The central cultural role of the broadcast media in advanced capitalist society has changed the nature and social function of ideology. This essay explores some of the changes in ideology under the impact of the communications revolution. In an earlier paper, I suggested that when “ism-ideologies” such as liberalism and Marxism were institutionalized in capitalist and socialist societies, there was a decline of rationality and ideology became increasingly fragmented, mythic, and imagistic.* Although hegemonic ideology tends to legitimate dominant institutions, values, and ways of life, nonetheless it is not monolithic. Instead, in advanced capitalist societies, hegemonic ideology tends to be fractured into various regions (the economy, politics, culture, etc.). There is no one unifying, comprehensive

*See my article “Ideology, Marxism, and Advanced Capitalism” in Socialist Review, 42, November-December 1978. Again, I am indebted for criticisms and comments on earlier drafts to the editors of SR, especially David Plotke, and to the Austin Television Group, especially to Jack Schierenbeck, who suggested many ideas which were incorporated into this article. I would also like to thank Carolyn Appleton and Marc Silberman for helpful comments and aid in preparing this manuscript.

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“bourgeois ideology”: hegemonic ideology is saturated with contradictions.

Many radical theories of ideology have neglected the role of mass-media images and messages in the production and transmission of ideology. Although Alvin Gouldner, for instance, is aware of the importance of television and devotes many interesting pages in *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology* to analyzing both print and electronic media, he does not want to include the images and messages broadcast by the electronic media in the domain of ideology. Louis Althusser highlights the role of the educational system as the primary site of ideology, while ignoring the mass media. These and many other discussions of ideology rely on an overly linguistic paradigm of ideology that cannot account for the impact of recent developments in the electronic media in shaping a new configuration of ideology in advanced capitalism.

1 See Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Dialectic of Ideology and Technology* (New York: Seabury, 1970). Gouldner argues that the major symbolic vehicle for ideology was print technology, which was primarily conceptual and relatively rational (p. 167ff.): “In contrast to the conventional printed objects central to ideologies, the modern communication media have greatly intensified the nonlinguistic and iconic component and hence the *multimodal* character of public communication” (p. 168). I reject Gouldner’s identification of ideology with print media and electronic media with non-ideological symbolic imagery. The electronic communications revolution has provided powerful new means for the production and transmission of ideology. Gouldner tends to equate print media with rational discourse, and electronic media with the “irrationality” of symbolic imagery. This view exaggerates the rationality of print media, and also fails to discern the relative rationality of the ideologies centered in the electronic media. Gouldner suggests that the shift from a “newspaper to a television-centered system of communications” leads to “altogether differently structured symbol systems: of analogic rather than digital, of synthetic rather than analytic systems, of occult belief systems, new religious myths” (p. 170). He fails, however, to draw appropriate conclusions, arguing, “In this, however, there is no ‘end’ to ideology, for it continues among some groups, in some sites, and at some semiotic level, but it ceases to be as important a mode of consciousness of masses: remaining a dominant form of consciousness among some elites, ideology loses ground among the masses and lower strata” (p. 179). Against this position, I am arguing that ideology has had a remarkable new impact on individuals in advanced capitalist societies, through the effects of the technology of the communications revolution.

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To overcome the deficiencies of earlier theories of ideology, I propose that we view ideology as a synthesis of concepts, images, theories, stories, and myths that can take rational systematic form (in Adam Smith, Locke, Marx, Lenin, etc.), or imagistic, symbolic, and mythical form (in religion, the culture industries, etc.). Ideology is often conveyed through images (of country and race, class and clan, virginity and chastity, salvation and redemption, individuality and solidarity). The combination of rational theory with images and slogans makes ideology compelling and powerful. Ideology roots its myths in theories while its theories generate myths and supply a rationale for social domination (if the ideology attains hegemony). Thus ideologies have both “rational” and “irrational” appeal, as they combine rhetoric and logic, concepts and symbols, clear argumentation and manipulation.

Most theories of ideology have failed to analyze properly the apparatus that produces and transmits ideology. For most of the history of capitalism, the ideological apparatus transmitted ideology through an elaborate set of rituals: military and patri-

3On the relation between ideology, myth, and revolution, see Georges Sorel, Reflections on Violence (New York: Free Press, 1950), and Lewis S. Feuer, Ideology and the Ideologists (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), who has written probably the worst book on ideology in recent history. Feuer is wrong to claim that ideology is essentially mythical. Against Feuer, Gouldner's emphasis on the relative rationality of ideological discourse is clearly correct. Feuer's strategy is to claim that all ideological discourse is a form of cognitive pathology in order to debunk, above all, Marxism. Feuer neglects to discuss ideology as hegemony, and fails to see that the “science” that he counterposes to ideology itself takes ideological forms.


5Althusser, “Ideology.” Althusser really doesn’t analyze the “ideological apparatus” here and falsely assumes a monolithic “state ideological apparatus,” whereas in fact the ideological apparatuses are not all state-controlled, and are full of contradictions. For a critique of Althusser’s analysis of ideology, see Douglas Kellner, “Ideology, Marxism, and Advanced Capitalism,” Socialist Review 42 (1978).
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otic pomp and parades, judicial ceremonies and trappings, religious rites, university lecture halls which invested professors with a priestlike aura, political speeches and campaigns, etc.

Ideology in bourgeois society has always been bound up with mythologies and rituals; the central role of the broadcast media in advanced capitalism, however, has endowed television and popular culture with the function of ritualistically producing and transmitting mythologies and hegemonic ideology. Hence, there is an increase of the imagistic, symbolic, and mythical components of ideology in advanced capitalism, and a decrease in rationality from earlier print-media forms of ideology.

TV AND HEGEMONIC IDEOLOGY

Conventional wisdom holds that television and the electronic media have provided a new kind of cultural experience and symbolic environment that increases the importance of images and decreases the importance of words. Many argue that television experience is more passive and receptive than print reading—that through American television people passively receive ideologies that legitimate and naturalize American society. Such a strategy of image production-consumption and cultural domination follows the logic of advanced capitalism as a system of commodity production, manipulated consumption, administration, and social conformity. In the words of Susan Sontag:

A capitalist society requires a culture based on images. It needs to furnish vast amounts of entertainment in order to stimulate buying and anaesthetize the injuries of class, race, and sex. And it needs to gather unlimited amounts of information, the better to exploit natural resources, increase productivity, keep order, make war, give jobs to bureaucrats. The camera's twin capacities, to subjectivize reality and to objectify it, ideally serve these ends and strengthen them. Cameras define reality in the two ways essential to the workings of an advanced industrial society: as a spectacle (for masses) and as an object of surveillance (for rulers). The production of images also furnishes a ruling ideology. Social
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change is replaced by a change in images. The freedom to consume a plurality of images and goods is equated with freedom itself. The narrowing of free political choice to free economic consumption requires the unlimited production and consumption of images.

Undoubtedly, American television plays an important role as an instrument of enculturation and social control. What is not yet clear is how television constructs and conveys hegemonic ideology and induces consent to advanced capitalism. The following analyses suggest how television images, narrative codes, and mythologies convey hegemonic ideology and legitimate American society; but I also want to show how the images and narratives of American television contain contradictory messages, reproducing the conflicts of advanced capitalist society and ideology. Against leftist manipulation theories which solely stress television's role as a purveyor of bourgeois ideology, I will argue that the images and messages of American television are contradictory both in their content and in their effects. Accordingly, after discussing how television functions as a vehicle of hegemonic ideology, some exploratory analyses of what forms emancipatory popular culture might take will be proposed.

TELEVISION IMAGES, SYMBOLS, AND PALEOSYMBOLIC SCENES

Television contains a wealth of symbolic imagery, building on traditional symbolism but also creating symbols: the totality of Jack Webb's staccato interrogation procedures, authoritarian personality, and crisp recitation of the facts forms a symbol of law and order; the immaculate homes on the situation comedies or soap operas become symbols of domesticity; Ben Cartwright and Walter Cronkite become father symbols; Mary Tyler Moore

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provides a symbol of the independent working woman; and the
soap operas generate symbols of stoic endurance through suf-
fering.

Symbolic images endow certain characters or actions with
positive moral features and other characters or actions with
negative features, providing positive and negative models of
identification. Symbols have a historically specific content; when
television symbols become familiar and accepted, they become
effective agents of enculturation. For instance, Kojak symbol-
lized 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 invested him with sig-
ificance such that his features crystallized into a symbolic
structure, linking his macho personality and authoritarian law
and order.

Today television is the dominant producer of cultural sym-
bolism. Its imagery is prescriptive as well as descriptive, and not
only pictures what is happening in society, but also shows how
one adjusts to the social order. Further, it demonstrates the pain
and punishment suffered by not adjusting. The endless repeti-
tion of the same images produces a television world where the
conventional is the norm and conformity the rule.

Some television symbols have powerful effects on conscious-
ness 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 sets of imagery paleo-
symbolic.\(^7\) The prefix "paleo" signifies a sort of "before sym-
bolism" or "underneath symbolism." Paleosymbols are tied to

\(^7\) On the concept of paleosymbolism see Jurgen Habermas, "Toward a Theory
of Communicative Competence," Recent Sociology no. 2, ed. Hans Dreitzel (New
York: Macmillan, 1970), and Gouldner, Dialectic. 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 writings. 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
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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 a wealth of meaning and significance; rather, the
paleosymbol requires a whole scene where a positive or nega-
tive 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. Thus Freud believed that
scenic understanding was necessary to master scenic images,
and, in turn, this mastery could help to understand what the
scenic images signified (resymbolization) and how they influ-
enced behavior.⁶

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 becomes 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 is appealingly portrayed by Timothy Bottoms.
It is easy to identify with this charming and seemingly honest
and courageous figure; he is shown, for example, vigorously
defending a Puerto Rican woman accused of embezzling money.
It turns out, however, that the young man stole the money
himself to support a lifestyle, including gambling, that far
outstripped his income. He is apprehended by the tough black
security officer, 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. Further, to white viewers the

⁶See Habermas, "Communicative Competence"; Freud, The Interpretation of
Dreams; and Alfred Lorenzer, "Symbol and Stereotypes," in Paul Connerton,
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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. In case the moral does not sink in during the pursuit scenes, our young embezzler is brutally raped on his first day in prison, in a remarkably explicit scene. Although one may forget the story, or even the experience of having watched the program, a strong paleosymbolic image may remain. The paleosymbolic images in this program are multiplied and reinforced by other programs and thus become even more powerful.

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 and 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. The viewer is likely to 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 (Lucy, Gracie Allen) or as adulterous, destructive, or greedy (in soaps, crime dramas, melodramas, etc.) 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, in which the dramatic climax exposes a woman’s murder, the evil act makes a particularly strong impression. In a soap opera, the paleosymbolic image of adultery and subsequent distress endows the characters and their actions with moral opprobrium that might evoke active dislike. 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. These paleosymbolic images may overpower more positive soap-opera images of women and create consciousness of women per se 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 particular 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 definition of television as entertainment makes television images more easily accepted, or at least not resisted, than might be the case in other contexts.

The television world neither consists of "pap," nor is it a "vast wasteland"; it is teeming with images conveying an "impression
of reality," values, ideologies, and messages. These images are
bonded into narratives which form a set of American morality
plays.

SITUATION COMEDY AND MELODRAMA AS
AMERICAN MORALITY PLAYS

Television situation comedies center on a conflict or problem
that is resolved neatly within a preconceived time period. This
conflict/resolution model suggests that all problems can be
solved within the existing society. For example, a 1976 episode
of Happy Days saw the teen hero Fonzie out with an attractive
older woman. He learns she is married, and a set of jokes
punctuate his moral dilemma. Finally, he sits down with the
woman, tells her he hears she's married, and when she says,
"Yes, but it's an open marriage," he responds: "No dice. I've got
my rules I live by. My values. And they don't include taking
what's not mine. You're married. You're someone else's." He
gets up, shakes her away, and is immediately surrounded by a
flock of attractive (unmarried) girls—a typical comical resolu-
tion of an everyday moral conflict that reinforces conventional
morality. In a 1977 episode of Happy Days, dealing with the high
school graduation of the series' main characters, Fonzie moral-
izes, "It's not cool to drop out of school." In a 1978 episode,
when his friend Richie is seriously injured in a motorcycle
wreck, the Fonz "reveals his compassion in an emotional prayer
for his friend" (TV Guide description), praying with eyes to
heaven, "Hey Sir. He's my best friend. ... Listen, you help
him out and I'll owe you one." Here ideologies of religion and
exchange reinforce each other; television attempts to be not the
"opiate of the people" but their active instructor and educator.

Interestingly, the working-class character Fonzie, here used
as the spokesman for middle-class morality, represents a do-
mination of the James Dean/Marlon Brando 1950s rebel.
Whereas Dean in movies like Rebel Without a Cause was a hope-
less misfit who often exploded with rage against the stifling
conformity and insensitivity of those around him, Fonzie quits
his gang (the Falcons) and comes to live in the garage apartment

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of the middle-class Cunninghams. Fonzie's defense of the dominant morality creates a melting-pot effect, where all good people seem to share similar values and aspirations. Hence, Happy Days provides a replay of Ozzie and Harriet and earlier TV family morality plays, with Richie Cunningham starring as David Nelson, the all-American good boy, and Fonzie as the irresistible Ricky Nelson, whose “hipness” made him an effective salesman for the middle-class way of life.

Television melodrama also contains a variety of TV morality plays, full of conflict, suffering, and evil. Not only is there an intense conflict between good and evil, but there are also clearly defined codes to depict moral and immoral characteristics. In most television series, the regular characters are good and intruders are evil, thus promoting fear of the “outsider” while teaching that conventional morality is good and its transgression is evil. After a highly emotional conflict, good triumphs and order is restored. The heated discussions of television violence and sex fail to note that they are the core of melodrama, since they heighten emotional impact and dramatize the moralities portrayed. Moralistic opponents of television sex and violence fail to note that it is precisely these features that actually help to reinforce the moral codes they themselves subscribe to, for transgressors of the established norms are always punished. For instance, the TV miniseries Loose Change portrayed the fate in the 1970s of three women who went to Berkeley in the 1960s trying to “make it” and “be free.” It reduced the explosive politics of the 1960s to melodrama, emphasizing the pain and punishment inflicted for not conforming and the rewards for adjusting to the existing order. It presented the 1960s as a disorderly, chaotic period to be eschewed for the order and stability of the present.

Television morality plays present rituals that produce and transmit hegemonic ideology. The soap operas ritualize the suffering brought about by violating social norms. Situation comedies celebrate the triumphs of the norms, values, and good

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will that enable one to resolve conflicts successfully. Each program has its own formulas and conventions. For example, the comedy hit Three's Company (which has often been number one in the ratings during the 1977-79 seasons) celebrates the sexual attractions of two single women and a single man who live together. Every episode deals with suggestions of sexual temptation among the three, or their dates, and eventual frustration and renunciation. Every episode portrays the sexual advances and frustrations of the landlord's wife and her husband's lack of sexual interest in her. The young man pretends to be a homosexual in order to placate the moralistic landlords, and episodes of feigned homosexuality are repeated. These diverse rituals permit the audience to play out fantasies of tabooed sexual desire—and renunciation of such desires. Despite the sexy facade, the program conveys traditional, more puritanical ideologies of sexuality.* Yet it would be too simple to imagine that the viewers simply submit to these traditional ideologies, that the effort to express and contain sexuality works smoothly.

Other situation comedies allow the audience to experience dramatizations of their own problems with interpersonal relations, work, the family, sexuality, and conflicts of values: they offer opportunities to experience solutions to everyday problems that take the form of rites of submission to one's lot and resignation (Laverne and Shirley, Rhoda, and Alice), or rites of problem-solving through correct activity and change or adjustment (Happy Days, All in the Family, Maude, and most Norman Lear sitcoms). Rites of submission often utilize individual self-assertion to promote conformity and resignation. For instance, Laverne and Shirley provides narratives that inculcate acceptance of miserable working-class labor and social conditions. Although Laverne and Shirley occasionally rebel and assert themselves against bosses and men, they generally adjust and try to pull through with humor and good-natured resignation. The Laverne and Shirley theme song boasts, "We'll do it our way...we'll make all our dreams come true...we're going to make it

*The women on Charlie's Angels and similar shows rarely, if ever, have lovers or erotic relationships. Despite the increasing sexual references, jokes, and innuendos, there is very little real eroticism on TV.
anyway," but poor Laverne and Shirley simply espouse middle-
class values and dreams, and do it the system's way. They
usually fail to realize their dreams and every episode ends with
acceptance of their jobs and social lives. The series tries, how-
ever, to make working-class life as appealing as possible for
Laverne and Shirley and the audience, thus helping working-
class people in similar situations to accept their fate with a smile
and good cheer.

TELEVISION MYTHOLOGY

Television images and stories produce new mythologies for
problems of everyday life. Myths are simply stories that explain,
instruct, and justify practices and institutions; they are lived,
and shape thought and action. Myths deal with the most signifi-
cant phenomena in human life and enable people to come to
terms with death, violence, love, sex, labor, and social conflict.
Myths link together symbols, formula, plot, and characters in a
pattern that is conventional, appealing, and gratifying. Joseph
Campbell has shown how mythologies all over the world repro-
duce similar patterns, linking the tale of a hero's journey, quest,
and triumphant return to rites of initiation into maturity.10 It is
a mistake to ascribe myth solely to a "primitive" form of thought
that has supposedly been superseded by science, for the sym-
ols, thematic patterns, and social functions of myth persist in
our society, and are especially visible in television culture.

Jewett and Lawrence's fine book on American popular culture
has described a recurrent pattern of an "American monomyth"
which begins with an Edenic idyll, and is then interrupted by
trouble or evil (Indians, rustlers, gangsters, war, monsters,
communists, aliens, things from another world).11 The com-
unity is powerless to deal with this threat and relies on a hero
with superhuman powers (e.g., the Westerner, Superman, Su-
percop, Superscientist, the Bionic Man, Wonderwoman) to re-

solve the problem and to eliminate evil. In the ensuing battle between good and evil, the hero wins, often through macho violence (although redemption can take place through a character of moral purity like Heidi, Shirley Temple, or Mary Tyler Moore; a person of homey wisdom like the Wise Father, Dr. Welby, or Mary Worth; or even a magical animal like Lassie, Old Yeller, or Dumbo). Myths are tales of redemption that show how order is restored.

Jewett and Lawrence show in convincing detail that much American popular culture is structured by mythical patterns and heroes and that our supposedly "advanced" society has not transcended or abandoned traditional mythical culture. Their examinations of Star Trek, Little House on the Prairie, westerns, Walt Disney productions, Jaws and other disaster movies, and various superheroes demonstrate that mythical patterns and themes (e.g., retribution through blood violence, salvation through superheroes, redemption through mythic powers) are operative in many major works of popular culture, and that these are used to purvey American ideology and submission to social authority. The American Monomyth traces the rise of the myth of the American hero, shows its many manifestations in contemporary popular culture, and discusses the repertoire of heroes and mythologies that television provides.\raisefootnotes{12}

Television mythologies naturalize the dominant institutions and way of life. Roland Barthes' example in Mythologies of the picture of the black soldier saluting the French flag on the cover of Paris Match illustrates this point.\raisefootnotes{13} Barthes explains how the picture conveys ideologies of the French empire, the integration of blacks, the honor of the military, which in a single image conveys an ideology of French imperialism. Likewise, the images of America on television election coverage propagate multiple political ideologies (the images of Carter in the 1976 presidential campaign communicated ideologies of the country, the small town, the family, and religion); TV sports transmits ideologies of macho heroism and competition; and the nightly crime and violence shows contain Hobbesian ideologies of human nature.

\raisefootnotes{12}Ibid.

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Television mythologies often attempt to resolve social contradictions. For instance, the cop show *Starsky and Hutch* deals with the fundamental American contradiction between the need for conformity and individual initiative, between working in a corporate hierarchy and being an individual. Starsky and Hutch are at once conventional and hip; they do police work and wear flashy clothes and have lots of good times. They show that it is possible to fit into society and not lose one's individuality. The series mythically resolves contradictions between the work ethic and the pleasure ethic, between duty and enjoyment. Television mythology speciously resolves conflicts to enable individuals to adjust.

CONTRADICTORY TELEVISION IMAGES AND MESSAGES

The forms of TV narratives and codes tend to be conservative. American television is divided into well-defined genres with their dominant conventions and formulas. Situation comedy, melodrama, and action-adventure series reproduce multiple ideologies of power and authority, law and order, professionalism and technocracy. But like all ideology in advanced capitalism, television ideology is full of contradictions. The regions of television ideology contain conflicting conceptions of such things as the family and sexuality, and power and authority; these conflicts express ideological and social changes in advanced capitalism.

In the 1950s, for example, a rather coherent dominant ideology of idealized family life permeated television situation comedies such as *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, etc. The middle-class family unit was idealized as the proper locus of sexuality, socialization, domesticity, and authority, even though in this period divorce rates began to soar and the family began to weaken as the dominant institution of everyday life. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, one-parent families began appearing on television, as did various other family forms, all symptomatic of the strains on the family and the fracturing of the dominant ideology of the family in American society. Contradictory por-
travels of the family and sexuality appeared, showing changes in sexual relations and contradictory responses to social change.

Similarly, in the violent world of television crime and action-adventure drama, the prevalent ideologies in the first television decades were those of the “iron fist” authoritarianism of Dragnet, The Untouchables, or The F.B.I. (Although even here there were always some contradictions—a few of the most popular westerns of the 1950s and early 1960s, such as Maverick, Gunsmoke, and Have Gun, Will Travel, offered differing images of authority). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the previously dominant forms were challenged by liberal morality plays like Mod Squad, Dan August, and The Streets of San Francisco—though older images of macho authority were resurrected in new form in such series as Kojak. In the 1970s, new ideologies of power appeared in the extreme individualism of Starsky and Hutch, Baretta, Serpico, and other series that featured passionately individualist cops who battled corrupt and inefficient authority figures. Other series, such as Ironside, The Rookies, and S.W.A.T., stressed teamwork and the submission of the individual to hierarchy. The ideological region of power and authority is now saturated with competing and conflicting currents.

Ideology, moreover, is not monolithically imposed on a malleable subject as some Althusserians and manipulation theorists seem to assume. The process of individual decoding of television images and narratives contains the possibility of the production of contradictory messages and social effects. Individual television viewers are not passive receivers of encoded television, but rather tend to process television images according to their life situations and cultural experiences (of which social class is a determinant factor). Middle-class viewers of television violence tend to be scared into social conformity and fear of crime, making them susceptible to law and order political ideologies, whereas individuals prone to violent behavior may act out violent or criminal fantasies nurtured by heavy television watching. Likewise, although Three's Company and Charlie's Angels are encoded as vehicles of puritan sexual morality, they may be decoded as stimulants to promiscuity or sexual fantasy. Although Laverne and Shirley, Alice, and many situation comedies are coded as rituals of resignation and acceptance of the status
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quo, individual images or programs may be processed to promote dissatisfaction or rebellion. Even the most blatantly conservative-hegemonic images and messages may have contradictory social effects. Images of consumerism, money, and commodity happiness on commercials, game shows, and other programs may encourage expectations of happiness through affluence which if frustrated may breed discontent. Though news and documentaries on the whole attempt to legitimate the political-economic system, their images and messages may help lead the viewer to critical views of business, government, or the society. As long as individuals in advanced capitalism are more than totally manipulable robots, they can process television images and messages in ways that may contradict the ideological encoding of the "mind managers."

The rather conservative effects of television codes may also be undermined by the introduction of new types of explicit content and new forms of symbolism. The insertion of more topical and controversial themes into the forms of situation comedy by Norman Lear and his associates helped produce a new type of popular television, as did the introduction of the miniseries and the docudrama form. Even within one of the most conservative forms, the crime drama, paleosymbolic scenes and images may contain subversive messages. For instance, *Baretta* and *Starsky and Hutch*, often criticized as among the most macho shows on television, often contain scenes that are anti-authoritarian and have broadcast frequent attacks on the FBI and CIA in recent years. Although paleosymbolic scenes often convey hegemonic ideologies, they too are full of conflicting meanings.

The contradictory images of popular culture produce the space for a discussion of emancipatory popular culture. The following discussion explores what images, scenes, and forms of television might be said to possess emancipatory potential, and is also intended to promote reflection on how the left can use television within advanced capitalism as a means of political and cultural development and enlightenment. . . . The following pages are animated by the belief that the central role of the electronic media in contemporary society makes it imperative for those who desire radical social change to explore the possibility

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of producing emancipatory culture and participating in media politics.

EMANCIPATORY POPULAR CULTURE

Popular culture per se is not manipulative, an instrument of class domination, nor a monolithic reproduction of capitalist ideology. Rather, in the historically specific form of popular culture produced by the culture industries controlled by corporate capital, popular culture has tended to reproduce hegemonic ideology. Traditionally, popular culture expressed people's experiences of oppression, struggle, and hopes for a better world, and served as an important part of oppositional cultures and political movements. In advanced capitalism, however, popular culture has lost many of its oppositional features and has become part of the apparatus of class domination. Nonetheless, the culture industries in America have never completely served as instruments of manipulation and class domination.

Radicals have often seen the production of an alternative, emancipatory culture as an important part of political struggle. Today, since electronically transmitted culture in the broadcast media occupies so much of people's leisure time, the production of popular television, film, music, radio, and theater would seem to be a high priority on the agenda of cultural revolution. But the generally derogatory attitude of the left toward the broadcast media—especially toward television—has precluded much significant intervention in this area.* It would seem that as most

*See the issue on left culture in America, The Origins of Left Culture in the U.S., 1880-1940. Cultural Correspondence/Green Mountain Irregulars, Spring 1978.

*Earlier, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and others saw the production of films and radio plays and the use of the new electronic and mass media for political ends as a crucial part of revolutionary practice, and Lenin said, "Of all the arts cinema is the most important for us."**

people get much of their information and view of the world from the electronic media, and in particular from television, the left should make a serious commitment to these media. Sadly, there have been all too few attempts to present radical cultural productions within the electronic broadcast systems.

Furthermore, the most influential radical traditions in America have in recent years scorned the very idea of media politics and intervention in popular culture. The Frankfurt school analysis of the culture industries as mass deception has strongly influenced left views of popular culture in America and has helped to encourage an elitist and ultra-radical scorn for the productions of popular culture as debased, manipulative, and narcotizing.[16] Although the Communist Party pursued a popular-front policy for some time in the 1930s and 1940s, one that had a more complex (and occasionally uncritical) attitude toward popular culture, American radicals have generally tended to see the products of the culture industry as instruments of capitalist propaganda, and left cultural critics have usually preferred to investigate literature or “high culture” than to study the forms of popular culture. The new left largely followed this view of popular culture as manipulation, seeing the cultural industries as dominated by “mind managers” who served as instruments of corporate-capitalist rule.[17] This perspective has led to contempt for television and the broadcast media, and has even

[16] For the classical Frankfurt School theory of popular culture as “mass deception,” see T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry,” in Dialectic of Enlightenment (New York: Seabury, 1972). The essays of Dwight Macdonald and other articles on popular culture in the radical journal Politics took the Frankfurt School position that popular culture was a manipulative instrument of social control and adulteration of high culture. See Macdonald’s “Notes on Popular Culture,” Politics, vol. 1, no. 1 (February 1944). The most influential anthology on popular culture in America, Mass Culture (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957) was strongly influenced by the Frankfurt School view. See the introduction by the editor, Bernard Rosenberg, who contributed to Dissent, and the articles by Lowenthal, Macdonald, Greengberg, Krakauer, Anders, Adorno, Howe, and van der Haag.

evoked demands for "the elimination of television," a position that has found some sympathy on the left. 18

Cultural criticism that works within this perspective is often able to state little more than the obvious: that television, and other media, is now dominated by various forms of capitalist ideology. Such an approach yields analyses of particular cultural productions that are banal and repetitive, and provides no way of taking seriously the rebellious, oppositional, and subversive moments in almost all forms of popular culture. Popular culture has traditionally contained at least elements of a protest against suffering and oppression. Oppositional moments in popular culture have taken the form of song and music, people's theater and festivals, and radical newspapers and literature. Blues, jazz, folk music, and union songs were a powerful voice which served to unite the oppressed in an oppositional culture. Socialists, the IWW, and anarchists had autonomous popular-oppositional cultures that bound together their members in a culture of protest and struggle. Early forms of mass-produced culture also had their popular and subversive moments: dime novels, nickelodeons, and popular magazines often undermined middle-class morality and expressed a rebellion against high-elitist culture, even though they often reproduced hegemonic ideologies.

What is crucial in this regard is to appreciate the ways in which these traditions of popular culture remain alive within the contemporary productions of the electronic media. * The left should not dismiss "mass culture" as an inferior form of culture that is counterposed to an "authentic" people's culture (which is usually confined in practice either to the culture of the left or to the margins of the society). Rather one should see the moments of protest and opposition within mainstream popular culture, and make these the focus of left cultural criticism and production (rather than restricting radical analysis to ritualistic denunciations of "bourgeois ideology" within popular culture). Even

*The oppositional and utopian moments of popular culture are developed in the theories of labor historians like E.P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, the theories of Raymond Williams and Stanley Aronowitz, and the ongoing work of the Cultural Correspondence group.
hegemonic ideology makes concessions to oppositional groups and people’s experiences of oppression, injustice, and exploitation. Careful analysis of American popular culture shows a strong anti-capitalist and anti-business tradition that remains operative to this day. In the muckraker tradition and in works of many of America’s finest writers, there have been concerted attacks on business and businessmen. The novels of Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair, John Steinbeck, Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, Joseph Heller, and other writers have depicted businesspeople as exploitative, mercenary, insensitive, and totally obsessed with the gods of mammon and profit. Far from idealizing business, many novels, films, and popular literature have been resolutely anti-business and even in network television there has been an increase in attacks on business.

Opposition to the established society has expressed itself in satire and comedic attacks on authority, as well as in serious, realistic criticisms of the society. Comedy and satire have often been effective means of social criticism and enlightenment. The subversive tradition of comedy in the theater was early on incorporated in film, in the comedies of Chaplin and Keaton, which often depicted with sympathy the situation of the op-

19. “The transformations of ideology take place within a process of class struggle, and hegemonic ideology is formed as a set of negotiated settlements between classes . . . . Hege
onic ideology is full of contradictions, shifts, and adjustments, and is constantly challenged by oppositional ideologies . . . . Hegemonic ideologies are not simply imposed on people. Ideology is not effective or credible unless it achieves resonance with people’s experience. And to remain credible it must continually incorporate the new, responding to changes in people’s lives and social conditions.” Kellner, “Ideology,” pp. 52–53.


pressed “little man,” and still provide splendid examples of emancipatory comedy (as in the images of Chaplin on the assembly line in *Modern Times*). Emancipatory comedy provides insights into the nature of the society that break through ideological conceptions. Emancipatory laughter suspends the logic of everyday reality; it is surreal and helps one to rise above ideological preconceptions in order to recognize the workings of everyday life. It could foster critical awareness by enabling one to laugh at a miserable life—and to see that life could be different. Many of the films of Chaplin, Keaton, the Marx Brothers, Mae West, W.C. Fields, and “screwball comedy” contain moments of emancipatory comedy.

The contradictions of popular culture were reproduced in a particularly provocative way in American film. Although its genres and conventions were often vehicles for hegemonic American ideologies, sometimes film was satirical or sharply critical of the existing society. Early films were working-class/immigrant oriented, and often opposed the values and institutions of the American system. What was perceived as their immoral and subversive content led to ongoing censorship battles that finally produced the Hays Code as the industry’s defensive maneuver to stem conservative outrage and avoid government regulation. Nonetheless, films continued to be perceived by conservatives and traditionalists as culturally and politically dangerous, and the film industry later became the subject of various inquisitions.

In the era of political and cultural repression in the 1950s, the oppositional voice of popular culture took many forms. The movies of James Dean and Marlon Brando, beatnik literature and poetry, and rock-and-roll music all contained moments of protest and subversion. At a time when political opposition was extremely limited, popular culture often became a vehicle

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of social critique and protest. In the 1960s, popular culture became a more open vehicle of protest and opposition, particularly in music and film.

During this period of cultural upheaval and political struggle, the most tightly controlled medium was television. It contained very few subversive elements in the 1960s, though such themes were never entirely absent. Earlier, in the 1950s, television had begun to develop a tradition of critical-realist dramas: plays adapted for television (such as Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*) or original dramas by Paddy Chayefsky, Reginald Rose, and others, which took social-realist forms. But this tradition died off, as did much of early television comedy that could not readily be contained within the situation comedy format (Ernie Kovacs, etc.). Since television developed in ways so heavily dependent on corporate sponsorship, and since there was no tradition of critical or subversive works in the medium to which reference could be made, there was much in the actual history of American television that seemed to justify the versions of manipulation theory that are still dominant on the left.*

Yet in recent years a number of programs have shown, by their popularity, that more controversial realist drama and topical situation comedies are forms of popular culture that should be taken seriously by the left. For instance, the high ratings of *Roots* showed the networks that controversial political dramas had popular appeal, as earlier the success of *All in the Family* had shown that more controversial and topical situation comedies could gain high ratings. These programs represent a real breakthrough in television and provide at least partial models for talking about emancipatory television culture.

*Those television shows that did break taboos were often censored, or even eliminated, despite high ratings. For instance, *East Side/West Side*, a series with George C. Scott, was removed, though it gained high ratings, when the social workers on the show started talking about organizing the oppressed to deal more effectively with the problems of urban life, which the program realistically presented. Later, the Smothers Brothers show was also cancelled (again despite high ratings) when they escalated satirical attacks on the Nixon administration and the Vietnam war policy, and refused to submit scripts for prior censorship.
Emancipatory popular culture challenges the institutions and way of life of advanced capitalist society. It generally has the quality of shock, forcing people to see aspects of the society that they had previously overlooked, or it focuses attention on the need for change. Emancipatory popular culture subverts ideological codes and stereotypes, and shows the inadequacy of rigid conceptions that prevent insight into the complexities and changes of social life. It rejects idealizations and rationalizations that apologize for the suffering in the present social system, and, at its best, suggests that another way of life is possible.

“Emancipatory” signifies emancipation from something that is restrictive or repressive, and for something that is conducive to an increase of freedom and well-being." In this strong sense very little television, or any mass-produced popular culture, can count as “emancipatory.” But certain forms do contain some emancipatory potential, forms that are present now in contemporary American society. No television program can be emancipatory per se, because the decoding by the audience can reject subversive messages or interpret them in a way that does not change anything. (Studies reveal that many bigots identified with Archie Bunker and that All in the Family strengthened their prejudices; other studies show that the strong condemnation of the military-industrial complex in the CBS documentary The Selling of the Pentagon confirmed—against the intentions of the producers—the belief of many that the Soviet Union is a dangerous threat and that a strong military establishment is vital.) Like the most conservative productions, more progressive efforts may have contradictory social effects.

Underlying this problem is the question of how people use TV, what its social effects are, and how television-watching relates to people's total experience. There is as yet no adequate answer to these questions—but it is clear that the passive spectator model is deficient. There are significant ideological contradictions in both the production and the experience of watch-

"I am using "emancipatory" in its historical sense as signifying "enlightenment" which contains insight and awakening, leading to a transformation of thought and behavior."
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ing television in this society, and many people are ready for more diverse, complex, and critical television than is now available on the networks. Though no one television show or series can radically change consciousness or alter behavior, television can cause an individual to question previous beliefs, values, and actions. Such a process contains the potential for more significant subsequent changes. The following analyses search out the emancipatory potential in certain forms of popular culture. I am not suggesting that “emancipatory popular culture” is “revolutionary art”—the latter must be part of an actual revolutionary movement and should radically alter the forms, content, and means of cultural production. What is argued, however, is that judging contemporary forms of mass popular culture by the criteria of revolutionary art is likely only to perpetuate the cultural isolation of the left. We are not in a revolutionary situation in America (to put it mildly!) and the concept of emancipatory popular culture is a sort of transitional concept in a period of conservatism and diffuse discontent.

I will first discuss some TV documentaries and miniseries that fit into earlier muckraking and critical realist traditions, and that have employed conventional realist and melodrama narrative forms to present a more accurate picture of American life than was previously presented on television. Here I argue for rejecting the anti-realism stance that has informed much radical cultural criticism. Then I discuss how certain Norman Lear comedies fit into a tradition of comedy as subversion and emancipation.

REALISM AS SUBVERSION

Although many consider “realism” a form of bourgeois narrative that simply reproduces the current form of society as “natural,” in the falsely idealized television universe certain forms

24For a sharp critique of the sort of cultural radicalism that takes an anti-realist stance and would reject all traditional “realist” or “melodrama” forms as inherently conservative or bourgeois, see Gerald Graff, “The Politics of Anti-Realism,” Salmagundi, 42 (Summer-Fall 1978).
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of realism are actually subversive. A more “realistic” picture could subvert the image of American society perpetrated by the television world, where society’s chronic problems and worst failures have generally been repressed. Documentaries can call attention to problems and mobilize public opinion for social change. The CBS documentary Hunger in America helped win support for Johnson’s war on poverty; Harvest of Shame called attention to the plight of farm workers; and Vietnam documentaries and news footage helped mobilize public opinion against the war. Many other documentaries and 60 Minutes studies have exposed business malpractice and economic-political corruption, the failures and crimes of the CIA and American foreign policy, and the problems of poverty, the cities, and oppressed minorities. Although network and PBS documentaries rarely analyze the roots of the problems, and even more rarely propose radical solutions and alternatives, nonetheless they have provided insights into American society that are usually excluded from the TV world.

Documentaries could be an important tool of political education. There is a long radical documentary tradition in America and some radical documentaries have even been aired on public television. Hearts and Minds, Harlan County USA, Emile de Antonio’s documentaries on McCarthyism, Vietman, Nixon, and the Weather underground, and many other radical documentaries represent an important resource which, if broadcast regularly on public, network, or cable-satellite television, could serve as important means of public enlightenment. Historical documentaries could create a better sense of the radical American heritage. There is also potential in the recent “docudrama” form to provide both a better sense of history and a clearer understanding of what is happening to us now. Docudramas on the Cuban missile crisis, the Pueblo incident, the Kennedy assassination, McCarthyism, and other topics, despite their distortions and exclusions, contain provocative accounts of recent American history which could prompt serious reflection on the need for change.

Recent network miniseries have used the forms of television melodrama and literary “critical realism,” following the example
of the British Broadcasting Corporation's presentation of dramas in a limited series form. The miniseries break from the series form, and have treated issues hitherto excluded from American television. Miniseries like Roots, Holocaust, Captains and Kings, Second Avenue, The Moneychangers, and Wheels have dealt with class conflict, racism and anti-Semitism, imperialism, and the oppression of the working class and blacks. They have often sympathetically portrayed the oppressed, poor, minorities, and workers, and presented capitalists and right-wingers as oppressors and exploiters. Docudramas like Tailgunner Joe, Fear on Trial, and King have criticized Joe McCarthy, J. Edgar Hoover, and the FBI, and vindicated Martin Luther King as well as victims of McCarthyism and FBI persecution in the entertainment industry. Kill Me If You Can sympathetically depicted the plight of a victim of capital punishment, Caryl Chessman, while presenting as strong a case against capital punishment as ever appeared on television.

These programs represent an important revision of idealized images of history, and a reversal of conventional good guy/bad guy roles. Formerly, in a series like The FBI and numerous police and spy series, the FBI, CIA, and police were pictured as heroic saviors, whereas radicals or anyone failing to conform to the rules of the system were pictured as the incarnation of evil. The economic and political systems, and social institutions such as the family, were almost always idealized in television culture. From the mid-1970s, however, television dramas have exposed brutal racism (Roots, King, and Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry); have shown the corruption of the political system (Washington: Behind Closed Doors); displayed the evils of McCarthyism and 1950s blacklisting (Fear on Trial, Tailgunner Joe, and the movie The Front); revealed class conflict; and in The Moneychangers and Wheels attacked two venerable institutions of corporate capitalism, the banks and the automobile industry. In all these programs the oppressed were portrayed in positive images and the oppressors in negative ones, reversing the usual content of television codes.

The phenomenal popularity of Roots—which broke all previous television viewing records—indicates that the American audience is receptive to historical drama that deals with oppres-
sion and struggle. Whatever its failings, Roots offered a vivid picture of the effects of slavery and racism. Its images of the kidnapping of blacks from Africa and their suffering called attention dramatically to the unspeakable atrocities practiced by individuals driven by the profit motive. Roots showed how the slave system subjected anyone who came in contact with it to degraded forms of behavior and how it inflicted misery on both the oppressed and their oppressors. The series resolutely took the point of view of the oppressed and for almost the first time in television history attempted in a dramatic forum to present blacks as complex human beings. The reversal of codes in Roots and its tremendous popularity shows the potential for broadcasting forms of popular culture that evoke sympathy for the oppressed and favorably present their struggles.

Although Roots distorted some historical facts and used stereotypes to portray, in particular, white racists, the series nonetheless presented the most realistic account of slavery ever shown on network television. It encouraged millions of people to reflect on slavery and the evils of racism. Roots was not a documentary and its historical distortions did not detract from its powerful and realistic picture of slavery. It used melodrama codes of clashes between good and evil to convey moral messages to audiences conditioned to such cultural forms. The recent Cuban film The Other Francisco is superior aesthetically and politically to Roots because it unMASKS the codes of bourgeois melodrama and uses a variety of documentary and dramatic devices to depict the situation of slaves in Cuba. Nonetheless, Roots has its emancipatory moments for American culture by breaking down some stereotypes of blacks and slavery and by bringing to awareness usually repressed topics.  

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23 It is estimated that 130 million viewers saw Roots when it was first run in January 1977, and that 80 million viewers watched all or part of the rerun of Roots in September 1978. TV Guide, 23 September 1978, p. A-4.


*The Other Francisco*, directed by Sergio Giral, Cuba 1975 (distributed by Tri-continental Film Center). This remarkable film opens with a melodramatic scene of a black Cuban slave's death, and then uses documentary to discuss a
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Wheels, a television miniseries shown in May 1978, and generally ignored by the American left in its periodicals, is a more complex example of subversive television. Wheels was based on a novel by Arthur Hailey about the Detroit automobile industry. The series opens with a corporate executive, played by Rock Hudson, visiting a Detroit ghetto in flames. He was trying to understand the blacks' problems and what could be done. Shortly thereafter we meet some of the children of the corporate executives: one young woman is an activist involved with a black man, and other children are in varying degrees of conflict with their parents. The series details the problems of black workers, the assembly line, worker sabotage, union internal conflicts, and management-labor struggles. It realistically pictures intense conflicts within management and destructive corporate infighting (one executive, to advance his own position, sabotages the new car model Rock Hudson was working on). Wheels repeatedly makes the point that Detroit automobiles are unreliable, stressing that cars produced on Mondays or Fridays are often shoddy because of absenteeism, inexperienced replacements, or worker frustration expressed in sabotage or poor work. (A subplot shows in fascinating detail how car dealers rip off car buyers.)

The focus on corporate capitalism is critical and realistic, and the picture of Detroit and the automobile industry is devastating. All significant problems are left unresolved: the situation of the blacks remains bleak, and no reform of the industry is depicted. Rock Hudson's decision to remain in the industry is stoic resignation at best, leavened with the hopes of love from his mistress, after the disintegration of his family following the suicide of his wife. Redemption through love is presented as the alternative to an alienated world of labor and a disintegrating nineteenth-century anti-slavery novel (Francisco) by a progressive bourgeois liberal. The film reconstructs the melodrama form of the novel and stops to analyze the codes of melodrama narrative and the historical distortion in the novel. The Other Francisco next attempts to provide a more realistic cinematic reconstruction of the life of the Cuban slave. Such an attempt to provide new socialist cinematic codes and forms is very difficult within the dominant television practice of advanced-capitalism, which first requires subversion of dominant codes and/or the use of traditional forms to convey subversive content.
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family and social scene. Capitalism appears as a system permeated with greed, exploitation, and waste. The series was anti-capitalist to the core and can be interpreted as popular revenge against the automobile industry.

The picture of the Vietnam War is especially interesting. From the beginning, there are intimations that Rock Hudson’s youngest son may be drafted. He is, and the Vietnam War is portrayed as an unrelieved nightmare, culminating in some remarkable footage of the son being bombed by his own troops (i.e., “friendly fire”). The war was portrayed as irredeemable evil perpetrated on the American people and the Vietnamese.

This miniseries often descended into soap-opera melodrama. Yet it is probably the appeal of the melodrama that makes this program an efficacious vehicle for its social critique. Wheels used melodrama conventions to convey social critique and to deal with real problems.*

POPULAR CULTURE AS POPULAR REVENGE

The previous analyses suggest that the conventions and genres of popular culture can convey social and cultural criticism and communicate radical political content. In fact, these TV miniseries contain a form of popular culture as popular revenge. The blacks are avenged against their oppressors in Roots, King, and other series that portray racists as evil and the struggles of blacks as legitimate. Holocaust provides popular revenge against Nazi oppression in its harsh portrayal of fascism and sympathetic portrayal of Jewish victims and resistance. Fear on Trial and other TV portrayals of McCarthyism and blacklisting gained a retrospective cultural victory for the victims of political oppression by

*In this sense, Wheels follows the melodramatic practice of the left filmmaker Douglas Sirk, who used lush color, intense passion, and conventional melodrama to engage his audience, while attempting to subvert bourgeois ideology.**

**On the subversive aspects of Sirk’s films, see the article by Rainer Fassbinder, “Six Films by Douglas Sirk,” New Left Review 91 (May–June 1975); Michael Stern, “Patterns of Power and Potency, Repression and Violence: Sirk’s Films of the 1950’s,” The Velvet Light Trap 16 (Fall 1976); and the articles on Sirk in Screen, vol. 12, no. 2 (Summer 1971).

Popular culture in all these examples—and there are many more—takes the point of view of the victims and attacks the oppressors, thus providing images that vindicate struggles against oppression. These images subvert more conservative, idealized images of American history and society which have tried to erase the memory of oppression and struggle from the popular consciousness. Moreover, as Jeremy Brecher suggests, "The very memory of revolt is a subversive force."28

The fact that many recent instances of television culture can be interpreted as forms of popular revenge indicates that the potential exists for using the electronic media for production of emancipatory popular culture. It may be that at present radical cultural production within advanced capitalism may have to use traditional forms to communicate subversive content. Since we are far from being in a revolutionary situation, it is counterproductive to limit what we count as emancipatory popular culture to the demands of avant-garde "radicalism" or "revolutionary art." Therefore, as part of a transitional cultural strategy, we should be aware of the usefulness of traditional dramatic forms for popular culture that seek to reach large audiences, and should be prepared to use and defend them in a strategy of left cultural intervention in popular culture.

None of the TV productions I have mentioned is free from distortion; nonetheless, they represent significant changes within television culture. Previously, for television, there was almost no treatment of the oppression of working people, blacks, or women. Whenever workers or the oppressed were dealt with in television culture, they were stereotypically portrayed, and rarely presented even as sympathetic characters. For the most part, television has systematically excluded the element of protest and attacks upon the oppressors from popular culture. During the cold-war era of the 1950s and 1960s, there was

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concerted ideological censorship and avoidance of controversial material, out of anticommunism and as an attempt to attract a large audience. There was tight control of programming by sponsors, network censors, and executives. But in recent years the tremendous cultural and economic success of television gives the networks the power to show more controversial programs. In the drive for higher ratings and profits, they will occasionally show controversial material if they believe it will help attain these goals. Consequently, the miniseries have been allowed to break previous taboos, as have a number of comedy programs. The relations between those who run the networks and the television audience are much more complex than the usual versions of manipulation theory allow. While it is easy to dismiss the apologists for the networks who claim that what is run simply reflects popular tastes, the response of the audience(s) does make a difference.

COMEDY AS SUBVERSION AND EMANCIPATION

Comedy provides the potential for subverting and discrediting dominant cultural and social forms—yet it can also deride deviance and teach the renunciation of desire. These “emancipatory” and “conciliatory” forms of laughter often coexist uneasily within the same series or even the same program. In some cases, the conciliatory aspects of comedy are clearly primary, as in such ABC situation comedies as Happy Days, Laverne and Shirley, and Three’s Company. Conciliatory laughter binds together television’s social role model-types into an idealized universe of good times and comfortable conformity. Such laughter also involves laughing at the renunciation of desire and at oneself for conforming, and encodes rites of renunciation.

The best work of Norman Lear, on the other hand, contains moments of emancipatory laughter. Television’s history has seen few genuine innovations, but Lear’s introduction of topical and controversial issues into situation comedy represents an important development. His best work, Mary Hartman, Mary

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29 On “conciliatory laughter” see Adorno and Horkheimer, “Culture Industry.”
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Hartman, was on one level a subversion of the forms of the soap opera and situation comedy, while on another level it engaged in social critique and satire. Whereas soap opera generally trivializes serious problems through pathos, sentimentality, and pseudo-realism, Mary Hartman approached some of the same problems more fully, often starting with apparently common everyday problems, and using humor and self-reflective irony to suggest that something is profoundly wrong with the current society. Whereas situation comedy uses a conflict-resolution model in which problems are humorously resolved in thirty or sixty minutes, the problems on Mary Hartman endlessly multiplied and were insoluble within the present way of life. In the process, authority figures of all types were ruthlessly satirized. Such reversal of codes and stereotypes could provoke reflection on social institutions and their workings. Further, more than any previous television show, Mary Hartman constantly reflected on television, the television view of the world, and its impact on American life. It confronted TV ideology with contradictory experiences and showed at once the false idealizations and distortions of the TV world and the failings of the social world. (That this view of TV and American society corresponded in many ways to radical perceptions helps explain the fascination of the left with this series.)

Mary Hartman dealt with topics previously taboo: impotence, venereal disease, union corruption, alienated industrial labor, religious fraud, and many other issues were introduced that were either completely repressed or gingerly approached by previous television series. In fact, most Norman Lear series presented subjects previously eliminated from the television world. Whatever the failings of Lear’s series, programs in All in the Family confronted bigotry and generational conflict more powerfully than ever before on television; M*A*S*H treated women’s liberation and middle-class malaise in a provocative man-

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ner: *The Jeffersons* and *Good Times* dealt with middle-class and working-class blacks more interestingly than on previous series; *All’s Fair* had more political debates (between the conservative male and liberal woman) than any previous TV comedy; and Lear’s syndicated comedies *All That Glitters*, *Fernwood Tonight*, *America Tonight*, and *Fernwood Forever* were imaginative shows that contained some of the most striking satires of television and American society ever broadcast.

Lear’s situation comedies have had their problems. *Mary Hartman* collapsed into cynicism and despair as the series ended after two years with Mary back in the kitchen, reproducing her former way of life with her new lover. The show was not really able to offer emancipatory alternatives. Most of Lear’s other situation comedies are structured by the standard conflict/resolution model that manages to resolve the problems and issues confronted without serious change. *All in the Family* usually suggests that all problems can be settled within the family (after all, “it’s all in the family”) and established way of life. Though Lear’s programs present real problems never before portrayed in the television world, they never offer solutions that transcend the limits of the current society.

Yet Lear’s situation comedies do show that it is possible to engage in social satire and critique in TV series. There have been other efforts in this direction such as Ernie Kovacs, *The Smothers Brothers*, and episodes of *Laugh-In* and *Saturday Night Live*. Most such programs have sooner or later encountered problems with the networks, often over censorship. This is to be expected, but should not obscure the changes that have taken place since *Leave It to Beaver* and the *Dick Van Dyke Show* were the exemplary television comedies.

Emancipatory comedy’s ability to use generic subversion and satire to provide critical insights suggests the inadequacy of championing either formalism or realism as exclusive models of emancipatory popular culture. *Mary Hartman* used formal-generic subversion and surrealism to convey a critical picture of the life of the “typical American housewife and consumer.” In one unforgettable scene, Mary is in the kitchen in the middle of the night, unable to sleep. Her husband Tom wanders in, and
they discuss an article Mary is reading about the differing sexual cycles of the male and female. Tom is experiencing impotence problems and he flares up at Mary, asking what is wrong with her. He demands to know what more she could possibly want, noting that he's given her a home, family, modern appliances, and even a four-piece toaster. "I don't know," Mary answers, "I just want something more." Tom huffily leaves the room, and Mary calls the telephone operator to see if a Mary Hartman is listed, or a Mrs. Tom Hartman. She isn't, and in a bizarre scene Mary crawls under the kitchen sink. Soon her sister Cathy and neighbor Loretta arrive. They extricate Mary, and the three women sit at the table, while Cathy and Loretta talk about their orgasms. Mary, evidently ignorant of what an orgasm is and extremely uncomfortable about the issue, asks them to leave. Her grandfather then comes in and tells her that she's right not to be satisfied with her present existence and to want "something more."

This remarkable episode combines formal innovation with thematic novelty, humor with serious drama. Perhaps the most effective emancipatory popular culture combines, as does Mary Hartman, formal and thematic innovation, following Brecht's prescription that radical art must concern itself with innovations of form and content, as well as the apparatus of production.31 But within the TV world, it is sometimes an advance even to use traditional forms as vehicles for controversial or subversive themes, as Lear has managed to do in some of his other situation comedies. This raises the difficult question of whether radical cultural production and criticism should demand that emancipatory popular culture meet the strict requirements of revolutionizing both form and content. It may be that given the current state of American television, radical cultural production might as a transitional strategy use traditional forms as vehicles of innovative, provocative, and politically challenging content. The problem with this approach, of course, is that it does not allow sufficient importance to the task of trying to create new cultural forms, subverting the codes of

the dominant television genres and thus producing a new type of television experience.

Such questions can only be answered through the acquisition of a larger body of direct experience in these areas than the left now has. It is not necessary to make an exclusive choice for one or the other strategy at this point. What is most important is to appreciate the ways in which it is now possible to produce emancipatory popular culture within television. This possibility is opened up not only by changes in the television audience, but by contradictions within the American television system and the emerging cable-satellite technology. There is first the contradiction between public and network television. Public television, to legitimize itself and gain the viewer contributions it needs to survive, must show a variety of programming which sometimes includes critical-realist documentaries, provocative political discussion shows, and social satire. Even within network television, there are differences between the "mind managers" and the employees of the "cultural apparatus"—the producers, writers, actors, and technicians who may have ideas and interests very different from those of their corporate managers.32 Today the networks will show just about anything that will increase their profits and competitive position in the ratings. Hence, if the audience responds to critical realism, subversive programs, or any type of potentially emancipatory culture, the networks will, within certain limits, probably play it.

Given this situation and the new opportunities that will be opened by the new communications technology . . . the left should consider how to produce, or how to participate in the production of, popular television, as well as documentaries, news commentaries and programs, and political discussions suitable for broadcast media. Yet if genuinely emancipatory productions are to be broadcast, there must be a cultural/media politics that will ensure public access and open new channels of communication. This would require radical transformation of the present communications and television system. Can we begin talking of the liberation of television?

32 Gouldner, Dialectic, ch. 7.