Criticism

RECEPTION DIFFICULTIES

David Marc

> . . . the history of modernist art is said by many to be a history of surrealism, and if this is so there are problems of scale, enormous problems of literary judgment, that are raised by the application of terms invented for describing Kafka's *The Trial* to such simplistic objects as television programs. I don't mean to sound so avuncular. *David Thorburn, Professor of Humanities, M.I.T.*[1]

> Any smoothly functioning technology will have the appearance of magic. *Arthur C. Clarke*

> When I sell liquor, it's called bootlegging; when my patrons serve it on silver trays on Lake Shore Drive, it's called hospitality. *Al Capone*

THE ATTEMPT to classify and restrict critical vocabulary according to subjective distinctions between "elite" and "popular" works is symptomatic of the current growing pains of a complex critical response to American television and of a general crisis in American letters which has been described as the clash between the "genteel" and "democratic" strains of American culture.[2] At the turn of the century, New Humanists such as C. E. Norton and Irving Babbitt sought to institutionalize rigid, *a priori* standards to govern the appreciation of art. Paradoxically, American Stalinists (such as Michael Gold[3]) carried this tradition well into this century. There are those today who would seek to adjudge television programs by a set of comfortable rules transmediated from a millenial tradition of literary study. The dialectical nature of art and even of craft are thus denied in favor of an extrinsically approved template of measure, validated by "the mind of Europe." Television, however, is native to the United States. Its technology, its tone, its narrative thrusts, indeed its very ruthlessness, is the synthesis of more than three hundred years in the non-European wilderness. Like Judaism, Christianity, Islam or any other *imago mundi* that came stumbling out of a desert, it transvalued that which came before the ordeal into an ideology whose growth pattern cannot be predicated on the basis of pre-existing sources and models, but instead begs acute observation of its peculiar minutiae in order to understand its mutated ecology.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates distinguishes between:

1) arts—rational methods for using knowledge toward the end of finding truth

and

2) knacks—arational methods concerned only with yielding what pleases[4]

American commercial television, where quantitative audience ratings and demographic surveys—as opposed to esthetic evaluations—determine whether a work will even be permitted to exist, has clearly placed its intention in the realm of "knack." However I feel no shame in borrowing from Spingarn and the New Critics in asserting that intention is ultimately of less importance than the generative reality of the work itself.[5] Unlike the New Critical view, I simply take it for granted that the generative reality is not circumscribed by the last page or the final commercial of the text. The sole *raison d'être* for *I Love Lucy* was indeed to gather multitudes of heads in front of television sets so that the investing commercial interests could increase sales through optimal exposure of their products. However, in order to accomplish this goal, a script had to be written, actors had to render performances, sets had to be designed, camera angles imagined, etc., etc. All of these activities are in the realm of art. To refuse to render esthetic judgment on their practice is a form of critical escapism which plays into the hands of the Hollywood/Madison Avenue/Wall Street dream system.

Television is not the syntopicon that Robert Hutchins and other would-be culture czars had in mind for the American people. As Edward Shils has pointed out, it flies in the face of the philanthropic liberalism which hoped that universal literacy would redeem its own sensibility as universal.[6] TV sears the critical skin of Ortega y Gassett, F. R. Leavis, Wyndham Lewis and other advocates of 19th-Century European anti-bourgeois artistocratic ideology. But is it really any surprise that the tastes of a tiny elite of super-educated literati did not become the tastes of millions; even "college-educated" millions? Television, for bad or worse, is the national culture of 20th-Century America. To deny the fact is poor research. To ignore the fact is suicidal politics. I, would-be upwardly mobile, lower class, New York City graduate student, have personally walked in front of more than one class of Iowa farmkid freshpersons and, on the first day of class, have lectured on television texts so obscure as to be analogous to the subtle literary allusions of a doctoral level seminar in 18th-Century literature, and not only have I been understood by the class members, but taken to task by them for my opinions. The television critic must take his cues from Whitman. He must go among the people and lend his training and sensibility to the new experiences of life with the machine. What is this machine after all if not merely the latest evolutionary product of the bio-pool? To ignore television is to follow the heritage of William

Cullen Bryant and Henry Longfellow; to write whimsical European lyrics while the vast and wild new environment of the continent—fraught as it is with dangers and possibilities—lay at one's heels. A modern day Whitman would have to watch television or else be forced to give up his connection to the masses of people who find their wishes, dreams, and role models therein. Perhaps television has become the "ordeal" of the American scholar, in Van Wyck Brooks's sense of the word. To refuse to watch has become the bottom line of the Old Gentility. To make believe that American television can be measured by the "standards" of the ballets and British stage productions of PBS (laughingly called the "Petroleum Broadcasting System" in advertising circles) is perhaps worse; a comi-tragic species of neo-gentility. For me, television is organic. It was more "there" than the trees and rivers themselves in the world I was born into. To reject it out of hand would be historical voyeurism; a kind of bourgeois nostalgia; even nihilism. Would the boost in self-image be worth the loss of my past? If I do not make my past usable, it will continue to use me. The critic born after World War II is born with TV, yet everywhere he is in blinders. To confront television has become merely the refusal to deny nature. Television awaits its Wordsworth who can skip through its wavy woods making sense of its light and dark.

Shils accuses those "who know better" and still give their critical attention to works of mass culture, of indulging in a "continuation of childish pleasures"; of cultivating an easy connoisseurship which makes them "folksy" and flaunts their rebellion against the rigor and aridity of the "high" culture which their parents, teachers and the cultural ruling classes once tried to impose upon them.[7] As if the parents did not buy the sets that sit in 97% of American homes! As if the "cultural ruling classes" were not the networks and advertising agencies top-heavy with Ivy League graduates! As if the scorn of teachers does not itself signal the highest form of validation in American culture! It is this kind of patronizing thinking on the part of Shils, MacDonald and others that allows for such an easy alliance between "the industry" and the university intellectual. It has been an unending source of strength for the networks and their advertisers to be able to tinker so grandly with American culture beneath the upturned nose of the very intellectual who is perhaps the best equipped individual to make an appraisal of their handiwork.

The choice is clear: to turn one's back on the exasperating present and make of culture study a tiresomely elegant and clever de-construction of an imagined finite, static whole, locked away in the distant and safeguarded tower of the ivied cathedral; or to place oneself in the shabby livingroom of the present and begin the struggle to make sense of the endless parade of artificed images that relentlessly marches before our eyes. T. S. Eliot's primary cultural determinants—religion and ethnicity[8]—pale as cultural indicators in the face of the choices offered by

TV Guide. Even the more recent cultural signifiers—income, education, occupation, sex and age—are becoming subsumed in the face of multichannel cable systems which are attempting to recognize, pacify and finally obliterate such avenues of identification as viable arenas of individual (human) expression. Yet television, beneath the powerful aura that sends intellectuals scurrying to their fallout shelters, is just a machine; a tool with no mind. The same knife that is flaying apart the cultural guts of America can be used to carve pluralities of artworks. As Herbert Gans has pointed out, all human beings have esthetic urges and are receptive to symbolic expressions of their wishes and fears.[9] Will the humanist critic (critic of the humanities) leave the recoupment of these symbolic expressions to the social scientist whose primary concern is merely to measure the effect of the text on those nameless others, "the masses?" If the term humanist means anything, those who accept the label must make their voices heard. I would submit that all the "validated" empirical analyses of the effects of mass culture on the masses aren't worth a damn because the social scientist is merely playing what has become Madison Avenue's own game—and nobody beats the dealer. Numbers are abstract symbols and nobody can manipulate them with more facility than the corporations whose very existence is predicated on them. Only the personal, critical, autobiographical testimony of individuals impassioned and trained to identify and evaluate the individual texts of authors and their relationships to each other can pierce the relentless, habituating *imago mundi* emanating from the scores of millions of receivers that fill every crevice of the republic with their highly deliberate, humanly conceived sights and sounds. Like Plato, the Puritans and the Soviet, the literary elite of the United States of America now tremble with fear that "civilization" (i.e., rational moral standards) can be completely undermined by a medium of expression. If anything, one would think that such a view would make a counter-statement all the more pressing a project. The dime novels which caused such horrors to the New Humanists (most of them far less complex in concept or imagination than many television shows) were eventually recovered by Henry Nash Smith as a fertile compost heap of the national imagination.

Perhaps most important is the fact that television simply will not disappear. Forget that. Instead, its own poets—and critics—must arise, Cincinnatus-like, from the audience and begin the guerrilla work of creating at least a tiny liberated zone. Collectives such as the Mariposa group and TVTV are beginning this work in the documentary area. There are those who feel that *Saturday Night Live* (NBC, 1975-1980) may be moving toward this in the commercial "entertainment" realm, though I remain not completely convinced. Television is, after all, merely a transmission system which can be used to the varied purposes of its controlling agents.

Why America?

In a nation which could never become a nation, which failed to recog-

nize even the most basic human rights of a tenth of its people for a hundred years culminating in civil war, whose black troops had to fight attached to the French army in World War I, who incarcerated its citizens of Japanese descent during World War II, for a nation that has at one time or another in its history struck out violently at every part constituting itself, the opportunity to become one nation under Walter Cronkite is a potent anxiety alleviator. Instant *gemeinschaft* for the culture that gave the world instant coffee.

IDEOLOGICAL DREAM I: Western Culture (Mediterranean arts and letters via Germany and England) was choking and dying at the hands of resilient archaisms. America is new space; a little *Lebensraum*. So we use our technology (ships and sailing arts) to take the whole shebang, Locke, stocks and barrel, across the sea and this time, with the advantage of bourgeois planning, do it right ("the advantage authors have of correcting in a second edition some faults of the first"[10]). The mind, after all, is separate from things (nature); ergo the culture of Europe is abstract. The land did not make the culture, the culture made the land (scape). The bourgeois mind, free of the irrational constraints of the pre-scientific blood aristocracy, will clear the new land and give us just the *tabula rasa* we need. Rocks? Indians? The mind of Europe can fix that. In our reformed religions which permit science, can the gun be anything less than holy? Every green pasture in Europe has already been painted twice. What we need are new vistas onto which we can build the picture windows of our libraries. Instead of shuttling off the peasantry to Manchester, we'll have enough land for those who find factory work too neurotic. White agrarian masses! We'll be able to have epics again! "History terminated at 1600"[11] anyway. Let's run it back one more time—and this time, please, with standards. Gotta have standards if we're gonna be the aristocracy.

Television is the Frankenstein's monster of the bourgeoisie. Its technology comes directly from the two world wars. The massive concentration of capital necessary to launch and sustain it at its scale is the signal achievement of the American middle class. The joke's on the middle class however because television is gobbling up the very "standards" which make a bourgeois life enviable. As Leslie Fiedler has written, "The high-minded petty bourgeois cannot forgive the rejection of himself as hero which is implicit in Superman."[12] Yet at the same time, the bourgeois has pinned his economy on Superman. Faced with the choice of dignity or money, the bourgeois capitulates to his car payments and joins the "official euphoria [which] spreads over the culture like the broad smile of an idiot."[13] If the masses are convinced they are living royally with synthetics and credit, why should they envy the bourgeoisie? Is not the bourgeois experience empty without status? Only suckers buy Cadillacs when everyone can afford them. What kind of ruling class can't be distinguished

from its lackeys without a tax return? The masses in their mortgaged recreational vehicles find fantasy figures of sex and violence far more "highly mimetic" than overly rational, under-sexed burgomasters.

IDEOLOGICAL DREAM II: The vibes are getting very heavy in Europe, what with all the wars and these goddamned dirty disgusting factories popping up all over the place. It's burnt out, baby. The social mobility ain't worth a shit. I can read and write and add and subtract and all I can do for a job is shovel pigshit or tighten screws for some Lordship in the London burbs? Medieval architecture just ain't worth these "ashes and rags."[14] I hear over there in America they got Indians living in the woods who don't pay no taxes and are into sex and dancing and drugs. "Lasses in beaver coats come away/Ye shall be welcome to us night and day."[15] Dot's for me! Get me a ticket on the next boat. All you got to do is throw a seed in the ground and—boom—supper. Beat! Beat! Drums! Here I comes.

As the French have realized for years, television is American dada. Charles Dickens on LSD. The greatest parody of European culture imaginable. *The Dunciad*, ninety minutes nightly; coast-to-coast with Johnny Carson as host. Police dramas owing everything to *The Rape of the Lock*. Yahoos and Houyhnhnms battling it out with submachine guns. A Grub Street backed with more money than the combined nobilities of Europe. Freud, debunked and resurrected at the drop of a hat. Sex objects stored in a box, available at the throw of a switch. Art or not art? Who the hell could care but Webster? Interesting? Only the genteel could find such a phantasmagoria flat. Yesterday's trashy Hollywood movies which were instantly beloved by the masses have become the work of unheralded *auteurs* and are shown in the ritziest art houses, prized by devotees of *le cinéma*. Whitman hung out in working class bars. The Beats went to the movies. Hippies are watching.

Notes Toward The Definition of Television

Oddly enough, television, far more than any art form, is ruled by its critics. Yet the manifestoes of these critics are not to be found in any public organ, but rather in corporate memoranda. For the true critical minds of American commercial television are corporate executives who carry titles such as Director of Programming, Vice-President of Audience Measurements and Chief Corporate Planning Officer. As critics, of course, they do not actually realize a single morpheme of their own in the text; not a word, sound or picture. This is left up to "independent" producers and their staffs. Yet if one of these critics comments negatively on a line or a character, it is more than likely to be removed from the text, post haste. They can throw a show off the air with a frown. Create careers with a smile. That Walter Kerr could ever command such attention on Broad-

way! A struggling writer can come to them with the mere idea of a play and, if pleased, they can procure him a quarter million dollar "grant" on the spot. If they meet resistance to their critical ideologies, they have legions of sociologists and psychologists who can generate "scientific" proof of their concepts.

Paul Klein (Philosophy Ph.D., Columbia University) was NBC Programming Director until recently. He is famous in the industry for his Least Objectionable Program or LOP Theory. This theory maintains that most viewing is the result of a formal decision to simply *watch television*, without a primary allegiance or thought to what's on. "What do we watch?" is merely a secondary question. Most people (despite the A.C. Neilson Company's figure that the average American watches over six hours a day) don't really have strong preferences for shows; or at least are too ashamed or guilty to express these preferences socially. Television shows, after all, are universally recognized as "low class" and even "idiotic." Owners of thousand dollar sets casually call them "boob tubes." So, they go to *TV Guide* or the newspaper and pick the "least objectionable" of all the lousy, trashy shows that are on. Along comes Fred Silverman, *wunderkind* with a mere MA in Sociology from Ohio State. He makes a brilliant modification which catapults ABC from last place to #1, The Nag Effect: Granted, adults are generally Hamlet-like about television choices. But not so 12-17 year olds! While Mom and Dad are LOPping around looking for something to watch, the 12-17 y.o.'s come marching into the all-important livingroom-with-the-primary-color-unit and announce, "I want to watch *The Incredible Hulk*." Mom and Pop, who can't see the difference anyway, defer. Without commitment, how can they muster the energy to fight hyperactive teenagers who are overidentifying with fantasy figures to compensate for their puberty crises? And what do 12-17 y.o.'s like? Violence and sexual voyeurism. Dashing surferboy cops in sexy and stylish flannels and denims wielding 45-caliber magnums. Hip blondes who jiggle bralessly.

The first important task of a television critic will be to determine the significance of the fact that Fred Silverman's father was a TV repairman. Through the looking glass?

1 Personal letter from David Thorburn, March 31, 1978.

2 Perhaps more than any other modern critic, Dwight MacDonald has been responsible for the polarization of these concepts, especially in "A Theory of Mass Culture," *Diogenes 3* (Summer, 1953): 1-17 and "Masscult and Midcult," *Against the American Grain* (New York, 1962). While this polarized view may be useful at times as differential terminology, it is somewhat self-destructive in that it implies some empirical absolute threshold of worth that has yet to be named. The concept of "midcult" simply begs two absolute thresholds.

3 Michael Gold, *The Hollow Men* (New York: International Publishers, 1941), esp. chapter one.

4 This translation from the Greek and interpretation are taken from John Cawelti, "Notes Toward An Aesthetic of Popular Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* (Fall, 1971): 255-68. Reprinted in Ray Browne, *Popular Culture and Expanding Consciousness* (New York: Wiley Press, 1973): 45-59.

5 New Criticism, as defined by Joel Spingarn, "The New Criticism," *The Achievement of American Criticism,* ed. C. A. Browne, (New York: Ronald Press, 1954), seems valuable to me in that it is an important first step in any criticism. Its demand for exacting examination of the text is perhaps especially important to popular culture critics who may be tempted to treat individual texts as arbitrary realizations of conceptual formulas without the close reading necessary to come to such a conclusion. The danger of New Criticism in popular culture study, as elsewhere, is that the critic must remember that it is only a first step toward recuperating a work.

6 Edward Shils, "Daydreams and Nightmares: Reflections on the Criticism of Mass Culture," *Sewanee Review* 65 (Oct.-Dec., 1957): 568-9.

7 Ibid., p. 570.

8 I think this is a fair conclusion to draw from T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt et al., 1968).

9 Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), esp. chapter two, p. 65.

10 Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography and Other Writings,* ed. R. Nye, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), p. 1.

11 Remark attributed to C. E. Norton by Prof. Sherman Paul in class of 18 October, 1980.

12 Leslie Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends," *Encounter* 5 (1955): 12-23.

13 Robert Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1962).

14 Walt Whitman, "Europe: The 72nd and 73rd Years of These States," *Leaves of Grass,* ed. M. Cowley, (New York: Penguin, 1959). (Poem copyrighted 1855.)

15 William Carlos Williams, "The May-pole at Merry Mount," *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1956).