

Prospects, Vol. 2, 1976.  
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The Television Artistry  
of Norman Lear

For David Thorburn,  
who now makes it  
impossible to write  
about TV without  
using footnotes.  
Horace  
3/3/77

*Horace Newcomb*

I

The November 10, 1975, episode of "Maude" was a brilliant presentation. Bea Arthur, the star, offered a tour-de-force performance, a one-woman show, a monologue in which she revealed to her psychiatrist her deepest fears, her most profound sense of self, of personal loss, and the search for personal meaning. The psychiatrist was present; we saw the back of his nodding head, an occasional movement of his hand scratching notes on a pad. He grunted at times. Arthur moved about a large ornate set. The office was decorated in high Victorian style with drooping plants, mirrors, heavy carved furniture, oriental rugs, and the psychiatrist's high-backed chair. This decor lent depth and richness to the scene, providing contrast to the single performance, the single moving actor.

In the middle of the set was a couch, a startling contrast in chrome and leather. After circling it for some time, having walked the entire set, occupied chairs, and rambled verbally through the rooms of her memory, Arthur finally lay back in the classic pose of analysant: "Oh well, since it's here I might as well use it." The camera moved in for a tight close-up of her face. She posed at an angle, her head lifted slightly out of the supine position by the tilted headrest of the couch. As she continued her narrative of parental conflict and adolescent rebellion, her face, rich with emotion shifted, then trembled, then dissolved as she wept. She strained toward the camera, toward us. An audience of millions hovered over her, listened, laughed, and shuddered by turns, becoming for practical purposes the human side of the silent and anonymous psychiatrist. We were the therapists. We analyzed Maude Finley, and in doing so, we analyzed "Maude." An unforgettable television moment, in true television fashion it was no doubt promptly forgotten.

That it should be forgotten, in spite of its excellence, should not surprise us. The fact that Americans spend most of their leisure time watching television easily explains the casual manner in which they absorb it

unnoticed. They have been saturated with indiscriminately presented, crowded, mindless material. Add to this the fact that we have no television histories, no real traditions, no ready references by which to measure what we see. Most important, we have had no names. Television has been the most anonymous of our entertainment media. The most important moment in the "Maude" episode, then, must have been in the running of the credits where the observant and interested viewer could read, "Supervised by Norman Lear." There were other working producers for the series. There were directors and writers and technical personnel. Like most of the popular visual arts, television is the result of creation by committee and we are constantly faced with the problems of ultimate responsibility and authority. But it is quite clear that Norman Lear makes the space for this sort of creativity in the series that he oversees. Since the beginning of "All in the Family" in 1971 the audiences, critics, and even nonviewers have been aware of the presence behind an expanding group of special television shows. Interviewed, analyzed, criticized, berated, and praised, Lear has established himself as the most prominent of the "self-conscious producers."

By "self-conscious producer" I mean those individuals who create television series out of a personal vision that is best defined by reference to their own expressions of personal values and attitudes. They are the artists and shapers of the shows in the truest sense. They carve broad outlines of form that best express particular visions. In most cases they do not determine the final content of single episodes, nor are they responsible for the minute details of performance. If one looks for theoretical analogues the most evident is the auteur theory of film direction. The analogy is acceptable if it comes without the excessive weight of ideology and personality cult. While it might be possible, for example, to speak in general terms of a wave of liberal views expressed by self-conscious producers in both the Lear shows and in the similar series "M\*A\*S\*H," we begin to see the ideology stretched when we look into the series developed by the Mary Tyler Moore organization, and there seems to be no way to include certain police shows in the same ideological stable even though they, too, are self-consciously produced.

Yet such a range of shows must be included in discussing the role of the self-conscious producer. For it is quite clear that in spite of Lear's current prominence, he is by no means the first such television artist. We need only hear statements of personal philosophy to find our leads to other, similar producers. Quinn Martin says, "I am a patriot. In the police stories that I do, I show the police in an idealized way. Without respect for the police, I think we'd have a breakdown in our society."<sup>1</sup> And immediately we can examine a range of QM productions, from

"The Untouchables" through "The F.B.I." to "The Streets of San Francisco." We can reexamine soap operas in light of producer Agnes Ekhardt Nixon's comments.

Protagonists with whom the viewers most identify today, the ones they champion most, often take the wrong step, make the wrong judgment and must suffer the consequences. They're human.

That suffering of the consequences is, this writer submits, key to the serial's popularity and longevity. For any dramatic entertainment to be a success in 1972 it must be relevant. And relevance repudiates the cliché of the sunset fadeout, of Nirvana on earth. In contemporary society, the mind viewing the small screen knows, if it knows anything, that life is not perfect, and that man has caused the imperfections. He caused them and must "suffer the consequences"—from family quarrel to global war.<sup>2</sup>

And we can rethink the Mark VII productions—"Dragnet," "Adam-12," and "Emergency"—when we realize that Jack Webb rooted his broadest conceptions in a basic personal viewpoint concerning what and who protects society. We must be aware, too, that his own views are informed, in part, by his concern with the shared images of popular culture.

The title came first, I think. The name *Dragnet* popped right up after I had discarded several others, and, as time proved, it was the perfect name for the show. Next I sketched out details of the lead character, a quiet, conservative, dedicated policeman who, as in real life, was just one little cog in a great enforcement machine. I wanted him to be the steady, plodding kind of cop the public never really understood or appreciated or ever heard about. I wanted him to be an honest, decent, home-loving guy—the image of 50,000 real peace officers who do their work without the help of beautiful, mysterious blondes, heavy swigs from an ever present bottle and handy automatics thrust into their belts or hidden in their socks.<sup>3</sup>

The value of this process of personal identification lies in the fact that we can suddenly cut through the massive anonymity of television. While the works still strike us as comfortably familiar, often as hallmarks of popular formulas from other media, they are nevertheless identifiable. They are not necessarily "better" television shows than those that bear no personal mark, but they are distinguishable. In this way, then, they are at least more valuable for they enable us to "see" television more clearly.

But the obvious benefits that come from the identification of self-conscious producers are to some degree offset by the questions that must arise once we have suggested personal responsibility for the creation of television shows. Some of them are old and familiar ones involving the relationship between artist and artwork. What is the relation of "authorial" intention to the final artistic expression? What is the relationship of the "sociological surface" to more complex symbolic structures of meaning? With special regard to the popular arts we must ask how budgets, sponsors, and censors work in the shaping of the work of entertainment. And we must ask whether or not the artist is simply reflecting the broadest, most indiscriminating needs of the mass audience or offering us some carefully defined expression of personal concerns, tailored so as not to offend. In other words, is the self-conscious television producer selling his own personal vision, or is he merely selling himself?

## II

It is easy to see how the work of Norman Lear stands at the center of such questions. With the beginning of "All in the Family" it was clear that a new type of television program had come to the American audience, and when the clouds of publicity and controversy began to settle, we were quite aware of the program as the work of a controlling mind. Although the show was adapted from a British prototype, Lear redefined it into a specifically American product.

But what does the immediate, enormous and continuing popularity of the program tell us? We need only pick up the newspaper to know that bigotry exists in America. Is the show catering to a deep, ineradicable racism in our culture? Or is it an ironic, implicit attack on those values, as many persons—Lear among them—would have us believe? Does Lear's own vision of what the show means carry any weight in the light of sociological analysis and conclusion? The attempts to answer the questions are varied, and with their different approaches and postures we can circle the meaning of "All in the Family" and come closer to some understanding of the program, the producer, and the audience. The criticism offers us a set of mutual reflections, each shedding continual light on the others. I suggest that consideration of the self-conscious producer's interpretation of what the show means will throw new light on the other interpretations and bring us one step closer to a full understanding of the place of television in our experience.

Recent criticism of "All in the Family" has transcended the early comments that focused on a single, simplistic meaning for the show. It is increasingly evident that the show offers a variety of content within its cen-

tral structure, and the range of possible responses has become the central problem for those who would define the presentation for us. James W. Chesebro and Caroline D. Hamsher use a complex critical system to determine some of the values communicated by the Bunker group. Their system is based on the literary critical theory of Northrop Frye and the theory of "dramatistic processes" of Kenneth Burke, and they have determined that the following "messages" are present in "All in the Family":

The series implies, initially, that *bigots only hurt themselves*, that their attack on human frailties ultimately destroys their own esteem and individuality and reveals them to others as insensitive. . . .

A second message of this series is that *bigots can be laughed at instead of hated*. . . .

The series posits yet a third message: *the WASP is dying as a national norm and ideal*. . . .

Finally, "All in the Family" suggests that *change is good as long as it is moderate and liberal*.<sup>4</sup>

Chesebro and Hamsher circumscribe their identification of "messages" with supportive examples and with the following analysis.

These messages, even when explicitly stated, as we have done here, are by no means automatically acceptable. The messages are conveyed in ways which disarm the viewer and make the viewer more susceptible to accepting them. In particular, Archie's drama (like that of "Sanford and Son") is ironic to the audience. Archie lacks intelligence and power; he cannot control his environment; his pride is a reflection of his stupidity. Archie's flaw is placed in a social context which makes him incapable of success; Archie becomes, therefore, a pathetic figure to be pitied rather than hated. The ironic form of the series sets bigotry in a formal setting which denies its power as a social force.<sup>5</sup>

The authors are careful to remind us that "bigots are not always ironic and we should not assume that bigotry only emerges ironically."<sup>6</sup> In view of this, all our good will in combating bigotry, even the good will of Norman Lear and the show itself, may not be enough to overcome serious social problems. Chesebro and Hamsher conclude that

Consequently, we may wish to be more cautious in believing that liberals always possess the power to disarm bigots. The liberal wish

to see bigots as ironic does not guarantee that bigots are therefore devoid of power. Groups such as the John Birch Society and the Christian Anti-Communist League have members whose educational, economic, and political activism exceed the national norms. There are things to fear in this world; some problems must be taken seriously. Liberalism may not have taken the most positive step in casting bigots as ironic; clearly the labeling process does not diminish the power of bigotry.<sup>7</sup>

Such comments, of course, tell us as much about the values of the critics as about the show itself. What they see in the episodes goes as far in reflecting what they experience as what was placed there by writers and producers. They imply an intent for the series that is not the intent of the producer, as we shall see later. And this is not to say that the audience will perceive either the intent of the producer or the intent discovered by these critics. It does suggest that the critics may not have gone far enough in their search for complex meanings in the series, nor far enough in defining their own position as members of the audience that reads some of its own values into the content it perceives.

Indeed, Philip Wander, another analyst of the program, suggests that television allows us to read our own psyches in the shows we watch, just as we might read ink blots for a psychologist. Arguing that each member of the show's larger family (friends and neighbors as well as the central nuclear family) is a "counter in a larger reality of social conflict. White racist, Black racist, non-violent White saint, non-violent Black saint. . . ."<sup>8</sup> Wander says that each of us, as a member of a particular social class or subculture or ethnic group, listens to that part of the show that affirms our present position. He cites evidence for this position from a study of part of the audience.

In the Winter, 1974, issue of the *Journal of Communication*, there appears an article by Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach entitled, "Archie Bunker's Bigotry." These writers surveyed some two hundred students attending a small mid-western high school. One of the questions they asked was, "Generally speaking, at the end of the program does Archie win or lose?" Forty percent of the respondents thought Archie won. When the respondents were divided on the basis of a personality inventory into high prejudice and low prejudice groups, the results were even more disturbing. Among the high prejudice group, when asked to choose between Mike and Archie, who do you admire, 38% said they like Archie. When asked about the use of ethnic slurs, 22% of this group said

they did not think the practice was wrong. Yet there was some encouraging information. Again among the high prejudiced group, when asked whether Mike or Archie made better sense, 10% thought Archie, 44% thought Mike made better sense. Among the low prejudiced group on the same question, only 3% chose Archie, while 43% chose Mike. The authors also asked, "In 20 years will your attitudes and values be most similar to Archie or to one of the other main characters?" Among the low prejudiced, 7% and among the high prejudiced 16% thought they would hold attitudes and values similar to Archie's; 39% and 37% of these two groups thought they would be nearer the values and attitudes of other characters on the show. Vidmar and Rokeach's findings suggests that satirical control of even the most outrageous opinions on television does not automatically inform viewer response.<sup>9</sup>

Because of such findings, because of his own interpretation, the show, for Wander, must be taken with great caution. Its suggestions are too easy, too easily absorbed by different audiences seeing only what they wish to see. Like Chesebro and Hamsher, Wander does not see enough of what his own values indicate as necessary for a successfully critical presentation. He says, "I do not recall any series, for example, in which the hero organizes political rallies. Perhaps it just wouldn't sell. Instead of political activity there emerges the pale promise of personal salvation if one will only feel the right feeling, rail the proper rail, make the appropriate donation. 'All in the Family' has come to be a secular Sunday school, gently exhorting us to do right, hinting at a better world if we will only lovingly persevere in what we are already doing."<sup>10</sup>

Archie Bunker becomes the focus in this soft, Sunday school world. We can accept him as the central figure because he does no real damage, as he would, for example, were he involved in instructing small children. "The attempt by Archie and for that matter, Edith, to raise a small child, conveying, if only by example, their own attitudes and values, would be pathetic."<sup>11</sup> Instead of this sort of pathos, instead of any real threat, Archie represents, finally, a cultural stereotype, one, Wander suggests, that we would want to reject in real situations, but to which we must cling for cultural stability.

. . . in his unwillingness to change, Archie serves both our nostalgia for inner directed individualism in a nation of clerks and our need to believe that this particular species of individualism is dying out. Therefore, we can study its peculiarities, laugh at its outrages, take courage from its imperviousness to economic and social forces so

far beyond its control that, in Archie's variation, it can only be maintained through a binding of illusion, delusion, and barbarity. Still there he stands, genus *Americanus*, circa 1850, the pioneer spirit in modern times.<sup>12</sup>

This final judgment moves away from a concern with specific social messages that might lead to action on the part of the audience, or that might reflect larger patterns of acceptance and apathy. It discovers importance in Archie Bunker, in "All in the Family," as symbol, as a metaphor that speaks to a confused culture.

Michael Arlen's view of this series moves in the same direction. Ultimately he is willing to go much further than other interpreters of America's most popular television series. He feels that the work of Norman Lear may be the first to ground itself in a drastic change of cultural consciousness. He begins by arguing that both the humor and the social topicality of the Lear productions fade into an "undifferentiated anger." ". . . it is a state of being, interrupted periodically by stage-business jokes or stage-business sentiment, or sometimes stage-business problems. . . . It has become part of the spirit of the occasion, like music in a musical comedy. . . . An individual outburst of temper may sometimes produce a concrete result, such as the disruption of a dinner, but for the most part these acts of the new anger are strangely actionless, and, in any case, are soon automatically defused and retracted."<sup>13</sup> For Arlen, however, even this expression of vague and modern anger does not account for the popularity of Lear's works. To discover the bases of their massive appeal he goes into more speculative territory, territory that calls into question our more conventional notions of how we, as audience, might react to what we see on television.

The comedies of Norman Lear are probably new in that they seem to depend mainly neither on jokes nor on funny stories, nor even on family—although they often give the appearance of depending on all three—but on the new, contemporary consciousness of "media." By this I mean that the base of the Lear programs is not so much the family and its problems as it is the commonality that seems to have been created largely by television itself, with its outpouring of casual worldliness and its ability to propel . . . vast, undifferentiated quantities of topical information, problem-discussions, psychiatric terminology, and surface political and social involvement through the national bloodstream. . . .

Mr. Lear is surely not the first explorer to have stumbled on this pool of media-informed consciousness, but he is the first man, as

far as I can tell, to have so formally and so successfully tapped it for the purposes of mass entertainment. It is perhaps not a step higher, but it is a step forward. Ancient drama, one might say, was concerned primarily with the act as act—as the dynamic of drama. Modern drama has gradually interposed motive and guilt as the new kinetic forces. Now, maybe, we are treading dizzily into a new phase, where both act and motive have blurred or receded and what we are left with onstage (or onscreen) is the strange dynamic of a ubiquitous, unfeeling, unknowing, discursive collective consciousness. Beginning with the comedies of Norman Lear—as Aristophanes might have been the first to appreciate—we have finally been plugged into our own Talk Show: connected to nothing except the assumption of being connected to something, which for the time being appears to be our new bond and our new family.<sup>14</sup>

These approaches to the works of Norman Lear suggest that it is not enough to examine the programs in terms of simplistic cause-and-effect social relationships. Each wants to go further, to suggest deeper complexities. It should be fairly clear that they are not far removed from one another in terms of final interpretation. Chesebro and Hamsher, as well as Wander, challenge what they see as a soft, liberal approach to difficult social problems. They feel that such representations might weaken the audience's already fuzzy approach to the issues. Michael Arlen simply goes one step further in attributing a generalized helplessness to the audience. Social issues are no longer issues, he suggests; "topics" have no hard meanings for many viewers. All is submerged into "media drama" and we respond immediately and vociferously to content that is familiar to us only because of our familiarity with television. If Arlen is correct, then the other writers are simply behind the times. Their concerns express an older time, a simpler consciousness in which problems do have some sort of solution.

Somewhere in between, somewhere in relation to these views, are the views of the creator of the shows. In considering Lear's attitudes toward his productions I do not want to suggest that we can arrive easily or quickly at a more accurate or "truer" vision of what these television shows "mean." I do, however, want to indicate another interpretive path. As suggested above, it may be best to see an artist's intentions as simply another interpretation of his own work. In placing that interpretation alongside the others we add to the range of meanings. Additionally, in the case of television, I will again say that it is important to establish the presence of such personal interpretation on the part of a controlling mind. Norman Lear has not been reticent about his personal values and

the role they play in the shaping of television series. His expression of those values sheds light on the work of the other interpretations, on the role of television in American culture, and on the role of his own shows as part of that larger process of cultural interaction.

### III

A beginning point is with Lear's recognition of the submerged content of television presentations. In many ways he is his own cultural historian.

Some of the print media question whether we have the right to express social opinion in a situation-comedy format. I think we do. And I do not believe we are breaking precedent in doing so. Throughout the years Newton Minow was calling television a wasteland, there were dozens of situation comedies on the tube. I remember the biggest problems those sitcom families faced. The boss is coming to dinner and the roast is ruined. Or daddy's about to take the car out of the garage and only Sis and Junior know that mom dented the fender that very afternoon. I'd like to suggest that there was a great deal of social opinion in that. America was being told that the biggest problem it faced was that the roast was ruined, which could only mean that there was no urban crisis, there were no problems between the races, and Vietnam was a word made up by Walter Cronkite.<sup>15</sup>

Lear's decision to use the medium and its formulas to deal with material of a specific, topical, and controversial nature, to raise implicit social commentaries to the level of explicit social questioning still leaves open the final nature of his presentation. Some of his statements indicate that he wishes to express the sort of classical liberal sentiments defined by Chesebro and Hamsher in their list of social messages. Here, for example, he discusses his relationship to the audience and the audience's relationship to the content he wishes to present:

The so-called adult themes that television is currently dealing in are themes for which the American people have always been ready. We in television simply weren't trusting the people of this country to accept or reject as they saw fit. The TV think tanks were telling us that the Bible belt wouldn't accept this and the South wouldn't accept that and the Administration wouldn't accept anything. I feel that we've reached a time in our national life where we must stop psyching each other out. We, especially in the media, must start to

trust the American public more. And to do that, we must begin to trust ourselves.<sup>16</sup>

Put more simply and more personally this means for Lear, "At fifty . . . I don't want to deal with TV's old drivel about the wife burning the roast before the boss comes to dinner. I want to entertain, but I gravitate to subjects that matter and people worth caring about."<sup>17</sup> As any follower of the shows realizes, this means that Lear will deal with racism in many forms, with difficulties involving human sexuality, with a range of characters who are supposed to be worth caring about.

In dealing with such issues, Lear's views do relate directly to a generalized "liberal" vision of good social relationships. It is more important, however, to focus on the relationships than on the generalization. It is this focus that is provided by examination of the role of the self-conscious producer. The audience observes an expression of liberalism filtered, self-consciously, through a personal philosophy rather than a simple expression of what might appeal to a large liberal audience. Those critics who point to the ambiguity in Lear's productions are not discovering for us the blind spots of soft liberalism. More often they are pointing—consciously or unconsciously—to the successful achievement of Lear's rather complex personal view of the nature of bigotry. He says, "My point is, bigotry exists in *good* people. What would happen if bigotry disappeared from the hearts of all good people tomorrow at noon? Who would be left? A couple of lynchers."<sup>18</sup> And, in a similar vein, "I want to reach, to understand the Archie Bunkers because there are more areas of agreement between them and the likes of me than there are areas of disagreement."<sup>19</sup>

Such views allow no simplistic distinctions between good guys and bad guys. Just as Chesebro and Hamsher suggest, Lear's view lays some responsibility for bigotry at the feet of those who are often most outspoken in their condemnation of bigots. We are forced to speak of "us" rather than of "we" and "they."

I believe we are all connected viscerally. Our education and our endowments vary, our early backgrounds vary, but as human beings, we all connect. I connect with Archie Bunker. Even those who disown him still feel some connection. Our peers in New York who say they can't stand a "lovable" bigot, they relate in some way to Archie.<sup>20</sup>

This suggests that Lear is not trying to disarm "bigots" with irony or control social problems with satire. The presentations are not supposed

to be objective descriptions of "those people." They are to be self-reflections of all the viewers. Laughter at Archie is not laughter at a social problem. Rather, each of us is rather schizophrenically laughing at an unfamiliar, perhaps unwelcome, part of ourselves. Only with this realization can we recognize the bite of the satire, the bitterness of the irony.

Our awareness of this reflexive aspect of Lear's comedies becomes far more astute when we realize that he is not merely offering us cerebral interpretations of his liberalism, but is uncovering, instead, some of his most complex personal relationships. Archie Bunker, for example, as has frequently been observed in print, is a reflection of Lear's own father. "My father and I fought all those battles. I thought: 'My God, if I could only get this kind of thing on American television.' . . . I never forgave him for being a bigot, but I found there were other things to love him for. If I had been smarter, and not his kid, I could have reached him, affected him in those attitudes."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Lear's wife points to another personal interaction. "A great deal of 'Maude' comes from my consciousness being raised by the movement . . . and from Norman's consciousness being raised by mine."<sup>22</sup> I do not mean to suggest anything so simple as that Lear's characters and stories are more profound because of his personal relationship to them. I do mean to suggest, however, that his characters and their situations should be taken as specific expressions of social difficulties rather than as general ones. The Bunkers are characters before they are types. Their conflicts are dramatic interchanges before they are social history.

Bunker's bigotry is problematic not because it does not solve social problems, but rather, because it throws the liberal into an immediate dilemma. Even if we believe that Archie enhances and promotes bigotry by his presence on television, we cannot censor him without becoming bigots. We can no more wipe him off the screen than we take the law or a gun and wipe out our neighbor who wants no blacks on his block. Lear even has the audacity to suggest that we may not be able to wipe out either Archie or our neighbor because we cannot wipe out a similar, frightening portion of our own minds.

In this view lies another answer to an interpreter. Arlen cites an incident in "Hot L Baltimore" in which we discover a "failure" on the show's part to behave in a consistently liberal manner. The scene involved personal relationships between two homosexuals and appeared to Arlen "human, and even serious."

. . . but then the mood would suddenly shift, almost in mid-dialogue, into an old-timey gag or a cheap laugh played off the in-

visible audience. At one point—supposedly a key moment—the youthful and well-intentioned but dopey hotel manager appears on the scene to try to patch things up between the two separating roommates. The scene requires him to shake hands with George. George, quite dignified, extends his hand. The camera cuts to the hotel manager mugging his straight-arrow distaste. Then we see George, playing it seriously. Then back to the hotel manager, alternately rolling his eyes, shuffling his feet, and continuing to mug he-man embarrassment while the sound track variously giggles, sniggers, guffaws, and breathes a chorus-like sigh of relief when the handshake is finally consummated. What seemed unusual about the scene was that the other actors onstage were directed to play it seriously. In other words, the caption on the picture, so to speak, said that we were watching a human, realistic, albeit comedic treatment of a contemporary "social problem," but in fact the figures in the portrait were dissolving into images of our own (and perhaps their creator's) anxieties and ambivalences: into a caricature of the homosexual's role in our society, which the "caption" was attempting to deny.<sup>23</sup>

For Arlen this is an example of the show's schizophrenia. If my understanding of Lear's own intention in addressing "social problems" is correct, however, the schizophrenia is not in the show, but in us. Arlen's caption on the picture should be reversed. It should say something like, "Look. This is the way we respond to human beings who are homosexuals. We respond in well-intentioned stupidity, unable to overcome our own cultural stereotypes." The caricature is not of the homosexual's role in the society—his dignity here is beyond most of us—the caricature is, once again, of our own role in society.

Nowhere does this complex view emerge more clearly than in Lear's consciousness of the possibilities and limitations of television as a tool with which to change people's attitudes. At the bottom line he almost approaches cynicism. "How much could I expect to happen from my silly little half-hour TV show, when the entire Judaeo-Christian ethic for some 2,000 years hasn't budged race relations."<sup>24</sup> Yet even this awareness has not prevented him from seeing his existing shows as his greatest opportunity for answering critics and for moving into new directions. When Laura Hobson, author of *Gentleman's Agreement*, charged that the show was soft on bigotry in its very refusal to use certain "taboo" words such as "nigger," Lear responded on the air, in an episode of "All in the Family" in which Sammy Davis, Jr., appeared as himself. "Archie asks Davis if he—Archie—is prejudiced. 'You prejudiced, Mr. Bunker? Why

if you were prejudiced, you would have called me nigger or coon or something like that. Not you. You came right out and called me "colored." ' And Archie beams."<sup>25</sup>

The continual spin-offs from the show, new series developed around popular characters on other series, indicate another method of using television to respond. While the spin-offs are clearly the result of the creation of appealing, well-developed characters, the decision to build shows around them rather than use them for comic foils is an important one. It indicates that these characters speak out of whole lives, complex experiences and are not to be defined solely by their interaction with our comfortably familiar leads in other series. In January, 1976, Lear even launched a comic soap opera that is astounding critics and audiences alike. It is probably the most complex television show yet created, exploring the form and content of traditional soap operas while stretching them to the limits of what the audiences can absorb. In many ways it is an attempt to use television to raise the consciousness of television viewers about the television they view. Similarly, Mike and Gloria now have a small child and we are watching Archie deal with the presence of an as yet undeveloped human being. It is a new side to a character who, while maintaining a central core of rigid personal characteristics, has, nevertheless, changed over the years. It is almost as if Lear hears his critics and responds directly to their challenges. They suggest that something is impossible in one of his shows and suddenly, if we are attentive and faithful, there it is on the screen in our living room.

#### IV

So now we return to Maude's encounter with her silent psychiatrist, for that episode, as unnoticed as it may have been, did much in the way of explaining and interpreting Norman Lear's personal visions. It was a daring show because it risked self-explication. Any number of critics may have noticed the psychological turbulence locked beneath the surface of Maude's brassy character. But it is doubtful that television's notoriously nonanalytical audience had given it much thought. This episode raised to the surface of the program the motivations of its central character, demanded that we see a more complex, at times frightening, side of Maude. It was as if a critic had written the show couching an analysis of the work of art in the fictional frame of psychoanalysis. Again it seems as if Lear is having his shows answer or respond to critical observations, for here is one of Michael Arlen's most perceptive comments on Lear's work.

Modern, psychiatrically inspired or induced ambivalence may, indeed, be the key dramatic principle behind this new genre of popular entertainment. A step is taken, and then a step back. A gesture is made and then withdrawn—blurred into distracting laughter, or somehow forgotten.<sup>26</sup>

If Lear seems to be responding to such observations in this segment of "Maude," he is also negating it. For in this instance at least the step back is not taken, the gesture is not withdrawn. And while the laughter is there, it is a nervous laughter that tenses us rather than distracts.

Maude begins her monologue with all the conventional social responses to therapy. She doesn't really need it, she tells us. But the little clues, the slips are there. She begins to move deeper into herself. She allows us to see her jealousy and her love for Walter. We see her concern for physical beauty in her continued trips to the wall mirror. There she speaks to herself as well as to us. The concern for physicality, for the biological self takes a more drastic turn when she finally admits that she is afraid to grow older. She is fifty, and the road ahead is "shorter than behind." "I can't take it," she says, "because I love this life." And again, "Dying is leaving an empty space where we once were." With comments such as these we are reminded of Lear's belief that all of us are "connected viscerally."

A similar correlation of ideas occurs in her discussions of her father. In the first portion of the show she can remember only the strain between them. She thinks of how difficult their relationship became when she, as an adolescent, could no longer accept her love for him, yet resented the lack of love she felt. Later in the show she remembers another side of him, remembers how he bought a special coat for her and rushed to meet her at the door of a high school dance so that she would not have to enter in her old wrap. One is reminded of Lear's almost plaintive realization that in spite of his father's bigotry there were "other things to love him for." And we hear the adult statement, probably false, "If I had been smarter, and not his kid, I could have reached him, affected him in those attitudes."

Perhaps the most important specific bit of analysis, however, comes when Maude tells her therapist-audience about her need for love. "I look for it," she says, "then I'm frightened by it. That's why I try to act tough, why my humor is so caustic." This is an astounding revelation. After it we should not be able to observe Maude in the same manner again. She has given a basis for Michael Arlen's charge of a "curious, modern, undifferentiated anger." Moreover, the description cannot



apply to this particular episode, for Maude has indeed specified her anger. She has differentiated it verbally, defined it in relation to herself. She and her anger are set apart. That anger is rooted in her need for love and her fear of accepting it. Her stridency is all bluff, self-protection. Her "humor" is a foil.

These observations lead us even further in speculating about a response to Arlen. Maude seems to have given us a personal expression of a widely shared experience. Her quick plunge into personal depths is perhaps too pat, too easy, but it does collapse an entire psychological profile into one dramatic presentation, heightening our sense of the true elements, as art should always do. If Maude is only expressing common symptoms, then, we may have found a basis for our apparent cultural dependence on Arlen's conception of "media," on these "vast, undifferentiated quantities of topical information, problem-discussions, psychiatric terminology, and surface political and social involvement." The easy media generalities flowing through a "national bloodstream" are far easier to deal with than human needs for giving and taking love.

I am not suggesting that Norman Lear is giving us easy answers to this particular cultural problem. I doubt that he is giving answers at all. He continues to mirror his audience, even in this episode when the character addresses it directly. And it should be very clear that the work of Lear easily slips into the undifferentiated media mass. One lingering disappointment of the "Maude" episode that I have dwelt on is that in the following weeks there was no evident change in the character. The only change might have been in the audience, or in that portion of it that remembered Maude's self-exploration. We could not listen to her jokes without remembering, to some degree, where they came from.

Then, too, I remember the final scene of that important episode. Maude turned in the door and said to her psychiatrist, to her audience, to us, "If I were to kiss you would you kiss me back? See you Friday." So I will not be surprised if Lear gathers his excellent writers and producers at some point and enables them to bring us back to that moment. I will not be surprised to see Maude in the psychiatrist's office at least once during each season. I will not be confused if, in the middle of another episode, she suddenly remembers her own comments in flashback. I am convinced that Norman Lear is conscious enough of each of his productions to see that such special moments do not fade completely. He is turning television back onto itself, and ultimately he may even invite us to be his "special guests" on the giant talk show we know as TV.

## Notes

1. *TV Guide*, February 16, 1974.
2. *Television Quarterly*, Winter 1972, pp. 51-52.
3. *Saturday Evening Post*, September 12, 1959, p. 86.
4. "Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series," in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 11-12.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
7. *Ibid.*
8. "Counters in the Social Drama: Some Notes on 'All in the Family,'" in Newcomb, *Television*, p. 37.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
13. Arlen, "The Media Dramas of Norman Lear," in Newcomb, *Television*, p. 29.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.
15. Martin Kasindorf, "Archie and Maude and Fred and Norman and Alan," *New York Times Magazine*, June 24, 1973, p. 22.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
18. Arnold Hano, "Can Archie Bunker Give Bigotry a Bad Name?" *New York Times Magazine*, March 12, 1972, p. 124.
19. Kasindorf, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
20. Hano, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
21. Kasindorf, "Archie and Maude," p. 13.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
23. Arlen, "Media Dramas," pp. 30-31.
24. Kasindorf, "Archie and Maude," p. 17.
25. Hano, "Archie Bunker," p. 124.
26. Arlen, "Media Dramas," pp. 29-30. It is important to note here as well that Lear is an acknowledged "devotee of psychoanalysis." Cf. Kasindorf, "Archie and Maude," p. 18.



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ISBN: 0-89102-069-1

ISSN: 0361-2333

LC No.: 76-7730

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Printed in the United States of America

*Designed by Harold Franklin*