Myth and ritual traditionally integrate individuals into the social order and celebrate dominant social values. Myths provide stories which dramatize society's values, ideals and way of life; they are enacted in story-telling media and are often embodied in rituals. Rituals provide collective, participatory activity in which individuals participate in festive cultural forms that are familiar, repetitive and entertaining. Today, in the advanced capitalist countries, television has replaced movies and radio as the primary producer and distributor of social myths and ideology, just as popular culture earlier supplanted religion and political ideologies as the center of the cultural system and social life.¹

Television today is the main focus of leisure-time activity for most Americans: over 98% of American homes have television, and the average set was on, during 1979, a record six hours and twenty-eight minutes a day.² Like earlier forms of popular culture, television employs narrative structures and conventional formulas. Its news, entertainment and advertisements are saturated with mythology, and television has displaced many communal, political and religious rituals with new forms of social ritual. I will not, however, focus in this paper on the effects of television on the viewer, culture or society. Instead, I will analyze the mythical forms and content of television narrative, and show how television provides repetitive, formulaic rituals which involve the audience in TV genres, series, values and ideologies. An examination of some of the dominant myths and rituals on American television will reveal how they provide hegemonic ideology for advanced capitalism.

Myth and popular culture

It is a curiosity of advanced technological societies that they still depend on myth and social ritual for maintaining ideological consensus and legitimacy. Traditionally, myths have taken the form of stories
which instruct and entertain; they contain moral messages — lessons — which support the existing social order. They also feature heroes who serve as social ideals, and villains who represent deviancy and evil. As morality plays, myths propagate certain ideals and values, while they delegitimize oppositional and nonconformist behavior; the entertaining form of these tales, however, masks their moral thrust, and the viewer is usually oblivious to their ideological dimension.

In contemporary society myth takes many forms. Recent studies have shown that American popular culture is still dominated by the same narrative patterns, themes and hero-types as traditional myths. For this reason, traditional theories and approaches to myth are still valuable in analyzing contemporary popular culture. But recent structuralist and semiotic theories also provide, I believe, useful theories and concepts for analyzing and interpreting contemporary myths. Levi-Strauss’ structuralist theory of myth, for instance, provides tools for showing how a certain type of social myth resolves central social-cultural contradictions; Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory of mythologies, on the other hand, helps show how another class of myths provide symbolic constructs which suppress contradictions, and naturalize and idealize existing society. In the following discussion, I will utilize structuralist and semiotic as well as traditional concepts to elucidate various features of topical myths in popular television. Although included in this will be the theories of Levi-Strauss and Barthes, I will use only selected elements of their work — and in some cases in a radically reconstructed form. In other words, I do not accept their theories or procedures completely, but simply use concepts and operations that I find helpful in discussing television myths.

Regardless of their various forms, the myths of a society are the bearers of its ideologies; in other words, myth provides the symbolic forms that ideology takes. Thus contemporary myth, by transmitting dominant values, ideal types and social norms, is a ritualistic enactment of ideology in story form — coded into narratives that entertain as they indoctrinate — which legitimize a social order, and help maintain social stability and cohesion. Therefore, in order to understand how the societies of advanced capitalism preserve their legitimacy and social stability, it is important to understand how dominant myths are constructed and transmitted. Demythologizing its myths thus becomes an important part of critical practice.

Structuralist theories of myth and social contradictions

For Levi-Strauss, “mythical thought always progresses from awareness of oppositions toward their resolution.” Certain television myths likewise articulate oppositions and bring about their resolution. But whereas, for Levi-Strauss, the contradictions articulate and resolve binary oppositions, rooted in the human mind, or mediating between
nature and culture, the contradictions I will be discussing are social contradictions which are given an ideological resolution in TV myths; in other words, I will attempt a "historical-materialist" reading of television myths, by analyzing historically specific social contradictions that are symbolically resolved.

In Levi-Strauss' theory, "a myth exhibits a 'slated' structure, which comes to the surface, so to speak, through the process of repetition. However, the slates are not absolutely identical. And since the purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction (an impossible achievement if, as it happens, the contradiction is real), a theoretically infinite number of slates will be generated, each one slightly different from the others." Television myths are similarly "slated" into variations on stock sets of themes (i.e., superhero, sexy woman, father figure, etc.), and there is a discernible set of dominant television myths and variations. Many of these myths attempt to overcome social contradictions in an "ideological" manner; since the social contradictions are often real, they are consequently veiled by mystification and pseudo-resolutions. This mythical resolution of dominant social contradictions will become more concrete if we look at some examples.

Certain television series are crucial in introducing new formats and subject matter which are then taken over by subsequent programs. An example of this is *Mod Squad*, which was aired on prime time during 1968-1973 (and which has been in syndication ever since). The series featured three young cops dedicated to preserving the existing order and solving its problems; it provided television myths which tried to resolve social contradictions between the "conventional" and the "new," the "straight" and the "hip," youth and authority — all in an effort to bridge the generation gap. The *Mod Squad* "family" included a young white male, Pete, who is hip and wealthy and experienced in the "drug scene"; Julie, a quiet, elusive and attractive young white woman; Linx, an afroed Black who grew up in the ghetto; and their father figure, Captain Grier. Having committed minor crimes, the three young "mods" were given the choice of going to jail or working as undercover agents; they chose police work.

In one revealing episode, Pete sees his old childhood sweetheart arguing with her cousin in front of the Police Station. She demands to see her father who has disappeared and threatens to go to the police. Pete is very taken by seeing her again and feels guilty about having jilted her earlier — he seems to have abruptly left both her and his family without any explanation. Genuinely concerned, he wants to find out what's troubling her. She is also Pete's old next door neighbor, so he makes an unannounced homecoming to a luxurious house in an upper-class neighborhood. His surprised and immaculately groomed mother greets him, at first with reserve, and then with mild abandon, and Pete responds: "You know something. You're a
good looking chick — for a mother."

These scenes, playing on mother-son and boyfriend-girlfriend stereotypes, as well as the sentimentality felt for past loves, invest Pete with all sorts of attractive sympathy. They resolve the contradiction of love by showing that Pete both loves and is loved by his mother and old girlfriend; and yet he is free of the entanglements of intimate relationships. He has a fine home; yet he is free of family obligations. In the mythologies of *Mod Squad*, there are images of work and duty, as well as a wealth of hedonistic images, suggesting that adjustment to the social world will provide luxurious rewards and plenty of good times. The contradictions between duty and pleasure, being hip and doing a straight job, being loved and being free, are thus resolved mythically. Moreover, Pete is made into the mythical image of a wealthy "mod" who leaves a life of luxury and ease to serve the "community" by doing police work. Thus it advocates the work ethic in a period of its decline. In the same series, Linc shows that Blacks can also "make it" in the white man's world without sacrificing their blackness or hipness. And the policewoman Julie shows that all things are possible for the mod woman, that one can be a beautiful woman and still compete and succeed in a male world. *Mod Squad* thus provides a new myth of the simultaneous possibility of individuality and integration — of doing your own thing and conforming to social roles and values. It cuts through the Gordian knot of social contradiction and ties together antitheses into a neat package that resolves social conflicts. Small wonder that *Mod Squad* appeared at the height of the dropout syndrome.⁶

As the *Mod Squad* example shows, television mythology attempts to reconcile warring ideological assumptions and societal contradictions by magically harmonizing conflicting phenomena. Society and individual life are replete with such contradictions — for example, the conflict between the old work ethic, which preaches duty, hard work, asceticism and thrift, and the newer consumer ethic which advocates lavish spending, fun and affluence. There is also the contradiction between the old ideology of individualism and the new conformity. In daily life and its ideological reflections, greed and selfishness coexist with benevolence and altruism; monogamy and sexual fidelity oppose multirelationships and open marriage. There is a profound ambivalence toward intellectuals, science and technology, which are at once admired and feared, respected and hated. Television mythology smooths over these ideological-social contradictions, so that the viewer can straddle both horns of the ideological dilemma or have it either way.

For example, the youthful cops who have proliferated the tube in the 1970s resolve central societal contradictions by being at once hardworking servants of the existing order and swinging, fun-loving devotees of the pleasure ethic: *Starsky & Hutch*, *Baretta*, *CHiPs*, etc. Sexual
promiscuity is condemned as the “bad” girls are punished by rapists, murderers and their own immorality that outlaws them from respectable society; and yet sex is condoned (encouraged?) through images of beautiful, voluptuous women, the bared chests of male stars, and much sexual innuendo. One can indulge in anti-intellectualism and technophobia as perverted intellectuals and crazed scientists concoct schemes to bilk millions of dollars or gain incredible power. At the same time, one can admire and respect the technological apparatus and technocrats on spy and science fiction shows — *Six Million Dollar Man, Star Trek*, etc. — and crime dramas — *SWAT, Emergency*, etc. Many television characters are at once rugged and independent individuals and yet conform to the corporate hierarchy. Charlie's Angels and other women stars are simultaneously sex objects and active, effective subjects; they are highly charged sexual images and yet embody traditional moral virtues. Parents and official authority figures are held up as repositories of wisdom and propriety, while youth are pictured as “where it’s at.”

Hence manifest individualism coexists with latent authoritarianism; manifest prudery conceals latent promiscuity; and a work ethic is harmonized with a fun ethic. Having it both ways confuses psychic and social conflicts, and encourages the passive acceptance of existing society. In this way the cultural contradictions of capitalism are speciously resolved. Conventional values are reinforced and some new values are taught; the conflict between the old and the new is glossed over; and some repressed desires are gratified through the titillation, sexism and racism latent in many images of women and minorities. And, of course, there is ample opportunity for venting feelings of aggression and violence in the nightly orgies of murder and mayhem which at once (perhaps in different people at different times) satisfy desires for aggression and violence, and/or frighten people into accepting existing law and morality.

The attempted harmonization of societal contradictions is possible because television imagery has both a latent and manifest dimension. The manifest or overt message — perhaps verbally articulated — may be that promiscuity is bad and is always punished, but the latent message of the images associates sex with glamour, excitement and thrills, thereby projecting a “Do it!” message. Furthermore, the symbolism is often unconscious, so that one is not bothered by the contradictions that dialectically dance to the tune of the electronic ideology machine. The viewers' rational faculties are apparently suspended, and latent messages sneak unsuspectedly past the censor into the unconscious, later returning to shape their thought and behavior. The result is to both reinforce traditional values, and promote adjustment to new values and social change. Hence a racist can laugh *with* Archie Bunker, whereas the tolerant liberal can laugh *at* him. Tensions are reduced as conflicts are mythically resolved, and there are some clear-cut prescrip-
tions of what to do and what not to do that help guarantee social consensus. Although conventional values and institutions are repeatedly endorsed, some novelties, new values and pluralistic tolerance are also allowed — within certain well-defined limits.

Social and political mythologies

Not all television narratives, however, deal with or attempt to resolve social contradictions. Many function similar to Roland Barthes’ “mythologies,” which simply glorify existing society. Thus a distinction can be made between myths which resolve social contradictions and problems, and mythologies which one-dimensionally exalt the dominant values and way of life. Mythologies suppress social contradictions and “naturalize” existing society, so that it appears to be devoid of social tensions and problems. Most of the situation comedies of the 1950s and ’60s were pure mythologies in the Barthian sense: *The Donna Reed Show, Father Knows Best, The Brady Bunch*, etc. Cop shows, westerns and action-adventure dramas in the first decades of television provided mythologies of law and order which rarely portrayed — except in rarefied symbolic form — real social problems or contradictions.

In Barthes’ formulation, mythologies provide semiotic systems which invest objects with a special aura of idealized significance. In his famous example, the picture of a Black soldier in a French army uniform saluting the flag signifies the French Empire, the loyalty of colonial regimes to Mother France, the integration of Blacks into the Empire, and the honor of the military. Mythologies coalesce into a set of pure images without history or contradiction (suppressing, in Barthes’ example, the anticolonialist struggles against France, racism and Black oppression, military crime, etc.). Mythologies are thus ahistorical idealizations that veil the present with an aura of legitimacy. Any object, Barthes suggests, can be absorbed into a mythology which transforms the object into a purified image by endowing it with a socially sanctioned meaning that reproduces ideology. And mythologies have a double function: they point out objects and events (description), and impose certain attitudes and values (prescription). Mythologies are thus the bearers of ideologies, which are attractively presented in images, morality tales and dramatic episodes.

For example, during network coverage of Presidential elections, images of red-white-and-blue, the flag, and a map of the U.S. showing the election returns project mythologies of democracy, or popular participation in government, and a national mandate for the elected President. Excluded are the facts that less than half of the eligible voters vote, that there is usually little political choice offered, that special interests control the political process in America, etc. In fact, American politics
have become increasingly saturated with mythologies. The 1976 Ford-
Carter campaign — debates aside — took the form of a battle of
images. Ford presented the image of the "President" — prominently
displaying the Presidential Seal, the White House and other trappings
of "royalty" in his television ads. He also used symbols of military might
and power, cramming his ads with images of missiles, generals and
military regalia. Carter, on the other hand, cultivated a "softer," more
populist image of the Man of the People, using images of himself in his
peanut fields, with his fingers in the earth, or surrounded by mountains
of peanuts. He also utilized images of the small town, family and
religion, appealing to mythologies which hark back to a simpler way of
life. Carter's mythologies were evidently more appealing than Ford's,
though Ford was also disadvantaged by his connection with Nixon (the
mythology of evil), as well as by the frequent images of Ford's clums-
siness (the mythology of the bumbler). Hence, in the battle of imagistic
mythologies, Ford stumbled out of the White House and a relatively
unknown Jimmy Carter won a Presidential election.

From the start, Carter worked hard at cultivating an attractive im-
age and mythology. He gave pollster Pat Cadell and mediaman Gerald
Rafshoon prominent positions in his administration, and played to the
hilt symbolic politics — following Cadell's advice that "too many good
people have been defeated because they stressed substance over style."
Carter tried to convey "style" in his early fireside chats and
airplane diplomacy, and in his media events like the Middle East sum-
mit talks and his Camp David retreat to the mountain top — all at-
ttempts to project an image of the concerned and determined Leader of
the People. Although Carter's symbolic politics appeared to have com-
pletely failed by summer 1979, when he had the lowest public opinion
ratings of any U.S. President in history, the occupation of the
American embassy in Tehran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan
enabled him to make a spectacular come-back in public opinion polls.
Carter mobilized mythologies of the innocent American hostages and
the evil, radical Iranians, which were propagated by news presenta-
tions such as ABC News' dramatic late-night program The Iranian
Crisis: America Held Hostage: Day "x". With the Russian invasion of
Afghanistan Carter mobilized the old Cold War mythology of the evil
communists bent on world domination. The result was a surge of pa-
triotism, militarism and Cold War fever which Carter manipulated to
gain support for his presidency.

The 1980 campaign was a battle of images in which Reagan success-
fully manipulated antigovernment sentiment, stressing Carter's eco-

omy failures, excessive spending and incompetence as a leader, in
advertisements and speeches. Reagan promoted himself as a "nice
guy" who wanted to cut taxes and government spending, strengthen
the military to "catch up with the Soviet Union," and, above all, "to
get Washington off our backs." What specific programs he had in
mind never really surfaced during the election campaign which, it was
generally agreed, trafficked more in symbols than substance. For
instance, although Carter was probably more effective in argumenta-
tion and in presenting his positions than Reagan in the TV debates, it
is generally agreed that Reagan came off as more appealing through
his more relaxed manner, smiles and subtle criticisms of Carter. It is
perhaps not that surprising that a former movie star and TV person-
ality was able to capture the presidency in an age of symbolic politics,
and so far Reagan has proved himself to be a master of television ritual
and symbolism in both the speeches he used to gain support for his
budget and tax programs, and in the humor and good cheer he
exhibited after the assassination attempt.

Symbolic and ritual politics themselves, however, cannot manage
the economy and solve the social problems of advanced capitalism. TV
can also help undermine personalities and policies which it previously
helped to secure and promote. Leaders are especially vulnerable to
changes in their symbolic fortune, and there are frequent sacrifices and
victims. Consequently, Ted Kennedy has had to contend with con-
flicting mythologies of Kennedy Camelot vs. Chappaquiddick bad
boy. Carter's symbolic fortunes were especially volatile, climaxing in
his 1979 collapse and resounding defeat in the elections. Such
dramatic changes in symbolic fortune can best be explained by the role
of the image and mythologies in contemporary politics. Moreover, it
may be that symbolic politics create mythical expectations beyond the
reach of flawed mortals; and consequently, as energy prices sky-rocket,
inflation and unemployment mount, and domestic and foreign crises
intensify, the symbolic fortunes of dominant politicians may become
unmanageable and subject to circumstances beyond their control.

Entire institutions and policies may be threatened by a radical
change in their symbolic fortune — e.g. imperialist intervention in the
wake of Vietnam, the Presidency after Watergate, and the FBI and CIA
following the multitude of revelations which put them in the role of
“bad guy.” After the events in Iran and Afghanistan, and perhaps after
the FBI’s operations uncovering political and economic corruption (i.e.
the “Abscam” and “Brilab” scandals), the mythologies of the CIA, FBI,
Pentagon and imperialist intervention may be retooled and reprop-
gated. It is quite probable, too, that a major force of public opinion
will mobilize against the nuclear energy industry after the Three Mile
Island incident and other dangerous episodes, perhaps transforming
the cone-shaped nuke plants into threatening icons of doom. Likewise,
the oil companies may fall victim to a mythology of evil, if their in-
signias (EXXON, etc.) come to symbolize corporate greed and rapacity
as their profits soar with sky-rocketing gas prices. Consequently, there
may be a steady erosion in the legitimacy of advanced capitalist soci-
eties, or new mythologies and symbolism may help stabilize the ex-
isting order.
The narrative, story-telling forms of TV news are thus as permeated with mythological forms and images as TV entertainment. As Gaye Tuchman points out, following Robert Park, in a study of television news mythisms: "News is simply a story." The metaphor is suggestive, for it implies that television news uses fictional conventions (narrative forms, symbolic devices, closure, etc.). TV news should be seen, Tuchman insists, as "a frame" framing "strips" of everyday reality and imposing order on it. The selectivity of "news" is subject to organizational restraints and institutional pressures, and the framing is subject to ideological and mythological forms. Hence inflation is metaphorized into a tornado, impossible to control, but necessary to clean up after; the New York City fiscal crisis is presented as a natural disaster which is to be solved by the same institutions — banks and corporate capital — whose manipulations, arguably, caused it in the first place; and the energy crisis is mystified as a disaster caused by evil, enemy forces (i.e., OPEC) which can only be overcome by traditional American virtues (i.e., independence, self-reliance, sacrifice, confidence, etc.) In other words, social and institutional forces are mythologized into "primal forces" and "become actors in a post-industrial passion play... Social actors are cast as villains and heroes, those who disrupt the consumer society and those who battle to retain the social order." In Barthes' theory, the mythologies of bourgeois society are infected with duplicity: they suppress history and deform language. Mythologies naturalize events or institutions by endowing their objects with a natural justification — as if it were "natural" to bomb Vietnam in order to stamp out communism; as if it were "natural" to kill violently those who violate the law; as if it were "natural" to wear all sorts of cosmetic and beauty aids. Mythologies rob language by reducing the complexity of a situation to a purified form of images and words which merely reproduce the dominant ideology and way of life. They condense history into simple stories and symbols. They reduce politics to images and slogans, paring down racism, for example, to the silly prejudices of an Archie Bunker. Barthes calls this form of myth deportationized speech. In an important passage he writes:

One must naturally understand political in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world; one must above all give an active value to the prefix de-: here it represents an operational movement, it permanently embodies a defaulting. In the case of the soldier-Negro, for instance, what is got rid of is certainly not French imperialism (on the contrary, since what must be actualized is its presence); it is the contingent, historical, in one word, fabricated quality of colonialism. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it
makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I state the fact of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and goes without saying: I am reassured. In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.20

For Barthes, mythologies induce a certain agreement and complicity with existing society. They freeze reality into fixed images, stereotypes and institutions. They show approved activity as taking place within an established structure and show what happens if one strays from this path. They package reality into neat informational and entertaining images that convince one that what “is,” is right. Mythologies also eternalize what “is” by forbidding what “is not.” As Barthes puts it:

[T]he very end of myths is to immobilize the world: they must suggest and mimic a universal order which has fixated once and for all the hierarchy of possessions. Thus, every day and everywhere, man is stopped by myths, referred by them to this motionless prototype which lives in his place, stifles him in the manner of a huge parasite and assigns to his activity the narrow limits within which he is allowed to suffer without upsetting the world: bourgeois pseudo-physis is in the fullest sense a prohibition for man against inventing himself. Myths are nothing but this ceaseless, untiring solicitation, this insidious and inflexible demand that all men recognize themselves in this image, eternal yet bearing a date, which was built of them one day as if for all time.21

Television turns the objects of everyday life into mythologies as the cop cars and guns eliminate violence; the middle-class home become the locus of family happiness; newscasters, television heroes and political leaders become figures of authority; the plop-plop-fizz-fizz tablet relieves headaches and indigestion. Television defines what is “real” as well as what is important and valuable. The mythical plots contain practical rules for survival embedded in and reinforcing dominant institutions and social practices. This has been the primary function of myth in every society. McLuhan has suggested that Homer provided the Greeks with a tribal encyclopaedia — “operational wisdom for all the contingencies of life — Ann Landers in verse.”22 Our
tribe's cultural encyclopaedia is television. In the words of Gerbner and Gross:

Common rituals and mythologies are agencies of symbolic socialization and control. They demonstrate how society works by dramatizing its norms and values. They are also part of a general system of messages which cultivates prevailing outlooks (which is why we call it culture) and regulates social relationships. This system of messages, and their story telling functions, make people perceive as real and normal and right that which fits the established social order. Television, the flagship of industrial mass culture, now rivals ancient religions as a purveyor of organic patterns of symbols — "facts" (news) and "fiction" (entertainment) — that animate national and even global communities' sense of reality and value. It comes close to fulfilling the dream of Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher who once said: "If a man were permitted to write all the ballads he need not care who should make the laws of the nation."23

Television thus provides a new symbolic environment which contains metaphysics, ethics and a new "industrial religion."24 With this in mind let us now examine in greater detail how television mythologies are enacted in TV rituals. In the following section, I will suggest how television genres and series have certain ritualistic features, and function as social rituals for the audience.

**TV ritual**

Not only has TV tended to replace many ritualistic activities such as picnics, sports and family games, but it is itself a ritualized institution. TV rituals act as an interface between formulaic genres and habitual audience viewing. They are participatory activities in which the viewers take part by watching regularly, and by drawing pleasure from the repetitive formulas, genres and myths of popular culture. Thus the viewer who regularly turns on a morning news show is participating in a shared, habitual activity which affirms the value of TV as a window to the world — and indicates the viewer's dependence on it for information, entertainment and perhaps assurance that everything is under control.

Television game shows are rituals of commodity fetishism, affirming the values of money, consumerism and possessive individualism. They provide rituals of success through ingenuity, getting a lucky break and winning, and ritualize the fantasy of getting something for nothing. They also ritualize the rewards provided for shallow, quick glibness and conformity to received wisdom. The flashing lights, elaborate game boards, and the enclosed space occupied by the contestant provide rituals of closure within technology, institutions and con-
fined space, as they dramatize the rewards for submission and commodification of the “self.” As Carol Lopate has noted, the female contestants’ masochistic, doting and sometimes childlike sexual submission to the male Master of Ceremonies — a revealing phrase! — ritualizes women’s submission to men. Observe how often and in what manner female winners kiss, hug, or grab with joy the M.C., and how the latter remains distant, nonerotic and dominant. Moreover, female contestants ritualize their roles as consumers, spenders of money and social conformists; whereas male contestants are often embarrassed by the foolishness as if their role was a bit more serious, though they compete nonetheless for the prizes — suggesting that one must conform to anything in order to be rewarded and to get ahead in society.

Interestingly, many quiz shows reward the contestant’s knowledge of a commodity’s price or estimation of the majority opinion (or the opinion of one’s partner) relative to some topic or object (e.g., Family Feud, The Match Game, etc.). These shows ritualize intellectual conformity by assigning compliance with the majority, or another’s opinion, a status above truth and falsity. Losers are often given consolation prizes, which project a mythology of the benevolent welfare state where losers, too, are taken care of. Unlike the earlier “dog-eat-dog” ideology of competitive capitalism, where losers were to be eliminated in the struggle for the survival of the fittest, game show rituals and welfare state ideology provide consolation for society’s losers who must suffer the indignity of public ratification of their inferior status by losing in game shows or showing up at the welfare office.

Soap operas celebrate the values of family life and domesticity. They show the dignity and importance of everyday life, and idealize the family unit. Soap operas provide mythologies of the Mother, the Father, the Wise Elder, the Affluent, and the Successful; in contrast with negative mythologies of the Wicked, the Seducer, the Naïve, the Reckless, and the Tragic. The endless problems that inhabit the world of soap operas embody Woody Allen’s bipolar philosophy (in Annie Hall) that Life consists of the Horrible and the Miserable. “Soaps” are American sagas: the odysseys of The Young and the Restless, following the Guiding Light so that All My Children can learn Love of Life, and in the Search for Tomorrow can find Another World; after all, in the Days of Our Lives, we only have One Life to Live, and, As the World Turns, we all live on the Edge of Night, for we may end up in General Hospital and be at the mercy of The Doctors (I think I got most of them in). Although soap operas deal with promiscuity, illness, interpersonal conflicts, divorce and the like, they present the family as the best possibility for love, compassion, security, and personal and sexual fulfillment. Through all the turmoil and misery, it is the family unit which provides comfort and support. Soap operas fetishize blood relationships as the only real, solid bond in a heartless world, making the viewers appreciate their own families a bit more.
Soap operas present mythologies of America as predominantly white, upper-middle class, professional and affluent. The Young and the Restless, one of the few soap operas to feature working-class people, showed the parents as stereotypically poor: the self-sacrificing, hardworking Mother and the seedy and uncouth Father. However, the Young and Restless children — professional and upwardly mobile — foster the myth that anyone can transcend class barriers and enter affluent society through hard work.26

While soap operas ritualize the suffering brought about by the transgression of social norms, situation comedies, on the other hand, celebrate the triumph of social norms, values and good will which enable one to successfully resolve conflicts. Each comedy series has its own ritualistic formulas and conventions which are repeated in every show. For example, the comedy hit Three's Company celebrates the sexual attractions and adventures 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, during the first three seasons, portrayed the sexual advances and frustrations of the landlord's wife and her husband's lack of sexual interest in her (often interpreted as impotency). The young man pretended to be a homosexual in order to placate his moralistic landlords, and the show repeatedly contained episodes of feigned homosexuality. In the 1979-80 season, the series introduced a voluptuous young woman who, in every program, aggressively tried to seduce the young man, while being hotly pursued herself by the new "dirty old man" landlord. These rituals enable the audience to play out fantasies of taboo sexual desire and renunciation of such illicit desires.

Television situation comedies provide rituals of integration whereby individuals are initiated into proper social behavior, and shown wrong and deviant behavior.27 "Sitcoms" are structured around problems or conflicts in which individuals do not at first know how to act properly or adjust to social situations. Through advice or experience — or sometimes luck — the characters pull through and resolve the conflicts, being once more integrated into the social order. These rites of initiation have the structure and function of American morality plays in which the individual learns how to adjust and fit into the social order.28 In this way conformity and dominant values and institutions are affirmed. There are also rites of exclusion which mock and attack deviants who are outside the social order or who cannot adapt. "Conciliatory laughter" is a ritualistic device whereby viewers can laugh at those deviants who are excluded from the social order while laughing at themselves for renouncing their own desires and individual differences in order to conform to society.29

In a recent study of television comedies, I have identified four types of rituals of integration: (1) rites of conformity and reassurance;
(2) rites of resignation; (3) rites of adjustment to change; and (4) rites of complexity and relativity. Not every TV sitcom, of course, falls into these typologies; there may be other categories and some sitcoms (e.g., The Mary Tyler Moore Show), seem to have the features of several typologies. Hence these should be taken only as models or "ideal types" which have both paradigm cases and rough approximations. Nevertheless, television tends to fall into typologies because the medium is so formulaic and conventional. The reasons for this are partly economic, and have to do with the race for ratings and profits which drives the networks to repeat, ad nauseam, winning formulas. There are also production conditions, especially time constraints, which prompt producers to follow tested and successful formulas. However, dominant formulas and typologies also respond to hegemonic ideologies and to the social conditions of advanced capitalism; thus there are social and ideological reasons for the predominance of certain ritualistic formulas and mythologies as well. The following analysis is intended to sketch out the dominant typologies of situation comedies and their ideologies.

(1) Rituals of conformity and reassurance celebrate social stability and homogeneity while ostracizing deviance. They utilize conciliatory laughter and tend toward the traditional and conservative. Most of the situation comedies of the 1950s and '60s fall into this category: Father Knows Best, The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet and Leave it to Beaver are paradigms. These comedies portray a totally idealized picture of middle-class American society devoid of real problems and social tensions. The situations tend to be timeless and ahistorical with no topical references. Indeed, controversy and topicality are not even allowed.30

Happy Days — the 1970s sitcom which harks back to the conformity of the fifties — also falls into this category.31 The Cunninghams represent traditional social virtues which are put into question and reaffirmed in every episode. Curiously, Fonzie, a "tough-guy," working-class character, is often used as a mouthpiece for middle-class values. These rituals of conformity thus legitimate middle-class values and exclude the possibility of alternatives.

(2) Rituals of resignation are found in sitcoms which point to social problems and oppressive social conditions, though the characters ultimately accept and submit to these very conditions — for example, Laverne and Shirley, Alice and Rhoda. The paradigmatic ritual of resignation is Laverne and Shirley, the most popular television show in the 1978-79 season.32 This series invariably inculcates the acceptance of oppressive 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 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 the acceptance of their jobs and social lives. The series tries, however, to make working-class life look as appealing as possible for Laverne and Shirley and the viewer, thus helping working-class people in similar situations to accept their fate with a smile and good cheer.

From the start the series portrayed Shirley’s “high hopes” crashing against a recalcitrant social reality. Laverne, who is more cynical and realistic, constantly tells Shirley to adjust and resign herself. Shirley dreams of entering “high society” and meeting a “rich businessman,” but her forays into this area always fail and she returns to her basement apartment and working-class friends. Although she attempts to get promoted at work and even goes to night school, her efforts are for naught and she resigns herself to an assembly-line job capping bottles in a brewery. Laverne and Shirley want cars and luxury commodities, but never have enough money to buy them. They want love and a better social life, but are stuck with the insufferable Lenny, Squiggy and the neighborhood gang at the Pizza Bowl. They want to be somebody, but end up accepting themselves as “bimbos.”

There is something touching about Laverne and Shirley’s close relationship and devotion to each other, as well as Shirley’s indomitable optimism, but it is depressing to see their hopes and dreams continually falter, and their failures accepted with simultaneous resignation and good cheer. The characters of Laverne and Shirley are furthermore completely static; they never learn or develop, and they eternally repeat the same situations, miseries and failures. These endless rites of submission use individual self-assertion and comradesy to promote resignation. Laverne and Shirley often do assert themselves and sometimes put their feelings for each other above external events and social pressures, but they always end up surrendering to their present life conditions. The overall message is thus profoundly quietistic: accept who you are, do not try to rise above your station, be realistic and accept things as they are — for, with effort, one can be an individual and human even within miserable working and social conditions. Laverne and Shirley consequently gives the false, subjective appearance of overcoming alienation while leaving the objective social conditions of alienation intact. Its mythologies of pseudohumanism provide an ideology of reconciliation to oppressive social conditions.

(3) Rituals of adjustment to change were initiated by Norman Lear in All in the Family in 1971, and were repeated in his series Maude, Sanford and Son, The Jeffersons, Good Times, One Day at a Time, Mary Hartman, etc. Whereas rites of conformity and resignation tend to be atemporal, Lear’s sitcoms are extremely topical and concerned with the issues of the day. Although rituals of conformity idealize existing society, Lear’s series are more realistic and deal with actual
problems. While most previous television series promote traditional values, Lear's programs champion social change and new values. Moreover, his characters are dynamic and change over the years; as they come to accept change in society-at-large, they enable the spectator to come to terms with social change and new values as well. Hence over the years Archie Bunker has mellowed, each year treating his wife Edith with more respect; he has overcome or at least softened some of his prejudices, even coming to like his "meathead" son-in-law. Edith, at the same time, has become more assertive and confident, rebelling more and more against Archie's tyrannical oppression. Mike, too, has come to terms with the 1970s, adjusting his radicalism to new social conditions.

The Lear sitcoms thus contain, for the most part, a liberal affirmation of existing society. They advocate liberal pluralism and tolerance for diverse and new values and life-styles; they advocate liberal issues like racial equality, abortion, women's rights and often have left-liberal political topicality. Although they are probably the most progressive situation comedies ever aired on American television, they nonetheless tend, in form and content, to simply provide more modern and up-to-date ideologies for contemporary American society.

(4) Rituals of complexity and relativity are found in such "ensemble" situation comedies as M.A.S.H., Barney Miller, Soap, Taxi and WKRP in Cincinnati. These comedies tend more toward an absurdist, "screwball comedy" ethos. They feature a variety of characters with diverse views and personalities, making for more complex situations and a varied clash of views. Hence M.A.S.H. contains a spectrum of views ranging from anti-authority, antireligion, antiwar, and anti-establishment to authoritarian, prowar, proreligion, protraditional sexuality views. Although M.A.S.H. tends toward the anti-authoritarian and liberal pole, other ensemble sitcoms like Barney Miller and Taxi utilize such a range of characters that one coherent viewpoint or simple moral is sometimes eluded. They often contain such a variety of screwball characters that they communicate more a sense of absurdity, complexity and cultural relativity than the more conformist, resigned and topical situation comedies.

These series, nevertheless, do contain characters who provide a moral center: Hawkeye in M.A.S.H., the Captain in Barney Miller and Alex in Taxi. Sometimes there is a coalescence of agreement among the diverse characters on a given issue, and these screwball series can become morality plays. The consensus of joy on a Barney Miller episode, because the Captain was returning to his wife after a rocky period of separation, contained a strong ideological affirmation of matrimony and of reconciliation despite the vicissitudes of married life. An episode of Taxi featured Alex quitting his job as a taxi-driver after being mugged. He took a much higher paying and safer job as a waiter, and invited his taxi friends to dine where he worked; during
the evening he decided to go back to taxi driving because he “was a taxi-driver at heart” and just had to put up with its problems, thus re-enacting the ritual of resignation.

These rituals of complexity and relativity therefore range from an absurdist portrayal of cultural relativity to an affirmation of traditional values. Even the occasional complexity and diversity of values, however, provides an ideology of the multiplicity of society in which there is something for everyone. Such programs provide an image of society that can accommodate and harmonize conflicting views, opinions and behavior. This ideology of pluralism is built into ensemble sitcoms, defusing their subversive moments.

There are also a variety of rituals of integration in game shows, soap operas, melodramas, family dramas and other genres which must be explored and analyzed to discern the specificity of TV myths, rituals and ideologies. Furthermore, these rituals of integration can be contrasted with rituals of order in the action-adventure series. Rituals of order celebrate the existing social order and sanction any means necessary to protect it. These rites often champion the individual hero — the cowboy, cop, soldier, detective, etc. — who is dedicated to the preservation of this order, and legitimize violence to protect and defend it. Rites of order often take monomystic form in which evil threatens stability and peace, and therefore must be eliminated by the hero. Mythic redemption often takes place through force and thus promotes violent, elitist solutions to social problems.

Action-adventure series feature clashes between “good” and “evil” in which the former mythically triumphs over the latter. This satisfies the viewers’ need for order and justice, while pleasure is found in the repetition of its formulas. Ritualistic gunfights, car chases, battles, the violent elimination of “evil” — all provide the viewer with intense pleasure. Rituals of order do, however, have rules and conventions to deal with various degrees of evil: especially evil villains can be brutally slaughtered; lesser transgressors may be shot but not killed; weaker villains are simply beaten up or hit; and white collar criminals are often simply grabbed and handcuffed. Rites of order dramatize what happens if social laws and values are transgressed, and demonstrate the consequences of refusing to conform. Not surprisingly they tend to be violent and bloody, and evoke a savage universe torn by the struggle between “good” and “evil.” Moreover, they tend to be socially conservative: society and its protectors are equated with “good,” whereas its transgressors are identified as “evil.” Here too, however, different ideologies are found in different television crime dramas, westerns, adventure series, etc.

In addition to its ritualistic genres and series, television produces public rituals and TV spectacles. These can take the form of singular, significant historical events like the Kennedy or King assassinations and funerals, the moonshots, kidnappings, or skyjackings. Public
rituals also include regularly scheduled collective events like political
covventions and elections, and what Lawrence and Jewett call "public
eccasies": the Academy Awards, beauty contests, the Superbowl, the
World Series and other "Big Events," which become national televised
celebrations. Whereas the members of earlier societies caroused and
celebrated their social existence themselves with song, dance, intoxication
and sex, today the festival is replaced by television spectacle: Eros
and Bacchus give way to TV spectacle in consumer society.

These public rituals dramatize dominant values and ideology —
above all success and winning. Television ritualizes contests of all
types, from elections to beauty contests, and celebrates the triumph of
winning. These success ecstasies veil the winners in an aura of godlike
triumph and condemn the losers to the degradations of failure. Public
rituals thus create hierarchies in every region of existence; by glorifying
the winner and condemning the loser to nonexistence, the former be-
comes an important value.

TV sports, for example, utilize older agonic rituals of competition
and convey Darwinistic mythologies of the survival of the fittest.
Sports-watching often merges on fanaticism and takes on especially
mythic-ritualistic overtones during the World Series, Superbowl, or
Olympics. The sportscasters are usually pleasant types, often ex-
atheletes, who promote middle-class values and emphasize winning,
competition and stardom. The games become titanic struggles that
immerse the viewers in the ritualistic drama of the primal bourgeois
passion play: winning or losing. They also provide vicarious identifica-
tion models, giving the viewers a moment of pleasure and power when
their favorite player scores and/or their team wins. TV sports enable
men to re-experience and fantasize their own moments of triumph,
when they played this or that sport and had a big day, and thus pro-
vide an active (and safe) field for their fantasy life. This is a largely
unexplored terrain that requires detailed analysis to decode its mul-
tiple meanings and to appraise its crucial, social functions.

TV also creates its own special rituals — TV spectacles — such as the
mini-series *Roots*, in which the nation ritualistically experienced the
passion play of Black suffering and redemption, or *Holocaust*, which
ritualized Jewish persecution and salvation. The rituals of TV spec-
tacles also include such pseudo-events as the celebration of the birth of
Lucy's or Mike and Gloria's baby, Rhoda's or Tiny Tim's wedding, the
climax of *The Fugitive*, the revelation of who shot J.R., and other TV
events that are hyped into TV rituals — events through which the na-
tion collectively shares their values. Mass viewings of films on TV like
*Gone with the Wind* and *The Godfather* might also fit into this
category. TV spectacles thus involve mass participation and celebration
of dominant values, ideology and institutions. Television's power as a
medium is in part due to the fact that it can both transmit and intensify
traditional public rituals as well as create its own special rituals.
It has not been widely perceived that it is the often-repeated TV rituals which provide audience delight — possibly more so than the individual quality of the text or complexity of plot. For this reason, it is Kojak's sucking a lollipop, pawing women ("Who loves you, baby?") roughing up suspects, yelling at his team ("Crocker! Stavros!") and standing up to his superiors that provide much of Kojak's appeal. Likewise, it is Archie Bunker's repeated bigotry, malapropisms, and angry confrontations with his "meathead" son-in-law that bring pleasure to the audience, evoking the joy of recognition whenever a ritualistic formula is repeated. The same holds true for the repetitive sexual innuendos and games in Three's Company. Genre and series analysis should thus explicate the rituals, myths and symbolic-iconic images that repeatedly appear, and should try to discern the appeal of each series and genre. The viewers, who gain much of their pleasure by participating in these rituals, expect this repetitive play and regularly tune in to get their weekly dose.

The foregoing analysis of TV myth and ritual helps explain both the repetitiveness and homogeneity of TV narrative and its power over its viewers. Television's ritualistic quality also helps explain why aesthetes and intellectuals who value originality, complexity, ambiguity, irony, shock, subversion of dominant values, rebellion, novelty and diversity in culture and life may be hostile toward television. However, the ritualization of TV thus far does not mean that it is by nature condemned to mythmongering and celebrating dominant values and ideology. In its relatively short history it has been forced to assume these functions on account of both its ownership and sponsorship by corporate capital, which has forced television to attract a mass audience in order to induce advertisers to invest the large sums of money necessary to finance programming. This situation could change: television could be used to demythologize or even subvert stale and obsolete values and ideology, and project emancipatory alternatives as part of the process of social reconstruction.37

To sum up: Television ritual is saturated with mythology. Television creates heroes and role-model ideals as it dramatically celebrates society's values, institutions and way of life. It attempts to resolve social contradictions, and enables individuals to work through their problems, desires and fears so as to experience a symbolic resolution. Television ritual inculcates values and ideology in a familiar and enjoyable set of conventions and patterned narratives that enables the audience to participate with pleasure in its own socialization and social domination. TV rituals suppress and distort history by ignoring contradictions and smoothing out conflicts which are shown to be readily resolvable within the present society. Television thus participates in a massive operation of ideological mystification which helps legitimize and stabilize advanced capitalism.
TV, ideology and advanced capitalism

Television — the electronic ideology machine — is a major producer and transmitter of ideology in advanced capitalist societies, as well as in state socialist societies. In previous articles, I argued that the central role of the broadcast media in contemporary society has changed the nature and function of ideology. Ideology in the culture industries is more imagistic, symbolic and mythical than earlier forms of ideologies which were formulated and transmitted in the print media. Today, television is not only the center of “leisure-time” activity, but it is the major producer and transmitter of hegemonic ideology. TV ideology, however, is not monolithic and homogeneous; rather, it is saturated with contradictions which reproduce the contradictions and social conflicts of advanced capitalism. Habermas’ theory of the “legitimation crisis” is plausible here in view of the fact that there is no single universal ideology in advanced capitalism. It is another question whether the very fragmentation of ideology in the world of TV is not functional for advanced capitalism.

Indeed, does the very activity of watching television keep individuals passively isolated in their homes, thus eroding a sense of “community” and the possibility of political mobilization and action? Do the very contradictions of television ideology keep everyone in their place by providing something for everyone? Do the cumulative myths and ideologies of television produce a false picture of social reality which works against political solutions? Does the formulaic and repetitive ritualistic structure of television programs, series and genres promote cliché-like thinking that is unable to grasp the complexity of experience? Is television the highest form of consumer society? an overwhelmingly powerful means of social control that can stabilize and legitimize society despite its glaring failures and contradictions?

Or, on the other hand, will television become a disintegrating factor in advanced capitalism? Will its fragmentary ideologies, heterogeneity and constant change increase ideological confusion and lead to the collapse of the once dominant ideologies of bourgeois society and advanced capitalism? Will its images of affluence, sexuality, etc. produce rising expectations that cannot be met in an era of scarcity? Will its ubiquitous, albeit distorted, mirror increasingly reflect the disintegration of advanced capitalism, revealing permanent crises in the economy, energy needs, politics and culture? Will television unwittingly legitimize emerging forms of struggle against existing society by simply portraying opposition and revolt? Will new forms of television emerge as a result of technological revolution that will create greater novelty, diversity and controversy in television production? Will the new forms of cable, satellite and public access/community TV produce programming that will subvert existing hegemonic ideologies and mythologies? Can television conceivably produce social enlightenment
and foster radical change?

No easy answers are forthcoming to these questions. To conclude, however, I shall offer a thesis and two proposals: television as an instrument of hegemonic ideology and social control can only be challenged if we develop strategies of critique and praxis. A relentless critique of existing television is necessary for its demystification—to break its power over the viewer. But denunciation, however justified, is not enough. Methodologies must be developed that will enable us to decode and criticize television news, entertainment and advertising. In the words of Barthes, let there be "no denunciation without an appropriate method of detailed analysis; no semiology which cannot, in the last analysis, be acknowledged as semioclasm." Harry Levin, in the same spirit, proposes "mythoclasm" as "a technique for interpreting phantasmagoria. It would be wielded as a scholarly instrument for the examination of superstitious yet significant misconception." This paper has attempted to provide some instruments for a "semioclasm" and "mythoclasm" which at once analyze and demystify, describe and criticize, television myths and rituals.

Analysis and critique, however, are still not enough—alternative television must be created. In the forthcoming electronics and video revolution more and more people will gain video skills, and people who desire radical social change must learn to use video and film as instruments of subversion, social critique and emancipation. Radical television will thus aim simultaneously at the subversion of dominant television forms and content and at the construction of emancipatory alternatives. The former will involve the subversion of the television myths, rituals and ideology described in this paper. An emancipated society will require new forms of television as well as economy; radical television must meet this challenge by creating new television myths and rituals—or, if possible, a new form of television that transcends myth and ritual.

Notes

1. Forthcoming historical studies will develop these theses, which are sketched out in my articles: "Marxism, Ideology, and Advanced Capitalism," Socialist Review, no. 42 (November-December 1978), pp. 57-66; and "TV, Ideology, and Emanicipatory Popular Culture," Socialist Review, no. 45 (May-June 1979), pp. 12-34. I am grateful to my friends at the Austin Institute for Media Studies for criticisms and comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I am also indebted to conversations and correspondence with John Lawrence, Horace Newcomb and Thomas Schatz.


5. Ibid., p. 226.

6. Just for the record, let me conclude the Mod Squad episode cited: Dave, the
brother of Pete's old girl friend, who was also Pete's best friend, was sent to Vietnam and was accidentally killed while handling explosives. It turns out that the company owned by Dave and Claire's father produced these explosives! Hence the father felt guilty, even suicidal, and, in the final scene, he sets out to blow up his whole factory to atone for his guilt! Pete climbs up the tower where the guilty father is going to end it all; and, at the last possible moment before the explosive is detonated, Pete talks to the corporate father out of blowing everything up by pretending that he (Pete) is the dead son, Dave! This sort of plot makes me fear with Adorno that "Every visit to the cinema leaves me, against all my vigilance, stupider and wiser" (Minima Moralia [London: New Left Books, 1974], p. 25). A paraphrase from Enzensberger provides the rejoinder: those condemned to live in a sewer should not feel dainty about handling shit.

10. The most amusing element of the debates was the technical breakdown which delayed the 23 September 1976 debate for twenty-seven minutes as Ford and Carter stood stiffly at attention throughout the delay. McLuhan remarked on the NBC Today show the next morning that the breakdown resulted from "bad vibes" due to a total misuse of a "cool" medium like TV for the "hot" medium of a college-style debate. McLuhan says, it is curious that the one possibility for discursive discussion so inappropriately used the media, resulting in a dull presentation of recited facts and memorized positions rather than real discussion. In an age of symbolic politics, the grand art of political discussion is evidently in decline.

12. Frankfurter Allgemeine (28 July 1979); cited in German Press Review (1 August 1979), p. 3.
15. Ibid., p. 5.
17. See the forthcoming study by Joe Hennan on the New York City fiscal crisis and its media coverage; paper presented at Purdue Film Festival, April 1979.
18. I am referring to Carter's 15 July 1979 "crisis of confidence" energy address, based in part on the memo by Stuart Eizenstat that urges Carter to blame the energy crisis on an appropriate villain (i.e., OPEC). For the text of Carter's speech and the story behind it, see The New York Times (16 July 1979), p. A10.
24. Ibid., p. 7.