

# TELEVISIONS

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## Television Images, Codes and Messages

By Douglas Kellner

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# Introduction

Few efforts have been made to provide a critical theory of television. This is unfortunate, for a view of the importance of television in contemporary life, and considering the heated debates over its quality and effects, we need theories and methodologies which will enable us to interpret and criticize both the forms and content of television. In this paper, I shall provide aspects of a critical theory of television that correspond to 1) the phenomenological experience of viewing television images; 2) the coding of images into narratives according to conventional rules and formulas; and 3) the act of interpreting television messages.\*

(1) The opening discussion of the phenomenological level describes the types of images that appear to consciousness for the television viewer.<sup>1</sup> Both "realist" theories (i.e. Bazin, Kracauer, Cavell, and those French "phenomenological" theories that Christian Metz polemicizes against),<sup>2</sup> as well as empiricist-sociological analyses of television or film,<sup>3</sup> unduly limit themselves to describing content or effects without more elaborate description of codes, ideologies, mythologies, and other technical devices and cultural constructs which organize television images into narratives. Such approaches are inadequate to analyze and interpret television narratives and require a semiological analysis of its codes, formulas, conventions, and rules.

(2) Semiological analysis shows that television is a formulaic, conventional, and stereotyped cultural form structured by technical and aesthetic codes which govern television production and reception. Although I utilize concepts and strategies from semiological-structuralist

texts, I reconstruct the theories of Metz, Peter Wollen, Umberto Eco, and Roland Barthes, by attempting to translate their often obscure terminology into concepts that can be used to analyze the codes and formulas of television narratives.<sup>4</sup> But, in analyzing how television programs and series are structured, I do not use semiology as the all-encompassing comprehensive, systematic, and exclusive discipline it is for some "semiologists."

(3) Whereas, television structuralism and semiotics describes *how* television communicates by explicating the codes and subcodes, television hermeneutics elucidates *what* is communicated. It interrogates the images, the coded narrative, and the television text to elicit its meanings. The sort of television hermeneutics I am proposing thus builds on the previous levels of analysis and utilizes a variety of interpretive strategies and devices. This discussion of the phenomenological, semiological, and hermeneutical levels provides analytical devices to approach television narratives from different standpoints. It shows the variety of theoretical approaches needed to conceptualize how television shows are constructed and communicate. No one approach to television narratives is adequate. In order to understand how television narratives communicate, I have combined the work of critical theory, phenomenology, semiology and structuralism, myth-genre criticism, and popular culture theory in an analysis of television narrative fiction. This systematic approach enables me to analyze, interpret and criticize the full range of meanings communicated in popular television and to overcome the one-sidedness and limitations of previous theories.

# Television Images and Phenomenology

At the phenomenological level of viewing TV images appear as "talking pictures." They seem to reproduce real objects and events. Television is watched most frequently in one's home, so the set is a familiar piece of furniture, surrounded by the other objects of everyday life. The talking pictures blend into the room and everyday living space; the piece of talking furniture appears as part of one's natural habitat. Unlike the larger-than-life movie images and the darkened, quiet, closed off social space of the cinema, the small images in one's living room appear as friendly, familiar visitors who enter into one's home whenever one wants to see entertaining pictures and stories.

Television talking pictures use a variety of sounds to intensify and connect the images. The sounds range from talking heads to background music which enhances or manipulates mood. It has been pointed out that television has been remarkably dependent on the spoken word and dialogue to advance its narratives and tell its stories.<sup>5</sup> Action-adventure shows usually use music to heighten the action or dramatize tension and suspense. Most crime dramas have set musical notations played in an action sequence. Detective shows often use canned up-tempo pseudo-jazz to convey mood and atmosphere; contemporary dramas and comedies more frequently use repetitive pop music sounds in their narratives. Music and sound cue the viewer to the narrative sequence and heighten emotional excitement. Although TV music tends toward musical cliché and its use of sound montage is quite undeveloped, sound remains an important part of the TV image and its structures and effects should not be neglected.<sup>6</sup>

One of the distinguishing traits of television is its fragmentation and discontinuity. Although there is a carefully planned flow of the TV Day,<sup>7</sup> television narratives are frequently interrupted by commercials, station breaks, and news announcements. Moreover, television viewing often tends to be casual and varied in its concentration and intensity. In many homes, the television is on from morning to evening and members of the household watch TV in bits and pieces, often interrupted by the telephone, conversations, visits or other activities. Since the television set is such a familiar part of everyday life, its ubiquitous images are often taken for granted and are not always closely attended to.

On the other hand, television is a habit-forming media. The magic of its electronic images has fascinated at least two generations of viewers and many believe that television has powerful social and cultural effects. The following discussion speculates on why the audience has been so captivated by television images, and reflects on what needs television serves and how it fulfills them.

TV's talking pictures are in motion, moving even faster than cinema images. The quick-cutting and fast-paced motion in television narratives<sup>8</sup> — create an illusion of lively motion and fast experience that appeals to an audi-

ence conditioned to the rhythms of an advanced technological society.

Moreover, the tube emits light: its dots and lines crystallize into images which glitter and glow.<sup>9</sup> When you turn on a television in a slightly darkened or completely dark room, it glows brighter than any lights and transmits not only brightness but luminous images. Earlier writing on television stressed its "magical" quality, and although TV is now such a familiar part of our homes that we tend to take it for granted, there is an aura of technological marvel around TV. Color TV has tremendously enhanced television's optical effects. The colors shine and shimmer: they are brighter and richer than natural color. Even though TV color is artificial and slightly different from natural color, its glow magically transcends in intensity and power other light giving sources in our TV homes.

TV images transform everyday life. *Television World* is more colorful, musical, dramatic, faster, and exciting than *Everyday World*. There is an artificial transformation of objects which take on added depth and significance. There is a symbolic metamorphosis of people who take on mythical features as the Star, the Hero, the Good or the Bad. Television enhances everything it touches with the pseudo-aura of its shimmering shows, its shining stars, its artificial glitter, its warm glow, and its carefully paced flow. In *Television World*, the *Everyday World* takes on new dimensions of color, sound, and significance.

Television brings one into the world of social space and provides vicarious experience of the wonders of the consumer society. It enables the viewer to participate in the events, spectacles, and social activities of advanced capitalism. It provides myths and rituals which celebrate the society's institutions, values, and way of life.<sup>10</sup> It provides a sense of involvement and social integration.

Of course, TV viewing really provides a parody of democratization and integration.<sup>11</sup> While more and more people are integrated into *TV World*, and cultural experience is more accessible than ever before, TV is also producing new forms of social alienation and "segregation". In effect, TV culture reproduces the "separate but equal" doctrine of segregationists, while it bastardizes the integrationists' dream. The audience is segregated as never before in its private dwelling space as it is integrated into *TV World*. Most people are segregated from the production of *TV World*, unaware how and why it is produced. Similarly, they are segregated from the often invisible government, or condemned to passive spectator politics.

The viewers are segregated from their history and past culture as they are immersed in the nowness of TV culture. Many are removed from active, participatory social experience as they lose themselves in the internal, vicarious experience of *TV World*. In TV space, the spectator is a King or a Queen for whom all these wonders are being produced, as they sit in their front-row center seats, creating the illusion that they are in the center of social space. When, in truth, they are simply marking time until they

have to return to their place in the rear or on the sidelines.

The experience of time is also transformed. Simultaneity, fragmentation and rapid movement characterizes TV time. Television overcomes previous boundaries of space and time and can show you events from distant places at the moment when they occur. In this sense, Sarnoff's dream that television would give us new power over the environment is realized.<sup>12</sup> TV montage provides a sense of all-at-onceness overwhelming one with sights and sounds from a kaleidoscope of experience.

TV fragments space and time giving one parcels of experience, carefully packaged and distributed. Its narratives speed up time, providing an illusion of intense movement and activity by quick cutting and editing, producing "technical events" that simulate real ones. Television is ill-suited to ordinary experience which contains long, sometimes painful, moments of intimacy, personal conflict, suffering, or simply empty moments of boredom and silence. The way that American television has been structured so far, such things cannot be tolerated in a medium that demands action. The result is that one gets experience that is quicker, more dramatic, and neater than experience in real life which is often messy, unpredictable, variable, and undramatic.

The total program flow further fragments experience, breaking down the programs into short sequences, punctuated by ads. The fragmented packages of experience are tightly and predictably structured, giving a sense of a well-ordered world. In this way, TV fulfills powerful needs for security, order, and knowing what's going on. One gets a sense of power from being in charge of television flow which one is able to alter with a flick of the wrist, or a push of the button. The glitter and glow provide a sense of excitement, that one is participating in important events. In these ways, TV's glitter, glow, and flow fulfill a variety of needs, and TV viewing become addictive.

It is probably "live TV" which gives television its sense of immediacy and "you are there" quality. Television provides seemingly direct access to social events and experience and magically transports the viewers from their homes into the social world. All television experience is mediated by various framing devices; so that even live events like political conventions, sports, interviews, or news transmissions are filtered, structured, and interpreted by the television apparatus.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore an illusion to believe that TV provides "direct transmission of social experience."

Moreover, much TV that appears to be live is really taped or filmed: game shows, soap operas, most talk shows, as well as many situation comedies and other entertainment are videotaped and their "live" appearance is really an illusion.<sup>14</sup> Film provides the possibilities for even more artifice as its mobility, editing, and framing devices make it possible to reproduce the actual social world, giving an illusion of photographic reality.

Photographic images transform "reality" into "image"; social life and experience thus become subject to a variety of symbolic mediations.<sup>15</sup> It is important to distinguish photographic images, which seem to depict everyday objects and events in a "naturalistic" or "realist" manner,

from *iconic* and *symbolic* images which connote moral characteristics and values, thus providing a basis for TV mythology and ideology.

Photographic images are denotative and have the quality of resemblance or likeness (*mimesis*) to their objects. They provide a visual "impression of reality." Photographic images of familiar objects—people, cars, houses, cities, landscapes—are the basis of television's *prima facie* "realism."<sup>16</sup> In photographic imagery, the distance between the signifier and signified is minimal; there is an apparent fusion between the image and the object, as if television were reproducing the "real world." Television thus appears to be the phenomenological art par excellence, in making manifest "the things themselves," in providing a privileged access to the phenomena of the world which magically appear in one's living room. In the phenomenological experience of watching television, the camera eye becomes the eye of the spectator, creating a sense of participation in the experience portrayed. Since viewers are conditioned to take photographic images and live TV as "real," there is a tendency to see television appearances as social reality.

In fact, one of the many disturbing effects of television is the extent to which so many viewers believe that what they are seeing on the television screen is real. It has been noted that over a quarter of a million letters asking for medical advice were sent to *Dr. Welby*, and Robert Young who played him was often asked to address medical conventions.<sup>17</sup> *Perry Mason* received many letters asking for legal advice and its star Raymond Burr was frequently invited to speak at law conventions. Although one might dismiss such an identification of TV and reality as quaint phenomena of early days of TV, as recently as 1979, Ed Asner of *The Lou Grant Show*, which features the newspaper business, was asked to speak at a newspaper convention, and viewers continue to inundate TV stars with letters which assume their characters are real people. Here a critical theory of television must make clear that the television world is artificial and mediated, produced by a technical and cultural apparatus, and that it is not a "window to the world," a picture of reality, or a slice of life. It is an illusion and naturalistic fallacy to believe that one is viewing pristine reality, or "seeing it like it is," when one is viewing television's version of the world, an artificial, manufactured construct, in which live television, or videotaped or filmed photographic images, provide a basis for a variety of iconic and symbolic imagery.

*Iconic images* are pictorial, stylized cultural forms. Unlike photographic images, they are conventional and arbitrary, connoting moral or evaluative qualities.<sup>18</sup> For instance, in well-defined iconic paintings of the medieval and renaissance period, Christ or the Saints were pictured in conventional ways, and their holiness was signalled with a halo. These iconic images provided a cultural shorthand, consisting of dominant conventions and rules of iconography. Early films too utilized an iconic language; the mustache and exaggerated maniacal gestures of the villain; the cowboy hero in the white shirt and the desperado in the black; the chaste purity of the good girl and decadent vamping of the bad girl; the vile capitalists and good workers and peasants in the early Russian films.<sup>20</sup>

Television builds on the iconic imagery of film and popular culture,<sup>21</sup> producing icons of the policeman with his badge, gun, and car; the middle-class family home; technological gadgetry; and the hip gestures of the teen heroes. Every show has its stock repertoire of images that can crystallize through repetition, familiarity, and cultural acceptance into a television iconography, consisting of those cultural constructs that denote a certain character and connote certain characteristics. Iconic images individualize and define the main characters: consider Fonzie's Tee-shirt, black leather jacket, duck-tailed haircut and expressive gestures as icons of his "coolness"; Archie Bunker's blustering rage, mispronunciations and racial slurs as icons of his working-class bigotry; Mary Tyler Moore's iconic images of wholesomeness; the TV cops' gestures of macho-masculinity as icons of power and authority; or the TV criminals' violent acts as icons of evil.

Usually the introductory sequence of a TV series is a collage of iconic images which define the characters and establish their identity. For instance, the opening of *Laverne and Shirley* provides iconic images of the girls accepting the indignities of their working and social conditions with smiles, good cheer, or resignation; the opening sequence of *Starsky and Hutch* provides iconic images of macho individuals who are at once tough cops and hip males, who are dedicated to their police work, yet are passionately devoted to each other. After the uproar over television violence, much macho mayhem was eliminated from the series and during the 1978-79 season the opening iconic images camped it up, showing Starsky and Hutch in a variety of strange outfits and comic poses, attempting to redefine the characters' and series' iconography.

The iconic images are a cultural shorthand for defining the moral qualities of a TV character, program, or series. Iconic images are subject to cultural change and market popularity. They may disappear, as when the white versus black shirt opposition for the cowboy heroes and villains was eliminated from the movies. New iconic images may provide novel cultural conventions. In 1976-77 Farrah Fawcett's smile, teased hair, bouncing, braless-breasts, and taut nipples achieved status as icons of sexuality on *Charlie's Angels*, helping promote a new genre of exploitation series cynically referred to as the "T and A" genre.

Iconic images are dialectically related to symbolic images which provide a more complex configuration of iconic images. Symbolic images are produced when a set of iconic features form a holistic construct, as when Christ's downcast eyes on the cross, the nails and blood, and the halo all together provide a symbol of divine redemption. Symbolic images are more complex and charged with significance than either photographic or iconic images, but the distinctions are a matter of degree and not a qualitative difference.<sup>22</sup> On the thematic level, symbolic images pertain to crucial areas of existence like sex, death, authority, or salvation. They are "polysemic" (i.e. They are invested with a multiplicity of meanings.) Iconic images exhibit and draw upon buried symbolic content. For instance, Suzanne Somer's or Cheryl Ladd's iconic features of sexuality are invested with special appeal because they coalesce into a "sex symbol" which endows all their ac-

tivities and iconic features with a sexual resonance. In similar ways, the icons of male virility and masculinity form male sex symbols.

Television builds on and uses traditional symbolism, but it also creates its own symbols. The totality of Jack Webb's staccato interrogation featured on *Dragnet*, his authoritarian personality, and crisp recitation of the "facts" formed a symbol of law and order. The immaculate middle-class homes on the situation comedies or soap operas become symbols of bourgeois domesticity. Ironside, Ben Cartwright, and Walter Cronkite become father symbols. Mary Tyler Moore provides a symbol of the independent working woman. Soap operas generate symbols of stoic endurance through suffering; and commercials attempt to create symbols which will manipulate consumer behavior.

Symbolic images endow certain characters or actions with moral features and other characters or actions with immoral features, providing positive and negative models of identification. Symbols have a historically specific cultural content; when television symbols become familiar and accepted, they become effective agents of enculturation. For instance, *Kojak* symbolized triumphant authority, law and order, and a stable set of values in an era of political upheaval and cultural conflict.

His forceful advocacy of traditional values fused his symbolic features into an iconic structure, linking his macho personality with bourgeois values, and authoritarian law and order.

It is a curious fact of our society that today television is the dominant producer of cultural symbolism. Previously, symbols were often fused into a hierarchy of significance by a well-defined code such as Christianity or Communism, or by a great poet or writer who created an organically consistent symbolic world, but television symbolism is fragmented, contradictory, and subject to the whims of television production and audience reception. Nonetheless, it can be argued that television symbolism provides the most significant models of behavior and norms of action in American society today. Its imagery is thus prescriptive as well as descriptive, prescribing the proper attitudes toward the police, property system, and the consumer society. Its images assume a normative status that not only demonstrates what is happening in society, but also shows how one adjusts to institutions and social morality. Further, it demonstrates the pain and punishment for not adjusting and shows how power and authority function.

Television imagery thus contains a metaphysics and an ethics. It shows us that we should drive a car, have a nice house, wear fashionable clothes, drink, smoke, keep a pretty smile, avoid body odor, and stay in line. The endless repetition of the same images produces a *Television World* where the conventional is the norm and conformity the rule.

There is a class of television symbols which have powerful effects on consciousness and behavior but are not always readily identifiable or conventionally defined. Building upon Freud's notion of scenic understanding and the concept of paleosymbolism proposed by Habermas and Gouldner, I call these scenic sets of imagery *paleosym-*

*bolic*.<sup>23</sup> The prefix "paleo" signifies a sort of "before symbolism" or "underneath symbolism" (in the archaeological sense). Paleosymbols are tied to particular scenes that are charged with drama and emotion. The paleosymbol does not provide or integrate holistic constructs such as the cross, the hammer and sickle, or aesthetic images that crystallize in one image a wealth of meaning and significance; rather, the paleosymbol requires a whole scene where a positive or negative situation occurs. Freud found that certain scenic images, such as a child being beaten for masturbation, have profound impact on subsequent behavior. The images of these scenes remain as paleosymbols which control behavior, for instance, prohibiting masturbation or producing guilt and perhaps sexual inhibition. Paleosymbols are not subject to conscious scrutiny or control; they are often repressed, closed off from reflection, and can produce compulsive behavior. Freud believed that scenic understanding was necessary to master scenic images and understand what the scenic images signified (resymbolization) and how they had influenced behavior.<sup>24</sup>

It is possible that television's paleosymbolic scenes function analogously to the sort of scenic drama described by Freud. Television scenes are charged with emotion, and the empathetic viewer can become heavily involved in the actions presented.

An episode on a television adaptation of Arthur Hailey's novel *The Moneychangers* may illustrate this point. An up-and-coming Junior Executive was appealingly portrayed by Timothy Bottoms. It was easy to identify with this charming and seemingly honest and courageous figure, who vigorously defends a Puerto Rican woman accused of embezzling money. It turns out, however, that the Junior Executive stole the money himself to support a life-style, including gambling, that far outstripped his income. Apprehended by the tough black security officer, he tries to get away, and is caught and beaten. There are repeated episodes where we may identify with the young man trying to escape, and then feel the pain and defeat when he is caught and beaten; some of the escape scenes take place at night in alleys, recreating primal scenes of terror and pursuit. Further, to white viewers the fact that the pursuer is black might add to the power of the imagery, building on socially inculcated fear of blacks.

The multidimensional and multifunctional paleosymbolism in this example carries the message that crime does not pay and that one should not transcend the bounds of one's income or position. What will happen if one transgresses these bounds is shown dramatically. This bourgeois morality tale might frighten potential white-collar criminals into remaining within the boundaries of law and order. In case the moral did not sink in during the pursuit scenes, our young embezzler is brutally raped on his first day in prison in a remarkably explicit scene. Paleosymbols are especially effective because although one may forget the story, or even the experience of having watched the program, a paleosymbolic image may remain. One may later have a psychological blockage against stealing or gambling, or a fear of blacks, or of going to jail because of the paleosymbolic images in this program, which are multiplied, repeated, and reinforced by other programs and

thus serve as powerful vehicles for transmitting the dominant morality and ideologies.

Paleosymbolic scenes may shape attitudes and behavior in ways that encourage racism and sexism. In the first decades of film, for example, blacks were stereotyped as comical—eye rolling, foot-shuffling, drawing, usually in the role of servant or clown—precisely the image fitting the white power structure's fantasy of keeping blacks in their place. Then, during the intense struggles over civil rights, blacks began appearing both as cultural neuters integrated into the system, or as evil violent criminals—a stereotype prevalent in television crime dramas featuring black dope dealers, prostitutes, and killers. These negative images were presented in highly charged dramatic scenes which conveyed paleosymbolic images of blacks as evil and dangerous. Such images are likely to reinforce racism since the viewer may have a stronger paleosymbolic image of the black junkie shooting up dope and killing a white person to feed his habit than of the good black cop who finally apprehends him, since the scenes with the evil black are more charged with intense emotion.

Likewise, paleosymbolic images have portrayed women as foolish housewives, evil schemers, or voluptuous sex-objects. Images of women as "scatterbrained" or as adulterous, destructive, or greedy are intensified by paleosymbolic scenes on television. Although these negative images of women are certainly countered by more positive images, it could be that the negative image remains most forcefully in the viewer's mind because of its place in the narrative.

In a crime drama, for example, the dramatic climax which reveals that a woman is a murderess endows the perpetrator with paleosymbolic features of evil. In a soap opera, the paleosymbolic image of adultery and subsequent distress endows the characters and their actions with moral opprobrium. Endlessly multiplied paleosymbolic scenic images of women committing adultery and wreaking havoc through their sexuality help create and sustain stereotypes of "woman-as-evil," building on and reinforcing previous mythical images, from Eve in the *Bible* to the seductive schemer on *Days of Our Lives*. These paleosymbolic images may overpower more positive soap-opera images of women and reinforce stereotypes of women as evil. Likewise, in a situation comedy, although the women often manifest admirable traits, such traits are frequently overshadowed by slapstick crescendos in which the woman star (Edith Bunker or Alice, for example) is involved in a particularly ludicrous situation.

Television commercials also utilize paleosymbolic scenes that associate desirable objects or situations with a product. For instance, Catherine Deneuve caresses an auto in one paleosymbolic extravaganza, linking the car with sexuality, beauty, etc. Other commercials create negative paleosymbolic scenes with ring-around-the-collar, bad breath, an upset stomach, a headache, or tired blood, creating anxiety or pain—which of course can be relieved through the products offered. TV commercials contain in an extremely compressed form the paleosymbolic drama which attempts to invest images with negative or positive qualities in order to influence behavior. The recent proliferation of commercials that sell no par-

ticular product but argue the merits of a generic item (milk, or chemicals) or even a way of life, as in corporate ads, whose content consists entirely in praise of the "free enterprise" system, suggests that the symbolic and socializing aspect of commercials is increasing. And it is possible that the notion of television as mere entertainment makes television images more easily accepted, or at least not resisted, for many viewers believe that TV is harmless diversion, failing to see its socializing functions.

The inhabitant of *TV World* lives in an imaginary space of photographic, iconic, and symbolic images, and

paleosymbolic scenes. Neither "pap," nor a "vast wasteland," TV is teeming with images which convey an "impression of reality," values, and ideologies. Television images are therefore not harmless vehicles of escape but powerful instruments of social control. It would be a mistake, however, to describe television and its effects strictly in terms of its images, for TV's festival of images is rigorously structured into narratives; consequently, to analyze television narratives we must understand the way images are coded into stories.

## Television Coding and Semiology

Having analyzed some types of imagery on the phenomenological level, let us now move to the semiological level and see how these images are coded into narratives, genres, series, and programs.<sup>25</sup> Here we shall go behind the images and examine their structuring devices, their principles of organization, their encoding. I am not using the term "code" in the technical sense of information theory or mathematical linguistics which formalizes the concept "code" into a formal-logical system. Rather, I use code in the sense of "codes of behavior," "technical codes," or "narrative codes," where code refers to conventional systems of rules that are familiar and culturally accepted but are frequently subject to revision and change. This analysis should make clear the highly artificial nature of *TV World* and should help explode the naturalistic fallacy that television provides a reproduction of reality or window to the world. For from the framing of the image to the final editing, television is governed by a set of complex codes that order and organize the images.

### TV Narratives and Pseudo-Realism

Television has followed the novel, drama, and cinema in its development as a primarily narrative art. A producer of a crime drama series proudly told a reporter, "We make our programs according to the rules of Aristotle's *Poetics*!"<sup>26</sup> In fact, like tragic drama in Aristotle's theory, television narratives invariably tell a story with a beginning, plot structure, and ending that are generally coherent, comprehensible, and respectful of the continuities of space, time, and character.<sup>27</sup> The plot is usually centered around human beings and their actions. The main characters are well-defined types who undergo carefully plotted conflicts. TV narratives are structured around commercials, demanding compact characterization and action, and periodic tension, suspense, and resolution.<sup>28</sup> TV's anthropocentric focus, frequent use of close-ups, and emphasis on attractiveness of character, at the expense of complexity of plot, elicits an emphasis on performance. Consequently, appealing performers are imperative to the success of TV narratives.

Television narrative is on the whole economical, expressive and easily accessible. It ties up a bundle of experience very neatly, providing a tightly structured cultural artifact. The narrative unity is, of course, qualitatively different from our everyday experience, which usually lacks the coherence, order, and predictability of television narrative. The viewer's desire to participate in a meaningful and well-ordered universe helps explain television's power and appeal, for television narrative helps satisfy deep human needs for meaning and order.

Many television shows are coded to provide identification and empathy — features Aristotle ascribed to tragic drama. In television drama, the leading characters are usually constructed for identification, and there are many aids to empathy. Melodrama usually provides attractive or sympathetic characters with whom the audience can identify, and makes possible a pleasurable release of fear or pity as the characters overcome obstacles and resolve their conflicts, or succumb to unhappy endings. Domestic dramas often furnish possibilities for identification with real-life characters and situations. They usually contain characters who represent the conventional norms and traditional values and are "super-ego" identification figures; others are "ego-ideals," i.e. the sort of superior moral, rational, and admirable characters whom people would like to be. There are also unsympathetic characters who are buffoons, half-wits, or downright evil. The obstacles to empathy or identification with these characters help provide negative models of behavior and personality traits. Much television invites its viewers to identify with "real life characters" and situations, while other television fantasies provide larger-than-life heroes, or purely imaginary types. The superheroes from *Superman* to *The Six Million Dollar Man* invite fantasies of extreme power; *The Incredible Hulk* makes possible identification with "idlike" aggression fantasies; *Fantasy Island* welcomes identification with a variety of bourgeois dreams; *Love Boat* offers fantasies of love and romance; *Star Trek* invites identification with pure rational thought (Dr. Spock), highly charged emotion (McCoy), or a well-integrated personality (Kirk), involved in a variety of exciting adventures.

Such multifaceted vehicles of identification make possible the expansion of individual experience and "play" with various personalities and behavior, but also manipulate some viewers into accepting conventional behavior and social roles.

As the previous analysis suggests, television narratives are coded to provide the features of wish-fulfillment, compensation, and dreamlike fantasy described by Freud as central to art.<sup>29</sup> Narrative fantasy offers direct wish-fulfillment in providing adventure, mystery, and romance. Happy endings fulfill wishes for the successful resolution of problems, for the restoration of harmony, or the elimination of evil. Sometimes narrative wish-fulfillment is more indirect, taking the Freudian roads of condensation, displacement, and sublimation.<sup>30</sup> In general, television provides the compensatory function Freud ascribed to art: a mild, narcotic pleasure, temporary escape, and imaginary gratification of desires.

Despite their fantasy nature, television narratives are usually governed by codes of mimetic realism (i.e. TV structures its images to create an impression of realistically depicting life).<sup>31</sup> Television has been very timid in contravening realist codes and relatively few shows or people have explored the surreal (as in *The Ernie Kovacs Show*, *Laugh-In*, *Monty Python*, and, occasionally, *Saturday Night Live!*). In television's early days, George Burns talked to the television camera, and sometimes used the television technical apparatus in clever ways to advance the plot and to call attention to the television-nature of the show, but generally the technical apparatus is strictly used to tell a story. It seems that "realist" codes can only be contravened in comedy or science fiction, as if it is only safe to leave behind the reality-principle in laughter or excursions into a science-fiction future. Even TV fantasy shows like *Superman*, or the bionic men and women, use narrative codes that give a semblance of realism to the stories.

Hence, story-telling and imitation of life have been the prime television aesthetic impulse, and not artistic expression, abstract formalism, surrealism, or any form of aestheticism geared to create beautiful images. Television narratives attempt to provide an "impression of reality." They usually stay on the surface, however, on the level of appearance, and do not probe into the depths of personality. TV narratives neither portray the fundamental relations and contradictions of society, nor the texture and movement of history—as in the "realist" novels of Balzac, Dickens, Tolstoy, and other writers analyzed by Lukács.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, television has not striven for an aesthetic transformation of reality; i.e. for creating a realm of beautiful illusion and artistic transcendence. It has not created higher realms of beauty and truth which could contradict or subvert the established society; it has not created emancipatory images of freedom and happiness which could provide alternatives to the everyday world—features Marcuse ascribes to authentic art.<sup>33</sup> Television's only "transformative" aesthetic has been to idealize the existing conditions of life, purifying ugliness, suffering, and want with a Southern California plastic cleanliness and glitter.<sup>34</sup>

Television's mimetic realism really tends toward "pseudo-realism." Television narrative tends to exclude

the tragic and seamy side of life; it tends to suppress class conflict and social contradictions; it stays on the surface of social appearance and does not penetrate into the constituents of social behavior. For example, it shows endless criminals and crime, but rarely looks to see what causes crime and criminal behavior. Television usually stays on a middle level of experience and excludes the highs and lows. Likewise, politically, it represents the center and tends to exclude, or it pejoratively depicts, the extreme right and left of center. It aims at the "lowest common denominator" and leaves out everything that cannot be coded into formulas accessible to a mass audience and reductive narrative form, excluding much social reality, individuals experience, and oppositional culture.

There have been efforts, however, to subvert the reductive aesthetic and falsely idealized social world of American television. These efforts have taken the form of documentaries and mini-series that reveal social problems, or situation comedies that deal with topical social issues and conflicts previously ignored in the *TV World*.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, some "realist" documentaries and narrative codes—criticized by some cultural "radicals" as "bourgeois"—are progressive and even subversive within the pseudo-realism of *TV World*.<sup>36</sup> The disgrace of American television is that until the 1970's, there were extremely few attempts to put any sort of controversial content on to the "timid giant." There are complex historical and economic reasons for the aesthetic impoverishment and restriction of codes and formulas in American television that are beyond the scope of this argument; instead, I shall discuss how and why television narratives have been structured into well-defined typologies, genres, and series.

## TV Genres

Television entertainment has been relentlessly coded into the formulas of dominant genres. Following the main development of "mass mediated" culture, it has patterned itself according to popular genres: Westerns, cops and robbers, situation comedies, soap operas, melodramas, and so on. A genre consists of a coded set of formulas and conventions which indicate a culturally accepted way of organizing material into distinct patterns. Once established, genres dictate the basic conditions of cultural production and reception. For example, crime dramas invariably have a violent crime, a search for its perpetrators, and often a chase, fight, or bloody elimination of the criminal, communicating the message "crime does not pay." The audience comes to expect these predictable pleasures and a crime drama "code" develops, enshrined in production studio texts and practices. Violence becomes part of that code and when writers for *The Untouchables* did not produce enough violent episodes, they were ordered to do so by the producer Quinn Martin, who acted as enforcer of the code.<sup>37</sup>

Although there are rules, conventions and formulas that constitute genre codes, the relation of a given program or series to the genre is one of "family resemblance" and not an absolute reproduction of some generic essence.<sup>38</sup> That is, formulas and conventions provide basic



guidelines, but not absolute dicta. Moreover, a genre should be seen as a loose and perhaps uneasy cultural consensus, which is constantly changing and developing in interaction with the transformations of the social environment. Genres are established historically when a set of formulas crystallizes into a well-defined and accepted type that probably corresponds to some important cultural concern, collective fantasy, and the dominant ideology. For instance, the Western formula was first produced in the nineteenth century and eventually emerged as a well-defined genre, producing highly conventionalized and formulaic works that reproduce mythologies of heroic individualism, the West, Manifest Destiny, and violent self-assertion.<sup>39</sup> The formula, then, is a frame of reference that establishes certain rules for television production, and provides set expectations and pleasures for the audience. Standardized formulas characterize the "work of art in the age of technical reproduction," and not originality, which is reduced to variations on a set theme within a set pattern.

The dominant genres can be seen as solutions to actual cultural conflicts and problems, which provide a set of social myths and rituals.<sup>40</sup> Situation comedies tend to ritualize social problems and their solutions; they furnish a set of morality tales which define proper and improper social behavior.<sup>41</sup> They are structured to plot a conflict, its unfolding, intensification, and ultimate resolution. Various series within the situation comedy show different modes of social integration, ranging from rites of conformity and reassurance, rites of resignation, and rites of adjustment to social change. Some situation comedies, like *M.A.S.H.* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* resolve cultural contradictions between individuality and conformity, between being an individual and working within a group.

Drama genres often mythically resolve central social contradictions. The crime drama genre, for instance, provides rituals of law and order, ranging from celebration of violence which maintain the existing society, to affirming macho-individualism (*Baretta*, *Starsky and Hutch*, etc.) or conforming to the team (*The Rookies*, *Ironside*, etc.). Series like *Mod Squad*, *Starsky and Hutch*, *Serpico*, and others resolved contradictions between being hip and being straight, having a good time and performing a socially useful role. The genres deal with the central conflicts of a society and reinforce its dominant values. They harmonize conflicting values and deligitimate subversive or oppositional values. They often absorb new values into their generic form, as when the situation comedy—which celebrated the middle-class nuclear family in the 1950's and early 1960's—expanded to include one-parent families, independent working women, and, later, divorcees and unmarried single people living together. Although the sitcoms continued to affirm the values of the family and middle-class morality, they expanded their generic form to harmonize social and value conflicts taking place in the society. In this way, the genres try to establish a value-consensus and social harmony. Genre analysis, therefore, has to analyze the social conflicts and problems behind the genre formulas and to show how genres provide ideological solutions to social problems.

Genres are differentiated by their photographic, iconic, and symbolic images, and the codes that structure them. Genres share a photographic space or setting. The Western unfolds in the wide open spaces of the frontier and centers on the town that provides an oasis of civilization threatened by disorder. The crime drama takes place in the violent space of the city and its institutions of law. The sitcoms and soaps operate in the familiar space of bourgeois domesticity or the workplace. The genres also provide a community (the home, police station, office, frontier town, etc.) where the main characters live and share social space. The generic conflicts unfold in this space, which is hallowed with an aura of communal harmony. Conflicts are resolved affirming institutions, relationships, and behavior.

The genres share iconic imagery. The constant repetition of images in the Western has led some theorists to suggest that its imagery is almost completely iconic.<sup>42</sup> The electronic and technological gadgets of science fiction, or spy genres, provide an iconography that produces a shared pictorial universe. In the crime drama, the police cars, badges, guns, jails, etc. provide a shared iconographic universe. Further, there are also sets of symbolic images common to the genre: the cowboy as the symbol of moral individualism; the cop symbolizing law and order; the couple symbolizing fulfillment through romantic love; the home symbolizing family happiness; and technological devices symbolizing the might of the system to maintain law and order and to crush its opponents. These sets of images bind together the generic programs into a familiar universe that produces a stable frame of reference in which television production and reception takes place.

The viewer's experience oft-repeated of genre imagery establishes attitudinal patterns and elicits a set response. At the start of the jazzy music in a crime drama, one knows that an action sequence is starting and prepares for excitement; the predictable satisfaction of this expectation provides pleasure. Lugubrious music sets the tone for soap opera melodrama and promises pleasurable tears and heartaches. Canned laughter on the sitcom clues the viewer to communal hilarity. Hysterical screams of joy on the game show invites the viewer to a shared celebration of commodity fetishism. "And here's Johnny!" brings one into the Johnny Carson show and the promise of light entertainment. Low-key classical music introduces the higher brow world of public television. In such conventionally patterned genres one is always on safe ground. One knows what to expect and is happy when the expectation is fulfilled. Standardized genres provide security and familiarity in a society seemingly gone amok. The satisfaction produced in this repetitive process binds the audience to the genre.

An important unit of the television genre is the *stereotype* which fulfills both an indispensable technical function in creating an easily identifiable and comprehensible universe of experience and a psychological function of providing pleasure in this well-ordered universe. As T.W. Adorno writes: "The technology of television production makes stereotypy almost inevitable. The short time available for the preparation of scripts and the vast material continuously to be produced call for certain formulas.

Moreover, in plays lasting only a quarter to half an hour each, it appears inevitable that the kind of person the audience faces each time should be indicated through red and green lights . . . The more stereotypes become reified and rigid in the present setup of cultural industry, the less people are likely to change their preconceived ideas with the progress of their experience. The more opaque and complicated modern life becomes, the more people are tempted to cling desperately to clichés which seem to bring some order into the otherwise ununderstandable. Thus, people may not only lose true insight into reality, but ultimately their very capacity for life experience may be dulled by the constant wearing of blue and pink spectacles.<sup>43</sup>

Genres are thus structured by a formulaic organization of shared photographic, iconic, and symbolic images which have become stereotypes. In this sense, stereotypes are icons and symbols which repetition and redundancy have reduced to clichés. For example, the universe of the crime drama is rigidly divided into good and evil, which are presented stereotypically. Good always triumphs and evil is suppressed in proportion to the magnitude of the crime. In this certainty that evil will be punished resides the pleasure of the crime drama: the violence that eliminates evil provides an experience of satisfaction in seeing evil punished.<sup>44</sup> The violent acts committed by the criminal elicit and justify the violence that eliminates evil.

Retribution, the Biblical "an eye for an eye," is the dominant stereotype of the crime drama.<sup>45</sup> In this sense, TV violence is not gratuitous but is demanded by the genre formula. Stereotypes of the normality of crime and the perversity of human nature are perpetuated. Stereotypes of the criminal, good cops, lawyers, minorities, women and so on provide the staple of television cuisine. As Adorno and Horkheimer once put it: "the bread of the culture industry is the stone of the stereotype."<sup>46</sup> On the crime dramas, it appears that crime emanates from human nature. Crime dramas usually ignore the social conditions that produce crime: poverty, broken homes, drugs and alcohol, and the horrors of capitalism. Those viewers whose view of the world is decisively shaped by the imaginary world of television have a distorted picture of social conditions.<sup>47</sup>

Formulaic television genres reinforce tendencies toward stereotyped thinking in contemporary society. Early studies of propaganda discerned increased stereotyping in journalism, mass-mediated culture, and political discourse.<sup>48</sup> T.W. Adorno and his associates studied stereotyping in connection with the success of fascism, and in their studies of *The Authoritarian Personality*, they concluded that stereotyped thinking was wide-spread in America, creating an authoritarian threat to its traditions of democracy and individualism.<sup>49</sup> Television builds on and accelerates this trend toward stereotyping. It transmits ideology through stereotypical images, pseudo-wisdom, clichés, and platitudes to represent and naturalize dominant ideologies. In this way genre conventions reproduce dominant social conventions and clothe them with ideologies. For example, crime dramas convey an ideology of human nature as selfish, aggressive, violent and destructive — an ideology formulated by Hobbes and reproduced by later

ideologues in order to justify capitalism, imperialism and fascism. The old ideology "man is a wolf to man" appears nightly in the television crime drama, transmitting an ideology that legitimates authoritarian law and order. In this way, authority figures and institutions of law and order become validated as necessary instruments of repression, required by the ideology to keep unruly human nature in line.

Genres share themes, stock situations, and ideologies. Soap operas present themes of endless troubles, getting into and out of jams. Although they indicate proper and improper ways to deal with problems, they also present unending woe and never-ending problems which convey ideologies of stoic endurance. Soap operas show the characters in situations of unwanted pregnancy, adultery, marital breakup, medical disorders, personality problems, alcoholism, and the thousand and one other delights of a disintegrating bourgeois society. Miraculously, the thematized disorder of the afternoon soap operas is overcome in the evening situation comedies, which show that every problem can be easily resolved within thirty or sixty minutes without radical change or great effort. No one has yet explored the cultural schizophrenia that is found in the perpetually disordered world of the soap operas in contrast with the easily ordered and reordered world of the situation comedy.

Genres from a tradition established by cultural consensus and practice. They eventually crystallize into relatively fixed patterns. Their imagery and codes provide a frame of reference for both the producers and consumers of the television commodity. Genre formulas and conventions determine the sort of story to be told, how it is to be told, its themes, ideology, and cultural effects. There is a certain market determination that influences genre popularity and survival, for television depends both on large audience viewing figures and advertising support. Hence, the 1950's were full of Westerns, whereas the 1970's were the decade of the crime drama. It is interesting to note that the Western died on television more on account of the composition of its viewing audience than of declining ratings: some Westerns had respectable ratings, but demographic analysis showed that it was mostly country people and lower income audiences which constituted its viewers; as a result, sponsors cancelled their support in search of a more affluent audience.<sup>50</sup> Other programs like *East-Side*, *West-Side* and the Smothers Brothers were cancelled despite high ratings because sponsors and networks did not want to be associated with controversial programs. The consumer is no more king in the television market than in the commodity market.

Genre theory requires historical analysis to trace the evolution of genres and to discern why certain genres are dominant at a given time in a given society. Such analysis should trace genre cycles and the interaction between dominant genres and society. Genre analysis should also elucidate the variety and contradictions within a genre. It should analyze changes within a genre and subversion of its dominant codes and ideologies. For instance, within the crime drama genre, the introduction in the late 1960's and early 1970's of police shows like *Mod Squad*, *Adam-12*, *Dan August*, *The Streets of San Francisco*, etc. subverted the

authoritarian law and order genre previously predominant (i.e. *Dragnet*, *The Untouchables*, *The FBI*, etc.), offering instead liberal morality plays. The ascetic, literally "untouchable," law enforcer of the authoritarian law and order genre (Sgt. Friday, Elliot Ness, Inspector Erskine, etc.) was replaced by more human, fun-loving, non-ascetic, and liberal cops. *Baretta* and *Starsky and Hutch* introduced new species of extremely individualistic cops who were constantly rebelling against authority. These programs too pictured government and police bureaucracies, as well as intelligence agencies like the FBI and CIA, as cold, impersonal, ruthless, and often ineffective agencies; they championed instead individualistic and humane values against the right-wing, authoritarian ideologies of previous crime dramas.

A new contradiction arose in the crime drama genre in the 1970's between cop shows which stressed team conformity and submission to the group (*Ironside*, *The Rookies*, *S.W.A.T.*) contrasted with those crime dramas stressing individuality and self-assertion. Genres thus reproduce central contradictions of the existing society, for the conflict between assertive individualism and team conformity is a central contradiction in contemporary American life. Some cop shows articulate one pole of the contradiction, whereas others try to balance and harmonize the contradictions. Genre subversion articulates contradictions which were previously latent or covered over within a genre. Consequently, it is possible to reverse or subvert dominant ideologies and values within a genre. Genres are open to history and vital genres can adapt themselves to conflicting values and ideological problematics. It is a complete mistake, therefore, to postulate one unchanging, monolithic, homogeneous ideology within a genre, for genres are full of contradictions and are constantly being developed and transformed. The heterogeneity of TV genres results not only because they must respond in a variety of ways to social and ideological conflicts, but also because the genres are articulated into series which frantically compete with each other for ratings, and producers attempt to individualize and distinguish each series.

### TV Series, Mini-series, and Special Events

So far in television history, TV series have been the dominant form of entertainment which have given TV its peculiar power and cultural significance. Television series present the same characters in a well-defined and often repetitive set of situations. A successful series presents attractive and interesting characters who become familiar and easy receptacles for empathy and identification. The characters and situations generally determine the series' popularity and importance. Major characters are anchors representing the familiar and the conventional; they confront people and situations which represent the unfamiliar and deviant. Constant repetition of the main characters' personality traits provide them with iconic and symbolic characteristics which make them moral models or yardsticks to measure social character and action.

For example, Efrem Zimbalist Jr. played Lewis Erskine, an FBI inspector, on *The FBI* series from 1965 to 1974. Erskine provided a model of an individual totally dedi-

cated to duty. Although the first season's programs attempted to delineate his personality, the succeeding series made him an impersonal tool of the FBI technical apparatus. Here the series code emphasized the flawed character of its criminals who were inevitably apprehended by the FBI apparatus. The series *Kojak*, on the other hand, developed the personality of its main character Lt. Theo Kojak, brilliantly played by Telly Savalas. Here it was Kojak's intuitive ability, his forceful character, and his macho individualism which was decisive in both the crime detection work and, probably, in the show's popularity. Other police series, like *Hawaii Five-O*, attempted to balance emphasis on the heroics of the main character, the dedicated work of his team, and the technical police apparatus. The personalities of the main characters become vehicles of moralities and ideologies, and the situations and plots convey moral and ideological messages.

Series are also effective ways of coming to terms with social change. They can present complex and novel moral situations, and can show the main characters adjusting to them. After five years of intra-family war on *All in the Family*, Archie Bunker suddenly faced situations of marital infidelity, losing his job, having an operation, and taking in a Puerto Rican boarder. In the next season, Archie had to contend with the problems of running his own business, addiction to pills, his wife's rape, the death of relatives, and Mike and Gloria's move to California. In the following 1978-79 season, the Bunkers had to adjust to a relatives' child being left with them, the problems of running Archie's tavern, and Mike and Gloria's separation.

And in 1980-81, he had to cope with Edith's death. These situations enable the audience to deal with serious issues which it often represses and provide moral guidance and intense vicarious experience. In this way, one learns how to cope with problems and how to adjust to change.

Television series in their first quarter century were for the most part static and escapist; their basically unchanging characters faced the same trivial problems and responded in predictable ways. Television, however, is well suited to deal with social change and complex moral problems, and there is some evidence that it is beginning to do so. Its totally negative critics sometimes forget how young TV is and fail to perceive its potential. Television genres and series are not inherently conservative. Television series could provide an excellent forum to dramatize cultural concerns, new conflicts, and to promote social change.<sup>51</sup> In its first decades, the series were absolutely forbidden to deal with certain topical social problems, issues like sex, religion, and politics.<sup>52</sup> Thus in the 1960's only a few crime dramas, like *Dragnet*, *Ironside*, and *Mo' Squad*, dealt with the constellation of new conflicts and problems that were tearing America apart; then with Norman Lear's ground-breaking *All in the Family*, 1971, situation comedies began to deal with topical and controversial subject matter.

Television in the 1970's began to explicitly deal with the issues of the day and has the potential to bring to awareness moral issues and problems, to stimulate discussion and fantasy on key issues, and to encourage moral choice and transformation. Although television morality

plays have for the most part reinforced traditional morality, it is possible to subvert this morality by dealing with new ideas and situations not previously confronted on television. Although television has yet to exploit its potential for subverting obsolete values and promoting alternatives, it could conceivably be a vehicle for more progressive cultural-social change.

One might compare television genres and series with film. From the 1920's through the 1940's, film genres and characters provided not only the most culturally significant morality tales, heroes, and models of identification, but also the most influential cultural response to current social issues. Since then it has become a banality that television has displaced films' central cultural role, but it has been overlooked that television has the potential to create mythologies, cultural heroes, and socially relevant material more effectively than film. The reasons are that television is so accessible and ubiquitous, and the weekly series or the mini-series have more episodes and time to develop complex characters, conflicts, and crises than film. Moreover, the format of television provides a familiar base of character and situation to build on and has more potential topicality, for television shows can be produced and distributed quicker than film. Finally, TV's presence in nearly every home means that television can attract a much larger audience than film.

The mediocrity of so much television and the many complex and significant works of film art have helped prevent many people from seeing the potentialities of television. Although the best films are far superior to television, one could still argue that in today's film market, which emphasizes disaster films, the occult and violent spectacles, the best television shows are producing better developed and more influential characters, more relevant and topical comedy and dramatic situations, and more complex confrontations with crucial issues than the usual Hollywood film. Although television's potential has hardly begun to be tapped, it should not be ignored.

In this context, the relatively new *mini-series* could play an interesting role. Following the model of English BBC dramatization of novels, transmitted by PBS in America, starting in the mid-seventies a series of popularized novels and docudramas on network television actually confronted American history and some of our current problems. Mini-series present works in several episodes, examples include: *Roots*, *Captain and the Kings*, *Testimony of Two Men*, *Rich Man*, *Poor Man*, *The Moneychangers*, *Washington: Behind Closed Doors*, *Loose Change*, *King*, *Wheels*, *Centennial*, *Holocaust*, *Roots: The Next Generations*, *Studs Lonigan*, *Blind Ambition*, and *Shogun*. They have dealt with such issues as black oppression and racism, class conflict, economic manipulation by the rich, corruption in the political system, violent suppression of organized labor, and continuing class conflict in our society. For the most part, they took the form of melodrama, full of sex and violence, and closed with the usual happy endings which tended to obscure the political issues. Nonetheless, the American audience saw at least attempts to depict its history and problems. The mini-series seem to add a flexibility and easing of censorship that allows television production teams to explore previously taboo areas. The phenomenal

popularity of *Roots*, and respectable showings of the other mini-series, indicate that this form may increasingly become a vehicle for social criticism.

Mini-series and TV specials might also break the hold of the series form over the viewer and networks, and habituate the audience to more novel and challenging types of television. In this regard, uncensored, uncut Hollywood movies, and more complex and daring made-for-TV movies, could expand the areas explored by television and engage in social critique and enlightenment on a level not yet obtained by other modes of popular culture. Although many made-for-TV movies have been mediocre, the form allows television to produce material that is especially topical and controversial. There have been a few interesting TV movies dealing with rape, a disaster in a nuclear energy plant (which caused a furor of protest from that industry!), and with white-collar, corporate crime in a more critical and realistic way than is found on series drama.

*Docudramas* which mix documentary fact with dramatic fiction have dealt with the Roosevelt era (*Franklin and Eleanor*), *Ike*, *Truman at Potsdam*, *Collision Course: Truman and MacArthur*, the McCarthy era (*Tailgunner Joe* and *Fear on Trail*), the Cuban missile crisis (*The Missiles of October*), the assassination of Kennedy, capital punishment (*Kill Me if you Can*), the effects of the Vietnam war (*Friendly Fire* and *A Rumor of War*), *Howard Hughes*, *Elvis*, *Jim Jones*, *The Ordeal of Patty Hearst*, and other contemporary historical events and issues. Docudramas have so far emphasized the drama over documentary, focusing on personalities and interpersonal conflicts. Both the technology of the small screen and the ideology of individualism have meant that the focus is on individual personality and not on collective action or struggle. Consequently, docudrama has tended toward video voyeurism that peeks behind the scene at the lives of the famous.

The docudrama synthesis of fact and fiction has been criticized by historians and others for its historical distortions.<sup>53</sup> Some of the criticism derives, I suspect, from the occasional critical presentation of recent American history and demystification of certain historical actions in the best of the docudramas. The worst docudramas have, on the contrary, remystified Presidents like Truman and Kennedy, or have simply reduced political figures to likeable, average human beings (i.e. *Backstairs at the White House*). Nonetheless, despite their failings, in the falsely idealized world of American television, they are a welcome addition and possible vehicle for future social critique and enlightenment.

*TV specials* are singular events which range from made-for-television movies to variety showcases for singers, comedians, and the like. Some are videotaped and others are live. Variety specials shimmer with the false glitter of TV spectacle; they have a surface sparkling immediacy, in which the spectator is invited to escape to *Entertainment World*. Such entertainment obliterates the real world, producing momentary participation in social spectacle and ritual. It simulates an artificial gaiety, warmth, humor, and song that are usually not found in the texture of everyday life. Or, like many film musicals, they invest everyday life with an intensity, color, abun-

dance, and community which transfigures the everyday world with an aura of joy.

It is curious how the glitter, glow, and flow of TV spectacle is able to transform into shining stars minimal talents like Sonny and Cher, Tony Orlando and Dawn, The Captain and Tenille, Donny and Marie, Barry Manilow and the like, who are in turn discarded after their brief moments of glory. These variety shows are best viewed, I submit, as rituals of mediocrity, with their pre-recorded music, canned laughter and applause, and pseudo-spectacle. It is a testimony to the aesthetic impoverishment of television that no real auteur of the Spectacle, like Busby Berkeley, Vincent Minelli, or the MGM movie team has emerged to create really dazzling TV entertainment. Likewise, few comedians have utilized the format of television to produce a really original TV comedy. For with the exceptions of Ernie Kovacs, *Laugh-In*, *Monty Python*, and, perhaps, some of *Saturday Night Live!*, most comedy shows simply reproduce stand-up comic routines or variety show/music hall codes.

TV special events range from historical happenings of prime importance to pseudo-events staged by TV. Many argue that TV is at its best as a medium for directly broadcasting live events: political conventions, election returns, sports, parades, and the like. TV enables the spectator to travel to the far corners of the earth and provides a "you-are-there" experience. Surely some of TV's most memorable moments have been the McCarthy-Army hearings, the Kennedy and King Funerals, Chicago in 1968, the moonshots, the Watergate hearings, and, for some, spectacular sports events. Indeed, TV's unique potential seems to be its ability to transport the viewer to special events

and to give a sense of participation in history.

TV specials also include pseudo-events that are strictly staged for television (i.e. an *Eviel Knievel Special*, beauty contests, testimonies to stars and celebrities, etc.). Like the previous media events criticized by Daniel Boorstein in *The Image*, TV puffery and promotion hypes events which are of no real social importance into TV happenings. Politicians take advantage of this situation and try to elevate their minor triumphs into media events by staging diplomatic trips, treaty signings, speeches, press conferences, etc., especially for television. Finally, television ever more frequently is staging pseudo-events and spectacles to celebrate itself and promote its interests in programs like *The Battle of the Network Stars*, in which TV stars compete in tennis, golf, swimming, etc. A network has stars from their series on specials like *The Pat Boone Family Hour* which celebrates the family and conventional values to transfer Boone's aura to the other stars and series.

All of the TV images and codes which I have discussed produce a set of signifying practices which generate social meanings. Since television is increasingly at the center of the media of communication and is the dominant producer of culture and ideology, it must create social images, values, and myths which provide individual role-models and legitimate social norms, institutions, and power relationships. Consequently, television has become an important ideological apparatus which explains, idealizes, and celebrates the existing society.<sup>54</sup> It does this by producing a set of messages about society, the individual, and everyday life. Accordingly, let us now provide a theory and some methodological strategies to interpret and demystify television messages.

## Television Messages and Hermeneutics

All of the constituents of *TV world* signify. Dialogue, facial expressions, gestures, music, color, editing, the technical, cultural, aesthetic, erotic, and ideological codes work together to constitute the TV message. Hence, television messages are often surprisingly complex and operate on many levels. Accordingly, a sophisticated method of television interpretation is needed which builds on structuralism, semiotics, and critical theory, as well as using the methods of hermeneutics, psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology. Hermeneutics substitutes for passive viewing an active process of creative interpretation. It tries to correct superficial escapism of untrained viewers with a method that provides insight and increased understanding. It utilizes a "hermeneutics of suspicion" which critically explicates the meanings and their saturation with ideology.<sup>55</sup> It suspects significance where the average viewer finds mere "entertainment" and the intellectual finds only triviality and a "vast wasteland." Critical television hermeneutics discovers, on the contrary, that television is teeming with multiple messages and a system of meanings.

Television messages are produced by the interactions among the imagery, the narrative text, and the operative codes and subcodes. All images are coded and their meanings are determined by the codes and the context of the narrative. The same objects can signify different meanings according to their generic-narrative context.<sup>56</sup> A gun in the policeman's hand signifies law and order, whereas a gun in the villain's hand aimed at Matt Dillon in *Gunsmoke* signifies evil, a threat to the community. A gun in a soap opera would signify the eruption of unexpected terror since guns are not part of the soap operas codes. Further, the type "rebel" and image "longhair" can have different connotations according to the code and narrative. The song, "He's a rebel" glorifies the rebel in the boy-girl rock code, as *Easy Rider* sanctifies long hairs in the film. Television shows like *Dragnet* or *Kojak* utilize codes in which rebels or longhairs are deviants, to be harshly taken care of. The act of "extra sexuality" can be condoned or condemned or rendered ambiguous according to the context of the narrative and the codes at work. Hence, TV messages are determined by the unique interaction of imagery

narrative text, and the intersection of codes and subcodes.

Understanding the interaction between code and text should help grasp the constituents of television messages. Whereas codes are those general sets of conventions, formulas, and rules, the text refers to the structures of a particular individual program. Each program can be seen as a textual system that forms a singular unity or unique configuration in terms of its composition and content. This uniqueness of the text should not be exaggerated for the television text is a conjunction of codes and subcodes produced by an interaction between network executives, producers, directors, writers, actors, editors, censors, and the other people and structures of an economic-technical apparatus. Hence, whereas each show is in a sense unique, its uniqueness is not the product of a single creator or "auteur." Television is the most collective-collaborative art in history and those who see creation as the act of a solitary genius will not find television suitable to their aesthetics.<sup>57</sup>

The familiarity and ubiquitousness of television make it a perfect vehicle for messages. Indeed, television provides a wealth of cultural norms and models, stereotypes, sanctified values, ideologies, morality tales, and myths—all for easy cultural consumption. What is especially troubling is the extent to which its procedure of communicating messages is not understood by its viewers. Most viewers, and surprisingly many "theorists," believe that television is harmless diversion and fail to see its socializing-ideological effects.<sup>58</sup> The problems in overturning this prejudice are manifold: the message is hidden by the plot; the code is hidden by the images; and the messages are both latent and manifest.<sup>59</sup> For instance, the manifest message of a cop show is that crime does not pay, but there are also latent messages of the authority and hierarchy in the images of how Ironside or Kojak relate to their subordinates. Progressive views of race or sex may be manifestly expressed, but the paleosymbolic images of blacks or women may carry contrary messages of racism and sexism. Although the manifest images portray crime, the relentless protection of property by the police and downfall of the criminal communicate latent messages of the sanctity of property, and make an equation of the property order with the natural order of things, as if it were a sin to transgress this order—although no overtly ideological statement of this sort is manifestly expressed. Negative images of radicals, hippies, communists or foreigners produce messages that all deviants or outsiders are "bad" and thus serve to legitimate the system and its "good citizens," although no manifest statement of this sort is put forth. A new show may deal with a relatively liberated, single career woman, yet the accompanying advertising messages may contain images of a woman washing, cleaning, and caring for the family, thus communicating a latent message that woman's place is in the home in the traditional wife role. Images of computers, bionic technology, and space ships, and of advanced police and medical technology, contain latent messages about the power and usefulness of technology, even though no technocratic ideology is pronounced.

Since television imagery exhibits a polysemic depth that contains both manifest, as well as latent, messages,

television messages can be interpreted on different levels. Since television messages are communicated by each image, scene, program, series and genre, hermeneutical analysis begins with analyzing the discrete images and then the messages communicated by the flow of images in a given scene. One can then ask what thematic message is communicated in any given program, for invariably there is a rather clear cut message or "moral."

For example, the *Star Trek* episode "This Side of Paradise" conveyed the message that individual initiative, striving, and achievement are of fundamental importance to human life. The *Enterprise* crew, in this episode, found themselves on a planet inhabited by plant "spores" that emitted effects which produced a state of euphoria. Captain Kirk resisted their effects due to his strong personality and "saved" his crew and the inhabitants of the planet from a life of mindless bliss. The social referent was obviously to psychedelic drugs and the message was that such drugs with their artificial paradises were a trap that obliterated individuality, work, creativity, and the struggles and conflicts that supposedly defined a human being. The images of the crew spaced out on the drug were alternately amusing and derogatory. The images of Captain Kirk showed him as steadfast, resolute, cunning, and resourceful—just the right image for an authority figure.

One can also analyze messages communicated by a given series. For instance, frequent watching of and endlessly rerun *Mary Tyler Moore* communicates the cumulative message that an unmarried working woman should be friendly and submissive to the men in her office but not sexually promiscuous and disruptive. Many shows deal with sexual attraction and renunciation, and show the limits of acceptable sexual interaction. The series also shows how an unmarried woman is to get along with others by conforming to the proper middle-class values. The cumulative message of *Star Trek* provides a validation of the American virtue of enterprise, corporate conformity, and the mission of America to civilize the world.<sup>60</sup> The cumulative message of a given series may not be apparent at first viewing, and may never be clearly articulated, but can usually be gleaned from sufficient viewing. Of course, there is no one system of messages in a given program or series, and indeed there may be contradictory messages. But, one of the tasks of television interpretation is to analyze and lay bare the variety and multiplicity of messages communicated.

Further, one might see how a genre as a whole has certain basic messages and how these messages may change over time in relation to changing social conditions. In a pioneering study of the television Western, *The Horse, The Gun, and the Piece of Property*, Ralph and Donna Brauer show how at different periods, the television Western genre as a whole communicated different cumulative messages, correlated to different historical events and social changes.<sup>61</sup> The earliest TV Westerns emphasized the individual cowboy hero and his horse (i.e. *The Lone Ranger*, *Roy Rogers*, *Gene Autry*, *Hopalong Cassidy*, etc.); they were extremely derogatory of woman, Indians, and other minorities, and were sexist and racist to the core, championing the virtues of the White Male Savior.<sup>62</sup> Starting in the mid 1950's, a series of Westerns appeared featuring the

gun and macho violence to maintain law and order (*Have Gun, Will Travel, Colt .45, Lawman, Bronco, Cheyenne*, etc.).<sup>63</sup> These more violent "adult Westerns" responded to fears in the repressive 1950's law-and-order mentality, and the increase in prominence of guns and other weapons responded to the concern with weapons in the arms race.

After a series of "transitional Westerns" in the late 1950's and early 1960's, which showed attempts to form communities in the face of threats from uncivilized forces (*Rawhide, Wagon Train, Over-land Trail*), in the 1960's, the dominant form of Western stressed the values of property and social conformity (*Bonanza, The Big Valley, Lancer, The Virginian, The High Chaparral*, etc.).<sup>64</sup> Here the emphasis was on owning one's piece of property and protecting it from threats from outside. There was increased emphasis on social conformity and a marked decline of individuality. The "property Western" corresponded to the migration to the suburbs and the corporate domination of American life stressing conformity and fitting in. The Brauers show how *Gunslinger*, the most popular and longest running TV Western, spanned several of these stages and incorporated the shifts from the adult gun Western, the transitional Western, to the property/civilized town Western into the series.<sup>65</sup> Hence, a more synoptic analysis of TV genres will show the shifting messages in each genre in relation to a changed social situation.

Television messages range from the simple to the complex, the coherent to the incoherent, the familiar and the obvious, to the novel and problematical, and the repetitive-reassuring to the subversive and emancipatory.<sup>66</sup> There are often contradictions within the TV messages of a given scene, program, series, or genre, and there are sometimes contradictions between the encoding by TV producers and the decoding by the audience, resulting in "aberrant decoding."<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, contradictions within *TV world* make possible "semiotic guerilla warfare" (Eco) which attempts to subvert dominant codes, values, and ideologies. Norman Lear's *Mary Hartman*, for instance, was one of the most interesting efforts to subvert both the form and content of situation comedy and soap opera genres, creating a new television hybrid. It systematically introduced novel content and often engaged in radical social critique.<sup>68</sup> *Saturday Night Live!* has likewise attempted to subvert dominant genres, either through the

introduction of new content or by satirizing existing genres. Other television documentaries, mini-series, and situation comedies have in recent years engaged in a mild form of subversion by presenting content that contradicts dominant television ideologies.<sup>69</sup>

Genre subversion and semiotic guerilla warfare has its limits, however, for it is not clear how much novel content or subversion of forms the television audience is ready to accept. Network programmer Fred Silverman, for instance, rejected *Mary Hartman* when it was first presented to him because "I hate it."<sup>70</sup> Likewise, a conservative audience is going to resist novel form and content that contradicts traditional values, or it may decode the programs in accordance with its own values. Thus, the documentary *The Selling of the Pentagon* was interpreted by critics of the "military-industrial complex" and the Vietnam war as a powerful indictment of the military (what producer Peter Davis intended), while pro-military conservatives and hawks saw it as confirming the dangers of military threat from the Soviet Union and the need for a strong military. Although Norman Lear intended to satirize the working class bigot in *All in the Family* and to present him as a "horse's ass," those in the audience who agreed with Archie's views identified with him and found him the most sympathetic character. In the view of some critics, the series served to strengthen their prejudices.<sup>71</sup>

The fact is that most TV programs and series allow a multiplicity of readings; hence, there is rarely one privileged TV interpretation.<sup>72</sup> In fact, since there is not yet a critical theory of television with canonical readings of television texts, there are no dogmas of television criticism blocking access to a critical hermeneutics of television.

These discussions of television images, codes, and messages show various ways that television narratives can be analyzed, interpreted, and criticized. The theory intends to be useful in providing a variety of approaches for television criticism. The categories were developed from theoretical inquiry and practical criticism and in turn should be further developed, modified, added to, and perhaps some will have to be discarded in the light of further critical practice and the development of television culture. Thus my theory intends to provide a provisional set of working hypotheses and not any final "system" or completed methodology.

instead a theory of images. I find **Pierce's theory of signs** unsuitable for **analyzing television and cinematic imagery**, as his notion of iconic and **indexical signs** is highly obscure, and his **concept of iconic** does not at all cohere with the rich usage in theorists like Panofsky (see note 19). Furthermore, Pierce's concept of symbolic signs is an impoverished concept with arbitrary linguistic conventions, losing the aesthetic richness of "symbol" that is most useful for cultural analysis. Although Pierce's work may be useful for a logic of signs, I do not find it helpful for aesthetics and am therefore surprised that semiologists like Eco and Wollen champion Pierce as foundational for an aesthetics of signs in cultural life.

<sup>16</sup>Kracauer, *op. cit.*, argues that film follows photography in addressing itself to a revelation of reality and stresses film's "realist" vocation. Whatever its merits and deficiencies as a theory of film, I believe that it is totally inapplicable to television, for TV's photographic images are but one kind of image which provides the basis for a variety of symbolic and iconic images conveying values, ideologies, and a generally sanitized and idealized view of the social world that is full of distortions and omissions.

<sup>17</sup>George Gerbner and Larry Gross, "Television as Enculturation," unpublished manuscript, p. 10. As an example of how media culture uses the association of its stars with their TV roles, we have the commercial where Robert Young, who played Dr. Welby, tells the audience that he is not a doctor and cannot answer the thousands of letters that he receives asking for medical advice, but he can tell you which coffee to buy. . . .

<sup>18</sup>*Broadcasting*, March 5, 1979, p. 34 for the Asner story. In another example of how the naive TV viewer reads TV images as reality, David Groh, who played Joe on the *Rhoda* series, states in a *TV Guide* interview: "It's strange what people think is important. Somebody sent a letter to the *Rhoda* show saying that I, as Joe, should tighten my tie, and that if I didn't they'd quit watching the show. Now here's a guy who watches the great catastrophes of the world each night on the news—war, famine, whatever—and he writes to the *Rhoda* show to

tell me to *straighten my tie or else.*" *TV Guide* May 3, 1975, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup>On the concept of iconic imagery, Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1955).

<sup>20</sup>For Eisenstein's sense of iconic imagery and montage, *Film Form* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949) and *The Film Sense* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947).

<sup>21</sup>For discussions of iconic imagery in film genres, Jim Kitses, *Horizons West* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Press, 1969); Colin McArthur, *Underworld USA* (New York: Viking, 1972); Raymond Durgnat, *The Crazy Mirror* (New York: Delta, 1970); and the articles on the musical in *Movie No. 24*, especially Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," pp. 2ff.

<sup>22</sup>On the concept of symbol, Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Standard Edition, 5), and Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale, 1970). Television symbolism functions analogously to literary symbolism which utilizes techniques of metaphor/condensation and metonymy/displacement, thus literary analysis of symbols like Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1967) is of help in grasping the nature of television symbolic imagery. For an application of concepts of literary symbolism to film analysis, James Monaco, *How to Read a Film* (New York: Oxford, 1977).

<sup>23</sup>On the concept of "paleosymbolism," see Jürgen Habermas, "Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence," *Recent Sociology*, No. 2 editor Hans Dreitzel, (New York: Macmillan, 1970) and Alvin Gouldner *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology* (New York: Seabury, 1976). Habermas and Gouldner claim that the concept of paleosymbolism derives from Freud but they provide no source references and I have not been able to find it in Freud's writing. In any case, the concept is rooted in Freud's notion of "scenic understanding" (see the Habermas source above) and is consistent with Freud's use of archaeological metaphors for the topological structures of the mind. See, for example, Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1962),

pp. 16ff.. The term "paleosymbol" thus refers in my usage to scenic imagery which remains in the viewer's mind but which is not mediated by concepts of interpretive understanding (i.e. is prelinguistic or non-conceptual).

<sup>24</sup>Habermas, *op. cit.*; Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *op. cit.*; and Alfred Lorenzer, "Symbol and Stereotypes," in *Critical Sociology*, editor Paul Connerton (New York: Pequin, 1976).

<sup>25</sup>Semiology, in de Saussure's sense, is the study of the life of signs in social life, focusing on their structure, interconnections, and codes. This analysis is influenced by the semiological theories of Barthes, Metz, and Eco, although my use of semiology will be selective and critical. For a sharp critique of the application of a too highly formalized semiological concept of code, rooted in information theory or structural linguistics, see Francoise Gallard, "Literary Code(s) and Ideology," *Substance*, No. 15, Fall 1976. Gallard is, however, misleading when she claims that the information theory model of communication "serves as the model for all semiotic analysis" (p. 69), for such a formalized and mathematized model does not operate in the work of Barthes, Eco, Metz, or my own analyses. Moreover, although great literature is often not coded into conventional formulas, television clearly is, hence the relevance of a semiological notion of codes in television analysis.

<sup>26</sup>Cited in Ed Zucherman, "The Year of the Cop," *Rolling Stone*, April 21, 1977, p. 61. Although my analysis is focused primarily on television narrative fiction, I believe that the news, sports, special events, variety shows, and other television productions also follow some sort of narrative codes. On narrative codes in the news, see Edward Jay Epstein, *News from Nowhere* (New York: Vintage, 1974).

<sup>27</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1967).

<sup>28</sup>David Thorburn, "Television Melodrama," in *Television as a Cultural Force*, editor Richard Adler (New York: Praeger, 1976). Thorburn's article is insightful and provocative, but tends to be uncritical and even apologetic for television narrative and



melodrama.

<sup>29</sup>Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 29-30.

<sup>30</sup>On the operation of Freudian categories in television narrative, see Peter H. Wood, "Television as Dream," in *Television as a Cultural Force*, *op. cit.*, especially his analysis of sexual displacement in the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, pp. 27-8.

<sup>31</sup>"Mimetic realism" is used here as a term to describe narrative codes that attempt to "realistically" represent or imitate common experience and everyday life. Various radical and modernist critics have attacked the pretensions and illusions in realist narrative codes and I am suggesting here that although television utilizes realist narrative codes, they are usually of an extremely impoverished type and therefore are better described, for the most part, as "pseudo-realism," in a sense to be specified. Moreover, it seems to me that traditional "critical realism," in the sense used by Lukács (see note 32) is subversive of the pseudo-realism of TV world. On this issue, see my article "TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Popular Culture," *Socialist Review* 45 (May-June 1979), pp. 31ff.

<sup>32</sup>Georg Lukács, *Realism in our Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971) and *Studies in European Realism* (London: Merlin, 1972).

<sup>33</sup>Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955) and *The Aesthetic Dimension* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), as well as my forthcoming study *Herbert Marcuse and the Vicissitudes of Critical Theory*.

<sup>34</sup>Ben Stein, *op. cit.*, pp. 105ff. One of the few interesting insights in Stein's wretched little book is his claim that television replicates the Southern California plastic and sanitized environment. On the surface, this is an interesting point, but it ignores the ideological mechanisms in the construction of TV world; see the review by Hersh and Kellner, *op. cit.*

<sup>35</sup>Kellner, "TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Popular Culture," *op. cit.*

<sup>36</sup>Kellner, *op. cit.*

<sup>37</sup>Erik Earnouw, *Tube of Plenty* (New York: Oxford, 1975), pp. 263ff. In a revealing memo, Quinn Martin advises his writers for *The Untouchables*

to put more violence in the scripts, but to vary its content: "I wish you would come up with a different device than running the man down with a car, as we have done this now in three different shows. I like the idea of sadism, but I hope we can come up with another approach to it" (p. 264).

<sup>38</sup>The term "family resemblance" is used by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: MacMillan, 1960) to polemicize against inappropriate usages of the term "essence."

<sup>39</sup>On the historical development of these and other popular genres, John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

<sup>40</sup>Kellner, "Television Myth and Ritual," *op. cit.*, and Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genre Films* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980).

<sup>41</sup>Kellner, *op. cit.*, an analysis the various types, ideologies, and social functions of situation comedies.

<sup>42</sup>Kitses, *Horizons West*, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup>T. W. Adorno, "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture," in *Mass Culture*, editors Rosenberg and White (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1957), pp. 483-84.

<sup>44</sup>I observed this one day in my Philosophy of Communications class. I was showing a video-tape of *Kojak* to analyze the crime drama genre; we ran out of time so that the tape was cut off; there was a mass scream of dismay that was soothed when the tape was put back on, right at the point in which *Kojak* shot the criminal who fell several stories out of a window to be crushed on the sidewalk. The students clapped and left the auditorium, even though there were a few minutes left in the show. Obviously there was a strong need to see evil punished and gratification obtained through its violent elimination.

<sup>45</sup>For a discussion of the function of Biblical concepts of retribution in popular culture, Robert Jewett and John Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City: Doubleday/Anchor Press, 1977), especially Chapter VIII.

<sup>46</sup>T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Seabury, 1972).

<sup>47</sup>George Gerbner and Larry Gross,

"Living with Television," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 1976), pp. 173-199.

<sup>48</sup>For early studies of propaganda and stereotyping, Harold Lasswell, *Propaganda Techniques in World War I* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1971); Walter Lippman, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1949); and Adorno and Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry," *op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup>T. W. Adorno, et. al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Norton, 1969).

<sup>50</sup>Les Brown, *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 52 and 103.

<sup>51</sup>Kellner, "TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Popular Culture," *op. cit.*

<sup>52</sup>"Lucy on Lucy," *TV Book*, *op. cit.*, p. 159.

<sup>53</sup>On "docudramas," see Bill Davidson, "Fact or Fiction?," *TV Guide*, March 20, 1976, pp. 4ff.; Mark Harris "Docudramas Unveiled," *TV Guide*, March 4, 1978, pp. 6ff.; Paul Heath Hoeffel, "Docudrama Debate," *Politics & Other Human Interests*, Febr. 14, 1978, pp. 23ff.; Eric Foner, "The Televised Past," *The Nation*, June 16, 1979, pp. 724ff., and the discussion of a conference on the docudramas in *Film Comment*, July-August 1979, pp. 2ff.

<sup>54</sup>Kellner, "Ideology, Marxism, and Advanced Capitalism," *Socialist Review* 42 (November-December 1978), pp. 37-66, and "TV, Ideology and Emancipatory Popular Culture," *op. cit.*

<sup>55</sup>On the "hermeneutics of suspicion," Ricoeur, *op. cit.*, pp. 32ff.

<sup>56</sup>On TV messages, Stuart Hall, *op. cit.*, and Umberto Eco, "Towards a Semiotic Inquiry into the Television Message," *Working Papers for Cultural Studies* 3, 1972, pp. 103-121.

<sup>57</sup>It is generally argued that the economic constraints and pressures, the time factor, and the collective nature of the television production apparatus have prohibited the rise of television auteurs. Alfred Hitchcock, for example, directed a series of television shows, and in an interview with Martin Agronsky (PBS, June 3, 1977) said that it was the limited time element in television production that necessitated quick work, excluding more creative aesthetic play. Hitch-

cock claimed that whereas the famous shower murder scene in the film *Psycho* took a week to produce a 45 second scene that consisted of 78 edited cuts, he would produce an hour long television program in a few days by using simple set locations and camera angles and settings. Hence, one looks in vain for the distinctive formal qualities in Hitchcock's television productions that one finds in his films.

<sup>58</sup>The most blatant formulation of this position is Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

<sup>59</sup>The distinction between latent and manifest levels of interpretation comes from Freud, and its application

to television is proposed by Adorno, "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture," *op. cit.*

<sup>60</sup>For an analysis of the mythologies and messages of *Star Trek*, Lawrence Jewett, *The American Monomyth, op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup>Ralph Brauer, with Donna Brauer, *The Horse, The Gun, and The Piece of Property* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975).

<sup>62</sup>Bauer, *op. cit.*, Chapter II.

<sup>63</sup>Bauer, *op. cit.*, Chapter III.

<sup>64</sup>Bauer, *op. cit.*, Chapter IV and V.

<sup>65</sup>Bauer, *op. cit.*, Chapter VI.

<sup>66</sup>Bauer, *op. cit.*, pp. 105ff.

<sup>67</sup>Eco, *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup>On *Mary Hartman*, see Kellner,

"TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Popular Culture," *op. cit.*, pp. 37ff.

<sup>69</sup>Kellner, *op. cit.*

<sup>70</sup>Fred Silverman, cited in Richard Reeves, "The Dangers of Television in the Silverman Era," *Esquire*, April 25, 1978, p. 46.

<sup>71</sup>For a survey of how *All in the Family* reinforced bigotry in certain audiences, Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach, "Archie Bunker's Bigotry," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter 1974), pp. 36-47 and the three articles in *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Autumn 1976), pp. 61-85.

<sup>72</sup>On the concept of a plurality of readings for each single text, Barthes, *S/Z, op. cit.*

# Notes

\*This paper is part of a larger study dedicated to developing a critical theory of television. It was first drafted in conjunction with a study group working on a collective book on American television. I am grateful to the members of this group for helpful comments and criticisms of earlier drafts: Lyn Carr, Bill Gibson, John Gibson, Jim Greene, Stuart Hersh, Frank Morrow, Harry O'Hara, and Jack Schierenbeck. For useful comments on later drafts I would like to thank Carolyn Appleton, Jane Feuer, Fred Jameson, John Lawrence, Joel Rogers, Thomas Schatz, and Marc Silberman.

<sup>1</sup>"Phenomenology" refers to the project initiated by Edmund Husserl, who wanted to develop a descriptive inventory of the structures of consciousness and to provide a method to analyze the content of experience. Husserl, *Ideas* (New York: Collier, 1962). Disregarding the apparatus of Husserl's phenomenological method and his transcendental idealism, I use the term "phenomenological" to refer to a descriptive analysis of the images of television as they appear to a viewer's consciousness and to analysis of the experience of viewing television.

<sup>2</sup>See Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema* (University of California: Berkeley, 1971); Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film* (New York: Oxford, 1961); Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (New York: Viking, 1971); and Christian Metz, *Film Language* (New York: Oxford, 1974), where Metz polemicalizes against "realist" and "phenomenological" theories of film. Kracauer and Cavell assume that film "mirrors" or "reflects" reality, and describe film as the "the redemption of physical reality" (Kracauer) or a revelation of "the world viewed" (Cavell). Bazin's theory of film is more sophisticated, but like other realist theories, his tends to neglect the role of the technical apparatus, codes and ideologies which create an artificial, highly mediated, picture of the world. Such "realist" theory reproduces the naive phenomenological experience of the television viewer who believes that

what he/she sees on the television screen is "real" (see below pp. 9f.).

<sup>3</sup>The dominant communication research paradigm of "content analysis" assumed that media content tended to reflect reality and to directly, or indirectly, influence the audience. Bernard Berelson, *Content Analysis in Communication Research* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952). A recent book on television by Ben Stein, *The View From Sunset Boulevard* (New York: Basic Books, 1979) assumes that television shows directly reflect the views of Hollywood producers and writers and mirror a Southern California version of reality. For the flaws in this type of analysis see Kellner and Stuart Hersh in the *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Spring 1980).

<sup>4</sup>Metz, *op. cit.*; Peter Wollen, *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1972); Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1976); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972) and *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974). Although I use semiological categories, I reject the pretensions toward a semiological system found in Eco and some of Barthes' work (i.e. *Elements of Semiology*). I also reject the use of Pierce's theory of signs which Wollen and Eco consider crucial for a cultural semiotics (see note 15).

<sup>5</sup>Tony Schwartz, "Listen", *TV Guide*, Febr. 24, 1979, pp. 5ff., and *The Responsive Chord* (Garden City: Anchor/Doubleday, 1973). I would contest, however, Schwartz's claim that television "is primarily an auditory medium" (*TV Guide*, p.5), for it is the dialectic of image and sound in TV's talking pictures that constitutes its mode of communication.

<sup>6</sup>TV sound requires the same sort of sophisticated critical analysis that T.W. Adorno applied to radio sound; see his articles "On Popular Music," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, Vol. 9 (1941); "The Radio Symphony," *Radio Research 1941* (New York: 1941); and "A Social Critique of Radio Music," *Kenyon Review*, Vol. VII,

No. 2 (Spring 1945).

<sup>7</sup>On television flow, see Raymond Williams, *Television* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974).

<sup>8</sup>In *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York: William Morrow, 1978), Jerry Mander argues that TV provides an illusion of vivacity and variety by "technical events," such as quick editing, zooms, superimposition of images, etc. (pp. 302ff). He claims that advertising contains on the average 20-30 technical events per minute and commercial TV programs contain 8-10 technical events per minute (p. 308).

<sup>9</sup>Conversations with Bill Gibson.

<sup>10</sup>Kellner, "Television Myth and Ritual," *Praxis* (forthcoming).

<sup>11</sup>Daniel J. Boorstin, "TV's Impact on Society," *Life*, Vol. 71, No. 11, September 10, 1971, pp. 36ff., and *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

<sup>12</sup>David Sarnoff, "Possible Social Effects of Television," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Volume 213, January 1941, pp. 145ff.

<sup>13</sup>Stuart Hall, "Television and Culture," *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (Autumn 1976).

<sup>14</sup>On the technical difference between film and video, Louis Jaffe, "Videotape versus Film," in *TV Book*, edited by Judy Fireman (New York: Workman, 1977), p. 29

<sup>15</sup>I use the term "photographic imagery" to refer to what is sometimes called a "natural sign," which in some semiological discourse "reproduces" real or natural objects. See Wollen, *op. cit.*, pp. 116ff. I find the "natural sign" talk misleading because, as my analysis of television codes will show, it is not the case that television images are natural signs; rather, even "photographic" images are an artificial reproduction of objects and events which frames them in coded narratives using a variety of symbolic and ideological coding devices. Whereas Charles Sanders Peirce, and many semiologists who follow his theory of signs, distinguishes among iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs, I utilize