensive."[50] In a 1977 story on the Intermedia Art Center begun by the New York State Council for the Arts, the headline similarly read, "TV as a Tool for the Artist," and the description of the Center's work presented its mission of making available the resources necessary for video production to artists and ordinary people.[51] Like video games, the name for this kind of media production might have included the terms *television* and *TV*. But the ultimate establishment of its identity as video art rather than TV or television art speaks to the sense of video's opposition to television as a more authentic alternative to the mass medium and as a form of critique of mass media and particularly broadcasting. It also speaks to the consolidation of TV as a term connoting commercial media rather than other uses of the CRT set and the video signal.

The Revolution Is Here

"Video revolution" is a phrase that has endured through decades of media history. Discourses surrounding the release of Sony's

Betamax in 1975, among other home video decks, continued many of the ideas already circulating for ten years about video as a force of upheaval and transformation. The *Washington Post* in 1973 described Cartrivision and U-matic as components of a "Home Television Revolution," touting all of the convenient and empowering benefits of "cartridge television."[52] Sony's Betamax advertising tagline "Watch Whatever Whenever" delivered on the democratizing promise described years earlier of giving the viewer selectivity (fig 3.2). It also modified some of the terms of video's identity, however, by emphasizing time-shifting TV rather than playing prerecorded tapes. Sony's print ads under the header "Make Your Own TV Schedule" pictured an issue of a TV program guide covered in a large "X." A Betamax commercial demonstrating a videocassette deck along with a Sony camera encouraged the consumer: "start your own network." When recording television shows for later viewing, Dr. Joyce Brothers told the *Times* in 1977, the video recorder "actually lets you gain control."[53] While expressing disappointment over home video's failure to become the platform for arts programming earlier imagined by elite critics, some discussions also highlighted the value of home video for providing an alternative means of watching movies that, like time shifting, improved the viewer's agency. By the mid-1980s, videotape decks were in more than 25 million homes and video stores numbered in the tens of thousands. "The size of this video revolution is staggering," reported the *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby in 1985, "even to minds numbed by Hollywood hyperbole."[54]

FIGURE 3.2 Sony's campaign sold the Betamax video recorder as a device for time-shifting programs taped off the air. By placing the product boldly in the foreground with the TV set in the background, Sony emphasized video's value as a technology improving on television.

At this point, video came to be caught between its positive value in relation to broadcast TV and a more ambiguous status in relation to cinema. Video allowed for the audience's selectivity in choosing what and when to watch, including movies. Their availability on tape was appealing enough in the later 1970s that some viewers spent huge sums on bootlegs of recently released films taped off the air or cable, or produced by someone connected to the entertainment business. One might spend $200 or more to own a cassette of a recent box office hit.[55] In the popular press, the advent of "TV Tape" was often represented as an innovation in cinema as well as television, as in a *New York Times* illustration in which a man seizes a videocassette in one hand and a wad of cash in the other, standing in front of a large televised image of the "Star Wars" titles, with a clutter of cables behind the set suggesting technological tinkering and exploration making possible the convergence of movies and TV (fig 3.3).

From the start of the home video boom, Hollywood studios recognized the VTR's prospects for transforming their business and their audience's expectations, and the entertainment industry greeted it as a transformational technology but also a source of uncertainty.[56] In part to stymie bootleggers, 20th Century Fox became the first studio to release its titles on videotape in 1978, pricing cassettes of movies like *M*A*S*H* and *The French Connection* for sale at $50 (and a few years later at considerably higher prices).[57] In the early 1980s, video piracy was serious competition to legitimate commerce in films on

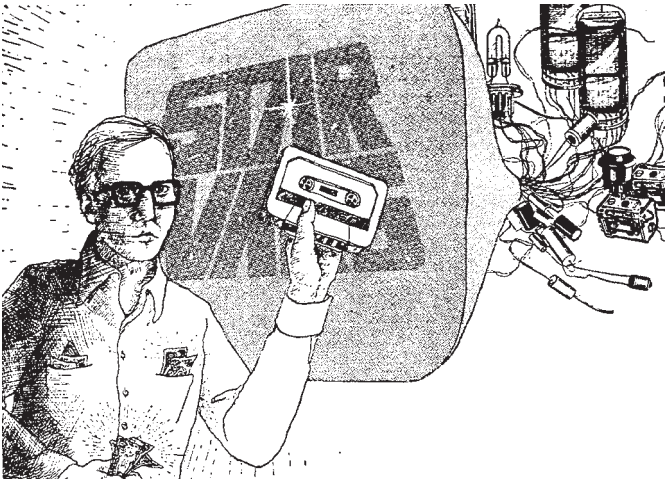

FIGURE 3.3 Illustration by Doris Ettlinger for the article "For Many, TV Tape Means Watching More—and Loving It," *New York Times*, August 27, 1977, using the most popular movie of the day to represent the appeals of home video.

tape, accounting for some 70 percent of prerecorded cassettes in circulation.[58] Bootlegging was a major cause of concern for Hollywood firms, which in 1976 sued Sony for selling a device enabling the audience to record films off the air, and lobbied Congress intensively in the early 1980s to impose statutory royalties on blank videocassettes and VCRs to compensate for its putative revenue losses at the hands of copyright-infringing tapers. The motivations for filing and appealing the Betamax case were undoubtedly multiple, and included a desire to protect television programs as the studios' intellectual property no less than films, as well as a sense of the imperative to assert

power in relation to Japanese electronics companies.[59] But the logic of Disney joining this legal action initiated by Universal was clearly to protect the ongoing profitability of its library of animated feature films, which it had been regularly rereleasing theatrically to appeal to successive generations of children. Disney's chairman testified at trial that the company was protecting its intellectual property from tapers by refusing to allow some of its films to be shown on cable systems such as QUBE, in Columbus, Ohio, where perhaps a dozen subscribers were known to be owners of videotape decks. He claimed that such preventive measures had cost his company $2 million.[60] The quick and broad adoption of home video by the American public made these protective efforts look silly by the mid-1980s, however, when the Supreme Court ruled that recording television broadcasts was fair use and refused to find that Sony was responsible for "contributory infringement" of copyright. By this time Hollywood had established a system of home videocassette distribution to retail outlets. Widespread piracy was averted not by judicial or regulatory intervention but by the creation of a legitimate system for the purchase or rental of movies on video.

In Hollywood's period of defensive video panic, the VCR had been likened to the Boston Strangler by the head of the studios' trade organization, the MPAA. By the middle of the 1980s, it had become a major opportunity for adding to Hollywood's revenues, and for appealing to the audience freed by videotape from relying on the TV networks for their home

entertainment. It promised to "rewrite the economics of movie making."[61] One press account of video's importance to Hollywood referred to tape as "the second great technological revolution" of film history (after sound), "which will profoundly change the art of movie making and the habits of moviegoers as well."[62]

Video meant all kinds of movies to view in the home. Especially coupled with projection television sets, another innovation of the 1970s, a videocassette deck could be one part of a home theater ensemble in the "media room," an increasingly common name for the family or recreation room. *New York Magazine*'s home furnishings photo essay on media rooms in 1976 proclaimed: "today's revolution is communications in the home." A media room in which to watch movies on a big screen would be "one big custom container for the latest in video equipment."[63] One of the owners of the media rooms represented compared his experience to living in a movie theater, which despite the novelty implied by *New York Magazine* was actually an old trope of representing televisions in the home as a combination of public and private experiences.[64]

Drawing as well on these tropes, *Newsweek*'s August 6, 1984, cover story, "The Video Revolution," balanced the two primary uses of the VCR. It told stories of movie lovers visiting video stores to rent recent Hollywood releases, as well as TV viewers time-shifting their shows. It announced that home video was soon to become "the next major mass medium," a fact sure to unsettle "almost every facet of the entertainment business."

The outcome of this shake-up was unambiguously to be a benefit to audiences: "The theme of this uprising is power to the people . . . the VCR lets viewers overturn television's tyranny." The audience welcomed the new device because it "appeal[ed] to the American love of freedom."[65]

It also apparently renewed interest in movies. Rather than siphoning from the theatrical box office, the VCR prompted new synergies between home video and theatrical exhibition. The sequel *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) was helped in its theatrical run by the popularity of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), the earlier film in the series, on videocassette and vice versa. *Raiders*, at the time the all-time bestselling videocassette, was offered for sale in some cinema lobbies where its sequel was playing, and copies moved briskly.[66] *Newsweek* described the relation between theatrical release and home video as a synergy, crowing that "VCR's appear to inspire enthusiasm about movies" and noting that Hollywood had upped the number of films released from the previous year.[67]

As the VCR became a standard component in ensembles of consumer electronics, video's meanings adjusted to the medium's newfound uses. In part, these uses would mark a shift of cinemagoing, in public imagination if not reality, from a public to private activity, from going out to staying in. Video had already been marked in distinction to television, and now it was also defined in a relationship of complementarity to movies and mainstream film culture. Families staying in to watch a movie on videotape might pop popcorn

and dim the lights to re-create movie theater sensations and some of the special quality of cinemagoing in distinction to more quotidian television viewing, as I experienced as a child, while retaining the comforts of home (and the annoyances).[68] One ad for an RCA videodisc player, whose tagline was, "Bring the Magic Home," pictured a man holding a box of popcorn sitting in the glow of his TV screen, surrounded by attractive women lured to his side by movies on video. This representation reproduced the social function of cinema as a place for heterosexual courtship, but relocated to the space of the home (fig. 3.4).

The television set was supposedly improved by video's revolutionary transformation into a technology to rival and substitute for the cinema, though at the same time cinema was brought down to the size of the home and the television set. The contradictory significance of the VCR suggesting a merging of public and private, big and small, was conveyed in *Newsweek*'s "Video Revolution" cover art. An illustration represents a VCR on a monumental scale, the size of a neighborhood movie house, with spectators queued up around it as if to pass into the tape deck–cum-theater (fig 3.5). The video revolution of this representation redefined categories of leisure experience by revising prevailing conceptions of television and cinema as mass media. In this way the medium of video negotiated between these audiovisual siblings and reinforced their mutual distinction even as it also introduced a new ambiguity to their relationship.

FIGURE 3.4 An advertisement for RCA VideoDiscs in a 1982 issue of *Playboy* represents video bringing the culture of moviegoing into the home, while also reinforcing associations between new technology and masculinity.

FIGURE 3.5 *Newsweek*'s cover on August 6, 1984, announced *The Video Revolution* picturing a VCR as a movie theater.

Video as a Masculinized Medium

Hollywood got richer from cassettes and VCRs, but home video also quickly became a major market for another kind of movies. Pornographic feature films, which had enjoyed a period of unprecedented popularity and theatrical success earlier in the 1970s as more than 700 theaters screened hard-core titles, found a huge commercial opportunity in prerecorded videocassettes.[69] This tapped into an existing market but also expanded the interest in explicit sexual representations to include consumers unwilling to view such films in public at an X-rated movie theater. Adult films were the "first big genre for prerecorded cassettes," writes Frederick Wasser, making up half of all prerecorded videotape sales through the end of the 1970s.[70] This led to an expansion of the porn industry and its abandonment of 35mm film for video. In the context of the 1970s, however, the shift was not of production from one medium to another but rather of consumption from public to private places. A colorful 1980 *Playboy* cartoon captures the tensions in the uses and meanings of prerecorded videocassettes: a man is seated at a desk viewing a television image while operating a videotape deck. By his side is a pipe and an issue of "HI TECH" magazine. The image on the TV screen is of two nude women, one atop the other in a sexual pose. Above the man stands his wife, lips pursed and eyes on the set. The caption reads, "You didn't think I bought this baby to tape 'Masterpiece Theater,' did you?"

As not only the pornographic content but also the "HI TECH" magazine in the cartoon indicates, interest in the VCR as a new technology was a masculinized form of early adopter culture alongside other forms of hi-tech gadgets. With video decks for consumers, video sprouted new associations in relation not to movies and television but to other forms of home electronics technology aimed at mainly male hobbyists and connoisseurs. This placed video alongside photography, audio tape recording, hi-fi stereo equipment, home computers, home movies, and similar types of tech-fetish hobbyist and collector pursuits.[71] The gendered character of society's adoption of new technologies typically invests them with forms of patriarchal power.[72] While the VCR was later feminized by some of its uses in the home, in its early years it was marketed as advanced technology for male consumers. In Ann Gray's study conducted in the 1980s, male dominance of VCR programming and controls (though not of watching) was evidence of a gendered division of household labor, rendering female technical competence invisible.[73] As a gadget for men's active use, video would be a departure from the feminized, passive medium of TV.

An example of this gendered video culture is *The Videophile*, a newsletter "published monthly at the whim of Jim Lowe" of Tallahassee, according to issue #3 of November 1976, mailed to subscribers to facilitate tape trading and to keep them informed of news about video technology. Lowe was particularly excited by the newfound ability to archive television programs and advertisements (which he defended including in recordings),

though he noted that most readers were more interested in collecting movies. In a list of names of videophiles and their interests in this issue, all were men. *The Videophile* print run in these days was only 100 copies, but these concerns indicate a social positioning of video within a context of masculine collecting and hobbyism.[74] When video cameras emerged significantly onto the consumer market, more professional publications would similarly integrate these new technologies into the culture of photography and stereo enthusiasts. The similarity of *videophile* with the terms *cinephile* and *audiophile* positions interest in the new technology in relation to cultures of connoisseurship and discernment with overtones of gender and class identity. ABC Publishing began to print the magazine *Video Today* in 1980, contained within two of its other titles and written by their staff: *Modern Photography* and *High Fidelity*.[75] Jack Gould predicted in the 1960s that video would be more like LPs than TV. In the emergence of *Video Today* and many similar forms of video culture in the 1970s and 1980s, video's identity extended its move away from mass culture and entertainment by association with masculine forms of artistic and technological leisure pursuit.

Later in the 1980s and 1990s, *The Perfect Vision*, a quarterly that billed itself "The High End Video Journal," was aimed at what Barbara Klinger would later call home theater "new media aristocrats," male connoisseurs of the latest audiovisual technology and the video equivalents of affluent hi-fi and photography hobbyists.[76] The most sanctioned use in

the discourses of masculine tech enthusiasts for video was to watch great movies in the home, as many a *Perfect Vision* cover would represent. One issue's cover pays homage to *The Wizard of Oz*, with the characters seemingly stepping off the filmstrip of the past into the video yellow brick road of a technologically advanced future. Another cover plays with *Singin' in the Rain*, as the movie's hero Don Lockwood swings from a lamppost in the film's signature number, a satellite dish taking the place of his umbrella (fig. 3.6). Through the application of technology, such imagery suggests, the male video hobbyist can achieve an upgraded experience of cinema. This visual rhetoric further distanced video, as a technology of active and sophisticated connoisseurship, from the feminized domestic medium of broadcast TV.

Cinephile Anxieties

For the cinephile connoisseur in particular, video would be a mixed blessing at best. In addressing the value of video as a means of viewing theatrically distributed feature films, movie lovers attentive to the materiality of media, such as readers of *The Perfect Vision*, would necessarily consider the quality and character of video as technology. They understood this in relation to the 35mm standard of first-run theatrical presentation and weighed the benefits of expanded access ("Watch Whatever Whenever") against the costs of video's difference from film, most often regarded as a deficiency or poverty of the image and, less often, the soundtrack. Watching movies on a television set

FIGURE 3.6 The (A) Spring 1990 and (B) Spring 1991 cover artwork by Gary Viskupic for *The Perfect Vision* conveys the potential of home video technology to improve on the experience of cinema and bring film classics to life in the home.

FIGURE 3.6 Continued.

might still be considerably higher in cultural status than watching broadcast TV, but videotape versions of movies were still wanting in authenticity and legitimacy compared with movies exhibited theatrically, particularly in 35mm. In cinephile and technophile discourses, video was often regarded as a medium of reproduction rather than a legitimate and authentic alternative format for viewing a movie. In some ways this positioned video as fraudulent insofar as it might appear to be a fair substitute for film. Cinephiles might regard movies on video as a secondary option after seeing the original artworks, just as photographic reproductions of paintings would be regarded in the art world in distinction to canvases hanging on gallery walls. Such discourses, however, would still position videotape movies above television broadcasts, despite the technological interchangeability and ambiguity of these media.

In its status as an alternative medium for exhibition of feature films, video laid bare the discursive distance and opposition between cinema and television, media forms that would seem to have so much in common aesthetically and technologically. After all, so much of television's content since the later 1950s has been filmed, and the techniques of film and video production are substantially the same. Efforts to distinguish video from cinema, particularly in the overlapping cinephile and academic press, would counterbalance the rhetoric of revolution, reimagining video not as the redemption of the TV audience but as the temptation, corruption, and possibly the ultimate decline of cinema and its culture.

These ideas had been brewing already through decades of televised cinema. In the network era, movies were among the most popular programs on television, airing frequently on both networks and local stations, and often in prime time to high ratings as well as late at night. But Pauline Kael insisted in her nostalgic 1967 *New Yorker* essay "Movies on Television" that one cannot judge a film after viewing it on TV, and claimed that spectators remember less of the movies they watch at home.[77] The experience of the film as a visual work and of its rhythm and pacing are too badly affected, and the "housebound, inactive, solitary" nature of home viewing is too different from being in the theater. Television, a mass medium always reduced to selling, is, according to her account, incapable of beauty. Television cannot transmit the aesthetic qualities of a motion picture made for the cinema (which unlike TV is capable of art), and certainly cannot convey the excitement of cinematic set pieces like cattle drives and chases. Kael was contemptuous even of the wide availability of so many old films on television, making it harder, in her argument, to tell the good films from the bad and to see them as they were originally regarded by audiences of the past. While clearly confessing to taking pleasure in revisiting old movies on TV, Kael was also drawing a boundary line separating one kind of experience of movies from another in terms of value, quality, and cultural legitimacy. Cinephile culture carried many of her distinctions and concerns forward when videotape further expanded the availability of movies for TV viewing.

The expansion of cable television in the 1970s and 1980s meant more movies on TV, as both premium and basic channels filled their schedule grids with theatrically released films. This allowed for many classic movies to be more widely seen and collectively remembered, but it also meant the editing and interruption of movies for standards and commercials and the reduction of the picture to fit the resolution, size, and shape of NTSC displays. To film lovers and critics, movies on television also functioned as a kind of translation, producing different effects, often to the detriment of cinema as a medium and art. The practices, common in the home video age, of colorizing, cropping (panning and scanning), and letterboxing films transferred to video made apparent the transformation involved in migrating media.[78] The computerized addition of color to old black-and-white movies for release on videocassette and airing on TV was a particularly galvanizing issue in the later 1980s for defenders of film against video's threat. Critics of this practice were typically disgusted by what they regarded as vandalizing cultural heritage for commercial gain and pandering to a mass audience's taste. Many saw this threat as television's unwelcome incursion against cinema.[79]

For Hollywood's broad audience, home video might not have posed a radical challenge to the identity of movies as a cultural form. Video essentially expanded an engrained practice of viewing movies in the home. For the still-young academic field of film studies, however, and for readers of publications such as *Film Comment*, *Film Quarterly*, and *Sight & Sound*, the

medium of video was often regarded as a cause for alarm even if it was also sometimes welcomed as an opportunity for broader access to movies. Richard T. Jameson described in a 1991 *Film Comment* essay how "this bastard brother of television seemed to threaten the integrity—maybe even the existence—of films *on film*," though he also offered his appreciation of the medium and its inevitable presence in film culture.[80] Charles Tashiro, who had worked at the videodisc distributor Criterion, charitably referred in a *Film Quarterly* essay to the transfer of texts from film to video as a process of translation, describing a range of compensations and corrections made during this work. "Videocassettes and discs are like large shards," he wrote, "hints of the original."

As with many commentators, Tashiro took care to point out technical differences between the two media, particularly in terms of color, resolution, and sound. And like some others, Tashiro also made a balanced case in favor of video in instances when the alternative might be a poor quality print, perhaps a 16mm transfer, projected badly or under unfavorable conditions.[81] Many repertory cinemas, film courses, and campus film societies of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s exhibited films using 16mm prints of questionable quality, so good video versions might have been preferable in many instances. Video versions were not all the same, as the regular "Life with Video" column in *Film Comment* would point out in the early 1990s. Technical aspects of film-to-video transfer and aspect ratios varied from one version or title to another. A movie taped off the air might

differ in quality from prerecorded cassettes, but television might also air films not available for sale or rental. Laserdisc was preferable to cassette, and the prospect of high-definition TV would be welcome as another improvement of the image.[82]

In such writing, cinephile authors established value-laden terms of legitimacy for serious, intellectual film culture. Video technology such as tapes and discs would be integrated into this culture without compromising the essential cinematic experience as theatrical 35mm film projection. Film might not always have every advantage, but video could not be seen as a legitimate substitute, never mind as equal to film, all things considered. By comparison with 35mm, the authentic and original instance of a movie, as well as by association with the medium of television, videotape or videodisc versions of movies were regarded as compromised. While technical issues were most often given to support this rhetoric, ultimately more ineffable qualities having less to do with technology than with cultural distinction also frequently carried the argument through. Even a future scenario of improved television resolution would fail to be an adequate solution to the problem of films on video due to the limitations inherent in television's identity and cultural status as an "alien medium."[83] Frank Thompson elaborated this case in eloquent, emotional terms in the pages of *Film Comment* in 1992:

> Unfortunately, "something like" [the original form of film] is as good as laser [disc] can get. Even the long-promised Video

> Messiah, HDTV, isn't going to give us back everything we've lost in the film/video trade. Films need size, darkness, the undivided attention of the audience. They need to be able to create an entire world for us to live in for a while. Television, even at the highest of hi-tech, is simply not able to deliver this experience on so many levels . . .
>
> By embracing video to the exclusion of real film exhibition, we're consciously and voluntarily surrendering many of the things that make film unique and wonderful, in exchange for convenience. Laserdiscs are swell, but they're just reminders of the real thing. You can gaze at your postcard of the Grand Canyon all day long, but it won't give you that breathless thrill you get when you're standing right there on the rim.[84]

In this mode of cinephile anxiety, video is a sham, a television-based means striving to replace cinema rather than an alternative to TV or a liberating new use for its technology. A rhetoric of authenticity (video can be "something like" but never the "real thing") positions the new technology as an object to be feared and mistrusted. The clearest notes sounded are of caution and loss. Film culture hangs in the balance, liable to be discarded in favor of the ease of a superficially appealing but less vital and ultimately inadequate simulation of cinema.

Some academic writers would also sound this alarm but in more fearful and defensive tones. Video presented an opportunity to broaden offerings in film studies at a time of the field's expansion. It was a cheaper alternative and often rivaled 16mm prints in visual and sound quality. In terms of convenience and accessibility, video had strong advantages, and in the later 1980s

came into wider use in university classrooms. As ever, university budgets were tight and administrators on many campuses viewed video as an acceptable or desirable substitute for film print rentals, which were rising in price. Film scholars and teachers were often reluctant to abandon film, however, and many resisted the pressure to replace films with tapes and discs.

The Society for Cinema Studies (SCS) convened a Task Force on Film Integrity to consider the use of video in the classroom, and its report appeared in a 1991 issue of *Cinema Journal*. The Task Force's stance on the issue was unambiguous and severe: "No film can be adequately represented by its video version."[85] After comparing the 35mm and 16mm film and NTSC video images in terms of resolution, the report concluded: "Film images are . . . sharper, more detailed, possess a higher resolution, and carry more information than do video images." The report also compared the images in terms of contrast, aspect ratio, and color reproduction, arguing that video is an "inferior medium."[86]

Consequently, the Task Force warned university administrators that classroom use of video posed a threat to the integrity and rigor of film studies as a discipline. It cautioned that video would make a poor archival medium, as tapes would not endure as long as films; it would be shortsighted to invest in video libraries. The authors not only insisted that film must continue to be taught on film, but also asserted that "[m]ost of the key aesthetic components of the cinema do not survive the transfer of film to video" and referred to video not only as

a "substitute" and "inferior facsimile" but even as "a form of counterfeiting."[87] At stake in this fight was not only the preservation of one medium or another, but of the identity of scholars of the medium under threat and the collective scholarly project they were undertaking.

Reporting in the pages of *Film Quarterly* from an annual meeting of SCS and the University Film and Video Association in 1988, Bruce Kawin made similar claims even more forcefully. Among the themes considered at that conference, according to Kawin, were distinctions between film and video and video and television. In the face of administrative pressures and shrinking budgets, film scholars had taken to video as a substitute for film screenings, and in Kawin's reporting, video had won the debate over whether to teach film history and aesthetics using film prints or videotapes and discs. He addressed this development as a crisis, claiming to have "heard the sound of Film Studies desiring the spectacle of its own destruction." One unnamed scholar at the conference foresaw a future in which high-definition video would erase the distinction between electronic and photochemical media, and television and cinema would be part of a wider field of moving-image media studies. Kawin treated this prospect as an existential threat and described the potential effect of video's dominance in film courses in quasi-Biblical terms: "I think I heard people selling wallpaper for the house of bondage."[88]

Like the cinephile press and the Task Force on Film Integrity, Kawin ultimately saw this crisis resolving on the very

definition of cinema in terms of its essential qualities, a definition expressed in terms of the materiality of the film image and apparatus. As in other examples of such reasoning, this argument ultimately could be made most strongly in impressionistic, evocative language distinguishing film from its rivals rather than through convincing logical and empirical claims. Kawin defended the appreciation of "every aspect of a movie that is just not there and not happening when the 'same text' is played back through the TV set." These aspects were described as: "the aura of the real thing, the richness of the dyes, the dark, the silver, the quality of the light that flickers from behind you. . . ." As with other writing defending film against movies on video, this brief for the older medium relied on a rhetoric of authenticity that made the case for cinema's essence most crucially as a negation of television. In this argument, video was a failed effort to make cinema more accessible and accommodating, and a threat to the future of film qua film. If cinema has maintained an identity distinct from TV and video in the years since these defensive discourses were articulated, it has been in the face of video's continuing—and intensifying—embrace of all audiovisual media.

Camcorders, Democracy, Authenticity

In the 1950s, video was represented as a positive alternative to cinema. In the 1980s and 1990s, cinema was represented as a positive alternative to video. The material qualities of the two media had not changed substantially in the interim, but film's

cultural status had improved to the point that it was frequently taught alongside literature in college classes, while television's status had quickly degraded following its initial golden age. The fortunes of these two media in terms of cultural status make a bold reverse image in the 1960s, even as Hollywood studios moved into producing filmed television programs in their soundstages and back lots in significant quantity, intensifying convergence of movies and TV industrially. Serious film culture blossomed in the 1960s, as festivals, art house theaters, and highbrow publications consecrated classics and celebrated directors as artists.[89] It was a cultural moment of widespread cinephilia, with many prominent intellectuals and critics looking at cinema as a medium of modern art. It cannot be a coincidence that film was culturally legitimated at the very moment that its status as dominant mass medium was ceded to TV. Television was its bad-object other, artless and hypercommercial, satisfying the base interests of its mass audience.

At the same time that cinema was seen to be threatened by videotape, however, video was undergoing another of its revolutions, the one associated with camcorders and amateur or home video. If cinema, and Hollywood in particular, have had an abiding identity as a dream factory and source of illusions and fantasies, television and video have maintained their reputation for access to reality and instantaneity, their ideological positioning as unmediated media. Authenticity has historically cut both ways with video: if video has failed to be authentic as a medium of film exhibition, it has also succeeded

as a medium of authentic representation of the real world, and of civic engagement and democratic participation. It seems particularly arbitrary that a medium so much criticized for its visual poverty and insufficiency relative to film would also be seen to have the advantage when it comes to representing the real. But through a cluster of cultural and historical processes, video has often been invested in popular imagination with this quality of access to actuality owing to its capacities to record and document everyday life and events of political and historical importance, and to the increasing ubiquity of video cameras in modern life for surveillance and amateur recording. In previously recorded television productions such as situation comedies, for instance, video has sometimes been the preferred format over film for its live look and its associations with broadcasting rather than cinema. One famous instance of this preference was *All in the Family*, a comedy noted for its social relevance recorded on tape rather than film. As video became a cheaper and easier alternative to film for many uses outside of the entertainment industries, electronic rather than photochemical media came to be associated more with the image of the real.

One moment in which this association was reasserted occurred on television in the fall of 1980. The FBI's Abscam sting operation of the late 1970s and early 1980s had caught state and federal legislators accepting bribes from agents including one pretending to be a wealthy Middle Eastern immigrant seeking asylum in the United States. Secretly videotaped

surveillance footage of acts of political corruption in a hotel room, where elected officials met the agents, proved to be sensational and irrefutable evidence in court, leading toward convictions. Soon after the sting was first made public, these events were parodied in a *Saturday Night Live* sketch spoofing *The Beverly Hillbillies*, "The Bel-Airabs," reinforcing the linkage between video recording and the real, and videotape's familiarity as a medium of capturing and documenting actuality.[90] After a well-publicized Supreme Court decision allowing it, the evidentiary videotape was broadcast on television evening news programs on October 14, 1980, an event marked in popular criticism as a historic occasion for both television and video. The *Washington Post* TV critic Tom Shales noted the "video *vérité*" look of the images, and essentially predicted what would later be called reality TV, as surveillance and other forms of taped footage were likely to find their way onto the airwaves in the near future as both news and entertainment. Shales imagined that this would "change the way we look at the tube—and the way it looks at us."[91] Video cameras had been available to consumers for more than a decade by the time of the Abscam case, but were not widely adopted in comparison to video recorders until the 1980s.

When video camcorders were released to the American market in the mid-1980s, they offered consumers a more compact and portable alternative to earlier video cameras, which required separate camera, microphone, and shoulder-strap tape units. Camcorders were marketed as an "all-in-one"

technology, tapping into the rhetoric of democratization of media that has accompanied many new devices promoted as easier to use than their predecessors.[92] While they were heavy and bulky compared to succeeding models, weighing as much as eight pounds, early camcorders made ordinary people rather than just tech enthusiasts and early adopters likely to shoot video and to produce audiovisual media.

Camcorders also quickly became a way for amateur media products to find their way into professional broadcasts and cable news programs, much as Shales predicted. Some of this video was in the mode of home movies, but the availability of less expensive and easy-to-use new video gear expanded the practice of amateur media production of many varieties. Amateur videos were made more famous by the ABC network's *America's Funniest Home Videos* (*AFHV*), a long-running series based on user-submitted clips, which began as a 1989 special and continued to air more than two decades hence into the 2010s. *AFHV* and other audience-submission programs such as *I Witness Video* motivated and encouraged viewers to make and send in a certain kind of videotape, and in the later 1980s and 1990s, shooting camcorder footage was seen as a way for ordinary people to "get on TV" and participate in mass media discourse that had hitherto been closed off to them, claiming a place in the national media conversation.[93] The ubiquity of camcorders led *Newsweek* to declare, in a moment of moral panic, that "amateur videographers lurk everywhere" eager to capture comical, lurid, revealing, or sensational events on

camera.[94] According to a more hopeful *Columbia Journalism Review* essay published in 1991, footage of events such as earthquakes and tornadoes taken by ordinary citizens shooting with camcorders "add a democratic dimension to television journalism worldwide."[95] Democratization of media in this sense meant not only democratization of the means of production but also of access to the airwaves, to network and cable news and public affairs programming and reality TV like *I Witness Video* and *AFHV*, though always on the terms of the commercial industry and its regulators.[96]

Camcorder video gained significant notice before long for practices linked to another conception of democratization. Some newsworthy camcorder footage in the later 1980s and 1990s represented issues of civic and political significance, promoting democratic governance and values around the world. The most famous amateur video of this time in the United States was George Holliday's recording of the beating of a black citizen, Rodney King, by Los Angeles Police Department officers. This footage aired many times on television after Holliday submitted it to his local station, and was taken for indisputable evidence of police brutality. The King affair was significant not only in the history of urban race relations and unequal criminal justice, but also for the centrality of amateur media to its narrative unfolding. As a Ted Koppel ABC News special *Revolution in a Box* reported in 1989, circulation of amateur video (along with satellite technology and other innovations in communication) was also opening up state-controlled media

systems in many other parts of the globe, particularly in the crumbling Soviet bloc and in politically tense regions of the developing world. Koppel described the shift both at home and abroad in dramatic terms: "Television has fallen into the hands of the people . . . A form of television democracy is sweeping the world, and like other forms of democracy that have preceded it, its consequences are likely to be beyond our imagination." The camcorder revolution was in a sense more literally revolutionary than other video revolutions, as its impact was seen in terms not only of changing social practices but also in terms of political effects, opening up communications to a greater range of voices and images and thereby diminishing state and corporate power. When a public uprising in Los Angeles followed an almost all-white jury's acquittal in 1992 of the police officers TV viewers had witnessed beating Rodney King, the video technology that enabled this witnessing was credited with training attention on a serious social problem. This problem, according to contemporary discourse, would not have been recognized in the same way absent the ability of individual citizens to document everyday reality truthfully and accurately. As a consumer electronics trade paper described, this event marked the historical moment when "the 'camcorder revolution' shook the nation by exposing police abuse and its racial undercurrents."[97]

Whether in the slapstick backyard comedy of *AFHV*, the gritty violence and confrontation of *Cops* and the Rodney King beating, or the alternative media of political movements the world over struggling for democratic freedoms, the form of

video associated with camcorders and citizen media production was closely tied to ideas about video's capabilities to capture and document reality in ways that existing media systems had not accomplished. In this construction of video, the enduring identity of television as a medium of directness, immediacy, and transparency was married with the tradition of documentary cinema's rhetoric of truthful capture of actuality in all of its detail and ambiguity, a tradition stretching back to the earliest days of moving pictures and before that to photography. A press release for *I Witness Video*, the NBC series that ran from 1992–1994 depicting crimes and disasters caught on amateur videotape, boasted that "the video boom lets Americans see each other as never before."[98] Amateur video was recognized as a way of revealing society to itself, for making visible previously hidden or inaccessible human experiences. Camcorder images, Jon Dovey argues, became "*the* privileged form of TV 'truth telling,' signifying authenticity and an indexical reproduction of the real world."[99] Video's authenticity and realism benefited from its technical limitations in achieving this sense of truthful directness, and from the handheld shooting style typical of amateur videography. A TV news producer in Tulsa, Oklahoma, told *Columbia Journalism Review* that footage shot by amateurs included in newscasts has "an unpolished quality that tends to make it seem more real." Moreover, she argued, subjects who might "sanitize" their actions in the presence of a professional news crew are less aware they are being recorded by ordinary citizens.[100]

The "more real" quality of amateur camcorder footage soon became integrated into fictional media as well in the form of diegetic video, what the TV Tropes website calls the "fake video camera view." One type is the camcorder image presented in films and television series as the production of characters in the narrative and coded as intimate and personal, probing the surfaces and depths of everyday reality. In movies such as *Reality Bites* and *sex, lies, and videotape* and television shows such as *My So-Called Life*, the switch from the usual film aesthetic to the view from a character's camcorder is presented as an index of realistic narration. The imagery in such sequences is often presented from the operator's POV, marked as video by framing lines, the REC or battery life indicators, and sometimes by a distinct video quality such as scan lines or differences in color and light. The device of characters shooting video in films and TV is not only evidence of society's embrace of amateur camcorder video but also of the status of video in the years of the camcorder revolution as a medium for the representation of the everyday lives of ordinary people. Another type of diegetic video is the surveillance camera footage familiar from crime dramas such as *CSI*. Like the diegetic camcorder device, the use of surveillance video as evidence in police work is a product of a society of ubiquitous video recording. The two devices are also similar in their use of video as an indexical medium. In its function as visual evidence for use in the prosecution of crimes, video in fictional representations extends the same meanings offered by the King case and the examples given in

Revolution in a Box. In popular imagination, video recording truthfully captures the image of reality and provides a faithful and useful record, and this valuation of "raw" video is in contrast to the less "real" (fictional, idealized, fantastical) cultural value of commercial narrative media, particularly film and television.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, video developed in multiple directions, performing various functions and producing a number of perceived effects and consequences. Its identity was contingent on its uses and affordances, and on widely circulating ideas about their social or aesthetic significance. Such notions depended most often on an understanding of video's relation to other popular media. Where video was valued, it was in contrast to prevailing conceptions of television. Where it was denigrated, this was a product of its enduring association with the small screen and its identification with commercial broadcasting, the epitome in these years of mass media. Video's identity was inconsistent as some uses and ideals of videotape recording and playback technology clashed with others, and its identity as a medium depended on how its uses and affordances were perceived and evaluated. Videotape was a technology characterized by interpretive flexibility, as different social groups constructed it according to their needs and interests.[101] The medium's status was negotiated in relation to this flexibility.

Most of all, what the cultural status and identity of video in these years reveals are anxieties surrounding television's status

as the most powerful mass medium, a formidable hegemonic institution of the later twentieth century. As the next chapter proceeds to the twenty-first century, TV retains this force, but new configurations of technology and social relations will complicate the distinctions of value and legitimacy that gave shape to phase two.