IN ONE OF THE FEW FAMOUS SPEECHES GIVEN ON THE subject of television, Federal Communications Commission chairman Newton N. Minow shocked the 1961 convention of the National Association of Broadcasters by summarily categorizing the membership's handiwork as "a vast wasteland." The degree to which Minow's metaphor has been accepted is outstripped only by the appeal of television itself. Americans look askance at television, but look at it nonetheless. Owners of thousand-dollar sets think nothing of calling them "idiot boxes." The home stereo system, regardless of what plays on it, is by comparison holy. Even as millions of dollars change hands daily on the assumption that 98 percent of American homes are equipped with sets and that these sets play an average of more than six and a half hours each day, a well-pronounced distaste for TV has become a prerequisite for claims of intellectual and even of ethical legitimacy. "Value-free" social scientists, perhaps less concerned with these matters than others are, have rushed to fill the critical gap left by status-conscious literati. Denying the mysteries of teller, tale, and told, they have reduced the significance of this American storytelling medium to clinical studies of the effects of stimuli on the millions, producing volumes of data that in turn justify each season's network schedules. Jerry Mander, a disillusioned advertising executive, his fortune presumably socked away, has even written a book titled
Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television. Hans Magnus Enzensberger anticipated such criticism as early as 1962, when he wrote,

The process is irreversible. Therefore, all criticism of the mind industry which is abolitionist in its essence is inept and beside the point, since the idea of arresting and liquidating industrialization itself (which such criticism implies) is suicidal. There is a macabre irony to any such proposal, for it is indeed no longer a technical problem for our civilization to abolish itself.

Though Mander, the abolitionist critic, dutifully listed Enzensberger’s The Consciousness Industry in his bibliography, his zealous piety—the piety of the convert—could not be restrained. Television viewers (who else would read such a book?) scooped up copies at $6.95 each (paperback). As Enzensberger pointed out, everyone works for the consciousness industry.

Despite the efforts of a few television historians and critics, like Erik Barnouw and Horace Newcomb, the fact is that the most effective purveyor of language, image, and narrative in American culture has failed to become a subject of lively humanistic discourse. It is laughed at, reviled, feared, and generally treated as persona non grata by university humanities departments and the “serious” journals they patronize. Whether this is the cause or merely a symptom of the precipitous decline of the influence of the humanities during recent years is difficult to say. In either case, it is unfortunate that the scholars and teachers of The Waste Land have found “the vast wasteland” unworthy of their attention. Edward Shils spoke for many literary critics when he chastised those who know better but who still give their attention to works of mass culture, for indulging in “a continuation of childish pleasures.” Forging a defense of childish pleasures, I cannot imagine an attitude more destructive to the future of both humanistic inquiry and television. If the imagination is to play an epistemological role in a scientific age, it cannot be restricted to “safe” media. Shils teased pop-culture critics for trying to be “folksy”; unfortunately, it is literature that is in danger of becoming a precious antique.

A S THE TRANSCONTINENTAL INDUSTRIAL PLANT built since the Civil War was furiously at work meeting the new production quotas encouraged by modern advertising techniques, President Calvin Coolidge observed that “the business of America is business.” Since that time television has become the art of business. The intensive specialization of skills called for by collaborative production technologies has forced most Americans into the marketplace to consume an exceptional range of goods and services. “Do-it-yourself” is itself something to buy. Necessities and trifles blur to indistinguishability. Everything is for sale to everybody. As James M. Cain wrote, the “whole goddamn country lives selling hot dogs to each other.” Choice, however, is greatly restricted. Mass-marketing theory has formalized taste into a multiple-choice question. Like the menu at McDonald's and the suits on the racks, the choices on the dial—and, thus far, the cable converter—are limited and guided. Yet even if the material in each TV show single-mindedly aims at increasing consumption of its sponsors' products, the medium leaves behind a body of dreams that is, to a large extent, the culture we live in. If, as Enzensberger claimed, we are stuck with television and nothing short of nuclear Armageddon will deliver us, then there is little choice but increased consciousness of how television is shaping our environment. Scripts are written. Sets, costumes, and camera angles are imagined and designed. Performances are rendered. No drama, not even melodrama, can be born of a void. Myths are recuperated. Legends conjured. These acts are not yet carried out by computers, although network executives might prefer a system in which they were.

Beneath the reams of audience-research reports stockpiled during decades of agency billings is the living work of scores of TV-makers who accepted the marketable formats, found ways to satisfy both censors and the popular id, hawked the Alka-Seltzer beyond the limits of indigestion, and still managed to leave behind images that demand a place in collective memory. The life of this work in American culture is dependent upon public taste, not market research. A fantastic, wavy, glowing procession of images hovers over the American antenasceni, filling the air and millions of screens and minds with endless reruns. To accept a long-term relationship with a television program is to allow a vision to enter one's life. That vision is peopled with characters who speak a familiar idiosyncratic language, dress to purpose, worship God, fall in love, show élan and naïveté, become neurotic and psychotic, revenge themselves, and take it easy. While individual episodes—their plots and climaxes—are rarely memorable (though often remembered), cosmologies cannot fail to be rich for those viewers who have shared so many hours in their construction. The salient impact of television comes not from “special events,” like the coverage of the Kennedy assassinations or of men on the moon playing golf, but from day-to-day exposure. Show and viewer may share the same living room for years before developing a relationship. If a show is a hit, if the Nielsen families go for it, it is likely to become a Monday-through-Friday “strip.” The weekly series in strip syndication is television's most potent oracle. Because of a sitcom's half-hour format, two or even three of its episodes may be aired in a day by local stations. Months become weeks, and years become months. Mary accelerates through hairdos and hem lengths; Phyllis and Rhoda disappear as Mary moves to her high-rise swinging-singles apartment. Mere plot suspense

David Marc, who teaches in the American Civilization program at Brown University, is the author of Demographic Vistas, a book about television which was published recently by the University of Pennsylvania Press.
or identification with characters yields to the subtler nuances of cohabitation. The threshold of expectation becomes fixed, as daily viewing becomes an established procedure or ritual. The ultimate suspension of disbelief occurs when the drama—the realm of heightened artifice—becomes normal.

The aim of television is to be normal. The industry is obsessed with the problem of norms, and this manifests itself in both process and product. Whole new logics, usually accepted under the general classification “demographics,” have been imagined, to create models that explain the perimeters of objectionability and attraction. A network sales executive would not dare ask hundreds of thousands of dollars for a prime-time ad on the basis of his high opinion of the show that surrounds it. The sponsor is paying for “heads” (that is, viewers). What guarantees, he demands, can be given for delivery? Personal assurances—opinions—are not enough. The network must show scientific evidence in the form of results of demographic experiments. Each pilot episode is prescreened for test audiences who then fill out multiple-choice questionnaires to describe their reactions. Data are processed by age, income, race, religion, or whatever cultural determinants the tester deems relevant. Thus the dull annual autumn dialogue of popular-television criticism:

Why the same old junk every year? ask the smug, ironic television critics after running down their witty lists of the season’s “winners and losers.”

We know nothing of junk, cry the “value-free” social scientists of the industry research factories. The people have voted with their number 2 pencils and black boxes. We are merely the board of elections in a modern cultural democracy.

But no one ever asked me what I thought, mumbles the viewer in a random burst of stupefaction.

Not to worry, the chart-and-graph crowd replies. We have taken a biopsy from the body politic, and as you would know if this were your job, if you’ve seen one cell—or 1,200—you’ve seen them all.

But is demography democracy?

Fortunately, TV is capable of inspiring at least as much cynicism as docility. The viewer who can transform that cynicism into critical energy can declare the war with television over and instead savor the oracular quality of the medium. As Roland Barthes, Jean-Luc Godard, and the French devotees of Jerry Lewis have realized for years, television is American Dada, Charles Dickens on LSD, the greatest parody of European culture since The Dumbazz, Yahooos and Houyhnhnns battling it out nightly with sub-machine guns. Sex objects stored in a box. Art or not art?

This is largely a lexicographical quibble for the culturally insecure. Interesting? Only the hopelessly genteel could find such a phantasmagoria flat. Yesterday’s trashy Hollywood movies have become recognized as the unheralded work of auteurs; they are screened at the ritziest art houses for connoisseurs of le cinéma. Shall we need the French once again to tell us what we have?

TELEVISION IS FUNNY

Though network executives reserve public pride for the achievements of their news divisions and their dramatic specials, comedy has always been an essential, even the dominant, ingredient of American commercial-television programming. As Gilbert Seldes wrote, in The Public Arts, “Comedy is the axis on which broadcasting revolves.” The little box, with its oblong screen egregiously set in a piece of overpriced wood-grained furniture or cheap industrial plastic, has provoked a share of titters in its own right from a viewing public that casually calls it the “boob tube.” Television is America’s jester. It has assumed the guise of an idiot while actually accruing power and authority behind the smoke screen of its self-degradation. The Fool, of course, gets a kind word from no one: “Knee-jerk liberalism,” cry the offended conservatives. “Corporate mass manipulation,” scream the resentful liberals. Neo-Comstockians are aghast, righ-teously indignant at the orgiastic decay of morality invading their split-level homes. The avant-garde strikes a pose of smug terror before the empty, sterile images. Like the abused jester in Edgar Allan Poe’s “Hop-Frog,” however, the moguls of Television Row make monkeys out of their tormentors. Profits are their only consolation; the show must go on.

In 1927 Philo T. Farnsworth, one of TV’s many inventors, presented a dollar sign on a television screen in the first demonstration of his television system. By the late 1940s baggy-pants vaudevillians, stand-up comedians, sketch comics, and game-show hosts had all become familiar video images. No television genre has ever been without what Robert Warshow called “the euphoria [that] spreads over the culture like the broad smile of an idiot.” Police shows, family dramas, adventure series, and made-for-TV movies all rely heavily on humor to mitigate their bathos. Even the news is not immune, as evidenced by the spread of “happy-talk” formats in TV journalism in recent years. While the industry experiments with new ways to package humor, television’s most hilarious moments are often unintentional, or at least incidental. Runes of ancient dramatic series display plot devices, dialogue, and camera techniques that are obviously dated. Styles materialize and vanish with astonishing speed. Series like Dragnet, The Mod Squad, and Ironside surrender their credibility as “serious” police mysteries after only a few years in syndication. They self-destruct into ridiculous stereotypes and clichés, betraying their slick production values and affording heights of comic ecstasy that dwarf their “original” intentions. This is an intense comedy of obsolescence that grows richer with each passing television season. Starsky and Hutch render Jack Webb’s Sergeant Joe Friday a mes- sianic madman. Hill Street Blues returns the favor to Starsky and Hutch. The distinction between taking television on one’s own terms and taking it the way it presents itself is of critical importance. It is the difference between activity and passivity. It is what saves TV from becoming the ho-
mogenizing, monolithic, authoritarian tool that the dooms-
day critics claim it is. The self-proclaimed champions of
"high art" who dismiss TV shows as barren imitations of
the real article simply do not know how to watch. They are
like freshmen thrust into survey courses and forced to read
Fielding and Sterne; they lack both the background and
the tough-skinned skepticism that can make the experi-
ence meaningful. In 1953 Dwight Macdonald was appar-
ently not embarrassed to condemn all "mass culture" (in-
cluding the new chief villain, TV) without offering any
evidence that he had watched television. Not a single
show was mentioned in his famous essay "A Theory of
Mass Culture." Twenty-five years later it is possible to
find English professors who will admit to watching Master-
piece Theatre. But American commercial shows? How could
they possibly measure up to drama produced in Britain and
tied in form and sensibility to the nineteenth-century nov-
el? To this widespread English Department line there is an
important reply: TV is culture. The more one watches,
the more relationships develop among the shows and be-
tween the shows and the world. To rip the shows out of
their context and judge them against the standards of oth-
er media and other cultural traditions is to ignore their
American origins and misplace their identities.

ENTER THE PROSCENIUM

The forms that came to dominate television
comedy—and therefore television—were video
approximations of theater: the situation comedy
(representational) and the variety show (presentational).
The illusion of theater is a structural feature of both. It is
created primarily by the implicit attendance of an audi-
ence that laughs and applauds at appropriate moments and
thus assures the viewer that the telecast is originating be-
hind the safe boundary of the proscenium. Normal re-
sponses are thus defined. The "audience" may be actual
or an electronic sound effect, but this is a small matter.
The consequence is the same: the jokes are underlined.

The situation comedy has proved to be the most durable
of all commercial-television genres. Other types of pro-
gramming that were staples of prime-time fare at various
junctures in TV history (the western, the comedy-variety
show, and the big-money quiz show among them) have
seen their heyday and faded. The sitcom, however, has
remained a ubiquitous feature of prime-time network
schedules since the premiere of Mary Kay and Johnny, on
DuMont, in 1947. The TV sitcom obviously derives from
its radio predecessor. Radio hits like The George Burns and
Gracie Allen Show and Amos 'n' Andy made the transition to
television overnight. Then, as now, familiarity was a
prized commodity in the industry. The sitcom bears a cer-
tain resemblance to the British comedy of manners, es-
specially on account of its parlor setting. A more direct ances-
tor may be the serialized family-comedy adventures that
were popular in nineteenth-century American news-
papers. Perhaps because of the nature of its serial continuity,
The sitcom dramatizes American culture: its subject is national styles, types, customs, issues, and language. Because sitcoms are and always have been under the censorship of corporate patronage, the genre has yielded a conservative body of drama that is diachronically retarded by the precautions of mass-marketing procedure. For example, *All in the Family* can appropriately be thought of as a sixties sitcom, though the show did not appear on television until 1971. CBS waited until some neat red, white, and blue ribbons could be tied around the turmoil of that extraordinarily self-conscious decade before presenting it as a comedy. When the dust cleared and the radical ideas that were being proposed during that era could be represented as stylistic changes, the sixties could be absorbed into a model of acceptability, which is a basic necessity of mass-marketing procedure. During the sixties, while network news programs were offering footage of Vietnam, student riots, civil-rights demonstrations, police riots, and militant revolutionaries advocating radical changes in the American status quo, the networks were airing such sitcoms as *The Andy Griffith Show*, *Petticoat Junction*, *Here's Lucy*, and *I Dream of Jeannie*. The political issues polarizing communities and families were almost completely avoided in a genre of representational comedy that had always focused on American family and community. Hippies would occasionally appear as guest characters on sitcoms, but they were universally portrayed as harmless buffoons possessing neither worthwhile ideas nor the power to act, which might make them dangerous. After radical sentiment crested and began to recede (and especially after the first steps were taken toward the repeal of universal male conscription, in late 1969), the challenge of incorporating changes into the sitcom model was finally met. The dialogue that took place in the Bunker home had been unthinkable during the American Celebration that had lingered so long on the sitcom. But if the sitcom was to retain its credibility as a chronicler and salesman of American family life, these new styles, types, customs, manners, issues, and linguistic constructions had to be added to its mimetic agenda.

The dynamics of this challenge can be explained in marketing terms. Five age categories are generally used in demographic analysis: (1) 2–11; (2) 12–17; (3) 18–34; (4) 35–55; (5) 55+. Prime-time programmers pay little attention to groups 1 and 5; viewing is so prevalent among the very young and the old that, as the joke goes on Madison Avenue, these groups will watch the test pattern. Prime-time television programs are created primarily to assemble members of groups 3 and 4 for commercials. Although members of group 4 tend to have the most disposable income, those in group 3 spend more money. Younger adults, presumably building their households, make more purchases of expensive "hard goods" (refrigerators, microwave ovens, automobiles, and so on). The coming of age of the baby-boom generation, in the late sixties and early seventies, created a profound marketing crisis. The top-rated sitcoms of the 1969–1970 season included *Mayberry R.F.D.*, *Family Affair*, *Here's Lucy*, and *The Doris Day Show*. Though all four of these programs were in Nielsen's top ten that season, their audience was concentrated outside of group 3. How could the networks deliver the new primary consumer group to the ad agencies and their clients? Norman Lear provided the networks with a new model that realistically addressed itself to this problem. In *Tube of Plenty* Erik Barnouw shows how the timidity of television narrative can be traced directly to the medium's birth during the McCarthy Era. If the sixties accomplished nothing else, it ended the McCarthy scare. The consensus imagery that had dominated the sitcom since the birth of TV simply could not deliver the new audience on the scale that the new consensus imagery that Norman Lear developed for the seventies could. Lear's break from the twenty-year-old style of the genre seemed self-consciously "hip." The age of life-style was upon us.

In the fifties and sixties, sitcoms were offering the Depression-born post–Second World War adult group a vision of peaceful, prosperous suburban life centered on the stable nuclear family. In these shows—among them, *Father Knows Best*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Donna Reed Show*, *The Trouble With Father*, *Make Room for Daddy*—actual humor (jokes or shticks) was always subordinate to the proper solution of ethical crises. They were comedies not so much in the popular sense as in Northrop Frye's sense of the word: no one got killed, and they ended with the restoration of order and happiness. What humor there was derived largely from the "cuteness" displayed by the children in their innocent but doomed attempts to deal with problems in other than correct (adult) ways. Sometimes an extra element of humor was injected by marginal characters from outside the nuclear family. Eddie Haskell (Ken Osmond) is among the best-remembered of these domestic antinomies. A quintessential wise guy, Eddie deviated from the straight and narrow as walked by Wally Cleaver; this was implicitly blamed on his parents. The
fact that Eddie was uniformly punished by the scriptwriters made his rebellion all the more heroic.

Beneath the stylistic differences that separate a classic fifties sitcom and a Norman Lear show, the two are bound together by their unwavering commitment to didactic allegory. Lear indeed updated the conversation in the sitcom living room, but the form of his sitcoms was actually quite conservative. Like the sitcoms of the fifties, Lear's shows reinforced what Dorothy Rabinowitz has called "our most fashionable pieties." "Fashionable" is the key term. As Roger Rosenblatt has pointed out, the greatest difference between Father Knows Best's Jim Anderson and Archie Bunker is that Jim, the father, is the source of all wisdom for the Anderson family, whereas Archie is more likely to be the object of lessons than the source of them.

Perhaps the reason that the sitcom has been looked down upon by critics as a hopelessly "low" or "masscult" form is that a search for what Matthew Arnold called "the best that has been known and said" is a wild-goose chase as far as the genre is concerned. R. P. Blackmur, though certainly no TV fan, commented in his essay "A Burden for Critics" that the critic "will impose the excellence of something he understands upon something he does not understand. Then all the richness of actual performance is gone. It is worth taking precautions to prevent that loss, or at any rate to keep us aware of the risk." Television is not yet a library with shelves; it is a flow of dreams, many remembered, many submerged. How can we create a bibliography of dreams? Blackmur also wrote that "the critic's job is to put us into maximum relation to the burden of our momentum." Television is the engine of our cultural momentum. It has heaped thousands upon thousands of images upon the national imagination:

Jackie Gleason rearing back a fist and threatening to send Alice to the moon.

Phil Silvers's bullet-mouthed Sergeant Bilko conning his platoon out of its paychecks.

Jack Benny and Rochester guiding an IRS man across a crocodile-infested moat to the vault.

Dobie Gillis standing in front of "The Thinker" and pining for Tuesday Weld.

Carroll O'Connor giving Meathead and modern philanthropic liberalism the raspberry.

Jerry Van Dyke settling in the driver's seat of a Model T Ford for a heart-to-heart talk with My Mother, the Car.

In Democratic Vistas Walt Whitman called for a new homegrown American literary art whose subject would be "the average, the bodily, the concrete, the democratic, the popular." The sitcom is an ironic twentieth-century fulfillment of this dream. The "average" has been computed and dramatized as archetype; the consumer world has been made "concrete"; the "bodily" has been fetishized as the object of unashamed envy and voyeurism—all of this is nothing if not "popular." The procession of images that was Whitman's own art, and that he hoped would become the nation's, is lacking in the sitcom in but one respect: the technique of television art is not democratic but demograp-}

**IN FRONT OF THE CURTAIN**

"The virtue of [professional] wrestling," Roland Barthes wrote in 1957, "is that it is the spectacle of excess." The sitcom, in contrast, is a spectacle of subtleties, an incremental construction of substitute universes laid upon the foundation of a linear, didactic teletheater. Even the occasional insertion of the *mirabile* or supernatural underlines the genre's broader commitment to naturalistic imitation. Presentational comedy, which shared the prime-time limelight with the sitcom during the early years of TV, vacillates between the danger of excess and the safety of consensus. The comedy-variety genre has been the great showcase for presentational teleforms: stand-up comedy, impersonation, and the blackout sketch. It is similar to wrestling, in that it too strives for the spectacle of excess. The pre-electronic ancestors of the TV comedy-variety show can be found on the vaudeville and burlesque stages: the distensions of the seltzer bottle and the banana peel; the fantastic transformations brought about by mimicry; the titillating physical, psychological, and cultural disorders that abound in frankly self-conscious art forms. But the comedy-variety show does not go to the ultimate excesses of wrestling. Like the sitcom, it is framed by the proscenium arch and accepts the badge of artificiality.

While the representational genres—the sitcom and its cousins, the action/adventure series and the made-for-TV movie—have flourished to the point that they consume almost all of the "most-watched" hours, the comedy-variety show has been in steady decline since the 1950s, when it was a dominant formula for prime-time television. Since the self-imposed cancellation of The Carol Burnett Show, in 1978, the few presentational variety hours that have appeared in prime time have been hosted by singers (Barbara Mandrell, Marie Osmond), and comedy has been relegated to a rather pathetic supporting role. The fall of the genre took place amid increasing demand for a "product" as opposed to a "show" in the growing television industry. As the prime-time stakes rocketed upward, sponsors, agencies, and networks became less tolerant of the inevitable ups and downs of star-centered presentational comedy. The sitcom and other forms of representational drama offer relatively rigid shooting scripts that make "quality con-
trol” easier to impose. Positive demographic responses to dramatic “concepts” are dependable barometers. Performance comedy is only as good as an individual performance; the human element looms too large. Furthermore, representational drama can avoid the dreaded extremes of presentational comedy. Kinescopes of early Milton Berle shows reveal the comedian in transvestite sketches whose gratuitous lewdness rivals that of wrestling at its most intense. The passionate vulgarity of these sketches could not have been wholly predictable from their scripts. Instead, it derives directly from Berle’s confrontation with the camera—his performance. Censorship of such material presents complex editing problems, which are easily forestalled in representational drama by script changes.

Berle’s nova-like career is itself an illustration of the fragility of comedy-variety on television. NBC signed “Mr. Television” to a thirty-year contract in 1951; by the end of the decade he had become an embarrassment to the network and was being used as the host of a bowling show. The message was clear: Berlesque, like wrestling, had been blackballed from television’s increasingly genteel prime-time circle. The late fifties, the heyday of Playhouse 90, The U.S. Steel Hour, and The Armstrong Circle Theater, was the “golden age of television drama.” TV then, as now and always, was on the verge of becoming sophisticated. The NBC late-night spot passed from the wacky Jerry Lester to the neurotically urbane Jack Paar. Berle was certainly neurotic; he simply could not be urbane.

Generally speaking, the comedian has had to frame himself with the proscenium arch and don the mask of a representational character to find a place in prime-time television. The networks have thus provided themselves with a modicum of protection from the unreliability of personalities. Presentational comedy—performance art—may simply be too dangerous a gamble for the high stakes of today’s market.

Interestingly, the disappearance from TV of the clown who faces the audience without a story line has occurred more or less simultaneously with rising interest in and appreciation of performance art in avant-garde circles. In “Performance as News: Notes on an Intermedia Guerrilla Art Group” Cheryl Bernstein wrote:

In performance art, the artist is more exposed than ever before. The literal identification of artistic risk with the act of risking one’s body or one’s civil rights has become familiar in the work of such artists as Chris Burden, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Tony Schaffrath and Jean Toche.

Burden invites an audience into a performance space where spectators sit atop wooden ladders. He then floods the room with water and drops a live electrical wire into the giant puddle. The closest thing television offers to a spectacle of this kind is Don Rickles, who evokes terror in an audience by throwing the live wire of his insult humor into the swamp of American racial and ethnic fears. Rickles, for the most part, has been prohibited from performing his intense theater of humiliation in prime time.

Twice the networks have attempted to contain him in sitcom prosenecia, but these frames have constricted his effect and turned his insults into dull banter. In recent years he has rarely been unleashed upon live studio audiences. The erratic quality of his occasional performances as guest host on The Tonight Show offers a clue to the networks’ reluctance to invest heavily in the presentational comedy form.

Bernstein points to the news as the great source of modern performance art on television. She deconstructs the kidnapping of Patty Hearst by the Symbionese Liberation Army as a performance work. The SLA was a troupe formed to create a multimedia work—the kidnapping—principally for television. The mass distribution of food in poor neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay area (in compliance with one of the SLA’s demands) and the shoot-outs and police chases were all part of a modern theatrical art that can exist only on television. Perhaps the proliferation of the news on television can be tied to the decline of presentational comedy; the two seem to have occurred in direct proportion to each other. The schlockumentary magazine (Real People, That’s Incredible!) is the point at which the two genres meet.

Furthermore, the bombardment of the home screen with direct presentations from every corner of the earth has created a kind of vaudeville show of history. The tensions generated by the nuclear Sword of Damocles create a more compelling package than even Ed Sullivan could have hoped to assemble. The nations of the world have become a troupe of baggy-pants clowns on TV. They are trotted out dozens of times each day in a low sketch comedy of hostility, violence, and affectation. The main show, of course, is the network evening news. Climb the World Trade Center. Fly an airplane through the Arc de Triomphe. Plant a bomb in a department store in the name of justice. Invade a preindustrial nation with tanks in the name of peace. Can Ted Mack compare with this?

THE THEATER COLLAPSES

The television industry is at the heart of a vast entertainment complex that oversees the coordination of consumption and culture. “Entertainment” has been established as a buzz word for narrative and other imaginative presentations that make money. It is used as a rhetorical ploy to specialize popular arts and isolate them from the aesthetic and political scrutiny reserved for “art.” An important implication of the definition of entertain is the intimate social relationship it implies between the entertainer and the entertained. In 1956 Gunther Anders wrote that the “television viewer, although living in an alienated world, is made to believe that he is on a footing of the greatest intimacy with everything and everybody.” The technological means to produce this illusion have since been significantly enhanced. Anders described this illusion as “chumminess.” Television offers itself to the viewer as a hospitable friend: Welcome to The Wonderful World of Disney. Good evening, folks. We’ll be
right back. See you next week. Y'all come back, now. As technology synthesizes more and more previously human functions, there is a proliferation of anthropomorphic metaphor: automated teller machines ask us how much money we need. Computers send us bills. Channel 7 is predicting snow. The car won't start. It is in this context that television entertains. There is an odd sensation of titillation in all this service. Whitman and other nineteenth-century optimists foretold an elevation of the common man to a proud master in the technoworld. Machines would take care of life's dirty work—slavery without guilt. Television enthusiastically smiles and shuffles for the viewer's favor. Even television programs we do not like contribute to the illusion (that is, "We are not amused"). Success in tele-American life is measured largely by the quantity of machines at one's disposal. Are all the household chores mechanized? Do you have HBO? Work is minimized. Leisure is maximized. There is more time to watch television—to live like a king.

Backstage of this public drama a quite different set of relationships is at work. In a democracy, the marketing apparatus becomes synonymous with the state. As the quality of goods takes a back seat to the quantity of services, the most valued commodity of all—the measure of truth—becomes information on the consuming preferences of the hundreds of millions of consumer-kings. Every ticket to the movies, every book, every tube of toothpaste purchased is a vote. The shelves of the supermarkets are stocked with referenda. Watching television is an act of citizenship, participation in culture. The networks entertain the viewer; in return, the viewer entertains thousands of notions on what to buy (that is, how to live). The democrat Whitman wrote that the most important person in any society is the "average man." The demographer Nielsen cannot agree more:

While the average household viewed over 49 hours of television per week in the fall of 1980, certain types viewed considerably more hours. Households with 3 or more people and those with non-adults watched over 60 hours a week. Cable subscribing households viewed about 7 hours a week more than non-cable households.

Paul Klein, the chief programmer at NBC in the late seventies, built his programming philosophy upon what he called the Least Objectionable Program (LOP) theory. This theory, expounded by Klein, plays down the importance of viewer loyalty to specific programs. It asserts that the viewer turns on the set not so much to view this or that program as to fulfill a desire to "watch television." R. D. Percy and Company, an audience-research firm, has found some evidence to support Klein's thesis. TV Guide, summarizing Percy's two-year experiment with 200 Seattle families, reported: "Most of us simply snap on the set rather than select a show. The first five minutes are spent prospecting channels, looking for gripping images." After giving in to the impulse (compulsion?) to watch TV the viewer is faced with the secondary consideration of choosing a program. In evolved cable markets this can mean confronting dozens of possibilities. The low social prestige of TV watching, even among heavy viewers, coupled with the remarkably narrow range of what is usually available, inhibits the viewer from expressing enthusiasm for any given show. The viewer or viewers (watching TV, it must not be forgotten, is one of the chief social activities of the culture) must therefore "LOP" about, looking for the least bad, least embarrassing, or otherwise least objectionable program. While I am ill prepared to speculate on the demographic truth of this picture of the "average man," two things are worth noting: anyone who watches television has surely experienced the LOP phenomenon; and NBC fell into last place in the ratings under Klein's stewardship.

I cite Klein (and Nielsen) to demonstrate the character of demographic thought, the ideology that ultimately produces most television programs and that is always employed to authorize or censor their exhibition on the distribution system. The optimistic, democratic view of man as a self-perfecting individual, limited only by superimposed circumstance, is turned on its head. Man is defined as a prisoner of limitations who takes the path of least resistance. This is an industrial nightmare, the gray dream of Fritz Lang's Metropolis reshoot in glossy Technicolor. Workers return from their multicollared tasks drained of all taste and personality. They seek nothing more than merciful release from the day's production pressures, or as certain critics tell us, they want only to "escape."

"Escapism" is a much-used but puzzling term. Its ambiguities illustrate the overall bankruptcy of the television criticism that uses it as a flag. The television industry is only too happy to accept "escapism" as the definition of its work; the idea constitutes a carte-blanche release from responsibility for what is presented. Escapism critics seem to believe that the value of art should be measured only by rigorously naturalistic standards. Television programs are
viewed as worthless or destructive because they divert consciousness from “reality” to fantasy. However, all art, even social realism, does this. Brecht was certainly mindful of this fact when he found it necessary to attach intrusive Marxist sermons to the fringes of social-realist stage plays. Is metaphor possible at all without “escapism”? Presumably, the mechanism of metaphor is to call a thing something it is not in order to demonstrate emphatically what it is. When the network voice of control says, “NBC is proud as a peacock,” it is asking the recipient of this message to “escape” from all realistic data about the corporate institution NBC into a fantastic image of a bird displaying its colorful feathers in a grand and striking manner. The request is made on the assumption that the recipient will be able to sort the shared features of the two entities from the irrelevant features and “return” to a clearer picture of the corporation. Representational television programs work in much the same way. If there were no recognizable features of family life in The Waltons, if there were no shared features of life-style in Three’s Company, if there were no credible features of urban paranoia in Baretta, then watching these shows would truly be “escapism.” But if those features are there, the viewer is engaging in an act that does not differ in essence from reading a Zola novel. The anti-escapist argument makes a better point about the structure of narrative in the television series. In the world of the series problems are not only solvable but usually solved. To accept this as “realistic” is indeed an escape from the planet Earth. But how many viewers accept a TV series as realistic in this sense? Interestingly, it is the soap opera—the one genre of series television that is committed to an anticlimactic, existential narrative structure—that has created the most compelling illusion of realism for the viewing audience. The survival and triumphs of an action-series hero are neither convincing nor surprising but merely a convention of the medium. Like the theater audience that attends The Tragedy of Hamlet, the TV audience knows what the outcome will be before the curtain goes up. The seduction is not What? but How?

Thus far, I have limited my discussion to traditional ways of looking at television. However, the television industry has made a commitment to relentless technological innovation of the medium. The cable converter has already made the traditional tuner obsolete. From a comfortable vantage point anywhere in the room the viewer can scan dozens of channels with a fingertip. From the decadent splendor of a divan the viewer is less committed to the inertia of program choice. It is possible to watch half a dozen shows more or less simultaneously, fixing on an image for the duration of its allure, dismissing it as its force disintegrates, and returning to the scan mode. Unscheduled programming emerges as the viewer assumes control of montage. It is also clear that program choice is expanding. The grass-roots public-access movement is still in its infancy, but the network mise en scène has been somewhat augmented by new corporate players such as the superstations and the premium services. Cheap home recording and editing equipment may turn the television receiver into a bottomless pit of “footage” for any artist who dares use it.

Michael Smith, a Chicago-born New York grantee/comedian, is among those pointing the way in this respect. Whether dancing with Donny and Marie, in front of a giant video screen, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, in Chicago, or performing rap songs at the Institute of Contemporary Art, in Boston, Smith offers an unabashed display of embarrassments and highlights in the day of a life with television. Mike (Smith’s master persona) is the star of his own videotapes (that is, TV shows). In “It Starts at Home” Mike gets cable and learns the true meaning of public access. In “Secret Horror” reception is plagued by ghosts. The passive viewer—that well-known zombie who has been blamed for every American problem from the Vietnam War to Japanese technological hegemony—becomes a do-it-yourself artist in Smith. If, as Susan Sontag writes, “interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art,” parody is the special revenge of the viewer upon TV.

Whatever the so-called blue-sky technologies bring, there can be no doubt that the enormous body of video text generated during the decades of the network era will make itself felt in what will follow. The shows and commercials and systems of signs and gestures that the networks have presented for the past thirty-five years constitute the television we know how to watch. There won’t be a future without a past.

In Popular Culture and High Culture Herbert Gans took the position that all human beings have aesthetic urges and are receptive to symbolic expressions of their wishes and fears. As simple and obvious as Gans’s assertion seems, it is the wild card in the otherwise stacked deck of demographic culture. Paul Buhle and Daniel Czitrom have written,

We believe that the population at large shares a definite history in modern popular culture and is, on some levels, increasingly aware of that history. We do not think that the masses of television viewers, radio listeners, moviegoers, and magazine readers are numbed and insensitive, incapable of understanding their fate or historical condition until a group of “advanced revolutionaries” explains it to them.

Evidence of this shared, definite history, in the form of self-referential parody, is already finding its way to the air. The television babies are beginning to make television shows. In the signature montage that introduces each week’s episode of SCTV, there is a shot of a large apartment house with dozens of televisions flying out the windows and crashing to the ground. As the viewer learns, this does not mean the end of TV in Jerry Mander’s sense but signifies the end of television as it has traditionally been experienced. SCTV is television beginning to begin again. The familiar theatrical notions of representation and presentation that have guided the development of programming genres are ground to fine dust in the crucible of a sat-
ire that draws its inspiration directly from the experience of watching television. *SCTV* has been the first television program absolutely to demand of its viewers a knowledge of the traditions of TV, a self-conscious awareness of cultural history. In such a context viewing at last becomes an active process. Without a well-developed knowledge of and sensitivity to the taxonomy and individual texts of the first thirty-five years of TV, *SCTV* is meaningless—and probably not even funny. In 1953 Dwight Macdonald described “Mass Culture” as “a parasitic, a cancerous growth on High Culture.” By this, I take it, he meant that mass-consumed cultural items such as television programs “steal” the forms of “High Culture,” reduce their complexity, and replace their content with infantile or worthless substitutes. The relationship of mass culture to high culture, Macdonald told us, “is not that of the leaf and the branch but rather that of the caterpillar and the leaf.” *SCTV* bears no such relationship to any so-called high culture. It is a work that emerges out of the culture of television itself, a fully realized work in which history and art synthesize the conditions for a new consciousness of both. Other media—theater, film, radio, music—do not bend the show to televised renderings of their own forms but instead are forced to become television. The viewer is not pandered to with the apologetic overdefining of linear development that denies much of television its potential force. Presentation and representation merge into a seamless whole. The ersatz proscenium theater used by the networks to create marketing genres is smashed; the true montage beaming into the television home refuses to cover itself with superficial framing devices. The pseudo-Marxist supposition that *SCTV* is still guilty of selling the products is boring—the show is not.

*SCTV* is among the first tangible signs of a critical relationship to TV viewing that is more widespread than a reading of the TV critics would indicate. American TV was born a bastard art of mass-marketing theory and recognizable forms of popular culture. Thirty-five years later a generation finds in this dubious pedigree its identity and heritage. The poverty of TV drama in all traditional senses is not as important as the richness of the montage. For the TV-lifer, a rerun of *Leave It to Beaver or I Love Lucy or The Twilight Zone* offers the sensation of traveling through time in one’s own life and cultural history. The recognizable, formulaic narrative releases the viewer from what becomes the superficial concerns of suspense and character development. The greater imaginative adventures of movement through time, space, and culture take precedence over the flimsy mimesis that seems to be the intention of the scripts. The whole fast-food smorgasbord of American culture is laid out for consumption. This is not merely kitsch. Clement Greenberg wrote that “the precondition for kitsch [the German word for mass culture], a condition without which kitsch would be impossible, is the availability close at hand of a fully matured cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions, and perfected self-consciousness kitsch can take advantage of for its own ends.”

In fact, this process is reversed in television appreciation. The referent culture has become the mass, or kitsch, culture. Instead of masscult ripping off highcult, we have art being fashioned from the junk pile. The banal hysteria of the supermarket is capable of elegant clarity in Andy Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Can*. Experience is re-formed and recontextualized, reclaimed from chaos. Television offers many opportunities of this kind.

The networks and ad agencies care little about these particulars of culture and criticism. The networks promise to deliver heads in front of sets and no more. But, as we will find in any hierarchical or “downstream” system, there is a personal stance that will at least allow the subject of institutional power to maintain personal dignity. In the television demography this stance gains its power from the act of recontextualization. If there is no exit from the demographic theater, each viewer will have to pull down the rafters from within. What will remote-control “SOUND: OFF!” buttons mean to the future of marketing? What images are filling the imaginations of people as they “listen” to television on the TV bands of transistor radios, wearing headphones while walking the streets of the cities? Why are silent TV screens playing at social gatherings? When will the average “Household Using TV” (HUT) be equipped with split-screen, multichannel capability? What is interesting about a game show? The suspense as to who will win, or the spectacle of people brought frothing to the point of hysteria at the prospect of a new microwave oven? What is interesting about a cop show? The “catharsis” of witnessing the punishment of the criminal for his misdeeds, or the attitude of the cop toward evil? What is interesting about a sitcom? The funniness of the jokes, or the underlining of the jokes on the laugh track? The plausibility of the plot, or the portrayal of a particular style of living as “normal”? What is interesting about Suzanne Somers and Erik Estrada? Their acting, or their bodies? Television is made to sell products but is used for quite different purposes by lonely, alienated people, families, marijuana smokers, born-again Christians, alcoholics, Hasidic Jews, destitute people, millionaires, jocks, shut-ins, illiterates, hang-gliding enthusiasts, intellectuals, and the vast, heterogeneous procession that continues to be American culture in spite of all demographic odds. If demography is an attack on the individual, then the resilience of the human spirit must welcome the test.

“To be a voter with the rest is not so much,” Whitman warned in his *Democratic Vistas* of 1871. The shopper/citizen of the demography ought to know this only too well. Whitman recognized that no political system could ever summarily grant its citizens freedom. Government is a system of power; freedom is a function of personality. “What have we here [in America],” he asked, “if not, towering above all talk and argument, the plentifully-supplied, last-needed proof of democracy, in its personalities?” Television is the Rorschach test of the American personality. I hope the social psychologists will not find our responses lacking.