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Television Discourse and Situation Comedy

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Abstract: This essay is a condensed version of a chapter from the late Paul Attallah's unpublished doctoral dissertation "TV before TV" (1987) at McGill University. It is published to commemorate the first anniversary of his death. It is an approach to the analysis of television discourse as one that does not question its own epistemo-ideological categories, but rather has tended to view television primarily as a technology capable of producing certain determinate effects. The author takes the example of the sitcom *The Beverly Hillbillies* to illustrate television micro-practices below the threshold of the dominant TV discourse; for instance that, as *Beverly Hillbillies* refused to rise above or transcend the sitcom genre, it spoke the great absence in television criticism at the time—the recognition of TV as still fundamentally an "unworthy discourse."

Keywords: television, discourse, unease, technology, effects, situation comedy

Résumé : Le présent essai est une version condensée d'un chapitre de la thèse de doctorat non publiée « *TV before TV* » (1987) du regretté Paul Attallah à l'Université McGill. Elle est publiée pour commémorer le premier anniversaire de sa mort. C'est une approche à l'analyse du discours en matière de télévision à l'effet qu'il ne remet pas en question ses propres catégories épistémologiques, mais qui a plutôt eu tendance à voir la télévision principalement comme une technologie pouvant produire certains effets déterminés. L'auteur cite l'exemple de la comédie de situation *The Beverly Hillbillies* pour illustrer les micro-pratiques télévisuelles sous le seuil du discours télé dominant, en donnant comme exemple que, comme *Beverly Hillbillies* qui a refusé de s'élever au-dessus de ce type de comédie ou de le transcender, il s'adressait à la vaste absence de critique télévisuelle – à la reconnaissance de la télévision comme encore fondamentalement « un discours sans valeur ».

Mots clés : télévision, discours, malaise, technologie, effets, comédie de situation

It is a widespread urban legend that Paul's 1987 unpublished doctoral dissertation in communication at McGill, "TV before TV: The Emergence of American Network Broadcasting Television and Its Implications for Audiences, Content, and Study" was "on" The Beverly Hillbillies. It wasn't. One sixty-five-page chapter of the dissertation entitled "The Unworthy Discourse" dealt with the situation comedy, and The Beverly Hillbillies in particular. But Paul's point here was a much larger one: we (scholars of communication media as well as ordinary viewers) do not know how to "talk" about television, and so talk about everything but—TV as a technology, TV as business, TV and violence—and this because fundamentally, as a low form of popular entertainment, TV was not worthy of more serious discourse or reflection. So anyone could—and did—say more or less anything at all about TV. And situation comedy was the lowest of the low, "the unworthy discourse," as he put it.

*Paul's dissertation is a study of the talk about the talk about television, and how, as a discourse, it eventually became the many things signified (or not) by TV itself: an institution. Paul's paper, like Aristotle's lost book about comedy in Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, reveals a fact about television that had certainly not been admitted by the 1980s: watching TV is about pleasure. Or enough pleasure for viewers to want to watch TV programs again and again.*

The dissertation chapter itself was too long to republish. But fortunately, among Paul's papers, Prof. Dina Salah (Ottawa University) found an eighteen-page conference version of the chapter and that is the one published here for the first time. Readers familiar with the bite of Paul's style will be rewarded as usual by his wit and the sharpness of his observations. Those unfamiliar with his thought will surely find that this paper, written twenty-seven years ago, shows a scholar remarkably attuned to his topic, and from which there is still much to be learned.

Special thanks to Prof. Salah for her fortuitous find, and also to Dr. Jason Hannan for his data skills.

Michael Dorland, Carleton University

Ever since it was made commercially available in the late 1940s, a great deal has been written in North America about television. On the one hand, the multiplication of writing on television is probably only a reflection of its very rapid diffusion in society. It does in fact appear to be the case that, as television spread, it came into contact with all sorts of pre-existing structures, situations, institutions, habits, etc., sometimes altering the relationships among them—as between children's leisure time, homework, and school—sometimes redistributing their relative importance or status—as between film attendance and television viewing—thereby setting off a great deal of talk about it. Increasingly, individuals, groups, institutions, etc., came to feel that they had some sort of stake in television and had, consequently, to talk about it, to define a position on it. Suddenly,

even the act of not watching television or of not owning a set became a way of singularizing oneself, of taking a stand on technology and society.

On the other hand, however, despite the proliferation of talk about television, despite the variety of its sources and the ostensible number of its approaches, attitudes, and objects, a quite surprising sameness emerges across the totality of writing. Writing on television characteristically takes only a limited number of forms (program reviews, content analysis, speculation about effects, economic or technological forecasts), it characteristically occurs in only a limited number of physical locations (press editorial rooms and universities), it characteristically shares and sets into motion certain common presuppositions and assumptions, it characteristically divides up the field of television into the same categories or areas and then always constitutes those categories or areas in the same way. And this appears to be the case regardless of whether one is dealing with what has been called "the popular press," learned discourse, the witty or provocative "think piece," and so on. It appears that across the sheer volume of the writing and across the variety of its forms, sources, attitudes, approaches, and objects, a certain unspoken and largely unselfreflexive model of how to talk about television is being proposed and reaffirmed.

Ease

Perhaps the surest sign of the model's existence and success is the ease with which we can speak of television. Talking about television is one of the easiest things in the world. People do it all the time, and often at great length. It is a form of public property, freely and equally available to all. It requires no particular precautions and no special knowledge before one can talk about it. And in a very real sense, everyone is just as qualified as everyone else to talk about it. The mode of its availability being generally the same for all, no one's opinion carries a priori any greater weight than anyone else's.

This has bred an ease in talking about television, a familiar self-assurance that has effectively dispensed with the need for soul-searching. Talking about television seems obvious and unproblematic. Television appears to be a clearly defined object with a clearly defined social status and role. Certain aspects of it can be subjected to study, certain methodologies, strategies, or approaches,

and even almost certain prescribed conclusions. Books and articles on the topic, almost universally, begin and end quite effortlessly. One very rarely senses that the authors agonized over or even searched for the most effective or the most appropriate way of broaching their subject. Much like the television programs themselves, writing on television just seems to happen. It poses and belies no existential angst. It is full, complete, and satisfying unto itself. So much can be assumed, so little need be explained.

It also appears that what has been said about television, from all the locations, and by all the sources, has been unavoidably bound up with all sorts of extraneous, non-televisual concerns: theories of communication or education or child-rearing, etc., expectations of technology, directions of research, plans for society, etc. There is no pure, natural, or obvious way of talking about anything, and television is no exception. Everything that is said about it is said from certain positions, with certain arguments or goals or points in mind, with a greater or lesser knowledge of the object's history, laws, genesis, properties, etc., with a greater or lesser understanding of the constraints or incitements around it, in relation to previous ways of talking about the object or to ways of talking about other similar or dissimilar objects.

The point of this paper will not be to set the others right, but to take problematically what they found easy.

Unease

If talking about television is relatively easy, talking about the ways in which people talk about television is relatively uneasy. This is not to say that absolutely no one has ever attempted to systematize the various writings on television, to show how they all exist on a certain logical continuum, with later developments proceeding from the triumphs or shortcomings of earlier ones, or how various positions have grown up around given problematics, etc. Indeed, most scholarly writing opens with precisely those sorts of concerns in mind. The problem is rather that only very rarely have television writers bothered to question the very categories themselves, or the tenacious and recurrent way in which they are maintained and continue to contain the same contents. Rarely is the question asked as to which interests subtend the existence of their categories and why they constitute their object of study in the manner in which they do.

The questioning of categories tends not to occur, however, because most television writing takes place within institutionalized disciplines such as sociology, journalism, mass media studies, psychology, etc. These have largely arrogated to themselves the legitimate study of television. Most TV writing, even when it is critical, therefore tends to remain within the boundaries of a given paradigm because it derives its critical strength from that paradigm and never goes so far as to explode it. This is perhaps an effect of posing the question from within the confines of an institutionalized discipline whose very institutionalization implies a certain stability of shared presuppositions.

As regards this paper specifically, I came to the question by a different route—by reading material that I had hoped would be directly related to *The Beverly Hillbillies*. I found little, and what little I did find tended to be unflinchingly judgmental and hence based on unspoken presuppositions about art, quality, and cognition, as though that were the only obvious, natural, or somehow necessary position to adopt. I did, however, discover a number of other insistent concerns and began to suspect that it was the very formulation of these other concerns, their mode of order of appearance, that could largely explain the absence of material related to my own interests. I therefore began to ask myself how these concerns were articulated and how others had dealt with them—how those concerns represented themselves to themselves through the writings in the field. The answer is that they rarely represent themselves to themselves and therefore rarely raise the issue of the epistemo-ideological interests that subtend them, rarely throw into crisis the presuppositions and assumptions that are their foundation. But this is perhaps not so unusual, as there are relatively few disciplines which willingly throw themselves into crisis.

It appears, then, that across the various tendencies, institutions, sites, etc., of television writing, a surprising sameness is to be found and that most of these writings share a common ground of assumption and presupposition, that most of them divide up the object-television into the same way and into the same categories (whatever their particular conclusions), and that most of them operate within what is in fact a single and same problematic. The problematic has produced some useful insights and fruitful hypotheses but it has also shut out other ways of constituting the object of study.

In order to catch the force and coherence of the insistent sameness of television writing, one need only turn to those authorized and freely available sites in which that writing is codified for academic and other institutional use: *Sociological* and *Psychological Abstracts*, *The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, *Dissertation Abstracts*, *The Cumulative Index to Journals in Television*, *TV Guide*, and the card catalogue of almost any library. These provide an excellent cross-section of television writing, from the most institutionally authoritative to the most popularly dismissible, and yet the themes, concerns, and hypotheses, as well as the way of constituting television as an object of study are surprisingly similar.

The way in which *Dissertation Abstracts* (Subject and Author Indexes 26, 1965–66) divides up television is exemplary of the way in which all other publications also constitute it as an object of study. *Dissertation Abstracts* uses the following areas:

- Television—scanning systems
- Television—law and regulation
- Television—psychological aspects
- Television—stage-setting and scenery
- Television—transmitters and transmission
- Television—closed-circuit
- Television and children
- Television and broadcasting—technological aspects
- Television broadcasting of news
- Television in education
- Television industry (see broadcasting)
- Television programs

This mapping of the field, despite some remarkable areas of confusion, is generally and unproblematically accepted by most work in the field. It is worth noting that the rubrics concerned with scanning systems, stage-setting and scenery, transmitters and transmission, closed-circuit, technological aspects, and television industry all seem to deal with the actual, physical machinery of television. And yet, one might have expected “television broadcasting” to have included more than just “technological aspects,” and certainly more than “Television broadcasting of news,” which comes immediately after it. Why are “psychological aspects” separated out from “Television and children,” “Television in education,” and “Television programs”? Why is a *technology* (and most of the rubrics make it unambiguously clear that television is first and foremost a

technology) presumed to have “psychological aspects” at all? What model or theory or hypothesis here is being proposed in order to account for the relationship between mind and machine, between “psychological aspects” and “technological aspects”? And indeed, what part of the mind is here made to enter into the relationship (the “psychological” as opposed to what? the “intellectual”?). Could “Television industry (see broadcasting)” not include “Television—law and regulation” or economic practices or advertising or the history of networking, etc.?

The answer to these questions cannot simply be that *Dissertation Abstracts* has merely categorized what has been written, for clearly these are categories that *Dissertation Abstracts* shares with numerous other sources, which are therefore not unique to it, and are therefore not solely determined by the objects it categorizes. Furthermore, there are many dissertations whose inclusion in one or the other of these categories would be highly problematic, to say the least. This mapping out of the field, then, not only betrays a certain internal confusion, but also excludes many other types of questions. In addition, even if it could be proved that the writings catalogued in *Dissertation Abstracts* did indeed enter quite correctly and quite uncontentiously into one or the other of the categories provided, our central problem would still remain. Such a perfect fit would indicate only the presence and tenacity of certain widely shared assumptions and presuppositions. It would still be necessary to examine them and also to examine how they contributed to the constitution of the object of study that is television.

The insistent concerns manifest across the range of sources mentioned can perhaps more simply be stated as a twin concern with, on the one hand, technology and its effects, and, on the other hand, with the encounter of authorities or hierarchies, but especially of the family and of children, with that technology.

The constitution of television as a technology is always bound up with a concern for, or an interest in, *effects*. If it were not, the study of television as a technology could be limited to the necessary technical information. This is, however, not the case. Vast regions of concerns have sprung up around the technology and take television’s technological status as their necessary and sufficient starting point. The constitution of television, first and foremost, as a technology, happens then within the context of certain epistemological interests and is the product of those interests or posi-

tions. It is symptomatic of something else but has nonetheless permeated every level of television writing.

The constitution of television as a technology may, nonetheless, be at least partially accounted for by the institutional force of behaviourist and positivist modes of research, which predate the existence or study of television and would precisely operate a reduction of the phenomenon of television to the observable and empirically verifiable effects of a technology, as well as by other institutionally grounded beliefs or expectations about technology. It is in this respect significant that Raymond Williams's book about television, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, should precisely begin with and then devote so much space throughout to a consideration of how we tend, collectively, to talk about television. The fascination with and continual return to apparatus, antennae, closed circuit, etc., as well as the entire domain of the "technological" is omnipresent and indelibly stamps out first apprehension of television as the apprehension of a technology, a machine, whose recent avatar may well be the *medium*. The undeniable advantage of the concept of medium, with a technological perspective, is that, unlike the simple concepts of television or of technology, the medium captures within itself the two roles required of television: to be a machine and to produce social and psychological effects. The medium is the machine already considered from the standpoint of its presumed effects. It appears, then, that the unspoken purpose of constituting television as a technology is to posit effects. Or rather, effects being desired because of institutionally prevalent modes of research, the technology that can produce them is constituted in the place of their production.

This, then, commands the appearance of those other categories that will be used to seize and to constitute television as an object of study. It also involves, however, the occultation of other kinds of categories and of ways of constituting television as an object of study. To talk about television as a technology and to make its technological status the necessary or obvious starting point of one's study is perhaps as much a hindrance as a help.

The privileged site for the study of effects has historically been and continues to be the *family* and especially the *child viewer*. This clearly involves a further set of presuppositions about the family, childhood psychology, desirable and undesirable forms of social

organization, etc. It has, furthermore, given rise to some classically enduring forms of television research.

Effects

The most enduring form of television research is undoubtedly what has come to be known as “effects studies.” In their simplest form, effects studies attempt to show the effect(s) that television can have on the viewer, especially the child viewer. Effects studies are the single most popular, abundant, and influential form of television research. Almost all television writing is to some extent informed by them. Effects studies dealing specifically with the representations of violence, and then of sex, ethnic or professional groups, women, etc., have been commissioned by numerous governments. Social scientists have thrown themselves enthusiastically into this type of research. Even the most unassuming television viewer can now state quite sincerely that television does have some effect. Debates on the effects of television ranged through the pages of *TV Guide* (see Harris) and continue to rage in the academic world. The idea, then, independent of its validity, is quite widely held and it is the necessary consequence of having constituted television as a technology. The effects most frequently studied are those related to the representations of violence and of sexuality. Representations of minorities, ethnic groups, policemen, women, etc., have also been studied from this perspective, in the belief that these presentations not only reflected but also helped shape attitudes about the people represented.

The epistemological presuppositions that subtend this form of analysis are, however, tenuous in the extreme. Their precariousness begins with the very status of the effect itself. Effects are never directly observable and must always be inferred on the basis of some other observation. The construction of effects under controlled conditions leads to all the well-known problems of observer impartiality and influence upon the results.

Beyond these problems, however, effects studies presuppose an equivalence between a representation and reality, as though a picture of a thing were the same as, indeed more powerful than, the thing itself. The naïveté of this presupposition would be touching (we need only show pictures of peace in order to produce peace), were it not dangerous (because certain images cause undesirable behaviour, those images and their makers must be prohibited).

The equivalence between representation and reality further posits a transcendent (therefore non-human and non-existent) subject that could have absolute knowledge of not only reality and the means of representation but also the way in which to transfer that reality into the symbolic realm of representation. This amounts to a total rejection of not only a textual specificity of the representation but also of the possibility that style, taste, tradition, historical circumstance, class, familiarity with other representation, availability of materials, etc. have any importance whatsoever in the manufacture of a representation.

The belief in the equivalence of representation and reality fuels just as easily those who fear it and who would censor television as those who admire it and would claim that television news, for example, provides an accurate or unmediated 'window on the world.' The documentary urge and the urge to censor are the flip sides of the same coin.

Effects studies, because they require controlled conditions, also abstract the viewer from the network of other social practices that surround and give meaning to the act of watching television. They presume too easily, and indeed necessarily, that viewers are blank slates onto which television effects its impact. In fact, people watch television in myriad ways that more often than not belie the stereotype of the glassy-eyed child mesmerized by all that passes before it. The belief in the viewer's susceptibility to television is further confounded by innumerable studies that indicate that most viewers do not remember the contents of a television newscast even a few hours after watching it. So if television is such a powerful technology, why does it turn out to be so ineffectual at this critical moment when it could marshal all its critical resources for propaganda or mass pacification or human betterment, etc.?

In short, the model of the human psyche proposed is deficient, as are the model of representation and the model of television as a technology.

The effects tradition has extended to consideration of television in education and in advertising, and there is in fact a strong convergence of interests, methods, goals, and epistemologies between institutionally or academically sanctioned effects studies and advertising research. Ultimately, the only intriguing thing about effects

studies is why they fastened so swiftly and unhesitatingly on the twin themes of violence and sex.

Clearly, however, effects studies have also led social scientists to delve ever more deeply into the area of what might be called micro-practices. Micro-practices, here, designate the region of human life that had heretofore been considered too inconsequential or too insignificant to be worthy of serious attention. This is the area of the use of leisure time, of single-family-centred child-rearing practices, of singular, individual, and even private practices. The most outstanding monuments to inquiry into micro-practices are undoubtedly the volumes on human sexual response, and so on. No detail is too small, no shred too insignificant, no scrap too secondary for the social scientist's attention. And television research, under the aegis of effects studies, participates enthusiastically in this movement. Books such as *Television in the Lives of Our Children* (Schramm, Lyle, and Baker), *The People Look at Television* (Lyle and Schramm), and innumerable others are veritable catalogues of micro-practices.

The more one studies television, the more it seems as though there were already a powerful socially organized interest and body of inquiry into micro-practices, into their description, investigation, and control, and as though television came to be one of the privileged points of entry into that hitherto inconsequential and uninvestigated private world because of its rapid diffusion in society, because of the spontaneous adherence it engendered, and because of its encounter with all manner of pre-established structures, situations, institutions, habits, etc. It seems as though the themes of sex and violence that constitute much of the content of television as well as the points of its study became the privileged points of contact of that technology with institutions such as the family, school, childhood, etc.

The necessity of current research on television—that is to say the way of talking about television, the way of constituting it as an object of study, in short, the discourse on television—has been to capture television as a technology capable of producing determinate effects rather than as part of a larger culture strategy. Current discourses on television tend to seize it as the starting point of their analyses. Television is constituted as something that causes other things to happen and not as something that itself caused to happen.

Consequently, rather than ask why television was introduced so successfully and so rapidly through the family, its position within the family is accepted unproblematically and questions are asked as to its effect upon the family.

This further determines that rather than questioning television as an institution—as what includes the audience as a necessary element in its own reproduction and necessarily posits a certain type of audience before its very inception—it is grasped at most, from an institutional point of view, as nothing more than a business or an entertainment industry. When television is grasped merely as a business or as an entertainment industry, the only way to account for relationships between the television-institution and its audiences—which are the absolutely central and indispensable core of the institution's success and continuance—is to view them as examples of passive manipulation, exploitation, or mere escapism. The consequent social and psychological theories needed then to explain why literally millions of people would willingly and daily subject themselves to passive manipulation, exploitation, or the enjoyment of mere escapism are hair-raising and tortuous in the extreme. The only way to explain it is to imagine that either the institutions or the producers who work in them somehow manage to maintain conspiratorially an overarching transcendence upon the audience. This leads typically to the belief that only a handful of men controls what we see and that they are mercilessly subject to the profit motive, or, in its more benign form, to the belief that the producer is a creative genius. In either case, a small band of people enjoy exquisite knowledge of the audience, of the institution, and of their own profit-motivated or other interests. How they manage to gain this privileged knowledge that was denied to others, and how they manage to use it daily without ever revealing it to others, is an even more challenging question usually answered by stating that the people involved are either highly skilled businessmen with a flair for the market or very sensitive artists who are in tune with the times.

This further means that rather than asking why a historically given audience enjoys a historically given medium such as television, as it does, the question is asked, once again, of the effects of that medium upon those who watch it, thereby once again reducing the audience to passivity. At its most sophisticated, this becomes a uses and gratifications study.

This, then, appears to be due, not only to the dominance of behaviourist and positivist modes of research in the institutions where television writing occurs with all their attendant presuppositions and expectations about technology, the family, psychology, forms of social organization, etc., but also to a prevalent epistemological interest in stabilizing contact between technologies and hierarchies, indeed in designing technologies for hierarchies, through the privileged investigation of micro-practices.

Situation Comedy

As a rule, one does not talk about situation comedy. To quote Mick Eaton, "There has been virtually nothing written about television situation comedy as a specifically televisual form" (Bennett 26). This is due to the way television is talked about in general, to the unworthiness that accrues to it and its products, to its institutional functioning, and to the various modes of availability of its products. Nonetheless, one may adopt a number of points of view in order to talk *around* the subject of situation comedy.

One may, for example, adopt an industrial point of view and talk about situation comedy as an economic proposition: is it successful and does it earn enough money? In this case, only its status as a commodity is of any interest and one might just as easily be talking about any other commodity: the situation comedy has no specificity.

One may adopt a social scientific and critical point of view and choose simply to ignore situation comedy either because it has no discernible effect or because it appears to be generally irrelevant and to make no contribution whatsoever to society. This goes a long way to explaining the dearth of material on situation comedy.

One may also, on the other hand, occasionally adopt the inverse stance and talk profusely about certain "quality" situation comedies such as *MASH* or *All in the Family* or *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. These shows are seen as important precisely to the extent to which they do not resemble situation comedies, because they make significant social statements, because of strong characterization or good scripting, and so on. In this case, it is the *content* of the situation comedy that is singled out for praise and attention, and especially the content's resemblance to "serious drama." One may also talk about *I Love Lucy*, for example, in terms of an incomprehensible

social phenomenon: why *do* people watch *Lucy*? She just must be a very zany/talented/gifted/etc. lady. Again it is the content (star) of the show that is singled out, and again questions of textual specificity or of audience reception are neglected.

Finally, one may adopt a historicist point of view and attempt either to classify types of humour or to retrace the origins of the situation comedy through films, radio, vaudeville, and the theatre, as Raymond Williams has begun in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Both of these can be interesting but they do tend to deny the situation comedy's *televisual* specificity and to see it as a variation on a pre-existing form, which it may not be, and on a previous content, which it may not share.

Occasionally, sitcoms are approached genealogically with all the attendant pitfalls of unprobemeticized genre theory (see Mitz).

Unworthiness

There is a strong sense in which television and everything connected to it is seen as unworthy—worthy certainly as a serious intellectual pursuit, unworthy as a source of ideas or of stimulation, unworthy of critical evaluation, unworthy even as a pastime. The entertainment it provides has long been considered inferior to the entertainment provided by book or films or plays, its information more ephemeral and less substantial than that provided by newspapers, books, magazines, or journals. In short, in the classic dichotomy between high art and low art, television definitely occupies the region of low art. And, as innumerable books proclaim, television is a “mass” medium, a business and not an art, that consequently obeys the laws of the lowest common denominator. As an activity, television is generally held to induce both passivity and violence, and ranks far behind sports, play, or socializing, and specially reading. Furthermore, there are no television theorists or scholars in the sense that there are films theorists and literary scholars, that is to say people inspired by a genuine passion for their object of study above and beyond its content, supposed effects, and presumed uses. There is no television equivalent of an auteur or of an auteur theory, nothing that might correspond to film or literary theory. There are very few, if any, journals devoted to television, there is no inquiry into the forms and language of television, no network of references, debate, and response. If, like film and literature, television does spark love in some people, the love that fuels the

inquiry, debates, and theory, then it is a love that dares not speak its name, for it is nowhere present.

Instead, television has the technological study of a technology: effects studies, uses and gratifications studies, sociological and psychological studies, impressionistic studies, etc., and these are clearly overdetermined by unworthiness. Does anyone attach electrodes to opera lovers in order to determine the behavioural effects of an aria? Does anyone claim that the meaning of poetry can be exhausted by a uses and gratifications study, or by the sociological and psychological determinants operating on the poet? The whole approach to television is akin to saying that if you write with a typewriter, that is to say with a machine, your writing is more objective or more likely to have an effect, etc. This is clearly possible only because of the holdover of theories of art that are not applicable to the high art objects in the first place, and to television's relegation to the status of a low art.

Indeed, the very act of watching television is not something to which one readily admits. Watching too much television or too much of the wrong type (non-news programming) is particularly unacceptable. Hours spent watching television are endlessly counted, tabulated, and pondered over, by an industry and social scientists alike. Newspapers, despite all the space devoted to "media" events and personalities, actually devote very little space to any type of television writing that might be comparable to film, book, or theatre reviews. And within that tiny space, television reviewers, as though compelled to demonstrate further television's unworthiness, typically adopt the stance of the bemused observer who is above it all or of the scornful critic passionately devoted to the quality not to be found on television.

Television is, in fact, so undeserving of our interest that only two types of people may legitimately attend to it. The first type consists of people who may be defined as suffering some lack: children, housewives, old people, the poor, off-duty labourers, etc. They lack either the knowledge to know better, they lack in other activities, or they lack the resources with which to engage in other activities, etc. For them, television is obvious and self-explanatory, if still undesirable. Their very social status exhausts their relationship to television and television's relationship to them. As a matter of course, we expect children to like television precisely because they are easily amused and do not know any better, but we also

expect them to grow out of it. Television is definitely a phase in life. The other type that may legitimately attend to television consists of people who may be defined as having a surfeit: social scientists, commentators, reformers, etc. They have a surfeit of knowledge and typically apply it to explaining what the first type is doing. Their social status gives them a privileged and authoritative view on television. They approach the object through a forest of precautions and justifications: we wished to find out why . . . , we were commissioned by X to discover . . . , it is our aim to explain . . . , etc. One of the major purposes of these is to sanitize the object as much as possible, to distantiate and objectify it, and to demonstrate manifestly that they themselves, the researchers, take no pleasure in it.

The first type's relationship to television, then, is entirely personal and insignificant, whereas the second type's is entirely social and authoritative. The second type provides a meta-discourse on the first.

This is the dominant *attitude* toward television. Everyone probably shares some of it, especially social scientists who must sometimes wonder about the status of their object and hence the worthiness of their work. Consequently, most television writing has dealt with ostensibly serious and worthy themes: the effects of televised violence, television as an educational tool, television as an industry, etc.

The problem of the unworthiness of the object is greatly amplified when one turns to serious and worthy themes: the effects of televised violence, television as an educational tool, television as an industry, etc.

The problem of the unworthiness of the object is greatly amplified when one turns to *The Beverly Hillbillies* for, though it was probably one of the most watched programs in the history of television, it was also one of the most vilified and despised. Its unworthiness stems from two causes: the *type* of program that it is (situation comedy), and the specific program that it is.

Situation comedy, despite its popularity and continuing presence in television schedules, remains almost totally absent in television writing. One would look in vain in newspapers, magazines, or books for any reference beyond a few words or lines to situation comedy. It is difficult even to draw up a list of clichés about situation comedy. It appears, then, that in an undeserving medium,

situation comedy constitutes a particularly undeserving form equalled only perhaps by the game show and the locally produced commercial.

This is perhaps because sitcoms are unamenable to existing methodologies, for it is in fact difficult to measure the social or behavioural effect of sitcoms, though it should not be too difficult to describe sitcoms in structural-functionalist terms (they satisfy a need). This is perhaps because they are genuinely seen as having little or no social importance and as being therefore unworthy of attention except in cases such as *MASH*, etc. Or it is perhaps simply because researchers have well internalized the rules of the institution of television, which itself devotes comparatively little effort to the promotion and product of sitcoms, preferring instead to lavish its time and resources on other forms. The absence of sitcoms in television writing might then simply be the structural effect of the institution.

As a sitcom, *The Beverly Hillbillies* is particularly interesting on a number of levels. Some sitcoms are much discussed (*All in the Family*), some are loved and fondly remembered (*I Love Lucy*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*), some are honoured and praised (*Dick Van Dyke*, *MASH*), and in every case it is because of some element extrinsic to the show's status as sitcom: the issues raised, good acting, good casting, etc. *The Beverly Hillbillies* apparently had none of that. On the contrary, it remained doggedly at the level of sitcom, refusing to rise above its status or to transcend itself. Consequently, very little was written about it, and almost all of it uncomplimentary. Within the institutional blind spot that designates situation comedy, *The Beverly Hillbillies* seems to stand out as one of the greatest absences of all.

The silence is surprising and one should try to make it speak for in its inclusions and exclusions, in what is spoken and in what is not, one detects a pattern or system, an order of regularity, a recurrent way of approaching, ordering, and constituting objects. In short, a discourse. The unworthy discourse.

Institution

An institution, as has already been suggested, engages a particular articulation of the social and the individual. To speak of television as an institution is to recognize that it both produces a discourse and is bound by a number of discourses. It is perhaps first and fore-

most an industry: it has a highly specialized production process, an extensive, sophisticated, and largely independent distribution network split between the private and the often corporate ownership of heavy large-scale technology (transmitters, satellites, landlines, etc.), and the private usually individual ownership of light small-scale technology (television sets and antennae, and, increasingly, cable converters, videotape recorders, etc.). It requires large outlays of capital and has clearly codified standards for producing its product. In this sense, then, it is socially constituted: it is independent of the wishes, interests, or scheming of any individual (producer, writer, viewer, etc.).

From this socially constituted industrial base, it produces its own discourse. That is to say that in *an ordered and regular fashion*, it produces a variety of representations by drawing upon a potentially infinite number of sources but seeking always *to construct them in the same way*. And, through these representations, it engages, again always in *an ordered and regular manner*, views as consumers, as free individuals in a democratic society, as parents, children, lovers of sitcom, etc.

A discourse, then, is *an order of regularity that insistently approaches, hierarchizes, and constitutes objects in the same way*. In the case of television, these objects are representations offered in television shows. The discourse of television constitutes its objects in the same way that certain things are said and certain others are not. This is not to imply that a discourse somehow excludes variety and induces monotony. On the contrary, it is rather to say that across the entire range of discursive output, certain presuppositions will remain constant. For example, sitcoms can include everything from *I Love Lucy* to *All in the Family*. Within that range, any number of highly contradictory and even antagonistic statements can be made. And yet, across these various specific instances, the procedures used to construct those (contradictory) statements remain the same: the same tropes appear (this can be something as banal as the physical appearance of the characters, the necessity of a funny look or gesture or presence, etc.); the same ways of setting up arguments or points to be resolved recurs; the same mode of address (wit) recurs; the same way of imagining a situation that will be both funny and significant recurs, hence the necessity of establishing a homeostatic situation with well-defined non-evolving main characters who nonetheless encounter an endless stream of minor, outside characters; the same relationship between the product and the institution

recurs (the various products must all achieve the same goal, hence the same mode of address, etc.); the same relationship between the product and the empirical reality it is said to represent recurs (the way reality is thought to look and operate is heavily coded into every aspect of the representation from the construction of narrative space to the definition of character types); and ultimately, the same conception of the audience recurs. The recurrence of these tropes, situations, characters, industrial-institutional constraints, and theories of representation indicates a recurrence of a certain conception of the audience. The discourse of the institution of television that, like all discourses, is intended *to* someone, systematically arranges, orchestrates, and constitutes its audience through its construction of representations.

Not only does it produce a discourse but it is bounded and produced as a technology by a number of other discourses. It has, however submerged, discrete, or unrecognized these may be, its own history, its own researchers, its own technical experts; it maintains ties with the family apparatus and with legal apparatus; it has a meaning, difficult to define, for vast numbers of people, whether as entertainment, sources of values, information, intellectual stimulation, etc.; it maintains very close ties with financial institutions, trade unions, the political apparatus; it is a means of communication, etc. All these factors operate quite independently of any individual intervention and constitute what is perhaps most clearly television's social, ideological, and cultural face.

In a social context, however, in which no constraints compel television viewing, it is necessary that an industry produce products that will provide some form of satisfaction to large numbers of people. Therefore, though on the one hand the television industry seeks to produce shows for profit, it must also simultaneously produce a certain pleasure in the viewer. The viewer must *want to watch* television, and the television program must, to a certain extent, meet the viewer's wish.

Furthermore, the viewer's past experience of television will inform his future choice of programming and future viewing patterns. If the industry failed to produce pleasure, the viewer would be unwilling to watch, and without the viewer's attention, the television industry would be unable to sell commercial time and hence unable to maintain itself. It must present itself, institutionally, as something desirable. Television must present itself as a body to be loved.

All its products must attempt to produce pleasure such that the pleasure of the past will be inducement for the pleasure of the future.

The institutionalization of television, that is to say its establishment as an industry with a public wanting its product, was possible only because of the viewers' historical internalization of the institution's codes and production practices. In the case of television, this institutionalization was aided by the previous massive internalization of radio and of what is conventionally called "dominant mainstream cinema." Television viewers had already internalized the codes and practices of these other two media and were able, to a large though not complete extent, to transfer them to television. It is historically the case that television more or less arrogated to itself the audience of both radio and films, and then of newspapers and magazines, such that the onus was initially, and for a long time afterwards, on them to redefine themselves in terms of television rather than the other way around. The institutional, economic, psychological, and other structures on which television depends were already largely in place by the time television arrived. This has partly to do with the moment of its arrival (it was in its initial phases perfected by and established along the same lines as the radio networks), with the type of material it originally broadcasted (borrowed often but hardly exclusively from radio, movies, vaudeville, etc.), and with the very form of broadcasting that integrated it as a privately owned household technology identical in its mode of acquisition and use to any other consumer durable.

This should in no sense be construed to mean, however, that television merely mimicked or borrowed from other media as though it were only an empty conduit. Television did mimic and borrow but important differences distinguish it. These have to do with television's now greater availability in the home, its higher rate of exposure of a vaster range of material, the view practices, situations, patterns, habits, etc., that accompany it, its popular status as a technology, the position it is commonly assigned on the spectrum ranging from pure entertainment to pure information, its apparently greater attractiveness than radio, etc.

In short, the specific complex that television entered made its establishment as an institution (an industry with an audience having internalized its codes and practices and wanting its pro-

duct) easier or quicker than had been the case for many other capitalist institutions.

Nonetheless, the fact and historical necessity of that process of internalization cannot be overlooked. It is through the internalization of the institution's codes and practices that certain configurations that may at first have been eccentric or unusual (though never radically incomprehensible, as in the case of the cinema) came to be stabilized and generalized. Certain tropes and devices began to acquire, or had probably already acquired from earlier institutional settings, standardized meanings, and came to be expected and recognized—the personality of Walter Cronkite is a good example of how a specific configuration of personal style, institutional setting, the constraints of journalistic professionalism, etc., came to be stabilized, generalized, recognized, and expected. It became possible to use these tropes, devices, and styles to provide coherence to what might otherwise be incomprehensible. This stabilization and generalization was possible, I repeat once again, only because of the historical internalization, however that might have been effectuated and facilitated and whatever its context may have been, of the institution's determinate practices. That is to say, then, that certain configurations, for whatever reasons, produced enough pleasure and found sufficient resonance with viewers, for them *to want to watch them again and again*, thereby making it profitable for the institution to repeat them again and again.

It was the extent to which these configurations produced pleasure and were therefore internalized that it became possible for an industry to constitute itself on the basis of the production of those configurations. Those configurations were produced according to determinate practices. It was furthermore the historical internalization of the determinate practices having produced the pleasurable configurations that made it possible for the industry, in the process of its constitution, to work upon those practices so as to produce the configurations more efficiently and with a higher coefficient of pleasure. Just as work upon the practices required industrial specialization, so did it attract increasing numbers of viewers, or at least viewers willing to attend to the greater specialization. Hence, the appearance of “genres”: sitcoms, game shows, newscasts, light entertainment, etc. And though the genre may fragment the market, it also strengthens it. Those viewers not likely to watch a soap opera might watch a detective story, and so on.

The institution, then, is not just a technology or an industry but also a set of mental or psychological practices that are, to a certain extent, an internalized mirror reflection of the outside institution. The history of American prime time network television, which arguably represents one of the most successful attempts at historical internalization, is in fact, with its adoption of the ideology of realism, its insistence on continuous flow, the dominance of narrative as a form of virtually everything, a TV star system, the fragmentation into genres, and the development of highly specialized production practices, a collection of strategies designed to increase the viewer's pleasure.

Availability

Availability originally presents itself as a fairly simple matter: something is available or it is not. And yet, the question of availability touches upon the very mainspring of institutional functioning. Availability, here, refers not just to the concrete or empirical presence of an object but also to its traces.

Memory, for example, is one of the privileged modes of access to most television production that is usually seen only once or twice before disappearing forever and living on only as a trace, an echo, or a twist: an occasional unexpected reference in a newspaper article, a moment of idle conversation, an allusion in another television program, the surprise of seeing a character in a different role, etc. For most people, memory remains the only form of availability of most television production. As an institution, television lacks a memory: it has no journals, no archives, etc. Its memory is quite literally the memory of its viewers.

Such a situation guarantees a memory that is both the memory of satisfying, pleasurable, or somehow outstanding experiences, and one that is split and fractured among age groups, geographical locations, personal preferences, etc. The result can be either the fantasizing of (necessarily partial) genealogies or the impression of infinite newness as though every television program were either born of strange parentage or had arisen out of nothingness. This is undoubtedly a structural effect of the institution that foresees no mechanisms for re-exploiting its vast stock of imagery beyond the haphazard rerun. And even then, the rerun looks more like a failure of the system than like a contribution to popular memory, the

absence of something new rather than the presence of something valuable. Nonetheless, the institution can be said to benefit from the impression that the absence of memory tends to bestow upon its every product: the overall impression of newness and creativity. Furthermore, since the memory is by definition the memory of something appreciated, however much time may have altered it, the institution manages to produce a pleasurable effect across the totality of its output.

Of course, the role of memory is not just a pleasurable structural effect of the institution. In some ways, it can be said to interfere. For example, whenever a television critic or reviewer writes about a program, he or she necessarily does so from within the context of his or her own memories, which may or may not find satisfaction in this specific instance. Writing about television can then become a defence or justification for one's own memories and preferences, as some forms are attacked, others defended, in order to create one of those partial genealogies or to construct some imaginary quality of television.

The availability of a given program depends, then, on the operation of some key institutional determinants. On the one hand, an economic need must be met for the realization of profit so that the institution may be maintained and may survive. On the other hand, that economic need must be met in a specific manner that will interest a given audience, spontaneously as it were, a manner that will engage the audience's desire to view that program, outside of any coercive structures or strategies. Audience expectations, composition, familiarity with the material, age, education level, etc., all that is called "demographics," must be taken into account. The realization of economic profit is, therefore, dependent upon the constitution of certain types of audiences, that is to say upon the orchestration, management, ordering, etc., of certain characteristics shared by certain members of the audience, upon the engagement in specific manners and through forms of a certain wish. Clearly, without the economic imperatives, the very existence of such characteristics would not even be recognized, and, were these characteristics not available to treatment, then the institution could not exist as it does. The existence and operation of the institution depend absolutely, then, upon this fundamental mechanism: the integration of an audience wish into an economic circuit.

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