Aesthetics, Television

Aesthetics—that branch of philosophy concerned with the arts, and definitions of artistic experience and artistic value—has always been a contested category in discussions of popular culture. Suspicion of the term, and of the elitist values and assumptions it was thought to imply, was widespread among reviewers and scholars of film, popular music, and (later) television long before academic literary and cultural theory in the 1970s and beyond dismissed aesthetic arguments as the mystifications of high culture and of society's dominant ideologies.

As we entered the 21st century, the political and ideological perspectives that prevailed for a generation and more in the American academy began to yield to a new synthesis. On this emerging view, the commercial and ideological forces that shape popular entertainments are acknowledged as central but are no longer thought to exclude aesthetic questions. This return to the aesthetic has great importance for the nascent scholarship on television, which was born in the era of high theory, of deconstruction and materialist forms of cultural studies.

It is helpful to recognize that the term "aesthetic" may be understood first in a descriptive, anthropological sense. From this angle, to identify certain cultural items as aesthetic is not to praise their beauty or excellence but merely to describe their chief defining feature: their membership in a class of experiences understood to be fictional or imaginary, understood to occur in a symbolic, culturally agreed-upon imaginative space—a theater; the intimate, privatized spaces of our experience of television; the vast ritual amphitheaters of the ancient world; the dark communal space of the movie house—where "real" experience is re-presented, re-created, symbolically displayed. We watch television fiction, that is to say, in a realm of leisure and "play," a territory or environment licensed as make-believe—an aesthetic space.

In estimating the importance of aesthetic perspectives for understanding television, it is instructive to compare prevailing American attitudes toward the medium with the attitudes held a generation ago toward our homegrown movies and moviemakers. Many film scholars have pointed to the irony that the U.S.'s recognition of her own achievement in the art of film lagged far behind that of Europe. Hollywood's genre movies came finally to seem valuable to Americans, the film critics have shown, only after the French nouvelle vague directors had popularized for educated Americans the myths and conventions of those ancestors of today's police and detective series, the films of Bogart and Cagney and Edward G. Robinson.

This change in American attitudes toward the movies—or, more accurately, this change in the attitudes of the educated classes—is the more instructive, and grows more ironic, when we consider how its emergence is tied to the decline of the movies as a form of popular art. Through the 1950s and the 1960s, as critics of the American film lost their defensiveness and began to speak with the same confidence as the literary critics, the American film itself was being supplanted by television as the U.S.'s principal medium of popular narrative. (In 1951, in the early dawn of the television age, 90 million Americans attended the movies each week; by 1959 weekly attendance had fallen to 43 million; today the vast majority of Americans attend the movies only two or three times per year.) As the Hollywood studios and their vast machinery for star making and film manufacturing receded into history and as there emerged a generation of reviewers, critics, and, finally, university professors whose deepest experience of art had occurred in the movie houses of their childhoods, the American film came to be detached or liberated from its identity as a consumer item, a mere commercial product, and to be located instead within an aesthetic field.

This recognition of the essential *artistic* dimension of the Hollywood commercial movie was and remains an intellectual achievement of great magnitude, for it permitted new perspectives on the cultural history of the United States, profoundly complicating our understand-

ing of the workings of our economic system and altering our understanding of the nature and possibilities of art itself. The most significant implication of this recognition, an implication explored by such scholars as Thomas Schatz and Leo Braudy among others, is this: capitalist greed, the crassest of alliances between commerce and modern technology, may constitute the enabling conditions of a complex narrative art.

But this recognition, which was the work of years and many scholars, was in certain respects a belated one. By the time it had been fully lodged in the educated consciousness, in museums and universities, the American film itself was no longer a habitual experience for the mass of the American population, having yielded to television not only its ability to incite contempt for manufactured entertainment but also its status as the nation's central institution for storytelling.

It seems probable, then (as the case of the movies as well as such ancestor systems as the novel and even the theater suggest), that cultures can perceive the artistic character of their primary entertainment systems only when such systems have become historical artifacts, when they are no longer experienced as habitual and common, no longer central.

In the first years of the 21st century, American television itself underwent such a transformation. The broadcast system offering a limited range of consensus stories aimed at a mass audience was undermined and will surely be supplanted by a system of narrowcasting to niche audiences and subcultures. And there were many signs that the old television, like the movies of the studio era, was ready to enter our museums and our school curricula. (This encyclopedia is itself a measure of the transition of television to an object of study and historical interest.)

The era of broadcast television parallels, and, in many respects may be seen to reenact, the history and aesthetic evolution of the movies and, in less precise ways, of such earlier instances of consensus narrative as the novel and the public theater of the Elizabethans.

What is crucial in all these instances is the intersection of historical, political, technological, economic, and aesthetic factors. In such a historicized understanding, aesthetic features appear in response to technical or ideological or cultural constraints. Human agents (writers, directors, producers, actors, audiences) may play a role, of course, but the narrative or dramatic field alters as well in obedience to what Thomas Schatz, echoing Andre Bazin, calls "the genius of the system."

These systems of storytelling and entertainment appear to follow a similar pattern of development, which cannot be accurately described without a partly aesthetic and evaluative vocabulary. Most simply, this pattern is one of self-discovery, in which the new medium begins by repeating and imitating the forms and strategies of its ancestor systems and gradually, through accident and experiment, discovers more and more thoroughly its own special resources. The novel, for example, is born as an amalgam of older forms: the romance, the picaresque tale, certain forms of religious narrative such as puritan autobiography, various forms of journalism and historical writing. At first it combines these elements haphazardly and crudely. Then, nourished by a large and eager audience that makes novel writing a highly profitable enterprise, the novel begins to distinguish itself clearly from these earlier forms, to combine its inherited elements more harmoniously and judiciously, and to exploit the possibilities for narrative that are uniquely available to fictional stories printed in books.

As many have argued, something of the same principle can be seen in the history of the movies, which begin in a borrowing and restaging of styles, formats, and performances taken from such older media as theater, still photography, visual art, and prose fiction and then evolving methods that exploit with greater and greater subtlety the unique properties of the motion-picture camera and the environment of the movie house.

Public attractions such as carnivals, the circus, and amusement parks were another source for early cinema. Some scholars have claimed that the defining attribute of the birth of the movies in the United States was the struggle between a populist "cinema of attractions" and a middle-class preference for narrative as inspired by theater and books. Such perspectives remind us that the forms achieved by a "mature" medium do not comprise some perfect fulfillment of its intrinsic potential but represent instead a narrowed range of possible outcomes as well as promises unexplored, roads not taken.

The evolution of such systems of entertainment and communication is always immensely complicated by the rivalry of competing systems, by the economic structures and political regimes that shape and support such systems and that are in turn altered themselves as the new media root themselves in people's lives. Improvements in technology and in methods of distribution and access further complicate the development of such media. In the case of film, for instance, decisive changes follow upon the advent of sound and the development of lighter, more mobile cameras and of more sensitive film stock; and seismic shifts in the very nature of film, in its relation to its audience and its society, occur with the birth of television.

Perhaps most significant of all, media systems and institutions for storytelling alter and extend their possibilities as their audiences grow more comfortable with them, learning the special codes and conventions such institutions generate and rely upon. The distance between *Fred*

Ott's Sneeze (circa 1893)—only seconds long, produced in East Orange, New Jersey, in the world's first movie studio—and Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936) is a rich, decisive emblem for these interacting processes, these enabling conditions of popular art.

American television during the broadcast era (roughly from the medium's inception in 1946 through the decade of the 1990s) enacts a similar history. It is not a history of unremitting refinement and improvement, of course, but it is a history impossible to understand without an awareness of the aesthetics of media transition, a recognition of the complex, ongoing ways in which the medium learned to use and then to exploit more subtly such defining constraints as the commercial interruptions; the reduced visual scale of the screen; the formulas, genres, performing styles, and actors it inherited from radio, theater, and the movies; the 30- or (somewhat later) the 60-minute time slot, the domestic environment in which TV is experienced.

In its first or imitative phase, American television recycled its ancestors—radio, theater formats, and movies, though an early boycott of TV by the Hollywood studios kept most American feature films off the screen during the medium's first decade. One way to understand the misnamed "golden age of live television" is to recognize that 1950s taste hierarchies, which assumed theater's inherent superiority to movies, underpinned many journalistic and scholarly accounts of the shift of prime-time production from live dramas made in New York to filmed series made in Los Angeles. But the popularity of early series such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–61, CBS) and *Dragnet* (1952–59; revived, 1967–70, NBC; and yet again 2003, ABC), deplored by many at the time as "boob-tube" fare, now seems sensible, even aesthetically enlightened. For these pioneering programs embraced the new medium's inherent friendliness toward episodic series, and their visual styles emphasized close-ups and domestic, enclosed spaces in ways that respected the modest dimensions of the TV screen. (In its strategy of filming before an audience, *Lucy*, that timeless hybrid, also found a way to mobilize some of the energies of live performance.) Moreover, their reliance on film was not only a sensible business practice that preserved the product for repeat broadcasts, it was also a recognition that the movies were, and had been for half a century, a central aesthetic experience for most Americans.

Both *Dragnet* and *Lucy* were deeply rooted in older media but also displayed a powerful if partial awareness of the resources of television. Those resources were a function of the medium's presence in the home, easily incorporated into the daily routines of domestic life, and its audiovisual limitations. The small screen, whose images were of marginal quality even when the unsteady broadcast signal was at its strongest, was unfit for panoramas or a crowded mise-en-scène; its primary theater was, and still remains (even in our era of digital signals and high-definition television), the human face and voice.

The physical realities of the TV environment, then, help to explain its fundamental genres of sitcom, family drama, courtroom drama, soap opera, medical show, all of which rely on dialogue and argument, psychological interaction, interior, intimate settings, close encounters. Even the crime series, with its emphasis on confining urban spaces, may be said to have an affinity for the small screen as the western or other forms of action/adventure do not. (And even most TV westerns, a secondary form of the medium in any event, domesticate their genre, emphasizing interior scenes and talking heads over cattle drives and sage brush.)

An aesthetic history of the medium, and of its complex, sometimes reluctant and evasive mirroring of aspects of American social history, can be traced in part through the evolution of its primary genres. Needless to say, not every new program in a given genre is an advance. The advertising regime that requires commercial interruptions, inflexible timetables, and audience ratings also encourages trivial imitation and replication of popular formulas. But even in a rigidly formulaic system variation and technical refinements are inevitable.

In its second phase (that of a systemic technical advance, approximately the decade of the 1960s) the dominant genres of the medium become increasingly televisual, writers adapt to the enforced commercial interruptions, directors and directors of photography master the nuances of the small screen, which is hostile to excessive movement horizontally, across its confining frame, but more hospitable to motion in depth, toward and away from the camera's eye; and performers and performance styles emerge that aim for quiet, minimalist effects suited to a medium dependent on close-ups and more friendly to ordinary faces than the mythic enlargements of the movie screen or the stylized flamboyance of the theater.

During this decade of technical advance the power of this domestic appliance to establish enduring, habitual connections with its audience is fortified and extended. Although most series episodes during the 1960s were self-contained and although characters rarely remembered their previous adventures, a drama of growth and aging often played out in the faces and bodies of performers who appeared week after week for years. This brute, inherent power of television is one key to the popularity of the soap opera as well as such prime-time programs as *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960–68, CBS) and *Gunsmoke* (1955–75, CBS). The former series, notable for its leisurely pace and conversational comedy, made its debut when Andy's son Opie (Ron Howard) was a six year old and carried its

audience through the heart of his childhood. In *Gunsmoke* Marshall Matt Dillon (James Arness) and his woman friend Kitty (Amanda Blake) ripen into senior citizens during the series' 20-year run. By the end of the 1960s the medium's prior history, a narrative field more widely shared by Americans than any earlier form of fiction or drama, establishes in the viewing audience a deep familiarity with story conventions and performers, and this intimate, accreting literacy itself becomes a resource on which programs can rely.

In its final phase—just before cable and satellite systems and new digital technologies threaten and then supercede the network monopolies of the broadcast era—the technical complications and refinements developed over two decades are joined to a more complex subject matter, and television fiction at its best becomes a genuine art form. The progression, for example, from *Lucy* to the *Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961–66, CBS) to the *Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77, CBS), *All in the Family* (1971–79, CBS), and *M*A*S*H* (1972–83, CBS) is more than an instructive social history of American society, though it is such a chronicle. It is also an aesthetic progression, in which the situation comedy becomes perhaps the signature American art form of its era.

One measure of the relative maturity TV fiction had achieved by the 1970s is the emergence of distinctive subgenres or strains of situation comedy, an analogue to the movie era when screwball comedy, Lubitsch-style worldly comedy, and the anarchic comedy of the Marx Brothers signaled something of the diversity of the Hollywood system. In the television equivalent of such a ripening, Garry Marshall's escapist comedies—*The Odd Couple* (1970–83, ABC), *Happy Days* (1974–84, ABC), *Laverne and Shirley* (1976–83, ABC), *Mork and Mindy* (1978–82, ABC), among others—emphasized vivid star turns and slapstick situations that drew upon and updated the tone and feel of *I Love Lucy*, on whose successor, *The Lucy Show*, Marshall had worked as a writer. A second strain of comedy developed from the more character-oriented and visually restrained style of the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which like the early Marshall shows engendered a range of similar series produced by the MTM company through the 1970s: *Rhoda* (1974–78, CBS), *The Bob Newhart Show* (1972–78, CBS), *The Tony Randall Show* (1976–78, ABC, CBS), among others. A third flavor of comedy was created by Norman Lear, the visionary writer-creator of *All in the Family* and then a series of similar shows that included *Maude* (1972–78, CBS), *The Jeffersons* (1975–85, CBS), and *One Day at a Time* (1975–84, CBS). Produced on videotape instead of film and aiming for social relevance and an invasive, vulgar intimacy, the Lear shows were loud, harsh, and overtly political, radically unlike the witty, visually decorous MTM series or the clownish escapism of the Marshall programs.

*M*A*S*H* offered yet a fourth variation in style and substance, for this classic series, one of network television's most memorable achievements, was filmed with one camera, on movie principles, and eschewed the live audiences of the other comedy factories. Developed by Larry Gelbart from the Robert Altman film (1970), *M*A*S*H* was ostensibly set during the Korean War but spoke directly to the ambivalence and anxiety generated by the war in Vietnam. In *M*A*S*H*, as in all the strongest series of the 1970s and beyond, the experience of the characters was cumulative, their rivalries and affections developed and shifted over time, and the program explored psychology and human relationships in ways that were uniquely enabled by the format of the weekly series.

As the foregoing implies, the 1970s and 1980s are the true "golden age" of broadcast television. The medium's defining genres achieve culminating incarnations in this period, exploiting their weekly installments to dramatize character development and multiple, entwined plots with compelling complexity and authority. The MTM factory shifts away from sitcoms toward the end of the 1970s, producing hour-long dramas, some of which reach new levels of psychological and social seriousness. Examples include *Lou Grant* (1977–82, CBS), about an urban newspaper; *The White Shadow* (1978–81, CBS), set in a city high school; *St. Elsewhere* (1982–88, NBC), a hospital series, and, most notably, *Hill Street Blues* (1981–87, NBC), a landmark *policier*, marked by jittery, rapid camera work and editing and morally complex stories and characters that influenced all subsequent TV drama and established its cocreator and executive producer, Steven Bochco, as one of the primary auteur-producers in American television.

This late period of the broadcast era is distinguished as well by made-for-television movies and miniseries that move beyond the limits of the weekly series to explore political and historical topics that had never before reached the TV screen. The emergence of these longer forms is a sign of television's maturity and enlarging ambition as a narrative medium. The format of the miniseries implicitly exposes how arbitrary and relatively inflexible is the length of theatrical movies. Television, in contrast, is theoretically free to allow stories to unfold according to the needs of the material, for its audience can easily tune in to chapters or episodes running across several days or even weeks. Some of the defining programs of the 1970s and early 1980s exploit this distinctive attribute of the medium. The following are representative instances of a much larger group of such texts: *QB VII* (six hours, 30 minutes, 1974, ABC), about a libel action that becomes a story of the concentration camps; *Rich Man, Poor Man* (12 hours, 1976, ABC), an ambitious social history of

the post-World War II United States; *Roots* (12 hours, 1977, ABC), an adaptation of Alex Haley's epic of the African-American experience; *Holocaust* (seven hours, 35 minutes, 1978, NBC); *The Awakening Land* (seven hours, 1978, NBC), an epic of American pioneers; and *King* (six hours, 1978, NBC), about the life and death of Martin Luther King.

Many of the television movies of this era are also thematically ambitious and visually complex. Some of these films exploit the performance history of the medium by casting actors who refine or play against personae they had established in TV series. As before, the following examples are drawn from a much larger range of texts. Elizabeth Montgomery, wholesome star of the escapist sitcom *Bewitched* (1964–72, ABC), appears in several thoughtful and disturbing films during the 1970s that deal with violence against women, including *A Case of Rape* (1974), *A Killing Affair* (1977), and *Act of Violence* (1979). Montgomery is also memorably cast against her subservient helpmeet series identity in the miniseries about frontier pioneers mentioned above, *The Awakening Land,* based on Conrad Richter's trilogy of novels. Mary Tyler Moore draws on and complicates the audience's affection for her sitcom character in a candid film about breast cancer, *First You Cry* (1978). Carol Burnett, beloved star of the variety show that bears her name (1967–77, CBS), plays a bereaved mother demanding answers from an unresponsive military in the antiwar film *Friendly Fire* (1979). David Janssen re-creates and deepens the wincing vulnerability of his roles in *The Fugitive* (1963–67, ABC) and *Harry-O* (1974–76, ABC) in such films as *A Sensitive, Passionate Man* (1977) and *City in Fear* (1980). As the titles just cited suggest, TV movies have frequently engaged painful and ambiguous material, often with a modest clarity rarely found in theatrical movies of recent decades. Both the series and longer-form programs of the 1970s through the 1990s deserve and will repay the sort of systematic cataloguing and close interpretation that is routinely granted to the movies of the studio era.

Though we are still too close to the broadcast era for a definitive verdict, it is probable that American television of the second half of the twentieth century will be recognized as a significant aesthetic achievement, the result of a never-to-be-repeated confluence of social, technological, and historical forces, a unique precursor to the digital entertainment future. It would not be the first time that popular diversions scarcely valued by the society that produced them were judged by the future to be works of art.

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