

WRITING FOR THE MEDIUM

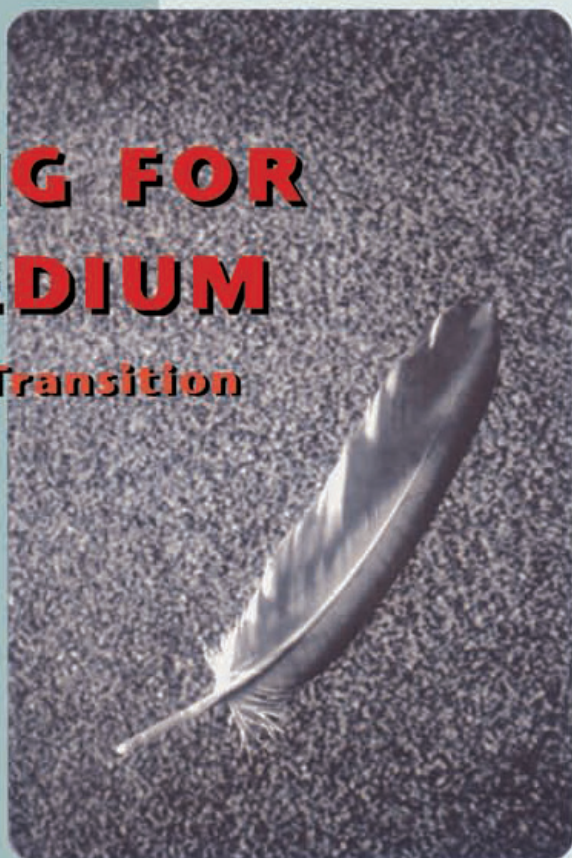
Television in Transition

Edited by

THOMAS ELSAESSER

JAN SIMONS

LUCETTE BRONK



AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Television in Transition

FILM CULTURE IN TRANSITION

Thomas Elsaesser: General Editor

Double Trouble

Chiem van Houweninge on Writing and Filming

Thomas Elsaesser, Robert Kievit and Jan Simons (eds.)

(march 1994)

Fassbinder's Germany

Thomas Elsaesser

(summer 1994)

Film and the First World War

Karel Dibbets and Bert Hogenkamp (eds.)

(fall 1994)

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

THOMAS ELSAESSER

This collection of essays was inspired by a desire to bring together some of the arguments that have, in recent years and all over Europe, shaped the debate about the future of television. It is undeniable that the commotion came from a certain anxiety and sense of crisis, although in some quarters (not represented in the pages that follow), the crisis was perceived and seized as an opportunity: to dismantle regulations and state controls, to discredit television's civic accountability, and above all, to make lots of money. Those, however, who felt that public service television – in its old, government-monopoly form and in its advertising-funded, commercial manifestations – was something worth defending also seized the crisis as an opportunity. It made it possible to reflect on what television had come to mean for audiences and television makers, for our sense of democracy, of community, and of the contemporary nation-state: the last in Europe paradoxically at one and the same time on the verge of disappearing into a Federal Europe, and of reasserting itself in the confused search for nationalism, regional autonomy and ethnic identity.

At this juncture, it seemed imperative to limit the topic somewhat and start by studying the fault-lines along a more traditional fissure: the high-culture/popular culture opposition, for example, or more precisely, the divide which is supposed to separate writers – men and women of letters – from such a stridently populist, easily demagogic and inherently ephemeral medium such as television. Under the title of 'Writing and Filming', an international weekend conference was organized by the Institute of Film and Television Studies at the University of Amsterdam and held at the Nederlands Filmmuseum on May 15th-17th, 1992. The event was itself something of a follow-up to a seminar organized under the title 'Television: Questions of Quality' by the Centre for Creative and Performing Arts at the University of East Anglia in Norwich two years earlier. The presence of speakers who attended both conferences (Cook, Bradbury, Hachmeister, Elsaesser) gave the discussions some continuity, understated by the fact that only the revised version of one paper – Jon Cook and Thomas Elsaesser's closing report from the Norwich meeting – is included here.

The Amsterdam meeting wanted to be a forum for writers and television programme makers and to extend the boundaries by including factual writing,

alongside the views of historians and scholars of television. A number of filmmakers were also invited, well aware that they might open up an intriguing double front: wary of television lest it swallow them, filmmakers sometimes feel they have to keep at arm's length the writers whose work they are suspected of betraying to the image and spectacle.

Yet their thoughts on the topics we proposed – 'the unwritable film' and 'the unfilmable text' – were key elements of the conference: the disputes writers have always had with directors and which both have had with producers, as well as the changing status of the director as author, give a much-needed historical dimension to the current controversies over how these roles are distributed in television. Writing and filming have always been perceived as sharing some fundamentals. Not only do film directors expect their unique stylistic and thematic 'signature' to be recognized by an audience, similar to the way writers are recognized by their readers, but films are often called 'texts', a sign, beyond the jargon, that they are beginning to receive the kind of close attention traditionally reserved for works of literature. More generally, filming presupposes writing: a film is usually produced on the basis of a script, a form of writing which has a complex but absolutely crucial status in the commercial film industry, while its need to exist at all is often challenged by personal, independent or avant-garde filmmaking. Finally, once a film has encountered a public, it becomes the subject of other kinds of writing: articles by journalists, critics and academics.

Writing, furthermore, is crucial for television. While one tends to think that the unique quality of television derives from its 'liveness', it is in fact a medium dependent on 'writing'. Yet much writing for television – and not always the worst – remains more or less anonymous: for factual programmes, news and political commentary, science programmes, children's television, game shows. Little attention is usually paid to the kinds and qualities of this writing. For all its visual impact, television remains very much a medium of speech and sound, historically derived from radio and currently competing not, in the first instance, with the cinema but with the press and newspapers.

In order to keep this perspective in the foreground, *Writing for the Medium* has been divided into three sections. The first is devoted to an analysis of what is at issue in the fight over the future(s) of television, singling out the slippery term 'quality television' in order to probe what is meant by quality in a popular medium, and how it can be defined or defended.

The second section focuses on literature and television. With wit and passion, the authors discuss some of the ways television and the written text have influenced and changed each other in the past decades. Going beyond the

question of literary adaptation, writers with experience in several media and genres, such as Malcolm Bradbury, Fay Weldon and Alan Plater voice their concern, but also their continuing engagement for a tradition of quality television writing, which they see under siege in the new world of deregulation and international co-productions. In Great Britain, the writer on television seems, for the time being, to have maintained a certain authority, not least thanks to the independence enjoyed by producers and commissioning editors. The situation is more precarious on the Continent, where authors feel that their craft often goes unrecognized. And yet, the skills required for television writing need to be more widely understood, if television is to retain the loyalty of national audiences.

The final section examines 'science on television', with series editors from Britain and Germany giving first-hand accounts of the scope for serious science reporting on television, but also considering the entertainment expectations of audiences when watching wildlife programmes or learning about current controversies in the sciences. A comparative study points out the different traditions and cultural debates which shape programming in this area across Europe.

Writing for the Medium will, it is hoped, stimulate the debate about the future of quality television and the place of writing, not least by suggesting that this place need not be confined to drama and fiction. The essays also document the readiness with which writers accept television as an important medium in its own right, instead of expecting it to derive its importance merely from the message it may be made to deliver. Given the tendency towards deregulation and the so-called 'market orientation' of broadcasting in Europe, it is important to understand more clearly, and across the whole spectrum of programming, which aspects of the public service remit in television – and, by extension, what sort of national film culture – are in need of support or need to be given a new purpose. As we notice, information and entertainment – two key elements of public service broadcasting as well as of the cinema – becoming increasingly intermingled and 'global', the meaning of a national audiovisual culture for the survival of democracy has to be much more widely discussed than it is at present. The prospects of a healthy media culture are important not just from the point of view of economics. An 'ecological' perspective is necessary to understand film and TV's relation to national literature, to developments in science, to concerns about the environment and to technological change. It may even remind us of the basic political arguments for maintaining a nationally specific, but nevertheless international audiovisual culture, in the face of what some see as the increasing dominance of one or two nations' cultures over every other on the globe.

Another outlook one might take away from the following essays is that,

predictions of many cultural pessimists notwithstanding, the future of literature and print culture is not threatened by the rise of film and television, just as film and the cinema are not threatened by the dominance of television. On the contrary, a new understanding of the function of writing in all its audiovisual combinations may well offer insights into why both writing and filming will maintain their importance as languages: as means of expression and of memory, as modes of communication and argument in an increasingly complex 'information society', in which the real danger is not scarcity and threat of extinction, but overabundance and overload. It is here that quality will have to prove itself against sheer quantity.

The essays thus discuss writing and television across quite a broad range of high-culture and mass-culture definitions. If in the past, it was the independent filmmakers who traditionally represented the high culture ground of the audiovisual media, a generation of writers has emerged whose very ways of thinking about literature includes the audiovisual media and their powers of representation. When these writers come to write for the medium, they are nonetheless caught in a paradox, namely that in looking for the expression of a personal vision, the script is particularly problematic, since it may blur what is distinctive and specific about working creatively with images and sounds as opposed to working with the written and printed word. On the other hand, there may be qualities of writing, distinctive features of literature and the print media which, when all is said and done, nevertheless refuse to yield to the audiovisual as the dominant form of cultural memory and human interchange.

Not all the contributions of the three-day conference could be included. This is in part a tribute to the 'live' nature of the event and in part a reflection of precisely the fact that discursive prose is not always the medium through which film and television makers wish to manifest themselves. Their spirited interventions, as well as the many video extracts shown to an appreciative public, remained very much in the editors' minds during the months they put together this collection. Special thanks are due to those who did respond and who now stand, in some sense, as the representatives of film- and televisionmakers, a role that does not detract from the distinctly personal and particular case they make. They are joined by two authors, Fay Weldon and Alan Plater, who were present in spirit though not in person, and whose permission to publish their addresses to the Dutch Screenwriters' Network in 1991 and the LIRA Foundation in 1993 we gratefully acknowledge. Thanks are also due to the LIRA Foundation for a generous publication grant, as well as to the Media department of the Netherlands Ministry of Culture, The British Council and the Foundation for Public Information on Science, Technology and the Humanities for their financial support. The editors are pleased to acknowledge

the support they received from many other quarters: they hope the volume may serve as a token of their appreciation.

PART 1

QUALITY TELEVISION

INTRODUCTION

THOMAS ELSAESSER

The principal characteristic of Neo-TV is that it talks less and less about the external world. Whereas Paleo-TV talked about the world out there, or pretended to, Neo-TV talks about itself and about the contact it establishes with its own public. It does not matter what it might say, nor what it might be talking about (now more than ever, since the public, armed with remote control, decides when to let it speak and when to switch channels). Neo-TV, in order to survive this control, seeks to hold the viewer by saying to him: "I'm here, and I am you". The maximum amount of news that Neo-TV provides, whether it is dealing with missiles or with Guido from Piacenza who has pushed over his wardrobe, is this: "I am telling you (and that's the miracle of it) that you are watching me; if you don't believe me, try me by ringing this number and I'll answer".¹

The first point to make about the great 'Quality Television' debate that has swept the countries of Western Europe since the mid-1970s is the name itself. Put simply, there was no need for a term like 'Quality Television' until that moment in time when another kind of television had either challenged it or seemed poised to supersede it altogether. Quality Television, one might say, started life as a retrospective and perhaps even a reactive notion, positioned on one side of a divide (one often speaks, and not always ironically, about the 'golden age' of, for instance, British television), whose other side is a spectre one can only imagine with dread: commercial pap, trash TV, round the clock game shows, in short 'moving wallpaper for morons'.² Once upon a time, when television – in Britain – meant the *entente cordiale* between the BBC and ITV (the first heartily embracing the public service remit and the second happily catering to popular tastes), quality might have meant merely the difference between good or bad programmes on the box. Then, suddenly, television began to heave and split like an iceberg, leaving marooned an island called 'quality TV', which immediately qualified for the status of an endangered species habitat.

The quotation from Umberto Eco's 1984 essay reminds us that in fact Italy was the first country to feel the full consequence of these upheavals, unleashed when the State decided to loosen its monopoly grip on broadcasting and tele-

communication. 'Deregulation' – the name for the combination of technological, economic and political priorities that brought about this change of mind among the governments of Europe – was, in other words, a revolution from above as much as one dictated by the demand for greater choice from viewers and consumers. But Eco's comments also suggest that there are other ways of marking the divide than quality vs trash, culture vs commerce. If neo-television typically talks more about itself than about the world outside, perhaps quality television may have to talk more about television from the inside before it can talk about quality.

The essays that follow are diverse in the arguments they advance and the moral stances they take, but also in their diagnostics and the history of television they implicitly or explicitly draw on. On the whole, they try to avoid too rigid a definition, either of television or of quality television. Nor do they address the economic and policy arguments for and against deregulation, which are comprehensively rehearsed elsewhere.³ Instead, an attempt is made to explore a terrain where 'quality' is not a category separating sheep from goats or a label designating a value we are all supposed to recognize, but where intrinsic criteria apply and a rather complex set of judgements operates about responsibilities and traditions, professional practices and professional ethics, which suggests that the view from outside and the view from inside – the historian's and the partisan view, so to speak – may eventually complement each other. While the authors all agree that such a dual perspective is desirable, they nonetheless approach the quality debate differently and focus it in a number of ways which it might be useful to sketch and briefly comment on.

In the opening essay, and speaking about the German experience, Lutz Hachmeister makes a persuasive case for public service television even in a commercial environment. However, he knows this case needs not only to be made, but 'marketed': quality television has to stand the test of prime time and high-profile scheduling, it has to be critically argued by mobilizing public opinion and stirring audiences, rather than serving as the fig-leaf of late-night programming, covering up the headlong rush to produce with tax-payers' money what the commercial channels offer on behalf of their advertisers.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith reminds us that quality need not mean exclusivity, and that in the mass market of the post-Fordian era, 'quality' is the competitive edge manufacturers are able to squeeze out of a saturated supply side and of overcapacity. Thus, quality television is about goods as well as good television, it implies an idea of service and customer satisfaction as well as the distinction of up-market and down-market. Finally, if the logic of the system presupposes that everyone

is after quality, then quality lends itself to be a signifier rather than a substance: that substance, in television, will depend on a programme's ability not only to aggregate viewers, but to speak to them as citizens and social beings, rather more than when it addresses them as connoisseurs or customers.

Sonja de Leeuw takes the specific case of Dutch television to show how certain traditions, namely that of the single play and the independent producer, have come under pressure, not only because they are labour-intensive and therefore expensive in money and talent, but because their value for television as a whole has not been sufficiently recognized. If the low cultural status of television in Dutch society has fostered a climate where TV makers often seem to despise their own programmes and those that work on them, quality television must mean a new professionalism within the institution, yet also lead to a new creative contract with those outside. Drama, for de Leeuw, is the research and development lab of television, the training ground for future writers and producers, and perhaps even more importantly, the meeting ground for established writers and proven filmmakers.

Olga Madsen is just such a creative producer to whom de Leeuw is addressing herself. Working inside the television institution and, what is more, inside commercial television, Madsen disagrees quite strongly with the suggestion that the single play is useful training for anything to do with television. It is the icing on the cake, the vanity cabinet for ambitious producers and writers or directors secretly hostile to the medium. Television drama's bread and butter is the series, the daily soap, the sit-com. Making the ordinary seem extraordinary and the unbelievable credible is the school where talents have to prove their quality and stamina, their creativity in the face of constraints, their co-operative capacities and social awareness, before they go on to other things, if that is what they want to do.

So much for the makers; what about audiences? Thomas Elsaesser zaps his way through the arts programmes on European television, marginal in the schedules because deemed of little interest to the mass of viewers. He finds plenty (signifiers) of quality, and even marks of national distinctiveness, but is it television? For the viewer, he claims, good television on its own terms knows its table manners, as it were, because it not only wants to be let into the home, it wants to be invited back. Being good company and able to put people at ease is one of the – often neglected – meanings of the word 'entertainment', and one that cannot simply be opposed to culture, because what is a culture that does not cultivate sociability and respect for the other? By this token, talk-shows can be quality television, but so can the broadcast of a Beethoven sonata.

Jon Cook and Thomas Elsaesser attempt to survey the kinds of definitions that have been offered, while also recapitulating a certain history. Recognizing that it would be presumptuous to be either all-encompassing or settling for the lowest common denominator, they outline a programme rather than offer a prescription. If one of the tests of quality television is that it is self-aware, that it has a sense of TV's own history and, furthermore, does not pass itself off as something else, the other test is whether it knows whom it addresses and how, which is to say, that it can make contact with the social, geographic and moral reality of its viewers. Such an approach tries to think the audience into the very definition of quality television and thus is not obliged to make 'quality' dependent on a line being drawn between public service broadcasting and commercial television.

Thinking the audience into 'quality' has implications also for one's idea of European television and for the future(s) of broadcast television. When audiences like to be addressed as participants in an imagined community and members of an imaginary nation, the often-lamented resistance of one European country's viewers for another European country's television becomes more plausible, even before one takes into account the financial risks and bureaucratic obstacles to co-production. Exceptions confirm the rule. If *FAULTY TOWERS* is anything to go by, British television comedy travels well, as indeed, do wildlife and science programmes. But German police series, French soap opera, or 12-part adaptations of Spanish novels tend to air in Britain only after midnight.

As to the future, it seems we have been living it for some time. Not only is the retrospective and defensive quality of the term 'quality' due to an illusion that there was a tide one could try to stem; to defend public service broadcast television as the *only* possible guarantee of quality may enshrine privilege and paternalism, while missing out on what can and does make television's future part of what kind of future there can be for democracy: new forms of participation and debate, of representation and the body politic.⁴

Finally, Jan Simons casts a scholar's critical eye on the whole debate and finds it wanting in several respects. He notes that many of the definitions of quality – including those put forward by the authors here – while pragmatic in intent, end up as tautological and narcissistic. The fact is that television, lacking both an aesthetic and a canon of authoritative works, stubbornly refuses to constitute itself as an object of study and analysis. Simons does not see how the appeal to television's self-reflexivity, the medium's maturity and its professionalism, in short: the view from within, could be sufficient grounds for establishing any kind of criteria for quality, or for discriminating in favour of one kind of practice over another. The view from without, on the other hand, even where it presumes to speak on behalf

of the viewer, merely rehearses some rather well-worn general principles of modern(ist) art, somewhat anachronistically, since these principles were explicitly designed to preserve the autonomy of art (and its attendant institution, the 'art world') from precisely any contamination with mass culture, diversion and entertainment.

From Simons' perspective, television has been unable to turn its (heavily constructed) transparency into an aesthetic value: the 'what' determines the 'how', and television remains, ultimately, a delivery vehicle, which means the quality of television resides in how it is used rather than in how it is made. But even if one were to recast the question of value and quality in such ethnographic or 'cultural' terms – as a question of the satisfactions, meanings, pleasures that the users derive from television, the criteria and the evidence would still stand in a tautological relation to each other. While this does not threaten the function or the functioning of television, it does threaten the critic, the theorist, and therefore the possibility of meaningful debate.

Simons' intervention highlights a paradox that runs through the essays: on the one hand, there is a programmatic refusal to judge what is 'good' and what is 'bad' television by the criteria of high-culture taste, by insisting on 'intrinsic' qualities and characteristics of the medium (which is not altogether the same as the quest for 'specificity' Simons attacks); and on the other, there is the claim that quality can be measured only by the medium's ability to speak *to* the outside world (if it cannot be trusted to speak *about* the outside world) and thus to offer a modus of contact and social cohesion which, increasingly, may be present only on and through television.

If the section were successfully to have homed in on this dilemma, it would have served its purpose. It would have moved the quality debate away from two ultimately sterile positions: that between good vs bad TV programmes, and that between public service television vs commercial television. Instead, one could begin to talk about different communities, institutions, interest groups or individuals *negotiating* the contacts and the contracts they can have with each other via television and its programming. Whether this is the state maintaining contact with its subjects (one aspect of the public service remit) or advertisers with their consumers (one function of commercial television), or whether it is different pressure groups trying to retain or create a certain public sphere via television (one aim of community or access television), what could be at stake in the quality debate is an analysis of inevitable challenges for democracy in the face of changing models and regimes of representation.

Notes

- ¹ Umberto Eco, 'A Guide to Neo-Television', *Framework*, vol. 25, 1984, p. 19.
- ² Kate Adie, in a memorable discussion, *TELEVISION 2000*, a Channel 4 MEDIA SHOW special, chaired by Muriel Grey.
- ³ See for instance Richard Collins, *Television: Policy and Culture*, London: Unwin Hyman, 1990, ch. 5.
- ⁴ Against Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Harmondsworth, Penguin: 1986, see John Keane, *The Media and Democracy*, London: Polity Press, 1991, or Graham Murdock, 'Whose Television is it Anyway', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 1, no. 6 (NS), 1991, pp. 18-19.

TELEVISION IN THE AGE OF CONSENSUS WITHOUT SENSE

LUTZ HACHMEISTER

The change of programme was unexpected; the advance warning came too late for several TV listings magazines. On December 15th, 1990, the 'blessed' year of reunification, ARD moved the third part of the US mini-series FAVOURITE SON to the early hours of the morning, and in its place, after the main evening news, an extensive programme from East Germany was shown, with lots of folk music. Similarly, the end of the bankrupt East German TV station DFF1 was being marked with patriotic tunes and brisk marching music, along with the assurance that the best DFF programmes would continue to be broadcast in the future. As it soon turned out, ARD and ZDF were, with a few exceptions (ELF 99), to take over from the former DDR TV only the variety shows and the entertainment formats of the 1950s – an act of historical-ethnological rescue, as tribute to the supposed 'GDR mentality'. By comparison, FAVOURITE SON was not patriotic enough. Even the US press had doubted whether the patriotic *American* audience would want to watch this political thriller, which portrayed a weak president, a corrupt administration and a baffled secret service, complete with intended references and clear analogies to current US political events. Linda Koszłowski appeared as a woman who left no doubt as to the fatal attraction of evil.

The change of schedule, ostensibly an accident of timing, is surely not without intent and significance: a tactical decision to secure the short-term loyalty of the audience, one of those contributions of public service broadcasting to the 'Volkswerdung' of Germany and part of the conservative slant of prime-time television. Certainly FAVOURITE SON, with its MIAMI VICE aesthetic, does not even approach being a masterpiece, but it is questionable whether ARD is capable of a politically analogous production at the moment or of a potentially profound narrative analysis of politics. On the other hand, folk music, imposed principally by the copyright owner Beierlein, has no difficulties in occupying the best programme spots and is really only to be found on prime-time TV. No other element has been making its mark in this way in recent years. Folk music enhances 'the development of a strong national feeling', as *Der Spiegel* recently quoted the President of the Hamburg Academy of Music and Fine Art, Hermann Rauhe. Equally, patriotic songs

represent the growing German national feeling in an economically overheated country, and a sociopolitical withdrawal into the realm of Biedermeier and the Restoration. 'Send your sorrows to the heavens', advises the 'Naab Valley Duo'.

ARD and ZDF give it their blessing: in countless family serials, pastors, bishops, ordained women and nuns strive to solve all social, cultural or local problems, so much so that their real-life counterparts complain of the high level of expectation imposed on them by such portrayals on the screen (the grumbling Witta Pohl, the careworn cleric Lenau and the clever nun Maria together represent the prevalent image of women on public service television). Joining the 'active' fictional clergy are doctors, professors, forest wardens and zoo directors, miracle healers and trainee teachers. One needs no special brief for an ideological critique to find proof that the structures of these popular serials (whose technical quality cannot be faulted) correspond to the authoritarian patterns of German feature films of the 1950s. Most conspicuous is the interweaving of contemporary political directives with pseudo-realistic serial conventions in Herbert Lichtenfeld's *UNTER EINEM DACH* (*UNDER ONE ROOF*) (ZDF): grateful immigrants, having fled to Germany from their native Romania, are perfectly integrated into the welfare state thanks to helpful, good-natured German citizenry, the immigrant family being careful to display their share of submissiveness and humility. *UNTER EINEM DACH* was certainly not trivial – it was, above all, propagandistic.

The Ideology of Non-commitment

'The man of the hour is non-committal and bland', said Manfred Delling in Marl, of the ideal protagonist of recent public service broadcasting entertainment. The ideology lies in this lack of commitment. Public service broadcasting is characterized by fixed, unadventurous formats and by its convergence with the current style of political leadership. The middle-of-the-road programme, inoffensive utility-television with a distaste for expressive images hold sway. The present state of ARD/ZDF prime-time programmes is a result, on the one hand, of the far-reaching confluence between 'political conservatism' and 'structural conservatism' (determined by the controlling influence of the dominant social forces and an enforced social cohesion, etc.) and, on the other hand, of the loss of identity which public service broadcasting has suffered since the system was opened up to competition in 1984.

This loss of identity emerges in three fundamental aspects: in the objective loss of journalistic relevance, i.e. the continuing diversification of patterns of viewing; in the failure to define journalistic aims; and in the uncertain use of marketing ideas and concepts. The managers of public service broadcasting compensate for this loss of identity either by referring to statistically researched public

approval or, in the case of less popular programmes, by invoking their old, legally defined duties (education, information, entertainment), in other words, abstract arguments which have no direct connection with actual journalistic or artistic practice. What has established itself as the fatal principle of public service broadcasting is the instinct of survival in a free market economy – without, however, the management being visibly aware of their ‘specific role’ in the market. The understandable desire to continue from a formal position of strength to produce ‘Television for all’ has led to a collusion of public service broadcasting with the very political forces which for decades have been at pains to take away its authority. Having finally deregulated the broadcasting market, they were able, with the help of technical state intervention, to bring commercial television rapidly on the road to success. As a consequence we note a remarkable change in the political groups connected with public service broadcasting. Today it is the Minister-President of Bavaria who calls for a generous subsidy for the established channels; Lothar Späth is suddenly in favour of the ‘diversification’ of the public service system, promoting the proposed Franco-German cultural channel; and now Keppinger, the Mainz-based alumnus of Noelle Neumann, is concerned about RTL-plus, because the Cologne-based private channel does not show sufficient respect for the acting German Chancellor. On the other hand, ARD and ZDF take the risk (rather aggressively, it seems) of breaking with the educated class, where the public service system has its foundations, and which could provide it with a spiritual life as well as its justification.

2

Adolf Grimme coined the phrase ‘broadcast of the broadcast of the broadcast’ to describe the characteristic nature of public service broadcasting. The advocates of a broadcasting system as far removed as possible from state interference or business influence regarded broadcasting institutions as autonomous intellectual entities, and for a time, broadcasting was unquestionably part of a holistic public education system. The discussions of the consensus-building foundations of broadcasting from those days yield instructive analogies to the democratic justification for political education today (‘teaching democracy as a way of life’); and the opening ceremonies, with their TV masts and transformers, had clear spiritual and paternalistic overtones. Radio, defined as the medium for speech and classical music (with the inevitable addition of a few dance tunes), conformed to the constitutional standards of education and culture; the putative audience was

conceived of as intellectually curious, willing to learn and catholic in taste. The convergence of intention and its realization in a given cultural product was much sought-after, which is to say that the legally designated categories of good broadcasting were derived from a notion of intellectual goals oblivious to the requirements of the medium. (Later, it developed its own dynamic, and 'education', for instance, acquired the strongly technocratic flavour of something aimed at solving the problem of lack of qualifications.)

Against the broadcasting culture of the intellectual left, made up of literary, educational and journalistic constituents, a conservative opposition developed, which wanted to see both closer ties between broadcasting and the state, and greater commercial opportunities. Two camps had formed, and for a long time they, and their terminology of attack and defence, were to remain constant. Although the abstract principle of public service broadcasting was never accepted without qualification by the wider public as an asset worth fighting for, the established system could nevertheless count on considerable support. A lobby consisting of journalists' associations, trade unions, the FDP, Social Democrats, writers, and the Church were spirited in their support of ARD and ZDF. The 'Defence of Freedom in Broadcasting' reached its apotheosis during the debates over the revocation of the NDR state franchise in 1979; the two anthologies, edited by Michael Wolf Thomas, reproduce exactly the moods and statements of the time.

The Convergence of Systems

Campaigners from the sympathetic groups were optimistic about finding support from the German Constitutional Court, but anyone today who examines the rulings involved will discover very quickly that the arguments which pointed to new roles for television in the wake of changes to its technological basis found increasing favour. When Martin Stock, an expert on constitutional law, states that the Court's rulings underestimated 'above all the dynamics of a primarily economic contest for audiences and advertising markets', he alludes very carefully to the fact that the 'dual system' established by the Court represents an artificial, hybrid construction of judicial wishful thinking. The substance of public broadcasting is not to be found in jaded references to the fundamental right to be supplied with services, regardless of geographical location or demographics, or in the traditional phraseology of the programming brief. (Stock's attacks on the 'positivistic, prosaic and sometimes vague stance' underlying media policies in Düsseldorf sheds significant light on the change in the political and cultural make-up of the groups connected with public service broadcasting; see M. Stock: 'Konvergenz im dualen Rundfunksystem?', *Media Perspektiven* 12/90.)

At this point we should make an important distinction: many advocates of public service broadcasting were in favour of the ideal principle, but not necessarily the actual conditions of ARD and ZDF, nor of the extant programming policy of public service broadcasting. On the one hand, they had to criticize the effects of automation, the obsession with impartiality, and bureaucratization; on the other hand, they had to defend the ideal principle of socially responsible broadcasting against the protagonists of untrammelled commercialization.

Although public service broadcasting was transformed in 1984 by the combined impact of technological changes, CDU media policies and the application of market forces, commentators remained broadly in favour (in a kind of transitional phase), not least because the programmes on commercial television turned out to resemble quite closely what critical discourse had always predicted them to be: cheap, US-dominated, violent, lacking in news content, and overrun with every kind of advertising. However, with the proliferation of channels, the broadening of patterns of viewing ('zapping'), the introduction of specialized channels (Eurosport, MTV), a new generation of viewers and critics emerged who accepted as self-evident public service television's loss of its central position within the media. They have, if at all, only a weak ideological investment in public service broadcasting. Triviality is no longer considered a tawdry, escapist drug (as long as it remains self-consciously so and does not attempt a pretentious camouflage) but is seen as a genuine achievement of television. This increased appreciation of the trivial and the popular benefits commercial TV more than public service TV, in structural terms. Furthermore, the realization dawned that commercial programming could also put its own mark on products in the more traditional journalistic genres (reportage, essays, news). Public service television is thus, in the end, forced to move from abstract principles to the practical structure and content of its programmes.

3

In a plea for the necessity of public service broadcasting, Wolfgang R. Langenbucher recently lamented that the 'contemporary political discourse over broadcasting' was unbalanced 'when a few stimulating half-hour magazine programmes on private airwaves are inflated into major journalistic achievements, in order to deflect attention away from the barrenness of other programmes. In fact, RTL-plus derived considerable publicity from the critics' enthusiasm for SPIEGEL-TV. The head of RTL-plus himself, Thoma, realized, albeit slowly at first, that this magazine programme – launched by Alexander Kluge and a product of North-Rhine-Westfalia's media

policy – was the only asset they had which posed a threat to the public service system. Whereas their usual fare (US series, popular feature films, game shows, etc.) merely competed for advertisers and audiences, SPIEGEL-TV raised the possibility of private suppliers replacing core areas of public service programming. In spite of everything for which SPIEGEL TV can be criticized, for example Stefan Aust's fondness for oratory and his indulgence in metaphor, it is quite undeniable that this magazine programme has developed a 'cinematic form of journalism', which uses the evocative power of meaningful images to create a TV-specific form unknown to public service television. With the praise for SPIEGEL TV came an awareness of the present and future possibilities of quality television in the private commercial sector. The 'debate over broadcasting', then, would only be unbalanced if the example of SPIEGEL TV were invoked in calling for the abolition of public service broadcasting – something which not even the head of RTL-plus would countenance. (On the contrary, he welcomes a public service television committed to relieving commercial TV of the duties towards 'legitimate culture'.)

Ratings and Culture: the Lure of Profit and Prestige

By now, RTL-plus has realized the attraction of quality products, since the combination of ratings and cultural TV 'events' wins them both profits and the plaudits of open-minded critics. RTL-plus's programming increasingly presents itself as gleaming with variety, as a mixed bag in which, above all, contrasting extremes are always to be found: a highbrow arts programme next to cheap sex films, Marcel Ophuls's NOVEMBER DAYS (financed by RTL-plus) next to Mike Hammer, and soon David Lynch's TWIN PEAKS next to SCHLOSS AM WÖRTHERSEE. The managers of the established channels are for the time being disorientated after this tactical move, which leaves public service television looking twee and middle-of-the-road. In the face of developments in programming and changing patterns of viewing, many erstwhile defenders of the public service concept are having to abandon their stance.

'Although nominally the aims of public service broadcasting still obtain', explains Dieter Ross, 'they are actually becoming redundant under the pressure of drastic changes.' For the greater, and probably the best, parts of television these aims have, he says, 'always been a foreign idea, borrowed from the bourgeois press, something imposed by academics and legislation', which 'with its abstract thinking' has ironed out 'real differences' in the way the consumer uses the various media. Public service broadcasting can only survive if it offers its own unique programming which conforms to professional standards and has faith in finding its audience. This supply-side model, which finds its substance neither in abstract legal terms nor in the 'status quo' of the statistically researched tastes of the

majority, requires the development of professional standards specific to the medium which, once accepted as the guiding principle, could serve as the basis of a marketing concept for public service television.

4

Television, by its very technical form of presentation, is a 'decategorizing' medium; one cannot look, therefore, for the central justification of public service television in judicial or categorical definitions of intent. Comprehensive definitions must be sought for the interplay of images and words, text and graphics. The products of 'quality television', in the light of such definitions, transcend the distinctions between education, information and entertainment; their structure is informed by journalistic and cinematographic standards of form and content; they attempt an aesthetic development of these standards. The label 'quality television' has nothing to do with esoteric offerings for devotees of classical high culture which are remote from the specifics of the medium; it relates to productions and structures of programming which treat the medium seriously as a means of reaching wider audiences. Since quality television cannot be expressed as a mathematical formula, we need an ongoing debate between media critics, communications scholars and programme makers to establish some working definitions. This would have as its basis, primarily, a knowledge of the range of existing international productions and production methods. It requires a thorough understanding of programming history and equally of media theory; however, it also demands an alertness to communication as a profession and a keen awareness of social, intellectual and everyday changes, so that one's own patterns of viewing are not taken to be the norm.

Lined up against such a 'critical culture' in times of radical change in media technology and politics are conservative tendencies and defence mechanisms. Each side attempts not to take the other seriously. TV criticism faces problems of status and, above all, of finding new blood; established reviewers find themselves surrounded by an 'entertainment culture' which they have no wish to comprehend; ratings-obsessed programme makers in the public service organizations happily take advantage of the new market conditions in order to declare once and for all that the critics' grumbling is obscure gibberish which has nothing in common with the actual needs of 'The Audience'. In doing so, both sides have been discussing fictitious groups, when in fact they cannot be at all sure on whose behalf they are speaking, writing or broadcasting. In this set-up, a greater possibility

of power is afforded the controllers, executives and heads of department: they work with substantial amounts of money; they are in direct contact with programme buyers, production companies and politicians; they determine the programming, while the critics usually have no lobby in this respect, must react after the event, and are badly paid.

Interplay of Internal and External Views

Public service television is making a mistake if, from its relatively strong position, it ignores the possibilities of fairly independent media criticism. Work towards a publicly effective structure of quality TV can only be conducted through the combination of internal and external views: public service TV presents itself as encouraging informed criticism. Thus, a 'theory of quality' TV would have to be developed. To bring the arguments about public service television into focus, one can first make the following assertions: Quality Television

- aims for a correlation between form and content
- has an awareness of the international context of professional journalistic and cinematographic standards
- is not uncritically affirmative but, rather, questions social and cultural norms
- is conscious of the history of the medium and therefore operates on a range of different planes of reference (the medium as its own reflection)
- establishes the facility for public feedback
- is produced by personnel trained to a high standard (this includes, above all, ongoing training in programming)

I have already stated that there can be no fixed formula for Quality TV which can automatically be applied to every product of public service programming. Striking trivial items, lively low-budget productions and proven classics can, and should, be elements in the programming; it would, however, be fatal to see them as the mainstay of public service broadcasting in the future. The central justification for public service TV, and the basis of its survival, is the consistency of Quality Television productions and their prominence in the schedules. For Quality Television belongs in prime time, however low the ratings. Public service TV, in any case, will lose a share of the market in the next few years through increased competition; against this background it seems sensible both from a journalistic and economic point of view to develop a specific identity early on, via a series of clearly characteristic programmes. This will require a concentration of creative personnel and methods.

The internal dynamics of bureaucracy and the multiplication of channels drove the public service system into a merely nominal differentiation of its programmes and into a constant multiplication of channels (Eins plus, 3sat, The European Cultural Channel, the extension of the Third Programmes) without a corresponding growth in creative, journalistic or artistic energy. As a result, we see a marginalization of those areas of programming which could contribute to the public service identity, a risk-avoidance strategy, which is leading to the impoverishment of prime time. A proper exchange, then, is not taking place: ZAK, on West3, has proved to be an audience-pulling programme of journalistic interest; it has not made the transition to the First Programme (ARD), perhaps because it would have presented unwelcome competition for the established political magazine programmes.

The Schizophrenic Attitude of Public Service Management

When SWF Controller Willibald Hilf freely acknowledges that Eins plus 'has never had a strong lobby and, financially and in terms of organization and personnel, has very limited resources', this indicates a schizophrenic attitude on the part of the management. They are basically aware of this unsatisfactory arrangement but cannot summon the will to put a stop to the erosion of public service programming resources. Moreover, ARD and ZDF rely on only a few in-house departments to develop aesthetically innovative and well-researched productions and to flaunt them when necessary as an indication of their identity. Apart from UNTER DEUTSCHEN DÄCHERN, no long-running series of documentary TV programmes has been established in prime-time. ZDF has no documentary series of its own at all. It is basically WDR which produces political TV drama (if at all), and on ZDF DAS KLEINE FERNSEHSPIEL is clearly distinguished from its larger relatives as an experimental cultural standard-bearer.

Given the dearth of traditional production departments, Quality TV is not produced in sufficient quantity. From time to time the major channels present the results of assiduous audience research, which insists on the quantitative assertion that ARD and ZDF are far ahead of the private commercial channels in the education/information stakes. Such 'expert' ventures simply reaffirm the status quo and are not concerned with the dynamics of the actual content of programming. The question of what is shown when, on which channel, is not an issue for mass communications scholars – apart from the historical work at Siegen – although such studies are needed as a link between contemporary TV criticism and media theory. Despite the lack of current programming studies generally, the fact that no detailed examination exists of these 'areas of strength' in public service TV indicates its shortcomings.

With reference to the TV play, a comprehensive study by Dietrich Leder has appeared in *Funk-Korrespondenz*. He criticized above all the productions' lack of correspondence to social reality, the recurring use of a handful of actors in stereotypical roles and of worn-out technical and dramaturgical devices. Surrounded as it is by numerous attractive movies on all channels (a distinct loss of function for the TV play), the genre falls victim to the general suspicion of being nothing but 'poor cinema' and ends up stranded between populist series and feature films.

Regarding current affairs programmes, ARD and ZDF have recognized the audience's enjoyment of 'spectacular reality' and have launched a formal campaign to secure an advantageous position over the commercial companies. These programmes have become opportunities for prognosticating, didactic head of department to enter the fray. Critics call this 'editors-in-chief TV', which indulges in the stale repetition of symbolic-ritual politics.

Consequently, ARD and ZDF began to make preparations for TV warfare, in which viewers were seen as 'virtual soldiers' who, along with editors-in-chief and correspondents, were waiting for the count-down. It underlined the relentless inevitability of events. Dieter Ross asserts that 'the role of headmaster is a particularly stubborn remnant of a kind of broadcasting which sees itself as perpetually serving a public office. Television should show its viewers events and people, without always trying to explain... The remit of television is to provide evidence in image and sound.'

Image Evidence and Direct Sound

Especially during election campaigns the investigative forms of journalism, which work with visual sequences and live recording, seem to be no longer practised. Any useful information is replaced by countless 'TV hearings', featuring timid questions from viewers and flippant answers from politicians, along with impressionistic surveys by leading candidates. Naturally, however, the variety of themes, genres and productions in public service television is still impressive in comparison to the meagre performance of its commercial competitors. But what does prime time actually look like on ARD and ZDF? Let us take, as a random example, the programming for week 2 of 1991.

On Saturday, 20.15, ARD: MARY'S BABY, genetic thriller purchased from Great Britain - ZDF, 19.30: MIT LEIB UND SEELE (WITH BODY AND SOUL), ecclesiastical serial, then 20.15, WILDE WASSER (WILD WATERS), German/Austrian *Heimatfilm* from 1962. On Sunday at 20.15, ARD: JOLLY JOKER, pilot film for an early evening series - ZDF, at 19.30: DAS SCHWERT DES ISLAM (THE SWORD OF ISLAM) by Scholl-Latour, then SKANDAL IN VERONA, three-part environmental thriller purchased from Italy (a repeat

from 1990!). On Monday, at 20.15, ARD: PFARRERIN LENAU (PARSONESS LENAU), series by Felix Huby. At 19.30, ZDF: SKANDAL IN VERONA II, and at 21.15, WISO. On Tuesday at 20.15, ARD: JA ODER NEIN (YES OR NO), gameshow with Joachim Fuchsberger - at 19.30 on ZDF: DIE REPORTAGE on traffic problems, and at 20.15: UNSERE HAGENBACKS (OUR HAGENBACKS), pilot-film for a series. On Wednesday ARD, at 20.15: DIENSTVERGEHEN (DERELICTION OF DUTY), thriller with Willi Millowitsch - 19.30, ZDF: DIE VOLKSTÜMLICHE HITPARADE (POPULAR HITS) with Carolin Reiber, and 20.15 STUDIO 1 with Bodo H. Hauser, 21.00 DER NACHTFALKE, US series. On Thursday, 20.15, ARD: SOLANG' NOCH UNTERN LINDEN, documentary; 21.03: EIN HERZ FÜR RUSSLAND (A HEART FOR RUSSIA), variety show - 19.30, ZDF: KAUM ZU GLAUBEN (HARD TO BELIEVE), comedy with Pit Wierich, 20.00: SO EIN THEATER (SUCH A FUSS), farce with Karin Eickelbaum and Harald Leipnitz, 21.00: WAHN ODER HEILUNG (DELUSION OR HEALING) from the 'Kontakte' series. On Friday, 20.15, ARD: WENN LUDWIG INS MANOEVER ZIEHT, feature film from West Germany 1967 with Hansi Kraus and Georg Thomalla - 19.30 ZDF: AUSLANDSJOURNAL, foreign news, 20.15: AKTENZEICHEN XY UNGELÖST, crime prevention/detection series.

Anxiety and Siege Mentalities

It is clear from this sample of programming why ARD's Director of Programmes, Dietrich Schwarzkopf, pleaded for 'new faces on TV', to 'win back the youth audience'. Without a critical awareness of its basic justification, public service TV faces a spiral into 'an absence of sense: ARD and ZDF will no longer be taken seriously by the relevant audiences as autonomous journalistic media entities. They will gradually lose contact with the independent minds in journalism, and this will lead to an intensified reliance on programmes made for the purposes of keeping political power and making official policy. From the uncertainty about the meaning and intention of programming structure arises anxiety and a siege mentality, disguised as the 'psychological relief' afforded by the viewing figures. But the constant emphasis on market share outside the segments dedicated to advertising can have no other explanation than this latent anxiety, since the viewing figures' deviation from actual patterns of viewing has long been known, as has their limited usefulness in assessing the disposition of target groups and the informational relevance of a programme. Many programming strategists still cling to the absurd illusion that high audience figures for populist programmes have something to do with the future of the public service system.

The head of series at ZDF, Gohlen, is absolutely correct when he takes ratings as evidence of the 'quantitative and qualitative success' of his output. Indeed, these series have attained their goal if there is merely a broad audience

reaction in favour of them; this is sufficient indication of their particular quality (the fulfillment of their brief). Series of this nature, however, can be adopted just as easily by a commercial system; their success conveys nothing about the audience's attachment to public service channels. To the viewers, it is of little consequence whether *INSEL DER TRÄUME* is shown on ZDF or SAT1.

5

The commercial impulse to establish a distinct identity is characteristic of a social ideology which at the moment is globally accepted. Given that the market in money and goods has both religious and secular meaning, the terms and concepts of marketing take on a tendency towards totalitarianism. This force affects the entire range of production of ideas, political models, theoretical concepts which are also subject to the conditions of rapidly changing 'market trends', 'climates' and 'market analyses'. At the beginning of the 1970s in the USA, marketing strategies were carried structurally into the field of social campaigns: 'Social marketing' signifies a 'management technique which should initiate social change, which is composed of planning, execution and control of programmes, and which aims to increase acceptance of a sociopolitical idea or behaviour by one or more target groups.' (Kotler/Robert: *Social Marketing*).

Difficulties in Public Service Marketing

Faced with the universality of marketing, all organizations based on abstract principles will encounter difficulties. The sociopolitical concept of a television separate from the state and business could only be 'socially marketed' as an education/enlightenment process which avoided short-term popularity bids. The possibilities of marketing for public service TV are in any case minimized by the broadcasters' departure, in practice, from the ideal principles of journalistic independence, as well as by the serious differences between ARD and ZDF in their conception of programming, and by the competition of ARD's regional stations with each other. Without at least relative consensus on the specific qualities and identity of public service programming, all efforts at marketing will remain superficial.

The aim, therefore, should not be to sell a given programme so that it attracts as large an audience as possible; rather, the marketing appropriate to public service TV should begin with the conception and structure of the programmes. When ARD offers *PEPE DER PAUKERSCHRECK* (*PEPE, SCOURGE OF THE TEACHERS*) at 20.15, and on the same day (16.11.90) the TV premiere of Chabrol's *EINE*

FRAUENSACHE is shown at 23.50, such a piece of scheduling suggests a lack of awareness of public service TV's identity in a journalistic market. This 'error of marketing' (if we wish to use the phrase) cannot be rectified, even through advertising campaigns ('Sit in the best seats with ARD and ZDF'), because the relationship between the schedule, the advertising campaigns and the target audiences remains abstract and heterogeneous. In future, it will have to be ascertained whether a reduction in public service supply can increase the journalistic relevance of the public service system, because homogenized supply makes for a more streamlined identity in multi-channel broadcasting. At the same time, within the framework of audience research, questions will have to be raised concerning the correlation between general educational background, users' interests, and actual use of television, to inquire into the connection between the basic legitimation of public service TV and potential target groups.

When 'business strategy', 'press office', 'public relations' and 'media research' are clumsily juxtaposed and when furthermore their relationship to actual programming remains unclear, a familiar 'corporate identity' mannerism emerges, which is expressed in the longing for standardized logos and lettering (ZDF is especially haphazard in putting its gleaming trademark on greatly differing productions). These trademarks of the public service channels cannot serve as the linchpin of marketing, but rather as individual products, personalities and specially designed series which in turn can then represent the channel's commitment to quality. Lavish magazine advertising of outstanding productions seem just as advisable as the publication of a high-circulation TV magazine with relevant information about the range of product without, if possible, the addition of obtrusive self-advertising by the media.

Difficulties of Public Service Reorientation

In the coming years there will be considerable competition in public service TV's strongest areas (news, popular serials, made-for-TV films). The North-Rhine-Westphalian project 'Westschiene', if realized, will aim at the core audience of the public service system; at the same time, it will address those journalists who are no longer supporters of ARD and ZDF. And at some point in time, the question will be put to the Constitutional Court as to how much economic and institutional capacity can be allocated to public service broadcasting under the conditions of a multi-tiered system.

The sooner public service suppliers fulfil their specific journalistic brief – via a schedule with internal consistency and high-quality journalistic and artistic influence – the stronger their position will become in the new competitive climate.

A public service television which cannot engage people intellectually and which only exists as the puppet of political and economic pressure groups can only deteriorate into a shadow of its former ideal principles and will probably lose any significance within those spheres of public debate which are vital to a democratic society.

(Translated by Nick Riddle and Thomas Elsaesser)

'QUALITY' TELEVISION

GEOFFREY NOWELL-SMITH

The context for this paper is the massive shift throughout Europe from state monopoly television to a system in which there is a multiplicity of service providers, predominantly run for profit, and in which the nation-state plays a much reduced role, whether as operator or as regulator.

The paper is in two parts. First, I contest the widely held view that this multiplication and deregulation of television services will inevitably lead to a rush down-market and the universal domination of trash. Of course there is plenty of evidence that in some places this has already happened, is still happening, and will continue to happen; and that this is a bad thing by any standard. But I would argue that the process is not inevitable, nor universal, nor is it entirely and 100% deplorable. There are strong countervailing tendencies within the system which mean that we can actually look forward to quite a lot of Quality television in the next decades, for reasons immanent in modern capitalism itself.

Second, however, I maintain that Quality television is not necessarily the same as good television and that the promise of Quality which we are likely to get from broadcasters over the next decade is deceptive. We may get quality, but we won't necessarily be any better off.

Over the past few years, in Britain and elsewhere, the rhetoric of quality has definitively displaced that of public service. Public service television as a concept and a fact is on its way out. Prior to 1990 all British television was to some degree public service television. This included the commercial channels ITV (1955) and Channel 4 (1982) as well as the BBC. The new Broadcasting Act has considerably lessened the public service requirements on commercial broadcasters. In the case of terrestrial broadcasts they are now very slight and in the case of satellite, next to none. For Channel 3, however, which is the main mass-market commercial channel, there is now a 'quality' threshold, introduced into the legislation at the debate stage, which allows the regulatory body, the Independent Television Commission, to allot franchises not purely on financial criteria but also on the basis of the quality of service the bidder is able to provide.

What does this mean? So far, there is little direct evidence. When the new franchises were announced, most were awarded to the highest bidder as re-

quired by the legislation, but in a couple of cases the regulator expressed himself dissatisfied with the highest bids. In one case, he said the bid was simply too high and would leave the company with no resources to provide a quality service. In another, he allowed Granada Television to retain its franchise for the northwest of England on the basis of its track record as a quality supplier and a suspicion that the competitor, Mersey Television, which had bid higher, would not be able to match it. However, within months of the franchise being awarded, the chairman of Granada Television was forced out by the board of the parent company on the grounds (so it was said) that he was too concerned with programmes and not enough with profit. Meanwhile in London, the new franchisee, Carlton Communications, which has replaced Thames Television, is firmly committed to cutting programme costs and reviewing peak-time schedules to eliminate non-profitable items. News that Silvio Berlusconi has entered the lists as a bidder for the franchise for the new fifth channel added to widespread fears of declining standards throughout the system – fears which were only allayed by the Government's realization that there was not enough money in the system to justify having a fifth channel in the first place.

From this evidence, one is tempted to deduce that only the regulator, Mr George Russell, speaking as the acceptable face of Toryism, stands in the way of a Gadarene rush to maximize audiences and minimize costs. But the evidence is not unambiguous. To interpret it, I propose to step outside the immediate world of television and look at the ideology and practice of mass-market quality in modern capitalism at large.

If there is one British institution which commands almost universal respect at home and abroad, it is not the BBC nor even the monarchy, but Marks and Spencer's. For the benefit of anyone who is not acquainted with it, I shall say briefly that Marks and Spencer's is a retail chain specializing in clothing and food-stuffs, which operates in the market place by offering more desirable goods than its competitors at a broadly comparable price. You can buy a cheaper bag of carrots at Tesco, or a cheaper child's dress at C&A, but if you buy at Marks you get that extra assurance that there won't turn out to be a rotten carrot at the bottom of the bag or a badly stitched seam on the dress – and if there is, the store will exchange the faulty goods without question. This quality of provision, moreover, is offered at the upper end of the mass market, not just to the rich (though not to the very poor either). The secret of Marks and Spencer's success lies in realizing that there was a market niche for its product and for its standard of service, and that managerial efficiency, including a certain squeeze on suppliers of semi-finished materials, could enable the product to be provided at relatively low cost. Marks and Spencer's slogan is – you've guessed it – Quality.

Marks and Spencer's is not alone in the world. Quality as a buzzword has spread right across British industry and service provision. Delivering more quality at less cost is the target of the Major government's reforms of the public sector. Quality is also a label that appears regularly in Europe in phrases like *Qualitätswein* or *Vin délimité de qualité supérieure*. And there is the example of Japan. Japanese products sell on quality, in both design and manufacture. Like Marks and Spencer's, Japanese manufacturers put the squeeze on component producers, but they gain cost advantage by efficient organization of the industrial process, not by sacrificing quality. The notion of quality is present both in the attitudes inculcated into the workforce and in the perceived attributes of the product. A Nissan may be a dull car to drive, but it exudes comfort, and it lasts longer than an Alfa Romeo.

What does quality mean in this context, or set of contexts? It is clearly not an absolute, nor is it the medieval *qualitas*, the quality of what a thing is as opposed to *quantitas* or how much there is of it, since it is itself a quantifiable attribute. Quality is something you can have more or less of, but the ultimate measure of it is customer satisfaction. It is a marketing objective to which certain industrial procedures are applied, and it can be made to produce profit.

There is no reason *a priori* why a quality-oriented industrial and marketing strategy should not be applied to the products of the cultural industries. Indeed, there are famous precedents. Already in the 1920s, the major Hollywood studios were adopting Fordist production methods and were targeting their product at a middle-class mass market. MGM and Paramount were engaged in what economists call non-price competition in order to entice their first-choice customers to see their superior product in their better appointed cinemas – leaving the bargain-basement part of the market to take care of itself. Out of this strategy came the films of Lubitsch and Minnelli, to name but two masters of the great Hollywood genres.

The situation in which British television finds itself is tailor-made for the application of post-Fordist industrial strategies in which non-price competitiveness will be a key element. It is actually quite an odd situation, in that it remains highly monopolistic at the core. There is a multiplicity of sources of supply – programme makers, copyright holders in existing programmes – and a huge audience. But there are very few actual broadcasters, and the customers of these broadcasters are not the public but the advertisers, represented by a handful of agencies. From the point of view of the broadcaster, the basic cost equation is: how much will a particular slate of programmes cost to produce or to buy from outside, and how much advertising revenue will it bring in. This will entail cost cutting. If you can buy

more cheaply than you can produce, you will buy from the cheapest supplier around, or you will have to reorganize your in-house production department to make it competitive. You will also be looking to maximize your audience, since your customers, the advertisers, want to sell their product to as many people as possible. But there is room in the overall equation for a number of different market strategies.

Programming that is obviously cheap may lose viewers; in particular, it may fail to attract the viewers that the advertisers like best – the ones with the most disposable income to spend. Viewers do not want cheap programmes. They don't look at a programme and say, 'It looks cheap, it is cheap, it must be good value with no frills, I'll buy it', because they are not actually buying anything. Advertisers don't necessarily want cheap programmes either. What they want is a good ratio between the rate they pay per minute and the size and status of the audience the programme can attract. This puts pressure on costs, but not beyond the point at which cheapness begins to look like tat.

If there was a real multiplicity of channels all competing for the same limited pot of advertising, the situation might be different. But my confident prediction for the 1990s is that both Channel 3 and Channel 4 will offer quality programming throughout a large part of their schedules in order to compete with the BBC and attract advertisers who themselves are looking for the quality market. In the case of Channel 4, this will involve niche marketing, trying to attract particular audiences and attendant advertisers to particular programmes. In the case of Channel 3 it will involve juggling the schedules so as to keep a large audience, with a lot of spending power, tuned to the channel throughout the day or evening. Channel 3 will also have to compete with Sky and possibly other satellite broadcasters at the lower end of the market. But even there they will not be seeking to mop up; they will want to abstract part of the audience, and for that audience as well as for the audience that watches NEWS AT TEN, or BRIDESHEAD REVISITED, the watchword will be quality.

So we will continue to get a good news service (on the whole better on the commercial channels than on the BBC), classical concerts, drama adaptations, consumer watchdog programmes, and most if not all of what was offered under a public service regime. The perceptible difference, if any, will be in the rationale: things will be done in the name not of the public but of the consumer.

So what's wrong? In a way, nothing much. Television in Britain will continue to offer the mass public a superior culture to that offered by the printed word. But it is important to distinguish what we are likely to get in the near future, which is very much a continuation of what we used to get under the old regime,

from the underlying and long-term implications of a new regime whose rationale is profit and for which 'quality' is a means to an end rather than an end in itself.

We can put it this way:

1. Although the system will probably deliver what its propagandists like to call quality, it may not. It will take only a slight shift in the terms of the economic equation to send costs and expectations, and with it 'quality', spiralling downwards.

2. Even if the system stays up-market, 'quality' television conceived in market terms still has major weaknesses. These weaknesses are similar to those in any system where public provision is offered as a service to customers rather than to citizens. Throughout the public service in Britain (or what's left of it) there is much talk of contracts – in the relationship between patients and doctors, or doctors and hospitals, as well as between railway passengers and the railway operator. The relation of the end-user (the 'customer') to the supplier is conceived on the same lines in the health service as the relation of a shopper to a shop or a car owner to a repairer. Contracts of this kind can deliver quality to the consumer, particularly at the upper end of the market. But they do not deliver comprehensive health across the nation or a rationally integrated transport system. Even less can they do so in the cultural field where the standard of quality is not measurable in economic or para-economic terms.

Quality in cultural life is a very complex negotiation of relative values in which the integrity and responsiveness of the supplier of meanings are constantly being put to the test. A protected authoritarian state-controlled system does not pass this test very well, which is why the opening up of the television market to consumer choice has certain advantages. But the management of the choice mechanism by privately owned and basically profit-oriented suppliers does not pass the test either. The temptation is too strong to package something which has all the signifiers of quality – the classical concert in the rococo hall with musicians in 18th-century costume – without the substance. Too often, also, diversity and responsiveness to the marginal demand will be attempted only when the demand has been aggregated to provide a package which will guarantee enough consumers to satisfy the advertiser. And too often, honesty will lose out to acceptability.

In a recent article¹, the philosopher John Mepham has suggested three golden rules for quality television in a plural society: a social rule of diversity – to match the diversity of a plural society; a cultural purpose of providing usable stories – with particular reference to popular fiction; and an ethic of truth-telling. To my mind these are rules for something better than mere quality. If they are not adhered to, the danger is not junk television (which like quality television can be

either good or bad), it is something like Kitsch. The German word Kitsch designates the art product which sells itself on the pretence of being art, on the use of the signifiers of artisticness. For television we need a similar word for the programme which sells itself on the signifiers of quality. I suggest Kwietsch. Pursuit of an advertisers' dream of quality will give us not so much 'nicht Kunst sondern Kitsch' as 'not quality but Kwietsch'.

Note

John Mepham, 'The Ethics of Quality in Television', in: Geoff Mulgan (ed.), *The Question of Quality* (The Broadcasting Debate, No. 6), London: British Film Institute, 1990.

QUALITY TELEVISION IN THE NETHERLANDS: SOME HOPEFUL REFLECTIONS ON BREAKING THE TABOO

SONJA DE LEEUW

Quality is a beautiful concept: in such a nice way, it divides people and leads to homicide. If there is one thing people will never agree on, it is quality, and while there may not be many taboos in The Netherlands, talking about quality is one of them.

The concept of quality is amorphous. It evokes all kinds of associations, most of which are based on prejudices. In our Dutch perception, British quality stands for civilization, German quality lasts over a thousand years, and French quality generally speaking means that it looks very nice but will not last very long. American quality can easily be associated with vitality; American musicals are above all sparkling. Consequently, there must also be something like Dutch quality: it is often associated with what is homemade, like strawberries grown outdoors.

In general terms, the concept of quality in television has been devalued. It is used for everything and therefore means nothing. Because the concept is amorphous, there are different ways of approaching quality, depending on one's view of the character and function of television, on the role of public broadcasting, and so on. I have therefore chosen a more kaleidoscopic approach which gives me the possibility of touching on several of these approaches and mixing general remarks with more personal ones. This allows me to escape from attempting to formulate a definition of quality. Such a definition can never be complete because it excludes ideas and notions one can never foresee and which could turn out to be useful at a later stage.

I will try nevertheless to approach the concept of quality and get as close as I possibly can, by focussing on some of the component parts. The kind of quality I am discussing here is determined by the framework of our Dutch broadcasting system. This framework certainly allows for the production of quality programmes, but unfortunately the results show that this does not seem to be the general goal of the broadcasting companies.

Some Preliminary Remarks

First of all, television has grown up now and is accepted, I hope, as a legitimate form of culture; culture in the sense that it produces and reproduces meanings and pleasures. Various meanings and various pleasures. I will not be tempted to contrast so-called high culture with so-called popular culture. Television is frequently referred to as 'our most popular art', as opposed to the traditional 'high art' cultural products (literature, music, visual arts and even film). This contrast does not provide a useful approach to evaluating the creative products of television. It denies that each cultural practice, including television, should be judged on its own merits. This implies that television not only needs adaptations of works of high art in order to attain a good reputation. The high culture critique of television has been rejected by humanities-based television studies which have often celebrated the popular, in genres like soaps, sitcoms, crime stories and game shows. From this perspective, everyone who liked and enjoyed *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED* is a bourgeois. In my opinion, this embrace of the popular has tended to work as a legitimization for not raising the question of quality.

This leads to a second distinction, between more serious or rather more culturally demanding programmes like literary adaptations or arts programmes and the 'really' popular ones, attracting large audiences, like soaps and game shows. The last category is often characterized as inferior in quality. Neither the unconditional celebration of the popular or the cultural, nor the underestimation of popular genres are effective when discussing quality. Both cultural and popular programmes exist because they meet the needs and wishes of the viewer. Quality has nothing to do with programmes for a minority or a mass audience; that is to say, neither cultural paternalism, which suggests that only cultural programmes for a minority can have quality, nor the consumer argument which measures quality in terms of audience response (ratings) is a valid approach. In other words, programmes made for a mass audience can indeed have quality, while on the other hand minority programmes can be very poor. The German crime series *TATORT*, for example, is of high quality and attracts large audiences.

In what way, then, is it possible to judge quality? One answer would be that quality should be seen as relative to the historically changing forms and genres television has developed. Soaps and sitcoms, for instance, should be judged with reference to the conventions and traditions of those specific genres. Their quality can be located either in a faithful and authentic application of the conventions, or in breaking them in order to explore a new style. Conventions are normative and therefore changeable. In the 1970s, 'good' television drama above all meant drama with a high degree of realism, both in terms of method (as documentary as

possible) and attitude towards reality (in the sense of ideological intention). Nowadays we would no longer share this opinion. Quite a different example from the history of Dutch television is the slogan used by the Dutch socialist broadcasting organization VARA in the battle for survival during the late eighties: 'quality culture for ordinary people'. In those years, quality drama referred to social realism as an overall mode of representation, integrating at the same time more popular elements derived from comedy and soap opera. Today, the VARA defines quality culture as a whole evening of programming which disguises the socialist message, for instance in the sitcoms, one of their last treasured traditions.

Quality and the Dutch Broadcasting System

With the arrival of commercial station RTL4 in 1989, the Dutch public service broadcasting system lost its monopoly, while options for commercial television through cable were left open. Today, these developments force our public service stations to reconsider their specific function and, if you like, mission. In government papers on broadcasting policy for the near future 'quality' and 'pluriformity' are mentioned as the leading principles, in connection with 'cultural identity' and 'international aspects'. There is a great deal to be said about these issues, but for the moment I will only focus on the main points. The Minister uses the term quality when she refers to the programming as a whole, which requires from the broadcasting companies 'high artistic and technical standards, originality and expressiveness and a clear self-defined standard'. On top of this, the Minister mentions the notion of authenticity. These characteristics, although not altogether clear in every respect, seem to be valid starting-points when discussing quality, and they should be applied to every programme category and genre, taking into account specific conventions. But what is 'a clear self-defined standard'? It could refer to programmes in both form and content reflecting the specific identity of each broadcasting company, which in The Netherlands, both institutionally and legally, retains traces of its origins along different denominational and political lines. Maybe the wish is father to the thought here. Our broadcasting system is organized in such a unique way that it has the potential of representing a wide range of ideologies (and not only those specifically relating to political, social or religious aspects). Such a variety, reflecting Dutch society as a whole, with all its traditions, new developments and tendencies, provides a recognizable 'station-identification' for the viewer.

However, the more recent tendency to consolidate the various viewer constituencies within each channel is dictated neither by the fear of so-called American media imperialism nor by any pressure to fall in line with other European

countries. Co-production on a European level is a growing necessity, not only for Dutch but also for other national television producers. Happily, The Netherlands is already, on a small scale, participating in European funds for broadcasting and programme making. There is, furthermore, no reason to believe that our national identity (which is partly international) is being threatened, whether by American series or by cable and satellite. Several studies have demonstrated that people by far prefer to see programmes in their own language. Thus, one of the qualities our national broadcasting system should concentrate on is to create a strong national programme output, which could, at the same time, function as a solid base for co-production. Such a national focus offers the best position for coping with the advancing uniformity.

Pluriformity is the other leading principle of our broadcasting system, though it might have become a bit threadbare over the years. The Minister prefers to use the word 'diversity', which refers to a diverse programme supply for a wide audience. But demanding diversity may also imply a loss of quality. It seems that the Minister fears a one-sided fascination with the 'new' when the concept of quality is put into practice. This is nonsense. Experimenting with the 'new' need not be unfavourable at all in this respect. Moreover, in the Minister's view, it is not possible to realize quality when programmes are aimed at majority audiences. As I observed before, this is a point of view that can hardly be defended. It gives broadcasting companies the possibility of a legitimate escape from quality.

Quality and Independent Producers

What is already happening and what may be strongly promoted in the future is leaving the programme production to independent producers and production companies. It gives broadcasting companies the chance to concentrate more and with better results on the quality of the programming itself. Certainly, the idea is not bad and not new, as the examples of ZDF and Channel 4 clearly show. And fortunately, some creative producers are working for television in a way that resembles the British situation we in The Netherlands have always been jealous of, and with the best results. But in daily practice there are many difficulties. Some of these independent producers are good, but the problem is that broadcasting companies often continue to work with bad ones as well. They withdraw from nearly all responsibilities, letting the production companies conduct their affairs as they please. In the field of drama, writers are the first to suffer from a situation where they are confronted with producers who do not respect union agreements concerning contracts, fees and copyright, while drama department authorities are watching from the side-lines, pretending not to notice. Most of them are not really

interested in writers. They need them, but at the same time they regard them as troublesome: a climate which exhausts talent and quality, instead of creating a stimulating situation in which talent can flourish. And in the end, of course, it is the viewer at home who does not get the quality s/he deserves.

Film and Television

Co-production between film and television is more fruitful, for both sides. It requires from the broadcasting companies a greater willingness to invest (not only in terms of finances) in the film industry, giving the film industry the impulse it needs in order to survive, while the broadcasting companies will get a programme in return. Hilversum does not yet fully recognize that filmmakers can be of great importance for the quality of television. Recent serials and series like *BIJ NADER INZIEN*, *OP AFBETALING*, *RECHT VOOR Z'N RAAB* and *PLEIDOOI*, written by film and television scriptwriters and directed by filmmakers, have set a quality standard for the future. Film director Frans Weisz has frequently emphasized that he does not distinguish between working for film or television. He follows his own quality standards as a filmmaker. Obviously, filmmakers aim at perfection more than people in television do, where frequently one take has to suffice. In the productions mentioned above, the perfection is visible on every level: script, directing, camera, acting, lighting, and art direction. This kind of work should be given a chance more often, regardless of whether it is produced in-house by television companies or by independents. At the same time, there are many talented television scriptwriters and directors, but they should be given the opportunity to develop their skills. A good example is the NCRV drama staff. The NCRV has established a certain continuity in producing good single plays and serials, because they have a writer and director on the staff, and through the years they have consistently invested in new talent. Apart from Weisz, the NCRV and the NOS, and more recently the AVRO, the broadcasting companies are not really interested in perfection.

Quality in Terms of Ideological Identity and Aesthetics

While the government is responsible for the public service system as a whole, the broadcasting companies are responsible for the quality of the programming and of specific programmes. As I said above, one way of measuring quality in the Dutch system is in terms of ideological criteria derived from a broadcaster's denominational or political identity. Once these ideological criteria become blurred, as they increasingly are in the quest for ratings, broadcasting companies squander their own culture and traditions. It is opting for the easy solution, repeating over and over formulas of success by shifting the rules and standards relating to quality.

The conviction with which a broadcasting company is capable of putting on the screen its beliefs, its view of culture and life counts with me in terms of quality. Quality criteria like credibility and authenticity are important in realizing a highly identifiable character. It is indeed possible within the framework of our broadcasting system, as the NCRV proves with their drama serials *DE ZOMER VAN '45* and *HET WASSENDE WATER* and with their single plays.

When I discussed aesthetic criteria for quality television I took for granted the aesthetic potential of television. It is a pity not everyone working in broadcasting does the same. There have always been conflicting views on the aesthetic character of television and its status as art which I will not discuss here. In the early days of television, the television play came into being as the art form of the medium television. The idea was that all the available technical means should be used as aesthetic means to create a specific televisual art form, television drama which in those days meant only single plays. This also implied original scriptwriting – instead of adapting works from other art forms – and televisual staging and directing. It still does, in my opinion. Quality television in this sense is the optimum use of all visual and narrative means, including speech and dialogue, available to television in close harmony with the specific genre or form the programme refers to and of course with its content. Building upon Stuart Hall, one of the founders of British cultural studies, who talks about the intrinsic form of television, television's own aesthetic, we have to conclude from watching every day that this aesthetic potential is hardly ever visible in the programmes, under the pressure of what Stuart Hall calls 'collective repression'. Too few television makers use the aesthetic potential of television. In drama, the story is often oversimplified and therefore hardly credible, the visualization is poor, the images are empty, dialogues are long-winded. But there are exceptions in the history of Dutch television drama which show that quality television is not an impossibility.

Quality and the Cultural Status of Television

The recognition of the aesthetic potential of television requires the recognition of the cultural status of television. In The Netherlands this status is very problematic. Television is not taken very seriously here, either in public discussion or within the broadcasting companies themselves. In this country, there is no such thing as a lively television culture in the sense of a public debate, criticism, and polemics. We do not talk about television, except at birthday parties. While in the seventies many respectable newspapers had their own television critics, most of these have now disappeared. What remains are general previews or short personal comments. Some of the theatre and film magazines leave room for television criticism, but

there is certainly no close analysis of television programmes and their backgrounds. In an attempt to intensify public debate on quality television, the Dutch Cultural Broadcasting Promotion Fund has recently published reports of discussions on documentary, drama, and theatre on television, and they have also co-organized public debates on specific programmes.

Strange as it may sound, most of the people working for the broadcasting companies do not take television seriously as a cultural phenomenon either. And they are the last to deny this. In an article in the Dutch weekly *Vrij Nederland* in the spring of 1992¹, the broadcasting chairmen fully admitted the lack of discussion on culture and quality on the NOS board. Even within their own broadcasting companies and programme departments, there is no tradition of critically discussing and evaluating the programmes. Opportunities to realize something 'special' are not created. What makes it even worse is that there is a growing tendency to head departments of culture and drama with people from the management field instead of the cultural field. As their policies show, these managers are more interested in ratings than in improving the quality of their programme output according to ideological and aesthetic criteria. Ratings are therefore looked upon as crucial for the continuity of programmes, and not quality.

Quality and the Single Play

To illustrate my arguments, the single play can serve as a good example. It can be used as a standard measure when it comes to improving and stimulating quality television. If we wanted to judge the quality of our public service by a quantitative criterion, the number of single plays broadcast in recent years would show that our broadcasting companies do not produce quality in this sense. It is common knowledge that single plays have a difficult position within television programming and drama policy. This is very sad. The basis for quality television drama is quality writing, and the single play can offer a place for developing writing talent with a personal statement in a personal style. This would also benefit serial and series writing. Just because the single play gives the writer room to explore and demonstrate his professional skills in a personal way, it is a danger for the bureaucratically organized television bastion. Within the limits of this paper it would take too long to go into this. However, I strongly believe that the single play is best equipped to offer artistic space for a personal or political interpretation of reality and for experimenting with style and aesthetics. Public service television should feel obliged to cherish the single play as a genre it has itself generated.

Perhaps our Dutch broadcasting system, with its many different broadcasting companies, has worked against recognizing the role of the writer and

the virtue of the single play by cutting up into small portions the available transmission time, as well as the financial and personnel resources. In this context co-operation between the broadcasting companies and combined efforts may be useful to the writer. This could be one of the advantages of the re-structuring of the three channels, which will force them to co-operate on a larger scale.

Quality in the Future

My own ideas of how quality in Dutch television can be improved would include different kinds of programmes. Especially in the field of drama, there is much to be wished for. I would not only like to see more drama in which traditional forms are further elaborated but also avant-garde drama which experiments with new forms and tries to push the boundaries of conventional representations and audience expectations. Like Wim T. Schippers used to do and is still doing. I would also like to see really good crime series which we do not have at the moment. Furthermore, there should be much more historical drama in which various moments of Dutch history could be presented, including the less glorious parts. Compared with other countries we are far behind in dramatizing our own history. Perhaps this is due to our forgetfulness, which is, according to Jan Blokker, a typically Dutch characteristic.

I would like to see more creative documentaries and live transmissions of theatre performances, a better solution to the presentation of theatre on television than half-way adaptations and much more exciting, too. Why should only football games go out live? There should also be more poetry and more poets on television, including a broadcast of the Night of Poetry, also live. Also missing is a (monthly) magazine on television programmes, and a solid and lively arts magazine dealing with actual art presentations; weekly or, even better, daily. What we also need is a quiz show on film, and passionate introductions to the screenings of films of great cinematographic value, and of course these screenings themselves.

The Dutch have a good reputation in breaking taboos, especially on television. If we wish to improve the quality of television, we should take up that challenge.

Note

Ageeth Scherphuis, 'Alle Omroepvoorzitters over Cultuur in Hilversum' (All Broadcasting Chairs about Culture in Hilversum), *Vrij Nederland*, February 22, 1992, pp. 10-13.

ON THE QUALITY OF SOAP

OLGA MADSEN

When talking about quality television many people confuse their personal taste with a more detached view of what quality television is or may be. Their definition of quality television is therefore too limited. It may be a paradox, but my ideas about quality television are very much the result of my personal experience as a filmmaker and producer. My career moved from being strongly involved in film to producing a daily soap for the Dutch commercial television station RTL4. This development may serve as a good illustration of what I think quality television is about.

For the sake of clarity I will first make it clear what quality television is not about. In discussions about this subject, people always mention a specific kind of drama production as being a good example of what they regard as quality television. Dutch examples are *OP AFBETALING*, *BIJ NADER INZIEN*, *HET WASSENDE WATER*, a British example would be *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED*. Typically, these productions are based on books which were classified as 'quality' in the field of literature. By extension, the same goes for other television productions which are adaptations from poetry, theatre or whatever else is considered as art. It is very strange that people never mention a programme originally made for television. This means they do not accept television as an art form in its own right. Creative people take culturally respectable subjects, try to turn them into television, and then think they produce quality television. For me, this is not the case at all. These programmes will never amaze or confuse or surprise me and that is what I think quality television should do.

The story of my career is the perfect example of how I got rid of the limitations imposed by people who think they know what quality television should be. Twenty years ago I started in the film industry, which did not really exist in Holland in those days. I was lucky to get involved in Scorpio Films, owned by Pim de la Parra and Wim Verstappen. We made a large number of very very low budget films. We were badly attacked: our films were considered to be of poor quality, vulgar and cheap. Scorpio Films was actually a group of pioneers who wanted to prove that making feature films was very important for this country and for its cultural development. Today their importance for Dutch film is being recognized,

but I will never forget the reactions. If I told somebody that I worked on a film like that, most people would not talk to me anymore. But inspired by Pim and Wim, we were all convinced of our goal: we wanted to make clear that it was a necessity to make films in your own culture.

Some years later, after having been first assistant to many other film directors, I became a director and producer myself. I made some films, and gradually I turned into what they call in this country a 'quality producer'. This label does not refer to the way I actually produced the films (they were still cheap) or to the response of the public. Nobody was interested in that. My films were considered quality products because of the subjects I had chosen. My first feature film, *GEKKENBRIEFJE*, was based on literature, my first documentary, *ITALO SVEVO*, was about a writer, and I also made television adaptations of works by Vondel and Goethe. I produced the feature film *DE ANNA*, directed by Erik van Zuylen, undoubtedly considered to be a quality director by the cultural élite of this country. After we finished this film, I started to have doubts about the value and interpretation of the notion of quality. We had worked very hard indeed to get that movie produced, it took us two years. But nobody, literally nobody of all those people who had always claimed they knew what quality was, went to see this film. Only one week in the cinema, seven copies, only twelve hundred visitors! I completely collapsed, I could not understand it at all. It took me at least one year to recover, and I did not know what to do anymore. What kind of film would I have to make to interest those intellectuals? Or maybe they did not exist at all?

Luckily, during that period I was offered a job at the film school in Amsterdam teaching feature film directing. I realized that it was a very good opportunity to recreate the fun in filmmaking I had always had, and to be honest I got a lot of help from the students, especially during our heavy discussions.

A year later I was asked to become a member of the board of the Dutch Filmfund. Of course, I realized the danger of becoming one of those people who claim to know what the standards for quality scripts and films are or should be. During the period of about five years that I served on the board, I analysed a mountain of scripts and films, made by people of very different backgrounds and interests. And this is where my training for a different way of thinking started. I began to realize that it is not my personal taste that makes a film worthwhile. If you wish to be an advisor on another person's script or film, you have to find and accept the goal of the other creator. And only when you accept the origin, the authenticity of the other person's conviction, can you have valuable discussions. These discussions are mostly about the technique of how to make the subject clearer to the reader of the script, i.e. to the viewer of the film. Because you can

teach technique, but you cannot teach quality. Any subject, and I really mean any subject, can be used for film or television, but it is the way you use it, shape it, that gives it quality.

These two functions then slowly made me realize that as far as I was concerned, filmmaking should not only be an individual way of expressing my own thoughts. It is actually a paradox: on the one hand I can only make a film if I, and I alone, understand or feel the motives. On the other hand, I do not find the film worthwhile if it is not at the same time appreciated in some way by other people. And by 'other people' I do not mean critics, that specialized branch of viewers, but members of the general audience. So, after five years of teaching and thinking about what films are worthwhile making, I found the desire again to make my own films.

I resigned, and fortunately the NOS commissioned me to write a script for a television adaptation of Chekov's *The Cherry Orchard*. I collaborated with the Dutch National Theatre for three months, while they were rehearsing the play for their theatre production. After the opening night in the theatre, the NOS sent me a very short letter saying that they had cancelled the project. The production did not get really bad reviews, but certainly not good ones either. And apparently the decision to cancel the television adaptation had a great deal to do with these reviews. The cultural élite of the nation had condemned this particular production and so caused the cancellation of the television version. Nobody was interested anymore in what I had planned to do with the television adaptation. There was no discussion about the subject at all. *The Cherry Orchard* is quality, no doubt about it, especially for the cultural élite. But apparently the NOS felt that only the élite were allowed to know, and thousands of television viewers did not need to.

Two days after this disaster, Joop van den Ende, Holland's biggest independent producer, who specializes in commercial television programmes, phoned me. We had never met, but he knew exactly what films I had made over the years. He wanted to ask me something, but first he warned me that I might get mad at him. He invited me to put the first Dutch soap opera on the screen within a period of three months. Before he had actually finished his sentence I said yes. So that is what I have been doing the past year: producing a Dutch version of the Australian original GOOD TIMES, BAD TIMES, now in its second year.

A long time ago I analysed SONS AND DAUGHTERS, an Australian daily series, a genre only suited for television. I remember that I was amazed by how free you can be in such a series, especially with the characters. Because they are so well established, you are allowed to do crazy things with them. Having now worked on soap so intensively, I have found a definition for the genre: a soap is a story told in

a naive way, in which it is possible, through the realism of the characters, to make unlikely stories likely. If you accept that definition, you will see the fun of the genre, and you will like it. If you cannot, you will hate it. The fun of course is in creating the unlikely stories. Never think that you can do anything, because there is a limit to what people will find credible. You have to find some kind of standard in yourself, and after a while you know almost by intuition when you can do crazy things and when you have to limit yourself to some form of realism. But we take the genre very seriously, indeed. And with us two million viewers do every night. Another reason for liking this work is that you have to dig very deeply into your imagination to reach your goal. And you are forced to do so, because every night there has to be a new episode of 25 minutes.

In her paper, Sonja de Leeuw claims that single plays are a good training ground for writers. I do not agree with her. The single play is the worst training you can give young authors, because they are put in a situation where they are responsible for half an hour of drama on their own. Can a first-time writer for instance introduce five interesting characters within half an hour? The craft of writing requires a great deal more training. On *GOOD TIMES, BAD TIMES* we now have a team of ten writers who deliver five scripts a week, every week. The first year we adapted Australian scripts, and we started with two editors, Rogier Proper and myself. This second year half of the scripts were adapted, and the other half were written by us, and next year all the writing will be original. I strongly believe that this is a good training situation for young writers.

We have just signed the contract for another 230 episodes of our soap, which will provide not only the writers but also the production staff with a good training period. Four directors are working on the series, three of them former students of the film school. Twenty-five actors are working every day, some experienced and some with very little experience. But you can take risks in this respect, because you know the public trusts you. The actors who are totally new have a very difficult time for the first weeks, but some of them are the future talents the filmworld will be able to take advantage of.

A more general reason why a daily soap series on Dutch television is important is that the audience gets accustomed to the Dutch language as a language for fiction. Why is it that they say it is bad acting when they hear: 'Ik hou van je' instead of 'I love you'? We are convinced that it is a necessity to make television drama in your own culture, your own language. Didn't I hear that same argument twenty years ago? More things remind me of that period: many people are shouting at me again with the same kind of anger, about the same kind of thing.

The past few years can certainly count as the most creative period of my life. Actually making films and television programmes is much more important than only talking and thinking about making them. I do not know what I will be doing next year, but one thing is certain: those people who claim to know what quality is will not be the ones I turn to for advice.

ZAPPING ONE'S WAY INTO QUALITY: ARTS PROGRAMMES ON TV

THOMAS ELSAESSER

Quality, yes - but Is It Television?

As a relatively recent arrival to The Netherlands from Britain, I have become used to dividing my life into BC and AC. Before cable and after... With it goes a new pastime: zapp TV5 Bernard Pivot and BOUILLON DE CULTURE, zapp BBC2 THE LATE SHOW with Michael Ignatieff or Sara Dunant, zapp Adriaan van Dis at the Ijsbreker, zapp West 3 LINIE K, zapp ZIGGURAT, zapp ARD KULTURREPORT. I had no idea there was so much culture on TV. Even so, I'm only scratching the surface, since I keep missing DE LITERATUURMACHINE, and I never seem to get up early enough to catch ZDF's 'Jugendstil' programmes, or stay up late enough for BBC's The Open University. Just as surprising, many of the programmes do not look all that cheap to make, and most of them have quality written all over them. A few weeks into my new addiction, however, I began to wonder: it may be quality, but is it television?

In one sense, this is a silly question. Everything on TV is television: its essence is to have no essence. Equally obvious is the fact that TV programmes about the arts and literature have recognizable formats, which they borrow from other TV genres – Pivot's BOUILLON DE CULTURE, for instance, is taking the chat show format up-market; other programmes use the news magazine format, where three or four items are thrown together, sometimes for no better reason than the need to 'do' the week's cultural calendar. Somewhat apart is THE LATE SHOW, with its flashy visuals, its in-jokes, its postmodern self-references and fronted by presenters who fancy themselves investigative journalists.

The question 'is it television?' nevertheless lingered because I found myself watching a recent BOUILLON DE CULTURE from start to finish, and only afterwards realized why. It had Catherine Deneuve as its celebrity guest, a real star, in other words. The camera was mesmerized by her; it couldn't take its single unblinking eye off her, regardless who spoke. Cutting away only reluctantly, it used every excuse to return to the divine Catherine for a reaction shot. So there we have it, I thought: the arts and high culture need the cinema, not the other way round, as we're so often led to believe. And television, too, needs the cinema. Here is Pivot, shuffling his prompt cards, but there is Catherine, introduced by highlights from

half a dozen of her films, from *LES PARAPLUIES DE CHERBOURG* to *TRISTANA*, from *REPULSION* to *BELLE DE JOUR*, feted by Pivot thanks to *INDOCHINE*, her latest film, just opening in Paris. The drama unfolding in the studio after this opening was one of deep, meaningful glances exchanged between the director of *INDOCHINE* and his leading lady, for whom, we are told, three men and one woman had been toiling for more than a year to write the script. Footage from the making of the film, a clip from the film itself, anecdotes from one of the writers. One had to admire Pivot – the skilful filleting of his various other guests – among them the poet and dramatist Jean Tardieu and a woman photographer who had just returned from covering white supremacist political rallies in South Africa. ‘Indochine’: the tissue of associations around the word became both the narrative principle of Pivot’s show and a star in its own right, evoking history, politics, memory in a potent mix of colonial nostalgia, guilt, exoticism, poetry, romance. Many subtexts did not have to be mentioned and were still present. Only recently, there was the film of *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, we remember Dien Bien Phu, Vietnam, the Boat People, even Algeria – the octogenarian Tardieu remembers it well, the photographer just happens to have taken a picture of Tardieu more than thirty years ago, and Catherine Deneuve knows a thing or two about photography, of course. Nobody needs to mention it, but we remember that she was once married to David Bailey. She reads one of Tardieu’s poems, Pivots reads another, an ex-minister suddenly appears to present Catherine with some especially rare tulips – ‘je les présente à vous en tant que femme’ – all these little coups de théâtre: is this programme celebrating cinema or celebrating literature, or is this ‘Kulturkitsch’ which is sending both up as well as making fun of itself? Towards the end, Pivot quite unashamedly pushes close to the camera a dozen books and half a dozen compact discs, and he also just happens to have three videos to pass around, vintage films all featuring Catherine Deneuve. It hardly comes as a surprise then to read in the credits that *BOUILLON DE CULTURE* is sponsored by fnac, the book and media supermarket chain. You may call it a travesty of culture, but it was a most agreeable hour in the company of interesting and famous people, whom Pivot put at their ease. High culture and pop culture, cinema and theatre, fine arts and photography, cleverly woven together and even-handedly glamorized, in a show that is ostentatiously sexy, unapologetically consumerist, and unmistakably French. And finally, just as unmistakably, it is television – with a little help from the cinema, or at any rate, the afterglow of its romantic history, and its romanticising of History.

Literature, the Arts on TV: Who Needs Them?

It is with the magazine format that the question becomes inescapable: for whom are these programmes made? *THE LATE SHOW* is clever and sarcastic, has well-written scripts, and alternates between servicing the educated yuppie, the politically correct intellectual, and the scholarly erudite. Afraid that its night-owl viewers might be stifling a yawn and turn off the set, it hurries its guests along and makes sure their views are at least eccentric, since there seems never enough time for them to be memorable. Not so long ago, for instance, it had the Irish poet Tom Paulin and the Cambridge academic Lisa Jardine argue about misogyny in poetry on a park bench in the middle of Hampton Court. The pretext was Ted Hughes' new book on Shakespeare presented on *THE LATE SHOW* only a day or so after the quality Sunday papers had 'done' the book in their review sections (as, of course, had the *Volkskrant*). But *THE LATE SHOW* also has bands perform in the studio whose latest music video you might have caught on MTV that afternoon, it has Francis Fukuyama discuss Hegel and the end of history with a philosophy professor from Oxford, or it gets a panel together on the latest Benneton advertising campaign. Is this television as cultural home shopping, an audiovisual listings magazine, or is *THE LATE SHOW* the harbinger of a new consensus regarding culture in a democratic, pluralistic society? Not glamorizing both high and popular culture, in the manner of *Pivot*, but asking high culture to make room for a genuine new multi-culturality, where nobody talks their subjects up, but nobody talks down to the viewer either, by clowning and mock-jocularity (as happens sometimes on *LINIE K*). *THE LATE SHOW* team usually speak with passion and enthusiasm about ideas, artists, books, as if they still mattered. As television, happily, the programme puts itself under pressure to be different, maybe because it does not want to be confused with *The Open University* programmes, which follow straight after and to which nobody pays attention, except the primed timers of a few thousand video recorders up and down the land. In fact, I tend to tape *THE LATE SHOW*, too, in order to look at it the next day, in fast forward. In its Saturday digest (*LATE AGAIN*) *THE LATE SHOW* actually does the fast-forwarding for me.

German arts programmes I recognize by their slow pans and languid views, the camera lingering with equal insistence on blighted industrial ruins near Dresden and the latest Baselitz on show in Düsseldorf. Over it, an elegiac voice monotonous a know-all commentary, wanting to be objective but ending up telling me what to think. Is it television? Is it *The Open University*? Is it cinema? If German arts programmes take themselves too seriously, it is probably because some of them are trailers for feature-length documentaries the directors are hoping to make with television money. This in turn is the consequence of a system of film finan-

cing, funding and exhibition which has obliged people who think of themselves as filmmakers for the cinema to work for television – on arts and culture reports: just for the money.

It does seem impossible to discuss quality on television without detecting the virus of commercialization and commodification infecting everything, the arts, culture, news, information, and even the weather report. The alternative, however, is the illustrated lecture, promoting an idea of quality and culture that reproduces the worst feature of public service television, when its self-appointed job was to improve its audience by deciding, if necessary on their behalf, what was good for them. Only a broadcasting system that still enjoys a monopoly over its viewers or an ample income from its license fee can be so well-meaning and paternalistic. Otherwise, zapp...zapp...zapp.

Quality TV and the National Culture

Is television capable of 'producing' national identity? Some time ago, a French initiative begun by Pierre Nora, under the name of 'lieux de mémoire' was discussed among historians and writers in The Netherlands. A series of articles appeared in the quality press (the *NRC Handelsblad*), at about the same time as the scriptwriter and journalist Jan Blokker produced a television programme entitled *HERINNERINGEN AAN NEDERLAND* (Remembering The Netherlands), about the village of Heiligerlee, site of a famous battle, in which the Dutch defeated the Spanish and from which historians date the origins of Dutch national identity. What Blokker notes is that the actual physical site bears few traces, if any, of this 'history', but that, in another sense, Heiligerlee is so typically an average Dutch village of the 1990s that it can well stand as a symbol of the absence, today, of any specifically national memory. The programme seems both glad and sad about what it finds. Glad that Heiligerlee has not been turned into the nation's historical theme park. Sad that so little remains by which one could commemorate the 'birth of a nation'. Looking for 'real' history and memory, television, it seems, can only record its absence. But history in this sense – if Godard is right about cinema and television working differently in relation to time, memory, identity – is more the task of film than of television. As it happens, Bernardo Bertolucci's *NOVECENTO* was scheduled against *HERINNERINGEN* on one of the other channels: zapping between the two could not have produced a starker contrast about fashioning national history as national identity, of memory as mythology, and history as cinema and spectacle.

And it is true, *HERINNERINGEN AAN NEDERLAND* seems unsure whether it is cinema or television: it may want to be the former but does not have either quite

the resources nor (happily) ultimately the necessary sense of self-importance. What strikes one are the stylistic marks of a certain art cinema: slow pans, static shots perfectly framed, empty vistas, long silences. By way of contrast, I tried to remember how, in recent years, filmmakers had created memory, also for television: by the speaking voice, by faces, by figures in a landscape bearing witness, as Marcel Ophuls' *LE CHAGRIN ET LA PITIÉ* and Claude Lanzmann's *SHOAH* well recognized.

These witnesses and voices, of course, cannot be recovered for events dating back some 400 years. Yet there are histories whose traces Jan Blokker's programme does not seem to be looking for which may nonetheless be *lieux de mémoire* for the nation as nation. If the Dutch people, for good or ill, do not have a national identity to which they feel an instinctive emotional allegiance, they are, researchers tell us, extraordinarily loyal to their television. This loyalty, too, must have left traces and thus constitute a history. It may not be the reference to a historical referent that makes up this history, which could then be conveniently recorded on television, but reference to television creating its own remembered reality. About this, the inhabitants of Heiligerlee might have memories, sharper ones than even about Liberation Day, such as the big flood of 1953 (the first natural disaster receiving media-saturation coverage), or the day their television set was delivered, or who they saw their first TV programmes with (often, over at grandmother's house), the early Eurovision programmes (which coincided with the first televised football world championship in Switzerland), a Royal Wedding or a coronation. We know the question: where were you the day President Kennedy was shot in Dallas? But we also know what the question actually asks: where were you when you saw President Kennedy being shot on TV? It is those memories and what they mean as personal traumas that blockbusters like *JFK* can work over, endlessly.

Perhaps the sense of sociability, of coming together around shared feelings, which such a national media history might document is after all not so different from what the peasants of Heiligerlee might have told Blokker at the time: about winters that destroyed the crops, or strange sightings, or soldiers looting and taking all the pickled beef. One thinks of Bruegel's *Fall of Icarus* and W.H. Auden's poem ('Musée des Beaux Arts'). When, one might ask, will media history have its 'école des annalistes'? To speak about remembering and forgetting in Britain or The Netherlands today is actually to forget about the surface, the ordinary, the everyday, of which television is, willy-nilly, our collective guardian. The fact that Western Europe has been without a war, a famine, a plague or any other event that really went to the heart of everyday experience for precisely these 50 years of television, the lifetime of at least one if not two generations, means that we have the luxury of building a culture and a cultural memory of the banal, the everyday, of

what interests ordinary people, what amused them and what moved them, what they saw in the movies and on TV: a history of leisure and of 'killing time', alongside the history of all the killing fields on television.

If it is true, as some of my friends tell me, that the middle classes in The Netherlands never actually created or supported an indigenous 'national' culture – whether high culture or popular but have merely been selective about what foreign culture they adopted, then Dutch viewers have the advantage that a national culture cannot be imposed from above. This is the 'sunny side' of the complaint (if complaint it was) heard on *HERINNERINGEN AAN NEDERLAND*, that the Dutch are the world-champions of short memory, always on the look-out for new trends and fashions.

By a nice irony, then, the early and quasi-universal adoption of cable in The Netherlands fits in well with the national character. Cable TV quite accurately reproduces this middle class notion of culture, as one finds it in any Amsterdam bookshop with the world's literatures, reviews, and journals at one fingertips, itself faithfully reproduced in the quality newspapers, with their cultural pages featuring reviews of foreign books well before they are translated. Zapping seems thus an old Dutch habit, cable merely providing an electronic extension, a continuity recognized by the VPRO guide which has the cultural programmes, the literature and arts programmes, the science programmes and the movies listed on what it aptly and conveniently calls the zapp pages. Has the spiritual mentor of what's good for you turned into the consumer guide of what's 'good value for money'?

For a case can be made that the very existence of television has posed a challenge to culture as a whole. As the spearhead of consumer electronics and the Trojan horse in everyone's home, television has given people the opportunity to follow what they like, without worrying whether it makes them better human beings or just rots their minds. Television is therefore not merely a technology for people selling themselves, or people selling us goods and services, opinions and information, culture and life-styles, and thereby selling us to the advertisers and the politicians. It has also brought a mutation in our concept of democracy, insofar as the relentless hunt after the viewing figures – and the market research associated with it – may be a kind of ongoing, quasi-ethnographic self-scrutiny, a national census, an investigation into choices and preferences, but also beliefs, anxieties, and needs. We all know that every time we buy in a department store or supermarket we vote; for these products rather than those, for these self-images rather than those. Soliciting our vote not through the ballot but through the wallet is our culture's way of determining not just what goods, services, and skills will continue to be supplied and which will wither on the vine, but also may well trace in the

sand the direction in which (the well-healed, affluent part of) mankind is evolving: television not as the censor of what we may or may not have, but as the sensor, part of the looped feedback system which envelops us like another ozone layer. Consumer democracy may indeed be a kind of ecosystem stabilizing our social selves, of which TV and other demand-led industries are the carriers and delivery points.

Quality TV or Quality on TV?

What sort of an animal is television finally? Is it deferential, or is it self-serving and self-satisfied, is it parasitic on all the other media, or does it merely parody and mimic them? Has it anything that is truly its own? If we answer in the negative, we would have to assume that television is a neutral transport medium, a sort of transparency, a film, window, or screen, which merely conveys most efficiently messages formed and fashioned elsewhere. Quality television then simply means quality ON television, or worse still, MY quality on YOUR TV set. But if television is neither a supermarket nor a bulletin board, what does distinguish it, and how do we then know what is good television? Its typical mode used to be that it was 'live' and therefore had a presence no other medium could rival, but this has long ago become merely one of television's carefully staged effects. On the other hand, television's history connects it to radio, and in its emphasis on drama it has affinities with the theatre. Insofar as it produces and consumes stories, it is comparable to literature. Its programme fillers (but also its biggest audience pleasers) are the movies, and finally, because it obliges everyone to be a performer, it has given us both Herbert von Karajan and Benny Hill.

But all this may ultimately be irrelevant: television's ancestor is neither this artform nor that artform, this medium or that, but rumour and gossip, always half-way between fact and fiction, driven as much by anxieties as wishful thinking, full of malice and sarcasm, but also our best index of sociability and an intact community life. Or, to change the metaphor slightly, television is like a skin, sometimes smooth, sometimes scaly, sometimes Oil of Ulay, sometimes warts'n'all: you touch it, and it touches you, and you know right away whether you like making contact. Television, contrary to common belief, is not primarily a visual medium, nor is it radio with pictures, but it is a tactile medium, for all its anonymity and ubiquity. Marshall McLuhan was right: television is radically different from cinema, which is a medium concerned with negotiating distance and absence, while TV knows no absence, for even 'white noise' connotes a palpable presence. Television also knows no off-screen space, for the TV camera goes everywhere, into the war zones of global conflict as easily as up somebody's hairy nostrils.

By that token, television is also obliging high culture to declare its hand: for insofar as literature and the traditional arts are featured on television, they have entered a kind of devil's pact, because they will be judged by values which are alien to them, and to which they have in the past been deeply antagonistic: on TV, the arts must be glamorous, they must have stars and personalities, they must be relevant and topical, they must have a human interest angle, and they must be seen to try to please.

Quality TV: Making Yourself at Home

This leads me to argue for an idea of quality television that takes a quite different starting point: not how good is this or that programme by this or that (traditional) standard. But rather, how does it speak to whomever it speaks to? Does it know how to ask: may I come in, am I welcome in your home? This thought occurred to me when I was scanning through the McKinsey Report of broadcasting in The Netherlands: no less than 89% of viewers watch Nederland 1-3 and RTL4! A mere 11% left to zapp and graze across the rich pastures of BBC 1 & 2, ARD, ZDF and West 3, TV5 and RAI Uno, MTV and CNN, Euro-Sport and Super Channel. How can that be? The language barrier, no doubt, but it is surely not the only reason: everyone understands German, and most speak English, and the Belgian channels aren't doing too well either.

What is it that television viewers want? In one word: the familiar – familiar sights, familiar faces, familiar voices. They want broadcast television, that is, television that respects and knows who they are, where they are, and what time it is: the weather forecast as the unsuspected *degré zero* of quality television! As against the timelessness and placelessness of cable and satellite TV, against the 24-hour news, music or sports channels, viewers seem to treasure the time-space co-ordinates of broadcast TV, which are themselves another aspect of what I've called the medium's tactile quality, its way of making contact. To the extent that language, as regional accent, as modulation and inflection of the human voice, is the most immediate, the most instinctive, and most important aspect of this contact space that envelops us as social beings and as TV viewers, it IS language that makes the difference, which is why RTL4 is so successful in its mimicry of a 'national' broadcaster, despite being a commercial channel and showing so much US TV and imported movies.

If I'm right about the reason for viewers' preferences of a television service that respects the times of day and the change of weather and knows whether it is addressing the young or the old, gardeners or opera lovers, then this may have a significant lesson for the future of television: as long as TV is not deserted by the

family or by people who come back from work in the evening, satellite television poses no more a 'threat' to terrestrial broadcast television than pornographic videos from the corner shop. Even in the USA, cable stations make up no more than 30% of viewers, and the figure does not seem to be growing. It's as well to remember this when reading about the drastic changes television is supposed to be undergoing with the introduction of HDTV, or the scenarios that predict its disappearance altogether.

Locality, language, the conjugation of the day, the seasons and the generations, the respect for lived time, the television community of familiar faces and familiar spaces: this would be my starting point for judging quality television, for it would imply an instinctive respect for the viewer, not just of his or her intelligence, interests and need to be stimulated and entertained, but of his or her existence as a physical as well as a social being. Paradoxically – and too bad for international co-productions – one implication would be that not all good television travels well; indeed it might be inexportable. Tactility, making contact, also means the light touch, surface, and yes, superficial. By the same token, then, there is no inherent reason why game shows and variety programmes, soap operas, or day-time serials could not be quality television, too. They may command that highest of accolades, which is not peak viewing figures, but viewer loyalty – of the kind enjoyed in Britain by *CORONATION STREET*, *EASTENDERS*, *THAT'S LIFE*, or in The Netherlands by *SAY AAA* or *GOOD TIMES*, *BAD TIMES*, but also by 'minority programmes': Adriaan van Dis at the *Ijsbreker*, or Bernard Pivot's *BOUILLON DE CULTURE*. Among television professionals, it's an open secret that in virtually every country, what has the highest viewer loyalty is nationally specific, domestically produced comedy and drama, which is very expensive to make, not least because it requires skilled writers.

Once one accepts this fact, one can see that, say, literature on TV is not simply a matter of making the classics accessible to the plebs, on literature's terms, but that it requires a new kind of self-understanding of literature itself, or at any rate, a recognition that it may be undergoing yet another of its many mutations in its social function during its long history. Television, I would argue, thus poses new challenges if not to literature (the hallowed institution of important authors and sacred texts), then to the craft of writing, for television is, could be, or should be the writer's medium, or perhaps more precisely a medium for writing: as narrative, as dialogue, as argument, and as spoken language, in the sense of a contact space and an aural surface.

Viewer loyalty, then, is not only an index for the ratings; it acknowledges, even in game shows and talk shows, those social skills we all recognize as valuable: the ability to tell jokes or stories, to keep a conversation flowing, be a

good loser, the ability to entertain, in the sense of being both a gracious host and a gracious guest. Given that television is a domestic medium, its idea of culture is necessarily closer to the idea of table manners than to a university degree, and more like having a good conversationalist at a dinner party than listening to an expert: the greatest bore is always the guest who lectures others, regardless of how interesting his topic. This would also be my definition of quality television: programmes that are able to enlist the loyalty of the viewer in the face of choice, not by restricting choice (whether paternalistically, or through protectionist legislation).

Am I being too modest in what I expect of quality television? Maybe, but I don't think so, because it is not easy to be entertaining, that is, to be both sociable and interesting. Not many programmes of whatever kind achieve it, and even fewer achieve it consistently. At any rate, it gives me a very simple criterion for knowing when I'm watching quality television. As a channel zapper, my favourites are not necessarily the ones that play clever games with me, those programmes that try to anticipate my impatience and zapp for me, by shorter and shorter takes, by quick editing, flashy visuals, and exciting computer graphics. Quality television, quite simply, is a programme that stops the zapping and makes me stay put, because I recognize it, and because it recognizes me. Of course, such recognition is an illusion, the *fata morgana* of belonging, the creation of an imaginary community from among solitary, self-regarding individuals: but then, that's television – democracy's lost hope, which, after the demise of socialism, may nonetheless be our last hope.

DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY

JON COOK AND THOMAS ELSAESSER

The History of Quality

Ever since television first became available as a mass medium in Europe in the early 1950s, its cultural status has been the subject of controversy. Occupying legislators and social scientists, as well as philosophers and cultural pessimists, the quality debate as such is not exactly new.¹ Furthermore, the frequency of official reports and parliamentary commissions (Peacock, Pilkington, Annan, to name only the most prominent British ones) demonstrates that unlike the USA, where within regulatory guidelines mainly intended to allocate the scarcity of broadcast frequencies, television was left to find its own (commercial) level, European governments never quite trusted their national television to take care either of its economics or of its status.² Holding on to the right to license the airwaves and control access, the State framed a set of rules – the famous ‘public service remit’ – which, redefined and modified over the years, effectively prescribed the operational context not only of television as a mass medium and a profitable industry, but also of what constitutes quality. Lord Reith, the BBC’s first Director General and often regarded as the father of the public service’s tripartite mission to ‘inform, educate and entertain’, came to think of television as ‘an unmitigated disaster for mankind’³, admitting in the face of television’s popularity and social impact to an unreconstructed paternalism, made up in equal parts of presbyterian asceticism and high-brow snobbery:

It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need and not what they want – but few know what they want, and very few what they need.⁴

The present debate, then, is something of a replay: of earlier confrontations over a government’s right to make money via the television licence fee, and private companies’ right to a ‘license to print money’ via television advertising. But it also makes the preceding stages appear in a slightly different light: part of an ongoing struggle about the contending claims of high culture and popular culture, about which medium has the power and the legitimation to embody – and if necessary –

enforce a society's consensus over values, meanings and pleasures – balancing the hegemony of middle class taste against the massive evidence of popular culture. While radio after the war still derived its cultural norms largely from print culture – where the consensus was assumed to be shared ambitions towards the apex of the social and educational pyramid – television had to find its own consensus, or rather, from the 1970s onwards, it increasingly exchanged the notion of a consensus for an idea of diversity, which by the time of the arrival of Channel 4 in 1982 had been given the necessary public service gloss with the reminder that, say, post-war Britain was neither the consensus society the BBC wanted to project, nor was it engaged in waging a perpetual class war, as the Left might have wished. Instead, it was developing towards a multi-cultural society, in which one day even high culture may become just another subculture with its own rituals and resistances – a process which was recently being referred to as the 'Balkanization' of culture.⁵ Although social transformations of this kind are due to any number of factors, it may well be typical of an audiovisual culture, immersed in images and representations, as opposed to striving after standards, truth and values. Equally, one sign of a consumer culture is that it is preoccupied with life-styles and makes a fetish of choice.

The setting up of 'minority channels' or 'third programmes' at the heart of either public service broadcasting (as in Germany and The Netherlands) or within the mixed regimes of government-controlled and commercial television (Great Britain) in the 1970s largely followed a cultural agenda, paralleling the expansion of higher education and reflecting the intense media consciousness of the generation that had watched the war in Vietnam on television and retained from it an appetite for news, current affairs, reporting and analysis, while also acquiring an appreciation of popular television programming, such as soap operas, comedy, chat shows and sports.

By contrast, the 'crisis' of the 1980s which brought new life into the quality debate does not seem to have the diversity of viewers' interests as its motive, nor was it prompted by a demand for multi-culturality. Driven by new technology – satellite transmission, fibre-optics, cable, 'narrow-casting', the video-recorder, the remote control – its fuel is the enormous economic gains which the different storage and delivery systems promise to the broadcasting and telecommunication markets. With the scarcity of frequencies no longer a technical barrier, these industries see the expansion of channels as a growth area for advertising and services, while those owning film libraries or rights to comedy shows or other proven TV programmes have before their eyes the prospect of instant profit from re-runs and repeats.

In a sense, it is quite clearly the fear that such a cost-cutting, advertising-led, re-packaged or tabloid-style television might well result from a no-holds-barred free market situation which stands behind part of the concern for quality. At the same time, the resurgence of free market arguments and the impact of broadcasting and telecommunication converging in quite novel ways is also an occasion to reflect on what exactly television has contributed to different kinds of quality – of our cultural life, our social life, or quite simply, to the ‘quality of life’.

Definitions of Quality

The quest for quality, then, does not take place in a historical vacuum, nor can it define itself in the abstract. By necessity, there is no reason to be nostalgic for a prescriptive model of do’s and don’t’s, yet on the other hand, one need not simply assume that quality is synonymous with popularity, especially when this is equated with the largest number of viewers on the night. In the many discussions and the growing literature on the subject, one can make out very different definitions of quality, which nonetheless fall into a number of recognizable categories. They can be briefly summarized as follows: there is the idea that quality television is ‘national’ television, i.e. TV programmes in which the nation, often quite self-consciously, speaks to itself about itself, its history or uncertain future (from *BRIDESHEAD REVISITED* and *JEWEL IN THE CROWN* to *BOYS FROM THE BLACKSTUFF* and *HOUSE OF CARDS*); then, there is the idea that a particular genre, preferably drama, the single play, the well-written comedy series is the touchstone of quality TV; but in this case, American imports might also be considered quality television, especially where production costs, entertainment values, acting or the writing attract a mass audience (e.g. *DALLAS*, *HILL STREET BLUES* or *L.A. LAW*); in this respect, the staying power of a programme, its eventual status of a classic (*THE AVENGERS*, *THE BENNY HILL SHOW*, *YES MINISTER*, *DR WHO*, *THE SAINT*, or the German crime series like *TATORT* or *DERRICK*) also connotes and confers the ‘quality’ label. This staying power is often attributed to the unselfconscious professionalism of those involved in making such programmes, quality becoming a technical standard (as in ‘quality control’) but, in fact, also setting an institutional, self-regulating standard. Perhaps it is worth elaborating a little on this last point.

If quality television can be defined according to a professional knowledge of the medium, it is what television makers understand by a well-made programme, whether this be drama, soap opera, news, documentary, or quiz show. This professional understanding of quality television may proceed by a tacit knowledge of what a well-made programme is. According to this view, quality television emerges out of the practice of making television.

It derives from a reflection on what has worked well in the past and how it might be improved.

Such a definition has implications, one of them being that quality television is expensive television. Here more does not mean less but better. An adequate money supply secures 'state of the art' technologies; it pays for good actors, writers, directors, reporters. It ensures good production values.

Insofar as this definition is an institutional one, it means that ultimately, quality television cannot be defined by a specific programme, whether well-made or of a particular genre. Instead, the broadcaster stakes the claim for quality on having an overall programming policy, i.e. a strong schedule. Quality television, according to this view is founded in diversity: different kinds of programmes appealing to different kinds and sizes of audiences, at different times of the day.

Put in these terms, quality television very nearly coincides with the traditional definition of the BBC's public service credo: 'Others can inform some of the people all of the time, or all of the people some of the time, but only we can inform all of the people all of the time'. What makes television good is its capacity to educate, to raise the cultural level of its audience, to introduce them to forms of art and debate which would otherwise be inaccessible, in short, to fulfil a national and a cultural mission.

At this point, critics of quality television might argue that it is a thing of the past, mourned only by the voice of those who have enjoyed a privileged role in determining what educates, informs and entertains. More generally, they decided what constitutes quality and value, be it thanks to an economic advantage (the license fee monopoly) or an educational and political advantage (the recruiting basis in the television industries, the vetting of senior appointments, the feather-bedding of in-house staff and cost-padding of in-house productions).

However, the same criteria of universality and diversity might also lead to a definition of quality television understood as the way a programme or a schedule develops the specific resources of the medium, rather than relying on other forms, whether it be literature or state pageantry, to establish the aura of quality. Good television is 'self-aware', conscious of its relation to the history of the medium and, therefore, also to the possibilities of parody and irony. In this view, quality television is a distinct cultural language which does not simply repeat or feed off other cultural forms. It is also a television alert to technological developments which permit a richer visual image and enhanced sound reproduction.

The emphasis on technological developments brings to the fore the possibility of defining quality television by a particular structure of programme making and distribution: through established institutions, securing both continuity and in-

novation in the practice of making television (see above). But such innovation might in principle also be achieved through 'deregulation', and a situation in which a multitude of channels is supplied by a range of independent producers, ensuring a diversity of programmes, while addressing themselves to a diversity of audiences (but see above, for the argument that outright competition could lead to cost-cutting on programme making and the buying in of proven material).

That such need not be the case is perhaps indicated by the history of Britain's Channel 4. Its executives and editors might well define quality television by the way it is able to give voice and image to constituencies which might otherwise remain silent and marginalized. As the channel's commissioning policy has shown, even within the public service remit, 'quality' can mean responding positively to historical and political change. For Channel 4 has worked according to a different conception of British society, not held together by a consensus but by its diversity and plurality of views, which the channel highlights by making programmes unconstrained by the requirements of 'balance' or the support of established authors and personalities.

Finally, and perhaps crucially, quality television can be defined only in a process of discussion. Quality is not to be subsumed under a single concept ('Quality television is...'), for the question cannot and should not be settled once and for all. Maintaining and developing a sense of what we mean by quality depend upon the analysis and discussion of specific programmes or specific programming strategies. If this is to be achieved, participation is necessary by all interested groups (television makers and viewers, critics and historians, a diversity of social and political constituencies), so that what we understand by quality television remains dependent upon a continuing public dialogue about the medium.

Although the definitions here advanced touch on cultural, economic, technological, institutional and professional criteria, the list is by no means exhaustive. It simply tries to make explicit some of the assumptions at work in discussions about quality television. In practice, these different definitions interact and overlap, while they also mark particular points of contention (see, for example, the dispute over programme making and distribution implicit in the 'deregulation' argument). More serious still, the definitions are all haunted, and not just by their own inadequacy. Different voices and interests are at work in the different definitions of quality, as are different conceptions of the cultural role of television: as a medium with the power to establish a shared set of cultural experiences across differences of regions, nation, class, and gender, or as a medium whose new identity is developing in its appeal to a plurality of cultural groups, with television addressed to disparate audiences rather than a common audience. One significance of recent

debates about quality is the way that the term is used tactically, as a part of a contest about who is to control the future of television. To enter the debate about quality has become a way of announcing that one is a player in the contest over control. Two questions arise: is the argument about quality always and necessarily in defence of a particular interest? Are the different conceptions about television's cultural role (its relation to its audience) mutually exclusive alternatives, or can one conceive a future for the medium where it develops its capacity to appeal both to special and general audiences?

Television Futures and the Question of Quality

Discussion of the future or futures of television makes the possibly mistaken assumption that it is the future that is being talked about. The point to be made is that when discussing the future we are mostly discussing what has already happened, and similarly, when discussing the present condition of television we are in fact discussing its past. Some of the fault-lines along which change may already have taken place can be recapitulated.

The notion of public service broadcasting as it has existed (in Britain under the duopoly of the BBC and ITV) since the mid-1950s is coming to an end, with new broadcasting regulations being adopted all over Europe, the opening of more terrestrial channels, and the increasing availability of English language as well as German, French, Italian satellite and cable channels in the households of the European Community.

The question can be raised whether these transformations might herald a period that sees not only the decline of public service broadcasting but of broadcasting altogether, in the sense of 'quality television' implying the provision of programming that is both integrated (bound together by common historical, geographical experiences and shared moral values, by the ideals of social solidarity) and diverse (taking account of different viewer interests and viewer realities). Thus, if broadcast television, be it through government deregulation or market-oriented packaging of product, were to come under further pressure, would this pressure be from television cutting itself loose more and more from the social bond embodied in the schedule and instead directly competing for viewer loyalty, with themed channels putting a financial premium on viewer access to certain kinds of programming (the 'exclusive' rights to broadcast live events, e.g. in sports: league football, Wimbledon, the World Cup)? Or would it be by a much more drastic redefinition of television as a commodity, with a corresponding decline in its 'cultural' status, but also its ideological role? Rupert Murdoch, for instance, astutely appropriated the public service argument for his own free-market approach when

he claimed that 'anybody who, within the law of the land, provides a service which the public wants at a price which it can afford, is providing a public service'.⁶

In either case, the implications would be political as well as economic. The notion of 'choice', so crucial to the deregulation argument (of which the debate about 'quality' is, as we have seen, the mirror image), conceals a fundamental imbalance, first about access (the argument that event-driven broadcasting, whether informative or entertaining, should be a service available to everyone). Second, 'choice' within a commercial broadcasting environment appears to regulate the relations between 'programmes' and viewers, when in fact it is largely determined by the relation between programme 'makers' and advertisers: a power structure in which the audience is the product, not the partner. Privilege here distinguishes less between those who can afford to pay for access but between those whose special appeal to advertisers secures them the attention of programme makers.⁷

Such a prospect may seem bleak, but it need not be seen in purely negative terms. Out of the 'decline' of broadcast television as a simulacrum of the social realm, there might emerge new spaces which are no less social and which may allow for different uses of the audience-gathering power inherent in the electronic media. For instance, it is worth speculating whether an altogether alternative future can be envisaged in the face of a fading away of publicly funded television and the Europe-wide increase in television run primarily on commercial lines. The recent work by the German film and television maker, Alexander Kluge, comes to mind. Through DCPT (Development Company for Television Programmes) Kluge produces a high quality magazine programme, characterized by an experimental use of established television forms, which is broadcast in two 'down-market' commercial channels in West Germany: SAT1 and RTL-plus. The programme is scheduled between prime-time feature films and a sex show, exactly in the kind of television environment thought inimical to quality television. Kluge's funding comes from one of the largest advertising agencies in the world, DENTSU of Japan. The programme has a small audience but is not threatened by this fact. It is élitist television intended for an audience educated within the conventions of art cinema, not afraid of appearing enigmatic nor anxious to court a popular audience. It assumes that a major restructuring in the audiovisual economy has already taken place – once more the theme of the future having already happened – one which has enormously increased the range of consumer choice and the viewer's capacity to invent a private schedule for the use of TV as a medium. It does not assume that TV has a public obligation to address or to create a large audience. It assumes a society of diverse groups with diverse tastes and interests who will define the television they want, not have it defined for them. Thus, quality television, instead of a public mission,

becomes a market niche, one kind of TV amongst many, 'televisual luxury goods in the audiovisual department store'. The idea that TV should provide a common stock of cultural experience, should maintain unity across diversity, should act as a form of social bond becomes a thing of the past.⁸

The European Context

In view of these mixed prospects but also of experiments largely unknown outside a given country's border, there is a special urgency in understanding the dynamics between individual national television cultures and the overall European context. Different models of what European television is and might be emerged. One such focus might be a serial written by Malcolm Bradbury, *THE GRAVY TRAIN*, independently produced with the support of the European Co-production Association for Television Programmes, broadcast on Channel 4 in the United Kingdom and scheduled for broadcasting by other European stations. The series has a cast of actors from England, Germany, France and Italy, was shot on different locations in Belgium, England, Germany and Austria, and works in an established television and cinema genre, the comedy thriller. The European character of the series is reflected in its funding, in the personnel who made it, and in its subject matter, which establishes a comic contrast between the ideals of European unity and a corrupt, bureaucratic actuality. Europe here is imagined in terms of national differences and alliances, in terms of the comic potential of national characteristics, ambitions, and rivalries.

The programme addresses itself to its different national audiences, partly through the identity of the actors, partly by appeal to a shared perception of EEC bureaucracy. The model is of a European television built out of the resources of different national televisions and cultural resources, with one nation establishing the dominant tone of a programme.

Two other models for a European television could be envisaged. One would be for an assertion of imaginary (which of course does not exclude historical) boundaries at a time when political and economic boundaries were dissolving or being re-drawn. Television production should not be consciously pre-occupied with an obligation to European cultural unity, but with the imaginative necessities of particular places and traditions. The example here was the work of the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski, and his recent series, *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS*. Kieslowski's work is intensely involved with the particularities of Polish culture and history, although it is the outcome of a German and Polish co-funding operation. The series has been sold on and broadcast through different national channels (e.g. BBC2 in Britain, WDR in Germany). It works within the con-

ventions of a European Art Cinema and is not concerned to recruit a large audience to justify its existence.

Another model would be that which arose on the margins of the so-called New German Cinema. Largely funded by television, some of the projects undertaken in Germany during the 1970s and 1980s are instructive cases of how, under admittedly quite specific circumstances, the cultural prestige of the cinema and the film author were harnessed successfully to television's power to gather audiences for nationally specific but internationally recognizable media events. Examples include ventures such as H.J. Syberberg's *OUR HITLER*, Edgar Reitz' *HEIMAT* and R.W. Fassbinder's *BERLIN ALEXANDERPLATZ*. These 'films' (between 6 and 16 hours long) are not a certain kind of product as much as they exemplify a certain idea of an event, and not only of an event, but of an event conceived as occupying both a social space and a discourse space: of debate, even of action.⁹ In their way, such programmes respond in the independent or 'quality' sector to what in the commercial field is the Hollywood blockbuster in the cinema, or the expensively produced series on TV, making much of its profits in the form of videocassettes, or tie-ins, subsidiary rights and merchandizing. It is conceivable that even without the marshalling of such enormous resources, concepts of programming might appear which have similar 'echoes' in the public sphere at large. In different ways, programmes like *CATHY COME HOME*, *THE WORLD AT WAR*, *THE SINGING DETECTIVE* have had a life beyond the ephemerality of their broadcasting occasion.

A third proposal might be for a European television built out of regional televisions. The idea is based partly on the extensive experience in regional programming of some British commercial channels, such as Anglia TV or Granada, a tradition that can be paralleled in Germany with the type and volume of production of the different regional German (publicly controlled) broadcasters, such as WDR, NDR, SFB, BR. A more extensive comparative study of programmes for regional audiences, promoting a positive regional identity, could lead to a discussion of the interplay between the regional and the national, and the quality of television programmes which have based themselves on regional identities using the reach of the medium to transmit the experience of one region to another, or to a national audience (see, for example, the British drama serial *BOYS FROM THE BLACKSTUFF*, or the German serial *HEIMAT*). By extension, television could play a role in establishing new trans-national regional identities in Europe, as was shown in a series of programmes on the North Sea, jointly undertaken by television makers from Britain, The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Norway.

The European Commission's Media project has amongst its aims the encouragement of such television production on a European scale. Some different

projects are intended to stimulate work across television and cinema production, including training for independent producers on project development and co-production (EAVE) and the Media Venture and Media Guarantee programmes which provide finance and credit for production. Discussion of the work of the Media project might focus on some of the problems of working towards a European television: the danger of producing a television that was led by deals rather than ideas, or of producing a kind of television which, in its aspirations to address a European audience about European themes, ends up addressing no-one. Against this needs to be set the potential of television to create new audiences despite cultural and linguistic differences. Another problem has to do with the different perceptions of Media, and more generally, of European television co-productions by commissioning editors and television professionals. English television makers in particular saw Europe as an opportunity to find money through co-funding but were slower to take up the possibilities of co-production. What was at stake then was not simply sources of finance, but how new kinds of programme might come out of active collaboration between television makers in different European countries and regions.

The significance of cultural factors is evident in any discussion of the relation between a programme and the broadcast schedule. A programme taken out of one schedule and placed in another is not the same programme. It takes on different qualities: a sitcom or popular drama first broadcast on British television becomes, when shown on PBS in the United States, an example of quality television, or Britishness. Likewise, programmes made for international markets are vulnerable to the vagaries of scheduling, and thus the meaning of the programme is created at the point of its consumption rather than at the point of production, a feature militating against highly individualized or 'authored' TV.¹⁰

The history of European television offers an opportunity for a new relation between television research and television production. A better understanding of how different European national televisions have developed could make the production of European television both more efficient and effective. Here is a chance for scholars and academics to study and publicize comparative developments, for instance of television in Britain and in Germany. Certain parallels and points of divergence emerged. In the postwar period, German television had been set up on the model of the BBC, with a strong public service broadcasting remit and an institutional structure which made it independent of both state and industry. In one traditional definition of quality, German television had to be quality television with an educational responsibility towards its audience. The strength of this formation is

indicated by the fact that commercial television was not established in Germany until 1984, some thirty years later than in Britain. More recently, German television has undergone substantial changes in its broadcasting structure, with three terrestrial channels, the availability of 25 channels through cable television reaching a wider proportion of the audience than in Britain, and the development of new visual quality from the television image through new technologies of transmission.

In the case of Britain, five main issues, all of them concerned with questions of quality, can be identified: the emergence of television from the shadow of radio (how much did the dominance of radio lead to an idea that quality television was talking television, television that talks at you or to you); the relation of television to other cultural forms (borrowing its sense of quality from the established qualities of literature or theatre); the implication of television history in national history (the coronation as a moment when television establishes its reputation as a medium which records major events and gains status from that fact); the public service broadcasting ethos, both as providing a vocabulary for defining quality television, and as the context for television's relation to government; and finally, the demise of that ethos, both through changes in the government's attitude and from the evidence of an audience preference for local rather than national forms of television (when they had the choice).

Both countries now find themselves at different kinds of watershed: Britain on the verge of a dispersed, multi-channel television, already underway in Germany; Germany coping with the prospect as well as the substantial difficulties of a new national television through the country's unification.

Notes towards a Conclusion

One issue is, evidently, the quality of the quality debate. In one sense, what is needed is a new kind of institution in television where the question of quality is actively debated in response to existing and emerging forms of television. This institution would not be regulative; it would not, that is, be concerned with enforcing standards of balance or sustaining a quality of dialogue about television by drawing on the full range of constituencies: programme makers, managers, critics, researchers, viewers, users, amateurs, professionals. Models for this kind of institution already exist, such as the Adolf Grimme Institute in Germany which annually coordinates the 'Television Days' in Cologne. Such a forum would acknowledge that the debate about quality is necessarily open-ended, but still vital for the development of the medium. It would draw on the historical and comparative understanding of television in the pursuit of its aim, which would be to stimulate the qualities of television, not to defend a standard which is felt to be perpetually

under threat. The precondition for such an institution is that no-one has the monopoly on quality, and that any debate about quality quickly degenerates if it is assumed that the outcome of the exercise is to defend or establish such a monopoly.

By the same token, training in and for the television industries needs to be seen as more than vocational or technical. The fact that there now exist academic institutions which provide students with a high-level background in the history and aesthetics of the film and TV media while not neglecting the practice orientation of programme making and television management suggests that however one defines quality, technical standards, production values or marketing needs to be complemented by other kinds of skills and knowledge, at least as long as TV provides a service as well as products and intervenes in history both through actuality (live TV, media events, performance) and memory (documentary, drama, narrative).

Notes

- ¹ Rudolf Arnheim, 'A Forecast of Television' (1935), in: *Film as Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957; Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, München: Hanser, 1956; Otto Gmelin, *Philosophie des Fernsehen*, Pfullingen: Barthenschlager, 1967; Peter Conrad, *Television: the Medium and its Manners*, London: Routledge, 1982; Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.
- ² For a history of post-war broadcasting policy in Britain and Western Europe, see K. Dyson and P. Humphreys, with R. Negrine and J.-P. Simon, *Broadcasting and New Media Policies in Western Europe*, London: Routledge, 1988.
- ³ Lord Reith interviewed by Malcolm Muggeridge, MONITOR, BBC1, 1967.
- ⁴ Quoted in James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility. The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*, London: Routledge, 1988, p. 124.
- ⁵ For instance, by Christopher Hitchens, on THE LATE SHOW, BBC2, June 28th, 1993.
- ⁶ Rupert Murdoch, 'Freedom in Broadcasting', The McTaggart Lecture, Edinburgh International Television Festival, 25 August, 1989, quoted in John Keane, *The Media and Democracy*, London: Polity Press, 1991, p. 121.
- ⁷ Up until recently, TV has been characterized by a relative scarcity of channels and a relative abundance of programmes competing to get on those channels. Now the situation looks set to reverse, with an excess of channels over programmes to put on it. This has already produced one kind of TV where programmes are rapidly repeated in order to fill up the schedule, i.e. a TV which

works on a daily rather than a seasonal cycle of repeats, with a minimum of updating and variation in programme format in order to contain costs.

- ⁸ The point is not how to 'contain' change or set up a 'counter TV'. The point is to recognize moments and develop structures inherent in the dynamics of change itself. The technologically produced multiplication of audiences, which is also the moment of their diversification, will no doubt lead to a 'neo-Fordist' shift away from mass production to a specialization of programming. This will exist side by side with ways of tapping and mobilizing the medium's power to gather national and even global audiences around the creation of events.
- ⁹ For a more detailed discussion, see Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema: A History*, London: British Film Institute/MacMillan, 1989, ch. 10.
- ¹⁰ The paucity of material from other European countries shown on television in Britain, for instance, may require a forum in which this work can be introduced and discussed, not only because of the occasion it affords for reflecting on such issues as the programme vs programming or on the unique characteristics of a national output, but also because of the increasing importance of specific European markets for all programme makers. Such forums exist in The Netherlands, where British programmes are not only shown regularly but are also discussed in the viewers' guides and quality newspapers.

QUESTIONABLE QUALITY OR THE UNDISCOVERABLE QUALITY OF TELEVISION

JAN SIMONS

Although television has already been in existence for almost half a century and, apart perhaps from radio, has become the most widespread medium of our times both socially and geographically, there still seems to be neither consensus about what counts as 'good' television, nor any agreement about the way such a consensus might be achieved. As Jon Cook and Thomas Elsaesser argue elsewhere in this volume, there is not even agreement about the norms by which judgements of matters of quality might be considered as consensual. On what community for instance does such a consensus depend? Is it the community of television spectators, the community of professional television makers, the community of television critics or scholars in mass communication, or the community of sponsors and subsidizers? What aesthetic principles, what 'specific means, materials and forms' could provide a theoretical base for judgements on the quality of television?

The cinema, in the first decades of its existence, inspired critics and theoreticians like Eisenstein, Münsterberg, Bálasz, Eichenbaum, Arnheim and others to explore its aesthetic potential and the formal principles on which judgements and evaluations of films could be based. The distinction between 'quality' and 'non-quality' films became historically institutionalized in a segregation of 'art cinema' and 'entertainment cinema' that represents not only different modes of narration, but also different ways of producing, distributing, exhibiting and speaking about film. After more than 40 years, however, the first aesthetic theory of television remains to be written, and television criticism, if it exists at all, is a journalistic, mainly informative and scarcely evaluative practice.

Confronted with such a situation, one wonders if the question of quality makes any sense at all. In his paper, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, for instance, argues that the ultimate measure of quality is 'consumer satisfaction'. Here the debate about quality is completely delegated to the market: 'quality' is simply what the consumer thinks adequately satisfies his or her needs, regardless of whose or what needs are satisfied or in what way. No effort is made to justify the needs to be satisfied, or to explain how those needs are satisfied or why those needs are

satisfied better in one way than another (or at least why the consumer thinks so). This attitude of cultural laissez-faire may suit a liberal market policy and may also satisfy those who prefer a crude sociological interpretation of 'quality' ('quality' is what a group of well-educated, well-earning and -spending consumers thinks satisfies their needs), but it can in no way satisfy the 'theoretical' requirements of students of the mass media. (Nor is such an attitude any practical help to those involved in developing and producing the audiovisual consumer goods in question).

A more productive way of proceeding might be to ask if and how the question of quality makes sense. Among the attempts to answer the question of quality, two extreme points of view are conspicuous: television as it stands is of low quality (although it could but probably will not be redeemed), versus the view that television in its current condition is fine and stands in no need of any improvement of quality.

The Critical Attitude

It is symptomatic of the difficulty of talking about the quality of television that the terms employed to indicate what quality might be are highly unspecific and often straightforwardly tautological. For example, 'good is what the consumer thinks is good', or 'good is what I think is good'; or 'quality' is 'what a social group of well-educated, politically progressive, critical middle-class young upwardly mobile people appreciates', while quality television, as Sonja de Leeuw puts it '.. is the optimal use of all the visual and narrative means.. available to television'.

Among the more commonly proffered statements on 'quality television' one finds such as: 'quality television aims at a correlation between form and content'; or '(quality television) is not uncritically affirmative but rather questions social and cultural norms', or 'is conscious of the medium and therefore operates on a range of different planes of reference (the medium as its own reflection)', or, to quote Lutz Hachmeister, 'is produced by personnel trained to a high standard.' Quality television should provide 'the artistic room for a personal or political interpretation of reality and for experimenting with style and aesthetics, offering the opportunity of turning away from approved themes and conventional forms' (Sonja de Leeuw).

What is perhaps most remarkable about these definitions of quality is that they seem to refer to a (possible, perhaps, but scarcely realistic) utopian television: they portray a kind of television that one would like to see but which is actually not there. Another remarkable trait of these definitions of quality is that they do not relate to the specific potentialities, materials and formal traits of television; they are not derived from an 'ontology of television', as most aesthetic and semiotic

theories of cinema for instance are. The latter are based on the 'specific' means and forms that together make up a 'language of film' and provide an answer to the question 'qu'est-ce que le cinéma?'¹ Although 'visual and narrative means' and 'style and aesthetics' are mentioned in these definitions of quality (and they are of course implied in such expressions as 'high professional standards'), they remain rather vacuous since they are nowhere specified. In fact, as already noted, the first comprehensive aesthetics of television still remains to be written.

The definitions of quality (innovative and original, self-conscious and reflective, critical and iconoclastic, 'optimal use of means' and so on) are not based on any specific characteristics of television but are derived from a general aesthetics of modern art. For the Russian Formalists, who perhaps most coherently formulated such an aesthetic, modern art entailed the conscious use of means to achieve new perceptions and understandings of objects, by breaking away from conventional, 'automatic' modes of representation and perception. The problem with these definitions is not that they are too general. After all, as general principles they have proved to be very powerful tools in the understanding (and evaluation) of many art forms and have provided a solid basis for the scientific or semiotic studies of art. In principle, there seems to be no reason why those same general principles should not provide a sound starting point for the debate about quality in television. But whereas in other media and art disciplines these general principles helped scholars and critics to explore, discover and define the 'specificity' of their object, and to develop a particular 'aesthetic' of their art, the debate about television remains at a general level where, even if one accepts those principles as criteria for quality, it is very hard to imagine what they would mean for television. Why is it still so difficult to make sense of those general principles when they are brought into the field of television?

Firstly, these general principles have been constitutive of the discourse of modern art, where they have fulfilled not only an intellectual and theoretical function in the understanding of art in general and modern art in particular, but they have also played a fundamental role in the constitution of the 'art world' as a socially and institutionally organized community with its own internal rules, hierarchy and authority. The general principles on which the aesthetics of modern art are based not only define 'objectively' the characteristics of works of modern art, but also describe (or prescribe) a certain competence required to be able to make judgements about the quality of modern art. To be allowed into the community of the art world one has to have knowledge of the history, the traditions, the 'norms and conventions', the material and formal possibilities and limitations of a certain artistic discipline, as well as its place in history and its relation to other arts. The

general principles of the aesthetics of modern art thus separate an exclusive and competent élite of connoisseurs who have the power and authority to talk and decide about matters of art. In this respect, in so far as cinema has become an object of academic interest and conservation, of aesthetic theory and criticism, and has developed its own circles of devoted cinephiles, it has joined the company of those other six 'muses' to which it so long aspired.

However, Walter Benjamin had already seen in the 1930s the similarities between the new mass medium cinema and such popular events as sports fixtures. According to Benjamin, one of the most striking characteristics of those new mass phenomena was that 'everyone assists the performances of film and sports as a semi-specialist'. Although part of the cinema, in spite of Benjamin's over-optimistic expectations, has been integrated into a specialized 'art world', it would seem to be television that has brought the radical democratization of specialized 'connoisseurship'.

Indeed, any spectator of television or commercial cinema can speak about the programme or film with the potential authority of a critic: mouth-to-mouth advertising plays a far greater role in the success of a commercial picture or the popularity of a television programme than the judgement of professional critics. This points not only to the commercial dimension of television and cinema, because the very commercial side of much television and film production implies that films and television programmes are 'devised' to fit not only the 'needs of the consumer', but also the 'competence' of this consumer. This competence, also the product of an 'education' through television itself, allows spectators to recognize the rules and conventions of genres, as well as their deviations, innovations and transgressions (and thus also the very artificiality of these genres). Innovation and the reinvigoration of standard, 'automatized' habits of perceiving and understanding are necessary driving forces in commercial cinema as well as television; there is, for instance, a wealth of media programmes which comment, ridicule, and parody other television programmes. Television personalities of one show appear as 'guests' in the talkshows of other television personalities (often to talk about yet other television personalities and their programmes). Television regularly celebrates its own history by re-broadcasting old programmes or shows, by making tributes to television stars of elder generations (comedies regularly refer to or quote from earlier examples); television programmes are made 'on the set' of other programmes or film productions: television seems to be the home of innovation, historical self-consciousness, reflexivity, intertextuality and originality. The problem is not that television lacks the characteristics of quality, but that those characteristics are to be found everywhere. Just as the modern mass media have democratized the

specialized connoisseurship, so they have generalized the very principles of a modern aesthetics to a point where they lose any discriminating power. If the principles of quality for television can only be formulated in a very general way, this seems to reflect their omnipresence throughout the medium. And if one wants to argue the lack of quality in the actual state of television, one can only do so by making statements of such a general kind that allow one to deny their presence in any particular programme.

A second reason why the quality of television cannot be properly defined by the cited criteria is fairly obvious: the principles are mainly derived from a discourse on the aesthetics of modern art, but television, of course, is not part of the institutionalized art world. Even if one does not want to make a hierarchical distinction between 'high art' and 'popular culture', television still broadcasts many other types of programmes besides drama: news, sports, quizzes and gameshows, documentaries, commercials, educative programmes, programmes about science, political debates and so forth. Within the aesthetics of modern art, the criteria for quality are closely connected with the notion of the 'autonomy' of art, which is in its turn the theoretical and ideological justification for the separation of art from life, the 'disinterestedness' of art that is supposed to serve no practical means, and the institutionalization of the 'art world' separated from society. The criteria for the quality of art focus mainly on internal and formal aspects of the works of art and their role and place within the artistic tradition. In the aesthetics of modern art, including the aesthetics of cinema, the judgement of quality is based on an appreciation of how the work of art is structured and how its specific means are used in novel ways to 'estrangle' and refresh the automatized perceptions, rather than on evaluations of what the work of art means (questioning of content being often condemned as 'moralistic'). Since the appreciation of the formal properties of works of art demands a highly sophisticated intellectual competence, the characteristic of members of the institutional art world (who, in turn, gain access to this art world by this competence), not only the quality of works of art, but the very 'artness' of art works can be defined in a semantically rather vacuous way as 'a result of its being dubbed, baptized, or honoured as a work of art by someone who is authorized thereby to make it an artwork by her position within the institution of the Artworld'.² Apart from its empty formalism, such a definition cannot be transposed to television ('quality television is defined according to a professional understanding of the medium. It is what those making television understand by a well-made programme...' - Cook and Elsaesser) because as a mass medium television is by definition not an institution separated from life and society and is therefore not only a matter of the professional members of the 'television community'. Television

is fundamentally rooted in the life of society and deeply immersed in the daily concerns and interests of its members. Any judgement on quality must take notice of this crucial social and cultural fact. Indeed, most debates or reviews of television programmes focus on the what of the programme rather than on the 'how'. What always seems to be the most relevant question about a television programme is what message is conveyed and how it is related to the interests of (parts of) the audience. This is also the case for such 'artistic' genres as television drama, in all its forms. Unlike cinema, for instance, where the director is acclaimed as the author of the film, in television it is rather the writer who is considered as the 'creator' of a series (and the director often an anonymous and interchangeable person). The formal and material devices of the medium mainly seem to service an apparently unmediated access to the world, events, persons or objects presented, whether they are real or fictitious. Television programmes rather seem to be judged by the 'realities' they transmit than by the way they transmit those 'realities', and these are rather evaluated from the point of view of the practical, social and cultural interests of the audience than from a purely aesthetic perspective. Indeed, it is probably exactly against this 'naïve gaze' that nowadays, in the age of the mass media, the aesthetic gaze is constructed. The nostalgic complaints about the 'lack of quality' on television are the product of a scrutiny that wants to see television for what it fundamentally is not. The complaints are really disguised accusations that television is not part of the world of art.

The defenders of television culture, on the other hand, look for its quality exactly in its social function. Acknowledging the 'economics that determine its production and distribution', they take as their starting point the fact that television reaches a mass audience 'and therefore a variety of discourses that they will bring to bear upon the programme in order to enjoy it'.³ Since these viewers, coming from 'numerous subcultures... with a wide variety of social relations' and a 'variety of sociocultural experience' have the freedom and ability 'to bring extra-textual experience and attitudes to bear upon the reading of the programme'⁴, the 'question of quality' becomes a question of the 'reading of the programme', rather than a question of the programme itself. Since, according to Fiske, for example, 'the economic dimension of television gives it a conventional form'⁵, the 'quality' of the readings concerns 'content' rather than form; and since different viewers from different 'sub-audiences' in varying situations bring different extra-textual experiences to bear upon the readings of the programmes, that 'extra-textual' experience would seem to bear more upon the readings and appreciations of the programmes than the formal properties of the 'texts' or their 'contents'. The meaning of a text is supposed to be the outcome of a 'process of negotiation

between this existing subject position and the one proposed by the text itself, and in this negotiation the balance of power lies with the reader'.⁶ The variety of meanings that result from these negotiations is even multiplied to a potential infinity of 'readings' in which the text loses itself, since first of all the social histories of complex Western capitalist democracies provide for 'almost as much individual difference as any natural gene bank'⁷, and second, in case of any conflict between the interests of 'the discourses of the reader' and 'of the text', the social interests of the reader prevail over those of the text.⁸

Following this reasoning, textual analysis not only should stop treating texts as 'closed', as Fiske demands, but in fact no longer makes any sense at all. Television studies becomes a field of ethnography or anthropology. And just as 'textual analysis' loses its point when confronted with an infinite variety of potential readings, so does the debate about quality. Since the 'reader' has the ability and the freedom to produce even non-television meanings when the interests of the 'discourse of the text' do not meet the interests of the reader, and since this can only imply that any television programme will be 'read' and interpreted according to the 'social interests' of this reader, any programme is as good as another, just as any 'reading' is as valid and legitimate as another. Programmes are nothing but stimuli that provoke as a response preferably 'non-television meanings': one wonders what the point of watching television is if television merely keeps its audiences trapped in narcissistic projections that confirm already existing 'social interests' and the 'meanings' that are determined by those interests. Television would not seem capable of opening new perspectives, new experiences or new meanings in its audience. There are apparently no public criteria against which the 'meanings' ascribed to the 'texts' can be judged (or even 'negotiated'). In the potential infinity of social histories that Western societies produce, the term 'social' itself becomes meaningless.

Ironically, this position seems to be exactly symmetrical to the liberal market position which defines quality in terms of unspecified 'consumer needs'. Ironically, too, it also approaches the same position of those who complain about the lack of quality of television, because it also defines the meaning and quality of television in such a general way that these terms lose any discriminating power.

This is not the only point where *les extrêmes se touchent*. The 'active readers' identified by cultural studies share some of the faculties of competent members of the 'art world'. Television 'texts' are radically 'producerly' as Fiske calls it, since they 'rely on discursive competencies that the viewer already possesses, but require that they are used in a self-interested, productive way'.⁹ Not only do television texts treat their 'readers as members of a semiotic democracy, already

equipped with the discursive competencies to make meanings, and motivated by desire to participate in the process', but since those readers show little respect for the 'interests of the discourses of the texts', they seem to have the same predilection for subversive and deconstructive discursive practices as the aestheticians of modern art, for 'innovation', 'originality', 'intertextuality' and so forth. That is, these popular 'members of a semiotic democracy' show remarkable resemblance to members of a less democratic semiotic community such as Roland Barthes or Jacques Derrida. And here one finds, surprisingly, a hidden norm for quality: any reading is good, as long as it is 'subversive' and 'deconstructive', i.e. uses texts in a self-interested, productive way. The 'best' reading seems to be one that produces a (or more) 'non-television meaning', thus a meaning against the 'discursive interests of the text'. Unexpectedly, the discourse of the aesthetics of modern art returns in a democratic disguise. Just as actual television disappears from view in the search for quality based on the general principles of this aesthetic discourse, so it does in the shift of attention to reading practices that are fundamentally based on the same general principles. The ethnographic search for 'productive readings' is as unproductive for any assessment of the 'quality of television' as is the aesthetic approach. And for the very same reasons.

Both approaches have in common that in spite of their apparent differences, they are fundamentally procedural. For those who complain about the lack of quality of actual television, quality and its criteria are determined by a socially authorized group of intellectually and artistically qualified persons. If this specialized community attributes quality to some programmes (or networks), these programmes or networks are thereby conferred the status of 'quality television'. And although the cultural ethnographic defenders of 'television culture' may seem to take a more 'functional' position by defining the quality of television in relation to the 'social interests' of its 'readers', their implied definition is also procedural in two ways. Whether the 'meanings' of the television texts meet the interests of the 'readers' is a matter about which only those readers themselves can decide; and in the final analysis the quality of those readings depends on their 'subversiveness' and their 'deconstructiveness' which are properties that can only be judged by the specialized competence of the cultural anthropologists themselves, according to a very classical schema of intellectual patronage of 'the people'.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of both positions is that they portray television as either totally 'bad' or totally 'good'. This seems to be symptomatic of a frustration shared by a social group of critical intellectuals who, on the one hand, are hoping for cultural nourishment and esteem from this new mass medium, but on the other hand must accept that they are denied any special status in this

'semiotic democracy'. As in most cases of 'splitting', somewhere in the process of identification and projection some important aspects of the 'other' get lost.

First, theoreticians of 'television culture' are right to point out that television reaches a mass audience and that this mass audience itself comprises many heterogeneous and often conflicting 'sub-audiences'. By the 'economics of its production and distribution', it cannot afford not to meet (at least some of) the interests of its audiences. Television, as a mass medium, is precisely unlike the institutionalized 'art world', not separated, but firmly rooted in the life, concerns and often contradictory and conflicting interests that make up a society. Therefore, television is not 'autonomous' in the same way as the art world, that precisely defines itself as 'disinterested' and independent from the political, cultural and economic concerns of society. It may very well be that the purely formal and procedural – though also highly controversial – 'institutional' definition of art depends on its proclaimed separation of 'art and life'. In any case, to acknowledge that television is a thoroughly social institution means that its quality should be judged by social, political and cultural as well as aesthetic criteria. Since quality can only be defined by certain norms, and since quality is by definition a discriminating term that distinguishes 'good' from 'bad' products, and since 'good' and 'bad' in the arena of social, cultural and political forces are always matters of debate, it is first of all impossible to reach a definite, 'objective' consensus on what quality is (since 'quality' always excludes its opposite). Furthermore, it is impossible to give a definition of quality without being partial.

How to be 'normative' and purely 'descriptive' at the same time? Although 'quality' is the issue of ongoing political and cultural debate, the term itself cannot be left completely open to be filled according to the interests, needs and desires of the participants of the debate. As a fundamentally social institution, television of course has to give a voice to the members of a society, just as the political institutions of Western democracies 'represent' the interests of different strata of citizens. But just as these political institutions cannot be monopolized by a specific interest group without ceasing to be 'democratic', so television has also a fundamental role to play in assuring some coherence and integration in a fundamentally pluralistic society. Apart from giving a voice to particular social interests, television also has a public role to play, which is the other side of its obligation to meet the interests of several heterogeneous sub-audiences. It is exactly the fear that this public role of television may be lost that motivates the advocates of 'quality television' to defend a public service broadcast system against a commercial system which, by definition, seems to be condemned to please the particular interests of its consumers.¹⁰

Just as the political institutions of Western democracies voice the different and often contradictory interests of different groups of 'citizens' in order to establish the conditions for an orderly and regulated negotiation of these interests, so television should – and often successfully does – create some place for the negotiation of the 'cultural interest' of its different and heterogeneous 'sub-audiences'. In so far as it succeeds in soliciting interest and curiosity about the ways of living, thinking and speaking of 'the others' and by so doing opens up its sub-audiences to 'imaginative identification with the details of other's lives, rather than a recognition of something antecedently shared'¹¹, television indeed might share one of the possible objectives of art, the injunction of 'the desire to enlarge oneself', '...to embrace more and more possibilities' and escape the limiting 'inherited descriptions of oneself', as Richard Rorty puts it.¹² By giving a voice to different perspectives and different interests, television might help its 'sub-audiences' to break away from narcissistic obsessions and to enter a fruitful negotiation not with the 'discourse of television' to produce 'non-television' meanings, but with members of other 'sub-audiences' to produce new social and ideological meanings.

Since television is deeply integrated in the life of society, it is also impossible, and indeed undesirable, to define 'quality' in purely formal ways as 'conscious of its history, self-reflexive, conscious use of all means available' and the like, since the quality of television cannot be considered separate from its 'meaning' for the life of the members of its sub-audiences and society as whole. Those desired 'qualities' can only be means to other, more substantially and politically defined ends. Perhaps 'quality' television in this sense, odd as it may seem to those who complain about the lack of 'quality' on television, can give a sound reminder of the more social and political concerns abandoned by 'modern' aestheticism.

Another feature of television is that it not only serves many and heterogeneous 'sub-audiences' but also many functions that it has taken over from other media or fulfils in the service of or parallel with other media and institutions. Television has become the major source of information about all sorts of events, ranging from war to sports. Television plays a major role in public education ('open universities', 'school lessons', 'television courses' and so on), in public political debate, in advertising and more neutral consumer information. In most of these sorts of programmes, it is the 'information' or the access to the represented events and states of affairs that is most relevant to the audiences, and those programmes are generally considered as 'good television' which seem to provide unmediated access to the real world, without the distraction of thinking about television as television. Instead of foregrounding a conscious and self-reflective use of its means and its specificity, as aestheticist discourse would require, here a certain 'self-negation'

of television seems to be more in place. Although it cannot be denied that specific professional skills of scripting, recording, editing and so on are required to achieve this 'self-negating' effect, they must be subservient in general to the purposes of informing, transmitting events, educating or whatever. Certainly the 'specifics' of the 'how' must concern both professionals and the practitioners of television studies, but they cannot in themselves provide a standard of the 'quality' of television. Rather, the 'quality' of television should be judged by roughly the same criteria as media with similar functions, as for instance the press or educational institutions.

Much of the confusion in the debate over the 'quality' of television therefore seems to result from a tendency to see television as analogous to expressive forms like works of art. 'Que la culture, c'est la télé, puisque la culture se transmet et que la télé ne peut que transmettre. Que le cinéma, lui s'était transmis lui-même, d'où que parfois il ait été un art', as Serge Daney wrote.¹³ Daney resigns himself, realizing that one cannot reproach television for not giving what it doesn't have. But maybe television has something more to give: as a medium that 'transmits' it might help to remember that the real value and quality of expressive forms, semiotic systems or whatever one calls them in the end does not lie within themselves, but in the 'extra-semiotic', communicative ends for which they are ultimately used. The matter of 'quality television' then becomes a matter of the quality of public social and private individual life.

Notes

- ¹ André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1975.
- ² See Stephen Davies, *Definitions of Art*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 78.
- ³ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, London: Methuen, 1987, p. 37.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- ¹⁰ See Nowell-Smith, 'Quality Television', elsewhere in this volume.
- ¹¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 190.

- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 29. See also R. Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics, Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, Oxford/Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992, p. 238 ff.
- ¹³ Serge Daney, *Le Salaire du Zappeur*, Paris: Ramsday Poche, Libération, 1988, p. 250.

PART 2

LITERATURE ON TELEVISION

INTRODUCTION

THOMAS ELSAESSER

Nowhere is the sentiment that 'traduction, c'est trahison' more quickly on everyone's lips than when the discussion turns to literature and television. It hardly appears worth arguing that a writer is trivialized by being visualized, a fate bad enough when a novel is adapted for the cinema, but an enterprise compromised beyond redemption once the small screen is involved. In the case of dead writers, television can at least claim a public duty when bringing the nation's literary heritage to new generations of viewers. With living authors, the medium stands accused of crass insensitivity, sensationalism, philistinism. If, having sold the rights, the writer is not involved in the script, s/he can at least disown the result. But woe to those authors who collaborate, or who, not being scriptwriters by profession, have handed the producer an original story: even when the acting is not over the top, and the setting not an absolute travesty of what the writer had before his or her mind's eye, there is still the fact that just about everyone attached to the project seems convinced the writer must be grateful to receive helpful suggestions – where to improve the characters' motivation, how to strengthen the dialogue, or what story-line to cut out. In television, so we are led to believe, advice is given to writers with the kind of abandon that would be considered reckless if given to a plumber; and if given to anyone else on the set, like the cameraman or the sound engineer, would be reason enough to call for a straight-jacket.¹

Such complaints can be heard in every country, whenever two or three writers are gathered together, or whenever writers and film or television makers debate with each other. Their grievances underline one of the most paradoxical and strange relationships to have formed over the decades between two kinds of creativity, although as I shall argue, there is more to it than certain individuals' sense of being used, abused and publicly humiliated.

The preliminary point on which, it seems, most of the contributors in this section agree, is that literature on television cannot merely be a matter of making the classics and the best-sellers accessible to the broader public on literature's own terms, or of giving air-time to contemporary writers so that they can advertise their books, important though these functions may be. Weldon, Plater, Bradbury – writers attractive to television because their work outside television already consti-

tutes the kind of value television is anxious to be associated with – implicitly accept in their reflections the legitimate claim television has on ‘serious’ writing – for all kinds of programmes, but especially for original drama and adaptations of contemporary and classic novels – on television’s own terms. They also accept that this presents a challenge to writers and may even require a new kind of understanding of literature itself, or at any rate, a recognition that literature is undergoing mutations in its social existence and consequently in its self-definition.²

Technology, Institution, Industry

What might writing for television on TV’s own terms mean, and what might it encounter? Firstly, there is the fact that literature and television are both technologies – we know it about television, but even if the idyllic image of the white page just waiting to be impregnated has given way to the flicking of the switch to boot up the computer, one still tends to think of writing as a fundamentally private, solitary craft. Writing for television, especially for drama series and soap operas is teamwork, collaborative also in the sense that the words sometimes precede filming and sometimes follow the image – modes of production, in short, more familiar from industry, where the script is ‘a blueprint, so that a few hundred technicians can make this thing happen’ (Fay Weldon), or ‘a set of instructions which the writer hands to other people’ (Malcolm Bradbury).

Secondly – a point made several times in this section – television is not just a number of people coming together to make programmes which audiences hopefully are going to watch, it is also an institution in the sense of a social practice with established rules, within which both the activity of individuals and the existence of programmes are given meaning. With an institution come traditions and a self-consciousness about status, as well as hierarchies. While the established author has in some sense also an institution, literature, as a back-up, the freelance writer or the professional television writer find themselves at the sharp end of these institutional pecking orders.

Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* as Jonathan Miller’s comments on Dickens’ *Dombey and Son*, quoted by both Cook and Elsaesser rather clearly demonstrates, a merely textual comparison can soon reach a certain impasse, since it travels down a road where it can only affirm each art form’s specificity, a valuable hermeneutic exercise in the case of literature and the cinema, but less suited to television, a medium that becomes textually dense, as it were, where it is most transparent and permeable: towards the event, the moment, the complexity of textures which Roland Barthes called ‘the obtuse’, and most of us are content to identify with reality. The institutional argument, on the other hand, allows one to ask different

questions: what does a producer buy when he acquires the rights of a well-known novel? A preconstructed and preselected audience, for instance; or the name and prestige of the author, paired with the fame of the leading actors: factors of recognition which minimize financial risk and thus affirm the producer's faith not in the text, but in the institution of literature.

Furthermore, television is an industry and, some would argue, an industry before it is an institution. Hence, some of the determinants affecting, for instance, drama and the single play – the preferred showcases for the writer – are unit cost, foreign sales and international markets, studio work or location shooting, big name actors. Such factors, few of which are present for the published writer, are therefore treated very much as extraneous to the 'real' business of writing but impinge very forcefully on the writer for television: 'writing a TV script is like sitting in a taxi; the meter is always running; you can always see the price turning over everywhere you go' (Malcolm Bradbury).

Going Public

For the television author, writing, then, becomes a very public experience, but public in several senses: public, insofar as the writer's word is no longer sacred, but subject to the contingencies and compromises struck between the many different people involved in a production: 'In fact, to be completely honest, a TV series isn't ever written at all. It's rewritten' (Malcolm Bradbury). But public also insofar as in many cases, the writer for television is meant to deliver a product, in which the voice of the author is not to be heard. Instead, the television writer's signature is his or her ear, so to speak, listening to the cries and whispers, the murmurs and shouts of the collective soul, giving the Babel of voices the shape that will be recognized as that of life itself: 'if you are to enter the minds of the population, subvert and impress them, become part of their consciousness, some moral and artistic duty is thereby imposed on you' (Fay Weldon).

Television not only tears the writer away from the privacy of the study, it also thrusts on him or her a different kind of public responsibility. For Fay Weldon it means, 'never insult, never underrate your audience', and Alan Plater: 'I have always written on the assumption that most people who watch my work are probably brighter in perception and richer in experience than I am'. But social accountability may also come from the changing context of reception. Malcolm Bradbury's *History Man* began life in 1975 as a satirical novel about the legacy of the 1960s;³ Bradbury's HISTORY MAN on television in 1981 became a national event and a political *cause célèbre*, reaching the nation's TV screens at just the moment the Thatcher government thought it time to punish the teaching profession and higher

education with curriculum reforms and damaging cuts: 'where the novel version... was a kind of half-tragic, half-ironic version of a generation that was dying, the television version is really a commentary from a later era on what was wrong with an earlier one' (Malcolm Bradbury).

The Nation

The impact of a television drama series can be extraordinary. It can give new words to the language, it makes fictional characters (and the actors that play them) literally household names, and it brings the writer a mixture of welcome fame and possibly unwelcome attention. If the idea of a national literature now strikes one as a distinctly 19th century affair, the invention of a tradition for the sake of fostering a politico-ideological national identity, then television drama today might be said to deserve the epithet 'national' with a good deal more justification than the assorted collection of laureate poets and establishment authors ever did: 'Nation speaking to Nation' (Alan Plater).

But in another sense, too, there is a parallel with literature. Especially in the first part of this century, it was the great European publishing houses that gave national literature an identity: Faber or Victor Gollancz in Britain, Gallimard and Seuil in France, Ernst Rowohlt and S. Fischer in Germany all nurtured talent whom they encouraged to develop as singular and individual writers, but who, nonetheless, under the same roof so to speak, helped to define the scope and state of the nation's literature. The same was briefly true of theatres, in Britain notably the Royal Court, whose commissioning policy brought to the fore a whole generation of playwrights, in many instances the ones that were to become the mainstay of British television drama. Today, it should be the broadcasting companies, whether publicly funded or commercial, and in particular their commissioning editors and producers who foster writers, whether it is in order to create prestige drama or to adapt the classics and well-known contemporary writers. In practice, however, the adaptations of the classics are done by the literary heavyweights, and if there is still money for a contemporary novel, the risks are so high that writer and adapter had better be bankable names: 'Over the last decade and a half I have written television dramatizations of work by Anthony Trollope, Conan Doyle and Olivia Manning, not to mention Agatha Christie and Georges Simenon. I have been referred to in print as "a high profile adapter"' (Alan Plater). As to original drama, everyone seems to agree that it is too expensive to make, unless it can start life (and survive) in the cinema or become the national entry at an international film festival.

Authorship

Little wonder, then, that authorship in television is an oddly floating category: in the end, it is still often the published writer or playwright working for television who is recognized as a television author. Malcolm Bradbury remains the author of *The History Man*, even though it was adapted for television by Christopher Hampton, but Malcolm Bradbury is also the author of *BLOTT ON THE LANDSCAPE*, after the novel by Tom Sharpe. Alan Plater, one of the writers behind the many successful British detective series, senses a problem:

we, the writers, are all in danger of losing our voices. We have become very skilled at singing other people's tunes but we forget the music we were born with. I am grumbling, because the last single, original television play I wrote was in 1984. Nowadays I have almost given up the effort. If I want to write an original, grown-up play I do so in the theatre which has become an oasis of sanity.

Plater makes an ardent plea for the personal vision of the single play, but he recognizes that he, too, now lives mainly by the six-part serial, a genre often belonging to the actor-character as much as to the writer. One of the questions, then, although not formulated explicitly, that can be sensed in his, as in other contributions to this section, is whether television has in any fundamental way altered the – moral, social – authority of the writer. In other words, not his or her aesthetic, or even professional authority, but the authority of literature itself, charged with speaking about the things that matter and above all, speaking for the position of the authentic self. Jon Cook alludes to this when he examines the history of Richard Hoggart's rhetoric about the visual as the vulgar and the largely unexamined distinction Hoggart makes between individual and text on one side, and the presentational and collaborative arts on the other. Malcolm Bradbury amusingly describes his own schizo-existence as the lonely novelist browbeaten by all that input coming down the telephone, before making an appeal to Walter Benjamin for a less hysterical and more historical view of the relation between the author of the 'auratic' work and the author of the work in the era of mechanical (now, electronic) reproduction.

With television writing, then, one may have to weigh the traditional (literary) categories of 'author' and 'text' against the sociological or even anthropological fact that television is primarily perceived as authorless by its audiences, perhaps one of the necessary conditions of it being a popular medium. What it has instead are figures with opinions and voices with stories, whose function it is to an-

chor the many diverse discourses of television, but who at the same time are endowed with personalities capable of passing back these discourses, making it seem that ultimately their true source is the audience itself.

Script and Word: Voice and Body

On television, the word is above all a body and a voice. Much like the theatre, one might think, but its reference point is conversation, not tragic drama, even though, as Fay Weldon remarks: 'Written dialogue is not natural: it reflects and focuses real speech. There is no way you can parrot it, imitate it. Listen to a crossed line on the telephone and you will hear real speech. The writer's task is to edit out the boring bits, convey what therapists call the feeling tone.' The therapeutic function of television is beginning to be more widely recognized. It manifests itself not only in the way television, in both fiction and factual programming, is moved to thematize 'problems', which is why many writers are convinced that long spells in the 'soap-factory' only teach writers to write badly,⁴ but it also explains why television produces not stars like the cinema – remote beings from another planet – but 'personalities', individuals able to elevate ordinariness exponentially.

Yet the conjunction of body and voice with the therapeutic has another dimension as well. Elsewhere in this volume, I argue that television is not, in the end, a visual medium as much as it is a tactile medium, a contact medium.⁵ If correct, such an assertion might well lead away from analysing television programming by way of generic conventions and give instead more attention to a quite different 'poetics', if one may venture such an expression. Jon Cook once suggested that television obeys not classical poetics, either in the term's 'Augustan' or 'Hollywoodian' sense (organized around rules, norms and genres), but rather follows a Wordsworthian poetics: of the spoken voice, of presence, and bearing witness. Indeed, when one thinks about it, television is full of leech-gatherers and no less impressive, as one comes across them by chance, in this or that feature programme than the old man from 'Resolution and Independence'. In a similar vein, John Fiske and John Hartley have talked about 'Bardic' television, while others have stressed the 'tribal' appeal of television, over either individual or national spectator identification: 'we were like ballad-singers around a camp fire, and the people gathered to listen were strictly the local peasantry', Alan Plater recalls about the early days of television drama, and he adds: 'The proper decent future of world television should be based on a very simple notion that I should tell you the stories from my backyard and you should tell me the stories from yours.'

The suggestion that poetry might be an appropriate model for thinking about scriptwriting may seem very odd indeed. But it is not necessarily words on

the page that clarify the feeling tone of a project. In this respect, the independent filmmaker has the advantage over the television writer: the first gives instructions to himself, the second gives them to others. And those instructions can, and perhaps should be, in several dimensions and art forms at once: an image triggered by a poem, a musical theme or sound pattern which can organize the experience of the images and even the narrative; and again, the possibility, unjustly relegated to the documentary, of someone bearing witness, with his or her words or with silence. For the writer-director, then, the script is more a kind of score for a performance piece, of which the finished film is the document. Such would be the unwritable film, made out of words, images, music, feelings: in short, the kind of film that only a novelist or a poet can put on paper. The unfilmable text, on the other hand, is every novelist's or poet's text *qua* text. This is the tautology that needs to be opened up, to create the gap across which can fly the spark from one medium to the other. Traduction, c'est trahison: yes, sometimes the bolder, the better.

Notes

- 1 I am here paraphrasing a polemical comparison made by Dutch screenwriter Chiem van Houweninge in his talk at the 'Writing and Filming' conference.
- 2 This may be the basis for arguing that literature and television are not mutually exclusive nor even competitive, but complementary. If the principle that the adaptation of a classic is not only good for the ratings, but also for those who own the publishing rights is well known, then it is as much a recommendation as a condemnation. One of the more educationally productive and also aesthetically pleasing experiences is that of self reference, or *mise-en-abyme*, which may be the result of having the 'same' material present and represented in 'different' media or material supports, as a sort of stereo effect.
- 3 See Malcolm Bradbury, 'Adapting and Being Adaptable', in *No, Not Bloomsbury*, London: Arena, 1989, pp. 297-308.
- 4 'In television, you have to write about what you are seeing, namely "the problem". There is no chance to create any subtext to a scene.' Robert Towne, quoted in David Russell, 'A World in Inaction', *Sight and Sound*, Summer 1990, p. 176.
- 5 See 'Zapping One's Way into Quality', above.

THE NOVELIST AND TELEVISION DRAMA

MALCOLM BRADBURY

1

First I have to tell you the story of my life. Not the story of how I first fell in love, or how I became the kind of mess I am today. I want to tell you how I became the kind of writer I am, which is a novelist who also writes a great deal for television and is very interested in both of these two different artistic activities. I started writing at about the age of sixteen, and I wanted to be a novelist; it was the great dream of my life. I couldn't play sport, the army didn't want me, and so I was inevitably unattractive to women, especially in the Fifties. And I was in love with stories, with Dickens and Trollope and D.H. Lawrence.

I then did a rather foolish thing. Thinking it would help my literary ambitions, I went to university to read English. It so happened I went to an excellent redbrick university, the University College of Leicester, which actually awarded an external degree of the University of London. It was a degree devised for people in Sierra Leone and Hong Kong and various other distant places, and it was assumed that people in such colleges needed a very special kind of literary education. So most of my degree was spent learning Old Norse, Old Icelandic, Old Danish, Old Hittite (or maybe it was New Hittite, I can't remember), and I learned very little about literature at all. The study of English literature stopped at the death of Martin Tupper (the death of Martin Tupper occurred, I believe, in 1889, also the year when Nietzsche went mad, though the two things were probably not connected). Modern literature, Modernist literature, got no place in the programme at all, and to be frank I was badly put off wanting to be a novelist, since according to my teachers one of the things that distinguished novelists was that they were all dead.

Luckily I was saved from all this by a piece of excellent fortune; I went on to do graduate work in the USA. There, as you know, they don't bother quite so much with the literature and language of the past, and they study literature that was being written this week, or probably even next week. Many of the people who teach in American universities are themselves writers, who can show you the

manuscript of the next era of American literature before they've even published it, and who also teach courses in creative writing, a subject I have now ended up teaching myself. Anyway, my faith in the contemporary novel, and my ambitions to be a writer, were restored. And so I ended up being both a novelist and a university teacher, which is what I still am to this day. In the course of all this, I found myself developing that curious form of fiction which creates an intimate marriage between the novel and the academic world; I mean 'the campus novel'. The advantage of the campus novel is that you can put your university in the novel, and write your novel in the university, and so keep both parts of your life useful to you at the same time.

As a result of all this, I ended up as a rather distinctive kind of novelist – that is, a novelist who was also an academic, a writer who was also a critic. A campus novelist is, almost by definition, a literary novelist – if only because the presumed audience of this kind of book is an educated audience, a graduate audience, an audience that actually knows something about universities and probably about the literary tradition. So, certainly with my early fiction, I could almost take it for granted that my audience, not just in Britain but in almost every country where, happily, it was translated, including Germany, Scandinavia, Japan, and so on, was an educated or graduate audience. That was true even of my third novel, *The History Man*, which was published in 1975 and became very successful. And then, one day at the beginning of the Eighties, the BBC in Britain came along to me with a proposition I couldn't refuse. They said: 'We want to adapt your novel *The History Man* as a television series. There's a very able young man, Christopher Hampton, who will do it for you, so you don't need to worry. He'll send you the scripts when he's finished, and you can change a few words if you like. Then we'll make it and you can come and see it, and if you don't enjoy it we'll show it anyway. All right?' So I said all right.

And all of this was done. My novel was adapted for television in four parts by Christopher Hampton, a brilliant playwright who also, as you probably know, did the movie script of *Dangerous Liaisons* and who is a splendid screenwriter. I watched the process carefully and learned a great deal. I was fascinated by the result, because my campus novel, which in Britain sold around 10,000 copies in hardback, suddenly, over several nights, reached an audience of 10 million. So the same story had, by process of being moved into a different medium, become a different book, with a different and much vaster audience. And that audience was no longer a graduate audience, it was the great British public. My work had changed in meaning, my audience was now transformed, and you will not be surprised to learn that I spent some time analysing the strange process by which all of this had happened.

What had happened, I understood, was that a transformation had occurred which was on a far larger scale than simply taking a story that had been told in one medium and then been reconstructed in visual form for another. Many different things had been adapted, and let us think about what some of them were.

First, my novel – as I say, definitely a literary novel – had been shifted from a verbal mode into a visual one. Now mine is a very ironic novel, with a very distinctive narrative tone. That is to say, it is a novel which distances itself from the characters, and in a way from the reader, by the nature of its discourse. It was then moved across to a visual medium where many of the things that could be done in the original medium could not be directly reproduced. It's hard to have an ironic camera, or tell a story where there is a good deal of parody. Even the world created inside the novel needs to be explained in a different way, to a different audience. So what Christopher Hampton had done was to take a literary text and make it into a not so literary one, though the result was no less cunning and no less sophisticated.

Secondly, my novel was not just adapted from one form to another, less literary one, and from one audience to another; it was also adapted in tone. *The History Man* is a story about the dying of the liberationist culture of the Sixties, the fading of the era of student revolution, and the book was set, appropriately, in 1972. It was published in 1975, just, as it were, on the cusp between the end of the Sixties radical culture and the emergence of a new form of cultural attitude during the Seventies – a very contemporary work. But by the time it appeared on British television in 1981, Mrs Thatcher had been elected to office. We were in the era of Thatcherism, of the new conservatism. Under Thatcherism, the entire cultural and political attitude toward the Sixties had been transformed; it was an adversary that had to be overcome. So where the novel version of *The History Man* in 1975 was a kind of half-tragic and half-ironic version of a generation that was dying, the television version of *The History Man* is really a commentary from a later era on what was wrong with an earlier one. So the values of the story, the myth and meaning of the story, had also been adapted in the process of translation from novel to screen.

There was another kind of adaptation, too, perhaps the one that interests me most. This is the adaptation from the very individual medium of fiction to the collective medium of TV drama. I have always believed that one of the characteristics of the novel (at least as it is practised in Britain) is that it is a very 'authored' form, in which the great Barthes-ian 'Death of the Author' has not really occurred. That is to say, novels are or can be written very much from the standpoint and vision of the original, individual, distinctive author, rather than being generic

objects, and this is part of the magic of the form. Let me try and explain a bit more what I mean.

When I sit down to write a novel, I imagine a society, a world, a verbal universe, a set of styles in my head, and I try to transcribe these into a developing narrative. I seek to observe and comment on culture, human behaviour, individual psychology, particular feelings and types of feeling. I try to discover something about language and the nature of literary form. Each novel is a new discovery, and in the process of that discovery, I attempt to reach the reader through the magic of a very particular set of words and emotions. Through words, and words alone, I want to devise a contract with each individual reader who, recreating the world I have imagined, will do a good part of the work for me. A conspiratorial writer-reader contract is devised, where I do a great deal of imagining, but then you, the reader, do a great deal more imagining in return. The theatre in which the drama is performed is the mind of the reader, and the reader re-reading and re-working my process of writing is one of the great ways in which the novel works.

It's said that if the match had been invented *after* the cigarette lighter, people would have said it was a great improvement. I often feel the same about the novel and the visual media. If the book had been invented after the cinema and TV screen, people would have said it was an improvement. Think of it. Here is a device, with so many pages enfolded on tiny sheets of paper, which can be scanned without a set or a screen. You can put it in your pocket, take it on a train, you can stop reading, put it away, and pick it up at the same place next day. You can scan backward and forward and read the ending first if you want. Admittedly, you can now do a good deal of this with a video-recorder, but not with the wonderful freedom of the book. But above all you can recreate the entire drama of a novel without actually performing it. This process costs nothing, because all the theatricalization goes on in the reader's head – where every version is different. You don't need to go on location in Vienna, or pay Anthony Hopkins a million pounds to be in it. It's all for free.

In the same way, the freedom that the novelist has to exploit this situation is extraordinary. Anything can go into a novel; casts of thousands, travel anywhere, sudden shifts in time, space, values or form. When you are writing a TV script, it is like sitting in a taxi; the meter is always running, and everything has to be paid for. You can always see the price turning over everywhere you go, or the difficulties of performance and production; that is the art of writing for the medium. But the novel has the meter switched off; you can write what you like, have Buenos Aires, have the moon, have whatever you want. That is part of the wonder of the novel, the wonder of being a novelist. And by contrast, the TV script or the film is a

limited medium; the characters are defined, the actions are fixed, the rooms are there, the imagination wanders only as far as the director or the camera permit. So the novel is never replaced by the TV drama, or the TV version. It has its own form of artistic and imaginative life, as well as its own distinct language and author. And often when we return to a novel after seeing the film or TV version, we are amazed by how much richer it is.

2

You might ask, if that is my feeling, and it is, why I have done so much work in TV drama myself. Well, I certainly have. During the Sixties and Seventies, partly because I lived in Birmingham where I met a good number of writers and directors working in BBC Drama, which had an important regional base there under David Rose, I was greatly seduced by TV and wrote a number of scripts for various TV theatres, like 'Play for Today'. And the experience of watching Christopher Hampton adapt my own novel increased my interest in the skills and arts of TV adaptation. So during the Eighties I did a great many adaptations myself. There were drama series versions of two novels by Tom Sharpe, *Blott on the Landscape* and *Porterhouse Blue*, which I adapted as series for the BBC and then Channel 4. There was a novel by Alison Lurie, *Imaginary Friends*, adapted for ITV, and Kingsley Amis's *The Green Man*, done for the BBC, and so on.

Also during the Eighties I found myself interested in something I called, to myself, the television novel – that is, I took stories and narratives that ten years before I would undoubtedly have written as novels and wrote them as television series. In fact the most recent things I have done, two satirical series about the European Community called *THE GRAVY TRAIN* and *THE GRAVY TRAIN GOES EAST*, started in this way. I began to plan a novel about Brussels and the idea of a common Europe and did a lot of research for it. Then, I think because I began gossiping about this idea at the wrong party, I met someone who wanted to commission it as a TV series for a European audience and as a European co-production. That is what happened, and the two series, which are in the process of being shown in a good many of the European countries, have been my main activity in the later Eighties.

I am, as it happens, desperate to return to the novel and have just written one called *Doctor Criminale*, which is about to appear (it came out in 1992); though I must admit that it has already been commissioned as a TV series. My previous novel came out in 1983, so it is nine years since I published a full-length novel, and the missing years have been almost entirely filled with television

writing. Why, after all I've said about my commitment to the novel, and my conviction that I am first and foremost a novelist, should I have become a novelist who spends his time writing mostly for TV?

There are three or four different possible answers, and some of them are perhaps distinctive to British TV. Because in Britain TV culture still supports the idea of a 'writers' theatre' – that is, it is possible to go, as a serious writer, to the BBC or Channel 4 and say you want to do a particular project, and this will be accepted on, more or less, the writer's own terms. But another reason is one almost the opposite to this; it's the difference between the experience of being a novelist and being a TV dramatist. As I said before, one of the things about the novel is that it is a work of the private and personal imagination. In fact, if you think about it, being a novelist is a very solitary if not almost disgusting profession. You get up, have breakfast, and then go into your study and switch on your Apple. Then you sit all day at home in solitude, fantasizing – about life, other worlds, strange sexual couplings – and try to work these imaginings out on the screen in front of you. Then it's time for dinner, a little late night TV, and off to bed; then you get up the next morning and it's back to the strange sexual couplings again.

Writing for TV is not like that. You get up in the morning, have breakfast, switch on your Apple, write down '1. INT. JOHN'S ROOM, HOTEL, MANCHESTER. DAY' and the phone rings. Someone says: 'Hi, this is Joanne, the location finder, I'm in Johannesburg. I'm looking out of my hotel window and I can just see this fantastic shot. I can see your character, Maggie, isn't it, coming round the corner and...' And I say, 'Just a minute, Joanne, this story is set in Manchester.' And Joanne explains that she thinks they can fix this great deal with the South Africans so it would be better to set it in Johannesburg instead. So you sit down and write: '1. INT. MAGGIE'S ROOM, HOTEL, JOHANNESBURG. DAY', and then the phone rings again. It's Peter. 'Yes, Peter, who are you?' you ask. 'I'm Peter who does 1976, I'm looking after all your 1976 stuff. You know, car number plates, kitchen furniture, clothes, that kind of thing. We really want to get 1976 right in this series. Anyway, I've found this really great kitchen, so if you could just jump in the car and come to London, because it really is a really great kitchen, real 1976...' And I say, 'Well, thanks a lot, Peter, but sorry, Paul rang up last night, and we've changed the whole thing to 1982'. And so it goes on.

The point is that writing for TV is not a lonely and solitary life, and TV is fundamentally a collaborative and communal medium. Everyone gets involved – the producer and the executive producer and the production assistant and the director and the designer and the location finder, about 20 other people who ring you all the time with ideas, suggestions, input, interference. In fact, to be

completely honest, a TV series isn't ever written at all. It's rewritten. Everyone feels they're involved in the rewrites, and they've often done their rewrites before you've even done the writes. Nothing is really private, the whole thing comes out of a shared world, and everything has been collaborated on. For the lonely novelist this can sometimes be very annoying. But, when it goes right, it can also be very exciting. In fact, one of the reasons for the pleasure of TV is exactly that the method of creation is so different from that of writing a novel. And so, of course, is the result, which is the achievement of a great team of people who have worked well, or badly, together and produced something for which they are all responsible. The writer probably feels most responsible, though if it hasn't gone well, there is always someone else to blame. But maybe this does explain to you why for over several decades I have actually enjoyed working in these two different worlds and building various kinds of bridges between them – adaptations, TV novels, and so on – constantly carrying things backward and forward between the one world and the other.

3

This is nearly the end, so now it is philosophy time. As you probably know, one reason why the British come to the European continent so often is to learn from its philosophers, since we do not really have a philosophical tradition in my country – one reason, perhaps, why we have the novel instead. But we do like mentioning the names of European philosophers, to show we could be a thinking nation if we cared to try. The name I want to mention is probably a familiar one on these occasions; I want to recall Walter Benjamin and his famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', written in 1935, but still a notable guide to the current argument about writing and filming, art and the era of the moving picture.

Benjamin, you may remember, proposes in that essay that 'the age of mechanical reproduction', which he believed we were just learning then to live in, and which we believe we have learned to live in, has the effect of destroying what he called the 'aura' of the traditional work of art, the original artefact, whether it be a painting or a novel. The work of art ceases to be single and ceases to be 'authored'. As soon as it can be endlessly reproduced through the modern technologies of mechanical reproduction, from film to, I suppose, photocopying, the mystery of its original nature and status, its scarcity and its creativity, begins to disappear. The production of the work becomes precisely the technology through which it is now created and presented, and according to Benjamin this is one of

the essential characteristics of Modernist and mass culture. Today we live in the inheritance of all this, Postmodern culture, where what to Benjamin was a striking cultural transformation is now a commonplace state of affairs, the modern 'imaginary museum' of multiplied styles, images, signs and art objects.

Benjamin's argument goes on even further. He argues that in time the mechanical or technological arts, the arts of serial reproduction, go on to create their own new notion of 'aura'. These technologies require their own skills and invent their own methods and models of art and creative activity, driven along by the changing technologies. These in turn acquire the status of new forms of art. He gives as an example the way in which the apparently random and modest use of the camera to record something happening – an incident or a scene in a drama – in the end becomes the artistic situation that shapes the incident or drama, so we watch not what is reproduced but how it is reproduced. What's more, the entire location of what is represented is changed. By the use of a studio, a particular location, or indeed by changes in the kind of performance required from the actors, the artistic occasions themselves are transformed. As the aura starts to fall away from the historical cultural forms, it is replaced by the new aura cast by everything to do with the new medium, which perhaps then goes on effectively to recycle the older one. And in time cinema produces not just a new technology but a changed idea of all the artistic components – narrative, storytelling, cultural signs, a whole new mythology of stars and settings, or conventions, references, and traditions.

One thing I have been describing here is a very familiar process where a 'literary' writer like myself (as I say, essentially a novelist) discovers some new possibilities in the artistic situation by moving from sitting at home writing novels to going out and writing for and working with TV. For the writer this could be described as a psychological as well as an artistic transaction. For the passage involves the fear of losing some of the essential skills, values and artistic convictions from which you began in the first place. You can indeed feel you are losing command or control in the literary art itself, just as, in adaptation, you may feel you are losing sight of the original book that was an expression of it. At the same time, you are excited, stimulated, and invigorated by the new techniques and possibilities, the technological evolutions, that can only be born from contact with a new and obviously constantly changing medium. I think it is important for that medium that the literary 'aura', the notion of artistic values derived from the tradition of the novel, indeed the very notion of an 'authored' script, is of fundamental significance for film and TV, which has a tendency to be technologically exciting and creatively dull or repetitious, over-conventionalized. So I think the 'writers' theatre' is very important and must continue to have a significant role in film and TV.

But I am also interested in the reverse process. For the experiences of the mechanical media can come back into and deeply affect the literary media, too, changing the fiction that you write. There is an important question to be asked about what film and TV, as modern forms of writing, are doing to our ideas of the novel and narrative, and our notion of the novelist and the novelizing imagination. Indeed, any attempt to look at the way the novel itself is changing could usefully contain some consideration of the new relationship, in the minds both of creators and readers, between literature and the contemporary mechanical media. This is hardly the time to go into this in any detail, but I would just like to say that the different conceptions of framing and signification, of the manipulation of time, of narrative pace and interconnection and intercutting that are changing the conventions of fictional narrative are highly dependent on a filmic culture. In fact, many of the techniques of fiction we describe as Modernist or Postmodernist owe a lot to the fact that modern writers have, by analogy, learned to be their own cameramen, their own sound-recordists, their own editors. And the process now has become so symbiotic, it is worthy of analysis.

So to my final point. There is much to be said for an attitude of literary and artistic interpretation that unites or links the activities of university departments of literature and departments of film. I hope that means looking both critically and empirically at some of the things I have been discussing here – the relation between the literary and the filmic 'aura', the role of the screenplay and of the writer in the modern media, and the changing form of the novel.

ON ACHIEVING GOOD TELEVISION

(The 1991 Dutch Screenwriters'
Network Lecture)

FAY WELDON

In Britain, this has been TV Franchise Year: the year in which the commercial network companies get looked at; if the quality of what they are beaming into people's minds and homes looks too bad, they are stopped from doing it. Some other collection of people gets to have a go. The BBC, the State non-commercial company, is spared this process. Common wisdom is that if you do something for a fixed salary rather than a profit, your problem is not going to be falling standards in response to commercial greed, but a tendency to bore your viewers rigid. Most State companies all over the world do this; the dead hand of accepted wisdom, political correctness, a respectable and dignified, balanced and responsible view, falls heavily upon them. The BBC tries to keep its image lively by showing sexual activity in a degree of detail which can disconcert the more puritanical of its viewers. But we are like that over there in Britain. And it is true that just as a bad writer deals in violent deaths and disasters to cover up a shortage of imagination, if a director has to rely on graphic sexuality to keep the viewer's attention, he, she has failed. Sometimes I suspect God of being a rather bad TV writer up there in the sky. If all else fails, he diverts attention by producing an earthquake or Irangate, or the Gulf War, or begins a new story idea by pushing poor Robert Maxwell off a yacht and seeing what develops. But I have a feeling that in The Netherlands, though you take sex lightly, you do not take God lightly. Countries are different. But I suspect what is quality in one is quality in another. All I was saying, before I was diverted by God, is that sex and violence do not create good television: they may provide watchable television, even obsessively gripping television, but that is not, I imagine, why you have asked me to speak to you today. No one needs new ideas from abroad when it comes to sex and violence. But perhaps there is a secret, not just to do with the spending of large sums of money, of having a larger pool of population to call upon when it comes to talent, that creates this mysterious thing called 'quality TV'. Yes, perhaps there is. And perhaps there are rules whereby we can penetrate the heart of this mystery.

In Franchise Year – as we in the media refer to the culmination of the five-year drama of hope, fear and suspense, which is the lot of the British commercial TV companies – I find myself doing rather well as a writer. I have the reputation of being a quality product. Commercial companies invest, rather quickly and suddenly, in the workings of my brain. Ten hours of drama were forced out of my head onto the page in the last couple of years: four of them by another writer, Ted Whitehead, in the form of an adaptation of my novel *The Cloning of Joanna May*. That was for Granada TV. Six hours of original drama – a series for Anglia TV called *GROWING RICH*. That's six hundred pages of closely worded, much revised, fined down, honed screenplay. I will discuss some parts of the latter later, when we get down to a little more detail on what can be achieved and how, or so it seems to me, in what is said to be 'good TV drama'. Quality TV.

There is a general feeling in Britain that quality TV means TV with low viewing ratings, which is why I do well in Franchise Year – only when fear of losing control over the box in the nation's living room really bites hard are companies prepared to trust the maverick, invest in the creative impulse of any single individual's brain. It feels like risk to them. And though there is no evidence whatsoever that quality equals boredom equals people switching off their sets, a habit of thinking has grown up in which the viewer is despised, is assumed to want only rubbish. And in the viewer's mind, alas, the concept has grown that what is good is boring, which is all too often the case, and if you tell your audience something is culturally valuable, they will switch off at once, and so they should. Good drama has much to learn from popular entertainment, and vice versa. Meanwhile, the producer finds himself torn between what he sees as forces from opposing poles – the requirement of the licensing authorities to produce quality, and of the advertisers to produce rubbish with high ratings between which they can place, to stunning advantage, their brilliant TV commercials. But of course it is not like that: it is too simple. It is once again, and how it hinders and restricts our postmodernist thinking, the trap of the false polarity. These are not the only two alternatives available. The viewer, to my mind, does not *want* rubbish. The viewer is wonderfully polite, *puts up* with rubbish intermittently in the hope of one day, one day, seeing or hearing something that illuminates his, her life. Only if it doesn't happen for ages and ages and ages, does he, she switch off. Which is why audiences in the USA do begin to switch off; and the companies there now look for creative drama, original drama, relevant drama, import writers from other countries, Britain in particular – and when presented with what they asked for get cold feet and start turning it all back into what is familiar – safe to them, stale to the viewer, and increasingly less profitable. But to invest so much money and effort in the

product of a single mind, that of the writer, is a terrifying thing.

Of course the making of TV drama, whether good or bad, is a group endeavour, but the 'better' it is, the more writer-based that drama will be. Ingenuity can compensate for lack of money. No amount of ingenuity will compensate for the lack of a good writer.

That is the first rule. Good TV drama is writer-based. You may have the best technology, the best actors, the best directors, but if your script is not lively, energetic, interesting, you are wasting your time and that of your viewer. You will produce something to fill a screen, your friends may even be quite polite about it, but you are wasting your time. And talking about 'friends', quality TV is not something that is produced for your colleagues, in order that they shall say 'oh, how clever you are', it is produced for an audience, who is never to be despised.

Rule No. 1.5. If your audience seems to love what you regard as rubbish, it is because you have failed to give them something better that they could better love. Your fault, not theirs. They are in love with love. That is their condition. But you're in charge here. Never insult, never under-rate your audience. If they want bread and you have given them stones, be ashamed of yourself, not them. The corollary, alas, and I do admit it, is that what is writer-based is risky. Sometimes it all goes wrong. Perhaps *THE CLONING OF JOANNA MAY*, perhaps *GROWING RICH* will produce yawns and groans from the population, ten hours of it, the massive switching off the TV moguls fear. I don't think it will, but then I wouldn't, would I? And it could. And perhaps the day will come when the viewer switches off and never switches on again. And then how will we all make a living? TV moguls hate risk. Yet, if they want quality TV, they have to take risks. That is what they get their big fat salaries for.

That is rule No. 2. If you want good TV you must take risks.

Rule No. 3. Trust your writers. Try not to say, 'oh, I've not read anything like that before: it might be risky, we'd better not do it.' Develop in yourself the capacity of saying, 'oh, I've never read anything like that before: it might be risky, let's do it!' Have some fun.

Rule No. 4. (These are rules for producers and production houses. We'll get on to rules for writers presently – though these are perhaps more appropriate for workshops.) Rule No. 4, as I was saying: Do not sit at your desk doing what the last person who sat there did, feeling that it is the limit of your obligation. If you are to enter the minds of the population, subvert and impress them, become part of their consciousness, some moral and artistic duty is thereby imposed upon you.

I have spent some 25 years in TV drama and watched it move from live transmission to tape, to tape which you could cut only once or twice at great

expense, with an actual razor, as if it were film. Drama beginning to move from the studio out into the actual world, on to electronic editing, to the present when tape is almost indistinguishable from film and costs pretty much the same. Though the basic difference remains this: in TV you try and get it right the first time around. The dependence on the editor is not great, for all his seven-machine editing suite and state of the art console which he plays almost like a piano, with uncanny skill. In film, the power is the editor's, more almost than the director's, very little with the writer. TV remains the writer's medium. This is not a view favoured by directors. Never mind. Directors would rather like there to be no dialogue at all. They'd rather look than listen. Poor things. Over the years, I have watched dialogue shrink and shrink on the page in its proportion to action and directions, and properly so; when a look on a face is as good as a word, let the look have it. Strange to look at TV dramas I wrote 20 years ago and see all that *talk* upon the page. Most of those early plays were wiped by the BBC to save tape and to save money: plays by Dennis Potter, John Osborne, Trevor Griffiths, Harold Pinter, Beckett, me – all gone. Extraordinary and wonderful performances by actors now famous beyond the dreams of credibility, or likelihood, gone, all gone. Lost to posterity, to save five shillings, in the service of some economy drive or other. Another rule. Do be careful when you set out to cut costs.

The change in writing style has come about little by little, and not consciously. The writer uses the technology to hand; otherwise what he, she writes appears stolid, old-fashioned. Producers, directors, writers, everyone working in TV must understand that things change and ought to change. And there is no use lamenting the past. We just have to write better plays than the ones that were wiped. Why not?

Rule No. 5: because it can't be said too often. Respect the viewer. She, he is your father, mother, sister, brother, child. Bear that in mind and behave accordingly.

Enough of rules, which are obviously made to be broken. I only offer them as a way of formulating problems and possible answers. Where, you will now be asking yourselves, do you get these writers from? These mysterious folk? Where, particularly in places like The Netherlands, where TV drama has been a lesser form, where the 'good' writers of the nation have traditionally not lowered themselves to write screenplays, finding it far too popular a form for comfort. They believe, I sometimes fear, that only what is inaccessible has real merit. They are determined to be received by an élite and an élite only; sticking to the novel, the stage play, the poem – to which only a minority of any population respond, believing that only what is boring is 'good'. So now there is a problem. How do you suddenly

now find writers, who have the wit, imagination and skill to fill the screen with work which satisfies the hunger of an audience which asks for bread and is too often given stones? Of course your audience includes the daft, the stupid, the bad, the ugly, those with debased tastes – I acknowledge that even as I ask you to respect them, in the same breath. Because who debased those tastes – well? We in the TV industry – which ought to be the TV craft, because of the responsibility it owes to the minds of millions. If we debased them, it is up to us to set it right.

To be practical, firstly you must pay your writers enough: sums that have some bearing on the cost of a production. Proper payment will improve the status of the writer. Money encourages people no end, even artists. Save on anything. Don't save on the writer, who is integral to every operation within television. Without them, nothing. Without a script, a blank screen. So recognize that within your budgets.

Secondly: you must enable your writers to work under proper conditions. Do not fight your Writers' Guild too much. TV is a joint enterprise, good relations are important. Keep your residual payments high. Everyone will reap the benefits, not just the writers.

Thirdly: involve your writers as much as possible in every stage of production. Do not even attempt, though the US TV industry has actually managed to achieve it, to claim copyright and moral authorship of transmitted work. By so doing you will thoroughly demoralize the writer. Worse, if you deprive him, her of credit, he, she takes no responsibility. She or he slaps out any old work, takes the money and runs. I believe the Writers' Guild of America to have sold out on copyright, taking first class fares in exchange. Shame on them, say I.

A final word to producers. Okay, so you've got the air space, you have a writer in mind. Where do you find the money? Well, that's what you're paid to do. I become quite religious at this point: I say God will provide, and I am almost serious. If you have a good programme in mind, a group of people bound by a common endeavour which is something more than just making a profit at the expense of the internal landscape of your fellow citizens, somehow He will. He will. Promise.

By now the writers here present will be in a state of alarm and confusion. They know well enough that writing good TV is not just a matter of putting scenes on a page. They, like me, wonder daily how it is done; feel it is safer to do what has been done before; are tempted to hand over work which is familiar to everyone. Difficult enough to be hired in the first place. Difficult enough to get paid anything, let alone *more*. Who ever heard of a residual? This is a domestic market here. We write in Dutch, not English. What is this woman talking about? How do you get a career in TV going when you can't get your foot on the first

rung of the ladder? So far as you can see, there isn't a ladder to put your foot upon, anyway.

Let me say a few encouraging things.

First of all, the world is your oyster. Europe is your home. The EEC is on your side. Languages are more open to translation than ever before: a foreign word is no longer a frightening thing. What is relevant in one country is relevant in another. The world grows smaller, the fax is your friend. It used to be a fear that for a programme to be internationally accepted it must deal in such universal themes that it could only be as crude as *DALLAS*, as absurd as *NEIGHBOURS*. It turns out not to be true. Good drama races round the world: there is such a hunger for it. Aspire to it. And do not, while we are about it, despise *DALLAS*. In its hey-day, it was pretty good. In the end, everyone got bored. When they got bored, so did the viewer. That way round.

As I say, 'how to write good TV' is a subject better suited to workshops than in this wide forum, but I'll throw out a few rules for writers.

Firstly: don't you despise your audience, either. The audience is yourself. You write the play, the drama, the soap you want to see, the one you feel the lack of. That way you entertain and move yourself, and in entertaining and moving yourself, you do the same for your audience. What the viewer wants, oddly enough, is the train of inventive thought that's coming out of your mind. He or she loves to follow it. It refreshes the spirit. 'Good' or 'bad' are misleading adjectives. It is inventiveness they look for.

Secondly: you are writing for a viewer out there, not pleasing a producer or a director. Your duty is to the audience, not, though they won't like me saying it, to the people who pay you. Your job is to manipulate them, so you get what you want. They stand as obstacles, however experienced, accomplished and well-meaning, between you and the viewer, in this peculiar act of communication called a screenplay. You, the writer, must claim back your status. You, the writer, are the one who lives in the real world. Those who work in the TV industry tend to live there, too, and have very little idea what it's like. Tell them.

Now I don't mean by this you don't re-write. Of course you do. You are not stubborn or stiff-necked. Take on board everything that is said to you: you have at least to consider its wisdom, or otherwise. You must not let your ego get in the way – more of a problem for male writers, I sometimes think. I sometimes see them with the director, two lions fighting; women's tendency is the other way, I fear: to want to please, to alter too much, to fight too little. All of this is work. Writing's work. To be a writer is to have a pleasant life, no wonder so many want to do it – but it is a hard-working life. So –

Thirdly: you are the best judge of your own work. But judgement must be impartial, and you must be more ruthless even than your editor.

Fourthly: do be practical. Granted that it is the function of TV technology to follow the writer, the less a programme costs the more likely it is to be made. What I said earlier to the producers will take time to sink in. A nation which wants good TV drama may well have to have government subsidy to achieve it. And there is no reason why government subsidy should not be available. If it's there for schools, for adult education, the arts, if the quality of individual response, the richness of individual imagination, is any concern of government, why then the tools for reform and enlightenment stare them in the face in the form of TV drama. While the government gets its act together, let the writer study the advantages and disadvantages of studio drama, the cheapest form of TV fiction, and the variety and liveliness possible even here.

Let me show you two interior scenes, cheap to set up; same room, same cast, same director. Two family mealtimes, separated in the story by a three-month gap.

These clips come from *GROWING RICH*, a six-part series by Anglia TV going out on Channel 3 next February, in novel form already in translation here in Holland. Our protagonist is Carmen, a 16-year-old schoolgirl; the Devil has his eyes on her. He is, in fact, trying to buy her soul in return for various goodies. Carmen is a female Faust. As someone in the series remarks, 'in the legends women never get to sell their souls: they just get given as gifts to men who do.' Me, I'm just trying to redress the balance. Centuries of injustice righted at a stroke! Hardly, but no harm in trying.

In the first clip Carmen's dreadful family are at breakfast. One kitchen set, one family of four. It's set and style I'm asking you to look at – and of course the situation. Carmen's family are slobs. Domestic hooligans. In the second clip Carmen comes home for tea to find the Devil, in the shape of Martin Sheen, pop-star and delivery boy, at the door, and everything very much changed inside – and her own body shape changing daily, according to the Devil's taste. Same kitchen set, same cast, same excellent director – Brian Farnham – different lighting, different costume, a totally different feel. An excellent director, my particular favourite because he always does exactly what I write, well, almost exactly, so he would be, wouldn't he?

Later in the screenplay, in a really very expensive scene, I wrote 'seven bulldozers dance along the skyline'. He hired seven bulldozers and a choreographer, and they did. I could have written 'three bulldozers move along the skyline' and saved the company thousands. I reckon if and when you watch the series you will judge for yourselves. Was it worth it?

Another clip, another interior. This is from Ted Whitehead's adaptation of *The Cloning of Joanna May* – made for Granada by the same team which made *LIFE AND LOVES OF A SHE DEVIL* for the BBC. More interiors, but seductive, lavish and glittery. A very different style of direction, and high drama. This is actually on film, but Philip Saville, the director, is one of our best video directors. *LIFE AND LOVES* was on video. Is that why we get the feeling of depth – tape has a curious flatness. Philip always organizes something glittering and moving in the background; he sets up shots as if he were using film, aiming for perfection. Mostly directors like to work in film, believing in the face of experience that they can control their editors. Directors who like writers are equally fond of tape. This clip is actually part of a promo tape, so you get the moments of drama and already quite heightened dialogue, heightened still further in a focused context.

Rules for writers:

All rules are made to be broken. If you have something to say, the means for saying it tend to follow on.

Don't, as we say in England, teach your grandmothers to suck eggs. Don't tell the audience how awful everything is, how terrible the world, your grandmother knows it. What your audience wants is explanation, enlightenment, fun, some reflection of its inner experience; not misery. Dutifully it puts up with what is antique, but it would rather have a cup of tea. It likes tragedy, it likes drama – it has enough dreariness between the time it gets up and the time it goes to bed without TV adding to it.

Be serious, of course you must be serious, but don't be dreary, don't be dutiful.

If in trouble, go back to first principles. What are you trying to do, when it comes to it? You sit there with a piece of paper in front of you – over there in a countless living rooms, people sit in front of screens and wait for what's in your head to confront them, entertain them, impress them, move them; fill them with wonder. You have a technology at your fingertips which enables you to do it. Use it to the full. Make it follow your imagination. You're in charge of it. Yours is the word which is the beginning of the world. What you're writing is a blueprint, so that a few hundred technicians can make this very remarkable thing happen. Only 40 years or so old in the history of the world. The mass communication of the fictional imagination. So the blueprint has to be effective: a great deal hangs upon it. It is, what's more, your responsibility.

If you don't give sufficient clues for the designer, the design will go wrong. Your fault.

If you mislead the cast, they will give the wrong performance. Your fault.

And so on.

Blame yourself, not others. Get it right next time.

Remember that the screenplay is a set of peculiar conventions. Written dialogue is not natural: it reflects and focuses real speech. There's no way it can parrot it, imitate it. On the whole people communicate with ums and ers and silences, unfinished sentences, gasps of dismay or gratification, and single words. Listen to a crossed line on the telephone, and you will hear real speech. Most of it consists of silence. Or else people run on without stop for five minutes at a time, bullying-out all interruption. Dialogue is a focussing of all these constituents. The writer's task is to edit out the boring bits, convey what therapists call the 'feeling tone'. The whole concept of fiction, the whole lure of fantasy, come to that: it lies in just this capacity, the editing out of the boring bits. Real life can get boring, because you have to live it through in real time. You can't edit out the tedious sections. You have to walk through that door to get to the street. What a waste of life! In film you just *are* in the street. Magicked there. Wonderful. In the real street you have to wait for something to happen. In the film it's there in seconds. Of course we all love feature film, the fictional narrative. We've found a way to improve on God's creation.

If written dialogue is not natural but a convention, so much more is the description of character, set, costume. What is mentioned in the few lines which head each scene is any departure from the norm. If I write on the page INT. LIVING ROOM, the designer will automatically set up a living room which belongs to someone of moderate income – or possibly a little above, because everyone aims up the socio-economic scale. He will choose a sofa and chair, a lamp, as unnoticeable, as ordinary as can be, as purchased by a husband or wife of ordinary income and aspiration and unpronounced taste. Given no clue, he provides what to him or her is 'normal', albeit in real life the designer's normality is a rare commodity. If I say ENTER HOUSEWIFE – I don't have to say how old she is, how she is dressed. She will turn up on the screen of middle age, of normal height, but plumpish and dowdy. If I say ENTER A GIRL, she will be 23, white, middle class, perky but not intelligent, stunningly beautiful and slim. If I want any variation I will have to say so. Write in 'cross-eyed', and the casting director will somehow manage. If I don't mention her eyes, they will focus normally. Which is the only reason why, in a couple of lines in the script, you can, alas, provide more than enough material for designer, costume and make-up departments and director. Your script records deviations from the norm. We, the writers, do this without even realizing it's what we do. This is our convention, our conditioning, so much part of us we don't even know we're doing it.

The trouble is that the convention as to what this norm is, lodged firmly in the minds of all who work in TV, tends to be 20 years out of date, and ordinary to the point of pain. Real life is various and extraordinary, albeit, alas, lived in real time. Television life, 40 years into its existence, is far more ordinary than it need be, albeit blessed by cuts, zooms, dissolves, to make its point. Let those who work in these ancillary departments get out into the real world, from time to time, and reflect it. I implore them. They tend not to. And you, the writer, be more specific when it comes to INT. LIVING ROOM. Have the fun the writer of the TV commercial has, every single accessory serving to make a point.

I wrote the above without reference to what, eight re-writes later, I had upon the page as blueprint for the clips you saw previously. I present screenplays in a way schools of television writing will tell you not to. I don't even put the directions in upper-case type. I find upper-case type difficult to read, and besides, they're an incitement for technicians to read only what applies to them, so they too easily lose the flavour of the whole. That's the rationale, at any rate. It may, of course, be just delinquency on my part. The writer's ego determined to get through.

Now in this next clip I'm going to show you an exterior. This is how the script reads – it begins:

221. EXT. WALSINGHAM. DAY.

The streets on this September day are thronged with pilgrims, tourists, prelates. Hymnsinging swells from the Anglican shrine-

The director's going to have to take his cameras out and get what he can. And there wasn't much thronging the day he was there, clearly. If I direct him too precisely he will only get irritated. So I don't say 'CUT TO PRELATE, CUT TO PILGRIM' – he gets the gist. Don't try to control too much. Allow leeway for the skills of other professionals. Don't tell your actors how to act. Peter Sallis is the veteran actor who appears in this clip. I don't write in 'He snarls'. He'll snarl without any help from me.

Another clip. Another interior scene, on location: a pottery; the religious statues bought in. Not too expensive to set up. That tear on the virgin's face was probably the trickiest bit of all but saved a page of conversation.

Rules for writers. Who can write, who can't write? Alas, it's true, some can, some can't. Roger Gregory, script editor on *GROWING RICH* is a wonderful editor and a hopeless writer. He knows it. Sometimes he tries to write a line just to hear us laugh. It is marvellous how without grace a line can be, for no apparent reason.

Television writing is like any other kind of writing: it is both a gift and a craft. It is unlike other forms of writing – the novel, the play, the poem – in that the craft can be developed until the absence of the gift is all but unnoticeable. But it helps to have it. Life's easier. And if you have it, while you're out of commissioners, try the other forms. Why not?

In television writing, as in all other writing, it is essential to lose the good opinion of the self. You have to be capable of everything your characters do, be in their skins while they do it, say it. Understand and sympathize with those who in real life you would despise and fear. You must find some link in your common humanity, and use it. It is not for the writer of fiction to condemn but to present. It is for the viewer to condemn, which does not mean the writer is not conscious of every social problem under the sun, and duty bound to explain it, understand it. Of course you are. TV is, always has been, the medium for social change: focussing the actuality of the world, the mirror in which we see ourselves and our society and do something about it.

I understand that here in The Netherlands, *EASTENDERS*, the everyday problems of miserable London folk, having failed to do well in the English language, is now being used as a format for translation in The Netherlands. That's exciting. That could work. It *is* work. But please in the translation, take liberties.

And let us not despise what we call 'soap'. It is a particularly powerful form of communication. One in which you can present, on a fairly simple level, every kind of human conflict, every kind of human solution: the social issues that confront us all, from AIDS to loneliness, to unrequited love to being falsely accused of murder.

Soaps get a bad name because, if you ask me, they are script editor-led, not writer-led. A script editor knows how people *ought* to react; if the cat gets run over, the child of the family will be heartbroken. There will be no space, no time, for variation. The writer, and the viewer, understands that a whole variety of reaction is possible, from indifference, to rejoicing, to relief, to the expected and culturally acceptable reaction of heartbreak. If the viewer gets spoon-fed a view of the universe that is less than his, her own experience of it, he, she will get bored and irritated and switch off, no matter how much shouting, and weeping, shrieking and beating there is on the screen. As I say, the viewer wants bread, not stones: the viewer, like the reader, like ourselves, the child who wants a bedtime story now grown up, requires a framework and an explanation for his, her own life, and a sense that there is more to life than chaos, and if you bear this in mind while you write, you will have drama here in The Netherlands unequalled in the world.

SPEAKING TO NATIONS

(The 1993 LIRA Lecture)

ALAN PLATER

All writers are thieves, and I have stolen my title from the BBC motto, which is: 'Nation shall speak peace unto Nation'. It is a worthy sentiment, albeit edged with bitter irony, when we consider that the 70 year life of the BBC has seen one World War and a blood-stained garland of so-called localized wars. The conclusion, for broadcasters, is that you may speak peace – indeed, you may yell peace at the top of your voice, but if it suits the politicians to send in the troops, that is exactly what they will do. In my bleaker moments, it occurs to me that perhaps Christ forgot to say: 'Blessed are the self-righteous for they can always be relied upon to form a firing squad.'

It may be that the presidents and prime ministers who send in the troops do so in the belief that this proves the enduring importance of presidents and prime ministers. They are, as is often the case, wrong. Most of the time, history doesn't give a damn. Who, for example, can remember the name of the prime minister during the period that William Shakespeare was writing the greatest plays in the English language? The answer is that we hadn't one. We had a monarchy instead. We still have a monarchy, as you may have noticed. Democracy, in the sense of a universal franchise, arrived 300 years after Shakespeare.

It is the writers who tell the true story of our confused and violent century – a true story that embraces many conflicts and contradictions. Ignore the autobiographies of the generals, the diaries of the politicians. Read Kurt Vonnegut, Primo Levi, Isabel Allende, Derek Walcott, Toni Morrison, Tom Keneally and a hundred others. Collectively, they will give you a very fair idea of the size, shape and texture of our beleaguered planet.

From all this you may conclude that I think writers are important people. That is true, but I go further. I think writers, along with their fellow artists, are the most important people in the history of the world. Painters show us what it looks like, composers what it sounds like, and writers what it feels like to be a human being. Writers bear witness. It is an awesome responsibility though the average professional writer will tell you it's much better than having a job in an office and

much safer than digging for coal or catching fish in the North Sea. I should also advise you to be suspicious of writers who claim they have exclusive rights to the soul and spirit of mankind: the next thing is they ask for more money.

This, you may think, is very high-minded stuff, considering that the central subject of this lecture is supposed to be Drama on Television. TV Drama, for most people, is a mixture of soap operas, situation comedy and police series. Isn't most of it trash? Yes, the majority of it *is* trash, but so is the majority of work in any art form at any moment in history. Audiences have to pay a price for every Shakespeare, Chekov and Ibsen: they have to sit through plays by all the writers who are *not* Shakespeare, Chekov or Ibsen. To reach any promised land, we must trek through a vast area of desert and wilderness.

Television drama is uniquely exciting for a number of reasons, and the most obvious is its youth. Television as a form has only been with us for half-a-century and its drama, for rather less. It is alarming to realize that I have lived through the entire history of the medium and worked through the majority of it as a professional writer. I also work in the theatre, and there you are part of a tradition going back to Aeschylus and beyond him to tribal rituals never written down but still lurking somewhere in our bones – make that comparison, and you discover that television drama is still a babe in arms. Babies may, of course, be lethal.

I started writing for British television in the early 1960s, a period which, looking back, seems like an age of innocence. There were only two channels in operation – the BBC and the fledgling commercial ITV network, which was modelled very closely on the BBC, with a legally binding, public service obligation built into its licence. There were three plays a week on each channel. In the very beginning, plays were transmitted live. The actors would perform the BBC Sunday night play; then, for the midweek repeat, they would return to the studio at Alexandra Palace and do it all again. Even when simple recording techniques arrived, editing remained primitive and was done, literally, with scissors and glue.

Audiences were innocent, too. Harold Pinter's first television play, *THE BIRTHDAY PARTY*, was transmitted in 1960 and drew the largest audience ever recorded for a television play up to that point. Nobody had bothered to tell the public that this was a difficult piece to understand – which indeed it was – and the people chose to meet and enjoy the challenge. I hate producers and programme executives who regard the audience as an inferior species of humanity; I have always written on the opposite assumption – that most people who watch my work are probably brighter in perception and richer in experience than I am. Nothing has ever happened to make me change my mind.

My first television plays were recorded in the North of England, in the BBC's Manchester studio, a former church hall. The rules of the game were very simple. I could tell any story I liked, providing it could be accommodated in about eight interior settings plus a couple of corners. We recorded the play continuously, starting on page one and carrying on until the end. The actors performed the play as if they were working in the theatre. The audience was able to watch a continuous acting performance with a camera three feet away from the actor's face. No other medium offers this privilege, and we throw it away at our peril. And the whole process was precisely like that of the theatre: we took an empty space and filled it with our collective imagination.

Perhaps the loveliest quality of television drama in the 1960s was its speed: making plays was quick and cheap. The Manchester studio, with one producer who was also director and script editor, provided eight plays a year for the network: one every six weeks. These days you spend six weeks trying to organize a lunch date.

It was a perfect way for a writer to serve an apprenticeship, learn something about the trade and, crucially, find a personal voice. But we were not inventing the tradition. That had already been done for us in the USA in the 1950s, by a remarkable group of writers of whom the most famous was probably Paddy Chayevsky. They created plays like *MARTY*, *THE BACHELOR PARTY*, *TWELVE ANGRY MEN* and *REQUIEM FOR A HEAVYWEIGHT*. We never saw these plays in their original form, but Chayevsky's appeared in print and had a powerful influence on pioneering writers in England, notably Ted Willis and Alun Owen. It should also be noted that the single play disappeared from American network television because the sponsors withdrew their support. This lends weight to a statement I heard from a Canadian producer two years ago: sponsorship is censorship. If your programme is sponsored in whole or in part by, say, a brewery, it is very difficult to write a play about a man with a drink problem.

Before they were removed from the air, the American writers made a vital discovery: television drama could be and should be the drama of ordinary people. *MARTY* was about ordinary people. Ted Willis's *WOMAN IN A DRESSING GOWN* was about ordinary people. But we must remember: there is no such thing as an ordinary person. Inside every human being there is a core that is unique and totally extraordinary. If you asked me to define in one sentence the task of the dramatist, it would be that: my job is to look at what is apparently ordinary and reveal the extraordinary that lies within.

That was our major discovery in the 1960s: television drama was democratic, and it gave voice to a generation of writers who might otherwise have been disenfranchised in our peculiar island culture.

This requires a brief dip into British social and political history. Britain is a strange country, insular, introspective and eccentric: good conditions for the breeding of poets and playwrights. We have a corrosive class system which we pretend does not exist. John Major has promised to get rid of it, but we know he won't. We are dominated, culturally and politically, by the products of Oxford, Cambridge and so-called public schools which are actually very expensive and exceedingly private – which is how the hypocrisy operates. At times we harbour the delusion that we are still a major world power when all the objective evidence is to the contrary. If, in football, we do not win the World Cup, there must have been a clerical error, or we were cheated by a wicked, foreign referee. Economically and politically, we are in truth a small and relatively unimportant island, but we hate to admit it. Historically, we pretend the Empire was created by the courage of our aristocratic leaders, eager to take the Bible and Shakespeare to the native population when what they really wanted was to steal whatever natural resources were available. In truth, the imperial adventure was built largely on the skill of our mariners and shipbuilders – a quality shared, incidentally, by the Dutch. I should confess at this point that my father and grandfathers all worked in shipyards, so this is my prejudice and, if you like, my hypocrisy. All that, and more, comprises Little England, and I haven't even mentioned cricket.

But something very important happened in 1945. The British people decided, by a democratic vote, to change the order of things. They elected the most radical reforming government in the history of the nation. The reforms included the provision of free education up to university level for every child according to his or her needs. It was and is one of the few totally moral acts ever carried out by a government.

There were practical objectives – notably the provision of a skilled and educated work-force to rebuild a Nation wrecked by the War. But nobody had anticipated the consequences in the Arts. Our parents had all left school at 14 and gone to work in factories, steelworks, coalmines or – in my case – shipyards. Our generation was given a much wider choice, and that range of possibilities included writing. Such a choice would have been inconceivable to our parents. I know D.H. Lawrence had made the transition half-a-century earlier, but he was a genius who made his own rules as he went along.

The result in the late 1950s and early 1960s was the emergence of a generation of writers with a whole new set of tales to tell – essentially tales of working-class experience – and the same educational revolution that produced the writers produced an audience for their work. There were novelists like Stan Barstow, Alan Sillitoe and Keith Waterhouse: dramatists like Arnold Wesker and Willis Hall, and

actors like Albert Finney and Tom Courtenay to speak the words.

But it was in the rapidly expanding television industry, where the needs of a mass audience had to be met, quickly and cheaply, that the writers found an immediate welcome. It is no coincidence that the major writers of television drama served their apprenticeship during the 1960s – Dennis Potter, Jack Rosenthal, John Hopkins and many others. Audiences watched the plays, took notice and did not forget what they had seen. Perhaps for the first time, the Nation was truly speaking to the Nation, in a multitude of new, exciting and sometimes dangerous voices. It became conventional to say that television was the writer's medium, theatre was the actor's and film was the director's. Today, they all seem to belong either to the director or to the marketing consultant; whatever your view, it doesn't add up to progress. It may sound a little cynical, but the equation seems to be: the writer's power goes down as the budget goes up.

I believe we began to lose our innocence during the 1970s, but as often with the loss of innocence, we did so with the best of intentions. There were rapid technical advances in the making of television. Black and white gave way to colour. Lightweight film and video cameras and increasingly sophisticated editing facilities meant that instead of working within the tight discipline of the studio, filling that empty space with our imagination, we could go on to real locations and show our audience the real world. We were no longer playwrights; we were movie-makers, with all that implies.

Let us consider some of the implications. The most obvious is that the process is much more expensive. It is very difficult to be precise about these matters, but today the average cost of a British television film made on location is approaching £500,000 per hour. The consequence for the writers' market is this. In the early 1960s there were, as I said, about 300 studio-based plays on two channels of British television. In the early 1990s, on four channels, we have at the most 50 one-off television films. The production values are obviously higher; but what we have lost is the infinite variety of personal visions that, with a bit of luck, present a picture of a Nation's culture. The Nation may speak to the Nation more loudly, but loudness does not guarantee diversity – only volume.

There is another formidable side-effect. In the 1960s we were telling simple little tales almost exclusively to a British audience. We were like ballad-singers around a camp-fire, and the people gathered to listen were strictly the local peasantry.

Now all this has changed. We are living in the global village predicted all those years ago by Marshall McLuhan. If our work costs £500,000 per hour to produce, then the work has to have additional qualities: it must have the ability to

attract co-production money, traditionally from the USA but more recently from Europe, and it must have sales potential around the world. There are very few certainties in our world, but let me offer one self-evident truth: innocence and the market forces are mutually exclusive.

The worst results of this state of affairs are those programmes which try to please everyone on the face of the earth and end up satisfying nobody. They are the equivalent of fast food – MacDonalds Television Incorporated. Because we are all Europeans, let us pick on the Americans for our examples. I mean programmes like *DALLAS* and *DYNASTY*, all sound and fury, fancy costumes and cheap emotionalism, spun on a web of sentimentality, smelling of dollars and signifying nothing. From the nation that invented the television play, and then abandoned it because plays didn't help to sell cheese, it is a double betrayal, even if totally predictable.

How can we tackle this world market without ending up with instant trash? One of the favoured English solutions is to rely on our considerable literary tradition: glossy dramatizations of Dickens, Trollope, Hardy and the like. We have also tried Shakespeare, but oddly, we make rather a mess of it on the small screen, perhaps because Shakespeare's imagination is too big and too hot to handle. But overall, our literary tradition seems to be one of our better exports and, the way things are going with our manufacturing industries, it might soon be our only export.

I should confess that I have been a major beneficiary of this tradition. Over the last decade and a half I have written television dramatizations of work by Anthony Trollope, Conan Doyle and Olivia Manning, not to mention Agatha Christie and Georges Simenon. Our literary heritage is a very broad church when overseas sales are involved. I have been referred to in print in *The Guardian*, no less, as 'a high profile adapter'.

There is nothing intrinsically immoral in this. One of the joys of dramatizing the work of, for example, Thomas Hardy or D.H. Lawrence is the privilege of spending several weeks and months inside the head of a great writer – sharing his perception and gaining some kind of insight into his working methods. As I said at the beginning, all writers are thieves, and if you spend time in the company of a great novelist, you are an officially licenced burglar and can steal everything of value. Nobody, apart from your nearest and dearest and possibly your agent, will ever know.

In crass commercial terms, perhaps the most successful dramatization I have done was the series *FORTUNES OF WAR* starring Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson, based on a cycle of novels by Olivia Manning. The experience of

working on this series, which sold all over the world, clearly illustrated the changing nature of our industry.

My job was to write dramatized versions of six novels, amounting to around 1600 pages of paperback: say half a million words. The first three novels are longer than the second three. My immediate response was to suggest to my producer, the patient and gifted Betty Willingale, that we make six films, based on each of the six books. In general, the longer the book, the longer would be the film. One film for each book – what could be simpler? It sounded very sensible to me, and it sounded equally sensible to Betty. It did *not* sound sensible to the industry. The laws of the industry said we must have seven episodes, each of them exactly 55 minutes in length. And the laws of the industry must be obeyed and that is what we delivered: seven episodes, each of them 55 minutes in length and of a very high quality. We won awards and were well paid. So what am I grumbling about?

Essentially, I am grumbling because we, the writers, are all in danger of losing our voices. We have become very skilled at singing other people's tunes, but we forget the music we were born with. I am grumbling because the last single, original television play I wrote – in the sense that Paddy Chayevsky wrote television plays – was in 1984. Nowadays, I have almost given up the effort. If I want to write an original, grown-up play I do so in the theatre, which has become an oasis of sanity. The theatre, as you may know, is a very strange place to go in search of sanity.

However, writers, in addition to being thieves, are also blessed with a degree of cunning. They can be quite Machiavellian if the incentive is great enough. Some of us noticed, I suppose around the late 1970s, that while the one-off play was in decline, there was still a need in the industry for what the marketing people call 'genre serials' – usually in six episodes and built around a love story or a murder investigation. More recently, I said of British television that you could write about anything at all, providing the central character was a detective. We love our detectives, from Sherlock Holmes to Miss Marple, from Hercule Poirot to Inspector Morse, and everybody at home is running around in circles trying to find the next one.

The writers' response was to create six-part series or serials which looked, at first glance, like conventional investigative thrillers or love stories but were, on closer inspection, original drama cut up into slices, and deeply personal statements. Obvious examples include Troy Kennedy Martin's *EDGE OF DARKNESS*, Dennis Potter's *THE SINGING DETECTIVE* and Andrew Davies' *A VERY PECULIAR PRACTICE*.

My contribution to this tradition was THE BEIDERBECKE TRILOGY, three series shown originally in 1985, 1987 and 1989 and currently being repeated on Channel 4. They are about two teachers, living and working in Leeds, again in my beloved North of England. In each of the series there is an investigation of sorts, but the real heartbeat of the work is the love story between the central characters, and hanging over all the episodes is a running commentary on the state of the nation, with special reference to the devastation of our state education system wrought by Margaret Thatcher and her market forces. They have taken our noble revolution of 1945 and kicked it to pieces with their big boots, or so it seems to me. That is another quality of British writers: we love to preach about the state of the nation, and I seem to have done a good deal of it today.

But that is crucial to the whole debate. What a writer offers is a passionate and personal view of the world. The television news bulletin tells us one version of the apparent reality. The documentary maker tells us a little more about that reality. The playwright says: once upon a time there was a reality which became a dream which became a story which became a play, and this play presents a deeper truth than the reality from which it sprang. This is true of every dramatist from Arthur Miller to Samuel Beckett. It is the search for meaning. Every play ever written asks the same set of questions. Who am I? How did I get here? And what shall I do next? If the play makes the proper connection with the audience, it then embraces the bigger, universal questions: who are we? how did we get here? and what shall we do next? And, as I have said, the great strength of British television drama during its finest period – broadly speaking the 1960s and 1970s – was that these personal visions were able to flourish, and profound questions were asked of the audience – sometimes seriously, sometimes not, sometimes in that tragi-comic half-light beloved of British dramatists, especially the Celts. Frequently, we do not know whether we are joking or not. Whether that is a strength or a weakness, I don't know, but it is certainly a national characteristic, and I think it is wonderful.

So it was that we were presented with a Dennis Potter view, a Jack Rosenthal view, an Alan Bleasdale view, an Alan Bennett view. They were all different. We should encourage people to preach about the state of the world, providing they all preach different gospels and – vital footnote in a democracy – providing we all listen.

What I find depressing about American television, even at its best – meaning wonderful programmes like HILL STREET BLUES and CHEERS – is the lack of this personal vision. We are given a collective vision, created by executive producers and big name actors and maintained by highly skilled teams of writers whose personal visions, if they exist, were long ago beaten out of them with large

bags of dollars. But I do not know who they are, how they got there and where they are going. Nor do they, which is very sad.

It occurs to me that the shape of this lecture, thus far, has echoed my definition of drama. I have talked about who we are – we British television writers – and how we got here. That still leaves the Third Act. What will happen next?

To be sure, we are in a very confused and confusing situation. Our traditional broadcasting channels are living through a period of great uncertainty, even absurdity. Channel 4 is probably the most secure of our four terrestrial networks, and it has achieved this position by aiming hard and true at specific minority interests in the community. Its relative poverty has turned out to be an asset. Too poor even to make an offer for the televising of British soccer, it bought what it could afford, which turned out to be Italian soccer. The British audience made an immediate discovery: Italian soccer is actually better than ours. Channel 4 has discovered what many of us have long suspected: that people don't always behave the way the market experts predict, especially when they are watching television.

By comparison, the commercial ITV network is in a mess, as a direct result of government legislation born out of venom and greed. I don't know whether the details of the franchise auction were reported here in Holland, but the outcome is likely to be catastrophic. For example, the company that now transmits in the North-East of England – the areas covered by the old Yorkshire and Tyne-Tees companies – has to pay the Government almost one million pounds per week in return for the privilege of making programmes. Other companies have to pay only a nominal sum. There will, inevitably, be mergers and takeovers, with the needs of the shareholders placed well ahead of those of the audience. Stocks and shares have no conscience, and no interest whatsoever in the personal visions of writers and programme makers. It has been predicted that by the year 2000 the whole of the world's television could be controlled by as few as four international media conglomerates. Friends, we have been warned.

Our main hope at the national level and – I would suggest – at the European level remains the BBC. We are currently in the middle of a great debate about the future of the Corporation, whose charter is due for renewal in 1996. The Government, albeit warily, has accepted the principle of the licence fee as the basis for the Corporation's continuation as a producing and transmitting organization. Even so, it has been a confused and messy debate so far, and much of the time the BBC itself has been its own worst advocate. Instead of proclaiming its case boldly and without apology, its senior officials have been too eager to climb into the clothes of the opposition – trying to prove they can be better free marketeers than anybody in the business. It is stupid, and it is wrong.

The principle is very easy to explain, and I don't know why our leaders – both in politics and broadcasting – find it so complicated. Commercial television, by definition, places the needs of the shareholders first. Public service broadcasting places the needs of the audience first. That is all anybody needs to know.

It concerns me that the BBC sometimes seems unaware of the strength of its own reputation. By way of evidence, let me offer a small but significant anecdote. In January of 1992, I spent a week in Jamaica researching for a film about the great migration of the 1950s, when thousands of Jamaicans moved to Britain. The film will star Lenny Henry, a marvellously gifted actor and comedian, born in England of Jamaican parents. It is rich material. We were guided around the island by two Jamaican minders. We went to places white tourists never go: to dangerous places where protection money has to be paid: to beautiful places indistinguishable from the Garden of Eden. We met an array of generous, witty, wise people, many of whom had every reason to be suspicious of us.

And what was the magic key that opened all these doors? Not that I was a well-known writer from England – but that we were 'from the BBC'. For this we must thank the BBC World Service, and a news tradition that persists in telling the truth, whatever the temptations to the contrary.

It is a precious heritage, almost unique in the English-speaking world. It would be sad but not altogether surprising if it were diluted by Government edict. The more the Government – *any* Government – distrusts the BBC, the better. It proves the broadcasters are doing their job properly. The bigger tragedy would be for the BBC to put up its hands halfway in an attitude of partial surrender – and that seems to be its present stance. Paradoxically, it is the people who generally work for the Corporation on a freelance basis – the actors, musicians, journalists, technicians and, naturally, the writers – who are its most passionate supporters. Like the cowboys in old-style Westerns, we have drawn our wagons into a circle. The only missing wagon is that occupied by the BBC Board of Governors.

My emphasis on the BBC and the public service principle is quite deliberate. It is also self-serving. If I am to do my best work as a writer, I need a public service outlet, or a commercial network with a public service obligation built into its licence. I need what we had in our age of innocence: the shortest possible distance to the audience. At the moment, we are clinging to public service principles by our fingernails, and I am not sure how much longer we can hang on.

I have ignored the satellite and cable revolution so far, in this speech as in my private life. In our house we have resisted, with little difficulty, the blandishments of the cable companies. So, despite massive publicity campaigns, has much of the British audience. There are, to adapt an old saying, lies, damned lies and te-

levision audience ratings, but the latter tell us that the top rated satellite show, *THE SIMPSONS*, is watched by slightly fewer than a million people. The most popular regular programmes on satellite – football matches and movies – are watched by about half a million people, the same number that might watch a late night specialized arts programme on BBC2 or Channel 4.

Those who live by the market forces are not excessively concerned about the creative impulse. BSkyB operated by Rupert Murdoch has, in its time on the air, shown only one piece of specially commissioned drama, a mini-series about the life and times of Princess Diana. It was, from all accounts, dire. But the cast included several highly talented actors, some of whom I have worked with in the past, when making decent, grown-up television plays. It is a terrible warning to all of us.

If much of what I have said seems gloomy, please bear in mind that I am in my late fifties, that stage in life when everything seems to get worse: the policemen are too young, the traffic moves too quickly, and food never tastes the way it did when you were a child. Also bear in mind that we are in a period of great industrial uncertainty: a BBC unsure of its future, a commercial network grappling with an absurd present, and a satellite and cable industry still not sure whether anybody loves them.

But there are a few reasons to be cheerful. With all my reservations about television ratings duly declared, let me point out something else. During the week ending March 7th, the latest for which I have figures, of the top 50 programmes in our country, the top 10 were all homemade, written drama. They included three episodes of *CORONATION STREET* and two episodes of *EASTENDERS* – soap operas that maintain a consistently high quality of writing and performance. Only 3 of the 50 programmes were American in origin – two feature films and an episode of *TOM AND JERRY*. The only non-British programmes made specifically for television were the Australian soap operas, *NEIGHBOURS* and *HOME AND AWAY*. Neither of these is exactly Shakespearean in quality, but they are honest, decent, bread-and-butter television.

Of the British product in the Top 50, the vast majority was dramatic fiction: either soap opera, situation comedy or drama series. The audience always has the last word, and it is sensible to remember that.

Let me offer another morsel of comfort. In 1988 I wrote the screenplay for what became a three-part dramatization of a novel by the British Labour M.P., Chris Mullin. The book, and the film, were called *A VERY BRITISH COUP*. It is a political thriller about the election, by a vast majority, of a radical socialist Prime Minister, and the efforts to destabilize him by the forces of reaction in Whitehall, aided and abetted by their American friends.

On the face of it, it should have been a total disaster from the conventional commercial point of view. Most people at home find politics and politicians boring, and the politics of the British Labour Party are, at best, opaque, at worst, a cocoon of spinning absurdities. I am a party member, and I know.

I have to confess, I used a little low cunning in my approach to the subject. Rather than a thesis on the inner workings of the Labour Party and, thereafter, of Whitehall and Westminster, I made it a traditional story about a guy from the sticks who takes on the big city slickers and almost wins. If you know our traditional stories, I could say it was a combination of Dick Whittington and Robin Hood, with a little of Frank Capra's *MR DEEDS GOES TO WASHINGTON* thrown in.

The result, thanks to marvellous direction by Mick Jackson and a stunning central performance by the late Ray McAnally, was a very British piece of work which, paradoxically, travelled all over the world with ease. It became Channel 4's most successful overseas export and won major awards in the USA and in Georgia in the then USSR. It earned Mick Jackson a ticket to Los Angeles – his most recent film being *THE BODYGUARD* with Kevin Costner – and I received a couple of amazingly silly offers from Hollywood. But Hollywood is a silly place, as we know.

There are at least two cheerful morals to be drawn from the story of *A VERY BRITISH COUP*.

First, that the audience will always take you by surprise.

Second, that the stories that travel furthest are those that are most deeply rooted in their home soil. You can only be truly universal if you are local and particular.

A final anecdote.

I was born in the North of England in a small ship-building town called Jarrow. My grandparents lived in a modest house with a backyard. There was no garden. My precious memories of childhood are of sitting in my grandparents' backyard listening to stories from my grandfather, an Irishman and a steelworker whose ring I wear, and from my grandmother, who left school at 12 yet adored paintings and books: from my parents and from an assortment of aunts, uncles and friends of the family.

The stories they told were about all manner of subjects: about war and peace, cats and dogs, shipbuilding and unemployment, football and greyhound-racing, the life and times of friends and neighbours. Some of the stories were sad, and some of them were funny, and mostly they were both, at the same time.

It often seems to me that most of my writing, during 35 years at the desk, has been a re-telling, with variations, of the stories I heard in my grand-

parents' backyard. Beyond that, it also seems that the proper, decent future for world television should be based on a very simple notion that I should tell you the stories from my backyard, and you should tell me the stories from yours. It is difficult to persuade the lawyers and company accountants and politicians who look after these things that the heart of the matter is really that simple. But I have a feeling it is. I will tell my story. You will tell yours. We all promise to listen. We will share the sacred music of our childhood. It's much better than fighting each other, and it is our best chance of saving the planet.

TELEVISION AND LITERATURE

JON COOK

I want to begin with an argument that is made more fully elsewhere in this volume: that television, at least in Britain, has shown a peculiar respect, even reverence, for the identity of the literary author. The evidence for this is both various and compelling. It spans different modes of television narrative, from the one-off play, to the mini-series, to the literary adaptation, to the television novel. It can be identified by different names: Dennis Potter, Malcolm Bradbury, Mike Leigh, Alan Bennett, Andrew Davies. Whether these writers are primarily identified as writers for television, as is the case with Dennis Potter and Andrew Davies, or as writers who use television as one medium of expression alongside others, as is the case with Malcolm Bradbury, they work within a television culture which appears to endorse their authority, to link the quality of television to the status of the writer. Thus, a new series or play by Dennis Potter is both anticipated and received as a significant cultural event. It is discussed in terms of the evolution of the writer's vision and style, seen as the result of a single creative will, assessed in terms of an oeuvre, decoded in terms of its author's recurrent obsessions. When a television narrative is in this way identified with a named and known writer, it confers quality on the programme. The contrasting fate of the writers of soap operas makes the point. The writers of *BROOKSIDE*, *EASTENDERS*, *CORONATION STREET* or *CASUALTY*, although credited each time an episode is broadcast, are not identified as the originators of what they write. Television reproduces a distinction established in the print culture of the nineteenth century between the work of quality identified by a known author, whose life and reputation are the subject of fascination, and the work of genre fiction where the name of the author is little more than a cipher.

My purpose here is not to test the validity of this distinction, but to note its presence, and in doing so to note too the extent to which television reproduces boundaries established within a literary culture. This applies to the great dead as well as the living. Television narrative in Britain has relied heavily on literary and, more particularly, novelistic sources. The most frequently adapted authors are Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, but the list of novels and novelists adapted for television is by now a long one and covers a wide historical range. It includes eight-

eenth century epistolary novels like Richardson's *Clarissa*, the nineteenth century moral realism of George Eliot, as well as the work of modernists like Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence. While at one level this activity may simply testify to television's insatiable demand for stories, at another it is clear that the established literary reputation or notoriety of text and its author are important reasons for its adaptation in the first place. Television borrows prestige from an existing literary tradition and, in return, donates its power to attract considerable audiences who might never encounter the original work in its printed form. Through this kind of adaptation, television announces its commitment to cultural quality, a commitment that makes literary adaptation one of the most expensive forms of television production in Britain. When Granada Television was looking for something to do with its considerable profits in the late 1970s, it was no accident that it turned to the adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* as a way of indicating that commercial success and quality television were compatible.

Original work and adaptation are two kinds of evidence for television's commitment to literary authorship. Any full account would need to include cultural programmes such as *THE SOUTH BANK SHOW* and *ARENA*. Both regularly take authors as their subjects. They recreate in televisual terms long-established cultural forms of attention to the author: the review, the biography, the interview. They draw eclectically on different lexicons of critical judgement. A single author may be praised for the realism of his work, for its formal complexity, or for the hidden imaginative sources from which it proceeds. They attend to authors in the singular, seeking out what it is that gives a unique signature to an oeuvre, rather than offering an historical or sociological account of authorship as a profession. Their persistence as a form of television's relation to literature can be interpreted in a number of ways: as a promotional device; as continuing evidence of a cultural fascination with the identity of the author, a figure who is simultaneously always and never at work; as a gesture of affiliation on the part of the new television culture to the older literary culture.

One current argument about British television is that changes in the medium – the new franchise system for the commercial channels, the presence of satellite and cable systems, the cutting back of the BBC's role as a seed-bed for new television drama and fiction – mark an end or, at least, a demotion of this particular relation between television and literature. This view is itself symptomatic of an unresolved question about the future of television: whether it is going to continue to address a national public within some version of the public service broadcasting remit or whether the medium is fragmenting into market niches, each one served by a specific channel or programming type. In the public service

version, literature stands to television as a kind of senior cultural partner. Television can bring to a wider audience works which were once the preserve of a cultural élite; it can recreate in televisual terms the priorities of a literary sensibility in ways that will improve the quality of a national cultural life. In the market niche version, television's dealings with literature become one more way in which the medium can cater for the tastes of an essentially minority but economically privileged audience. Television ceases to proselytize on behalf of literature. It is no longer legitimated by a cultural mission, but by its capacity to respond to different markets of taste.

However, British television's respect for the literary author marks only one of the ways in which the relation between literature and television has been articulated. Once we make the transition from the author to the audience or the reader, a different set of arguments comes into view. The hostility of both radical and conservative critics to television is a commonplace in the history of cultural criticism. Television was seen as either destroying existing cultural values or frustrating the development of new forms of cultural invention and relationship. While this position has been substantially revised in more recent work, it persists, notably in arguments about the relation between literature and television. In a polemic, 'Box Against Books', published in *The Times* newspaper in 1985, Richard Hoggart gives a typical account of what he takes to be the essential antagonism between television and literature. His piece takes the adaptation of the novel as the central form of the relationship, and while he concedes that television can provide a useful if limited reading of the original texts, the main force of his argument is that the structural limitations of television are such that it cannot 'give us the book':

The process of reading attentively a book of some penetration and depth is multiple, a matter of more than one meaning being held in place at the same time, of echoes, memories, of the figure in the carpet unfolding, of vertical resonances in play whilst the line of events pursues its apparently horizontal way, of stopping, looking up, thinking, going back, going on. The television script of even a short novel is itself a considerable abbreviation... It [the adaptation] is also decided by what the medium, the visual, the left-to-right medium does best and insistently tries to enforce on those who work in it...

The terms of the argument are no doubt familiar. Television replaces the complexity of the literary experience, its aesthetic and emotional richness, with its inherent tendency to simplification. And this loss is mapped onto another one: the reader's

relation to the book is free, self-determining, reflexive. Television is by contrast an insistent and tyrannical medium which regulates the responses not only of its audiences but also of those who work in it.

The usefulness of Hoggart's piece is that it discloses the cultural hierarchy which underpins his evaluation. This hierarchy is informed as much by the history of English puritanism as the aesthetics of Henry James. At its apex is the relation between the single individual and the text, set above what Hoggart describes as the 'collaborative' and the 'presentational or performing arts'. Film and television are the primary collaborative arts; drama and music, the main presentational or performing arts. Neither of these offers the expressive freedom given in the literary relationship. Neither gives the individual subject the same opportunity for self-awareness. The relation of literary reader to literary text, freed from the requirements of visual presentation or public performance, is the occasion for the recognition of what literature offers and television cannot, a quality that Hoggart describes as 'the spirit of the text'.

Hoggart writes in a way which seems largely unaware of the history of his own rhetoric. What he draws from the puritan tradition is not only a sense that solitary reading is the condition of an encounter with spirit. He also displays a puritan distrust of the visual. He argues that a recognition of television's limitations in adapting literature will make it less likely that we will produce 'transliterations which are against the spirit of the text, which set our own often rather vulgarly visual imaginations against richer literary imaginations'.

Calling this kind of argument an example of cultural élitism or bourgeois individualism is likely to ignore the important questions. What disposes Hoggart to link the visual to the vulgar? What disposes him to find spirit in a literary but not in a televisual text? The short answer to both these questions is metaphor. The language of Hoggart's argument establishes equivalences both within his piece and beyond it. Hence 'the richer literary imagination' is, by implication, equivalent to the individualistic literary arts, and 'the vulgarly visual' to the 'presentational' and the 'collaborative' arts. The visual is vulgar presumably because pre-literate (vulgar in the sense of shared by all and, therefore, of less value than the rarer good of the literate and literary imagination; vulgar, too, perhaps because it displays what is better presented by implication and therefore does not call for the exercise of interpretation). The relation between television and literature becomes a metaphor for other kinds of religious, social, and aesthetic relations which already carry with them an evaluative charge. Thus, in Hoggart's case the superior value of literature over television works as much by transferring evaluative assumptions from other domains as by any form of direct argument.

The theatre director and writer Jonathan Miller has made a parallel argument to Hoggart's and again in the pages of a newspaper, *The Sunday Times* in February 1989. Miller shares Hoggart's distrust of television's visualization of the written, but his frame of reference is to the psychology of perception rather than a religious and subsequently literary tradition of interpretation. According to Miller, the mental image created in the act of reading is different in kind from the physical image produced on the television screen. Mental images can be vivid but indeterminate. Physical images have no such room for indeterminacy. In the process of adaptation, what is indeterminate in the mental imagery of the reader is filled out in the translation to the screen image. Miller uses an example from a character in Dickens's novel, *Dombey and Son*:

Although the mental image is said to be vivid, it is not unremittingly detailed. You can sustain, for example, a vivid image of Mr. Carker's teeth in *Dombey and Son* without having to visualise the rest of Mr. Carker's face. The bother is that when you have it on film the rest of Mr. Carker has boringly and unremittingly got to be there, as long as he's on screen. In the book, Mr. Carker is his teeth. But he can only be his teeth in literature. He can't be his teeth in images.

The importance of the example to the argument is made evident in Miller's claim that 'you cannot film a metaphor' (or a metonymy in the case of Carker). The process of adapting literature to television, or cinema, is equivalent to the loss of tropes or figures on which literature depends for its effect. Visualization means an end not just to metaphor, but also to irony, synecdoche, and metonymy. And with the loss of these goes the loss of the pleasures of interpretation or decoding.

There is an obvious answer to this objection, and to Richard Hoggart's distrust of 'the vulgarly visual'. It is that on television the visual image is never simply iconic; it is always working as a code. But how it works as a code or a rhetoric is less clear; less clear, too, how the rhetoric of literature compares to the rhetoric of television. A lot of the work on television codes has drawn on the notion of the stereotype, that, for example, the costumes used in the adaptation of eighteenth or nineteenth century texts come to encode certain standardized cultural memories about the past. The other closely linked view is that the encoding of both word and image in television is fundamentally ideological. So the visual coding of standardized cultural memories is linked to a hegemonic account of national identity, or whatever. These encodings may not be taken up by viewers. The ideologically preferred reading of a television text may be resisted by a subversive reading. But

my point here is simply to note how much the linked concepts of ideology and stereotypy have dominated critical debate about the rhetoric of television.

Television in the service of the author, television as the corruption of the literary text: both these claims have been elaborated in the same period of television culture in Britain. They are the terms of what is likely to be a continuing debate, but they are not by any means the only terms. The comparison between television and literature may be better put as a comparison between television and print. We take for granted the diversity of printed texts but, I think, are less inclined to grant the same diversity to television. Interestingly, when the diversity of television is discussed, the metaphor of the parasite is often close at hand. Television, it is argued, is parasitic on film or drama or literature. It is an essentially secondary medium, a relay for a variety of texts created outside it. Here outside can mean literally outside, as in the case of sport or ceremony, or it can mean culturally outside in the sense that the real inventiveness resides elsewhere, in the image-making power of the cinema, or the social commitment of drama, or the metaphoric power of the literary text. But there may now be a question about which is the parasite and which the host. Television has astonishing powers of appropriation, but it also reinvents what it appropriates and then can begin to culturally sustain what it reinvents. Whether this is thought culturally valuable or not is going to depend upon a richer description of what the medium can do, one that is alert to its variety, its intertextuality, rather than its power to reduce all differences to the identities of segment and flow. This may seem a quixotic claim in the face of BSkyB. But if public debate were to move away from thinking of television either as a cultural juggernaut, levelling all before it, including literature, or simply as a marketing operation, it might open the way to a more inventive making and use of the medium.

LITERATURE AFTER TELEVISION: AUTHOR, AUTHORITY, AUTHENTICITY

THOMAS ELSAESSER

Let me start with a quotation by Jean Luc Godard: 'La télévision fabrique de l'oubli, tandis que le cinéma fabrique des souvenirs (television is in the business of making you forget, while the cinema produces memories)'.¹ Whether we agree with Godard or not, his aphorism has the virtue of clarity, since it polarizes not only the two media we are concerned with here, it also marks a historical parallel. Eighty years ago, in 1913, a very similar sentiment was expressed by Georg Lukacs, contrasting a medium of 'fate' with one of pure 'surface'.² The difference, of course, is that Lukacs was referring to the theatre, and comparing it to film.

Historically, the attitude of writers vis-à-vis a new medium, especially one with mass appeal, has always been a mixture of contempt, anxiety and envy. The debate about the morality of theatre people or men and women of letters working in and for the cinema, for instance, goes back almost to the beginnings of film: in Germany, to name only one prominent example, it was known as the *Kinodebatte* and already by 1920 produced polite yawns on the part of film critics.³ In some of the more strident contributions now as then, the debate is clearly the site of a struggle for cultural power and legitimacy, in which literature and the word are put on the defensive by the image and sound, with writers torn between warning about the new medium's social influence and wishing to derive economic advantages from its capacity to win them audiences.⁴

To mention television and literature in one sentence is, similarly, to touch a raw nerve in our cultural sensitivities. Take the old chestnut of 'adaptations': discussions invariably focus on how to mediate the gap between 'culture' (as the preserve of the few) and 'entertainment' (the pleasures of the many): usually this mediation is perceived in terms of loss (of artistic value, of complexity and sensibility, of informational richness and textual density). Yet it could just as well be represented in terms of gain (of accessibility, of power to circulate, of audiences – and, yes, financial rewards). The stance we take, in other words, depends not necessarily on the merit of the texts in question in either medium, but on the priorities we set in our views of culture. Indeed, a fully culturalist or pragmatically inclined mind might claim that every adaptation is a reading, every reading a 'per-

formance', and every performance the creation/writing of a text: a no-lose proposition.

What evidently comes into view when studying these debates are not only the economic foundations of all culture, including literature, but also the erosion of established boundaries whenever a new medium emerges. It is the latter that is perhaps more interesting, for it obliges one to reflect on what kinds of boundaries are being crossed in any act of transfer, translation, adaptation, interpretation. In contrasting literature with the audiovisual media, the opposition that is both implied and often enough evaded is the high culture/mass culture divide, not only because the two practices so readily stand as synonyms for two extremes of cultural value. Intriguingly, on either side one finds passionate believers, even zealots – defending the authenticity of their respective pleasures, tastes and discriminations, as well as asserting that the very survival of civilization would be at stake, if the other side were able to impose itself completely.⁵

A few years ago, the London Folio Society invited two well-known figures, the writer, opera director and scientist Jonathan Miller and the novelist and scriptwriter Frederic Raphael, to debate the motion that 'good books do not belong in front of a camera'. Miller takes a hard line, concentrating on the fact that mental images, such as Mr Carker's teeth in Dickens' *Dombey and Son*, are a literary reality to which no filmic reality could ever correspond, no more than the cinema or TV could render the tense used by Flaubert to describe Emma's days after she has been abandoned by Rodolphe.

The characters in a novel are made out of sentences. That's what their substance is. In the same way that as Cézanne's apples are made out of paint, and there is no way they would look better if they were made out of photography. Mr Carker is a prose-person – not a person described in prose but a person made *out of* prose. [With *Little Dorritt*, it is] the laborious conscientiousness of BBC detail which cargoes the thing down. It's Crabtree & Evelyn filming, Laura Ashley filming.⁶

To Frederic Raphael, Miller's high modernist defence of literature's specificity has all the fanaticism of scriptural fundamentalism:

How many subsequent versions of *The Odyssey* have there been since the blind poet sat at some lout's fireside and sang for his supper? Versions and perversions without number have derived from that supposedly perfect text which, if the author had had a modern widow,

would now be indicted for the plagiarism which has given us such works as *The Aeneid* and Mr Joyce's little number. (...) The party of God and the party of Literature have more in common than either will admit; their texts may conflict, but their bigotries coincide.⁷

Laura Ashley on one side, the Ayatollah Khomeini on the other. Given this chasm, probably the most useful proposition about literature and television would be to admit that one is comparing apples with oranges. But one could also try to break up the binarism that juxtaposes literature (the writer, the author, the work, 'literature') and television (the industry, the impersonal apparatus, the anonymous 'product', the institution television), where television too often figures as the villain in the dystopic scenario of the 'individual' vs the 'machine'.

For if one reversed the hierarchy of terms and started with television, a different picture might emerge, with a complementary rather than competing role for writing itself. When starting with television, the question must be: what exactly is being transferred? – is it the story, the nation's memory of a famous book, the cultural capital of an author? An example used by a colleague in his television classes is the BBC adaptation of the 19th century classic *Pride and Prejudice*: the author may be Jane Austen, but for quite a few of the eight million viewers who tuned into the serial, the author is Fay Weldon who adapted it, and who is very much a name author: Weldon and the BBC, on the other hand, gave Jane Austen a new public, once a production still had found its way onto the cover of the Penguin paperback edition. Yet given the series' substantial production values, maybe what has left its most palpable signature on *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* is the BBC's costume and property department, itself in the service of another institution: the British heritage industry. Would this mean that the real author of *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE* – the TV serial – is neither Jane Austen nor Fay Weldon, but 'England': that mythical kingdom ever so often magically rising from the sea for the benefit of American or Japanese tourists?

Such instances suggest that television may mark the moment when neither popular culture nor high culture can still be usefully defined in opposition to each other. While there is still much evidence of anxiety about the so-called 'Chinese Wall' between high culture and mass culture having collapsed,⁸ too many other kinds of 'culture' have come into play, too much of the information we require for our everyday lives, including information about literature and the arts, comes to us *only* via television. The medium now perforce serves several of the functions hitherto performed by separate public institutions – from Parliament to the Church, from the museum to the shopping centre, from the school to the news-

paper. But even without such transformations of the public sphere, the dynamics of both popular culture and high culture are such that both have become commercial cultures, one requiring advertising, the other corporate sponsorship, and each relying on the sophisticated technological infrastructure of the record and CD industry (in the case of music, for instance) or of photography (the fine arts). Thus, whether we talk about individualist print culture or technological mass media culture, both have been forced into coexistence by what is known as 'the marketplace'. Yet the bargains struck at this marketplace are not only economic: they are also semiotic, a notion I would briefly like to illustrate.

If one looks at a contemporary writer such as Hanif Kureishi, author of *The Buddha of Suburbia* and writer of the film *MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDERETTE*, one immediately notes how television constructs for an author very different frames of meaning. When interviewed on Channel 4 for *REAR WINDOW*, a programme not specifically concerned with literature, Kureishi not only talked about writing as a matter of seducing the reader, he also inserted himself in a whole number of other cultural and social fields, for which his expertise was far from self-evident, though nonetheless made credible and meaningful: he talked about suburbia and community, about race and racism, about homosexuality and male bonding, about violence, about filmmaking. The reason he could do so was that television conferred on him a special semiotic status, that of the personality, indeed even a star, for the Mayor of Bromley, the London suburb where he grew up, compares Kureishi to David Bowie, Bromley's other prodigal son. Kureishi, perfectly aware of and complicit with the fact that he was performing, playing a role written for him by the medium television, 'capitalized' on television to speak about social and political issues. A trade-off, in other words, where it is difficult or even irrelevant to decide whether Kureishi was used by television or whether it was Kureishi who used television?

Jane Austen and Hanif Kureishi: a further point to make about this unlikely meeting via the small screen is that it illustrates how television seems to inherit, and perhaps only by default, a number of social roles. Programmes about literature, whether through the discreet 'plug' on *BOOKMARK*, the interview with Melvyn Bragg on *THE SOUTH BANK SHOW*, the *ARENA SPECIAL* TV portrait or the BBC adaptation, create what one might call new semiotic spaces inside the traditional roles between the writer (as source of multiple meanings) and, say, the publisher (as material support of these meanings), between the public library (as repository of cultural memory) and the author (as repository of cultural capital). Adaptation understood within such circuits of meaning and value tends to refigure the process of loss and gain mentioned above. Instead of seeing novel into film as fatal acts of

relativizing what are 'essential' values attached to each medium (the view of Jonathan Miller), one may come to recognize that a text can exist within several different 'economies' and acts of exchange, in which it makes little sense to oppose too starkly an 'original' and its 'copy'.

The second point is that 'Jane Austen' and indeed 'Hanif Kureishi' connote more as well as less than their work. They represent an institution, namely literature, which television both celebrates and defers to, both acknowledges and triumphs over.⁹ For if literature (still) has a high social prestige, so does (at any rate until recently, did) the BBC. Such a field of force also implies that television and literature encounter each other in the first instance not as two kinds of texts, but as social facts, and furthermore, however uneven the balance of power may be, it does somewhat change the notion of the 'author' (as individual) confronting, David-like, the impersonal machine (the broadcasting network). Nevertheless – and this may be particularly true of someone who is not at the same time an 'author' of literature – writing for film or television means encountering industrial modes of production, processes dictated by assemblage and montage, by blueprints and prefabricated elements, in short, by a different relation of part to whole. Brecht and Benjamin in the late 1920s had already proposed such a concept of the writer, in analogy with journalism, but their model is in some sense more apposite in the age of television, not only because film and television require teamwork, but because TV is expensive, involving social responsibility (how the license fee is spent) or financial risk-taking (how the shareholders' money is spent).¹⁰

Finally, television's social brief with regard to literature may also be reflected in the changes of the literary canon. One wonders whether the fact that Jane Austen and Dickens, Galsworthy and D.H. Lawrence seem to fare slightly better than George Eliot, Thomas Hardy or Joseph Conrad in the adaptation stakes will have any repercussions on 'Eng Lit'. To take an analogy from the cinema: thanks to the reruns on television and the video-recorder, we now have a film culture where *CASABLANCA* and *SINGING IN THE RAIN* are more important than *STAGECOACH* and *CITIZEN KANE*: television gives a kind of living memory of film history, quite different from academic approaches to film, which used to concentrate on Jean Renoir, Orson Welles and John Ford, montage cinema, neo-realism and the *nouvelle vague*. Today's film culture also knows its authors – Spielberg or Paul Verhoeven – but it is much more determined by genres, oriented towards stars, and it doesn't shy away from rewriting film history according to topical, thematic and issue-oriented criteria. Might the same be happening to literary culture? A sort of smelting process, which Brecht, in his seriously flippant way, once called the *Messingkauf* approach to tradition, meaning that literary culture is inherited by the

next generation of writers in the same way a trumpet is bought by a scrap merchant for its brass value.

A shocking thought, even today, and yet, how many people would even know what Jonathan Miller is referring to, when he makes his argument about Cézanne's apples, were it not for photography and colour reproduction? However, when critics of television defend literature, perhaps it is not this or that text they worry about, but the survival of the very act by which literature, or painting, imposes boundaries on the viewers, exacts from them distinctions, and calls for separation and distance. Television, by contrast, with its 'flood of images' notoriously transgresses orders of existence, not only when soap opera stars come to open new supermarkets but also when arts programmes trade on the confusion between fictional characters and actual authors, and biography becomes the only tool of literary analysis.

Here, too, however, it is useful to look more closely. Where once upon a time an arts documentary might have presented the writer Anthony Powell as the epitome of the author as sage and seer, showing him, without apparent irony, retreat to the secret garden at the bottom of his stately home to attend the prompting of the muse,¹¹ and Alan Yentob might have interviewed Dennis Potter in order to let him tell his life as a spiritual and moral journey, illustrated with extracts from his TV plays,¹² *THE SOUTH BANK SHOW* on Martin Amis commits no such 'pathetic fallacies'.¹³ Presenting Amis' novel *London Fields*, it opens with a Notting Hill Gate street scene, where Amis can be seen stalking his fictional characters, while a voice-over – clearly not that of the writer, but of his American narrator – reads passages from the novel outlining the story. Amis, sipping a whisky and picking up a TV remote control, then zaps through the channels until he comes across Melvyn Bragg, the presenter, introducing a *SOUTH BANK SHOW* special devoted to Martin Amis and *London Fields*. A BBC programme about Philip Roth was careful not to miss the chance of a similar mise-en-abyme of a writer notorious for po-faced impersonations of himself. More ingenious still, another programme gave a chance to 'real' persons to vent their grievances about the 'characters' they have become in other writers' fictions. Apart from individuals whose chance encounter with Philip Roth in a London lift brought them literary immortality in his books, the programme showed Malcolm Bradbury telephoning a sociology lecturer at a Northern university who, for the last 10 years, has been trying to live down his reputation of being the model for Howard Kirk, hero of *The History Man*, only to be assured by Bradbury that he had never met him, but that he felt flattered if a real person should have been identified as a fictional character.¹⁴

Such playing on the conventions of realism and reference indirectly

targets the trauma that television might be for a certain idea of literature, for whether in the popular vein of the tabloid press (reporting as news the imminent plot-complications of the nation's favourite soap opera) or in the postmodern idiom of *THE SOUTH BANK SHOW* and BBC2 arts programmes, television seems to be making fun of one of the central creations of literature: the 'authentic self', the self-possessed subject, whose identity the novel since the romantic period has been so careful to construct and who, in the moral ideal of the sovereign self, seems to haunt the confrontation between the two media.

Dennis Potter, author of *PENNIES FROM HEAVEN* and *THE SINGING DETECTIVE*, might be said to be a writer thus haunted. Passionately holding on to the notion of the sovereign self but, equally passionately, determined to do so through television, Potter, until recently, has only written for television, yet nonetheless considers himself a 'writer' almost in the classic Leavisite tradition of D.H. Lawrence. Asked why he preferred television, given his presbyterian faith in the word and his rootedness in the poetic literalness of the Bible, Potter replied:

Television held for me the possibility of a common culture, and I chose it to assuage some guilt about the popular, about the tyranny and treachery of words, which has to do with education, which in England has to do with class. Television is a form of democratization.¹⁵

In Potter's work, the sovereign self can find itself only in its encounter with a non-literary 'other', the triteness and inauthenticity of popular culture, epitomized for Potter in sentimental songs from the 1930s and 1940s, kitsch birthday cards, trashy dime novels or strip cartoons, all of them collective mementos of emotion and history, of emotion *in* history. An authenticity of feeling, in other words, that is guaranteed not by the 'word' or 'by people made of prose', but which attaches itself instead to body and voice, gesture and inflection. Potter's discovery, potentially of great interest to literature, I believe, is that because the fashioned body and the grain of the voice have, this century, been preserved by such recording technologies as the gramophone and the moving image, the word has become not only speech but (secular) flesh. Thus, the very marks of inauthentic self-hood, dismissed by Miller as the 'Crabtree & Evelyn' school of film, might yet, thanks to television, revitalize literature's preoccupation with private trauma, personal memory, and identity as introspection.

The apparent inauthenticity of the medium television, as well as its disregard for the traditional boundaries of text and author, reality and representation, make for a kind of complicity, a 'white irony', which is a form of intertex-

tuality, but also a defensive move: TV insists on its self-referentiality and artificiality precisely because it is so close to life. Hence, the popular on TV (TV insinuating that there is no difference between on-screen and off-screen life) and the post-modern on TV (irony, dead-pan absurdity, mise-en-abyme of self and role, history as nostalgia) are merely two sides of the same coin. This coin is television's relation to time and temporality.

Time, I want to suggest – and this also returns me to my opening remark by Godard – is the crux on which television's distinctiveness as a cultural form may be put to the test. The time experience of TV differs from the cinema's, whether we define it as the deadline structure of Hollywood narrative or as the 'sculpted' time of European art cinema. Television time, on the other hand, has two characteristic modalities: its (technical) ability to be 'live' and therefore its care and concern with the schedule, and its (archival) function of the replay. The schedule is both a way of harnessing the multitudes of temporalities television is supposed to 'cover' in its news and current affairs (when a story 'breaks', as CNN would call it) and a way of embedding the individual viewer's heterogeneous and discrete experience of time into its own flow, and thus imbuing the activity of TV-viewing with a semblance of direction. The archival function, on the other hand, suspends direction, reorganizes flow and thus works in a diametrically opposite sense. Insofar as individual identity is invested both in a linearity inflected towards a goal and in memory as the preservation of special moments taken out of the flow, television provides a potentially very intense experience of self precisely by its many ways of manipulating the time sense of the viewer.

Like other temporal arts, but much more openly and on a more relentless scale, television is a machine for managing time, primarily ours, the viewers'. To this end, it organizes disruptions, breaks (what television studies calls 'segmented flow'), not only because interruptions help maintain attentiveness, but because only discontinuous or segmented time is time inflected towards meaning, creating those knock-on effects called 'causality'.

But what kind of causality can television actually provide? For the spectating self, television is time held between promise (the spectator trying to 'catch it on TV' – this 'it' being 'life'?) and frustration (because television never ends, never reaches closure, it never 'delivers' life). While film is always less than life and more than life and, furthermore, knows the finality of narrative, television cannot escape the tension of a temporality inimical to narrative, however many stories 'break'. It is one of the reasons why soap operas and series are the natural forms of television storytelling.

From this perspective, Jean Baudrillard's dictum that 'on TV everything is

meaningful and nothing makes sense' does take on an almost tragic ring about a medium that can never be the vehicle of tragedy, however much it lives off so-called human tragedy. The time of tragedy is perforce one of irreversibility, while TV's technical possibility of the replay ensures that the past can always be brought back. Thus, TV knows no past, and by that token no present, while at the same time presence, liveness, the moment is the medium's main claim to attention, while its command of the past is its capital. It is easy to see how a philosopher might argue that television cheats us of our lives, that it is the most inauthentic of all media, and thus the end of literature, understood as the affirmation of the dignity and authenticity of a personal destiny. This was the case made by Georg Lukacs against the cinema in 1913, and this is what I take to be the complaint of Jean Luc Godard against television today.

How to atone for the replay, the repeat and the repetition, these almost blasphemous interferences in the nexus joining time with identity? Godard himself has tried to demonstrate it in his video-film *SCENARIO DE PASSION*. But a contemporary writer, Martin Amis, also comes to mind as someone who, at least in one of his novels, has taken the ambiguous experience of television time into his fiction, with the aim of fashioning from it a vision of the authentic self, giving an idea of what might be a literature *after* television. Here is Amis, defamiliarizing the ordinary:

Is it just me, or is this a weird way to carry on? All life, for instance, all sustenance, all meaning (and a good deal of money) issue from a single household appliance: the toilet handle. At the end of the day, before my coffee, in I go. And there it is already: that humiliating warm smell. I lower my pants and make with the magic handle. Suddenly it's all there, complete with toilet paper, which you use and then deftly wind back on the roll. Later, you pull up your pants and wait for the pain to go away. The pain, perhaps, of the whole transaction, the whole dependency. No wonder we cry when we do it. Quick glance down at the clear water in the bowl. I don't know, but it seems to me like a hell of a way to live. (...)

Eating is unattractive, too. First I stack the clean plates in the dishwasher (...) then you select a soiled dish, collect some scraps from the garbage, and settle down for a short wait. Various items get gulped up into my mouth, and after skilful massage with tongue and teeth I transfer them to the plate for additional sculpture with knife and fork and spoon. That bit's quite therapeutic at least, unless you're having soup, which can be

a real sentence. Next you face the laborious business of cooling, of reassembly, of storage, before the return of these foodstuffs to the Superette, where, admittedly, I am promptly and generously reimbursed for my pains.¹⁶

In *Time's Arrow*, from which this passage is taken, the sovereign self of D.H. Lawrence and even Dennis Potter seems to appear as a mortified parody – the slapstick self, so to speak – challenging the validity of identity in the medium of time and memory. Although there are echoes of Joyce and Beckett, Amis' novel does not seek refuge in 'spatial form' to shore up the shattered self, for while an object in space can be turned upside down and back to front and still be recognized as the object it is, the same does not apply to time – time reversed drastically changes our perception and understanding of events. *Time's Arrow* confronts literature with the parody of its own temporality, so to speak, giving an ambiguous turn to notions of causality, of motive and therefore meaning. The ironic twist, however, lies in the fact that Amis' device as literature is a tour de force of language and imagination, while its analogue in film or television is a most mechanical and prosaic device inherent in the basic technology: the rewind button on the editing table or the video-recorder.

Yet clearly the conceit of *Time's Arrow* – namely to tell the story of a man's life backwards – would hardly be comprehensible to the reader, without his or her own familiarity with audiovisual technology and the banality of its time-shifting. On the other hand, by the same token Amis has made sure that *Time's Arrow* is a novel which it would make no sense to adapt for television: once again, literature *after* television.

Time's Arrow is no ordinary man's story; it is that of an American doctor, whose life journey leads him towards his future self, as SS medical aid in Auschwitz.

He is travelling towards his secret. Parasite or passenger, I am travelling there with him. It will be bad, it will be bad, and not intelligible. But I will know one thing about it (and at least the certainty brings comfort): I will know how bad the secret is. I will know the nature of the offence. Already I know this. I know that it is to do with trash and shit, and that it is wrong in time.¹⁷

Amis' meticulous description of the world in reverse not only acts as a powerful literary estrangement effect, but explores the underlying drama of time reversed, and what I alluded to as the question of finality and origin, of authentic-

ity and agency, in relation to an event, whose irreversibility and un-historicisability, so to speak, have become its moral and metaphysical core. T.W. Adorno made famous the injunction against 'poetry after Auschwitz', to which Paul Celan, Primo Levi and writers like George Steiner have tried to respond. In a bold move, in which relief becomes pain, violence becomes tenderness, separation at the ramp becomes the reuniting of families, and extermination the gift of life, Amis, too, has attempted to imagine what history might mean after the reruns on film and TV. As with Potter, but from the inverse standpoint, Amis has confronted literature and television under the aspect of temporality and authenticity, in order to wrest a new humanism from the encounter with an inauthentic medium.

That this humanism implies new coordinates of time and space is what I take away from my examples of literature after television, a prospect suggesting that no single medium or form can be the guardian of either memory or history this century, and that beyond all competition for authority and legitimacy, literature and television cannot forever remain the antagonistic orders of existence-in-time they now seem to be.

Notes

- ¹ Claude Ventura and Serge le Peron, *JEAN LUC GODARD 1960-1990*, WDR 1992.
- ² Georg Lukacs, 'Thoughts on an Aesthetics for the Cinema', translated by Barry Ellis Jones, *Framework*, no. 14, 1981, pp. 2-4.
- ³ See Tony Kaes, *Kinodebatte*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1978 and Heinz B. Heller, *Literarische Intelligenz und Film*, Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1984.
- ⁴ To stay with the German example, a similar debate took place in the 1970s when filmmakers became increasingly dependent on production funds from television, giving rise to what became known as the 'Literaturverfilmungen', or 'dusting off the classics grandfather keeps in his glass book-case'. See Rick Rentschler, *West German Filmmaking in the Course of Time*, Bedford Hills, NY: Redgrave, 1984, and Thomas Elsaesser, *New German Cinema*, London: British Film Institute/ MacMillan, 1989.
- ⁵ See John Fiske, *Television Culture*, London: Methuen, 1987, where the author ingeniously makes the case for taste and discrimination on behalf of popular culture.
- ⁶ *The Sunday Times*, 12 February 1989, Supplement, G.9
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, London: MacMillan, 1986, pp. 3-62.

- ⁹ According to Jon Cook, an institution in this sense would be characterized by a set of rule-governed activities, a set of roles (author, publisher, reader) and a structure of organizations and places (today: the armchair and the word-processor, the agents' office and the lunch club, the telephone and the publishing house).
- ¹⁰ 'When you are writing a TV script, it is like sitting in a taxi; the meter is always running, and everything has to be paid for. You can always see the price turning over everywhere you go.' Malcolm Bradbury, 'The Novelist and Television Drama', elsewhere in this volume.
- ¹¹ David Cheshire and Alan Yentob, ANTHONY POWELL, ARENA, BBC2, 1983.
- ¹² Alan Yentob, DENNIS POTTER, ARENA, BBC2, 1987.
- ¹³ Melvyn Bragg, MARTIN AMIS, THE SOUTH BANK SHOW, Thames TV, 1989.
- ¹⁴ J. Amos, ONLY THE NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED, BBC2, 26th March 1993.
- ¹⁵ Alan Yentob, ARENA, BBC2, 1987.
- ¹⁶ Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1991, p. 11.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

UNWRITABLE FILMS, UNFILMABLE TEXTS?

JAN SIMONS

Literature and the cinema enjoy a very complex and ambiguous relationship. On the one hand, film is said to have learned to speak its 'own language' the day it adopted narrative technique, and this is roughly correct if one means by 'narrative' a certain way of telling a story, rather than the mere fact of the story itself, since obviously, to tell stories the cinema did not have to wait for Griffith's legendary introduction of the close-up and editing patterns that were to become the hallmark of classical cinema. Film is supposed to have learned its language once it moved away from a theatrical way of presenting scenes from a frontal, static and continuous point of view and learned to treat space and time in a dynamic, free-moving, that is, novelistic way. From that day, the cinema has been adapting novels (and has continued to adapt plays) to the screen, not least because of the benefits of borrowing the prestige of well respected literature in its struggle for artistic recognition (a practice later adopted by television for the same ends – see Jon Cook, elsewhere in this volume).

On the other hand, literature learned some of its modern techniques from the cinema: the Jamesian conception of a mimetic and subjective rendering of events, as well as the kaleidoscopic 'montage' typical of Dos Passos, are widely considered as the literary reworking and integration of fundamentally cinematic techniques and devices, which perhaps find their highest and most radical development in the 'nouveau roman' (in particular in the works of the writer and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet). Apparently, there is a simple and mutually beneficial trade-off: literature provides the cinema with stories, and the cinema brings literary stories to a larger audience than they would ever have achieved in print. Furthermore, both parties to this deal have a chance to enlarge and enrich their own stock of narrative devices and techniques.

Unfortunately, however, the relationships between literature and the cinema are less simple and certainly less harmonious than this exemplary model of cultural and artistic free trade would suggest. In the first place, not all literature is thought sufficiently interesting, prestigious and above all famous enough to be brought to the screen by the classical film. A story must first have proven its

commercial marketability (by being a 'bestseller') or its cultural longevity (by being a 'classic') before producers are willing to take the financial risk of making a film of it. Hollywood's literary choices may therefore look somewhat conservative: instead of refreshing the literary canon by filming new, modern novels and stimulating young talented writers, Hollywood has tended rather to prolong a literary tradition that has a strong institutional basis in education and in academic criticism. On the other hand, many less classical or canonical works of popular fiction have been 'adapted' to the screen without getting either the critical 'credits' or the audience being aware of the literary source of the film. Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler and Daphne du Maurier are not the only 'popular' authors that have provided Hollywood with stories or plays, yet hardly anybody would think of films like *REBECCA*, *THE BIG SLEEP* or *THE MALTESE FALCON* as 'adaptations': the perennial debate over the merits, but mostly the disadvantages of adaptation is usually restricted to the fate of the literary classics on the screen.

Literature and theatre generally have not always seemed very grateful for the way that the cinema has taken over their texts. The cinema has been accused of distorting classic works by simplifying them at the level of plot structure and thematic content, as well as style, in order to accommodate the intellectual and aesthetic limitations of a popular audience. The same objections now voiced against the adaptations of literary works for the television screen, as Jon Cook points out in his contribution to this volume, have always dogged the cinema, and it is not only the popular or 'commercial' cinema that stands accused. Although art cinema has been less restrictive in its choice of literary sources than classical Hollywood, and although art cinema can hardly be criticized for wanting to accommodate the intellectual and aesthetic preferences of a mass audience, directors of an established artistic reputation have also been accused of violating works of literature by the mere act of bringing them to the screen.

Apart from sometimes barely disguised religious and moralist objections to any visualization of 'the word' – be it biblical or literary – the gist of the argument against screen adaptation revolves around the so-called 'specificity' of the typical means of expression of each art form, which renders them mutually incompatible. What is often in fact a struggle over hierarchy among the arts just as often is presented as a debate about what Russian formalists would call the 'literaricity' of literature and 'cinematographicity' of film. Since every art form or expressive medium is typically defined by what distinguishes it from other arts or media of expression, it follows that the particular forms of art are not translatable among each other. According to this line of argument, it is not the fact that film is a mass medium that makes it incapable of 'telling' the stories of the great works of literature, but

simply because cinema is cinema and literature is literature; they are not the same thing.

According to this argument, film on the one hand necessarily gives too little. It is not only for commercial reasons that a feature film is committed to a length of roughly 90 minutes to two hours, but also because of limited attention span. Scriptwriters are forced to squeeze the content of novels of sometimes epic length into this relatively brief time slot and therefore have to omit many of those episodes or short scenes that have only minor relevance for the unfolding of the plot (and thus would not be noticed or remembered by the audience anyway), but sometimes carry enormous symbolic and thematic weight. Since its emancipation from theatre, film has tried to avoid being merely a filmed stage and therefore tries to minimize dialogue, even though important information or even important philosophical or thematic reflections on the story (often what the story is 'about') are conveyed by dialogue or monologue. Since the viewer has only a limited memory capacity and only limited access to the story world that unfolds ineluctably before her eyes, a story should focus on the really important characters and events: many side figures and small incidents are sacrificed for the screen. Above all, the time-bound projection of the story on the screen does not allow the spectator to sit back and reflect on what is seen: perceiving and understanding have to take place simultaneously, or so it seems. And since a film not only shows, but also talks, sings, makes music and many other noises, the spectator could concentrate sufficiently to discover hidden or underlying meanings in the film. As Walter Benjamin has said, film does not allow a 'contemplative' attitude in its viewers.

As an audiovisual medium, film could only render scenes and events 'literally' and cannot, as literature or poetry, make use of puns, word games, metaphor, metonymy, irony and other rhetorical figures of speech. Only the kind of popular literature with simple stories and a plain use of language could be adapted without the loss of those literary qualities which it does not depend on, presumably, anyway.

On the other hand, film gives too much. A film cannot evoke characters, locations or events merely by citing one or two specific traits (by metonymy), it cannot avoid a complete specification of what it represents. Film leaves nothing to the imagination of the spectator, and by appealing to the visual and auditory senses, it appeals more to sensuous, physical and emotional reactions than to intellect, reason or the moral. In short, film misses all the subtleties that language and literature are capable of and appeal to the 'lower' rather than the 'higher' faculties of the individual. For all these reasons, any text – with the exception of

popular literature which shares with film its sensuous, transient and primarily emotional gratifications – is principally ‘unfilmable’.

The classic argument against adaptations, according to which the film ‘steals’ the fantasies of the reader by imposing an inescapable visualization, can itself be seen as an attenuation of the opposition between ‘words’ and ‘images’ in a way, since the argument implies that the visualization of a text is an important part of the process of understanding it, just as a process of conceptualization and a certain degree of ‘linguistification’ is an indispensable part of the comprehension of films.¹ One can also argue, theoretically, that a story with its thematic and symbolic layers is not identical to the printed text but in the end is always a result of interpretation and understanding by the reader, and that the same goes for film and television. ‘Meanings’ are never literal because they are never actually present on the page or on the screen. Flaubert does not say in *Madame Bovary* that the river is an image of death, or the moon a symbol for a prostitute, and it is very well possible to read, understand and enjoy the love scene with Emma and Rodolphe without noticing the symbolic and grotesque dimensions. These dimensions are entirely left to the interpretative readiness and capacities of the reader, and just as a description of a landscape in literature can be taken literally or ‘figuratively’, so can a visual rendering of the same landscape, as so many paintings in both classical and modern traditions demonstrate.

In fact, an adaptation is not a translation of a novel, but the filmic interpretation of a story, in very much the same way as Flaubert took the story of an adulterous wife as the basic material for his literary elaboration and interpretation of it. Of course, one can discuss the ‘quality’ of an interpretation, just as one can discuss the dramaturgic and scenic interpretation that a theatre director gives in his staging of a classic tragedy or a modern absurdist play. Chabrol’s *MADAME BOVARY* is not Alexander Sokolov’s treatment of the same story, and neither is Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. Each version gives its own interpretation of (roughly) the same material. (If this were not so, why bother to adapt at all? Why go and see a movie if one hopes or even expects to ‘read a book’ on the screen?)

A filmic copy of a literary work would not only be impossible, but also quite useless: if reproduction were the point of adaptation, then indeed one would do better to read the book. It is a normal and widely accepted cultural practice to go to the theatre or the opera not simply to grasp an often already familiar story, but to see what this or that director or theatre company made of it. Why should this not be allowed in the case of filmic adaptations of already extant and well-known stories such as *Madame Bovary*? There are only better and worse interpretations of a story, just as there are better and worse literary works, theatre plays and

movies. One's appreciation of a novel, a play or a movie will very much depend on one's expectations, shaped by one's knowledge, one's familiarity with the art form in question, one's temporary needs and moods, one's preferences and one's tastes. One can of course justifiably argue against a certain adaptation as inadequate or as ignoring certain aspects that were of importance in the interpretation the literary author gave of the story. But this can never entail a principled objection against all filmic interpretation (or indeed against all realized or possible filmic interpretations of the story of *Emma Bovary*).

Nevertheless, in spite of all the arguments against the traditional objections to cinematographic adaptations of literary works, the whole debate regularly recurs and is always conducted in the same terms (see Jon Cook's paper 'Television and Literature'). The arguments against adaptation appear to be very resistant to counter argument: they would appear to be not open for debate at all. It seems there must be something more at stake than just an open and reasonable discussion about aesthetic qualities, qualities of interpretations, the skill of writers or filmmakers, or whatever grounds for the discussion of novels and films. I suggest that this 'something more' is the will to defend a cultural privilege and status, closely associated with the ability and skills to appreciate certain kinds of art works in certain highly encoded and sophisticated modes of apprehension and understanding. Film and television – often praised for their important role in the education of 'the people' – not only radically democratize the works of 'high art' that were traditionally only accessible to a privileged few, but also bring to bear new – maybe less purely cognitive and 'contemplative' – ways of aesthetically experiencing and comprehending works of art. It is exactly this appeal to the traditionally denounced 'lower' faculties of the human being that promises to renew and enrich a classic, but also quite narrow understanding of the 'aesthetic experience'. It is perhaps exactly the potential for new ways of talking about art and aesthetic experiences that makes the cinema and television suspicious in the eyes of the representatives and spokesmen of the traditional narrative arts.

For some filmmakers poetry can be the starting point for the process of conceptualizing a film. Here, indeed, poetry functions as a 'trigger' for images, conceptions, visualizations, and a play of free association and imagination (rather similar perhaps to the private fantasies elicited by literature or poetry and so precious to the opponents of filmic adaptation). Nevertheless, many filmmakers feel a written text to be a constraint on their imagination and their artistic freedom. Scripts to them are like recipes that only permit obedience to the prescribed, mainly linear and rational unfolding of a story or an argument. Godard once said that the script was invented the moment the producer entered the scene of film

production, and indeed producers, financiers, subsidizers, managers of actors and actresses, potential distributors, TV channels and whoever is financially or otherwise involved in the production of a film demand a script in order to calculate costs, plan, estimate the commercial potential, judge the role of a character, and so on. Once the shooting of the film has started, the filmmaker no longer has the freedom to discard footage if he is not satisfied with the results, or to invent a new twist in the plot as the writer can when he or she is conceiving a novel. A script is often considered first as a means to generate finance for a film project and is experienced subsequently as a heavy constraint: it is the obligation the filmmaker takes upon himself as his part of the contract with the producer and the funding individuals or institutions behind the producer.

The counter-image of this constraint is the quasi-mythic 'free cinema', completely freed from any pressure from 'the word'. But in practice, as a product of an essentially collective effort, film can never remain at the level of private fantasy, since those fantasies have to be communicated in an intersubjectively intelligible way, and in this respect film is principally no different from literature or poetry. Writers and poets also have to find publishers for their product, and writers and poets also have to put down their 'ideas', 'visions' or 'fantasies' in language, which is the most 'intersubjective' and 'social' means of communication available to mankind.

Attractive as this image may be as a counter-practice to most of classical and narrative cinema, it is as mythical as the idea that images can never encompass the subtleties and levels of abstraction that the word permits. Every film has to start from an idea, whether or not this idea is expressed in written form, or whether this idea has originated from reading a story or poem or from some other real or imaginary experience of the filmmaker (or 'designer' as Dutch filmmaker Pim de la Parra conceives his craft). Of course, a film can never be completely reduced to its written script (why else should one take all the trouble and expense of shooting and editing it), yet it would be a mistake to think that 'pure film' can do without any conceptualization, or that a film could be 'conceived' independent of language (just as it is a mistake to think that all visual experiences can be 'translated' into language: the difference between a duck and a goose can only be conceived imagistically). Images without conceptual or 'schematic' consequence of one sort or another would be without any meaning and quite 'literally' would say nothing. This was of course the point of Eisenstein's theory of 'intellectual montage'. It was also the basis of Freud's interpretation of dreams and, in a sophisticated and playful way, the theme of painters like Magritte. And if, as is commonly asserted, film itself is 'like a language' in that it is to a large degree 'coded' – even if one

wants to break away from 'codes' as avantgarde filmmakers do – then why not admit the major role that natural language plays in any conception of any sort, including pictures? Why try to keep 'cinema' isolated in a domain of the purely visual, when film is in fact a promiscuous mélange of all sorts of 'languages', and when film and television could help us to understand the relationship between 'word' and 'image' in radically new and refreshing ways? Why deny ourselves this creative extension of our cognitive and imagistic resources?

Note

Russian formalists like Boris Eichenbaum and filmmakers like Eisenstein pointed to the role of 'inner speech' in the understanding of a film. Nowadays cognitivism claims that there is a central level of 'conceptual structure', where information from diverse faculties such as the visual, the auditory and linguistic come together and can be exchanged between those faculties: otherwise it would be unexplainable why we can talk about what we see, and make 'visualizations' out of words read or heard. See E. Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, London: Routledge, 1992, and R. Jackendoff, *Consciousness and the Computational Mind*, Bradford: MIT Press, 1989.

PART 3

SCIENCE ON TELEVISION

INTRODUCTION

JAN SIMONS

Television is a medium where science and popular imagination meet. Television itself is a product of advanced technology that addresses its electronically produced images and sounds to a mass audience. It is a paradigm example of how science and technology have radically changed both the private and public sectors of social and cultural life. Television has drastically transformed family life, social habits, leisure time, consumer practices and many other ways of social behaviour. It has transported public forms of entertainment from the theatre, the cinema and the sports fields into private homes, and it has become for most people the major source of information about and means of access to the world they live in. Television sets the public agenda not only by proposing the topics one talks about, but also by quite literally programming the schedules of its audiences (as Thomas Elsaesser points out). Television largely shapes the ways in which the world is perceived, imagined and talked about. Television thus largely forms the popular imagination by feeding it with images (and sounds) which it has produced and distributed by a highly developed technology. It has become our electronic sense organ on the world.

Like the normal human eye that sees without seeing itself seeing, television as an electronic eye does not show itself 'seeing'. That is, television rarely shows 'how' and by which means its images and sounds are produced, but mostly presents its images as a result of a direct, immediate, 'live' visioning of the real, instead of a complicated, mediated and technological process. Television gives us, in a way, the twentieth century version of Plato's cave, where the reflections of reality were taken for the real itself, because the inhabitants of the cave were unaware of the way by which the representations of reality were produced. Of course, the television spectator is well enough educated to know that technology does play a decisive role in the making of television. The trouble is not only that most spectators do not exactly know where technology comes in and what role it plays, but maybe more fundamentally that in television – as in the audiovisual media in general – the measure of technological success is exactly how direct and immediate an access it can give to the reality it represents. The more successful television technology is, the more it seems to abolish the difference between

representation and reality. And in this sense, television is really a paradigm example of how science and technology have transformed and are endlessly going on to transform the social, cultural and political environment into what Jean Baudrillard calls a generalized 'simulacrum'. This 'postmodern condition' either inspires a general indifference or – but maybe this is just the other side of the same coin – causes a certain discomfort about the kind of reality we live in and the reliability of the images television provides us with.

Part of the rather surprisingly great interest television has for science – as pointed out by Jaap Willems in his comparison of four European countries – may be explained by the wish to take away this discomfort by self-reflexively disclosing the methods, procedures and measures and results of scientific and technological research. After all, science is supposed to test its theories and hypotheses, its 'images of the real' against the very real itself. Scientific method and technological success seem to guarantee a correspondence between the 'imaginary' and the 'real'. However, even if such a strategy were to help demystify the working of television, it would certainly be at the cost of mystifying science, since matters such as 'truth' and 'correspondence with the real' are no longer part and parcel of the scientific and philosophical discourse, where concepts are just 'tools', and the validity of theories and hypotheses are measured by their practical results or their usefulness in thinking and talking about problems. 'Real science' has very little to do with the popular imagination of scientific work and technological research. So when it comes to science on television, television seems to be trapped in an unresolvable paradox: it can only give a remedy against a general cultural discomfort about the way technology shapes life, society and culture by mystifying the very sources of this discomfort that it wants to demystify. And this is not the only paradox in which 'science on television' is caught: in the postmodern condition, television is not only a major source of indifference but at the same time the major form of escape from this indifference because television is for most people the major source of entertainment, through drama, games and quiz-shows, sports, rock-videos and so forth. Television is closely associated with leisure, while science on the other hand is associated with the efforts of learning and teaching, for most people typically activities to which they were or still are 'forced' by parents, school and university. Several strategies can be and actually are used to overcome this difficulty.

First of all, the topics of 'science on television' mostly are chosen with an eye to the most immediate and urgent concerns of the audience: health, environment and the applications of science that are or can become part of the everyday reality of the spectator. It certainly is a sign of the times that the once popular topic of the future expansion of human control over space by spectacular technol-

ogical developments now has changed places with a more pessimistic and critical concern of the negative consequences those same technological developments have or may have for our natural and our immediate environment. Also in this realm, the celebration of scientific progress and technological promises of a better future have made way for a more dystopic questioning of the potentially negative natural, social and ethical effects of science, and certainly this critical approach has done a lot to demystify the image of the scientist as the infallible guide to a promising future. Moreover, this shift also brought science on television more in line with the hopes and concerns, fears and desires, in short, the 'imagination' of the television audience.

A second strategy adopted to overcome indifference or gain the interest of a skeptical audience is to borrow formats from popular television forms to present science on television. Of course there is always the appeal of the spectacular and the sensational, so favoured by commercial television stations who prefer 'dinosaurs for all seasons' above programmes about a more complicated reality, as Jana Bennett puts it. Narrative seems to be a format that is particularly appropriate to convey information that goes beyond the spectacular. As Graham Creelman says, the programme maker becomes more of a dramaturge that creates the 'feather-bed' in which the information about nature and wildlife falls particularly well. Here the results of scientific research are 'plotted' into a story about animals, plants or whatever. This strategy dramatizes and inevitably also anthropomorphizes in itself non-dramatic and non-narrative events and processes in order to bring the world of wildlife and nature closer to the common experience and the world of interest of the spectator, and particularly closer to the reasons why television itself is of interest to this spectator. Paradoxically, a form that comes close to the fairy tale is used to inform about scientific topics, and science itself becomes a kind of tale teller, while the 'wonderful' world that is told about has more in common with the universe of a folk tale than a scientific lab. Most of the time, however, those programmes serve other rhetorical ends than just to convey scientific information. They rather want to engage the spectator in the struggle for the preservation of nature or an extinguishing species. Narrative can also be used as a format to tell about scientific research, its setbacks and its discoveries in the form of a 'bio-pic' on 'great scientists' or simply about a specific research project. Here science becomes a kind of adventure with the hero-scientist as its protagonist. This format tends to support the myth of the great scientist who, even when the programme intends to be a critical reflection upon the effects of technology, is ascribed the role of the down-to-earth, rational scientist that puts an end to the reign of evil in the traditional horror story (very often by winning the crowds with an appeal to common

sense to get rid of fatal superstitions). But of course, the popular, narrative and non-narrative formats (talk-shows, interviews, news items, and so on) can also revive the mythical image of the mad scientist, trying to artificially outdo God's creation, as can be seen in programmes about DNA manipulation, atomic research and the like. The critical deconstruction of the myth of the scientific hero of human progress can easily reanimate that opposite myth of the mad scientist as a fundamental threat for mankind. Whatever strategy or format is employed to bridge the gap between scientific practice and popular imagination, it always seems to be the latter that sets the rules of the game and the terms of the text. Especially in the case of 'science on television', television does not really seem to be able to escape its function of shaping and furnishing the popular imagination without ever coming to a reality behind the image. It is exactly this impossibility to break out of the limits of popular imagination that is sometimes exploited by scientists who heroically and triumphantly present spectacular 'break-throughs' specifically in medical research, in the hope of gaining personal fame and institutional finance, as Aart Gisolf makes clear. The ignorance of the non-specialist, in combination with pre-existing common sense schemas of the heroic researcher always struggling with the evils of nature and of course television's predilection for the drama and narrative of competition, is here manipulated for less scientific, private or institutional ends. Here, the scientists themselves become the masters of ceremony in Plato's cave.

But what would actually be 'science on television'? The gap between common sense understanding and the highly specialized scientific ways of understanding, conceiving and reasoning seems already far too broad to even hope that it might be bridged by television programmes on science (this is rather the specialized field of institutions like school and university). On the other hand, science and technology are too important to be left entirely in the hands of a scientific, academic élite, already far too used to its status apart 'above society, or at least outside politics' (Elsaesser). Scientific research and its technological applications do after all have real and really important political, social, cultural and ethic effects. Rather than presenting scientists, their research and their results, a possible way to get out of Plato's cave might be to employ journalistic research strategies that very often function so well in the realm of politics, to explore the world of science itself and to make scientists themselves a remarkable rare species. To show how they work, how much of scientific research is a matter of intuition, sheer luck or irrational persistence rather than a rational and logical procedure of establishing theories, deriving hypotheses and empirically testing. Knowing how the world of science is also a world of sharp competition not only for getting the best results, but also for

obtaining publicity, fame and money would probably really contribute to the demystification of science without, however, falling into the ideological trap of the image of the scientist as a ruthless Frankenstein. As an institutional world, that is, science is not that different from other institutional worlds that make up society and are part of everyday experience. It would bring the image of science in line with the images of other social and cultural practices, all open to questioning, wondering and above all, debate. And exploring, questioning and discussing of all possible worlds is exactly what television seems to be made for.

GEE-WIZARDS OF THE BOX?

THOMAS ELSAESSER

Science on television: it may not be a perennial favourite of talk-shows like 'sex, death and violence', but the fact that in the discussions about television relatively little is heard of science and scientists should not deceive us: it is a topic in need of some attention. The general neglect underscores the contention I want to put forward, namely that media representation of science and scientists, but also the scientific community's attitude to television, is as good a barometer as any of television's changing function in the world of 'neo-TV'.¹ In this sense, the section on 'science on TV' rightly joins that of 'quality television' and 'literature on television' as a significant instance of what this volume tries to explore, namely the shifting hierarchies between print culture and audiovisual culture.

At one time, the place that scientific knowledge occupied on television was a minor but elevated one, with programmes reporting about biology, chemistry and physics either non-existent or tucked safely into schedule-ghettos. By and large reserved for open university slots, science when it spoke did so, however, with singular authority. Scientists explained the world to us, leaving little room for doubt. If natural history (especially in the form of wildlife programmes) and astronomy occasionally inched their way towards the edges of prime time, it was often thanks to charismatic presenter-personalities, like Patrick Moore (*THE SKY AT NIGHT*), Magnus Pike and David Bellamy. Especially in the wake of C.P. Snow's famous 'two culture' argument, the mission to explain the scientific view of things through television was regarded as one of the moral duties but also daunting challenges of a public service broadcaster like the BBC. Nowhere could this concept of 'science is for everyone' be better studied than in the ambitious, twelve-part series, *THE ASCENT OF MAN*, presented by the respected historian and mathematician J. Bronowski who, according to the blurb of one of his books 'is as well-known as C.P. Snow as an integrator of science and the humanities'.² The programmes strikingly documented that 'Man' had ascended to an imposing height, from which the learned Dr. Bronowski could turn round and address all viewers, those still climbing as well as those who barely managed to hang on to a pass in ordinary-level science.

The relative rarity of such large-scale projects thrust into relief the subordinate but secure TV-niche occupied by the hard sciences. Faithfully reflecting

scientists position at the very apex of social prestige, programmes left their views uncontested because science subjects were, for the most part, territory that television merely visited from time to time, and therefore approached with the kind of politeness reserved for guests with whom one could not quite feel at home. Within the wider framework here sketched, in which the relative cultural status of 'books' and 'the box',³ of high culture and the popular are also at issue, this has meant that science has in the past registered on the spectrum very much to the side of high culture.

This is worth signalling if only in passing, when we think of C.P. Snow again, for whom not only the ominous gap between the arts and the sciences had threatened to become unbridgeable, but who suspected scholars in the humanities to be so ignorant of developments in scientific thinking and method that they seriously undervalued the contribution made by science to culture as a whole.⁴ Here, then, could lie a task for television, and its use of figure-heads like Bronowski, who saw

all history, certainly all intellectual history, as a unity, with religion influencing government, science affecting religion, technology shaping society, philosophy changing the arts, and each playing on all the others in a complex and evolving pattern in which the mind of man has been supreme.⁵

But such a task of mediation is often a thankless one, and science on TV is, almost inevitably, caught in a dilemma of trying to satisfy not only two masters – science and common sense⁶ – while pleasing neither, but also to have to mediate within television, between the obligation to inform (a journalistic task) and to educate (a pedagogic role).

If one believes that at the root of the changes currently transforming television lies the fact that the balance of public service TV is increasingly tipping towards TV run on commercial lines, then one could expect the coverage of science to be a prominent casualty. If a government-regulated, state-controlled television charged with a certain social responsibility inevitably associates science programming with its more onerous duty of educating the viewers, then its antagonist, a profit-oriented and ratings-driven, more or less efficient 'delivery vehicle' for bringing audiences to advertisers might be forgiven for shying away from this, the public service remit's most pedagogic side. Yet, speaking of British television, this does not seem to be the case. While deregulation, decentralization and competitive bidding have shaken broadcasting institutions, jeopardizing

prestige programming such as television drama, while it seems that science-related programmes are flourishing. The BBC, traditionally strong in this area, has with TOMORROW'S WORLD and HORIZON two very different but equally well-established programmes, flanked by extensive wildlife and nature programmes (David Attenborough's LIFE TRILOGY for instance) not to mention special three- or six-part series about genetics, language acquisition, artificial intelligence, astronomy or the history of mental illness. Similarly, the ITV networks and Channel 4 have also nurtured prestigious and engrossing series: from SURVIVAL and EQUINOX to DISAPPEARING WORLDS and Tim Hunkin's eccentric and highly original SECRET LIFE OF DOMESTIC APPLIANCES. Outside Britain's terrestrial networks, in the world of cable and satellite TV, Super Channel puts out BEYOND TOMORROW, and there is the Discovery Channel, entirely devoted to documentaries, many of which touch on science topics. Generally speaking, programmes try to combine a high information content with an equally high entertainment value, and not always at the expense of educating the viewer into awareness and even a conscience (HORIZON and EQUINOX in particular have produced some highly critical science programmes).

The reasons for this relative abundance of TV science programmes are no doubt several, and even in themselves contradictory. A quantitative account is difficult to give, evidently depending much on how broadly one frames the idea of science. Is it just the natural sciences, or does one count the social sciences, does one include technology, and if so, do we distinguish between pure research, its domestic applications, and its social implications? How do the broadcasting institutions cut up the cake and assign editorial responsibility? At Germany's WDR, for instance, the science programming section consists of 'medicine/social sciences', 'natural sciences/technology', 'psychology/pedagogy', 'history/contemporary life'. This tends to reproduce the academic boundaries and contrasts with the BBC, where individual programme heads or series editors make their own decisions as to what kinds of science fall within their brief.

Such differences highlight the more fundamental distinction between how television sees science, and how scientists see television, which I want to explore and which, to my mind, puts in question the whole concept of mediation. If we return once more to the 'two-culture' debate, it becomes clear that, from a slightly different perspective than Snow's, his argument addressed not a split, but an alliance: namely that of the educated élite. The ignorance of scientific knowledge and culture he criticized only touched university dons, political decision-makers and members of the literary establishment. On the whole, all of them men and belonging to the same socially homogeneous, highly privileged group of people as the scientists, researchers, Royal Society members and fellows from

whom they were said to be so deeply divided. It left out of the equation the veritable chasm that separated the vast majority from either of the two cultures, while paying little attention to what, during the same period, began to be recognized as another (definition of) culture altogether: one that included the popular arts, mass entertainment, people's social and leisure activities. In short, it took Raymond Williams' intervention, before the debate between C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis could actually be appraised in its historical as opposed to polemical dimension.

In this re-appraisal of what is meant by culture in the first place, television played a crucial role. To begin with, by its very nature television addressed itself precisely to the constituency whose claim to culture, but also to possession of a culture of its own, Williams had so vigorously argued. It suggests that the concept of culture present on television had to be considerably broadened. As it happens, the public service/commercial broadcasting duopoly in Britain did achieve precisely that. In the case of literature, as we saw above, many writers did take up the challenge offered by television to divide their time and talents, doing original scripts, working on adaptations and writing for the print media, and in the process, they redefined the way they saw themselves and viewers saw the nation's literary culture.

But what about science? Did television bring the other of Snow's two cultures into contact with the third one, popular culture? The answer is not straightforward, since one needs to understand how television functions as a filter, a membrane, a screen. It is a kind of passage way, or platform where different groups seek, if not physical access, then representation, in both the political sense (someone standing in for someone else) and the mimetic sense of 'images' or 'discourses' of themselves. In this last respect, television has over the last 20 years culturally come of age. As an institution, but also as a 'world', it exists on its own terms and speaks, at least on some occasions and maybe even most of the time, always also about itself. From such a speaking position, it redefines whatever subject, topic or interest it takes up. Here, we need not be detained by whether the speaking position is the pretension to a journalistic mission or on the contrary, a relentlessly 'domestic' or 'family' outlook on things; whether it is the fact that for television, everything connects with everything else, even though such connections may not make any sense (the argument of 'flow' and 'segment'), or whether, in Umberto Eco's definition, television's speaking position is: 'I am here and I am you'.⁷ Suffice it to say that in a very tangible way, it is difficult to discuss a nation's culture or cultures without discussing its television culture, and one may even need

to think of television culture as not just one culture alongside others, such as a country's literary or scientific culture, but as the culture which sets the terms for other cultures to redefine themselves.

In the case of science on TV, the changes probably mean that some of the top-down, pedagogic ways of speaking are no longer acceptable 'television', which suggests that the temptation to discriminate between 'serious' and 'popular' science programmes needs to be resisted. The question of a programme's value cannot be answered except by asking: value for whom and in what respect?

More specifically, the role television has assumed in becoming everyone's common culture (and perhaps even the only common culture mankind has ever known) has also affected the public status of science, most notably insofar as television brings to science a quite different agenda from that of science itself. Not surprisingly, this agenda includes popular notions, anxieties or prejudices about science, as well as a pragmatic choice about the aspects of science that might appeal to viewers' self-interest, their fears and fantasies. Science programmes therefore prefer to astound viewers with some of the miracles science can accomplish, from pills that take the wrinkles out of old skin, to gadgets invented to make gardening more fun, or smart machines that let you order merchandise merely by drawing the item on an electronic sketchpad. But science programmes on TV also know that we hated science and maths at school, that we probably felt bored by demonstrations, frustrated by diagrams, and humiliated by men in white lab coats. In other words, rare is the science programme that does not seem to acknowledge it is talking to non-scientists, presumably on the not unwarranted assumption that specialists read about their field in learned papers or monographs.

Pragmatic considerations also explain why the majority of science programming deals with three kinds of disciplines: medicine, because we are all interested and have a stake in staying alive; wildlife, because animals are such allegorical creatures, so much like us and so unlike us. Even without anthropomorphism and disneyfication, wildlife is about the struggle for survival, fighting over food and mates, about nurturing and killing, in short, the eternal verities of birth, sex and death, and therefore not unlike the points of interest found in the third category of science programmes that score well, natural history programmes, attracting viewers because we like to know about our planet, where we came from, where we are going and why we are on earth at all. If science thus seems to touch the metaphysical, the format is strictly narrative: programmes take the viewer on an adventure trip, on a journey of 'discovery' (a whole channel now caters for this 'let me take you by the hand' view of science). While the more modest offerings are narrated by a well-trained and occasionally well-known voice-over, one can tell

the expensive programme by the fact that a 'real' scientist is the viewers' guide, taking us to locations that turn out to be sites of secrets and authenticity, and before our eyes, the scientist turns detective, pursuing a trail, interpreting clues, finding strange coincidences, and unravelling one conundrum, only to leave us with a deeper mystery to ponder.

Confined to such roles, scientists can hardly be blamed for not recognizing either themselves or their subjects. And it would seem that for the most part, the science community has regarded television with some suspicion, being a medium that cannot always be trusted to put their case either accurately or fairly, given the pressure to go for a *story*, to look for action, for results, to need a 'breakthrough' or spectacular discoveries as a hook. Such an outlook militates against the very processes of scientific investigation, which are slow, painstaking, involving false leads and frustrations, requiring patience and perseverance, and therefore operating within a time frame quite opposed to that of television. The worry for scientists about science programmes must be: how irrecoverable is the loss in terms of precision or cogency when compared to the 'primary' discourses or delivery systems of their work, such as science publications, congresses, textbooks, and is this offset by the gain in accessibility and audiences? Is popularization a desirable goal at all? And what goal? A general knowledge of certain sciences, or only about a particular field's most advanced – i.e. speculative and spectacular – developments?

As with literary adaptations, the answers from the point of view of the scientist are likely to be negative. Most scientists fight shy of the media, distrusting the broadcasters' motives but also their ability to render complex, and often abstract relations in visual, graphic or verbal form. Where science on TV is not squeezed into impossibly short 'news' items, it is, for the sake of comprehensibility, simplified to the point of travesty or glamorized out of recognition, fostering exaggerated expectations or trading on irrational fears. Furthermore, the nature of most scientific endeavour is such that its very efficacy relies on a specialist vocabulary and even on a way of thinking which is not only alien to most people, but being counter-intuitive, will seem perverse, élitist, arrogant.

A collision course would appear to be pre-programmed. While scientists might like more knowledgeable and sympathetic interviewers who let them speak and explain themselves, instead of giving them mere soundbites over some visuals that may be pretty but can also be pretty irrelevant, the broadcasters, for their

part, might wish if not for more down-to-earth scientists, then at least for more telegenic ones, or they might wish for more money to make programmes that include location shooting, that invest in the time it takes to follow a story, or for real filmmakers to take on the task of breathing life into jargon and abstractions.

Two kinds of agenda seem to be involved, and, at first glance, they have little in common. On the side of the sciences (for the sake of brevity, included in this are the natural sciences as well as medicine), the fact that the gap between common sense understanding and the highly technical and specialized research of the various disciplines is ever-widening makes it seem increasingly futile to try and convey an even halfway accurate picture of the work done in labs or research institutes. On the side of television, this very same gap makes it important that audiences not only know what goes on behind closed doors and under the cover of scientific exclusivity, but that there is some general accountability: after all, most scientists rely on taxpayers' funds for their work, and those paid by corporation or special interest groups are if anything more worryingly unaccountable.

In practice, this accountability is both present and disguised on television. Thus, on the news, science appears in one of two guises: either as a story of breakthroughs and discoveries, usually in the field of medicine; or on the occasion of potential or actual disasters. The two instances are deeply contradictory. In the first case, the grand narrative of infinite progress is triumphantly reaffirmed, as test tube babies, genetic fingerprinting and new drugs bring happiness to childless couples, help solve crimes and settle alimony suits, or cure hitherto incurable diseases. In the second case, nuclear accidents like Chernobyl, epidemics like AIDS and Mad Cow Syndrome, or public health hazards like *Salmonella*, *Listeria* and Legionnaire's disease require explanations and experts. Usually, the broadcasters, often on behalf of the State, will bring on the scientists in order to justify policy decisions, to which the endorsement by scientists adds weight and credibility. However, almost as often, scientists on news bulletins have a more overtly ideological function, being called in when, as a consequence of some policy or lack of it, an 'accident' has occurred, where they, and their readiness to disagree among themselves, are used as an alibi in an exercise of damage limitation. The civilities of professional debate become the trappings for the mise en scène of a stalemate, seemingly demonstrating that if even scientists can't agree, how should a government minister – seeking their advice – do better? Television broadcasters often enough collude with these strategies: the prestige of science is thus a double-edged sword, at once lending authority and lending itself to having its authority neutralized. In neither case, however, is the scientific status an apolitical one. On the contrary, the prestige of science is itself its most outstanding political feature.

While scientists may traditionally have seen themselves as a social group only insofar as they are accorded a status above society, or at least outside politics, the 'politics of representation' have cast scientists in very different roles, somewhat stripping them of their much-vaunted objectivity. No longer is it possible to rely on the fine distinction they have often drawn between their disinterested pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, enlarging the frontiers of mankind, and the military or economic uses which politicians and others make of these enlarged frontiers. Such assertions have come under some scrutiny in the wake of the atom bomb, napalm or 'agent orange' in Vietnam. To put it even more sharply: perhaps it is because science is both feared and admired, because so many hopes are pinned on its 'advances' for securing prosperity and progress, in fact for ensuring the very survival of mankind, that it can indeed claim a legitimate place on television, but it is likely to be one where scientists have to be prepared to be accountable, just like politicians, which is itself a measure of the importance that science has assumed in society.

In one sense, this accountability has been called in, as it were, before it was ever granted or even on the agenda. The popular imagination and mass-culture have always preferred to depict scientists as mad and dangerous: sign of a credibility gap and a deep-seated ambiguity, which the century and a half since Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* has done little to resolve. In vain, scientists may claim to be victims of negative stereotyping; objects of fascination and fear, their demonization and derision continue unabated:

Deep in his rank basement, cut off from humanity at large, the Bainboro College entomologist playing with his nervous insects had enough eccentricity for greatness. But even he himself did not suspect this until the following day when the roaches [he had bred] still raged through the cities, burning towns and woods at an even more desperate rate.⁸

Needless to say, these vindictive caricatures of scientists in popular novels – hyper-intellectual and power-crazy, sexless and anti-social – are unlikely to turn up on television, except in reruns of 1950s science fiction B-pictures. And yet, given the receptivity for such stereotyping, the kid glove treatment scientists tend to get on television is surprising. Few and far between are the programmes, for instance, that probe the ethics of either individual scientists or a particular group beyond historical cases such as Oppenheimer's protest about nuclear physicists' collaboration on the atom bomb, or the behaviour of Nazi scientists (Tom Bower's *OPERATION PAPERCLIP*, or *HORIZON'S HITLER'S BOMB*). Dissenting scientists like Richard Feynberg or Josef

Waizenbaum appear, but as idiosyncratic individuals. Even with issues about which the public has strong views, such as experiments on animals, it is usually the violent tactics of animal rights activists that make the news rather than the issues themselves. Much of the science on TV – from the BBC's TOMORROW'S WORLD to Super Channel's BEYOND TOMORROW (the names are a programme all by themselves) – is hagiography: wide-eyed, geewhiz wonder.

TOMORROW'S WORLD connives in the myth of expertise and knowledge. It asks us to stand in awe at what scientists pull out of their top hats. It invites us to defer to a figure whose status and power (founded upon knowledge) is inverse to that of the viewer (founded upon ignorance). Significantly, however, the figure of the scientist is physically absent from the programme. Perhaps it is felt that his or her mandarin language will alienate the average peak-time viewer. Or perhaps it is assumed that he or she will be lacking in charisma. (...) The achievement of this powerful myth – of scientism – is to effectively depoliticise, dehistoricise and desocialise our understanding of science and technology.⁹

Against this mystification of science, one might cite the BBC's other science programme, HORIZON, which has done some major investigative journalism on science topics and scientists: about the unseemly fights over who should get credit for identifying HIV (with the suggestion that personal and professional rivalry might be one of the major reasons for the progress of AIDS treatment being so disappointingly slow). Other programmes that have tried to lift the almost conspiratorial veil over much that goes on in research institutes concerned the blatant disinformation and deception practiced by scientists involved in the Reagan 'Star Wars' initiative or some (predictably) horrific images about how meat production (chicken, pork, beef) has reached almost unimaginably cruel forms of productivity increases (FAST LIFE IN THE FOOD CHAIN). HORIZON, while clearly working to established formulas, has an honorable track-record of balancing upbeat programmes which show the world's scientists working in peaceful harmony for the greater good of all mankind (SIGNS OF LIFE, CARBON C60, THE NEW ALCHEMISTS) with more skeptical, critical and reflective pieces (INSIDE THE CHERNOBYL SARCOPHAGUS, EXPENSIVE THEOLOGY).

HORIZON depends on the co-operation of scientists, and it is probably no accident that it features a far greater number of American scientists than those from any other country. This reflects not only the fact that American scientists are more publicity-adept, but also that collectively, the American science community must have become convinced that in the battle for representation, there may be

something to lose but also much to gain: after all, even controversial programmes enhance the status of science by stimulating interest. A public service broadcaster such as the BBC, on the other hand, fully aware of the role science plays in the economic fate of the country, seems to accept the risk that scientists may not be the best advocates of their case, or that most science is too complicated and technical a subject to make good television. Undeterred, HORIZON believes that the gravity of some of the issues behind the issues does make it imperative that they should be represented on television, even if this means restaging scenes or resorting to some hoary dramaturgical devices, like telephones ringing in empty offices or chance encounters at airport check-ins. What is almost entirely absent, however, even from HORIZON programmes, is a sense of the extraordinary high economic stakes which massively influence research decisions and research directions. While clarity on this score might, at first sight, tarnish the image of scientists' disinterestedness, it would in the end give a more realistic idea of the pressures under which they work and the priorities that inform their judgements.

Juxtaposing 'investigative' journalism to gee-whiz celebration and identifying one with 'serious' and the other with 'popular' science programming would, however, be itself a form of mystification. For one thing, the distinction underestimates the kinds of composite interest groups a television science programme has to negotiate: prime-time audiences on BBC1 for TOMORROW'S WORLD, which tries to pack into its variety menu a solid portion of serious consumer advice, and HORIZON on BBC2, teasing the viewer with a well-told detective yarn and not averse to creating suspense or dramatic irony when it helps to make a point. Moreover, the distinction 'serious' vs 'popular' also perpetuates a notion of integration which was already problematic when used by J. Bronowski or C.P. Snow.

 Servicing these Olympian figures (the scientists) is another kind of expert, the more worldly television presenter, the mediator of knowledge (...) who translates the hieroglyphics of science into colloquial language.¹⁰

The criticism the authors here level against TOMORROW'S WORLD is that the programme conducts a public relations exercise on behalf of 'the scientific, technological and industrial establishment'. Yet, quite generally, such efforts at mediation, whether the result of a conspiracy by multinational capitalism or not, point up one of the

endemic weaknesses of the public service remit in its traditional form, of which TOMORROW'S WORLD is almost as guilty as of mystifying science: its 'pedocratic' rather than democratic understanding of its audiences.

Assuming that television is indeed developing a distinctive culture of its own, audiences will gather not around the difference between popular and serious programmes, but around notions of the social and the variety of viewing communities it can create.¹¹ Such a television culture may itself be an ideological construct, bearing little relation to historically evolved social groups or communities, defined by class, race, or religion. Yet its merit would be that it breaks down the division between high culture and popular culture as much as the distinction between a humanist and a scientific culture. For unless one actually believes in pedocratic television, divides are not what television is about. Its 'politics of representation' are based on speaking on behalf of a consensus and thus speaking the voice of complicity: precisely, the public service broadcaster's famous commitment to diversity. No more mediation, any more than the hierarchy it implied, where certain interests, activities, types of knowledge or skill were seen as inherently superior to others.

Once one accepts the notion of television as a major arena for the, admittedly, often very unevenly weighted struggle for representation, then the place of specialist knowledge such as science would be decided by forces other than the mission to instruct: who needs what to be present and who wants (to pay for) it, which is to say, whether the need (of scientists) to be seen and heard on the box matches the public's desire to see and hear (about) them. For programme makers, the task would not be to reconcile the public service remit to 'inform' or 'investigate' with the commercial imperative to 'entertain', nor worry whether science would be compromised if it found itself in programmes disparagingly known as 'infotainment'.

Rather, this proposition needs to be turned around and the case be argued that television science means it is television first and science second: 'infotainment' becomes simply the generic term for much of television programming, less any abusive connotations. The changes taking place in broadcasting, in this view, are the consequence not so much of conspiracies or financial greed, but part of more general mutations of the body politic. In what could be called the post-parliamentary phase of Western democracy, where lobby pressure and vested interest groups increasingly influence decision making, a new social bond or social contract may be in the process of forging itself, not least through journalists and the press – the fourth estate – between consumer culture and representational democracy. In such a case, television becomes an even more important

political forum, an electronic public sphere, dominated by representation and the image.

The politics of representation, in turn, can yield criteria or reference points by which to analyse television programmes including those on science – criteria which instead of erecting a dichotomy between the ‘serious’ and ‘popular’ differentiate, for instance, according to: the modes of argumentation or of narrative structure;¹² the role given to the image as opposed to the voice-over in illuminating complex processes (some of the most celebratory of HORIZON programmes score highly on this count, such as *THE NEW ALCHEMISTS*); the foregrounding of a human interest beyond sentimentality or pity (witness the HORIZON programme dealing with a group of addicts whose ‘designer crack’ inadvertently led to a new insight into Alzheimer’s disease); the enabling or empowering effect of a programme (a major concern in Tim Hunkin’s Channel 4 series devoted to demystifying the technology of ordinary household appliances by a kind of dada bricolage or ‘garden-shed boffin’ irreverence); and finally, the way programmes engage with the public’s general ambivalence, discussed above, who regards science with a mixture of awe and distrust, expectation and anxiety, investigative skepticism and consumer self-interest.

Medicine is a particularly good example of how such ambivalence can manifest itself. On the one hand, there is the public good or society’s duty to inform (on matters of public safety and preventive health care) and on the other, the viewers’ personal interests (fitness, food, legal and illegal drugs). But as the debates around AIDS and the media have shown, programmes dealing with complex feelings have to negotiate a consensus, which comes down to questions of representation: is it right to shock people into awareness with sensationalist advertising campaigns, or should information be targeted at those groups most at risk while not discriminating against them? Should television intervene in order to calm fears, by minimizing the threat of AIDS to the population at large, or should programmes point out the economic factors responsible for the spread of HIV among the population at the lower end of the social hierarchy and in the third world?

Faced with this dilemma, science programming has invariably resorted to a pragmatic view of audiences: knowing and anticipating what impels the viewer to watch and more specifically, what in the case of science might be his/her self-interest. On the other hand, other constraints may shape a viewer’s interest. Gerard Leblanc,¹³ for instance, has argued that it is illusory to discuss different kinds of spectatorship without seeing them rooted first of all in people’s place of work. In particular, he is skeptical about the notion of learning by playing when it comes to television science. Pointing out that playing is understood by most

people as a form of leisure or escape and thus stands in a structural opposition to acquiring skills, knowledge and practices which might be rewarded by pay-rises or promotion, Leblanc differentiates between the 'instructional' mode of television science (e.g. Open University type programming) and programmes 'advertising' science, among which he includes not only programmes that celebrate the achievements of scientists and the wonders of technology, but also all programmes constructed as narratives, whether of the adventure or the detective genre. The unresolved contradiction of television science, according to him, is that in the instruction context, science is the upbeat story of industrial progress and personal achievement in which the viewer-trainee is assigned a part, whereas in the advertising context, the marks of industry and commerce, of wage scales and skills discrimination have to be entirely effaced in order to give the viewer the imaginary mastery that constitutes entertainment. Often, moreover, the two discourses are addressed to the same individual in two different roles of his/her life. Leblanc, redefining the 'two-cultures' gap in terms of the work/leisure divide, argues that science programming must anchor the social existence of science in its industrial and production context, the only context that can promote an understanding for what might one day be a science culture. Any other television science – however high-minded, critical or investigative – is simply consumed by the viewer as fiction, the soap opera of science as infinite progress or permanent disaster.

But does a shift from science as argument to science as narrative always have to have this connotation? Several distinct issues are involved: firstly, while it may be difficult for scientists to be good scientists *and* media-genic, it does not follow that only the worst scientists make good presenters on television. Secondly, if there is a danger of scientists using the media in order to justify their need for ever-increasing amounts of public money, argumentative and narrative structures are equally vulnerable to manipulate. By contrast, what might best serve the public interest is television's own ideology, with its investment in story and narrative, with its insistence on the human angle: it may help to demystify the notion of scientific objectivity, even as it panders to the myth of science as progress.

The third point is more fundamental. If one is serious about a science culture and regards television as a valid means by which to bring it about, one would be ill-advised to start from a preconceived agenda, however high-minded or politically progressive it might be. Instead of expecting television to be its delivery vehicle, the agenda in question is rather what is the hard core, so to speak, around which the self-interest of viewers and the interest of television can converge when the subject is science? To return to an observation made above: because we instinctively fear the power of science, are awed by its almost supernatural capacities

to work miracles, because we distrust scientists, suspecting them to be playing God, while envying them for having such a clear purpose in life, science and scientists are, from whatever side we look at it, an emotional issue. Emotion, on the other hand, is what television is good at, and thus science as an emotional issue cuts both ways. Aware of the gap between our dependence on science and our inability to understand or wisely use the technologies it puts at our command, we are likely to bring to science programmes the same web of anxiety and troubled concern, fairy-tale credulity and dumb-struck disbelief we normally experience when television is after us, that is, after ratings and audiences, and therefore making emotional television. The push and pull of emotional ambiguity form the material from which television fashions both a subject and a form, making no a priori distinction whether viewer interest springs from moral outrage or the pleasure of discovery, from vicarious participation or the kind of curiosity that is at one and the same time self-reflexive and self-interested. As in other time-based arts, where the subject is emotion, the form will often be narrative, and television, a consensus building, refereeing, let's-work-it-out-by-working-it-through machine, lives by the stories it tells, by the contact it makes with those groups and individuals that have something to tell, that can bear witness to what it means to be human or, at any rate, a sentient being on this earth.

At this point, a distinction needs nevertheless to be made. If science programmes do indeed brush, inadvertently or with self-important intent, with metaphysics, and if story-telling remains the most common currency and small change for making meaning, then the kinds of narratives science programmes deploy may well require further scrutiny. When Leblanc criticizes television science plotted as an adventure journey with the pay-off an enigma to be deciphered or a 'strong' image as the trophy to be carried away, he objects to what he calls the sales pitch approach to human destiny, where 'the space of vertigo surrounding the great questions mankind poses itself is managed like an ad campaign'.¹⁴ Leblanc speaks from a position that believes in a knowable human destiny, the viewer needing merely to be given a horizon to master based on 'real' social experience, which according to him, narrative science programmes fail to do. But of course, science does not have all the answers, any more than religion or literature. Yet by the same token, the very fact that one can invest such meaning-making expectations does impose on science narratives the kind of formal discipline or reticence of message shown by the other myths and master-narratives that in our culture raise ultimate questions without necessarily pretending to solve them. It may therefore be a source of comfort that some of the most successful science books in recent years have been about the sciences that do not speak only to

immediate concerns like health and medicine but are by their very nature obliged to take the longer view, to look back as well as forward, such as paleontology and astronomy, and that, furthermore, they unapologetically narrativize their subjects.¹⁵

By contrast, at the sharp end of the infotainment accusation have often been wildlife programmes. An example might be the controversial decision of Anglia Television, producers of *SURVIVAL* (one of the best-known television nature series and always concerned to wed the drama of life in the wild to an ecological agenda), to re-package some of its programmes by combining out-takes or footage not used in the original series with a re-edited and re-written commentary, in order to market them as entertainment-oriented programmes for video and cable distribution. What especially caused a stir was a programme on sharks where the voice-over was that of Anthony Hopkins (fresh in people's minds and ears as Hannibal Lecter from *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS*). The nonsense pairing from a science perspective has its logic, of course, in the not unwarranted assumption that viewer interest in killer sharks and viewer interest in serial killers converges at the level of the fascination emanating from sex, death and violence. A similarly transgressive thrill might explain the popularity of programmes featuring predators (e.g. *THE VELVET CLAW*), for as not only Anglia knows from market research, programmes with spectacular violence among animals – for instance, a wildebeest attacked by a crocodile and snatched into a Serengeti watering hole – consistently rate higher than more soberly informative ones showing the fragile ecology of a particular region such as the island of Madagascar, in all its complexity.

The counter-example to Anglia's bid to recoup through spin-offs and secondary outlets the not inconsiderable financial investments it makes in its breathtakingly beautiful while at the same time ecologically and scientifically responsible *SURVIVAL* programmes are David Attenborough's natural history series, notably *THE LIVING PLANET*, *LIFE ON EARTH*, and *THE TRIALS OF LIFE*. Produced by the BBC, they demonstrate the advantages of a large public body able to make television where no expense of time, money, labour and research is spared. Given the popularity and appeal of the material, it is not surprising that these series, too, were quickly re-packaged into a mega-series, called *THE LIFE TRILOGY*, thus cross-breeding natural science programmes into a format more akin to a fictional epic or even a soap, in order to have a niche on the video-shelves. The impression was reinforced by the 'bardic'¹⁶ function taken on by Attenborough, a voice and a presence at once inside and outside the physical space, the natural habitats and faraway places he not so much visits as periodically emerges from. The opposite of the mediator, Attenborough is participant and witness in an almost Homeric guise, who carries the viewers' interest even through the more expository passages by the

emotional charge of a lived commitment to wonder and inquiry, which, however, is as much in the lyrical and rhetorical power of the script he speaks (deceptively delivered as if he was improvising on the spot) as it is conveyed by his figure and voice solidly planted in the locations.

If Hannibal Lecter and the shark, the wildebeest and the crocodile may stand for the compromise between television and science in its spectacular mode, around the rhetoric of emotion and death, and David Attenborough deep in the bush whispering to us about the family ties of primates ten feet away from a gorilla the size of King Kong can represent television science in its domestic mode, around the rhetoric of emotion and life, there is a third example of how television science creates a contact space that probably would not exist without it: say, that of the pasta rings and the seacucumber in HORIZON'S THE NEW ALCHEMISTS. This programme is ostensibly about a new generation of technologies merging the mechanical with the organic, in fact also a meta-commentary on the very issue that concerns us here, namely what kind of culture might supersede the arts vs science divide in the age of television. Under the buzz-word 'smart materials', scientists are devising mechanical structures that behave like biological organisms: a piece of steel that can alter its shape and density and, thanks to sensors and electronic feedback, respond as fast and flexibly to changes in its surroundings as the locust wing according to whose principles it is built.

The engineers are contrasted with and complemented by a number of biologists who are growing organic materials to engineering designs and specifications or training neurons to multiply in linear rows in order, one day, to programme them as the 'chips' of the next generation of computers. At the cross-roads of biology, chemistry, engineering and computers, projects are emerging that aim at imitating nature's designs, no longer by amplifying and extending their scale, as in spectacular civil engineering feats or sky-high architectural structures, but by reproducing some of nature's optimal energy-to-force ratios: grasshoppers jumping fifty times their height; giant fish, gliding smoothly in the water, or heavy sea birds rising on the mildest of breezes. By contrast, man-made machines waste heat when they produce light, pollute when they gather speed, or rotate dangerously fast in order to get lift. The programme's central metaphor is that of skin and muscle, as an optimal relation between strength, elasticity and sensitivity: while a scientist from Pisa observes cooked pasta shapes in order to develop a new polymer that contracts and expands in size, a Japanese scientist has made the sea cucumber his life study because this simple organism is basically a muscle covered by a skin changing from smooth to hard, soft to rigid in precise relation to the stress factor of the muscle at work, like a pair of trousers turning into a solid chair when we need to sit down.

The programme's wit and humanity derive first of all from the individual scientists it shows talking about their work and demonstrating their experiments. But they also reside in the elegant simplicity of its counterpoint structure, blending a powerful argument about research interdisciplinarity with a research goal at once economic and social (the rising cost and scarcity of energy and labour obliging technologies to become non-polluting, energy-hyperefficient, and adaptable). Yet what makes *THE NEW ALCHEMISTS* an example of engrossing television is finally how it plays on a double cultural register: setting up a striking contrast between research operating at the very edge of the making of intelligent life and the emotional intimacy between programme makers and scientists, with the Japanese researcher even reciting to camera the song he had made in praise of his sea cucumber. This contrast in turn cleverly echoes another, that between West and East, between a 'Promethean' or 'Frankensteinian' way of thinking about technology, whose gigantomania or hubris is fast becoming life-threatening, and a 'Zen' way of thinking, directed towards a pliable, zoo-morphic but no less tenacious and scientifically audacious technology, supporting nature rather than supplanting it.

Television science at its best, I am tempted to conclude, is precisely such a muscle, having found an optimal ratio between responsiveness to stimulus and solidity of structure, between density of texture and sensitivity of contact. These, of course, are properties of texts and modes of address, which returns us to narrative and argument, concept and script, questions at the heart of television science, no less than of other forms of television. However, as I trust the examples have shown, they do not arise in the abstract for, when science is at stake, it ultimately relates to the 'management' of taboo regions, of thresholds and limits, what one might refer to (in analogy to the emotional core of television) as the metaphysical core of science. If this seems to increase the odds insurmountably, it points to the fact that television science is indeed caught up in some big questions: not just how the species man, arrived at a precarious point in the evolutionary chain, will have to refashion its relation to nature, or rethink its own history as a probably unsustainable eco-system, but also how television – neo-TV – will situate itself between the lecture hall and the movie theatre, the museum and Disneyland: so, it is a moot point whether next time we switch on the box for a science programme, it brings on the dinosaurs from *JURASSIC PARK*¹⁷ or the sea cucumbers from the science park.

Notes

- ¹ See Umberto Eco, 'A Guide to Neo-Television', *Framework*, 1984, vol. 25, pp. 19-27.
- ² J. Bronowski and B. Mazlish, *The Western Intellectual Tradition*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963.
- ³ 'Box Against Books', by Richard Hoggart, *The Times*, 1985 and discussed by Jon Cook, above.
- ⁴ What Snow worried about was that the two sides of the academy were no longer communicating with each other, that scholars of the classics or English literature had very little idea and also perhaps little respect for their science colleagues.
- ⁵ Bronowski and Mazlish, *ibid.*, p. 7.
- ⁶ The title of another of Dr. Bronowski's books is *The Common Sense of Science*, 1958.
- ⁷ Eco, *ibid.*
- ⁸ From Thomas Page, *The Hephaestus Plague*, quoted by George Basalla, 'Pop Science: The Depiction of Science in Popular Culture', in: Gerald Holton and William A. Blanpied (eds.), *Science and its Public*, Dordrecht and Boston: D. Reidel, 1976, p. 270.
- ⁹ See Kevin Robins and Frank Webster, 'Today's Television and Tomorrow's World', in: Len Masterman (ed.), *Television Mythologies*, London: Comedia, 1984, pp. 110-113.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- ¹¹ See my 'Television through the Looking Glass', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 14, 1-2, 1992, pp. 5-26.
- ¹² For an exemplary analysis along these lines, see Roger Silverstone, 'The Agonistic Narratives of Television Science', in: John Corner (ed.), *Documentary and the Mass Media*, London: Edward Arnold, 1986 (rpt. 1990), pp. 81-106.
- ¹³ Gerard Leblanc, 'La science comme fiction', in: Jean Mouchon (ed.), *Bulletin du CERTIC*, Université de Lille 3, no. 10, 1989, pp. 23-39.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- ¹⁵ See Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*, Toronto: Bantam, 1988, or Stephen Jay Gould, *Ever Since Darwin*, New York: Norton, 1977.
- ¹⁶ See Fiske and Hartley's definition of 'bardic television', *Reading Television*, London: Routledge, 1978, pp. 85-100.
- ¹⁷ See Stephen Jay Gould, 'Dinomania', *New York Review of Books*, 12 August 1993, pp. 51-56.

SCIENCE ON TELEVISION

AART GISOLF

The science journalist is a foreign correspondent in the land of science and not a translator for scientists. More attention is paid to science in the media these days than ever before. This applies as well to the print media as to radio and television. And this is understandable since there are now more media, more journals, more radio and television channels than 10 years ago, and more scientific research is conducted than ever before. Moreover, science has discovered that the media can be extraordinarily useful where money is concerned. And finally, many a scientist is driven by vanity into the merciless embrace of the talk-show hosts.

If we limit ourselves to television, we can see roughly two sorts of programme in which science is given attention. In the first place, there is the news and topical magazine category, and secondly there are the special science programmes. A third form is the television play or film in which, for example, famous scientists are portrayed or fictionalized or in which science itself plays a more science-fictional role.

The daily news and topical magazine programmes pay keen attention nowadays to scientific news items or scandals. The subject matter of these programmes, including scientific subject matter, is presented by journalists of general training with no particular expertise in either science or science journalism. This does not matter as long as they put the right questions, but it does become problematic as soon as judgements of the significance of specific developments are concerned.

Scientific news should first be published in a recognized journal before it appears in the lay press. The recognized journals have a so-called 'peer review' system, which means that an article on some scientific research is first judged by several professional colleagues before it is accepted for publication. In one of the leading medical journals, for example, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, two thirds of submitted articles are rejected. The reason for rejection is mainly: 'inadequate quality'. Occasionally, however, a research article is rejected on the grounds that the content has already appeared in the lay press. *The New England Journal of Medicine* is exceptionally strict about this.

As soon as a piece of research appears in the scientific press, there follow, according to the supposed significance of its content, press notices and

reports via the telexes of major press agencies. Often it is the journalists who comb the scientific journals for news, but often, too, it can be those funding the research or even the researchers themselves who draw press attention to the results of their published research. Whether a similar news item is put out by the television news depends largely on what else has happened on that day. Hence, in times of few topical events, there will suddenly appear more reports of scientific research in the news.

The question becomes critical when scientific news assumes a sensational character: for instance, a new treatment for a hitherto untreatable illness or a 'break-through' in nuclear energy research, to name two examples. In such cases, it is not easy for the ordinary journalist to judge whether the matter in hand really is sensational. Things can often go wrong here, for in the once-a-day rush involved in the preparation of the daily news broadcast there is no time for extensive investigation of the background of the report. Moreover, the average length of such a news report is generally between 30 and 90 seconds, which leaves little space for subtleties.

In addition, things often go wrong in the current affairs categories in the following sense: that an allegedly sensational piece of science news can be presented uncritically to the viewer, without any adequate indication of its relative context. Scientific news does not just appear from one day to the next. An important development or break-through is usually announced some time well in advance. It will be discussed in scientific circles, advances in a certain direction will be reported at congresses, and journalists who maintain contact with the scientific world have usually already heard that there is 'something in the air'. It is then the journalist's job to be sufficiently widely informed to be able to evaluate the news for its true worth or to have at his disposal informants whom he trusts enough to make this assessment for him. The second category of television programme where scientific topics are presented to viewers is the scientific feature programme. By now, very many television channels carry their own science programme. These mostly take the form of a magazine in which several different topics will be dealt with in each programme. The makers are usually scientific journalists, though what exactly it means to be a scientific journalist is not entirely clear. One finds scientists who apply themselves to the task of explaining scientific phenomena and developments to the layman. There are journalists who have specialized exclusively in science reporting; and there is also a small group of ordinary journalists who, at some earlier stage of their careers, have 'done' some science themselves. This latter group, in my view, is more interesting, since they are inclined to confront scientists with as much distrust as they would in interrogating a politician. This usually produces a

more interesting report than in the case of the second kind of journalist, the so-called science specialist, who is more inclined to translate science for the layman, which is difficult to understand and often leads to the kind of discouraging pronouncement as: 'It's too complex to explain exactly, but what it all comes down to is...', by which means the journalist conveys his own superior understanding of a science which the public is considered too stupid to be able to grasp.

The scientist who has turned to writing about science or to the making of television programmes for a wider public is as a rule not critical. It seems difficult for him or her to achieve a distance from the field. As a result, in turning to television as a career in itself, the ex-scientist is usually restricted to editorial work or, possibly, studio presentation. This can often lead to the kind of programme that passes over the more problematic, darker side of scientific developments.

Who eventually decides what should be seen in the line of science on television? This is a question which I, after many years of making television for various institutions in different countries, still cannot fully answer. Mostly, there is a head of programming in any particular area. For example, a head of informational programmes or a 'Head of Science and Features' at the BBC, or a Chief Editor in German television. He or she determines what will be transmitted. Assistants come up with the subject matter, and what most interests the head of programming stands most chance of being realized. I have yet to see an organized policy for giving a systematic opening to specific scientific disciplines.

Very often, a lead story in an authoritative daily or weekly newspaper, such as *Der Spiegel* or *Die Zeit* in Germany, or *Time* or *Newsweek* in the English speaking world, is the cue to giving treatment to that particular topic on television. Where science is concerned, television remarkably often follows in the tracks of the daily newspapers. This is understandable, since the papers are simply faster, and where the writing journalist's work is finished, only then does the TV programme maker's work begin. The huge logistical operation required to get the camera and the scientists together at the right moment in order to get images of the right phenomenon should not be underestimated. Television is rather sluggish and cumbersome because so many people are involved before the finished product.

Science is expensive. For the most part it is paid for by society, but especially in the USA, a lot of science is funded by foundations. A grant, or the like, is given for a limited period, but if no result is achieved in that time, then the grant will not be extended. In view of the fact that those who decide these grants are frequently powerful but scientifically not really educated persons, a favourable report in the lay press can help to get renewed funding for research. This is the

reason, especially in the USA, why many scientists turn to the media with fantastic news items and 'break-throughs'.

When asked for their motives for working on a television programme, most scientists reply that they work with society's money and therefore have a certain responsibility to account for what they do. This is certainly an important motive, but it is useful for the journalist to look at any particular research project in relation to its funding. Perhaps an industrial concern has put in a lot of money and hopes thereby indirectly to be able to gain publicity. In Europe, things have not yet gone too far down this road, but the journalist should always be on the alert.

Many journalists have a tendency to discuss things with each other without checking whether what their colleagues assert is indeed the case. I once saw an instance on Germany's Network Two with a sick child in a children's hospital in Kiev in the Ukraine. The child had leukaemia and was being played up as a typical Chernobyl victim. I would have fallen into the trap too if I had not by chance been in the same clinic two weeks earlier, when I got to see the same child. When I asked how long the child had had the disease, I learned that the symptoms were first evident a year before the reactor accident. The case thus had nothing to do with Chernobyl, and therefore I did not film the child. It is easier, however, to preach what everyone already thinks. You get transmission time sooner by showing how bad things are with the children, even if at the present time, some 5 years after the reactor accident, hardly any increase in the incidence of leukaemia can be detected, than you will for a film which attempts to explain how the true consequences will only appear in their full dimensions after 10 years.

Television is actually a scandalously superficial medium with an equally scandalously great impact on the public. For this reason, it is worth the effort to keep on trying to send out across the ether intelligent reports on science. To be able to select judiciously, as a rule one needs to know ten times more than can be included as information in any programme. My own advice for science on television therefore is not openly to write for television, but in parallel with television in order to get across something of that remaining ninety percent of knowledge.

(Translated by Murray Pearson)

ON BEING GOD AND DARWIN

GRAHAM CREELMAN

There can be a real excitement – a charge of energy almost – about the making of natural history programmes. Occasionally, it is possible not just to open people's eyes to some spectacular piece of behaviour, but also actually to create a climate of opinion which alters the perception of a particular species. It is more like being a movie director than a documentary maker. A documentary most often moves relentlessly towards a detailed and argued conclusion. Even those forms which deal with the randomness of life proceed in a way which is part of a process accountable inside the logic of documentary. But with fiction and natural history, the unravelling of the story can be radical and illogical and yet have its own specific and satisfying truth. In many ways, it is this and not their cuteness which explains the popular success of animal programmes. Natural history usually deals with unscripted events. The script, in our case, is the imposition of dramatic structure on usually unstructured and very often outwardly unconnected events. It is like being Darwin and God at the same time.

This is why we do what we do. But being God and Darwin – the explainer and the explained – does put natural history filmmakers in an anomalous position. What we create is dramatic – because we make it so. But it is also science, very often good science. And our work is 'entertainment' – prime-time material which slugs it out in the ratings with the lightest of froth and holds its own. But if our work is entertainment, should we be obliged to invest it with purpose? Many television producers will argue that entertainment is a satisfactory end in itself. Entertainment is a way of easing the cares of the world, of moving people out of the humdrum or the painful into an artificial environment where reality can be temporarily forgotten. To this extent all television is entertainment – if the definition of that word means a distraction from personal reality. And there are few things capable of distracting modern urban reality more completely than the well-crafted natural history film. Therein lies the allure of playing God with all creation. It is possible – and natural history filmmakers are often attacked for this – to recreate a totally convincing but false picture of a natural world in which there are no environmental problems and the great cycles of mating, birth and death are beautifully photographed, sanitized images from a wildlife soap opera. It is this

approach – sometimes labelled the ‘Chocolate Box’ technique – which is often criticized by those who would use natural history programmes as a blunt instrument to be wielded in the environmentalist cause. To this interest group, most natural history films prevent people thinking about the real issues by showing an artificial but skilfully plausible ‘real world’. And it is between these various stools that the wildlife filmmaker can find herself dangerously balanced. Not only can she play God and Darwin, she can be a front-line fighter in the battle to save the planet or a maker of animal soaps. The satisfaction is to create a skilful blend of the ingredients, a feather-bed which makes the falling from the stools a comfortable business.

Let’s take some examples. It is through entertainment values – the powers to absorb and distract – that we can make a film accessible. It is by being well-crafted and dramatic in structure that we can get over our underlying message, which need not enter obtrusively into the enjoyment of the film as a piece of successful television. If all we do is make people in awe of the beauty of the natural world, or intrigued or enthralled by the interaction of some of its creatures, then maybe we will also make the connection about the tragedy of possible decline and degradation. I do not think that exploiting our wildlife images for the maximum dramatic effect in any way undermines the essential value of the information as a window on the natural world – a window which while not overtly opening on to an environmental message can nevertheless make many millions of ordinary people aware of the complex wonder of fragile natural systems. The very beauty of something – be it a natural system or a work of art – can create the desire to preserve it. The shock of seeing the damage or destruction of works of art can be almost physical. I do not think we questioned the tragedy of what happened recently at the Uffizi. We did not have to create an argument why works of art should not be destroyed. Equally, the wonder of animal behaviour creates a climate in which such things are cherished, even if the programmes are presented purely as entertainment.

While staying firmly inside the ‘entertainment’ stockade, it is occasionally possible not just to open peoples’ eyes to some spectacular piece of behaviour but actually to create a climate of popular opening which can alter our perception of a particular species. *SURVIVAL* took a brave gamble when we spent one of our largest-ever production budgets to make a film on bats. At *SURVIVAL*, we have no brief to make films for minority and specialist audiences. What we do is extremely expensive, and only a mass audience will justify that expense to broadcasters. And bats are by no means everyone’s favourite animal. They probably inspire as much irrational fear and loathing as any creature. But in the hands of one of the world’s

greatest natural history photographers, Dieter Plage, the subject was one of wonder and awe. The audience had not known that the bat was so important to the survival of so many plant species throughout the world. Here we used images of the highest quality to entrance the viewer. We saw bats come in the dead of night to the flowers of the wild banana. We saw them visit the tiny flowers of the saguaro cactus in Mexico. And this was done with exquisite slow-motion photography of a quality never before realized with wild bats. The unfolding of these wonderful images uncovered the message that bats are both vital and endangered. But this was seamlessly part of the dramatic story. A quest for the secrets of an unpopular, feared creature uncovered the story that many of the world's wild fruits depend solely on bats for pollination, and even that bats are the first to help the regrowth of the rain forest after felling. Bats will fly across these ravaged open spaces. Birds will fly round the edge. The bats droppings will contain the seeds of plants which will germinate in the empty ground. When these plants grow, the birds will come to them, and the droppings of the perching birds will create the next cycle of regeneration. These film sequences could not have been achieved without spending a great deal of money. As a low-budget, 'environmental' programme on a minority channel, this film would simply not have the impact or the audience. It is immensely sad that the filmmaker, Dieter Plage, was killed in the rain forest canopy of Sumatra while making a film on orang-outans which he hoped would finally drive home to world audiences just how tenuous the survival of these great apes is. And again it would be the quality of the photography and the dramatic story he had to tell which would have converted entertainment, seamlessly, into knowledge.

It can be relatively easy to set an agenda of concern when natural history films are dealing with the life stories of individual animals. Very often the 'soap opera' aspects can drive the messages, and by playing at God, the producer can organize the script to arrange a satisfying dramatic outcome. The 'message' travels comfortably on the well-upholstered back of a big budget and superlative technique. But it is possible to make a mass audience understand and care not just about a particular species, but about the ecology of a whole country. SURVIVAL did this with a film on the unique flora and fauna of the Indian Ocean island of Madagascar. Here, again, we used the techniques of popular filmmaking to make the audience watch long enough to care and then to care enough to have sympathy for the tragic story that was unfolding. If an audience is not involved, it will not care. And to make them care is not a function of 'well-meaning' or 'right-thinking'. It is a function of knowledge to explain connections, thereby creating fascination, and of dramatic skill in translating that fascination into empathy. But

will the increasing commercialization of global television mean that the high ground is increasingly occupied by the mindless and the banal? Will our beautiful images and their underlying messages prove to be too expensive and too thoughtful in the chase after cut-throat maximization of mass audiences? If the American networks are an example, then this might prove to be the case. The major American networks are spiralling down-market to outbid each other with increasingly lurid and bloody 'reality' shows based on true-life rapes, murders and disasters. Any pretence at altruism in programming is being progressively abandoned, and American programme makers themselves confess to being ashamed of their own work. But that is just the networks. The reason for their desperate competition is the strong growth of specialist interest cable channels, and the staple of the most successful of these, the Discovery Channel, is the documentary and, most particularly, the natural history film. The high ground has not disappeared, but it has been redistributed.

The picture throughout Europe is fragmented, with some countries apparently following the American path and others treading their own individual routes. Britain is historically the largest creator of natural history programming in the world, and here geographical accident has meant that cable channels, and until most recently satellite, have had practically no penetration in the television market. Britain is well served by efficient terrestrial transmission systems, which means that the land-based networks will probably maintain their primacy, or at best see it only very slowly eroded. Which means that natural history programme makers in Britain have no ethically pleasing bolt-holes to run to. The alternatives to the BBC and ITV systems as yet do not have the budgets available to make programmes with the production values which will allow them to compete with other mass audience entertainments. And this makes it even more important that wildlife filmmakers do not listen overmuch to the siren voices which would persuade them that their skills are best employed in the minority, environmentalist ghetto. Now, more than ever, it is important that the filmmaker's skills as a dramatist and an entertainer are employed to the full. Otherwise our work will fail to compete for the mass audience. But it is not skill that is fundamental. It is understanding why what we do has such resonance. At base, what we are about is explaining in dramatic terms the endless fascination of parallel lives on this planet: apes and cats, even warthogs and dung-beetles have tragedies and victories, domestic successes and failures that touch us all. Charles Darwin realized this when he first saw orang-outans in captivity, and in part it was this experience which led him along the road to *The Origin of Species*. After this first encounter he wrote in his notebook:

Let man visit Orang-outang in domestication, hear expressive whine, see its intelligence when spoken (to); as if it understands every word said – see its affection. – to those it knew. – see its passion, rage, sulkiness, very actions of despair; let him look at savage, roasting his parent, naked, artless, not improving yet improvable, let him dare to boast of his proud preeminence.

CITIZEN SCIENTIST OR A DINOSAUR FOR ALL SEASONS?

JANA BENNETT

Do science broadcasters know if they are serving their audience with what they want or are deemed to need? Are they tackling the 'right' stories for their audience? There has long been a creative tension within science programme making over what we are trying to achieve. I'm not talking about specially tailored programmes with a specific educational brief, but mainstream television.

Is our primary purpose 'educating by stealth?' or are we examining science, medicine and technology because of their relevance to society at large (this includes explaining important findings about the world around us). If it is the former, then the question is, is it being done in an accessible way, and do viewers understand better at their end of a programme than they did before. If it is the latter, then it means having to both explain, inform and, on occasion, bite the hand that is feeding us, in order to tell interesting stories about the process of science. I would apply the same standards as in current affairs television: in doing a report on the poll tax, for example, spending valuable airtime going into agonizing detail about the mechanics of the poll tax is justified only if in so doing, one is illuminating the political debate about fairness and helping viewers to understand the implications of a policy. In the same way, in science, there has to be a balance between overloading with facts on recombinant DNA in order to talk about upcoming decisions on genetic release into the environment – it is not sufficient to present a 'gee whiz, here is how they did it' explanation unless it is a means to understanding a wider story. It would be a mistake not to arm viewers with the tools of understanding, but science broadcasting is in danger of overwhelming viewers with 'pure' fact at the expense of debating the importance of science itself in relation to politics and society.

It was heartening to read a recent survey of 1,000 readers of *The Guardian* newspaper which found that the top documentary programme watched by women was a science programme, HORIZON. And that wasn't an aberration: second on the list was also a science programme. There are obviously dangers of stereotyping an audience; many broadcasters assume women are more interested in the arts or social affairs than in science and technology. It would be a mistake to

assume this interest arises because viewers are mere 'consumers' of science, medicine and technology. There is no direct 'consumer' interest in the Hubbel space telescope, fractal geometry, or CERN. Cold fusion? Well, maybe that was a popular story because the scientists were offering something infinitely consumable if it was true... But science broadcasting is fortunate in that people want to watch it. Even in the fiercely competitive environment of de-regulated television, say in Australia or New Zealand, serious science is prime-time viewing.

If Britain is going to cope with the challenge of the Nineties, it is going to have to develop more 'citizen scientists' – citizens who are well-informed and who don't feel cut off from the world of science. In a participatory democracy, decisions about the quality of life are going to be increasingly dependent upon being able to assess competing arguments, many based on science. This is especially true of environmental issues but is relevant to jobs, health, education, energy and eating out.

But television has a difficult task in helping to inform or perhaps even encourage 'citizen scientists'. There *is* an appetite for science broadcasting, but is it perhaps greater for entertaining stories of scientific mystery, strange phenomena and life histories of cuddly animals than television that reflects a more complicated reality? A sure way to a big audience is through a title like 'The Mystery of the Dinosaurs Wiped Out by Meteor from Outer Space' (undeniably a good story). A less certain way of attracting viewers is to tell a story about the *process* of scientific endeavour or the implications of the shortage of post-graduate scientists and of poor research funding or even what to do with the so-called 'peace dividend' – do we spend the disarmament windfall on R & D or education or spread the jam thinly across all of society's urgent social needs? People are more ambivalent than ever before about the power of science, its failed promises, the conduct of scientists, and the uncertainty of scientific knowledge. To tackle these 'issues' television has to work hard to find a way of telling a story which will draw viewers into the subject.

The Sixties and Seventies were a time of great hope – the White Heat of Technology and All That, with successive governments using notions of science to underpin economic programmes. The Eighties gave way to skepticism about scientific promises of continuing advances. In the Nineties, scientists are in a yet more ambiguous role. They are coming under pressure from the Green movement to deliver certain answers where there may not be certainty, and from governments – over North Sea pollution, leukemia clusters around nuclear installations, food safety, BSE, genetic release. In addition, the advances – embryo research, organ transplants, genetically engineered crops, energy technology are not viewed

today by the public as 'cost-free' achievements. They are all the subject of debate. It may be 'good' science, but does society want its offering? These are the debates which television broadcasters have to reflect, without falling into 'anti-science' attitudes.

The media must take some responsibility for the ambiguity of public feelings about science. In the past we have embraced science far too uncritically in the search for a 'good story', acting at times as the scientist's messenger, reporting discoveries and stressing achievements without assessing implications. It makes it more vital than ever to cover science in a more detailed and skeptical way. But that strategy runs the risk of, frankly, boring or disappointing audiences.

In the USA, even the non-profit protected public broadcasting network is affected by the relentless measurement of audience ratings. And science programmes are not immune. Every editor is anxious about the so-called 'sweep season', the period of most intensive audience metering. The subsequent ratings figures are vital to public stations – not for advertisers, but in the competition for financial support from corporate sponsors and charitable foundations – that means programmes on, say, dinosaurs are definitely in season, scheduled specifically during 'sweep' periods. For the time being, British television can resist such strong pressures, but we cannot afford to ignore audience figures altogether, nor would we want to. There *is* great competition for airtime on British television – science has to compete with all the other programming and is successful in doing so.

Science broadcasting should come of age in the Nineties, acting as a two-way bridge between science and a more engaged, knowledgeable and interested public, one that is more aware of the interconnectedness of science and society – and prepared to grapple with the social and ethical choices involved. For the scientific community, a more informed public will view scientists in a more human way.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY ON TV: FOUR EUROPEAN COUNTRIES COMPARED

JAAP WILLEMS

In The Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain and Germany, about 2% of broadcasting time on TV is devoted to science and technology. In relative terms, there are no pronounced differences between these countries. In absolute terms, however, the differences are remarkable: German TV devotes about twice as much time as the other countries to these subjects. In other respects, too, clear differences can be found in the TV coverage of science and technology.

Science and technology are fields of activity which do not usually manifest themselves conspicuously to a large public. Nor are they very accessible. Scientists and technicians develop new ideas, techniques and products which may exert a profound influence on everyday life, yet most people remain wholly ignorant of the import of these developments. Thus, false hopes may be raised for new medication or fears about technology or automatization and about various undesirable side effects.

A negative attitude towards science and technology may impede the discussions of new developments or technologies, whose ultimate success may well hinge on the outcome of these discussions. Both universities and corporations are influenced by the social and cultural infrastructure within which they operate.¹ To promote a so-called public debate, accessible information on the activities of scientists and technicians is an essential prerequisite. Traditionally, the mass media play an important role in this process. Indeed, the popularization of science and technology is primarily a matter of the mass media, in which television occupies a prominent position. Research by the Dutch National Cultural Planning Bureau indicates that most of their respondents show an interest in these subjects and want to receive information on science and/or technology via television.² Scientists and engineers also favour this medium.³

However, recent research for the Foundation for Public Information on Science, Technology and the Humanities has shown that the time devoted to science and technology on Dutch TV is meagre. The average time devoted to science amounts to less than 4% of the total time available for broadcasting.⁴ This inquiry primarily focussed on scientific research and only implicitly on technological research.

Since the acceptance of useful products resulting from scientific research may well be related to their technological implementation, technology has subsequently become a subject of our research as well. Moreover, we were unable to compare our previous results with those from other European countries. Discussions on the relative merits of TV in different countries have hitherto been dominated by prejudice. According to some, there is far more attention paid to science and technology on British TV than in The Netherlands, while others argue the contrary. To make a meaningful comparison between European countries, it was first necessary to make an inventory in a systematic and consistent fashion. This has led to the present follow-up study.

The Workgroup Popularization of Sciences from the University of Nijmegen has conducted quantitative research on behalf of the Ministry of Economic Affairs (General Technology Policy) addressing the question of how much science and technology appears on TV in The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany and Great Britain. This kind of inquiry has not previously been undertaken. In some countries (notably Great Britain and France) there has been related research,⁵ but primarily of a qualitative nature. The results of our present research were first presented to the Ministry of Economic Affairs in the study 'Quantitative Comparative Research for TV Broadcasts in Four European Countries'.

Method

For twelve weeks in the period March-May 1991, three full-day programmes were analysed weekly for broadcasts that concerned science and technology. In The Netherlands, this involved the channels NL1, NL2, NL3 and RTL4 (a commercial station), in Belgium BRT1 and BRT2, in Great Britain BBC1 and BBC2, in Germany ARD, ZDF and West3, 11 TV channels in all. This restriction to science (as opposed to the humanities) and technology resulted from the interest of the principal.

In the analysis, information on science and technology has been defined as follows: programmes or parts of programmes are regarded as providing information on science and technology if in the programme there is explicit or implicit reference to fundamental and/or applied research. Explicit reference means that the research which provided the basis is mentioned explicitly. Implicit reference occurs when the information provided in a programme cannot have been obtained without scientific or technological research. This definition has been used in previous research on the share of science and technology in newspapers and on television and has proved its usefulness there.⁶ Educational courses, school television programmes and programmes of open universities have not been included. When information on science and/or technology was mentioned more than

once during one day, as may happen in successive news bulletins, it has only been counted once.

Results

For the 11 TV channels concerned, the amount of broadcast time devoted to science and technology has been compared to the total amount of broadcasting time. Table 1 gives the number of minutes devoted to science and technology for each channel and their percentages in relation to the total supply for a total of 35 measuring days.

Table 1: *Share of natural sciences and technology with respect to total broadcasting time for 11 European TV channels.*

	Science and technology (in minutes)	Total broadcasting time (in minutes)	Percentage
NL1	614	18174	3.4
NL2	396	17515	2.3
NL3	156	17715	0.9
RTL4	395	40895	1.0
BRT1	207	21505	1.0
BRT2	612	7700	8.0
ARD	629	33810	1.9
ZDF	805	33370	2.4
West	910	30841	3.0
BBC1	334	37622	0.9
BBC2	1041	36833	2.8

The high percentage of BRT2 is due to BRT policy of programming science and technology predominantly on BRT2. The total broadcasting time of BRT2 is low, therefore the percentage of science and technology is high. The low score of NL3 is conspicuous. The NOS (Netherlands Broadcasting Foundation) which is located on channel NL3 has as its goal to make 'supplementary programmes' about subjects not covered by other Dutch broadcasting organizations. Apparently, however, this hardly applies to science and technology.

Table 2 specifies the share of natural sciences and technology per country. The survey covers non-commercial channels only, and therefore the Dutch channel RTL4 has been omitted.

Table 2: *Share of natural sciences and technology with respect to total broadcasting time for four European countries.*

	Science and technology (in minutes)	Total broadcasting time (in minutes)	Percentage
Netherlands	1166	53404	2.2
Belgium	819	29205	2.8
Germany	2344	98021	2.4
Great Britain	1375	74455	1.8

The differences between the countries, expressed in percentages, are not pronounced, but when expressed in absolute broadcasting time in number of minutes, the German channels can be seen to devote two to three times more attention to science and technology than the other countries. Great Britain scores decidedly lower than many had expected.

Dispersion

What type of programme is liable to show science and technology? Table 3 attempts to answer this question. In Great Britain, the share of programmes specifically dedicated to science and technology is high. This is not surprising, since such programmes have a long tradition there. However, the contribution of scientific and technological items to British news bulletins and topical programmes is low. In other countries, such programmes devote more time to science and technology. In all four countries examined, most information on science and technology is offered by 'other programmes'. The Netherlands scored highly in this category.

Duration of programmes

What was the duration of individual items on science and technology as broadcast? Table 4 gives an answer to this question for the various countries and for the only commercial channel, (Dutch) RTL4. The difference between reports on science and those on technology is evident. The former are on average longer. There are also clear differences between countries in this respect. All items on science broadcast

Table 3: *Science and technology categorized by type of programme (in percentages).*

	Belg	Germ	Neth	RTL	UK
News/topical programmes	10	18	10	1	-
Science and technology programmes	18	20	10	29	46
Other programmes	72	61	81	70	54
Total minutes	819	2344	1166	395	1375

Table 4a: *Duration of programmes and parts of programmes dealing with science as percentage of total broadcasting time (in percentages).*

	Belg	Germ	Neth	RTL	UK
Less than 5 min	21	47	44	20	-
5 - 9 min	-	23	27	7	-
10 - 29 min	63	21	24	47	46
More than 29 min	16	9	6	27	54
Number of programmes	19	135	71	15	28

Table 4b: *Duration of programmes and parts of programmes dealing with technology as percentage of total broadcasting time (in percentages).*

	Belg	Germ	Neth	RTL	UK
Less than 5 min	32	67	59	35	27
5 - 9 min	23	23	27	41	5
10 - 29 min	13	7	13	18	32
More than 29 min	32	2	1	6	36
Number of programmes	31	218	71	17	22

by the BBC are longer than 10 minutes. BRT, too, tends to broadcast science in items of long duration. Information on technology, however, usually occurs in shorter items. In The Netherlands and Germany, more than half of these are shorter than 5 minutes.

Subjects

What are the subjects dealt with in programmes on science and technology? They have been subcategorized under science and technology by country in Table 5. Table 5a shows that of the four types of scientific discipline listed, natural science receives the most attention. This high position is mainly due to reports on biological fieldwork: the quality documentary film. In decreasing order, medical and environmental sciences come next. Germany shows the most balanced picture.

Table 5a: *Share of various science disciplines in percentages.*

	Belg	Germ	Neth	RTL	UK	Total
Medical sciences	11	21	12	-	11	14
Environmental science	5	21	1	1	12	11
Natural sciences	83	58	87	99	77	75
Technical sciences	-	-	1	-	-	0
Number of minutes	380	1289	718	265	933	3585

Table 5b: *Share of various technology disciplines in percentages.*

	Belg	Germ	Neth	RTL	UK	Total
Medical technology	5	13	38	26	-	15
Environmental technology	29	18	16	7	7	17
Applied natural science	7	14	13	-	19	13
Biotechnology	1	6	4	-	2	4
Technology of materials	-	1	4	5	-	1
Information technology	54	19	9	5	23	23
Applied technology	4	30	17	56	49	28
Number of minutes	439	1055	448	130	442	2514

The distribution of time devoted to the range of technological subjects shows great diversity, with medical technology scoring remarkably highly in The Netherlands. Biotechnology and technology of materials have a low score. The high score for Belgium on information technology is due to numerous programmes for computer applications in schools.

Topicality

How topical is the scientific research discussed in the TV programmes? We define a programme or part of it as topical when a recent occurrence (such as a dissertation, report, activity, political issue) is at stake. Our results show that topicality plays no significant role for the subjects discussed. For programmes on natural sciences, topicality is very low indeed. The predominance of documentary films on nature is the reason for this. Only in the environmental sciences do we see that most information is linked to topical issues. Table 6 provides more detail.

Table 6: *Topicality in science and technology programmes in percentages.*

	Belg	Germ	Neth	RTL	UK
Medical sciences	42	34	43	-	-
Environmental science	100	43	100	100	55
Natural sciences	37	8	11	30	3
Technical sciences	-	100	100	-	-
Total topical	41	21	16	30	9
Total number of minutes	156 (224)	265 (1024)	113 (605)	80 (185)	80 (853)

(Percentages of non-topical information have been left unspecified. For total duration in minutes, the non-topical part has been bracketed.)

Technological research is characterized by its frequent relation to new products or methods. If a programme devotes attention to potentially new applications, we label it as innovative. In our analysis, we distinguish between product innovation and process innovation. Table 7 provides a survey. The attention given to innovation in technology in TV programmes is 72% for Belgium, 65% for Great Britain, 55% for The Netherlands and 51% for Germany. Thus, all countries devote more than half of their time to information on technological innovations. In Belgium and Great Britain, product innovations are emphasized, whereas in The Netherlands and Germany attention is more balanced between product and process innovations.

Table 7: Attention to product innovation (a) and process innovation (b) in TV reporting on technology, expressed as percentages.

	Belg	Germ	Neth	RTL	UK
Medical technology	-/100	27/25	13/60	79/-	-/-
Environmental technology	25/5	14/28	54/4	78/22	6/-
Applied science	-/-	8/9	24/-	-/-	55/18
Biotechnology	-/100	7/2	13/56	-/-	100/-
Technology of materials	-/-	67/33	63/-	100/-	-/-
Information technology	100/-	21/54	46/10	100/-	100/-
Applied technology	100/-	36/27	28/8	100/-	46/7
Total percent innovative	64/8	23/28	28/27	93/2	58/7
Total minutes	283/34	241/298	127/122	121/2	258/30

(Time percentages for non-innovative reporting have not been specified.)

Conclusions

At first glance, the present investigation shows that The Netherlands are on an equal footing with the other three countries. The Netherlands devote more attention to the sciences and technology than is the case for Great Britain, and almost as much as Germany. However, these percentages present a distorted picture, since the total amount of broadcasting time varies considerably between the various countries. In absolute time, therefore, in duration in minutes, Germany devotes almost twice as much attention to science and technology as The Netherlands. In Great Britain, too, there is more time for these subjects than in The Netherlands. Belgium, which has the highest relative score, has the lowest in absolute amount of broadcasting time.

Moreover, scientific and technical subjects are more 'hidden' in other programmes in The Netherlands than in the other countries. Only for 10% of the time is there information presented in science and technology programmes that can clearly be recognized as such, compared with 20% for Germany and almost 50% for Great Britain. More than 80% of the Dutch information on these subjects derives from 'other programmes', whereas this figure is only 60% for Germany and about 50% for Great Britain.

Information on science and technology occurs in a more dispersed form in The Netherlands than elsewhere. More than 80% of the programmes are shorter than 10 minutes, and only a small percentage lasts longer than half an hour. The German contribution can be roughly characterized in a similar way, but Great Britain and Belgium feature longer durations.

In terms of topicality, The Netherlands does not distinguish itself from other countries. Only Belgium attaches a high priority to topicality. However, topicality is not the only measure of whether information is new. Attention to the possibly innovative nature of products and processes is also of importance. Attention to innovation is highest, viz. over 70%, in TV programmes on technology in Belgium. The Netherlands occupies the same level as Great Britain and Germany in this respect.

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Notes

- ¹ See A. Rip, *Techniek als Mensenwerk*, Enschede, 1988, and G. Rijntjes (ed.), 'Techniek en Maatschappelijke Controversen', *SMO-Informatief* 1990, pp. 90-3.
- ² W. Knulst and P. v.d. Beek, *Publiek en Techniek*, SCP-cahier 57, Rijswijk, 1988.
- ³ J. Willems, 'Bioloog Populariseert niet uit Eigenbelang', *BioNieuws*, 1991, 1-5, p. 3.
- ⁴ J. Willems, 'Wetenschap op de Nederlandse TV', *Massacommunicatie*, 1991, 19-3, pp. 240-253.
- ⁵ See A. Bernon-Gerth, 'La communication télévisuelle scientifique et technique, regard sur la production et la création en Grande Bretagne et en France'. Paper presented at the International Conference PCST, Madrid, May 1990. See also A. Hansen and R. Dickinson, 'Mediated Science'. Paper presented at the International Conference on Policies and Publics for Science, London, April 1990.
- ⁶ L. Hanssen and J. Willems, 'Wetenschap in de Krant', *Massacommunicatie*, 1992, 20-4, and J. Willems, 'Wetenschap op de Nederlandse TV', *op. cit.*

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FILM CULTURE IN TRANSITION: ON THE SERIES

Film Culture in Transition is the name of a new series which addresses the debates around a new and exciting field of study. Never have movies been more popular or more ubiquitous, they meet us on television and in the home, at the videotheques, on posters and in advertising. Yet no consensus exists about how the cultural and historical role of the audio-visual media might be understood, and the contest for legitimation among the more established academic disciplines obliges those who teach and research in these fields constantly to question their intellectual foundations and aims.

Film Culture in Transition wants to set new accents, review the state of debates, explore the territory beyond the established topics, but also to consolidate what has been achieved. The focus is on work coming from Europe, continuing the dialogue between the continent's fascination with Hollywood and America's attraction to European aesthetic and critical thought. By trying to shape the debates among different intellectual traditions in Europe itself, the series provide a forum that respects each country's distinctive film and television culture, developed alongside and in competition with Hollywood.

The objective is not a general line, but to provoke reflexion and stimulate research, to give body and substance to the many transitions now centred on the audio-visual media. The elements are in place to make the case for *Film Culture in Transition*.

Thomas Elsaesser
General Editor