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An Historical Inquiry into the Political and Cultural
Context for the Emergence of a Television Aesthetic
in the Nineteen-Fifties

Kevin L. Dowler

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Communication Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

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ABSTRACT

An Historical Inquiry Into the Political and Cultural Context for the Emergence of a Television Aesthetic in the Nineteen-Fifties

Kevin Dowler, Ph.D
Concordia University, 1993

This inquiry is concerned with the examination of an aesthetic discourse of television as it emerged in the early nineteen-fifties. The set of critical texts analyzed are considered as evidence of a shared disposition constitutive of a coherent discourse that regarded television as an aesthetic medium, or, at minimum, to embody aesthetic potentials.

The inquiry seeks to discern the cultural and historical conditions whereby an aesthetic analysis of television could be undertaken. This involves retracing genealogically the origins of the aesthetic of television through the analysis of critical discourses of popular media and aesthetics which emerged at the turn of the century in the United States, placing the development of a television aesthetic within the historical context of discourses that sought to legitimize aesthetic criticism of popular culture. The television aesthetic is seen to arise neither ex nihilo, nor as the simple outcome of the reapplication of a coherent "tradition" of criticism of popular culture that preceded

it: it is both the product of historically antecedent discussion of the popular, and a product of the specific juncture within which it emerges.

Also addressed is the set of relations which obtain between this formation and other discursive formations, between those favourably disposed toward popular culture, and those espousing negative dispositions, focusing on the question of the conditions which allow the term aesthetic to be applied to popular media. This revolves around the question of the nominative capacities of intellectual and cultural formations with regard to all media: the capacity to determine what can or cannot be called art.

The discourses engaging with the popular are examined in relationship to other discourses and domains which held a different, and competing, definition of social and cultural space. This leads to assessing the set of relations which governed attitudes toward culture and authenticity, and why this discursive formation was unable to establish the legitimacy of television as an aesthetic medium.

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Finally, I must thank Barri Cohen, who has been in the unfortunate position of having to cope with me and this project on a daily basis for two years. I have to acknowledge her forbearance as my own demands stole precious time from her own important work. The advantage of having an intellect greater than my own at my immediate disposal was an invaluable resource, and I am uncommonly lucky and grateful to be in this position. To her I express my most heartfelt gratitude for all the direct and indirect ways in which she sustained me during the writing of this work.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1. INTRODUCTION: AMERICAN MODERNISM AND
THE STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE 1
2. THE EMERGENCE OF THE AESTHETIC
AS A DOMAIN OF ENQUIRY 49
3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF TELEVISION CRITICISM
AND THE TELEVISION AESTHETIC 98
4. THE CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS OF
THE AESTHETIC OF TELEVISION 168
5. THE END OF ART 222
6. CRISIS, CONSENSUS, AND CONTRADICTION 289

BIBLIOGRAPHY 350

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: AMERICAN MODERNISM AND THE STUDY OF POPULAR CULTURE

The counterconcept to popular culture is art.

Leo Lowenthal, "Historical Perspectives
on Popular Culture"

If you were to say to me, "What's the best
thing in America, artistically the best
thing?", I would reply, "cowboys, westerns!"

George Balanchine, "Notes for The Flood"

In 1962, Igor Stravinsky and George Balanchine, along with conductor Robert Craft, staged the ballet The Flood for the CBS network. Although both Stravinsky and Balanchine felt that television imposed certain constraints that made the presentation of ballet in that medium problematic, they were both nonetheless favourably disposed toward it and the possibilities it appeared to offer. Stravinsky seemed especially drawn to the medium, and indeed went so far as to suggest that "if I live to write another opera myself, I know that it will be for the electronic glass tube, rather than for the early baroque stages of the world's present-day opera houses."¹ In a set of notes from pre-production

¹ Igor Stravinsky, George Balanchine, and Robert Craft, "Notes for The Flood," in The Eighth Art: Twenty-Three Views of Television Today, ed. John Cogley (New York: Holt,

meetings for The Flood, Robert Craft has preserved an extraordinary moment that captures the thinking of two representatives of "high" culture media as they attempt to develop an approach to the "popular" medium of television. In the following passage, George Balanchine describes the staging for the flood scene itself:

The floor should be covered with a shiny bitumen-like material. I want to show a deliquescent black surface bubbling like an oil field. Underneath the black tent the male dancers will bob up and down from their knees, individually, here and there all over the camera area, like black furuncles. Their movements might also be synchronized with countervailing explosions of black rubber tubes, balloons, bubblegum. The female dancers move along the mounting and bursting blobs of black. The men are the waves and the women are people drowning in them. The men hoist the women and fling them and twirl them, then swallow them in the folds of their black substance. The audience must feel that it is drowning.²

One could imagine that this is a description of a performance art work, since this scene bears marked similarities to the description of what would soon become the "happening," and later evolve into performance art. The employment of elements such as "black rubber tubes, balloons, bubblegum" anticipates the devices and props that will become familiar in the Pop Art performance works and installations of Robert Rauschenberg, Claes Oldenburg and Allan Kaprow. It is quite clearly an avant-garde spectacle, and the shock it produces lies perhaps less in its avant-

Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 269.

² Ibid., 267.

gardist combinatoire of materials and textures, and more forcefully in the realization that this is a production which is, to use the common phrase, "made for TV." What it immediately brings into question is a whole set of assumptions surrounding the relations of high culture and the popular, since it confuses the boundary between art and mass media. In a curious way, this scene stands as an intersection of apparently contradictory modes of production: on the one hand, that of the avant-gardist work of art, evident in both the formal attributes of the work as described and through the bona fides provided by Balanchine and Stravinsky as genuine avant-garde artists; and on the other hand, the status of this work as television, written specifically for, and presented through the television medium.

Most interesting, perhaps, is the way in which it problematizes the attacks made on television in the name of the avant-garde. How do we reconcile these attacks with the activities of avant-garde artists working directly in a medium considered to be the chief threat to the continued existence of that self-same avant-garde? The existence of this contradiction suggests that there is no guarantee that a mass medium is, by virtue of its very nature as a mass medium, irreconcilable with the aims of an avant-gardist or modernist aesthetic and political project. The fact that these artists were actively engaged in producing works for

television, although certainly not indicative of the overall condition of television at the time nor of its subsequent development, does demonstrate how, for one moment at least, the interests of high art and the television industry coincided, and an attempt was made to fashion an aesthetic appropriate to the medium.

The lack of affinity between the avant-garde and the popular captured in Lowenthal's dictum that the "counterconcept to popular culture is art" ignores the continued fascination on the part of both the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde with new media, as well as their active participation within them. This brings forward a question concerning notions of aesthetic authenticity that are attached to the appropriate form that artistic labour should take (in Lowenthal's case underwritten by an epistemology based on the distinction between free and alienated labour), the relation between the historical development of society and the historical development of a given medium, and the discursive, theoretical constructions of the relations between media and society.

A critical theory of a mass medium such as television that ignores its actual historical development runs the risk of being a vulgarization if it does not address its uneven and often contradictory development, nor if it assumes, as a form of organized capital, that its telos is preordained. We must, therefore, be cautious with regard to the

employment of claims such as Lowenthal's as the starting point for the historical inquiry into popular culture and popular media. It must be borne in mind that Lowenthal's axiom is itself historical, although it appears in the form of a law. It assumes that the bifurcation of society which the claim itself introduces is fixed, whereas it is the product of shifting relations that are not immutable, but merely reified as such.

The inquiry begun here takes this as its starting point, or rather takes the opposition between the claim made by Lowenthal and the example of The Flood as its beginning. Within the space between the two one can discover a contradiction in which popular culture, and television in particular, functions like a palimpsest over which is written another television, another popular culture -- one which becomes television, becomes popular culture, as the product of intellectual labour which devises the codes by which the key to the popular will be struck.

The examination undertaken here is an historical inquiry into the sets of relations that (over)determine how television was (and is) constructed discursively. At its most basic level, this inquiry is concerned with the elucidation of the main tenets of an aesthetic discourse of television as it emerged in the early nineteen-fifties in a set of critical texts that are analyzed herein. These writings, although dispersed through various periodicals,

journals, monographs, and anthologies, demonstrate enough similarities to be considered as constitutive of a coherent discourse and evidence of a shared disposition that regarded television as an aesthetic medium, or at minimum, to augur or embody aesthetic potentials.

Beyond the level of description and collation that gives rise to the outlines of this discursive formation, this inquiry also addresses the set of relations which obtain between discursive formations, specifically between those favourably disposed toward popular culture, and those taking a negative disposition toward it. In particular, our investigation focuses on the question of the aesthetic insofar as the conditions are available that allow the term to be applied to popular media. This revolves around the question, and the power, of the nominative capacities of intellectual and cultural formations with regard to all media; that is, the capacity at given historical junctures to determine what can or cannot be called art.

The inquiry seeks therefore to discern the cultural and historical conditions whereby an aesthetic analysis of television could be undertaken. This involves retracing genealogically the "origins," as it were, of the aesthetic discourse of television historically, through the analysis of critical discourses of popular media and aesthetics that emerge at the turn of the century in the United States. Thus, our examination seeks to place the development of an

aesthetic of television within the historical context of discourses that sought to legitimize aesthetic criticism of popular culture.

The study is not limited, however, to the diachronic unfolding of a specific discursive strain. Rather, the examination of the discourses engaging with the popular is developed in relationship to other discourses and domains that held a different, and competing, definition of social and cultural space. Thus, the emergence of the aesthetic discourse of television is seen to arise neither ex nihilo, nor as the simple outcome of the reapplication of a coherent "tradition" of criticism of popular culture that preceded it. It is both the product of an historically antecedent discussion of the popular, and at the same time a product of the specific juncture within which it emerges. There are, therefore, both synchronic and diachronic dimensions that have to be considered together in order to make sense of the way in which this discourse is structured.

This leads to the set of relations that governed attitudes toward culture and authenticity. With regard to the television aesthetic, this begs the question of why it was that this discourse was unable to make its claim in such a way as to establish the legitimacy of television as an aesthetic medium. In that context, we must consider the relationship between popular culture and the fine arts, between mainstream and the avant-garde. The example of The

Flood, although it post-dates the period being examined here, does indicate the degree to which this relationship stands open. Nevertheless, the decade of the fifties is marked by a cultural retrenchment that repudiated any claim that popular culture might be of aesthetic merit. Clearly, this disposition was successful to the extent that any such pretensions were dismissed.

The Flood is interesting to the extent that it points to the inescapable observation that the relation between "high" and "low" is never fixed, although it often appears to be so. That Balanchine should cry that he thinks nothing is better than television westerns gives one pause, issuing forth as it does from someone whose reputation was grounded in what might be considered the opposite to that which he claims as art. It is in the very thought of opposition that this dissertation dwells; as an historical inquiry, it begins with the observation, so well demonstrated by the discussion of The Flood, that the relationship between high and low or, if you want, between affirmative and negative culture, is mutable. As Hans Robert Jauss has pointed out, "the history of art cannot be reduced to the common denominator of negativity . . . This is so in part because negativity and positivity are not defined qualities in the social dialectic of art and society, and can even turn into their opposite since they are subject to a curious change of

horizon in the historical process of reception."³ It is precisely this shifting relationship between positive and negative dispositions toward popular culture that is traced out here. With regard to what is now called popular culture, and was in the time period addressed in this inquiry called the popular "arts," the historical question focuses not on the legitimacy of popular culture as it is discussed today, but rather on the circumstances that have allowed or disallowed, as the case may be, the popular to be regarded as a legitimate domain of cultural practice. Thus this inquiry seeks to uncover the conditions that allowed an aesthetic of television to emerge, and then further to delineate the factors that prevented such a discourse from developing any legitimacy and that led ultimately to its collapse. We therefore go backward, to uncover the basis upon which the aesthetic claim can be made, and forward, to grasp why such a claim, once made, could not obtain any currency within the politics of the cultural domain during the period in which it appeared.

Critical approaches to the study of television and other mass media have most often taken the position that art and mass media are fundamentally irreconcilable. Within the terms of this position, espoused either explicitly or implicitly by many critical media scholars since the 1940s,

³ Hans Robert Jauss, Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), 16.

the nature of the modes of production and ends of art and the culture industry differ to the degree that they constitute utterly distinct spheres of culture. Within a conception of the social as bifurcated into genuine and inauthentic spheres of praxis, the autonomy of art has been the guarantee, so to speak, of its freedom from pollution by the culture industry. Art, under these conditions, is defined as genuine and authentic, over against the culture industry as inauthentic and false. This disposition, however, places us in a rather awkward position in respect to the example of The Flood. Indeed, what are we to make of Stravinsky (whose avant-garde pedigree stretches back to the scandal of the "Sacre du printemps" in 1913) and his claim that he would write opera exclusively for television? Although we cannot gauge viewer response to this, we can at least note that they were confronted with avant-garde works on television. Whether their experience was "genuine" is a side issue in any case, because concern is clearly centred on the use of conventional mimetic forms in television that are opposed to the formal departures of a radical avant-garde -- innovations that become the litmus test for gaining status as an authentic work of art. Yet this distinction between authentic and inauthentic art cannot account for The Flood's appearance on television, a medium that was not supposed to be able to accomodate art. It is difficult to determine how a production like The Flood could be inserted

into a blanket condemnation of television, since it seems to escape the categorical accusation made by Lowenthal of being "pre-digested" by virtue of its radical nature, which conforms to the criteria of formal innovation required to distinguish it from the formulaic products of the culture industry. What this suggests is that television as an expressive medium offers a set of possibilities ignored by the mass culture critics, solely on the basis of its nature as a technology. The example of The Flood privileges a specifically avant-garde conception of the work of art, and although that conception itself can be contested, it does possess the features of the work of art demanded by the critics of television, and indeed, its creators share the same artistic values as the critics.

An aesthetic of television does not, however, necessarily have to conform to the radical project promoted by the neo-avant-garde in post-war America. A number of other critics of this period, although sharing in a number of respects the same modernist outlook, considered certain developments in television as evidence of an aesthetic specific to television that needed criticism and guidance if the medium was to mature as an art form. This discourse was often pitted against the critical discourses written in support of avant-garde practices, since it refused to limit the conception of a modernist aesthetic only to the transformations occurring in the fine arts. The

distinction between avant-garde art and mainstream cultural commodities was considered in some quarters to be fallacious, and supportive of a false dichotomy that was both reductive and misleading.

The central problem here, however, is not the reconciliation of artistic expression or modernist aesthetics with mass media production practices. This reconciliation is already effected in the fact of the production of The Flood itself, although the example remains potent to the extent that this is consistently overlooked as a performance of that merger. What is at stake, rather, is a conception of social space at the theoretical level that refuses to acknowledge that the avant-garde has never been immune to the technological transformations in communication media, and has, more often than not, celebrated those very technologies bemoaned by a cultural critique aimed at propping up an avant-gardist practice in opposition to cultural and aesthetic possibilities made available by new communications technologies.

Within the arguments of the critics of mass media, such as those of Dwight MacDonal and Clement Greenberg, there appeared to exist a contradiction stemming from the concatenation of conservative residues from the mass society critics with a progressivist, avant-garde stance. On the one hand, the developments in the social sphere -- the levelling of culture through the breakdown of class

structures and the development of technologies of reproduction -- were actively deplored, while on the other hand, the expressly radical gestures in the arts simultaneously celebrated. Although not immediately apparent as a contradiction, it is unlikely that social conditions and the development of avant-garde art can be so easily pried apart; even Theodor Adorno, who certainly was not positive about prevailing social conditions, was sensitive to the fact that art, while it may protest against the social, is also its product. These critics, who relied on Adorno's analysis, seemed to have ignored this particular point. The idea that the progressive development of art is dependent on concurrent social development was overlooked. This allowed these critics to sponsor radical formal transformations within the field of the arts while at the same time espousing a retrograde, preservationist position that sought to bolster the residues of European aristocratic culture in the American context, at the expense of popular culture. Furthermore, this position focused narrowly and only on innovation in the traditional arts and ignored the avant-garde fascination with the new media and increasing employment of intertextual strategies (established initially in the cubist collage). The critique of mass culture, in both its conservative and radical forms, perpetually ignored the fascination on the part of the avant-garde with innovation occurring in the mainstream, and ignored the

substantial effects popular culture had on the form of the art works themselves. The critique further assumed that innovation could not occur within the domain of popular culture, and discouraged the idea that there existed any relationship between works of art and quotidian experience.

The transformations in the form of modernist art works do not appear in a purely historical relationship of formal innovation with respect to art works that preceded them, but are shot through with the everyday. We could look for evidence of this in any number of places: for example with the scandal over the dirt on the bare feet of one of Caravaggio's Madonnas, or consternation with Courbet's depiction of workers as subject matter for painting, or with the intertextual strategies that arrived with the appearance of the newspaper fragment or matchbook cover in the cubist collage. In each of these instances it is the attempt to incorporate the real that incites scandal; what disturbs is the implicit refusal to maintain the distance between the aesthetic domain of the work of art, its explicit "fiction," if you will, and the domain of the quotidian. Here, I would disagree with Michael Fried, who argues that

by the first half of the 1760s if not earlier deliberate and extraordinary measures came to be required in order to persuade contemporary audiences of the absorption of a figure or group of figures in the world of painting, and thus consequently the everyday as such was in an important sense lost to pictorial representation around that time. The latter was a momentous event, one of the first of a series of losses

that together constitute the ontological basis of modern art.⁴

Rather, the calamity of modern art is the desire to breach the gulf separating art and real life, thus violating the norms constituting the divisions of social experience. Fried disregards the strategy of the avant-garde, which broke with the very tradition he describes, and with the ontological assumption he assigns to modern (and modernist) art. Modernist art, normally described in terms of its break with the world (which was subsequently held to be its critical basis),⁵ is, contrary to that notion, preoccupied with its status as other, a breach which avant-gardist strategies attempted to overcome through the reabsorption of the work back into the world.⁶ The scandal of the modern

⁴ Michael Fried, Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980), 61.

⁵ As in the aesthetics promulgated by Adorno, where the modernist work stands as the last refuge against a fully instrumentalized lifeworld; for example: "art takes up a definite position vis-à-vis reality by stepping outside of reality's spell . . . and tacitly polemicizes against the condition of society at a particular point in time." Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 7.

⁶ "What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men [sic]. When the avant-gardistes demand that art become practical once again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content. . . . The avant-gardistes proposed the sublation of art . . . art was not simply to be destroyed,

has thus been the scandal of the real. The controversial status obtained by the examples mentioned within the visual regime was a result of the inclusion of elements from the everyday. This inclusion violated the space of the pictorial, thus breaking with the magical effects of representation.

This is particularly true of the historical development of American modernism, in which realism and naturalism constituted the decisive break with the culture and aesthetics of the Gilded Age.⁷ The scandal of the real was the invocation of the street, of the slum, of the low, which represented a protest against the rarefied neo-Platonism of the Genteel Tradition and the Puritan ethos, and the insistence on the representation of the emergence of a vibrant vernacular culture that was America itself. As much as European avant-gardism reacted against the structural rigidity of academicism, the American realists rejected the spiritual and moral claims of the Genteel Tradition to represent American life, as well as the legitimacy of European models of culture, and struggled for a practice that would bring art closer to the reality of actual social

but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved." Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant Garde, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 49.

⁷ This will be discussed in detail in chapter 4.

conditions and therefore relevant to the society in which it was being produced.

The birth of American modernism around the turn of the century was thus the birth of the desire to have an art that would have a closer proximity ontologically to the realities of everyday American society and culture. This requires rethinking the notion that the radicalism of avant-gardism and modernism can be discovered through the superficial dimensions of formalist experiment and structural innovation. To a large extent, this latter view is the product of historical revisionism undertaken in the forties and fifties that reconstituted modernist practices (in the United States, at least) in terms of an historical progression toward emphasis on medium over content. This legacy is evident in Fried, to the extent that he reaches back even further to find the source of this transition.⁸ Despite recent revisionism, which rejects both the teleological and prescriptive tendencies of the reconstruction of modernism (of the history of painting in particular), the history of modernism is still nevertheless most often equated with the rise of abstraction, over against naturalist and realist modes of representation.

⁸ Fried's analysis is arguably anachronistic, since he appears to apply an hypothesis developed with regard to abstract works of art (Fried was a student and acolyte of Greenberg): "in general, the reader who is familiar with my essays on abstract art will be struck by certain parallels between ideas developed in those essays and in this book." Absorption and Theatricality, 5.

The idea of modernism as the equivalent of abstraction has obscured the historical development of the preoccupation with form as itself an extreme expression of realist tendencies. Thus the notion, elaborated by Clement Greenberg, of historical progression toward an emphasis on medium over content contains a grain of truth, in terms of the increased focus on the ontological essence of each medium; in Greenberg's case, paint and canvas. From this perspective, however, the emphasis on medium, rather than being seen as the emancipation from the constraints of realist modes of representation, is to be viewed as an extreme type of realism. This is so by virtue of the recognition that to reduce painting to pure medium is to get at the basis of matter itself, to get at, as Miles Orvell calls it, "the real thing."⁹ This is also, however, to assume that formalist abstraction was the only direction experimentation with medium took. Recent historical accounts have suggested that this understanding of modernist practices was too narrow, and ignored the contents of abstract works as expressions of consciousness, as attempts to get closer to the reality of the interior of artistic consciousness itself. These accounts imply that there is a sociological basis upon which to make the link between the social reform tendencies in realist works of the thirties

⁹ Miles Orvell, The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989).

and the emergence of abstraction in the forties and fifties that was ignored by those preoccupied with formalism.

In either case, what is important to recognize is the link with the real as the initial impulse of modernist practices in the United States. The history of American modernism is the history of realism, but one that has to be grasped as a bifurcated trajectory. The abstractionists sought the real in life just as much as the realists, and both must therefore be understood as two halves of a whole. The schism, if you will, occurred over the nature of what constituted the appropriate means by which to establish closer proximity to the real, over what mode of representation would be ontologically closer to the truth of lived conditions. In what is understood to be realism, this took the form of naturalist re-presentations of the rural and urban landscape that sought fidelity and verisimilitude with actual social and material conditions; in the case of abstraction, this took the form alternatively of inquiring into the basis of matter, or into the means whereby to express consciousness itself. What have come to be observed historically as distinct -- and antithetical -- practices are in fact the product of the same challenge to Genteel Culture, a revolt into the real, and away from the arid and morally stultifying dimensions of the Genteel Tradition's aesthetic practices.

To understand American modernism in the twentieth century in this way not surprisingly has consequences when viewing the relationship between realist and abstract movements over the course of the century. When viewed as the expressions of the same impulse, it becomes necessary to grasp the way in which they should ultimately be held as opposites from each other. In particular, the linkage of the real to the popular and the consequent negative cast realism developed requires further elucidation. Much of the remainder of this essay is devoted to understanding this with regard to the emergence of the television aesthetic as a realist aesthetic. At this point it will suffice to allude to the idea that aesthetic practices maintain only a small amount of autonomy with regard to social and political transformations within and without the United States, despite assertions to the contrary. In particular historical periods, within the context of the dominant "structure of feeling" that stresses either individualist or communitarian values, emphasis is placed either on abstraction or realism, contingent on the political and social values of a given period. In other words, under a particular "regime," one is in dominance while the other is in abeyance. Thus the relationship between the two is not a matter of one triumphing over the other, as is often claimed with the emergence of revitalized modernism after the Second World War. Rather, it is a question of enabling conditions;

an historical configuration that provides the necessary conditions wherein one mode of representation takes precedence over the other.

The oscillation between formalist and realist values within art theory and practice occurs within a social dialectic that is alternatively concerned with community or individualism. As attention shifts politically and socially within the United States in response to political, economic, or social crises, so too does the disposition toward realism and abstraction. Realism is linked predominantly to the emphasis on community, and therefore the faithful reproduction of social conditions; abstraction, on the other hand, is identified with an emphasis on individuality, expressed through a mode of representation that is focused on interiority and individual consciousness. This is perhaps most easily identified historically when one observes the swing away from the formalist experiments of the twenties and the emergence of the documentary style in painting and photography and in the proletarian novel in the thirties, as a response to the economic hardship produced by the Great Depression. In turn, the movement back toward abstraction through an emphasis on psychology and meta-psychology in the forties and fifties can be seen as the product of the collapse of socialism and reformism, and the increasing suspicion and fear of collective and mass movements engendered by the Second World War.

It is within this context that the emergence of the television aesthetic in the 1950s must be understood. Particularly interesting is the way in which it emerges in a period that appears to be moving in another direction; the television aesthetic, based in realism, appears antithetical to the tendencies of the period. This essay focuses on the period roughly between 1950 and 1956, when television was in its first stages of critical development, broadcasting live, and centred for the most part in New York City. Although a discussion of television itself and the television industry enter this study at different points, we will be concerned primarily with texts about television, or more precisely, the way in which television is figured discursively. The study will focus on how it was that this new medium was given meaning through the way it was made sense of in writing. This essay is thus not about television per se, but rather is concerned primarily with its reception in the critical texts that told us what television was, and could be, according to the perspectives of that time.

Entwined with this is the question of the status of the popular, and therefore the credence given to those critical and theoretical texts that sought to define television in aesthetic terms and to treat it as an emerging art form. It is here that the excursus into the development of American modernism becomes crucial, in terms of the varying dispositions toward the vernacular and the popular. In the

1940s and 1950s, a reconstructed elite stratum of cultural arbiters consolidated itself around a negative disposition toward the popular and reinstalled a version of an aristocratic model of high culture derived from Europe. This rejection of the premise of the original revolt against the Genteel Tradition -- that genuine American culture had emerged in popular forms -- reversed the course of American modernism, which returned to the elitist tendencies prevalent in Genteel culture. Class consciousness, disguised as taste cultures, returned in terms of the maintenance (as opposed to removal) of social divisions based on taste, in a vertical hierarchy stretching between low, middle, and high. The high-brow, originally a term of denigration invented by Van Wyck Brooks at the turn of the century, was inverted semiotically to designate that which had to be protected from the "spreading ooze," as Dwight MacDonald called it, of mass culture.

It is thus surprising to discover in the early 1950s a group of intellectuals and cultural commentators and critics whose efforts were directed toward defining television as an aesthetic medium, against the efforts of the majority of intellectuals to define popular culture as inauthentic and the sign of the dissolution of culture. This may account for the absence, until quite recently, of any discussion of the television aesthetic. The aesthetic norms developed for television, based for the most part on the privileging of

the original teledramas, focused on the psychological realism of the portrayal of individuals in particular social circumstances. The dramas, as some critics pointed out, conveyed reality with a high degree of verisimilitude due to the formal aspects of the medium itself, both in terms of the immediacy of reception, but also in the intimacy created both by the camera's ability to focus on details and the combination of small screen size and intimacy of viewing conditions. The intimacy so achieved by television was considered to be the way in which television brought us closer, ontologically, to the real "as it is." However, this closer proximity to the real was not simply the product of the formal aspects of television as medium, but was also an effect of the contents of the dramas, which were linked closely to the formal aspects of the aesthetic itself. As will be described later, the teleplays often involved lower- and lower-middle-class types unable to resolve their dilemmas against the backdrop of seemingly immutable social forces and relations. The portrayals of certain class and character types constituted a social realism as well as a psychological realism to the degree that race and class came in through the backdoor, so to speak, in the way those issues mediated the character structures of the teleplays.

The elements of social realism links these works with the reformist tendencies and political aims of the art of the thirties, and the documentary style realism that emerged

in the post-depression years; this corresponds to the critical description of the teledramas as "slice of life" realism. The original teleplays nevertheless reflected transitions occurring in cultural production generally in the intervening period, and thus cannot be described as merely continuing the social realism that emerged in the thirties. The concentration on character over action in the dramas was not only a product of the formal constraints of the medium itself, but also reflective of the shift from the emphasis on material conditions in the early thirties toward a preoccupation with existentialist and Freudian metapsychology beginning near the end of the decade. Arguably, since television dramaturgy was influenced primarily by the theatre, the contemporary emphasis on psychological realism was imported tel quel into the television dramas. However, as will be examined below, this emphasis on the psychology of the individual was of a general social concern, which in turn was expressed in cultural production generally. Thus, television itself, and critical texts that accompanied it, were affected in part by preoccupations circulating in American society generally, and consequently reflected those preoccupations both in aesthetic practices and critical texts. At the risk of appearing functionalist, the critical writing of the period can be described as being reflective of the social concerns over individual adjustment in relation to society.

The texts aimed at constructing a television aesthetic thus shared with the emerging modernism certain tendencies with regard to the level of focus vis-à-vis aesthetic practice. As Warren Susman suggests in regard to the relationship between high and popular culture, "there must be some relationship, if not in form then in content (issues, problems, themes) or if not in content perhaps in form."¹⁰ This suggests that popular culture shares preoccupations with "high" culture, at minimum to the extent that they co-exist synchronically. Susman poses this as a question rather than an affirmation; here we will attempt within a limited scope to demonstrate that such relationship does indeed exist, and that the practices and discourses in one domain cannot be understood without reference to other domains, including aesthetic practices and political, social, or theoretical discourses. The relationship between these areas holds true at least to the extent that one makes the analytic distinctions (such as between high and low) that divide culture into distinct domains.

Underscoring this sense of shared values is not, however, to suggest that cultural domains function synchronically to the extent that analysis of one domain's discourses and practices can predict dispositions in

¹⁰ Warren Susman, "Communication and Culture," in Mass Media Between the Wars: Perception of Cultural Tension, 1918-1941, ed. Catherine Covert and John Stevens (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University, 1984), xix.

another. Here we might borrow the idea of "social formation" from Nicos Poulantzas taken up by Frederic Jameson, who writes that

every social formation or historically existing society has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of several modes of production all at once, including vestiges and survivals of older modes of production, now relegated to structurally dependent positions within the new, as well as anticipatory tendencies which are potentially inconsistent with the existing system but have not yet generated an autonomous space of their own.¹¹

As Jameson goes on to add:

The temptation to classify texts according to the appropriate mode of production is thereby removed, since the texts emerge in a space in which we may expect them to be crisscrossed and intersected by a variety of impulses from contradictory modes of cultural production all at once.¹²

The latter is especially interesting with regard to the emergence of a television aesthetic. Rather than identifying something that might be isolated as a pure discourse constitutive of the specificity of a television aesthetic, this discourse has to be understood as the product of the intersection of a "variety of impulses." This understanding leads directly to the necessity of examining the texts concerned with developing an aesthetic of television in relation to other formations and discursive elaborations of what can be designated as aesthetic.

¹¹ Frederic Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1981), 95. (Emphasis original.)

¹² Ibid.

The idea of a dialectic in which certain cultural values predominate over others at given historical junctures becomes important here. Against a functionalist perspective that views cultural activity as reflective of social relations at a given historical moment, we have to see development in terms of the structural coexistence of several modes of production simultaneously, as Jameson rightly points out. However, the model adopted by Jameson appears to be occupied nonetheless with the notion of the replacement of older forms by newer, within a telos typical of modernist dispositions. Rather than dominant, vestigial, and emergent forms, the case of the American dialectic, shuttling between the alternatives of individualism and communitarianism, remains unresolved. As such, there is no sublation occurring, in which synthesis is achieved along the lines of a Hegelian model of progressive historical development. Undoubtedly newer forms emerge, but they nevertheless retain vestiges of older practices. This was certainly the case with television, as it moved through a hybrid fusion of theatre and radio on its way toward the appearance of plays written specifically for the television medium. At the same time, however, they contain elements of social reformism drawn from thirties literature and dramaturgy, as well as picking up elements drawn from re-emerging modernist tendencies -- especially notable in the emphasis on form as it appears in the critical texts on the

television aesthetic. Although the teleplays were characterized critically as "new" and "original," the criteria used to defend their aesthetic worth were drawn in large part from the emphasis on form that was central to modernist discourses from the 1940s onward.

There is nevertheless some confusion, as Susman emphasizes, concerning the terms of the relationship between content and form with regard to cultural developments. Susman suggests that the emergence of a new technology of communication (such as television) is often understood as productive of a radical transformation in culture, something that he denies: "Certain formal elements may change without any deeper social or even psychological changes."¹³ This was the case with television: in the terms expressed by Jameson, the realist aesthetic promulgated by certain television critics was a residue of a "vestigial" mode of production. The modernism that emerges in the same period is also, however, in its turn a vestige of older modes of production as well. As has been suggested, both modernism and realism also share a common root in the radical repudiation of the Genteel Tradition. It must also be kept in mind that the modernism promulgated during this period was concerned with formal innovation in traditional artistic media, and completely ignored or dismissed the aesthetic potentials of the newer mass media.

¹³ Susman, "Communication and Culture," xix.

What is important with regard to the emergence of the television aesthetic is that despite its newness qua technology, the aesthetic that emerged was based upon a realism which, in contrast to the burgeoning modernist innovations occurring in the traditional arts, seemed anachronistic. As described later, the political circumstances that favoured abstraction and self-absorption marked an important shift with regard to aesthetic production and dispositions toward the continued exploitation of realism within popular media. In content, if not in form, the television aesthetic still elaborated upon a practice that had been in decline and disfavour for some time (although it persisted in bourgeois theatre), a disposition that defended the direct social function of art, and emphasized a populist approach toward representation, based on the premise that the realist work possessed a high degree of communicative (and critical) potential. This disposition was emphatically abandoned in the postwar period as the political climate changed, and aesthetic attitudes became increasingly privatized and expressive of individual consciousness or became absorbed in formal innovation. This is the context in which the television aesthetic appears as a vestige of an outmoded practice, and accounts, politically, for its demise. Thus Susman's question concerning form becomes relevant: the television aesthetic that emerged in the early fifties is an example which

demonstrates that the advent of a new medium in itself did not signal a radical change; rather, "deeper social or even psychological changes" were occurring in other spheres, which subsequently influenced the forms adapted for television.

Chapter Outline

This investigation proposes to consider the question of the historical place of aesthetic critique in television analysis, with attention to the relation of aesthetic theories to social theory and the political dynamics between intellectual formations espousing differing dispositions toward television. Emphasis will be placed on the historical role of these formations with respect to the initial development of television broadcasting in the early 1950s and the emergence of a television aesthetic during this period. As well as discussion of the development of a television aesthetic, of significant importance will be the examination of the failure of this aesthetic critique of television to establish itself as a norm. This failure is examined in relation to both network programming strategies and production practices. More important, however, is the discussion of the demise of an aesthetic of television in relation to competing intellectual and cultural formations and theories regarding the nature and effects of television. Particular emphasis will be given to the effects of mass

culture theory in the development of negative dispositions toward popular culture.

This thesis proceeds through a case study of the emergence of an intellectual formation in the U.S. in the early 1950s that sought to legitimize television as an art form and to construct aesthetic criteria specific to the television medium. This case is elaborated not to provide a context in which to debate the epistemological merits of various perspectives toward television research, but rather to grasp the historical dynamics that give rise to a particular disposition toward television. The values of this formation are then contrasted with the rise to dominance in the same period of a particular critical "paradigm" over others, engendered through the power of a widely-shared social theory that strictly separated art and mass media. The foreclosure on aesthetic debates over television in the mid-1950s sets the parameters for subsequent research in epistemological terms. Thus a particular understanding of the social (and of television for that matter) has to be examined in terms of the power of specific configurations to legitimize that view, and the methodological and epistemological consequences stemming from that understanding. The failure of an aesthetic of television to obtain such legitimacy and normative validity therefore provides a significant historical case wherein we

can empirically examine the dynamics by which a given medium obtains a determinate form.

Chapter two is centred on sketching out in introductory outline the "problem" of aesthetics vis-à-vis mass media research. In similar terms to that outlined in brief above, this chapter will examine the emergence of social theories of a bifurcated society, and the consequences of this particular conception. The restriction of aesthetic analysis to specific modes of production and reception will be assessed with attention to their constitutive effects for mass media research in general, in terms of the limits placed epistemically on the types of research questions that can subsequently be posed.

We will then take up the question of historical transformations of attitudes expressed toward different media and the opening this provides for an understanding of media as discursively constructed in historically contingent ways. This is followed by an examination of more recent television research, with consideration of the liabilities of such research framed in terms of the epistemic limits outlined in earlier discussion of the emergence of critical theories of mass media. We will trace the contours of the effects of disciplinary struggle that include the relations between film and television criticism, the importation of Continental theories, and, in particular, the evacuation of aesthetic approaches to television criticism. These

approaches are then contrasted with the developments of recent television history and historiography that is seen to be more appropriate to the case undertaken here, and potentially able to overcome the ahistorical aspects of theoretically-driven television criticism. Those historical accounts that focus on structural or political economic approaches to the television industry cannot, however, fully account for the emergence of aesthetic practices and discourses in television's early phases. We therefore argue that a gap exists in these accounts that must be addressed by a cultural approach, since these practices and discourses are not solely the product of industrial conditions, but also are determined by prevailing cultural dispositions that are external to, and predate, the development of the television industry infrastructure.

We then shift to a theoretical discussion regarding the relation between what Habermas defines as "production" as the making and consumption of commodities, and other forms of activity designated as "interaction." In terms of the subsequent analysis presented in this study, the distinction between the two domains is crucial to understanding that cultural practice is not governed by relations of production, but guided by social interactions that determine the norms for practice. This is especially important with regard to the way that both aesthetic and social-theoretical discourses function to outline the contours that determine

(as in the case of television) what will be taken as appropriate forms of aesthetic practice. Historical analysis is then seen as the process of uncovering the enabling conditions for the historical appearance of a category of analysis, in this case, the use of aesthetic criteria in relation to television criticism. This chapter explores the possibility of prising open the level of interaction concerned with the formation of norms, and to apply that to the relations between intellectual, critical and social formations.

Chapter three presents a detailed textual analysis of the critical writings that develop a set of criteria constitutive of the television aesthetic as it emerged in the early 1950s. The chapter begins with a brief overview that traces the history of broadcast criticism beginning in the 1920s. Discussion then turns to the material and spatial conditions that enabled both television production and a particular aesthetic framework to emerge in the cultural milieu of postwar New York City. The aesthetic is then traced through its initial stages as a hybrid form developed with influences from radio formats and theatrical dramaturgy, up until the emergence of the production of original plays written specifically for television. The critical texts that emerge in this period are then analyzed in terms of their shared criteria with regard to the key features they privilege as the essential elements of

television, and the basis upon which the aesthetic potentials of television would be realized. What emerges is a form of "psychological" realism, referred to as the "slice of life" school of drama, which reflects the presumed ontological proximity to reality that television, as a medium, is said to possess.

Chapter four reviews the realist aspects of the television aesthetic, and traces the emergence of realism in American cultural practices at the turn of the century. This chapter examines the attacks on the Genteel Tradition of American cultural production at that time, and the development of a realist aesthetic in literature and the visual arts that sought the "truth" of the emerging American culture within the popular and the vernacular. The populist dimensions of the television aesthetic are traced back to this initial impulse to seek the foundations of genuine American culture within the popular, and the concomitant rejection of European aristocratic models of culture. Particular emphasis is given to the question of the real, and the struggle over representational practices that would bring art closer to the realities of the everyday of American social and cultural life, issues that reemerge in the aesthetic criticism of television. Discussion then proceeds to the outlines of realist dramaturgy as it emerged in the 1930s, and the relationship between social reform and cultural practices that are a characteristic feature of this

period, and the transition over the decade from a social realist aesthetic toward a realism emphasizing the psychological dimensions of characterization, which then leads directly to the type of dramaturgical practice imported into the original television dramas. This chapter establishes the cultural antecedents of the television aesthetic and demonstrates how these antecedents provide the basis upon which it can develop its legitimacy.

The fifth chapter examines the collapse of the aesthetic of television and investigates the problematic status of television in relation to increasing sociological and cultural concerns over the effects of mass media, especially as they arose in the postwar context. Here, the examination is broadened to demonstrate how larger cultural and political currents, the influence of which can be detected in the discursive strategies of the texts on the television aesthetic, also worked to deny the aesthetic merit of television and popular culture generally, and thus led to the demise of the television aesthetic. We begin with a discussion of the critical backlash to the dramas that had previously been considered the acme of aesthetic expression in television. This discussion is then linked to the increasingly problematic status of fictional portrayals of the real related both to the collapse of liberal reform and the tensions of the Cold War, and to the increasing attacks on popular media from both liberal and conservative

quarters. as well as to the reinstallation of an aristocratic elitist conception of culture through the efforts of modernist critics. It is argued that, on the one hand, the complex and often contradictory status of politics in this period resulted in a retreat from social and political engagement on the part of artists and, on the other hand, that this process was aided by the critical promotion of a l'art pour l'art attitude that sought to isolate "high" culture production from the popular. The effects of this political shift are seen as fatal to the attempts to establish television as a legitimate site of aesthetic worth, and therefore precipitated the failure of the project to establish an aesthetic criticism of television.

The final chapter addresses postwar modernist aesthetics which were rooted in the cultural experience of the avant-garde, and notes how some of its elements appear in the television aesthetic. The appearance of these elements within the aesthetic discourse of television confirms the existence of a shared sensibility that informed both television aesthetic criticism and other forms of aesthetic criticism of the period. Despite sharing certain approaches with vanguard modernism, however, the television aesthetic is also viewed in dialectical opposition with modernist tendencies regarding the locus of aesthetic production. Thus this chapter addresses the problematic of

authenticity in relation to privileged media and modes of production. The failure of the television aesthetic to obtain a critical mass is examined in terms of its relations to network structures, other prevailing intellectual trends, and political attitudes both toward mass media and its content. The chapter is concerned with grasping the larger dimensions of intellectual movements of the period, in terms of addressing the background of taste formations and their effect on social understanding. The development of the television aesthetic discussed in the previous chapters is contextualized in terms of broader intellectual currents circulating in the 1950s. The solidifying of the differentiation between high and low, authentic and inauthentic, over the preceding century that led to a certain social and cultural configuration produce the outlines of the context into which the television aesthetic was received. Here the agenda of those fostering an aesthetic approach to television must be considered in relation to the broader intellectual concerns of the time about the state of the social and the status of television within it.

A Note of the Usage of Terms

Inevitably, the usage of particular terms, especially when drawn from the repertoire of aesthetic theory and art criticism, comes under scrutiny, and begs some form of definition. This is particularly the case with the use of

terms such as naturalism, realism, and modernism. Although an attempt might be made to fix a definition of realism and modernism that might be productive enough for subsequent discussion, this would undermine the historical character of these concepts. They have no immutable and final content, but signify differently at different historical moments. While the meanings of such terms always share some basic similarities across time, at different historical moments they take on different characteristics and emphasize different elements drawn from a constellation of descriptors that can be mobilized to stand "behind the back," so to speak, of the terms.

This can be further clarified with the sense in which form is understood to operate within the historical process affecting the shifting signification of these terms. The notion put forward later that realism emerges as the 'product of a social demand' finds its basis in the Marxist idea that praxis is productive of form; as Henri Lefebvre puts it, if "every praxis is content, this content creates forms."¹⁴ These forms, as he notes, can be aesthetic forms -- those which concern us here. Although the commodity form is the most significant for Marx, he (nor Lefebvre) by no means limits the idea of form to the commodity, or its "pure" form, money.

¹⁴ Henri Lefebvre, The Sociology of Marx, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 46-6.

As Lefebvre suggests, content "is content by virtue of the form born of its contradiction; these it usually resolves imperfectly, and seeks to impose coherence on the content."¹⁵ Thus form in turn reacts back upon praxis, and mediates the content out of which it initially arose. This is the case with the television aesthetic, which emerges as a complex of different historically derived forms, and which seeks to impose its own coherence on television practice. Important in this process is the illusion of solidification, and in this respect, "form is deceptive:"

it induces false impressions, erroneous thinking: namely, the impression of fixidity, confusion between the natural (immobile) thing, and the social thing (abstract, hence formed historically).¹⁶

This warning points us toward the understanding that form is a social product, and therefore historical; it furthermore carries with it "a very special process: reification."¹⁷

This is brought out emphatically by Perry Anderson, when he describes modernism as a "portmanteau" concept:

what is concealed beneath the label "modernism" is a wide variety of very diverse -- indeed incompatible -- aesthetic practices . . . These -isms, which spell out specific programs, were unified post hoc in a portmanteau concept whose only referent is the blank passage of time.¹⁸

¹⁵ Ibid., 46.

¹⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Perry Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution," in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Carey Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois,

Anderson points directly to the imperfect resolution that modernism (and mutatis mutandis, realism), as a category, performs on the variety of practices it attempts to make cohere under its sign, and he thus tries to explode the reification process that reduces complex historical processes and practices to a unified whole.

We must be especially attentive to this warning in regard to the analysis of forms, which must be taken up in relation to their historical development, for, as Marx writes, "Man's [sic] reflection on the forms of social life, and consequently, also, his scientific analysis of these forms, take a course directly opposite to that of their actual historical development. He begins post festum [where] the results of the process of development . . . have already taken on the stability of natural, self-understood forms."¹⁹ Of course, this is precisely Anderson's point, that categories such as modernism not become naturalized to the degree that they become retroactively applied as a category to explain historical phenomena.

Despite this, at the risk of violating the above dicta, both modernism and realism will be employed as useful terms. Although they may not, as Anderson insists, be reducible to specific instances or movements (the "-isms"), they

1988), 332.

¹⁹ Karl Marx, Capital, v. I, quoted in Lefebvre, op. cit., 47-8.

nevertheless operate as regulative ideas, or what Lefebvre calls "juridical principles." This is to say that there are forms, superstructural if you want, which regulate, adjudicate (or perhaps better, mediate) practices. Categories such as realism and modernism function in this way, not only retroactively in a reified manner, but also in the way they organize praxis that will take specific historical forms at different junctures (hence the proliferation of "-isms"). As Lefebvre notes, "the abstract thing, the form . . . cannot carry the process of reification to its conclusion. It cannot free itself from the human relationships it tends to dominate . . . It cannot fully exist qua thing. It remains an abstract thing for and through human beings."²⁰ This we can take to mean, aside from its insistence on the necessity of human action in this process, that in regard to regulative or juridical principles, specific forms will be given through the application, if you will, of the principle in a given historical instance.

We can by way of this insight underline the character of realism and modernism as regulative ideas, as forms themselves, while at the same time recognizing that they do not have specific content, since they are rules, not actual practices (and thus behave like the law), which take on specific forms at different moments. These specific forms

²⁰ Lefebvre, Sociology, 48.

would have to be examined, as Marx suggests, in terms of their historical unfolding. Thus Anderson is correct insofar as he uncovers the violence that the category does to the specificity of various practices, but he fails to recognize their mediating function and, indeed, their political function.

For our purposes, it is useful to maintain the usage of the categories of realism and modernism, but with the proviso that these will take specific form at given moments, and that these forms must be analyzed with that historical specificity in mind. The idea of form brought out here allows us to grasp that both realist and modernist strategies of representation are the forms that provide the solution to the crisis engendered by the collapse of the Genteel Tradition and the centrality that representing the real takes on subsequent to that collapse.

As Anderson remarks, modernism is typically and often simply defined in a case of conventional semiotic difference "by way of contrast with realist and other classical forms in the nineteenth, eighteenth, or earlier centuries."²¹ In terms of the usage of modernism in this text, a certain confusion appears with regard to the fact that it is difficult to prise apart realism and modernism in their initial stages of development in America at the turn of the century, since they are connected in terms of the impulse to

²¹ Anderson, "Modernity and Revolution," 322.

break with the Genteel Tradition. This leads to the first crucial point, which is that when this text refers to modernism, it refers only to the development of American modernism, distinct from other movements occurring simultaneously in Europe. Secondly, there is the tendency herein to be guilty of the reductionism that Anderson bemoans, which is undertaken for the sake of clarity -- to the extent that is possible -- by avoiding a proliferation of terms that might lead to confusion. As an excuse, this essay is not about American modernist movements per se, and therefore lacks the specificity that would be necessary if that were the case.

The term modernism is therefore limited to two basic, if inadequate types, which are inferred on the basis of analysis of the historical texts from which the provisional definitions of these two types are then subsequently drawn. The first refers to innovation at the formal level with regard to the structure of various media; in other words, formalism. Second, the term also refers at times to another prevalent tendency, which is toward the expression of the internal consciousness of the artist, most notable in the period we are concerned with here in Abstract Expressionism. It became unavoidable to use both of these senses in order to make the discussion comprehensible, since both dimensions are relevant to understanding the accounts of the period.

The sense in which it is being employed is in most cases identified by the context in which it is presented.

In addition, at times there is the effort to configure certain tendencies within modernism as forms of aestheticism. This is related to an important shift in the understanding of the communicative function of the work of art. Modernism is characterized as a retreat from the communicative potentials of aesthetic experience by deliberately making the work opaque to meaning, primarily through abstraction and an emphasis on formal dimensions at the cost of alienation from the work.

This is contrasted with realism, much in the differential manner described by Anderson. However, the contrast has not only to do with the superficial formal aspects of the work -- that is, the contrast between figurative and non-figurative work -- but also, and more importantly, in relation to the social and communicative functions of the work of art. Realism in this sense is seen as an attempt to convey the world as it is relative to actual social conditions; the verisimilitude of the realist work thus attempts an intimacy with existing conditions (and is often critical of those conditions), as contrasted with modernism, which tended to seal itself off from any direct referent to the quotidian. Thus the realism referred to here is engaged to the degree that it attempts to utilize to the fullest extent possible the communicative potentials

available through the process of identification that occurs in aesthetic experience. This is accomplished through making things recognizable; the prime example being the work of the American Scene movement, which attempted to capture life in America as it was. The contrast is therefore between an art form that is socially engaged -- realism -- and one that retreats into the private -- modernism -- in line with the dialectical aspect of American cultural development outlined briefly above.

Finally, the question of the aesthetic also needs to be addressed. Of course, definitions of the aesthetic are notoriously varied and contested. Indeed, this text attempts to underline the historical contestation over what constitutes the aesthetic, which objects can be designated as aesthetic, and ipso facto as art. The definitions of the aesthetic of modernism and realism, such as they are described above, are determined for the most part by the way they appear to be defined according to the textual evidence drawn from the time period with which this inquiry is concerned. As much as possible, the term aesthetic or art is understood in relation to and in the context of the historical circumstances of its usage. There is therefore no attempt to define the aesthetic as such, but rather the effort is directed toward grasping how the term is employed and contested within the time period addressed in this text. Leaving the question of definition to aestheticians and

philosophers, the task here is to underscore the way in which this and other terms are employed strategically in the politics of culture.

CHAPTER 2

THE EMERGENCE OF THE AESTHETIC AS A DOMAIN OF INQUIRY

But the ludicrous inquiry of that French mathematician, who asked, "What does that prove?" after seeing Racine's Iphégenie, is appropriate here. This question may seem ludicrous and also narrow-minded. Yet, it is, as a purely rational question, in keeping with a specific and great tradition of alienation from the arts . . . It is significant that, in all great systems of reason in the rationalistic modern age, the aesthetic component is omitted.

Ernst Bloch, "The Artistic Illusion as the Visible Anticipatory Illumination"

The question of an aesthetic of television cannot be pursued in the abstract; this is so because, as the following chapters are intended to demonstrate, the usage of aesthetic categories, even the mere invocation of the term aesthetics itself, implies the invocation of a set of values which are ascribed to different objects, that is, they are designated objects of aesthetic worth or as works of art. This is to say that they are appropriated by discourse, excorporated and re-incorporated into aesthetic discourses and given attributes which are not inherent to the objects

themselves, but as Kant pointed out, given in the act of aesthetic judgement itself.¹

One cannot, therefore, set out to discuss the "aesthetic" of television without encountering the latent values that govern the usage of aesthetic terms. It is, however, conceivable to avoid these difficulties through shifting into a different mode, wherein one can seek to identify the constellation of what constitutes at given moments aesthetic dispositions and attitudes, and what is nominated properly as art within those moments. This would be, as William Boddy suggests, to "remain agnostic, and likewise sceptical of the unqualified aesthetic superiority" with regard to the claims made for particular programmes or genres.² Thus, rather than applying notions of the aesthetic anachronistically, it is more appropriate to seek understanding via the sets of relations and values which (over)determine notions of aesthetic worth at given historical junctures. We are, however, blocked from this understanding in part by the legacy of critical

¹ "That which in the representation of an object is merely subjective, i.e. which decides its reference to the subject, not to the object, is its aesthetical character; . . . [the subject] will therefore speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a characteristic of the object and the judgement logical . . . although it is only aesthetical and involves merely a reference of the representation of the object to the subject." Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgement, trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 25, 46.

² William Boddy, Fifties Television: The Industry and its Critics (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 8.

communications research itself. Until the values inherent in critical approaches are broken with, it is difficult to analyze the history of television outside of a critique which begins with a negative taste judgement regarding popular culture. As Robert Allen has pointed out with regard to soap operas -- which can be applied to all fictional television programmes -- they "took on meaning within American critical or aesthetic discourse primarily through their exclusion from the referential field of that discourse: the field of 'art'."³

What will be traced out briefly here is the transformation of the theoretical question concerning an aesthetic of television into an empirical, historical question. This should allow the reader to understand why the research problematic emerges as it does, and the kind of theoretical and methodological issues that are raised along with it. This problematic marks out the trajectory of a movement from the discussion of the theory of media to the practice of history, which also harbours traces of a logic that assumes shape in terms of a methodology for historical inquiry into the medium of television that is central to this dissertation.

³ Robert C. Allen, Speaking of Soap Operas (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1985), 12.

The Category of the Aesthetic and Critical Theory

Until fairly recently, the category of the aesthetic has been rarely utilized, let alone addressed, in critical television studies. For empirical sociology, or what has been known since Lazarsfeld as "administrative research," the idea of aesthetic experience did not seem to even exist.⁴ With the notable exception of Horace Newcomb, and possibly Herbert Gans, or more recently David Thorburn, no one seemed much interested in pursuing television as an aesthetic object.⁵ Even Newcomb appears to have abandoned his aesthetic approach in favour of one informed by the cultural anthropology of Erving Goffman and Victor Turner, and Gans' approach has been rightly criticized for being "uses and gratifications" in sheep's clothing; in any case,

⁴ Lazarsfeld does in fact address the question of aesthetic criticism with regard to the mass media in "The Role of Criticism in the Management of Mass Media," Journalism Quarterly 25 (June 1948). This is discussed in detail in chapter 5.

⁵ Horace Newcomb, ed., Television: The Critical View (New York: Oxford University, 1976); Horace Newcomb, TV: The Most Popular Art (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1974); Herbert Gans, Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste (New York: Basic Books, 1974); David Thorburn, "Television as an Aesthetic Medium," Critical Studies in Mass Communication 4 (1987). See also Charlotte Brunson, "Problems With Quality," Screen 31 (1990), and her "Television: Aesthetics and Audiences," in Patricia Mellencamp, ed. Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990).

neither (Thorburn aside) appears to have stimulated any research.⁶

One possible reason for this was the effects of theoretical influences that emerged with the reappearance of "critical" television studies in the early 1980s. As E. Ann Kaplan writes in her introduction to one of the early anthologies of television criticism, the effects of the language paradigm drawn from structuralist and post-structuralist theories imported from Europe within critical media research resulted in the consideration of television "texts" to be "produced . . . by the dominant signifying practice within which they are embedded . . . embody[ing] the dominant ideology of culture."⁷ The valorization of television studies at this juncture was thus obtained through the legitimacy provided by a set of theoretical figures grounded in a disposition that viewed media merely as the site for the discursive reproduction of class relations. Despite the turn to superstructural concerns, to culture, the economistic residues in ideology critique appear to have promoted an analysis of television that has been too one-sided. As George Lipsitz writes, "creation, communication, and reception all respond to commercial

⁶ On Gans, see William Boddy, "Loving a Nineteen-Inch Motorola: American Writing on Television," in E. Ann Kaplan, ed. Regarding Television: Critical Approaches -- An Anthology (Frederick, Md.: American Film Institute).

⁷ E. Ann Kaplan, introduction to Regarding Television, xiv.

imperatives within mass communication, but they are at least partially autonomous from strict commercial concerns as well. What models do justice to the centrality of economics to mass communication without becoming reductionist and one-dimensional?"⁸ Within the legacy of Critical Theory, it is hard to imagine what those models might be, since it consistently returns mass media analysis to the base. Charlotte Brunsdon has noted the way that "television is constructed through reference to that which is other than television -- already existing and validated art forms . . . Television is the object of the naïve gaze against which the aesthetic gaze is constructed."⁹

Much of the early Marxian approaches to mass media could not think of television as anything but false consciousness, a delivery system for ideology.¹⁰ Even the revolt against Althusserianism did very little to change this view, but merely democratized it by offering resistance and

⁸ George Lipsitz, "'This Ain't No Sideshow': Historians and Media Studies, Critical Studies in Mass Communications 5 (1988): 158.

⁹ Charlotte Brunsdon, "Television: Aesthetics and Audiences," 61.

¹⁰ For a discussion of ideology critique and its transformations vis-à-vis television studies, see Mimi White, "Ideological Analysis and Television," in Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism, 2d rev. ed., ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), esp. 165-66.

negotiation as alternatives to domination.¹¹ Here we can recognize the rather strict adherence to the early tone set by the members of the Frankfurt School, primarily in the essay "Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," by Horkheimer and Adorno.¹² One of the central tenets of this essay, echoed in Greenberg, MacDonald, and other mass culture critics (as well as remaining implicit in current ideological critiques), is that the organized form of production constitutive of mass media precludes consideration of those media from an aesthetic perspective.¹³ Echoing in turn a disavowed Kantianism (both in terms of the concept of genius and of "disinterested interestedness"), Horkheimer and Adorno consider that the profit motive attests to an interest that cannot be reconciled with the aesthetic purism they espoused. As Martin Jay has noted, "Dialectical social research was receptive to insights generated from man's prescientific experience . . . it recognized the validity of aesthetic imagination, of fantasy, as a repository of

¹¹ See, for example, Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Culture, Media, and Language, ed. Stuart Hall, et al. (London: Hutchinson, 1973).

¹² In Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1986), 120-167.

¹³ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in Art and Culture: Critical Essays (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961); Dwight MacDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture," in Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957).

genuine human aspirations."¹⁴ Although aimed primarily at traditional sociological research, the point also holds for Marxist thinkers: "Both extremes either misconstrue subjectivity as either totally autonomous or totally contingent."¹⁵ Key here is the appeal to an aesthetic that forestalls the ideological foreclosure on meaning and refuses to give in to the totalizing impulse behind both positivist and Marxist research. Although art is normally invoked as that which is dialectically opposed to mass media (as it certainly was for the Frankfurt School), attention to the aesthetic dimensions of mass media would be required to overcome the one-sidedness of a purely ideological approach. This would require overcoming the prejudices that favour a view of art and aesthetics as an autonomous social subsystem distinct from quotidian experience (that fully-instrumentalized area where the mass media operate). This would mean going back to that form of Critical Theory that refused to see cultural phenomena as merely "an ideological reflex of class interests,"¹⁶ and overcoming the constraints on analysis produced by the radical separation of art and mass media. In a way this promise has been broken, since those insights could no longer be obtained

¹⁴ Martin Jay, The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 82.

¹⁵ Ibid., 81.

¹⁶ Ibid., 178.

through mass media, which, through time, came to be analyzed almost exclusively from an ideological perspective.

There is an unresolved contradiction that inhabits the core of Adorno's thinking, wherein the best art would reveal the truth against the lie of ideology, but at the same time withdraws from the world. The emphasis on protest over against the possible truth value immanent to the contents of the works themselves indicates a withdrawal that takes the principle of non-identity to the extreme, and denies any effective place for art within a world presumed to be overburdened by instrumental reason. Although sensitive to the economistic impulse lurking behind ideology critique, Adorno and others break the promise of Critical Theory by returning both mass media and the avant-garde to the logic of the base: "Like its counterpart, avant-garde art, the entertainment industry determines its own language, down to its very syntax and vocabulary, by the use of anathema. The constant pressure to produce new effects (which conform to the old pattern) serves merely as another rule to increase the power of the conventions."¹⁷ Thus even the fate of art, supposed to be mass media's opposite, appears sealed.

If this avenue appears blocked due to the historical accretion of hostility toward mass media underwritten by the initial claims of the Frankfurt School, a possible alternative might be derived from hermeneutics, in

¹⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno, "Culture Industry," 128.

particular that of Gadamer and Jauss.¹⁸ Gadamer provides an ontology of the work of art in relation to a notion of community, and, more importantly, thematizes the aesthetic as the starting point for an epistemology grounded in a different conception of truth from that of the natural sciences (the epigraph from Bloch is pertinent here). Despite the counter-Enlightenment tendencies of Adorno and Horkheimer, their monological conception of reason (Zweckrationalität) prevented them from reconstructing a humanist conception of truth as logica probabilium as Gadamer does. Jauss goes a step further by taking issue with Adorno's concept of negativity, demonstrating how this is not a quantifiable social object, but is subject to shifting historical relations. By reintroducing the concept of identification, Jauss is able to construct a theory of aesthetic experience that restores the communicative function of the work of art. The resurrection of the communicative function of art (over against a concept of the work of art that "denounce[s] the prevailing forms of communication as instruments of destruction" held out the promise of reconciling aesthetics and mass media.¹⁹

¹⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1986); Hans Robert Jauss, Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982).

¹⁹ Max Horkheimer, "Art and Mass Culture," in Critical Theory and Society (New York: Seabury Press), 279.

Unfortunately, however solid this critique may be -- Jauss does provide empirical evidence of shifting modes of reception of art works -- it is still hostile to television and mass media in general.²⁰ Although philosophical hermeneutics and the Rezeption Ästhetik are more open to interaction with the art work, they still operate under the sign of the authentic, over against mass media as inauthentic. From this point of view, the history of philosophy cannot get around the taste judgement that lurks beneath the notion of authenticity.

We are thus still left with the epistemological and historical problem stemming from the evacuation of the aesthetic from mass media analysis; the question of the absence of aesthetic critique is linked to that of the epistemological effects of theory in the reconstruction of social and cultural practices along hierarchical lines.²¹

²⁰ As Jauss comments, "edification in our time is confined to the lower depth of the hackneyed, the merely entertaining, and the demagogic; it makes its appearance in dime store novels, Harlequin romances, devotional objects, in the lyrics of pop tunes . . . in the age of the mass media [t]he 'dream factory' which satisfies the demand for a 'better world' sublates the cognitive distance of admiration, and the flooding of the viewer with stimuli can set off defensive strategies of unimpression-ability which cut off all aesthetic communication." Aesthetic Experience, 98, 171-2.

²¹ As Jauss remarks of Rousseau's attacks on the theatre, "they anticipate something for which the culture industry and mass media are being attacked today, i.e., manipulation. They thus make manifest the unavowed puritanical derivation of materialist 'commodity aesthetics' and ideology critique." Aesthetic Experience, 40-1.

Here, it seems possible that, as an alternative, the aesthetic could be opened up along historical lines by tracing out, not only views on art, but also attitudes concerning social development and social theory together. Thus the extent to which an aesthetic concept could be restored implies a reconstruction along the lines suggested in Habermas' analysis of the concept of Öffentlichkeit (public sphere), or Eagleton's Ideology of the Aesthetic.²² This appears to be a much more promising line of inquiry, since it implies an empirical-historical basis that would overcome the one-sidedness of theoretical inquiry (such as merely counterpoising the hermeneutic approach to the marxian) by being able to substantiate claims through appeal to the historical register and the documentation of the shifting meaning of different categories (such as that of the aesthetic). The potential for explanation via a reconstruction of the relations between the discourse of social theory and social development, and the transformation of the concept of the aesthetic within and between those two elements, appears good, considering the rewards for understanding obtained in Habermas' analysis. This type of inquiry could be undertaken in a practical fashion in terms of a case study.

²² Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1989); Terry Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

Against the manipulation of abstract philosophical concepts and theoretical interventions, a careful analysis of a specific historical instance could itself raise the theoretical and methodological claims, over against the current theory-driven models that often operate in an a priori fashion of seeking evidence to back predetermined understandings of the social.

Television and Objecthood

One of the initial problems facing the historical researcher, and indeed a persistent problem in television analysis generally, is how one is to determine what television is. This is no trivial matter, as the discussion to this point suggests, since one's disposition in this regard will likely overdetermine the questions one asks and, consequently, what kinds of results research will yield. As Eileen Meehan notes, "depending on the degree of abstraction, the focus of inquiry can shift from a particular individual (biography) to the interactions of persons acting on behalf of organizations (instrumentalism), to organizations as entities acting for themselves (institutionalism) to governmental and industrial entities pursuing interests across economic and political systems."²³

²³ Eileen Meehan, "Critical Theorizing on Broadcast History," Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media 30, 4 (Fall 1986): 394.

If, for instance, television is to be regarded strictly as a commercial enterprise, then understanding the development of television can be obtained by thinking of this development as a series of management problems -- problems and solutions that can be made meaningful by being reworked into an historical narrative.²⁴ Another way to think of television is as a set of "texts" encoded with ideology, which is assimilated in the watching and listening to those texts. Television is then a pathway or delivery system for the distribution of meanings that attempt to bind the social together.²⁵ Yet another way of thinking of television is as a medium of cultural expression. From this latter perspective, television can be thought of as expressive of more than simply either ideology or the reproduction of social relations, but also can be considered to embody a set of aesthetic potentials (although this disposition has, as both Brunson and Allen have recognized, become highly problematic within contemporary television criticism). Understood in this way, television can become

²⁴ See, for example, James Baughman, "Television in the 'Golden Age': An Entrepreneurial Experiment," Historian 47 (February 1985); or the essays in Hollywood in the Age of Television, ed. Tino Balio (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

²⁵ Much of British Cultural Studies has concentrated on this relationship between textual "meaning" and audience reception. For a recent discussion of cultural studies and television, see John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television," in Channels of Discourse, Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism, 2d rev. ed., ed. Robert C. Allen (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992), 284-323.

the object of aesthetic analysis, ranging from the organicism of Aristotle or the formalism of Kant through to the recent emergence of an auteurist theory of television.²⁶ It is interesting to note that the latter, cultural, perspective is absent from Meehan's list, which indicates to some degree the prevalence of a bias toward industry accounts, and an understanding of television as mere commodity.

These examples, of course, are in no way exhaustive of the range of views on television, but they represent significantly different starting points and consequently yield significantly different insights. It is not proposed here to suggest that any one of these approaches is richer than another, although this inquiry does argue implicitly that, as Meehan suggests elsewhere, "While structural analysis identifies the economic dynamics that support innovation, such analysis does not explain the possibility of innovation."²⁷ This is the point at which a cultural analysis becomes crucial, since economic categories cannot account for the specific forms cultural practices take. Nevertheless, much as Meehan claims, a cultural account cannot be pursued in the absence of other accounts, since,

²⁶ On the latter see, for example, David Marc and Robert Thompson, Architects of the Air: The Makers of American Television (New York: Little and Brown, in press).

²⁷ Eileen Meehan, "Conceptualizing Culture as Commodity: The Problem of Television," Critical Studies in Mass Communication 3 (1986): 453.

given the constraints of any specific level of analysis, all accounts are partial. However, we might note in regard to the proffered examples that the substance of the knowledges yielded do not conflict with one another; this would thus not explain why we should prefer one disposition over another.

As Philip Drummond and Richard Paterson have noted, television is not "some unified essence, for as our studies show, television works at a range of levels, involving the economic and political conditions of production, distribution, and consumption, as well as formal and aesthetic operations of TV texts.²⁸ With regard to the question of research, this is substantively reiterated by Eileen Meehan, who writes that

As one moves through these levels of abstraction, one not only asks different questions, but also traces different dynamics, uses different data, and constructs different sorts of accounts explaining these data -- accounts that are intricately linked to the particular level of analysis and degree of abstraction. This is not to suggest that historical inquiry and its resulting accounts are doomed to inaccuracy or relativism. Far from it, the construction of these accounts adequate to the level of inquiry is an essential part of the research process.²⁹

Yet one or another in various guises and at different times has held sway over others; as Meehan notes, "in explaining

²⁸ Philip Drummond and Richard Paterson, editor' preface to Television in Transition: Papers From the First International Television Studies Conference (London: British Film Institute, 1985), vii.

²⁹ Meehan, "Critical Theorizing," 394.

how things happened, these accounts imply that the 'how' explains 'why'."³⁰ This "why," however, has taken different forms historically with regard to the meaning of television, on the basis of a process similar to that described by Thomas Kuhn as a "paradigm shift," something which both Meehan and Drummond and Paterson overlook.³¹ The different critical approaches they cite do not coexist pluralistically; they compete with one another in terms of understanding television and its placement within the social and cultural context. This is particularly the case regarding television, which is transformed periodically through the intercession of different cultural discourses or theories that resituate television within the social sphere and the spectrum of cultural production and consumption as a whole. From an historical perspective, television emerges at different times with different identities. This is especially the case with regard to television's cultural status.

The supposed pluralism of television's critical approaches is, however, symptomatic of the extent to which television, and other media for that matter, are constituted (and overdetermined) through the discursive apparatus that are overlaid on them. What this suggests is that there are

³⁰ Ibid., 395.

³¹ Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970).

no necessary constitutive or ontological differences between media, except possibly in the strictest material, physical sense. Television appears, at different times, through different accounts arising from differing dispositions, to be one thing and then another, which is the product of the discursive optic through which television is viewed, and not due to anything intrinsic to the medium itself.

To make this clearer, we can consider the case of the cinema which, as appears more and more the case with television, has gone through a series of distinctive, if not absolutely clear-cut historical transformations. To characterize this as briefly as possible, we can say that the cinema began its life as an artistic medium, became a mass medium, and was subsequently resurrected as an aesthetic medium. Television, unlike the motion picture, is still consistently regarded as a "bad" object; this is no longer the case with the cinema, a mass medium that previously had its own long history of being considered a bad object. If one were to ask the question as to how this distinction came about, it is clear that this is not a case of unequal development in which the longer history of film production could be seen as a historical progression toward higher quality, with television development lagging behind by virtue of its younger age (indeed, most accounts of television see this as inverted, that is, a "Golden Age" of aesthetic achievement followed by a "vast wasteland"). Most

significant for our purposes in relation to television is the latter stage of the cinema's transformation, the excorporation of certain films from the mainstream by the privileging of particular directors and their insertion into an aesthetic discourse of auteurism (a variation of Kantian genius), typified by the efforts of the critics of the Cahiers de cinéma in the fifties, for example, or by Andrew Sarris' "pantheon" of directors.³² In other words, cinema has been recuperated by way of auteur theory, and reinserted in an aesthetic discourse propped up by a distinction borrowed from Kantian aesthetics. The strong version sought to identify the characteristics and idiosyncrasies of directors imprinted on a heretofore seemingly uniform set of structures and patterns said to be shared by all commercial Hollywood cinema. As Robert Allen suggests, it was not "surprising that early attempts to pull some of the products of popular culture into the field of aesthetic discourse took the form of the discovery of 'authors' where none had been seen before. Such works were then legitimized because a 'source' had been established for the text's 'meaning'."³³

³² Andrew Sarris, American Cinema: Directors and Directions (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968).

³³ Allen, Soap Operas, 15. As will be discussed later, this was also the case in the 1950s regarding the privileging of the playwrights of the anthology dramas as the sign of their aesthetic authenticity.

The strategy of figurative excorporation from the mainstream mass and incorporation into aesthetic discourse suggests quite clearly the way in which a given medium (in this case film), and indeed a given work in a medium, can be transferred from the status of mere culture industry commodity into a work of art, and be both subjected to and legitimized by an aesthetic critique. What is important to note is that this transformation does not occur at the level of production, but in reception. Furthermore, it is a very particular and specific disposition toward the work that has little to do with a general audience, and everything to do with the stakes of the field in which discourse about the work is being produced.³⁴ How a given medium will be understood, and thereby the choice of analytical methods to which it will be subjected, has very little to do with the medium per se. It indicates that a medium is not intrinsically an art form, nor necessarily excluded from being one; the status that a medium might hold at a particular juncture is not given, but acquired through the intercession of a discourse that can legitimate it as art.

One might therefore ask what the conditions are under which this excorporation could be accomplished. Clearly, the status that a medium might hold as an art form is not

³⁴ See Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1984), especially "The Dynamics of the Fields," 226-256.

given ontologically, but requires the act of discursive legitimation; thus the question arises regarding how this might be brought about; this implies a further questioning of the relationship between sites of discourse production and actual cultural practices, with regard to film or other types of organized cultural production, such as television. This instance of a shift in the values ascribed to the practices in a given medium brings into question the notion of economic determination. It suggests that such interactions are not economic in character, but political and communicative in nature. In other words, exploring this set of relations might provide evidence that the interpenetration of discourse "spheres," so to speak, is not economic in character, and that the received histories of both film and television that stitch programme forms tightly to industry economic interests might be too narrowly conceived. This implies the shearing-off, if you will, of the political from political economy.³⁵

If such an historical transformation was apparently possible in film, might it not also be true of television? As William Boddy notes, "Attempts by broadcast historians to organize television programming into coherent chronological segments have largely confirmed the significance on the late 1950s as a transition between distinct television eras."³⁶

³⁵ See the discussion later in this chapter.

³⁶ Boddy, Fifties Television, 4.

If these changes "represented a repudiation of the aesthetic values promoted by prominent television critics and writers earlier in the decade," then clearly a period existed wherein television was regarded as an aesthetic medium.³⁷ Indeed, as Boddy goes on to write, "writers on television in the early 1950s constructed an unusually explicit and widely shared normative aesthetics of television drama."³⁸ Even the most cursory examination of literature on television written in the 1950s reveals a large number of texts that either used the word "art" in their titles, or discuss television as an art form. Unlike the cinema, the process of transformation between status as mass medium and status as art appears to have operated in reverse, where an aesthetic of television emerged during the initial stages of the development of the medium, only to disappear a few years later, during the latter half of the 1950s. For the most part, however, until recently, accounts of television's development have relied heavily on an ill-defined concept of a "Golden Age," spanning roughly the decade of the fifties, followed by a period of consolidation and stagnation lasting until quite recently. Much of the contemporary writing has been aimed toward shattering the myth of the Golden Age, which constitutes a myth to the extent that such a characterization renders it opaque to analysis. The

³⁷ Ibid., 1.

³⁸ Ibid.

accounts currently being criticized are so, as Boddy points out, "for encourag[ing] a personalist bias in television historiography, where program changes are accounted for by the preferences of specific producers or network leaders."³⁹ This point need not be quibbled with, although it perhaps underplays agency as much as the accounts it criticizes overplay the role of agents. The earlier accounts nevertheless depended for the construction of a Golden Age on particular programmes that could be said to represent the apex of aesthetic expression in television. The privileging of live dramas as the best that television could offer sets the stage for the decline of television based on their absence. The shattering of the "myth" of the Golden Age, however, leaves the basic value judgement undisturbed.

What is also left unexamined are the reasons why a particular genre of programming could be singled out as representative of an aesthetic of television, and the discursive resources that would provide the necessary means with which to mount an aesthetic discourse of television. The question that emerges consequently is: What are the historical conditions that allow for the emergence of an aesthetic discourse of television, and then, what are the factors that lead to its demise? It is modestly suggested that inquiry into this question has significant value in

³⁹ Ibid., 5.

respect to the historical understanding of the development of the television medium.

The Question Concerning Aesthetics

William Boddy, in the introduction to his book Fifties Television, quotes Edward Buscombe, who poses the question "Was the evolution of American television into its present form an inevitable process? To answer this question adequately would require a history of television which goes beyond the mere recording of the various technical, economic, and aesthetic developments, beyond merely noting that certain events occurred."⁴⁰ It is in answering this question that examining the emergence of a television aesthetic takes on its significance. The extent to which this development emerges as a problematic rests with the way in which it raises issues of aesthetic value that constitute the medium discursively, which have effects in regard to the question of the evolution of television. Beyond the "mere recording" of aesthetic developments, little has been written regarding the discursive construction of the medium in aesthetic terms, nor its positioning in competition with the prevailing cultural critiques of the medium.

Furthermore, this raises a set of issues stemming from that absence that are not only historiographic in nature,

⁴⁰ Edward Buscombe, "Thinking it Differently: Television and the Film Industry," Quarterly Review of Film Studies 9 (Summer 1984): 197.

but also bring into question the status of theory and the taste dispositions which lurk underneath. We have to ask whether the absence of an aesthetic component in contemporary analysis accounts for the absence of an analysis of this particular historical development, discarded in favour of the causal attributes of economic transitions. Here the hermeneutics of suspicion turns its gaze toward social theory itself. Unlike the earlier form this question took, however, it can be posed anew in relation to a specific historical case. The attitudes toward the authenticity of both artistic labour and aesthetic experience prevalent in the stylized versions of Critical Theory might become potentially less compelling when seen as supporting a view of art that is highly relativistic and, in fact, ideological.

In addition, within the current climate of concern for the popular, and the expressed desire to embark on a critique that would "explode the 'objective' canons of aesthetic taste,"⁴¹ and the reappearance of a populist aesthetic discourse,⁴² it seems germane to return to the initial struggle around the development of television. The liberal-democratic attitudes espoused by the critics favourably disposed toward television in the 1950s bear

⁴¹ Andrew Ross, No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture (New York: Routledge, 1990), 211.

⁴² For example, John Fiske, Television Culture (New York: Routledge, 1987).

marked similarities to the contemporary populist attitude toward television being evinced in more recent scholarly writing. The current erosion of the aesthetic elitism handed down from the mass culture critique can be seen in some respects to echo the struggle to legitimate a concept of the "popular arts" that reaches back to the 1920s and is central to the aesthetic debate over the legitimacy of television in the 1950s.

The (Re)Emergence of Television Studies

For the most part, academic and scholarly television criticism and analysis has been preoccupied with the question of the object status of television, and this has had notable effects within the field of media studies. Television studies has been concerned for the most part, on the one hand, with economic or structural accounts, and on the other, with the discussion of the relationship between film and television at the level of its object status. With regard to the latter, for example, a recent anthology, Logics of Television, virtually reproduces the same concerns voiced in anthologies of the early eighties announcing the emergence of television studies.⁴³ The early anthologies, such as E. Ann Kaplan's Regarding Television or Rowland and Watkins' Interpreting Television, are preoccupied with the

⁴³ Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990).

status of media studies, and read the development of television analysis into the history of struggle to establish communication studies in the academic curricula.⁴⁴ What these two collections mark is the staging of a qualitative approach to television study that would differentiate itself primarily from empirical sociology or "administrative" research, and secondarily from aesthetic approaches. In regard to the prevailing social science methodology of the 1960s, Kaplan notes that "little attention (as far as I can gather) was given to television aesthetics, to how meaning is produced, or to television as an ideological institution."⁴⁵ However, as she goes on to state, the influence of the language paradigm in literary studies bled into media analysis to the extent that traditional aesthetic inquiry was displaced by a disposition that saw texts as "signifying practices embody[ing] the dominant ideology;"⁴⁶ from which can be inferred not only a repudiation of positivist approaches to the study of media, but also literary analyses such as New Criticism, which viewed the text in isolation from its social

⁴⁴ Regarding Television: Critical Approaches -- An Anthology (Frederick, Md.: American Film Institute, 1983); Interpreting Television: Current Research Perspectives, ed. Willard Rowland and Bruce Watkins (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1984).

⁴⁵ E. Ann Kaplan, introduction to Regarding Television, xiii.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv.

conditions of production. Hence the installation of ideology critique via semiotic theories of language imported from France in the early 1980s meshed perfectly with political economy, resulting in the expulsion of aesthetic critique inherited from the traditional humanities curriculum. Allen suggests that the introduction of structuralist and semiotic theories into television studies was responsible for renewed attention to the aesthetic dimensions of television, but as Kaplan's comments make clear, they constituted the ammunition with which to launch an attack on humanist (ergo aesthetic) approaches to media.⁴⁷

This set of conditions is accompanied by the tension (re)produced in the more recent attempts to assimilate approaches utilized in film to the analysis of television. The essays in Kaplan's volume are marked by the preoccupation with the relationship between the cinematic gaze and the "glance" of television.⁴⁸ In large part, the critical approaches to television emerging at this time cannot be uncoupled from film theory. Much the same preoccupation appears to be reiterated in more recent inquiries into television; as Patricia Mellencamp writes in her prologue to Logics of Television: "critical to the

⁴⁷ See Allen, Soap Operas, 12.

⁴⁸ This distinction is posited by John Ellis in Visible Fictions: Cinema; Television; Video (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).

context of this book is the awareness for film scholars of the misfit that occurs when the intricate methods of film analysis including psychoanalytic constructs of desire and disavowal, are superimposed on TV."⁴⁹ The relation between film and television in this work is constituted primarily in terms of the anxiety over the "misfit" between the two. The preoccupation with the problems engendered in trying to map film theory onto television seems to have left little space for television itself.

As Mellencamp goes on to point out, much of that anxiety is generated by the realization that "the difference between film and TV is often centered around arguments regarding the difficulty in defining or locating the 'TV text'. . . ." Similarly, in an essay in one of the earlier anthologies, Jane Feuer writes in regard to the aesthetic analysis of television that "Not much has been written on the aesthetics of television. One of the reasons for this becomes obvious as one sets out to correct this lack: no one is entirely sure what the entity 'television' is."⁵⁰ The anxiety over television thus emerges simultaneously with the "rebirth" of television studies in the early 1980s, and for film scholars at least, appears not to have diminished in the following decade. Feuer, however, casts doubt on this

⁴⁹ Patricia Mellencamp, prologue to Logics of Television, 6.

⁵⁰ Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in Regarding Television, 12.

relationship when she claims that "The differences between television and its supposed linguistic sister, cinema, are too great not to see television as a qualitatively different medium," but one which nonetheless lacks any specificity: "Is television a thing-in-itself . . . or is it merely a means of transmission for other processes of signification?"⁵¹ Although she never answers that question, Feuer's essay does point to the type of ontological thinking that situates the television aesthetic in its "essence" of live-ness; her attack on Herbert Zettl's aesthetic of the real could be equally applied to critics in the 1950s who will be discussed later.

Feuer nevertheless raises the issue of a television aesthetic only to reduce it to ideology; this is thus entirely consistent with the historical narrative of television studies with which Kaplan introduces the anthology. To a degree, this might also be seen as the residue of the historical narrative plotted by Rowland and Watkins in the introduction to their anthology:

With regard to the humanities, the compromise was to buy into the traditional aesthetic analyses of content that led far too deeply into the mass culture debate. . . . In drawing in part from the standard humanities syllabus, one of the costs for communications studies was to accept the traditional distinction between high and low culture in which the classics of literature, art and music were taken as given and as the former, while television and other mass media were clearly associated with the latter. . . . [I]n accepting so much of the high culture perspective--at least its

⁵¹ Ibid.

agenda, if not all its conclusions--in television criticism, the field was accepting the very terms of its dismissal.⁵²

Significantly, the authors note that the reemergence of television studies was following the example of the intellectual formation which is discussed in detail later in this dissertation: "Precedent for such coverage lay in the work of Gilbert Seldes and a number of traditional critics who had been using the periodical forum to comment on the 'popular arts' since at least as early as Seldes' and others' work for The Dial and Vanity Fair in the 1920s."⁵³

Rowland and Watkins clearly point to the central effects that a "traditional" aesthetics had on the development of television studies. This is a key insight, since it tends to confirm the power that an aesthetic discourse has to set the agenda. However, it is also deployed as an argument against pursuing an aesthetic critique. Symptomatic here is the operation of the label "traditional." Echoing this sentiment from a more recent, postmodernist, perspective, Charlotte Brunsdon states: "An aesthetic of television would thus, in some ways, have to be an anti-aesthetic to be adequate to its object and the practices constituting it. Engaging with the popular, the domestic, and the functional, it undercuts the very

⁵² Willard Rowland and Bruce Watkins, "Introduction: Beyond Mass Culture and Normal Science in Television Research," in Interpreting Television, 12-13.

⁵³ Ibid., 19.

constitution of classical aesthetic judgement."⁵⁴ The reinsertion of an aesthetic is thus marked by the appearance in the intervening years of postmodernism: the "anti-aesthetic" signalled by Hal Foster's collection bearing that title, dissolves the genre distinctions characteristic of the humanities tradition.⁵⁵

The virtue of this position is that it at least opens the door to an inquiry into the aesthetics of television. Although the bias toward economism within ideology critique is still prevalent, works such as those of Lawrence Grossberg, for example, utilize postmodern theory to weaken the tendency to characterize television solely in terms of the role of messenger for hegemony.⁵⁶ Within recent Marxism itself, Michèle Barrett argues that "Works of art and literature are still seen as passive and innocent terrain on which ideological armies go about their usual battles. This is not wrong, but it is limited. Of course, works of art do encode ideological positions, but we do not ex. ust their significance by decoding their ideological content . . . The point is that an exclusive emphasis on

⁵⁴ Brunsdon, "Aesthetics and Audiences," 63.

⁵⁵ The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture (Port Townsend, Wa.: Bay Press, 1983).

⁵⁶ Lawrence Grossberg, "The In-Difference of Television," Screen 28 (1987); "Postmodernity and Affect: All Dressed Up With No Place to Go," TMs [photocopy] (1987).

ideology necessarily denies the aesthetic dimensions of the text."⁵⁷ Much the same can be said about television.

Revisionist Television History

Although the literature points toward an increasing sensitivity to the category of the aesthetic, it continues to ignore the existence of a television aesthetic as it emerged in the 1950s. In large part, the postmodernist approaches tend to be guilty of ahistoricism and in that sense reproduce the weaknesses of the modernist progressivism they were presumed to overcome. As Martin Jay points out, "much postmodernist analysis has been vitiated by a confusingly ahistorical failure" to acknowledge the way in which particular patterns emerge historically.⁵⁸ Jay is referring specifically to the availability of categories for analysis (i.e. the autonomy gained by the aesthetic sphere), but his comment applies equally well to the absence of what William Boddy called "more sophisticated work . . . a more complete aesthetic and historical understanding of the medium."⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Michèle Barrett, "The Place of Aesthetics in Marxist Criticism," in Marxism and The Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988), 699.

⁵⁸ Martin Jay, "Habermas and Postmodernism," TMs [photocopy] (1986).

⁵⁹ William Boddy, "Loving a Nineteen-Inch Motorola: American Writing on Television," in Regarding Television, 1.

The recent work of Boddy and others⁶⁰ marks the encouraging development of what Boddy calls a "revisionist television historiography" begun in the early 1980s.⁶¹ In 1984, in what amounted to a manifesto for television history, Boddy wrote:

An appreciation of these [historical, economic, and critical] contexts is central to several fundamental problems in current television historiography: the attempts to periodise television's past and account for historical change; the integration of formal texts into the medium's economic history; and an understanding of the role of creative personnel and generic conventions in the history of television.⁶²

Thus a more "sophisticated" television history would have to account for these different dimensions through attention to the various contexts in which they are simultaneously embedded. Although this introduces a daunting level of complexity, "uncovering the logic and consequences of these broad social choices regarding U.S. television requires a wider perspective than generally deployed in the traditional

⁶⁰ Eg. Brunson, "Aesthetics and Audiences;" "Problems with Quality," Screen 31 (Spring 1990); Ross, No Respect; as well as Lynn Spigel, "Television in the Family Circle: The Popular Reception of a New Medium," in Logics of Television; and George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," in Camera Obscura 16 (1988).

⁶¹ Eg. Buscombe, "Thinking it Differently," along with Kenneth Hey, "Marty: Aesthetics vs. Medium in Early Television Drama;" "Nightmare in Red: A Cold War View of the Communist Revolution;" and John O'Connor, "Introduction: Television and the Historian," all in American History/ American Television: Interpreting the Video Past, ed. John O'Connor (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1983).

⁶² William Boddy, "Entering 'The Twilight Zone'," Screen 25 (1984): 98.

literature."⁶³ In sketching out what this history would look like, Boddy suggests that

Four contexts offer avenues of historical inquiry: relations among the distinct sectors of the television industry (including equipment manufacturing, program production, network operation, and television advertising); long-term changes in the advertising and marketing strategies of American business; long-term changes in the motion picture industry; and the history of federal broadcast regulation.⁶⁴

It is significant to note the absence of the aesthetic in this account, which seems to repudiate his earlier demand for historical analysis of the fifties television aesthetic. In 1984, he noted that "such writing did create a remarkably ambitious and consistent set of aesthetic prescriptions for the medium. To a large extent, these aesthetic frames have remained unexamined in the subsequent literature." In 1990, he writes: "Few attempts have been made to reexamine the aesthetic and ontological claims these critics proposed in defense of their program preferences." Despite this, he shifts the focus from analysis of the aesthetic proper, casting it as an appurtenance within a particular economic regime. Here we can see how the four contexts of historical inquiry dominate the discussion of the aesthetic. This is not, of course, to say that these points are not well taken; indeed, all of these areas require further elucidation. The problem that arises, however, is the dominance of an

⁶³ Boddy, Fifties Television, 3.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

economic logic, to which the aesthetic is here reduced. This tendency can also be seen in the writing of James Baughman, for instance, who claims that "a set of entrepreneurial imperatives (and not high-mindedness) first created and then closed the Golden Age of Television," and that "much of the content of the American mass media has related not to consumer preference but to managerial imperatives."⁶⁵ Although this may be partially true, it does not explain why the television aesthetic takes the particular form that it does. As Baughman and Boddy both well demonstrate, one cannot underestimate the significance of the economic logics that are the motor of the television industry, and to that extent their criticism of many previous historical accounts is well-taken. Nevertheless, the economic history that both Baughman and Boddy advocate cannot fully account for the appearance of an aesthetic discourse of television, nor can it account for the specificity of programming content. Furthermore, it cannot fully account for the specificity of the transformation of that content that occurs simultaneously with changing industrial infrastructures based on the transition to different programme forms, which is central to all accounts of television history. It can also be added that the emergent aesthetic discourse has to be analyzed in regard to

⁶⁵ Baughman, "Television in the 'Golden Age'," 180, 176.

the way it positions itself not only relative to the industry, but also in terms of the way it competes for dominance with other theories of the social formation and the place for television within it, as well as other aesthetic theories that circulated at that time. Against the work of more recent forays into television by film scholars, the historical work represented by Boddy and others can nonetheless be considered more adequate to the needs of the type of inquiry advocated here. Certainly the fundamental insights concerning economic and industrial relations made by Boddy and others are of paramount importance to this project, and it could not be undertaken without them.

From Economy To Cultural History

Although a number of theoretical and practical issues related to historiographic research have already emerged in this discussion, there are still fundamental aspects of the inquiry that require some elucidation. Despite the fact that historical inquiry is more comprehensible as a methodology rather than a theory, as Gadamer points out in Truth and Method, the goal of understanding is always guided by what he called "application."⁶⁶ Application is the motive that gives contemporary meaning to a particular inquiry. The undertaking of history, and the selection of

⁶⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 274ff.

particular documents for analysis does not occur ex nihilo, but expresses a need in the present, that is, it has relevance for the contemporary situation of the researcher. In that sense of application, inquiry is always biased: the goal of understanding is not simply to decipher a text, but to apply it in the present to a particular problem facing research. Understanding is thus always relative to the horizon of the present, and as that horizon shifts, a different form of understanding is called for. From this perspective, history is always revisionist in nature, since different perspectives will always reveal new or different understandings. Thus, empirical-historical inquiry will always be mediated by certain motives, and to a degree, some have already been revealed through the description of the emerging problematic that has been outlined above. However, this inquiry nevertheless proceeds on the basis of two fundamental theoretical insights concerning the relationship between culture and politics. Out of these insights appears a theoretical structure that motivates the historical revision to be undertaken.

Following the insights into the ascendancy of the economic developed in the work of Karl Polanyi,⁶⁷ Louis Dumont makes the observation that "economics as a 'philosophical category' represents the acme of

⁶⁷ Karl Polanyi, The Great Transformation (London: V. Gollancz, 1944).

individualism and as such tends to be paramount in our universe. . . . economics escapes the fetters of general morality only at the price of assuming a normative character of its own."⁶⁸ The centrality of the economic can be traced, according to Dumont, back into the natural law philosophies which become condensed in Adam Smith's dictum concerning the individual's propensity to "barter, truck, and exchange." With this as the fundamental basis for the concept of the subject, the economic, as Dumont points out, assumes a normative character for our (capitalist) society. This "teleological order" arises in large part from the collapse of a hierarchical social order, where that order is replaced by the ideology of individualism at the outset of modernity. What is crucial to note here is the evaporation of political relations, and their replacement by economic relations: the relationship of human to human is substituted by the relation of humans to things. One of the central problems for social theory in the twentieth century has been the way in which the economic has itself captured that theory. Economy is thus not only central to the structure of social relations, but also embedded structurally in social theory itself.

Recent work, such as that of Dumont, has however brought into question the centrality of the economic,

⁶⁸ Louis Dumont, From Mandeville to Marx: The Genesis and Triumph of Economic Ideology (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1977), 53, 60.

inasmuch as it distorts the political problems with which modern societies are faced. Consider the following description of modernity offered by Dick Howard:

By using the category "modernity" to describe what is usually simply called capitalism, I want to suggest a broader definition and field than the merely economic. Modernity is that form of social relations (and relations to nature) which emerges when all traditional, external origins of legitimation are destroyed and where the genesis of events is no longer explicable by a causal logic. Modernity is defined by the immanence of origins; it is a social formation that continually questions itself and its identity. Social relations, defined by the immanence of the question of origins are by their very nature political. Decisions of social justice or questions of economic interest must therefore be formulated and resolved as political in this modern sense--and the inverse must be avoided, i.e. the political must not be reduced simply to the economic.⁶⁹

Howard argues for an understanding of modernity that is essentially agonistic, and draws its source, not from critical theory, but rather from Kant. The core is reflective judgement as it is presented in the third Critique: "lawfulness without law." As Howard indicates, "Proof of such a judgment cannot follow the model of the first critique with its transcendental, abstract 'I think' as subject asserting a predicate of a real object; proof, rather, must be achieved through a public and intersubjective process of reflection whereby agreement

⁶⁹ Dick Howard, The Politics of Critique (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1988), 198-99.

comes into being. This kind of 'lawfulness' implies the step to politics."⁷⁰

The fundamental insight is that politics is not predicated on the economic as the relation between humans and things, but rather concerns relations between humans, which still persist as problems to be resolved. As Howard suggests, "it implies that something more and other than the economic is sought (even if it is only sought for the solution of economic problems). However perverted or distorted, the political sphere is still present."⁷¹ The significance this has is in the way that it refuses to reduce the political to the economic, and from this perspective opens up an avenue of research foreclosed by the economism of both political economic and ideological approaches. Politics here are seen as a set of discursive symbolic relations that govern the social, and which are concerned with problems that are not immediately reducible to economic conflict, although they often take that form. The criticism of the work of Boddy is apropos here, certainly to the extent that he tends to see the discursive work of the aesthetic solely in terms of the shifting relations of production within the television industry. However, when viewed from a political perspective that sees

⁷⁰ Ibid., 184.

⁷¹ Ibid., 119.

this as more than simply the residues of economic activity, a different set of relations appears on the horizon.

The idea that the normative dimensions of aesthetic discourses cannot be grasped through economic categories might be better understood if we turn to a second theoretical insight obtained from Habermas' discussion of production. The effect of the category of production is underlined by Dumont, where he states "production in the economic sense is used . . . as the prototype of a much wider category that tends to encompass the whole of human life. Relations between men [sic] are subsumed under a term that properly designates relations to things. It is a choice example of a hierarchical judgement commanding the inordinate spread of the semantic area of a word."⁷² Habermas charts out this development from "an idealist concept of practice" through its materialist transformation: "With the materialist interpretation of the idealist concept of practice in terms of constitution (most recently developed by Husserl), 'production' is transformed into the expenditure of labour power, 'objectivation' [i.e. reality as social product] into the objectivation of labour power, the 'appropriation' of what is 'produced' into the satisfaction of material needs (that is, consumption)."⁷³

⁷² Dumont, Mandeville to Marx, 156.

⁷³ Jürgen Habermas, "The Obsolescence of the Production Paradigm," in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge,

As Habermas goes on to state, this process of reducing production from a concept of practice (objective reality as the expression of human powers) to the category of labour raises a number of problems for social theory, which the production paradigm can neither avoid nor explain. Of particular interest here is the way in which the production paradigm narrows the concept of practice to one particular mode -- making commodities: "The production paradigm so restricts the concept of practice that the question arises of how the paradigmatic activity-type of labor or the making of products is related to all the other cultural forms of expression of subjects capable of speech and action."⁷⁴ Following both Habermas and Dumont, we can see how production is both narrowed and expanded simultaneously, that is, reduced to one particular form of understanding at the same time as it is inflated as the only means of understanding. In addition, Habermas, by problematizing the narrowness of the paradigm, indicates how other forms of expression escape its grasp. In other words, examining the relations of production is not sufficient to account for all forms of cultural expression, nor especially, for that matter, their normative content.

Using the work of György Markus as his example, Habermas points out that despite Markus' adherence to the

Mass.: MIT, 1987), 78.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 79.

explanatory power of production, he divides social practice into two distinct dimensions: "social practice appears under a twofold aspect: on the one hand, as a process of production and appropriation, which proceeds in accord with technical-utilitarian rules . . . and, on the other hand, as a process of interaction, which is regulated by social norms."⁷⁵ What Habermas finds remarkable about this is that Markus claims the production paradigm allows us to see this "dual process" as a unity; for Habermas,

This assertion is astonishing because Markus, with all the clarity one might desire, distinguishes between the technical-utilitarian rules for producing and employing products, on the one hand, and rules of social interaction, that is, norms of action dependent upon intersubjective recognition and sanctions, on the other hand. Correlatively, he proposes a clear analytic separation between "technical" and "social" spheres. He leaves no doubt that practice in the sense of the production and useful employment of products has structure-forming effects only for the metabolic process between human beings and nature. By contrast, practice in the sense of norm-governed interaction cannot be analyzed on the model of the productive expenditure of labor power and the consumption of use values. Production constitutes only an object or a content for normative rules.⁷⁶

In Marx, the classical distinction between techne and phronesis is absorbed into the single category of productive labour as constitutive of all praxis. The key insight Habermas makes here is the failure of the production paradigm, by reducing all praxis to techne, to answer questions about human interaction and the formation of

⁷⁵ Ibid., 80; emphasis original.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 81; emphasis added.

norms. As Habermas suggests, these can only be explained by switching to a "paradigm of action oriented toward mutual understanding," that is, communicative relations. If the production paradigm is only the object for normative rules, and the formation of norms must occur, not in the technical sphere, but at the level of the social sphere through communicative interaction, then it is of little help in explaining aesthetics, which is a normative discourse organized specifically to guide and mediate the cycle of externalization, objectivation, appropriation, and reproduction characteristic of cultural expression.

These two theoretical insights, then, on the one hand concerning the relation of politics and economics, and on the other concerning the differentiation between the technical and social spheres, can be coordinated together to ground a thesis preoccupied with establishing the outlines of a model adequate to its level of analysis. In effect, these two insights offer the means by which to distinguish between relations of production and social-normative relations necessary to proceed with the question concerning the interaction of cultural discourses, and the extent to which they provide normative claims that act as a guide to practices. Together, these two theoretical positions pry open a domain of research that is opaque to those enquiries which proceed with production as their central category.

The extent to which this kind of sociology is central to historical tasks is brought forward by Norbert Elias. In his discussion of the relations between history and sociology, he notes that historians often lack an understanding of social structure essential to grasp the historical dynamics within which the actions of individuals take on meaning: "The role and structure of social phenomena usually remain unclarified in the framework of historiography . . . It is the task of sociology to bring the unstructured background of much previous historical research into the foreground and make it accessible to systematic research as a structured web of individuals and actions."⁷⁷ As he notes, "The change of perspective does not, as it is sometimes asserted, rob individual people of their character and value as individuals. But they no longer appear as isolated people, each totally independent of the other. They are no longer seen as completely hermetic systems, each of which harbours the ultimate explanation of this or that socio-historical event."⁷⁸

Borrowing from sociology, Elias introduces the notion of 'figuration' as a structural social arrangement within which framework the actions of individuals can be understood. The value of introducing this concept lies with

⁷⁷ Norbert Elias, The Court Society, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 25-6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

the understanding that the analysis of the structural social arrangement is simply a different level of the same historical process implied in the analysis of individuals. From that perspective, the systemic or structural approach characteristic of sociology can be wedded with the examination of individuals in traditional historiography; otherwise, "as these planes are absolutely inseparable, specialization without co-ordination would mean a misdirection of research."⁷⁹ It is important to underline the point that the dimension of individual activity cannot be abandoned in favour of a structural analysis. This is often overlooked, since the structures appear to take on a life of their own:

that the same or similar figurations can frequently be formed over an extended period by different individuals, makes it appear as if these figurations have an 'existence' outside individuals. Bound up with this optical illusion is the use of the terms 'society' and 'individual' whereby these appear as two separate objects made of different substances. But if we adjust our conceptual models more exactly to what we actually observe, we find that . . . the individuals who here and now form a specific social figuration can disappear and give way to others but, no matter how they change, the society, the figuration itself, is always formed by individuals.⁸⁰

This brings out an historiographic dimension which is absent from the sociology of Habermas and Howard. Unlike their specific attention to the social structure, Elias draws attention to the actions of individuals within that

⁷⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 26-7.

structural context, and it is this perhaps that differentiates his approach from the former. Thus moving beyond the initial theoretical stage of reconstruction of social structure as outlined by Habermas, historical inquiry must also occupy itself with the analysis of the specific actions of individuals seen against the backdrop of the structural configuration. Although the emphasis on the sociological dimension by Elias serves to underscore its absence in the historical field, and to give validity to the procedural order theorized by Habermas, it is nonetheless clear that historical inquiry cannot proceed solely along that trajectory, but must also examine the individuals operating within the constraints of a given structure. In addition, Elias makes clear that figurations may appear to have a certain "relative independence" from individuals, but they are nonetheless embodied by individuals, and one must therefore be cautious concerning the effects of reification that sociology and economic histories tend to produce by attending exclusively to the social system.

In respect to the analysis of the emergence of a television aesthetic in the 1950s, the same concern over reification applies. Over against an analysis that concentrates on structural arrangements, it can be argued, with Elias, that the actions of individuals must be seen as central to, and of a part with the entire historical process. As Elias makes clear, this is not to restore any

conception of full agency to a given group or individual, since the structure imposes constraints on action that must be fully accounted for. However, sociological reconstruction alone cannot account for historical dynamics which require an analysis of the actions of individuals within that theoretical reconstruction. Here, in effect, is where history takes on its task. In regard to the specific case of the television aesthetic, attention therefore must be paid to particular individuals and intellectual formations. Once the level of communicative interaction is identified, the specificity of the historical dynamics of interaction can take place, that is, historical inquiry can begin to examine the actual detailed interaction of individuals and groups within this domain.

CHAPTER 3

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TELEVISION CRITICISM AND THE TELEVISION AESTHETIC

According to Charles Siepmann, who was writing in 1962, "Television's true literature has, in fact, yet to be written."¹ This was his conclusion at the end of an essay surveying the books that had been written about television since its inception. The verdict comes as somewhat of a surprise, given what seems to be a fairly large body of literature, if we are to judge by the number of examples to which he refers in his survey. It appears, however, that he is chiefly concerned with what he detected as an absence of writing about television from those he calls the "critics, historians, and philosophers." Regarding the overall development of television literature, he writes that

As late as 1950 those of us writing about television did so, for the most part, speculatively. Thereafter, authors (at least those sporting clothbound covers) divide themselves into three groups, reflecting perhaps at once the strength and weakness of the culture of which they are a part. For the most numerous are the "how to do it" boys, with books on how to write, produce, direct, teach, prepare advertising copy and the rest, for television.

¹ Charles Siepmann, "The Missing Literature of Television," in The Eighth Art: Twenty-Three Views of Television Today, ed. John Cogley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 224.

Next in order come the social sciences, tabulating facts and figures on audiences and viewing hours, television's effects on viewers and the like. Trailing far behind are the critics, historians, and philosophers, trying to see television in the broader perspective of life and culture in our time.²

It seems that for Siepmann, the strength of that culture lay in its initiative, and weakness in its lack of self-reflexiveness. He bemoaned the emphasis on the empirical, and called for a broader social and cultural context within which television might be understood. "Like patriotism," he said, "head-counting is not enough."

In another essay in the same volume, Gilbert Seldes provides what may be an answer to the question Siepmann raises concerning the dearth of critical literature. Seldes viewed the advent of a new medium, in this case television, as cause for resistance from intellectuals and cultural commentators, on the basis of a possible deflation of cultural capital derived from investment in older forms:

The relations between any new form of entertainment and the older ones with which it competes and which it may destroy is never simple, and our capacity to see the interplay between new and old is affected by custom, snobbery, and a kind of vested interest in what we have learned to like, especially if the learning comes hard. There are of course, people who are ready to find something useful or amusing in what's new, but few of them are critics and arbiters of taste. The ones who feel deeply are likely to denounce a new form for moving into territory already staked out, for degrading whatever it borrows from the past, and for jeopardizing the cultural heritage of mankind.³

² Ibid., 217-18.

³ Gilbert Seldes, "Beg, Borrow -- Or Annex," in The Eighth Art: Twenty-Three Views of Television Today (New

Indeed, the "arbiters of taste" of the 1950s, the mass culture critics and the modernist vanguard, denounced television strenuously, as they denounced popular culture in general. This "cause," however, though it may contain an element of truth, must be viewed with caution. Resistance to transformation was clearly the case, for instance, vis-à-vis the erosion of the conservative Genteel Tradition in the United States in the early years of this century. By this point, however, the so-called "vanguard" of culture was promoting radical strategies with regard to cultural production, against which the popular culture of the nineteen-fifties seemed to take on the hue of conservatism. As Siepmann suggested, reflecting on the apparent lack of transformation wrought by the supposedly "revolutionary cultural and social force" of television, "more decisive, perhaps, as 'cause' is the commercial orientation of our mass media as, to a large degree, it imposes a primary concern with the satisfaction of mass appetites and consequent avoidance of anything disturbing to conventional complacency."⁴ Resistance to television could thus be said to derive, not from its radical potential to disturb the cultural status quo, but rather from its function as a conservative aesthetic force, against a cultural vanguard that understood modernism as a constant state of revolution,

York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 101.

⁴ Siepmann, "Missing Literature," 223.

at least at the level of formal innovation. By linking mass taste with fascism (as the product of the irrational masses), "by implication, any art linked to mass culture, such as realism, was also dangerous."⁵ This particular taste disposition, more than any concern over the potential disruptive effects of television (disruption being the province of the modernists in any case), characterizes much of the intellectual attitude toward television in this period. Although television did present a potential threat to the elitism lurking within American modernism, this was considered to be in terms of television's regressive tendencies, rather than in its radical possibilities.

Siepmann was nevertheless wrong on both counts: first, in regard to what he claimed was a dearth of critical literature, and second, that television was uniformly uncontroversial during its evolution prior to the time of his comments. As to the first point, Siepmann looks to monographs for a source of television criticism. Other than Seldes and Reuel Denney, and Siepmann's own writing,⁶ however, virtually all critical literature on television was in the form of essays, dispersed across a range of

⁵ Erika Doss, Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1991), 253.

⁶ For example, Charles Siepmann, Radio, Television, and Society (New York: Oxford University, 1950); Reuel Denney, The Astonished Muse (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1957); Gilbert Seldes, The Public Arts (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

periodicals extending from industry magazines through to literary and theatrical reviews to sociological journals. Until the advent of communications departments in universities, which had a tendency to at least consolidate the academic research on television, any systematic survey of the literature required an extensive search through a wide variety of periodical formats.⁷ Despite this dispersion, it is still possible to discern a surprising degree of coherence as regards the shared sense of criteria by which television is to be evaluated.

Secondly, Siepmann was incorrect to suggest that a primary concern with "mass appetites" led to the "avoidance of anything disturbing to conventional complacency," at least in the early stages of television's commercial development. As William Hawes notes, "The big-city, East Coast television viewership made it possible for dramas to play to relatively modest-sized audiences . . . rather than the enormously diverse 'mass' public."⁸ Early critical commentary on television championed what became known as the "slice of life" genre of television drama, which consisted of a realism based, for the most part, on the lives of urban

⁷ This is most readily seen in the examination of the references employed in doctoral dissertations on television from the fifties and early sixties, which rarely refer to academic journals or monographs.

⁸ William Hawes, American Television Drama: The Experimental Years (University, Ala.: Alabama University, 1986), 137.

middle-and lower middle-class individuals. Much, if not all, of this type of drama was negative in character, that is to say, tended to focus on unsolvable psychic or social problems, and the stories typically lacked any definitive resolutions. However, by the mid-fifties, one can detect increasing critical discontent with this form. What had been originally applauded as serious art, and singled out as exemplary of the artistic potential resident in the television medium, became by this time an object of mockery and derision.⁹ Briefly, what this suggests, contrary to Siepmann, is that the content of the realist dramas was in fact highly contentious and controversial, given the way they portrayed social conditions as seemingly unchallengeable in their structural immutability, but also in terms of the psychic damage to the individual such rigidity might produce. The effect of sneaking class and racial conflicts through the back door, so to speak, was to create a critical (and political) backlash that ultimately led to the disappearance of this genre, replaced at the end of the fifties by the phantasmagoric other-worldly projections of the western and science-fiction, thereby

⁹ See, for example, Robert Kass, "Film and TV," Catholic World 182 (June, 1956): 225; Vance Bourjaily, "The Lost Art of Writing for Television," Harper's Magazine 219 (October, 1959): 156; and for Jack Gould's comments, said to have initiated this backlash, see Ralph Lewis Smith, A Study of the Professional Criticism of Broadcasting in the United States (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 156. This is discussed in detail in chapter 5.

effectively displacing issues of social contention onto safer terrain.¹⁰

There is truth, then, in what Siepmann puts forward as a claim for the conservatism of television, but only in so far as it applies to the period of structural transformation of the television industry itself, which occurred with the movement of production from New York to Los Angeles in the second half of the 1950s. The integration of television with the motion picture industry may have had many of the consequences critics of the time feared. Ironically, and against much recent opinion, live, sponsored programmes may have provided much more latitude for innovation and the inclusion of potentially controversial material, as opposed to the spot-advertising format which emerged with the move to the West coast and to filmed series.¹¹ One could speculate that a producer negotiating directly with one

¹⁰ "[I]f such [self-]criticism is to appear at all, it too must be veiled. The Western assists in this difficult problem, for the story is well-removed from his own locale, both geographically and psychically. Because it is always a story taking place 'out there,' and 'a long time ago,' self-criticism can appear without being directly recognized as such." Peter Homans, "Puritanism Revisited: An Analysis of the Contemporary Screen-Image Western" in Harry Skornia and Jack Kitson, eds. Problems and Controversies in Television and Radio: Basic Readings (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1959), 271.

¹¹ James Baughman writes that "Some of early television's best programming was possible only because certain sponsors, in exchange for compromises about straight razors and Communist tobacco consumption, gave producers wide leeway in what they presented." The Republic of Mass Culture: Journalism, Filmmaking, and Broadcasting in America Since 1941 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ., 1992), 45.

agency and sponsor may have provided the conditions within which to argue for the inclusion of certain innovations and the use of potentially problematic material, unlike producing a product which had to please everyone, and which was by that time also subject to the restrictive code of the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters and network continuity departments.¹²

Prior to this transformation, however, the preoccupation with "mass appetites" was not as central as it became in the latter half of the fifties, and this allowed a space for experimentation in television.¹³ Some have argued that early "quality" programming served merely as a loss-leader with which to establish a fledgling industry -- both by building an audience and placating government concerns¹⁴ -- and while this may be true judging by the subsequent development of network television, this does not

¹² This code, adopted in 1956, is reproduced in Television's Impact on American Culture, ed. William Y. Elliot (East Lansing: Michigan State, 1956), 328-340.

¹³ William Hawes writes that "The post-war period to 1958 was, in fact, merely an extension of and elaboration upon the experimental years. Television drama would not break from its theatrical roots until the impact of the mass public, financial strategies, advertising, relocation in Hollywood, and emerging electronic technologies was felt." Television Drama, 145.

¹⁴ See, for example, Vance Kepley Jr., "From 'Frontal Lobes' to the 'Bob-and-Bob' Show: NBC Management and Programming Strategies, 1949-65," in Tino Balio, ed. Hollywood in the Age of Television (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 41-61; William Boddy, Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 104-7, 126-7.

necessarily account fully for the optimism with which the introduction of television was met nor the continued effort to develop an aesthetic of television during the first decade of commercial network operation after the Second World War. Even if we assume such a loss-leader strategy was in fact part of some overall economic plan, it nevertheless offered an opportunity to develop an aesthetic that would be specific to, and make good on, what was thought to be the potential of television as an art form.

The evolution, or perhaps more accurately the transformation, of television criticism and the development of the television aesthetic follows a pattern first described by Marshall McLuhan.¹⁵ This begins with a period of hybridization, where the new medium carries the content of the media that precede it (in the case of television, elements of radio, the cinema, and the stage). These elements are eventually modified to the extent that a practice emerges, and with it a form, that no longer has the appearance of a hybrid, but is, rather, specific to the medium in which it is presented. This was certainly the case with television, especially given the institutional context in which television evolved, as it adopted wholeheartedly familiar radio styles and programming formats of its parent companies, and adapted directly from the stage, a

¹⁵ See Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: Signet Books, 1964).

result of the concentration of theatre professionals in the fledgling television industry.¹⁶

This was, however, not only the case with the evolution of the content of the medium itself, that is, the movement from adaptation and hybridization to originality, but was also characteristic of the critical discourses that emerged along with the medium. The initial critical examinations of television drama sought to determine the degree of fidelity that such programs had with their stage counterparts. The refining of sensitivity to the constraints, as well as the possibilities, of the medium vis-à-vis the other media of stage, film, and radio led to an increased focus on what functioned "best" on television, fuelled in part by television itself, where specific instances of "good" drama could be singled out as exemplary of the potential augured by television as a dramatic medium. In this manner, both television practice and critical practice developed together, criticism encouraging specific kinds of televisual form, and certain kinds of television practices providing the formal examples upon which an aesthetic of television could eventually be propped.

The critical discourses on television that emerged in the early stages of the medium's development cannot be divorced from televisual practices and the appearance of

¹⁶ Adaptation from film was strictly at the level of technique, since film properties were jealously withheld from television use by the major studios.

original televisual forms around which such a discourse could be organized. At the same time, neither can be abstracted or isolated from broader cultural currents and aesthetic dispositions, and therefore can only be understood in the context of the concatenation of cultural dispositions such as they appeared following the Second World War. The psychological realism that dominated the post-war stage also became the core aesthetic of the television dramas, and this is indicative of the way in which television drama participated in the general climate of introspection that developed in the early post-war years. The formal constraints of the television medium itself were ultimately linked discursively to this genre, almost as if television had been invented to meet the requirements of this particular aesthetic.

What emerges from this historical moment -- the convergence of a particular set of aesthetic criteria and a medium apparently well-suited to such an aesthetic -- is the attempt to configure, discursively if not in practice, television as a form of art. William Boddy has claimed that "Although the early writing on television had several distinct origins and aims, from journalistic reviewing and prescriptive manuals of television production techniques to general cultural criticism, such writing did create a remarkably ambitious and consistent set of aesthetic prescriptions for the medium. To a large extent, these

aesthetic frames have remained unexamined in the subsequent literature."¹⁷ It is this literature, and its aesthetic "frames," that will be examined here.

This examination begins with an outline of the historical development of broadcast criticism, in order to construct a general context out of which the aesthetic discourse of television can be seen to emerge. The specificity of television discourse is then linked, in cultural terms, to the historical conditions prevailing in New York City, both as a geographical site with large creative labour resources and, more importantly, as embodying a particular taste disposition. From there, we will examine this location's effects on the transformation of television practices and critical discourses from early theatre-oriented programming to the emergence of original teledramas and the aesthetic criteria used to differentiate television from other media.

This leads to the identification and discussion of the key terms that emerge from the discourse to demarcate television, as a medium, as unique. The usage of these terms is considered as a discursive strategy that attempts to isolate and define the essential constituents of television qua medium, and thus provide the starting point for an aesthetic form of television. These key terms will

¹⁷ William Boddy, "Entering the Twilight Zone," Screen 25 (1984): 99.

then be linked to the depiction of the kind of content of the original teleplays -- the "slice of life" -- which appears to correspond to the aesthetic criteria as defined through these key terms. The particular form of realism that emerges, however, can be seen not to be a product of television per se, but rather a reflection of the cultural concerns of the period, which then brings us back to the relationship of television to the general cultural climate, and sets the stage whereon we can develop a broader discussion of forms of representation in this period of cultural development in the United States.

The Development of Television Criticism

The place of popular culture criticism, especially that of the newer broadcasting media, was no more guaranteed in the years leading up to the Second World War than it was when Gilbert Seldes wrote his first appraisal in 1924.¹⁸ As Ralph Lewis Smith's historical research reveals, it was not until the social scientific approach to communication research gained some legitimacy that the study of popular media developed any credibility among intellectual and cultural elites.¹⁹ Prior to the Second World War, Seldes' Seven Lively Arts stood as a rather lonely exception to the general intellectual disdain for discussion of popular

¹⁸ Gilbert Seldes, The Seven Lively Arts (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924).

¹⁹ Smith, Professional Criticism, 39.

culture, the presumed solidarity between intellectuals, artists and the working classes in the nineteen-thirties notwithstanding.

According to Smith, one of the first ever texts of broadcast criticism, of radio, appeared in 1924 in the Christian Science Monitor, the same year as Seldes' Seven Lively Arts was published: "Mr. Volney D. Hurd, who instituted the first radio section in the Christian Science Monitor in May, 1924 . . . realised that art forms carried by the new transmission medium were reaching millions of people. Was it not reasonable to assume that a radio drama received by such a vast audience required at least as much critical attention as a theater performance . . .?"²⁰ Up until this time, writing about broadcasting had focused exclusively on scientific and technological development, and this marks the first instance of criticism oriented toward the contents of mass media.²¹

²⁰ Ibid., 16.

²¹ This concern about media effects in this period is particularly marked in relation to the cinema. By the late twenties, the demand for study of the influences of film led to the work of the Motion Picture Research Council, funded by the Payne Study and Experimental Fund. This work, commonly referred to as the Payne Studies, was comprised of nineteen scholars from seven universities and was undertaken in the years 1929 to 1932, and subsequently published in eight volumes. It stands as the largest study of its kind prior to the resurgence of communications research at the beginning of the Second World War. See Robert Sklar, Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 135-39, 325.

At the same time, the introduction of broadcast criticism inaugurated a split which was to define such criticism well into the latter half of this century: "There were the visual, popularly written and illustrated, informative pieces on the industry in magazines like the Saturday Evening Post, while a spirit of gentle debunking (which was to grow more severe as the years passed) combined with grave social concern infused the occasional critical articles of the 'serious' magazines."²² As Smith suggests, this early development of a negative disposition toward popular media on the part of intellectual elites prevented the possibility of a serious criticism of broadcasting to develop. In the period between the second half of the nineteen-twenties and the early nineteen-thirties "A new profession for the journalist, which might have helped both the broadcaster and his listeners, could have been firmly established. . . . this never happened . . . the transition from regular scientific writing to regular critical writing about radio never took place."²³ Instead, as Smith writes, the "serious" magazines preferred to look down upon the emerging phenomenon of broadcasting: "the jibe 'low-brow' was to become the most popular battle

²² Smith, Professional Criticism, 19.

²³ Ibid., 20.

cry in what Gilbert Seldes in 1953 called 'the Thirty-Years' War' between the broadcaster and the critics."²⁴

Experiments in broadcast criticism were thus inhibited by the lack of intellectual interest, which prevented criticism from finding a place in the intellectual or pseudo-intellectual magazines,²⁵ and was further inhibited from developing on a regular basis in newspapers, which responded to what they perceived as the economic threat of radio to their advertising revenues by barring comment on radio from their pages.²⁶ The combination of these two factors created a serious impediment to the sustained development of an ongoing criticism: "They [critics] were just beginning to exhibit confidence and purpose when the daily press and the serious magazine decided to ignore the new medium, the one as a result of economic fear, the other from a misguided desire to remain intellectually pure."²⁷

What Smith calls "that generalized intellectual contempt for popular entertainment and art" was to continue more or less intact well into the nineteen-forties. The negative disposition toward broadcasting was further

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Vanity Fair appears to be an exception to this situation. As Gilbert Seldes wrote in 1956 of his experiences in the 1920s, "it was at Vanity Fair that the idea of the popular arts as arts actually began to take shape . . ." The Public Arts, 290.

²⁶ Smith, Professional Criticism, 23.

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

consolidated in the early thirties through the concatenation of a "traditional dislike for mass entertainment" with the temporary collapse of the economic system with which the broadcasting industry was strongly identified.²⁸ However, at the beginning of the Second World War, the surge of social scientific research into the effects of mass media appeared to provide the necessary stimulus for a sustained broadcast criticism to develop:

Sociologists, psychologists, and specialists in communications were busy analyzing programs and devising methods of testing radio's effectiveness These media studies never appeared directly in popular magazines. But their conclusions, which did circulate in professional journals, were interesting and important. They were convincing evidence of the role radio had been playing in our society as more than just a mover of advertised products or a mere dispenser of mass entertainment.²⁹

For Smith, the first two years of the nineteen-forties were crucial to the emergence of a profession of broadcast criticism. The social scientific research evidently legitimized the study of mass media and opened up a space in which criticism could be fostered, based on the increasing sensitization to the role mass media played in American society. As Smith writes, "these two years of critical activity were important because they enabled the profession of criticism to stake out a confident claim to future

²⁸ Ibid., 28.

²⁹ Ibid., 39.

relationships with the new medium and its audience."³⁰ The new medium was, of course, television. The effects of the reemergence of broadcast criticism after the war via social science (which had a significant influence on Seldes' Great Audience)³¹ were such that the task of the critic would consist in social criticism of the media, along with aesthetic criticism. Referring specifically to Seldes' formulation in The Great Audience, Smith argues that "critical inquiry performs an urgent public service differentiated from its aesthetic activity. . . . his [the critic's] most difficult task may well be the integration of an aesthetic approach to art as a private experience with a social approach to a mass medium as public experience."³² Such criticism would thus have to be more than simply aesthetic criticism.

Even as late as 1962, the critic Laurence Laurent was arguing that "the best drama critic would not necessarily be the best television critic."³³ This was due, according to Laurent, to the tendency of critics to employ traditional criteria drawn from drama aesthetics for the analysis of

³⁰ Ibid., 47.

³¹ Gilbert Seldes, The Great Audience (New York: Viking Press, 1950).

³² Ibid., 127.

³³ Laurence Laurent, "Wanted: The Complete Television Critic," in The Eighth Art: Twenty-Three Views of Television Today (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 162.

television programmes, in the absence of consideration of the particular nature of the economy and business structure of the medium. As he suggests, "There are many factors beside the entertainment producer and the entertainment consumer and in the long run our complete television critic could not be any better than his understanding and knowledge of the industrial complexes behind the programs."³⁴

Criticism of television was thus charged with a dual function: to analyze programmes with aesthetic criteria while at the same time remaining attentive to the economic, political, and social impact of the medium itself; and the latter, as Laurent makes clear, apply not only to the possible effects of programmes on audiences, but their possible effects on the programmes themselves.

Nevertheless, the foregrounding of the commercial dimensions of the emerging television medium did not prevent the development of an aesthetic approach to television, despite an awareness of its mediating effects on the production of television programmes; that television was a commercial enterprise did not exclude the possibility that it could also be a form of art.

This is brought out quite clearly by Life magazine, which announced in 1947 that "Television: it is a commercial

³⁴ Ibid.

reality but not yet an art."³⁵ Television became a commercial reality in 1941, although network television did not become a real possibility until the Federal Communications Commission granted authorization for commercial cable distribution of television signals in 1948.³⁶ Despite twenty years of experimentation with television drama,³⁷ Life stated, under a banner which read "The fare is mediocre to bad," that "neither the movies nor radio nor the theater nor any of the arts has yet developed a technique suitable to this revolutionary new medium, whose possibilities, once they are recognized, will be limitless."³⁸ The Life author underscores the pervasive sense of optimism that characterized much of the early writing on television -- the "not yet" signifying the firm belief in the eventual development of television into an art form, once a technique and an aesthetic specific to the medium are discovered.

Much of the subsequent literature would be focused on this issue of the difference between television and other

³⁵ "Television: It is a Commercial Reality But Not Yet an Art," Life Magazine 22, 1 December, 1947, 117.

³⁶ Stewart Lewis Long, The Development of Television Network Oligopoly (New York: Arno Press, 1979), 50, 56.

³⁷ As William Hawes notes, WGH, the General Electric experimental television station in Schenectady "in 1928 presented the first television drama, 'The Queen's Messenger,' in its experimental laboratory." Television Drama, 109.

³⁸ Life, "Television: It is a Commercial Reality," 118.

media; on the one hand, with an eye to the effects of the structuring process brought about by the adoption of radio formats -- the fact that the television programme derived "from structures, both textual and economic, originated by the early radio programs" and that the "broadcast text as developed in the United States on the commercial networks is fundamentally a segmented, disrupted, permeable discourse because it was created by and for advertisers"³⁹ -- and, on the other hand, the sense that, even within these constraints, an aesthetic specific to television existed immanently (and simply awaited discovery) that would transcend the limitations imposed by structures imported from other media, structures which were fundamentally alien to what was considered an entirely new medium. Optimistically, it was presumed that such a transcendence would result in art, contrary to the experience of the development of radio.

Unlike radio where, as Smith notes, "professional critics arrived too late upon the scene to give strong encouragement," with the advent of television, "professional broadcasting critics shook off the lethargy into which radio had culled them and from the very start began to appraise the fascinating theatrical toddler. . ."⁴⁰ Much as the

³⁹ Michele Hilmes, Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 108-9.

⁴⁰ Smith, Professional Criticism, 169.

comments in Life suggested, Smith writes that "expectations of program quality did not prevent some strong expressions of disappointment. But disappointment is not the same as disillusion, and instead of the hopelessness with which many critics viewed the radio scene, their remarks can be interpreted as statements of encouraging concern." Clearly, the advent of television provided the opportunity to stage a critical intervention that would serve to prevent a repeat of the history of radio. It would provide a fresh beginning in which critical participation from the outset, refracted through the lessons learned from the artistic failure of radio -- attributed to the lack of critical guidance -- would furnish the appropriate evaluative criteria (and presumably, effective pressure to adopt those criteria) to insure that television would develop qualitatively into a new form of art.

This has to be set against the backdrop of the negative intellectual disposition toward mass media and the popular in general that persisted throughout this period and, as Smith points out, became increasingly shrill. Thus the optimism expressed by some broadcast critics, and television critics in particular, must not be understood as a general shift in intellectual attitudes toward a favourable regard for popular culture: quite the opposite. The empirico-sociological criticism from which the general interest in mass media was derived extended, for the most part, from the

characteristically negative disposition toward popular culture, which is perhaps no surprise, given that its original impulse centred on the propagandistic effects of mass media. In addition, European refugees, such as those of the Frankfurt School, as well as the New York Intellectuals (influenced by members of the School, as well as conservative thinkers such as Ortega e Gasset), had written highly critical articles on popular culture from a sociological perspective, including attacks on the aesthetic dimensions of mass media.

Oddly enough, the basis upon which such qualitative sociological criticism rejected the claim of popular works to be forms of art rested on the question of authenticity, of realism, that would become the central tenet of the television aesthetic as it developed in the early fifties. Adorno, for instance, writes mockingly that "Mass culture, if not sophisticated, must be at least up-to-date -- that is to say, 'realistic,' or posing as realistic -- in order to meet the expectations of a supposedly disillusioned, alert, and hard-boiled audience."⁴¹ Indeed, as will be described later, it was precisely this disillusionment Adorno mentions that provided the conditions for the coming into being of a culture of introspection, within which psychological realism

⁴¹ Theodor W. Adorno, "How to Look at Television," Quarterly Journal of Film, Radio, and Television 8 (Spring, 1954): 218.

emerged as the key materialization of this phenomenon in artistic expression, in both the fine arts and popular arts.

The negative attitudes directed toward the commercial dimensions of popular media did not however inhibit the development of an aesthetic approach within television criticism -- at least initially. In the early stages of television, the negative disposition to popular culture in general within some intellectual formations did not characterize attitudes toward mass media in toto. This must be contrasted with other formations that, while recognizing the constraints imposed by the logics of capital and industrialized modes of production, nevertheless shared a favourable disposition toward mass media and television in particular, expressed in terms that underscored the artistic potential that television (and other popular media, for that matter) augured, and which provided a set of aesthetic prescriptives with which this potential might be realized.

A Politics of Place

The potential development of television into a bona fide art form was dependent on particular historical conditions, in which location played a preeminent role. In the latter half of the 1950s, television production shifted almost in its entirety from New York to Hollywood, which also entailed a shift from live television to film and from anthology dramas to continuing series. As William Boddy notes, "The programme shifts of the late '50s in sum

represented a repudiation of the aesthetic values elaborated in the critical discourse on television in the first half of the 1950s."⁴² If the movement of television production to Hollywood signalled the end of the era of experimentation in television, we can deduce from this the significance of the industry's location in New York City in the early fifties for the emergence of a television aesthetic.

In part, the specificity of this aesthetic lay in its self-definition as anti-Hollywood. From the very beginning, television and its concomitant aesthetic dimensions would be described in terms that would distinguish it from the motion picture. This was, in part, a result of the early attempt to differentiate television from film in order to avoid film union demands for wage parity for television work, which production budgets in the fledgling industry could not support: "To avoid such union demands, the television industry concentrated for a time on forming an identity separate from film, originating a vocabulary wherein cameras were, for example, called 'iconoscopes.'"⁴³ As Hawes suggests, "Such effort might not have been pursued had the motion picture industry furnished its products in the first place."⁴⁴ Thus, the difference between television and film was also in part the result of the reluctance of the

⁴² Boddy, "Twilight Zone," 99.

⁴³ Hawes, Television Drama, 93.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

motion picture studios to release their wares for broadcast and their withholding of production facilities due to fears of competition. As a result, television developed in a different manner than might have been the case if the motion picture community had been favourably disposed toward it. As Hawes writes, "Speculation on what influence film might have exerted on television dramas if attitudes had been different is worthwhile. All television drama might have been on film; there might not have been a live period and never a transfer of stage-oriented dramas to television."⁴⁵ The influence of the stage and the development of live as opposed to filmed television were crucial, therefore, for the emergence of the television aesthetic and the type of productions that ultimately comprised what became known as the "Golden Age" of television:

As it turned out, the reluctance of film moguls to embrace television drama during the experimental years produced a positive impact on television: it eventually made television and television drama self-sufficient. For this reason, television drama established technical capabilities, stories, stars, editing techniques, aesthetics, financing, and its own public.⁴⁶

This self-sufficiency, however, could not be achieved in the absence of available pools of skilled creative and technical labour (as well as capital). These were available in abundance in New York City's "theatre district" where, as

⁴⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Hawes notes, after the end of World War I, "The artistic community consolidated its productions in those ten blocks."⁴⁷ At that same time, the Rockefeller Center became the site for the construction of an entertainment complex that included broadcasting facilities, thereby further integrating the various media interests in the same location.

Given the reluctance of the motion picture studios to participate in television and the presence of the major broadcasters, the prime developers of the television medium, it is no surprise that television would be located in New York. In this environment, the influences of the stage and radio production

were brought to television drama through the talents of the production heads, producer/directors, writers, performers, and other staff people, most of whom were identified with the theater. Many performers came from radio, too, and participated in television mainly because it was in the same building. . . . The variety of capable actors already at radio stations and local theaters was plentiful. . ."⁴⁸

As Laurence Laurent wrote, "In the years between 1948 and 1956, most television originated, live, in New York City, where a shortage of production facilities was balanced by the nation's best pool of dramatic actors directors, and producers."⁴⁹ This opinion was seconded by Paddy

⁴⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 148.

⁴⁹ Laurent, "Complete Television Critic," 162.

Chayefsky, who claimed that "The best actors, writers and directors are in New York, and the only definite advantage Hollywood has is the steady sunshine . . ." ⁵⁰ Clearly, this situation provided the conditions where skilled individuals from other media could be employed in television, and the aesthetic dispositions embedded in the contemporary practices of those other media were undoubtedly imported into the production of early television programmes. Thus the particular configuration obtaining in New York in this period provided conditions under which the television aesthetic would emerge in a very specific way.

The physical presence of talent, labour, and production facilities, however, does not alone explain the significance of New York as a centre for television production. New York, in addition to providing production resources and infrastructure, also embodied an attitude. In substance, this attitude expressed the superiority of New York over Hollywood, and symbolized the artistic integrity that was presumed to define the East coast, as opposed to pandering to the audience, which it was felt (in the East) was the only concern of the West coast motion picture industry. The intellectual disdain for popular media was thus reconstituted within television discourse itself as an intellectual disdain for the practices of the motion picture

⁵⁰ Paddy Chayefsky, Television Plays (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 128.

industry, against which the workings of television would appear replete with integrity.

Nelson Bond, writing in 1955, indicates the way in which the historical rivalry between East and West manifested itself in relation to television:

"East is East," claimed Mr. K., "and West is West and never the twain shall meet --"

The perennial veracity of this observation has been displayed in this, our generation, wherein two Titans currently compete for domination of man's newest entertainment medium -- television. These titans are, of course, the East Coast television backers who stack all their chips on live-TV (i.e., shows produced directly on camera for immediate transmission) and the West Coast movie moguls who with equal vehemence maintain the only future for the industry lies in production of filmed television . . . ⁵¹

The politics of place thus became a central feature in the critical defense of television, especially in regard to its distinctiveness from film, and this was ultimately exploited by the industry itself in defense of its own practices. According to Smith, the location of television production in New York was for the critics essential to maintain television's authenticity and to guarantee its continued creative development: "The critics are predisposed against Hollywood becoming the chief manufacturer of television dramas. . . . [T]hey feel the vigor of the New York stage lends the new medium a little of the creativity of traditional theater and an esprit de corps, a dedication

⁵¹ Nelson Bond, ". . . And Then, Of Course, There's Film," in How to Write For Television, ed. William Kaufmann (New York: Hastings House, 1955), 49.

which broadcasting desperately needs. The critics feel that there is a sincerity of approach to the drama emanating from New York which would simply cease to exist, if operations were transferred to Hollywood."⁵² Thus a "sincerity of approach" characteristic of New York was opposed to what was perceived as Hollywood's "lack of vision" (Smith's phrase), as part of a politics that pitted the East against the West. As William Boddy points out, this was an element within a critical strategy to define a television aesthetic and to define "television's proper program forms" that exploited the prevailing anti-Hollywood sentiment in the East: "The aesthetic opposition of film and live programming in the writings of television critics in the 1950s inevitably mingled with more general attitudes toward the motion picture industry, New York versus California as production centers . . ."⁵³ As Boddy goes on to elaborate,

The complex criteria -- live versus film, the drama of character versus that of plot, an aesthetic of theatrical naturalism versus Hollywood genre and spectacle, anthology versus continuing character series, sixty-minute versus thirty-minute programs, the television writer as legitimate playwright versus the motion picture studio employee -- all operated to reinforce the opposition between the networks and Hollywood.⁵⁴

As well, Boddy also underscores the fact that this strategy was exploited by the networks in order to secure their own

⁵² Smith, Professional Criticism, 199.

⁵³ Boddy, Fifties Television, 73.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 76.

position in the face of potential competition and regulatory intervention: "In hearings before the Senate Commerce Committee, network representatives presented the issue [regarding independent film program producer's complaints] as one of defending television from the corrupting influence of Hollywood. . . . [T]he networks in the mid-1950s found it useful to enlist the rhetoric of critical defenders of live television for their own commercial battles."⁵⁵

All of the different dimensions that came to characterize the television aesthetic thus found their negative counterparts in the motion picture industry and were defined within what we might call a politics of difference that pitted sincerity and authenticity -- and therefore art -- against insincerity and lack of authenticity, i.e. mere entertainment. What the mass culture critics accused all popular culture of being -- inauthentic -- against which was offered the example of a mode of production that could be characterized as aesthetic and therefore resulting in art, was reproduced within the aesthetic discourse of television, where television critics accused the motion picture industry of being inauthentic, against which television practices, drawing on the aesthetic legitimacy provided by its proximity to the theatre, could be positioned as constitutive of genuine art.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 75-6.

In addition, then, to the availability of physical resources and technical and creative labour, the location of television in New York must also be understood in terms of a peculiar cultural attitude that was organized symbolically around geographical locales, between East and West. A mythology, prevalent since Turner's invention of the "frontier thesis," lies at the basis of the television aesthetic, which counterpoises the refined, urban tastes of the East with the opportunistic frontier mentality of the West.⁵⁶ What will ultimately be writ large on the television screen through the Western genre itself is, in the early stages of television development, the organizing principle through which television can be described as art, against its negative counterpart embodied by the practices of the motion picture industry.

From Hybrid to Original

In the absence of involvement by the motion picture industry and as a result of its location in New York, the chief influence on early television was that of the theatre. Programme formats, as has been noted, were adopted from radio, as a result of the major broadcasters viewing

⁵⁶ See Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in The Frontier in American History (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947).

television as an extension of radio.⁵⁷ What would be shown, and how, was however the responsibility of the programmers, who came primarily from the world of the theatre. Many of those who would go on to achieve a degree of fame for their television work -- Albert McCleery, Fred Coe, Worthington Miner, for example -- were graduates from the Yale drama school. "Coe," as Frank Sturcken writes, "was one of the earliest of many Yale-trained graduates who would come to network television."⁵⁸ Coe himself initially saw his role as expanding the audience for mainstream theatre through the medium of television: "When the 'Playhouse' did its first show in October, 1948, all of us were convinced it was our mission to bring Broadway to America via the television set. And so we drew our material from the Broadway theatre . . ."⁵⁹

Coe's thinking typifies the early conception of television as a delivery system for another medium, the stage. With the intensive development of commercial television after the Second World War (Coe was hired in 1945), the emphasis in television drama lay with adaptations

⁵⁷ Hawes, Television Drama, 40; Albert William Bluem, "The Influence of Medium Upon Dramaturgical Method in Selected Television Plays" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1959), 27.

⁵⁸ Frank Sturcken, Live Television: The Golden Age of 1946-1958 in New York (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Company, 1990), 16.

⁵⁹ Fred Coe, "TV Drama's Declaration of Independence," Theatre Arts (June, 1954): 31.

drawn from both classical and contemporary sources, a product of "a rigid theater-oriented mentality [that] was characteristic of television decision makers" during this period.⁶⁰ For the most part, "television drama before World War II was comparable to New York's off-Broadway or London's fringe theatre. After the war, television drama moved toward standards similar to those of Broadway."⁶¹ This shift, prompted by expansion and the consequent hiring of production staff drawn from the theatre, led to the entry of the "official" theatre into broadcasting:

Broadway got into the act and the high and mighty Theatre Guild and the American National Theatre and Academy lent respectability and professionalism in their attempts at series drama. The Theatre Guild made arrangements with NBC in October of 1947 for a joint presentation of a series of six plays on television. . . . It was a highly publicized venture and as a result was a major step in the development of television drama.⁶²

For Gilbert Seldes, writing in 1949, this early period of programming was particularly notable for its reliance on other media, a fact that he regarded critically: "the first thing to notice is how much of the television schedule consists of events intended for an audience which has paid its way into a stadium or concert or opera house Another large section of the schedule consists of programs which virtually duplicate material used elsewhere In

⁶⁰ Hawes, Television Drama, 137.

⁶¹ Ibid., 145.

⁶² Sturcken, Live Television, 21.

all of these, television is a remarkable recorder and transmitter."⁶³ The early stage of television development immediately after the Second World War can thus be characterized in terms of the emergence of a hybrid form. As a new medium, it functioned initially as a carrier for materials derived from other media, a "recorder and transmitter," as Seldes writes. In this, it follows McLuhan's claim that new media are at the moment of their introduction simply conduits or vehicles for the contents of the media that precede them.⁶⁴ It is not surprising, given that in the early stages television drama consisted entirely of adaptations -- "theater television," as Hawes calls it⁶⁵ -- that criticism in turn would also be derived from a theatre-oriented perspective.

For some critics, television was in essence merely an extension of developed dramatic forms into a new medium, forms that remained inextricably linked to the theatre: "The theatre of television and the stage may use different techniques which are influenced by the criteria and limitations of their own peculiar media, but they rely on

⁶³ Gilbert Seldes, "Television: The Golden Hope," Atlantic Monthly 183 (March, 1949): 35.

⁶⁴ As McLuhan wrote in The Medium is the Massage, "We impose the form of the old on the content of the new." Marshall McLuhan with Quentin Fiore, The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects (New York: Bantam Books, 1967).

⁶⁵ Hawes, Television Drama, 145.

the same history of drama and dramatic theory. Since their dramatic heritage is a common one they are highly interrelated forms."⁶⁶ In other words television, as a new medium of distribution, was simply a means by which to reproduce dramatic forms that were a product of developments occurring in the theatre. New techniques, such as they had evolved, were merely the necessary adjustments required so that ideas developed elsewhere could be adapted for presentation in the new medium:

Because the legitimate theatre has ceased to be the dominant means of distribution, we must not conclude that it may not still be a dominant source of ideas. . . . [T]elevision and movies are still -- and probably will be for centuries to come -- enormously dependent upon ideas which were evolved in the theatre . . . movies and TV are beginning to evolve new techniques of reproduction and distribution. But what they reproduce and distribute is not new.⁶⁷

Others, however, rather than viewing television as merely a vehicle for older forms and ideas, saw this use of materials and techniques drawn from the theatre and elsewhere only as a necessary stage in television's development. In this view, which preoccupied much critical discourse up until the mid-fifties, the adaptation of forms from preceding media was a transitional moment of exploration, wherein television experimented with various

⁶⁶ Gary Gumpert, "Television Theatre as an Art Form" (Ph.D. diss., Wayne State University, 1963), 54-55.

⁶⁷ Tyrone Guthrie, "Theatre and Television," in The Eighth Art: Twenty-Three Views of Television Today (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 92.

forms as it sought out what would become pure television itself. For instance, in Edward Stasheff's and Rudy Bretz' rather oedipalized version of television's trajectory, television would have to discard its "parent art forms" in order to realize itself as television qua television, to become a new art form that would no longer be beholden to the art forms from which it was originally derived:

Television, like any art, tends to carry over old, non-functional traditions of its parent art forms . . . As a result, many of the programs which the rapid growth of sight-and-sound broadcasting has given the public are not really television shows in themselves, but simply the photographing and transmitting of shows which could be, and are, presented in other media.⁶⁸

As they go on to emphasize, television is not merely a transmission medium for the parent art forms, but has its own specificity as a form of art and its own means of expression: "besides being a 'medium,' a mechanical means of transmitting older art forms, television is also a new art form in itself. Just as both radio and the movies had to

⁶⁸ Edward Stasheff and Rudy Bretz, The Television Program: Its Writing, Direction, and Production (New York: A. A. Wyn, 1951), 19. This is consistent with attitudes taken earlier in the century with regard to the development of specifically American art forms. At that point, the problem was the discovery of a form which would be American, and not dependent on, or derived from, European models of cultural production. In a similar manner, the discussion of a televisual form is centred on the matter of its distinctiveness, and the features which would differentiate it from other media, thus reproducing, in effect, the same problematic. The question of specificity, it seems, persisted at other levels of American cultural discourse. (See chapter 4.)

drop certain habits and traditions of the theatre as they developed, so TV has dropped some and will drop others."⁶⁹

As these citations indicate, the question of form emerges within this perspective as a paramount concern. This is predicated on the idea that television, although it shares elements with other media (i.e., sound from radio, visuals from film, 'liveness' from the stage), is nevertheless different by virtue of its inherent nature as medium. Here, then, in a similar fashion to the way a politics of difference founds an aesthetics of distinction between East and West, a discourse of form is elaborated that works to differentiate television from other media. According to this discourse, what is crucial for the development of television into an art is the discovery of its essential form.

Robert Lewis Shayon, writing in 1950, considered television drama to be of poor quality as a result of its dependence on other media. Shayon opined that "An inevitable thinning-out process seems to take place in adapting full-length plays to television."⁷⁰ The result of the adaptation of stage productions for presentation on television was a loss of dramatic impact: "Everybody, it seems, must propitiate the insatiable new medium -- even if

⁶⁹ Ibid., 19-20.

⁷⁰ Robert Lewis Shayon, "Television in Review," Saturday Review of Literature, 28 October, 1950, 47.

it means scaling down the kingdom, the power, and the glory of the theatre down to ten- and twenty-inch mediocrity."⁷¹ The solution to this dependence, and thus television's release from the constraints imposed by the adaptation of forms derived from other media, would be the discovery of the basic "functional unit" that would define televisual form and act as the central feature by which television could be differentiated from other media: "The unit of television drama," writes Shayon,

has yet to be discovered. . . . As everyone knows, television drama both borrows the units of films, radio, and stage, and scrambles them together in a crazy-quilt pattern. This is the real reason why TV drama is relatively unsatisfactory to date. When TV finds its true, functional unit I suspect all the present limitations won't matter.⁷²

Seldes, as noted above, was equally critical of the tendency of immediately postwar television to content itself with adaptations from other media; as he states, "It is of course easier to hire a personality than to invent a form appropriate to the new medium. . . . It is to be expected that television would be derivative -- every new form of popular art borrows from its predecessors; but it is surprising that mere inventiveness should be so feeble."⁷³ Gumpert points out that Seldes sought an answer to the

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Shayon, "Television and Radio," Saturday Review of Literature, 4 November, 1950.

⁷³ Seldes, "Golden Hope," 35.

problem of televisual form in the medium's self-exploration that would lead television away from adaptation toward the discovery of its "specific form."⁷⁴ Seldes suggests that "television is just beginning the essential process of self-exploration which every form of entertainment must go through, shedding its borrowed finery and learning to use its own best qualities."⁷⁵ The outcome of such self-exploration would be the end of television as a hybrid form and the emergence of a truly televisual form that would be distinct from other media:

In its self-exploration, television may find a surprising answer to the problem of the dramatic production, taking us far from the double bastardy of a stage play masquerading as a movie and called a teledrama. Some of the current dramatic productions seem to be pushing forward a little, breaking through formal barriers. . . . The discovery of this form will be a turning point in the course of television as a popular art.⁷⁶

According to McLuhan, "The hybrid or the meeting of two media is the moment of truth and revelation from which new form is born."⁷⁷ In effect, this was the message of this perspective on television's development: that the conjunction of the new medium with older forms would result, synergistically, in the creation of a new form. This

⁷⁴ Gumpert, "Television Theatre," 4.

⁷⁵ Seldes, "Golden Hope," 36.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 63.

result, however, would only be realized with the recognition of the distinct features and constraints that are constitutive of televisual form -- the features which denote its difference from other media. As Charles Siepmann wrote in relation to form, "The artist is one who, for purposes of self-expression, lends himself to the strait disciplines of form. . . . The beauty and impact of any work of art derive, in some part, from its mastery of the limitations imposed by the form adopted."⁷⁸

That this broad comment on the relationship between medium and expression should appear in the midst of a discussion of television is indicative of the degree to which attention to the specificity of televisual form preoccupied many of these writers, and also the extent to which form emerges as a paramount concern generally, in terms of an essentialist attitude that searches for the specificity of each medium as the central core out of which its aesthetic would emerge. Siepmann makes it quite clear that any discussion of the aesthetic merits of a given work will derive from its "mastery" of the constraints imposed by the medium in which it is produced. We can note the way in which the discussion of form carries with it an implicit demand for originality, consistent with Marx's claim that

⁷⁸ Siepmann, Radio, Television, and Society, 353.

the emergence of a new praxis demands a form, in this case, the aesthetic form of television.⁷⁹

Form does not however, as Marx suggests, inhere to the medium, but rather is the product of social forces. We must therefore be cautious about accepting essentialist claims regarding the aesthetic form of television at face value. Gary Gumpert, for instance, commenting on a claim of Albert Bluem's dissertation -- "that the only major aspect of video drama which is not also characteristic of a great deal of modern drama is length"⁸⁰ -- notes that his conclusion cannot be understood to have any significance outside of the commercial television broadcasting system, itself a product of historical phenomena:

The question of length and drama is an important consideration in regard to a commercially oriented television industry. . . . [However] length is not an inherent facet of the medium, but rather a manifestation of commercial and institutional procedures. . . . [M]ass media operate according to certain rules and regulations . . . but these rules cannot be considered an organic part of the medium unless one considers the entire broadcasting industry as being synonymous with the medium.⁸¹

This serves to remind us that the form of television itself is an abstraction, a reification, and thus the product of historical, social processes. This applies to the demand for a specific televisual form as much as it does to the

⁷⁹ See Henri Lefebvre, The Sociology of Marx, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 46-7.

⁸⁰ Bluem, "Influence of Medium," 328.

⁸¹ Gumpert, "Television Theatre," 11.

impact of program formats imposed by the structural arrangement of the broadcasting industry. In this sense, the "organic" elements of the medium, which Gumpert suggests are the essential constituents resting beyond the historical accident of the broadcasting industry, are themselves historical and abstract. Beyond the actual physical properties of television, any discussion of form is the product of practices that must be understood in terms of their actual historical development, i.e. as reifications, and not as natural phenomena.

In the case of television, the identification of its basic formal constituents qua medium emerges as the central concern. Once identified, it is presumed that mastery of the "limitations imposed by the form" of television itself, as opposed to the imposition of other forms onto television, would result in the emergence of television as art. Form becomes the category through which the critical discourse of television establishes television's uniqueness, and thus the basis upon which a claim can be made for television as art. It is through this discourse that the criteria are set forward that would distinguish television from other media, and set the medium on a trajectory where it could realize its potential as a form of art through the ontological inquiry into its constituent elements. Thus the televisual form would emerge through sensitivity to the basic properties of the medium itself, through cognizance of the

limits imposed by formal constraints, and by working within those constraints, rather than trying to emulate the effects produced in other media by adapting their forms to television. To proceed otherwise, as Charles Siepmann wrote, would simply lead to the failure of television to reach its potential; echoing Seldes' language, he states: "Any attempts (and many such may currently be seen on television screens) to 'transfer' to television techniques of radio and film are both foredoomed to failure and calculated to make a bastard of television."⁸²

Immediacy, Spontaneity, Intimacy

The transition of television from a "remarkable transmitter" of forms adapted from other media into a medium for which original material was developed consistent with its "specific form" was, at one level, a matter of historical accident. As Fred Coe explained, in the early fifties motion picture properties were out of bounds due to the uncertain status of the kinescope as film. The inability to develop those properties was partially determinate in forcing television to define itself in a way that would mark its difference from the motion picture.⁸³ At the same time, producers quickly ran out of Broadway plays to reproduce. After turning to literature as a source

⁸² Siepmann, Radio, Television, and Society, 356.

⁸³ Coe, "TV Drama's Declaration," 31.

of material, Coe recalled that "When we found no more novels to fulfil the standards we set up, we explored biographies and documentaries. It was in the course of this phase that we came up with what then seemed to be a precedent-shattering idea. Since we were working with research material, why not create an original script based on this material instead of buying a book written from the same material?"⁸⁴ In this way, the content around which the television aesthetic would be developed, plays that were "made for TV," evolved out of a situation of scarcity, and the necessity to produce original material to make up for the shortfall of adaptable works. In part then, the movement from hybrid to originality was a product of the lack of material which could be taken from elsewhere. The development of original television productions, and, ipso facto, the trend toward a definable televisual form, occurred in an unforeseen way.

The advent of original teleplays marked the beginning of what has become known as the "Golden Age" of television. This was also, as Coe puts it in the title of his article, the moment of "television's declaration of independence" from other media, and the stage at which television had evolved, it was presumed, into a true art form. The advent of the teleplay signalled the moment when the specificity of television that was sought by the critics would emerge,

⁸⁴ Ibid., 87.

through the exploration of its formal characteristics by playwrights with material written directly for the medium.

These characteristics were organized within a system of difference that identified them as unique, in opposition to the media from which television, in its hybrid phase, was said to derive. In one of the early primers on television production, an example of the "'how to do it' boys" that Siepmann describes, Edward Stasheff and Rudy Bretz begin their description of the television programme with a comparative analysis that underscores the differences between television and other media. They note first that "theater drama is conceived, written, produced, directed, and acted to be readily visible and audible to an audience in all parts of the theater, an audience in the same room as the cast. Television drama is conceived and presented to the television audience in terms of what the camera sees, since television is essentially a photographic medium."⁸⁵ Thus television is distinct from theatre by virtue of the framing effect of the camera, and the different locations of the audience and the actors. It is also, despite being a photographic medium, different from film, and closer to radio, given the "psychological difference imposed by the conditions under which the audience sees and hears the show," which is the intimate setting of the home, as opposed

⁸⁵ Stasheff and Bretz, The Television Program, 20-21.

to the large audience in the theatre.⁸⁶ Thirdly, television differs from film in its "ability to transport the audience to the sight of events taking place elsewhere at that same moment;" it is live, unlike film, and "this knowledge gives the drama a 'live theater' or 'first night' excitement which a film, made months or years previously, cannot possibly have."⁸⁷ All of these differences are delineated in order to demonstrate how television, although similar in some aspects to other media, is nevertheless at the same time unlike any of the media from which it borrows. As Stasheff and Bretz conclude: "In short, while television derives many of its elements from the theater, the movies, and radio, while it serves as a transmitting medium for sports, news, and special events, it is also rapidly developing as a form of entertainment which is unique. That uniqueness is based on immediacy, spontaneity, and intimacy."⁸⁸ These three features -- immediacy, spontaneity, intimacy -- become the central characteristics around which the specificity of television would be constructed. The extent to which a given production would be seen to be effective in terms of televisual form would be judged by the degree to which it successfully exploited these dimensions.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 25.

Attention to these formal attributes would result in something that could be called true television, and, ipso facto, would also result in the creation of art. This is registered implicitly in an earlier article by Bretz, which is titled, significantly, "TV as an Art Form." In this text, the three markers of television's uniqueness are strongly linked to its development as a form of art (although at this point "actuality" is the third term, later replaced by intimacy in his book with Stasheff).⁸⁹ Here, Bretz defines what is meant by each of the three terms:

"Immediacy," of course, refers to the feeling the viewer has that what he is watching is at that very moment occurring at some distant place. . . . [B]Y "spontaneity" is meant the feeling that the action being watched has never happened before, at least not quite in the same manner. . . . "[A]ctuality" refers to the feeling that what is being seen is real. . . . The highly popular comedy shows, audience participation shows, and variety programs contain these three qualities of immediacy, spontaneity, and actuality to a considerable extent.⁹⁰

Thus television, to be an art form, would need to possess all three of these qualities, all of which, it should be noted, are predicated on realism and on a presumption of ontological truth, even if only as a "feeling." Indeed, Bretz himself raises a Platonic objection to these claims

⁸⁹ As can be judged by some of the citations below, actuality does not 'disappear,' as it were; rather, it exists along with the other three terms. Gilbert Seldes in particular stressed the term actuality in relation to live television. However, intimacy, as will become clear, is perhaps the most important term of the four.

⁹⁰ Rudy Bretz, "TV as an Art Form," Hollywood Quarterly 5 (1950-1): 153-4.

being made on behalf of television drama: "A live dramatic show, on the other hand, would appear to be devoid of all three. Actuality is here replaced by illusion . . . spontaneity is reduced to nothing by the necessity of following a rehearsed script, and immediacy is destroyed as far as possible by giving the illusion of time other than the present."⁹¹ Here the ancient philosophical problem of mimesis seems to threaten the ontological status of television as reality. However, for Bretz, there is the more immediate, pressing problem that drama programmes may be entirely unsuitable for the television medium; as he asks rhetorically, "If dramatic shows are devoid of actuality, spontaneity, and immediacy . . . how do we reconcile this with their obvious popularity with the television audience?"⁹² The answer, perhaps not surprisingly, is somewhat tautological -- because it is performed live, it has the qualities of liveness:

In the first place, there is some doubt as to whether these three qualities are completely lacking in a live dramatic show. . . . It is, after all, a performance. A performance is in itself something real, and is happening for the first time. It has never happened before in exactly the same way. The quality of actuality is inherent in a performance as long as it is a real performance, immediacy is present if the performance is taking place at the present time.⁹³

⁹¹ Ibid., 155.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

Although this answer seems weak, philosophically at least, it is nevertheless reassuring in the way it accounts for drama's popularity in terms of its inherent televisuality, dubious as the argument may appear in retrospect.⁹⁴ The key, however, is the apparent capturing of some reality, which is presumed to be the essence of television.

The reality effect is also traced to the circumstances under which television is viewed. In this formulation, the phenomenological situation of television watching -- what Stasheff and Bretz called the "psychological difference imposed by conditions under which the audience sees and hears the show" -- is considered as cause in relation to the effect, television's emphasis on "intimacy." In Bretz' own account, this term does not appear; rather, as was noted, it later replaces actuality as the third term. This is perhaps due to the fact that the notion of intimacy, unlike actuality, was not derived from the medium per se, but from the conditions of reception, which effect the way television programmes are presented and what contents are best suited to the medium. This is based, as Tad Mosel suggests, on the paradoxical situation wherein television programmes, despite being delivered to millions of people simultaneously, are

⁹⁴ More recently, this view of liveness as the essence of television has come under attack as "ideological." See Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in E. Ann Kaplan, ed. Regarding Television: Critical Approaches -- An Anthology (Frederick, Md.: American Film Institute, 1983), 12-22.

nevertheless viewed either individually or in small, intimate groups; as Mosel writes: "They say that the average television play reaches an audience of twenty million people, the largest audience in the history of entertainment. . . . I much prefer to believe the exact opposite, which, in this age of paradoxes, is also true -- that television is the most intimate entertainment medium ever conceived."⁹⁵

Although it is not a component of the medium, as a product of the relationship between medium and conditions of reception, it is determinate to some degree as regards television content. As Flora Rheta Schreiber writes, "The fact that the video audience is an audience of one has its effect not only on the subject matter, but on techniques. The TV screen should be thought of as a very personal revealing mirror or window. Looking through this window, you see the part rather than the whole, and the part becomes the reference point around which the viewer's imagination can go to work."⁹⁶ Here we see quite clearly the extent to which the viewing situation was considered an integral element of the aesthetic dimension of television, and how it was presumed to reflect back on both the content and technique of presentation.

⁹⁵ Tad Mosel, Other People's Houses: Six Television Plays (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), ix.

⁹⁶ Flora Rheta Schreiber, "Television: A New Idiom," Hollywood Quarterly 4 (1949-50): 183.

This conception of television as an intimate medium is further linked to a stress on verisimilitude, where the conditions of reception require television to project an impression of credibility. In this case, the absence of the large audience of the theatre was thought to establish the conditions where the viewer became more critical of what was being presented: "television needs honesty . . . because it speaks intimately to the viewer, in his own home, when he is alone or with one or two of his family or friends. . . . He is reacting by himself; and by himself he is far quicker to discern the false and the shoddy."⁹⁷ This dimension is also emphasized by Bluem, who suggests that "the intimacy of the group audience and lack of 'crowd psychology' tend to create a strong need for credibility and honesty in characters and situations represented."⁹⁸

Bluem, however, claims that this is nevertheless a product of the "positive limitation" of television, its small screen size and low resolution, and therefore grounds the conception of television as intimate in a technical attribute of the medium itself:

The terms 'honesty,' 'credibility,' and 'intimate' are frequently employed in describing the requirements of drama for the home audience. . . . In this connection, the small screen size of the home receiver must be regarded as a positive limitation upon the television

⁹⁷ Arthur Heinemann, "Honesty is, Generally, the Best Policy," in How to Write for Television, ed. William Kaufman (New York: Hastings House, 1955), 41.

⁹⁸ Bluem, "Influence of Medium," 130.

playwright. . . . The influence of the reduced screen bears a significance, then, in a discussion of the limitation upon dramatic form in the medium.⁹⁹

Bluem claims that "While 'intimacy' may result in part from the conditions of viewing, it is generally considered a result of a technical limitation in the medium, the severely reduced image which the audience sees. The term has implications which seem to bear directly upon the dramatist's approach to various elements of drama."¹⁰⁰

Whether one considers intimacy to be an attribute of the television medium itself, as Bluem does, or the result of the conditions of reception, it is evident that all of the authors agree that the conception of television as an intimate medium mediates the development of televisual form.

For Bretz, the small screen size acted as a constraint on television, since it reduced viewing pleasure: "A large deterrent to the enjoyment of any program is, of course, the small size of the average television screen, for actual size has a great deal to do with visual enjoyment."¹⁰¹

However, most authors, like Bluem, considered the small screen size and low resolution as a "positive limitation" since the intimacy these conditions demanded seemed to allow television to portray something akin to real life, missing

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 142.

¹⁰¹ Rudy Bretz, "The Limitations of Television," Hollywood Quarterly 5 (1950-1): 251.

in the vast sweep of both the stage and motion picture. A theatre critic, for instance, remarked that "while the TV camera fails to give a play the size and vastness it assumes behind the proscenium, that same camera can capture the power of the intimate impulse in a dramatic work. In live television -- more so, it seems to me, than on film -- the camera can take hold of a life and get into it in a way that sometimes has as great validity as the corresponding stage process, or even better."¹⁰² Here again, we can note how an apparent limitation is converted into a positive attribute, in terms of the way intimacy appears to lend itself to a heightened sense of the real, in the way that television seems to "get hold of life."

A Slice of Life

The terms intimacy, spontaneity, and immediacy, as well as actuality, lend themselves to a conception of television rooted in the idea that, unlike the stage and the motion picture, television is about the real. Both the theatre and the movie give us, to use Tyrone Guthrie's phrase, "an enormous helping of something larger, louder, and more high-colored than most of us are ever likely to experience."¹⁰³ Television, on the other hand, by virtue of its scale, was considered to be closer to life and to everyday experience.

¹⁰² Robert Whitehead, "From Stage to TV Screen," Theatre Arts 40 (October, 1956): 69.

¹⁰³ Guthrie, "Theatre and Television," 96.

The reality which television portrays is one in which we experience, according to Gilbert Seldes, "that 'shock of recognition' which comes to us when we encounter our fellow beings in moments of stress and revelation, when they are being frankly and completely themselves;" television thus "invites us to 'the contemplation of things as they are' . . . television will satisfy the deep human desire to look, at times, on the face of reality."¹⁰⁴

This notion of television showing us "things as they are" or letting us see the "face of reality" pervades much of the writing in this period, although this does not necessarily refer only to the fact that television was transmitted live; rather, it refers preeminently to the qualities of television as they are expressed through the three key terms examined. Actuality and intimacy are combined to produce a realism that, although it may be fictional, is nevertheless "based in fact" and centred on "everyday crises through which the same depth of insight can be achieved, but without the excessive theatricality" of the stage.¹⁰⁵ This is achieved, on the one hand, by the instantaneous delivery of the image -- the fact that it is live -- and, on the other hand, through the ability of the camera to capture the smallest details. As Seldes writes, "The sense of the actual is greater in television than in

¹⁰⁴ Seldes, Great Audience, 187; "Golden Hope," 36.

¹⁰⁵ Chayefsky, Television Plays, 126.

any other dramatic form, greater than that of the stage because it can escape the theatrical limitations of time and space, and more immediate than the movies because nothing intervenes between the action before the camera and the reconstructed action on the home screen."¹⁰⁶ Thus, immediacy and actuality, as an effect of live television, contribute to the sense that something real is occurring. This sense of reality, according to Paddy Chayefsky, is further magnified by the effect of the camera:

It not only provides you with intimacy, but it allows you the incalculable advantage of realism. Realism, in the theatre, is a synthesized business; what one achieves is really the effect of realism. In television you can be literally and freely real. The scenes can be played as if the actors were unaware of their audience. The dialogue can sound as if it had been wiretapped.¹⁰⁷

For Seldes, the directors most adept in creating successful television were "the ones who recognized another essential: in the modern theater the characters on the stage interact and the audience overhears what they say to one another;"¹⁰⁸ for Chayefsky, the camera's ability to penetrate into the scene evidently further enhances this characteristic and increases the sense of reality.

¹⁰⁶ Seldes, Public Arts, 191.

¹⁰⁷ Paddy Chayefsky, "Good Theatre in Television," in How to Write for Television, ed. William Kaufman (New York: Hastings House, 1955), 46.

¹⁰⁸ Seldes, Public Arts, 185.

Worthington Miner, according to Hawes, "once said that the basic difference between television and motion pictures was that, in pictures, actors for the most part moved in and out of a fixed frame; in television, they often remained still, while the frame around them moved."¹⁰⁹ This suggests that the events that appear on the television screen unfold in a natural way, and are simply revealed to us by the camera, which catches them unawares. Miner implicitly confirms Chayefsky's view that the camera discovers, as it were, the real, and that the action would be produced by the camera and not by the actors. This discovered reality of television, as Siepmann forecast in 1950, was not based in physical action, but rather on the psychological dimensions of character, which the camera was able to capture by penetrating to the realm of intimacy:

We suggest that television lends itself to the development of a new kind of drama in which action is not, as in the film, predominantly physical, but psychological -- both sight and sound serving to give overt expression to covert operations of the mind. Subtleties of this kind are difficult to achieve on either stage or screen. . . . The film is extrovert. Television, perhaps, lends itself to introvert adventures. It is a medium potentially more intimate and subtle.¹¹⁰

The ability of the camera to observe the smallest details, combined with the small size of the viewing screen, led to an emphasis on character, much in the way Siepmann

¹⁰⁹ Hawes, Television Drama, 53.

¹¹⁰ Siepmann, Radio, Television, and Society, 357.

anticipated. For Chayefsky, "The good hour show is generally a character study, and it can be a far more incisive and penetrating character study than can be put on the stage."¹¹¹ The reason, as we have just read, was that "In television, there is practically nothing too subtle or delicate that you cannot examine with your camera. The camera allows us a degree of intimacy that can never be achieved on stage."¹¹² The relationship between a formal attribute of the medium and intimacy is again brought forward, in terms of the way the connection between them resulted in stress being placed on the development of characterization, as opposed to action. Rod Serling, for instance, notes that "the television play was beginning to show depth and a preoccupation with character;" he then links this directly with television's spatial limitations:

In terms of technique, the "close-up" that had served as such a boon to the motion pictures was further refined and used to even greater advantage in television. The key to drama was intimacy, and the facial study on a small screen carried with it a meaning and power far beyond its usage in the motion pictures.¹¹³

The extent to which character became the focus of television drama is made clear by Fred Coe who, making his list of "representative" shows that demonstrated television's

¹¹¹ Chayefsky, "Good Theatre," 45.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Rod Serling, Patterns (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 9, 10.

development of a unique form, wrote that "every play on this list is a character study. None has an intricate plot, because intricate plots are just not right for television. The TV approach, as opposed to the theatre or movies or radio, is an approach to the understanding of character rather than to the complication of the story line."¹¹⁴

Seldes states of the writers associated with Coe that "The group concentrate on character, letting plot rise out of the hopes and fears and habits of human beings without overprojection, with intensity and passion." In doing so, in Seldes' opinion, they "have actually created a style of drama which is neither theatre nor movie and definitely is television."¹¹⁵

According to Tyrone Guthrie, "television drama has been most successful when intimately realistic; when it presents a Slice of Life truthfully."¹¹⁶ As Smith notes of the writers of original television drama, "their concentration on character instead of action" led to a consistent pattern wherein the themes of these dramatists were primarily concentrated on the depiction of a "realistic slice of life" where "the small person's relation with larger issues"

¹¹⁴ Coe, "Declaration of Independence," 88.

¹¹⁵ Gilbert Seldes, "A Clinical Analysis of TV," New York Times Magazine, 28 November, 1954, 55.

¹¹⁶ Guthrie, "Theater and Television," 96.

became the central conflict.¹¹⁷ The relation between the "small" individual and social circumstances reflected a pattern that typified the majority of television plays: "The most definitive pattern is discerned in the economic status of the characters The protagonists are placed in a total situation in which economic pressure is an active stimulus to character motivation."¹¹⁸ The "slice of life" was thus a particular slice, concentrated on characters drawn for the most part from lower economic and social strata:

Economic and geographical [i.e. urban] environment seem to be common features in the majority of these plays. There is still a third area where commonality in situation is observable. This involves the nature of the general social status of the characters in the plays. . . . Protagonists are inextricably involved in a lower- or lower-middle class pattern of existence in contemporary American society. All are the "wage slaves" who can no longer find romance, happiness or relief from "the job."¹¹⁹

A second significant trend, according to Bluem, along with the urban locale and economic and social status of the characters, was "the manner by which the playwrights attempt to expose subtle inner or covert feelings in the characters."¹²⁰ This trend suggests for Bluem that "There is, then, evidence among these plays to suggest that the

¹¹⁷ Smith, Professional Criticism, 173.

¹¹⁸ Bluem, "Influence of Medium," 182.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 184.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 248.

broad concept of 'intimacy,' as a condition of video as a theatrical medium, has had widespread influence upon the playwrights."¹²¹ Once again we can note how an attribute ascribed to television is considered determinate as regards the form that materials written specifically for the medium will take. Particular emphasis is placed on the spatial aspects of television and the relationship between limited space and the development of the psychological dimensions of characters.

This is seen quite explicitly in Rod Serling's and Paddy Chayefsky's reflections on their craft, where they both employ the same spatial metaphor to describe the technique of television writing, which is in turn linked directly to the spatial limits considered inherent to the television medium. Chayefsky writes that "television drama cannot expand in breadth, so it must expand in depth."¹²² Likewise, Serling suggests that "The physical limitations of the television drama are part and parcel of the innate problems of the writer . . . television's 'intimacy,' so often its strength, is an outgrowth of this weakness. . . . This lack of space is often reflected in the techniques of television playwriting. The author must often probe

¹²¹ Ibid., 249-50.

¹²² Chayefsky, Television Plays, 132.

vertically because there just aren't enough inches to let him spread out horizontally."¹²³

This depth is clearly not literal, as in the staging of movement along the Z-axis toward and away from the camera, but refers rather to the probing into the depth of the inner psychological dimensions of the characters. Thus the development of insight into the psychic states of the characters becomes paramount; the limited scope for action across the horizontal axis of the screen provides the conditions for the emergence of a dramatic form that would emphasize individual psychical states and reactions to internal conflicts. As Bluem indicates:

these plays tend to concentrate upon a limited action involving few characters. . . . Action is limited to the exposition of a conflict within one or two characters, and extraneous action is confined. . . . The crises are 'small' or inward and heavily devoted to the resolution of conflict within the protagonist alone. The conflict is resolved with little or no external social consequence or effect. . . . In certain of these plays there is a development of characterization designed to enlarge upon the 'inward' conflicts by exposing subtle changes in attitude and states of mind.¹²⁴

Smith, like Bluem, notes that the connection between intimacy and verisimilitude resulted in the emergence of a particular style of writing and a new and original form of drama: "The outstanding qualities of these plays were, in the critic's opinion, their concentration on character

¹²³ Serling, Patterns, 17.

¹²⁴ Bluem, "Influence of Medium," 321.

instead of action, on restricted episodes rather than on lengthy, broad scenes, and on the nuances of genuine dialogue."¹²⁵ For Bluem, intimacy as a term captured the essence of this new form of drama which, although predicated on what initially appeared to be a constraining formal element of television, was in fact the basis upon which a unique dramatic form could emerge: "The word seems to embrace the suggested conditions of form described by Charles Siepmann, who implied that the medium, as a result of the reduced image, might permit a 'new kind of drama,' in which focus is devoted to 'covert' rather than 'overt' action, with emphasis upon the psychological, as opposed to physical action."¹²⁶

Psychological realism thus emerges within critical discourses as the mode of drama of television, a product of its nature qua medium; its intimacy, the result of technical limitations that in turn affect the conditions of reception, becomes the basis for a "new form of drama" that would account for both the limits induced by the technical features of the medium and the peculiarities of the way in which television is viewed. Siepmann's description of a new kind of drama in 1950 presages the claims made for the television dramatic form just a few years later; he clearly anticipates much of the later television analysis described

¹²⁵ Smith, Professional Criticism, 173-4.

¹²⁶ Bluem, "Influence of Medium," 143-4.

above. Most importantly, he connects the specificity of the medium with the emergence of television as an art form, thus anticipating the promise that television would become art once it had discovered its essence.

We must, however, again be cautious about accepting these claims as being the product of television, as if they arose out of the medium itself; here again we can detect a process of reification that finds these developments within the medium, rather than recognizing the degree to which the social configuration at this historical moment maps concerns about intimacy and the "mental underworld" onto television. For instance, psychological realism, as has already been described, was by no means invented for television; rather, the development of television drama seems to be part of a prevailing set of social concerns reflected in cultural production in all media in the postwar period.

The Jargon of Introspection

This concentration on inner conflict, as has been noted, was not particular to television. The increasing interest in the United States during the immediate postwar period in psychoanalysis and in the sociological questions of the relationship between the individual and society denote an era preoccupied with the inner self. Charles Siepmann was therefore in a sense speaking for the time when he announced that "If television, by exploitation of what we believe to be its inherent limitation -- the confined

dimension of its projected image -- can explore such fields, it may offer us an art as new and as momentous as that mental underworld (revealed to us by Freud and his successors) which it seems so well-adapted to explore."¹²⁷ That television is well-adapted as a medium to explore the unconscious may indeed be true, but it is not at all self-evident, as Siepmann implies, that it was predestined to do so. To stretch the Freudian idea a little further, one might claim that Siepmann's comment expresses a desire for wish-fulfilment, to the extent that he finds a medium ready made to be filled with the content that became symbolically central to American society in the years that followed his pronouncement. Indeed, Bluem claims that "It is significant that the conditions which supposedly set video apart from other theatrical media have had the least consistent influence," which suggests that television did not develop in a unique way, as many of the authors cited here claimed, but rather that it developed within a particular set of social conditions which overdetermined its trajectory.¹²⁸

Paddy Chayefsky in particular had the insight to recognize that the emphasis on the psychology of the characters was not simply a product of the formal constraints of the medium, but part of a general concern of a society in the midst of an identity crisis, of which the

¹²⁷ Siepmann, Radio, Television, and Society, 357.

¹²⁸ Bluem, "Influence of Medium," 322.

psychological dramas of television were but an expression. As Chayefsky wrote, "These are strange and fretful times, and the huge inevitable currents of history are too broad now to provide individual people with any meaning to their lives. People are beginning to turn into themselves, looking for personal happiness. . . . The jargon of introspection has become everyday conversation."¹²⁹ That introspective concerns were "everyday conversation" meant, for Chayefsky, that it was inevitable that drama would come to portray this as its theme, a theme for which he felt television was particularly suited: "The theatre and all its sister mediums [sic] can only be a reflection of their times, and the drama of introspection is the drama that the people want to see. . . . This is an age of savage introspection, and television is the dramatic medium through which to expose our new insights into ourselves. The stage is too weighty, and the movies too intense, to deal with the mundane and all its obscured ramifications."¹³⁰

Television thus becomes the medium par excellence for the representation of what can only be called, if Chayefsky is to be believed, alienation. Unlike the movies and the theatre, which give us "something larger, louder, and more high-colored," television is the medium of the everyday, of the mundane. It presents "things as they are," rather than

¹²⁹ Chayefsky, Television Plays, 132.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 132, 178-9.

as they ought (or ought not) to be. In this sense, television is anti-spectacular; the television aesthetic was organized along realist lines in such a way as to fashion television as the opposite of the spectacle of the motion picture and the stage. In an implicit Platonic mimetic order (or perhaps better, in the order of simulacra), television is a step closer to the true; unlike the spectacularization of life presented through the medium of the stage and screen, television is the stuff of everyday life.¹³¹ Thus, contrary to the types of alienation produced through the effects of spectacularization for which mass media were held culpable,¹³² by penetrating to the realm of domestic intimacy, by giving us a "slice of life," television would show us alienation itself. This it would do by being real, which is to say closer to the essence of the real along the Platonic mimetic chain; closer, ontologically speaking, to the "real thing."

The question of authenticity was of acute concern for many intellectuals and cultural commentators of this time,

¹³¹ This holds true generally despite NBC's programming strategy to mount "Spectaculars," as Pat Weaver called special programmes, to develop audience interest in television. See Vance Kepley Jr., "From 'Frontal Lobes' to the 'Bob-and-Bob' Show: NBC Management and Programming Strategies, 1949-65," in Hollywood in the Age of Television, ed. Tino Balio (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), 47.

¹³² As in, for example, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1986).

and it preoccupied those negatively disposed toward mass media as much as it absorbed those pushing toward the aesthetic legitimation of television. The privatization of experience, further reinforced in television by the intimate scale and reception conditions along with a preoccupation with motivational techniques in acting, resulted in television's concentration on the inner dimensions of characters and an examination of their psychic states -- much as the rest of the American intelligentsia were generally preoccupied with the psychic states of the members of their society. The convergence of particular historical currents in American cultural development with the social and political conditions that arose in the early postwar period gave rise to a cultural configuration absorbed with representations of the psychological dimensions of individuals within society. The jargon of introspection arose out of a concern for identity, prompted by a crisis brought on by the instability of definitions of the subject within the social order.

The collapse of agreement over what constituted a coherent subject against which naturalist scenarios could be played out marks the beginning point for probes into the interior life of individuals. The idea that "a coherent relation between man and an intelligible society" was no longer tenable meant that this condition could no longer be taken as the basis upon which a naturalist aesthetic could

rest, and led to the emergence of psychologically-oriented forms of expression, centred on an anti-rational conception of the social order.¹³³ Hence the shattering of meaning in the relation of historical movement and individual lives to which Chayefsky refers.

It is at this point that television discourse converges with modernist tendencies to retreat into privacy and self-expression. Given the general collapse of a coherent relation between the individual and society, it is no surprise that Chayefsky, a television playwright, would claim (as you will recall) that the "huge inevitable currents of history are too broad now to provide individual people with any meaning to their lives." Television thus reflects in aesthetic discourse the same preoccupations that pervaded culture generally, that is, the jargon of introspection, which perhaps not so coincidentally bears a marked similarity to a phrase of Adorno's: the "jargon of authenticity." As Trent Shroyer writes at the beginning of Adorno's book, after World War II the "use of existentialistic terms became, Adorno argues, a jargon: a mode of magical expression" in which "consequently, there is a loss of the objective context of human society and an idealistic compression of all historical consciousness into

¹³³ J.A. Ward, American Silences: The Realism of James Agee, Walker Evans, and Edward Hopper (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1985), 4.

the sphere of self-experience."¹³⁴ This seems, despite its sophistication, not to be all that different from Chayefsky's intuitive grasp of the effects of a shift in discursive attention after the war. In particular, what is noticeable is the withering away of social content in favour of the exploration of individual consciousness. This was an historical feature of the transformation of cultural expression that occurred during the period from the middle of the nineteen-thirties to the end of the Second World War.

¹³⁴ Trent Schroyer, foreword to The Jargon of Authenticity, by Theodor Adorno, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, 1973), xiii, xiv.

CHAPTER 4

THE CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS OF THE AESTHETIC OF TELEVISION

In the early 1950s, the so-called "Golden-Age" of television, the core of critical acclamation for the new medium focused on the live drama-anthology programs originating from New York City. This acclamation was based on a particular set of criteria that emerged from early experiments with television and sought to establish a set of aesthetic guidelines that were organized around the constraints and possibilities of the medium, and which would differentiate television from other media, particularly the motion picture and the theatre.

Although this aesthetic was fashioned in such a way that it would account for the specificity of television as an expressive medium, it did not arise independent of tendencies and developments in other media, and in American culture in general. The emphasis on "realism" (with its particular televisual expression) must be seen as the outcome of nationalist debates over cultural production stretching back to nineteenth-century America. Thus, in order to understand why the realist disposition emerges as it does at the core of critical approaches to television in

the 1950s, it is important to trace out its historical antecedents in the reshaping of what came to be understood as culture in the United States after the turn of the century, and which continues to resonate in more recent debates.

Despite the overall transformation in the attitudes and dispositions of the cultural elite after nineteen-fifteen, only a fragile and short-lived consensus emerged regarding the importance of indigenous forms of cultural expression and quotidian life as the source of inspiration for models of a national culture. What constituted the sole source agreement and bound the critics together was a shared negative disposition toward imported forms of European aristocratic cultural expression and, in particular, a rejection of the Arnoldian conception of culture as the maintenance of the best of the past as too static in favour of a dynamic and progressive notion of culture better suited to the American temperament.

In charting out the emergence of a realist aesthetic in creative expression (and indeed in science as well),¹ it is

¹ The emergence of realism in art described below must be understood as part of an overall transformation that included scientific observation as well. Most important is the growth of empirical sociology in the early part of the century, concurrent with the spread of photography, that transformed visual perception of the social. In addition to comments regarding cultural expression cited below, see Miles Orvell, The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989). See also Warren E. Susman, "Culture and Civilization: The Nineteen-Twenties," in Culture as

important to recognize that despite a shared nationalist tendency, there were nevertheless deep divisions and conflict regarding the sources which come to be representative of "the best" the United States has to offer. It is here that the politics of culture become crucial, and become central to understanding how particular critical dispositions emerge much later in relation to television. As will be described below, the debates in the 1920s between the "radical" modernists and those holding a liberal-populist attitude favourably disposed toward popular culture signify the first attempt to legitimate popular culture expression in the face of cultural-elitist tendencies, a debate which is restaged (although under entirely different political circumstances) after the Second World War in relation to the proponents of an American-led high modernism. As well, the specificity of the television aesthetic cannot be grasped without reference to the developments in the theatre of the 1930s and 1940s, and the influence of the left-wing movement on dramaturgy through innovative strategies of realist representation, and the attendant debates between "bourgeois" naturalism and "revolutionary" realism that took place, and the eventual rise to dominance of "psychological" realism.

History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973).

The examination of the development of a television aesthetic cannot be understood, therefore, merely as a set of solutions to the formal constraints of the television medium, although it is in part a response to those constraints. Rather, the particular form this critical discourse took historically must be seen also and primarily as an engagement with, and relative to, antecedent cultural debates and the cultural politics of the time. Only in this way will the specific features of the formula for the television aesthetic that emerged in the early fifties make sense.

Since the television aesthetic is a complex concatenation of various cultural and critical tendencies developing in the United States since the turn of the century, this chapter will return briefly to a discussion of the basic elements of the television aesthetic as it appeared in the 1950s, and then turn toward an historical examination of those previous cultural developments in order to trace out the bases upon which the television aesthetic rested. This will begin with discussion of the development of a concern for the "real" and the empirical as it emerges between 1900 and 1920, and the development of nationalist critical tendencies and realist aesthetics in literature. This will be followed by discussion of the emergence in the 1920s of the realist school and the rejection of the "Genteel" culture of nineteenth-century bourgeois America,

as well as intellectual forays into popular culture as both source of material for cultural expression and as the basis for the construction of a national culture. Thirdly, we will examine the dramaturgy of American theatre in the 1930s and 1940s as a key site of struggle over the nature of dramatic representation which affected both the way that television dramas were written and the way that they were discussed and criticized.

Ontology and Televisual Form

It would be relatively simple to describe the emergence of an aesthetic of television in the 1950s and the critical efforts to legitimize television as a form of art as a reactionary move pitted against the developments in the visual arts and literature in the post-war period. Certainly, the attempt to discuss a "popular" medium like television in artistic and aesthetic terms was to some extent aimed at critics like Clement Greenberg, Dwight MacDonald, and others who considered mass media to be debased forms of genuine culture, to be "kitsch," or recycled high culture.² The emphasis on naturalist or realist forms of drama as opposed to the neo-avant-garde strategies appearing after the Second World War could be

² Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in Art and Culture: Critical Essays (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961); Dwight MacDonald, "A Theory of Mass Culture;" and Leslie Fiedler, "The Middle Against Both Ends," in Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957).

taken as a conservative reaction to the more "progressive" tendencies of modernist art practices.

It was not, however, reactionary -- except if one were to ignore the history of the dialectical oscillation back and forth between naturalist and abstractionist movements from the beginning of the century up until the advent of television and beyond. To the extent that the rejection of the negative (avant-gardist) intellectual disposition toward popular media had already occurred a number of times in the preceding decades of this century, this form of cultural conflict was simply being replayed again in regard to the defense of television as a genuine form of cultural expression. Gilbert Seldes, for instance, reflecting on his experiences in the 1920s as a cultural critic favourably disposed toward popular media, wrote that "it was not so much against the scholars and the pendants of our time that we reacted. It was against the avant-garde and the intellectual and the sophisticated critic who were for everything modern, provided they could think of it in the framework of the fine arts."³

Unlike Clement Greenberg and the other mass-culture theorists, this earlier attentiveness to the popular held the thesis that the relation between high and popular culture was not simply based on a unidirectional conception

³ Gilbert Seldes, The Public Arts (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 291.

of appropriation and dilution of high culture forms by low or middle-brow culture (Greenberg's "kitsch"), but rather that it was reciprocal in nature, and that the fine arts were not necessarily the sole embodiment of progressive culture. Later, in defense of television, Henry Rabassiere wrote of "would-be intellectuals" who "refuse to see any transmission belt between popular and high culture, or between popular ideologies and high ideals."⁴ According to Rabassiere, "In their dread of being caught in a profane mood, would-be intellectuals alienate themselves from the sources of national experience and risk forfeiting their share in forming it."⁵ The contempt expressed toward the elitist tendencies of some intellectual formations was, as Gilbert Seldes suggests, not new; it was an element entrenched in American cultural debates stretching back to the early decades of this century.

This conflict over the value of popular culture and of intellectual dispositions toward popular culture was the backdrop against which the aesthetic discourse of television was developed. To the extent that critics favourably disposed toward popular culture shared some of the same values with the elitist mass-culture critics, in terms of the ideals of the educating function of culture and a

⁴ Henry Rabassiere, "In Defence of Television," in Mass Culture, 373.

⁵ Ibid.

"belief in the improvability of mass taste and sensitivity and the public responsibility of the creative individual," the promotion of a public agenda by this group of intellectuals is no more innocent than that of the mass-culture critics.⁶ It is distinguished from it by the advocacy of participation in the shaping of popular culture, as opposed to outright condemnation. With the presence of a counter-discourse levelled against the weaknesses of the empirical assumptions of the mass culture critics,⁷ along with the existence of television programming that could be considered to have artistic merit from a conventional dramaturgical perspective, the opportunity arose to construct an aesthetic discourse that attempted to legitimize television as a new art form.

As a result of the spatial proximity of the television broadcasters to other forms of cultural production in New York City, an inevitable concatenation of influences occurred which affected the initial form which television took. The presence of a talent pool consisting of both creative and technical labour drawn from radio and theatre and employed in the new medium created a situation wherein

⁶ Charles C. Alexander, Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth Century America (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1980), 70.

⁷ See, for example, Rolf Meyersohn, "Social Research in Television," in Mass Culture; and Leo Rosten, "A Disenchanted Look at the Audience," in The Eighth Art: Twenty-Three Views of Television Today, ed. John Cogley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962).

the aesthetic dispositions and modes of production practices current in those other media were integrated into television practices and programme contents. As some scholars have suggested, the particular configuration obtaining in New York City in this period (especially in its distaste for "Hollywood")⁸ provided the circumstances under which the television aesthetic would emerge in a very specific way.

Nevertheless, as Lawrence Laurent points out, this was not sufficient for the development of a specific television aesthetic, nor its discursive counterpart:

Television critics particularly liked the big, live, dramatic production because -- among other reasons-- this form lent itself immediately to traditional criticism . . . Critics tried to evaluate live TV drama by the same standards they would have used for the legitimate theater. Such standards, failing as they must to account for limitations of the medium -- small screen, chromatic precision, financial restrictions -- were unfair to television.⁹

The difficulties of the dramatic adaptation are implicit here, and the call for criticism of television that was sensitive to its formal constraints also harboured a call for an aesthetic discourse that would not be borrowed from another medium, but would be specific to television, and, indeed, calls for television programmes that would not be

⁸ See William Boddy, Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990), 73-76 passim.

⁹ Lawrence Laurent, "Wanted: The Complete Television Critic," in The Eighth Art: Twenty-Three Views of Television Today, ed. John Cogley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 162.

mere adaptations from other media, but specifically designed as television productions.

The development of anthology drama programmes such as Studio One at CBS and NBC Television Playhouse in the early fifties gave opportunities to writers who were willing to explore the latent possibilities of the new medium; Television Playhouse, according to Seldes, was credited with "the astonishing feat of creating a genuine television style, with original materials."¹⁰ The most often referred-to example of original drama from this period is undoubtedly Marty, written by Paddy Chayefsky, which was remade into a successful feature film. The strength of its success as a feature was attributed to the quality of the writing, and it was exploited as an example of a work written for television that could compete on equal footing in another cultural milieu; as David Manning White put it:

Television is capable of contributing its share to the best in our popular arts, as seen clearly in the academy-award-winning movie, Marty, originally a television play. That its author, Paddy Chayefsky, should go from television to the legitimate theater in New York . . . is but another example of the mobility of an artist who has something worthwhile to say, no matter what the medium.¹¹

Although the reference to "legitimate" theatre suggests a certain amount of insecurity over the status that television held at the time, it is clear how the crossover both to film

¹⁰ Seldes, Public Arts, 182.

¹¹ David Manning White, "Mass Culture in America: Another Point of View," in Mass Culture, 16.

and theatre operates as a resource to authenticate television work as art. The attention given to Marty is significant in relation to those concerns, since it was considered a breakthrough of sorts in the way it made original use of the television format that transcended adaptation and created a new aesthetic that was subsequently appropriated by feature film.¹²

This aesthetic was, as noted in the previous chapter, characterized primarily as "psychological" and "realistic," where it used the screen size to its advantage by the frequent employment of close-ups that emphasize character over action: "So far, television drama has been most successful when intimately realistic . . . directed and acted with attention to psychological realism; when it does not make any attempt to be larger and more high-colored than the everyday life of ordinary people."¹³ This emphasis on projection of the interior life of the characters over action was echoed by Charles Siepmann, who saw the small screen size as well-adapted to this form. As we saw in the previous chapter, Siepmann equated the dramatic explorations of television to the processes of psychoanalysis in

¹² Kenneth Hey, "Marty: Aesthetics Versus Medium in Early Television Drama," in American History/American Television: Interpreting the Video Past, ed. John O'Connor (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1983), 123, 126-7.

¹³ Tyrone Guthrie, "Theatre and Television," in The Eighth Art, 96.

uncovering the operations of the unconscious.¹⁴ Although perhaps somewhat excessive in its claim to rank television with the advent of psychoanalysis, this very early formulation of the television aesthetic nonetheless anticipated the writing of the mid-fifties.

Siepmann, Seldes, and the other authors clearly privileged drama over other genres of television programming as auguring the potential for the development of television as a genuine art form, although Seldes also considered comedy to have possibilities, once it had transcended "the transvestite bellowings of Milton Berle."¹⁵ This depended in turn on existing programming that could be assimilated to an aesthetic discourse. An aesthetic approach was perhaps not flexible enough to accommodate other forms, tied as it was to the history of traditional arts, but the appearance of adaptations from the stage provided the conditions upon which a hybrid could develop, although as Laurent noted, this was limited by the lack of sensitivity to the differences between the stage and the television screen as media. With the further evolution toward original television drama, the specificity of a television aesthetic could be fostered by drawing upon formal innovations in the medium, and it could begin to make claims for a distinct

¹⁴ Charles Siepmann, Radio, Television and Society (New York: Oxford University, 1950), 357.

¹⁵ Seldes, Public Arts, 137.

type of practice which the medium of television itself called for, and which would differentiate it from the aesthetics that preceded it.

As Director of Television Programs at CBS from 1937 until 1946, Seldes was intimately involved with the experimentation that led to the development of dramatic programming. In The Public Arts, he offered a comprehensive analysis, beginning in the nineteen-twenties, of the historical development of popular media. His characterization of the emergent form of television drama in the mid-fifties is consistent with the other formulations that we have seen. Referring to the work of Chayefsky and others, he remarked that:

Essentially their work is marked by a high concentration on character more than action, and they reveal character in a series of small episodes rather than in long-continued action. The techniques of television are admirably suited to this approach because the intensity of the close shot creates an interest in people, and the capacity to cut from one scene to another (with lapses of time implied) frees the dramatist from the necessity of bringing all his people together in one place and compressing their interactions into a single sequence.¹⁶

Here, he credits the same elements as Guthrie and Siepmann as central to the specificity of the television aesthetic; he further differentiates television by emphasizing its differences from both film and the stage: the spatial intimacy television creates as opposed to the wide shot in film, and the temporal dislocations of cutting that cannot

¹⁶ Ibid., 182-3.

be simulated on stage. Seldes also considered immediacy a central characteristic of television, and emphasized that the blend of fiction and actuality that he found in the new dramatists conformed to the type of "realism" that functioned best on television.

For Seldes, the key to this realism was what Jane Feuer has referred to as the "ontology" of liveness¹⁷ as the essence of television and its fundamental aesthetic characteristic:

When television comes to create its own style, its own special way of telling a story, it will naturally draw on its essential nature. . . . The capacity of television to transmit without any intervening step will still remain unique. Its identifying feature, the essence of its character.¹⁸

As Seldes goes on to remark, "When the essential character of man is left undeveloped, he has not fulfilled his destiny. And this is true also of an art."¹⁹ It is thus evident that Seldes at least had no qualms in describing television as art, or at minimum a potential art form, provided it is allowed to mature through the expression of its fundamental essence.

Like the other critics, Seldes evinces a concern with the formal characteristics and constraints of television as

¹⁷ Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in Regarding Television: Critical Approaches--An Anthology, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, Md.: American Film Institute, 1983), 13.

¹⁸ Seldes, Public Arts, 192.

¹⁹ Ibid.

medium, and he begins to build an aesthetic out of that essential material. Although he and the other critics do not go so far as suggesting, like the vanguard critics in fine arts, that this would lead to the replacement of content by pure form, he does make the claim that a television aesthetic would have to be sensitive to the specificity of its formal nature as medium. However, like the expression of the essence of, say, painting, as pure form espoused by the proponents of aesthetic modernism, the "destiny" of television is also linked by Seldes to its formal properties, without which television will remain undeveloped as an art form.

Here the fundamental ways of describing media are in fact shared with the advocates of aesthetic modernism, although they are put to work describing altogether different sites for cultural production. The aesthetic in both cases is tied to a modernist conception of progress and historical development that forecasts the future fulfilment of the telos of the respective media in an ineluctable fashion. It is important to draw attention here to the appearance of these criteria in the midst of the consolidation of much of the intellectual vanguard against television, particularly those espousing a formalist approach in the "fine" arts. Thus, a significant insight can be gained here, in terms of the penetration of the concern for form itself and its mediation of critical

dispositions toward media and aesthetic practices. Despite the apparent divergence of opinion regarding the value of popular media, both sides of this debate converge at the level of the discourse as it pertains to employment of terms used to figure the essential characteristics of media and their subsequent potential for development aesthetically. It appears, superficially at least, that this is the case with regard to a shared emphasis on form. This suggests that critics on both sides of the debate over popular culture shared more than their differences would allow them to admit. However, unlike the mass culture theorists and "advanced" critics, Seldes and others saw no contradiction in applying such formalist aesthetic criteria to television or other popular media.

If most critics of the period shared to some extent a similar conception of a modernist aesthetic, which appears to organize the discourse despite divergent dispositions toward popular culture, then evidently their differences must arise from a different source. To note the similarity in fundamental approach to the description of media in formal terms is not to suggest that the distinction between naturalism and modernism is false, although, as will be noted below, at basis they shared (in the United States at least) a common impulse regarding the rejection of nineteenth-century idealism for an inquiry into the real. Rather, it is to suggest that the question of form, and the

form of representation, emerges as a key site of struggle over the locus and definition of culture itself. As Miles Orvell indicates in regard to the rejection of the nineteenth-century culture of imitation, "What was at stake in defining what was 'real' and what was 'unreal' was the value structure (as much as the ontological one) of American culture."²⁰ This applies as much to the question of television's cultural function as it does to the popular culture of the first quarter of the twentieth-century -- the period Orvell addresses -- and indicates the persistence of the debate over the authenticity of different media as sites for cultural production and expression. Here we must turn to the historical development of modernist and nationalist attitudes in the cultural field in the United States and the divergence over the nature of the real and the authentic that provides, on the one hand, a shared set of aesthetic prescriptions regarding the advancement of media, and on the other, debate over the appropriate and authentic site for that development.

The Collapse of the "Genteel Tradition"

Nineteenth-century American culture was predicated on a fundamentally Arnoldian conception of culture, as "knowing the best that had been thought and said." This meant, in effect, the adoption of European aristocratic models as the

²⁰ Orvell, Real Thing, 151-2.

prevailing standards of excellence. As Orvell states, "The dominant assumption was that we were still vassals to Europe in the arts" and that there existed "a desire to create, in the midst of a commercial society where fortunes were based on coal, railroads, and iron, a fantasy of aristocratic status."²¹ The problem, as Orvell notes, ultimately became the degree to which this approach to culture was highly imitative. By the turn of the century, an increasing number of artists and cultural commentators became concerned with the apparent distance between a set of social, moral and aesthetic prescriptions adopted from Europe -- given authority by the middle- and upper-classes -- and an emerging popular culture that appeared to no longer share those values.

This distance expressed, however, not merely a class conflict, but a fundamental re-evaluation of the relationship between environment and cultural expression. Although not reaching its full articulation until Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture was published in 1934,²² the definition of culture was undergoing a transformation away from a narrow Arnoldian conception toward considering

²¹ Ibid., 59, 62.

²² Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934; reprint, New York: Mentor Books, 1946).

culture as the "whole customary organization of a society."²³ The effect of this transformation was to place equal value on all dimensions of culture; to that extent, the critics' "nod toward the 'lesser' arts was congruent with an anthropological relativism that saw dignity in all items of a culture, including the lowliest."²⁴ In America prior to the twentieth century, however, the function of art had little to do with reflecting reality, and was concerned primarily with the uplifting of the spirit, at the expense of quotidian experience: "the source of American discomfort with the realist aesthetic is the Puritan conviction that the phenomenal is important only when symbolic -- that the spiritual and the eternal count far more than the material and the temporal."²⁵ The influence of the Puritan ethic, which had "consistently separated America's finest literary minds from the materials of life about them," as well as the reliance on foreign models of cultural expression, precluded any attempts to fashion an aesthetic that would find its

²³ Reuel Denney, "The Discovery of Popular Culture," in American Perspectives: The National Self-Image in the Twentieth Century, ed. Robert Spiller and Eric Larrabee (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1961), 170.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ J.A. Ward, American Silences: The Realism of James Agee, Walker Evans, and Edward Hopper (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State, 1985), 6.

source in the everyday experience of American life.²⁶ For many American scholars and cultural commentators at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, this disposition toward culture had become moribund, since the European past no longer represented the realities of the contemporary United States. The "schism between the ideals of the intellectuals and the practices of the people" was for a number of commentators the reason for the failure of a distinctive American literature and culture to emerge.²⁷ The gap between culture and social life as it existed at the time thus signified a crisis for culture itself, expressed by the perception of a disjunction between outmoded models of thought and actual existing conditions in America.

For George Santayana, speaking in 1911, America was "a country with two mentalities, one a survival of beliefs and standards of the fathers, the other an expression of the instincts, practice, and discoveries of the younger generation."²⁸ It was the older generation, what he called the "Genteel Tradition," that was the chief obstacle for the development of American culture, inhibited as it was by both an outmoded moralism and a set of cultural values

²⁶ Robert E. Spiller, "Literature and the Critics," in American Perspectives, 37.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," in The Genteel Tradition, ed. D.L. Wilson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1967), 39.

fundamentally alien to the realities of an emerging American nation. The concept of a Genteel Tradition was a fortuitous one, since it seemed to capture in a concise manner what had evidently been the problem with American culture; as Charles Alexander remarks, Santayana "left Americans a vivid, appealing analysis of what looked like a deepening malaise in the nation's cultural life. And he left a useful label for what was wrong, a descriptive term that could be stretched to cover a multitude of sins against American creative life . . ."29 In that respect, what Santayana actually had to say in his analysis was to a large degree less important than the effect that the label itself had. In a similar way that "les anciens" became the object of scorn and ridicule in the "querelle entre les anciens et modernes" in Enlightenment Europe, so too the Genteel Tradition became a slogan that could be employed both by nationalists and by the Progressives and modernists to identify what they considered regressive tendencies that persisted in the United States. Indeed the extent to which this concept resonated within American cultural criticism well into the 1920s might be judged by a remark written by Gilbert Seldes some thirteen years after Santayana's lecture, where he states that

²⁹ Charles C. Alexander, Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth-Century America (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1980), 27.

in America, where there is no recognized upper class to please, no official academic requirements to meet, the one tradition of gentility is as lethal as all the conventions of European society, and unlike those of Europe our tradition provides no nourishment for the artist. It is negative all the way through.³⁰

It is thus evident the degree to which this single designation provided a new generation of American scholars and commentators a focus for the expression of a critique of American culture, and the central means by which to signify their difference from the earlier cultural dispositions. Indeed, as the case of Seldes demonstrates, "it was the Genteel Tradition's characteristic optimism and moral idealism, which often appeared as smugness and stuffiness, that later provoked ridicule and fiery denunciation from insurgents in the arts."³¹

The rejection of this tradition was also a central characteristic of the other key text of the period, Van Wyck Brooks' book-length essay America's Coming of Age. As the title suggests, Brooks was concerned with the emergence of an indigenous culture that could no longer be expressed through the framework of the Genteel Tradition which "persist[ed] not as the normal expressions of a race . . . but through prestige and precedent and the will and habit of a dominating class largely out of touch with a national

³⁰ Gilbert Seldes, The Seven Lively Arts (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924), 355.

³¹ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 9.

fabric unconsciously taking form."³² Expressing for the first time the sentiments shared by the new generation of critics, Brooks warned that the maintenance of a "pure" literary style, that is, one lacking any referent to actual quotidian conditions existing in contemporary America, could only continue to be bought "at the cost of expressing a popular life which bubbles with energy and spreads and grows and slips away ever more from the control of tested ideas."³³

Like Santayana, Brooks shared a concern over the cultural stagnation of the nation and whether "catchwords really do or do not correspond with convictions, and whether these convictions really do or do not reach down among the real problems of personal and social life."³⁴ Also like Santayana, Brooks held the opinion that it was the function of the critic to espouse a form of social criticism that would turn the function of culture toward becoming an expression of the social life of the nation, by overcoming both a "disconnected genteel moralism and disconnected estheticism."³⁵ Here once again the relationship, or rather the distance, between reality and cultural forms of

³² Van Wyck Brooks, America's Coming of Age (New York: B.W. Heusch, 1915), 15.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 169-70.

³⁵ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 78.

expression became paramount. The notion of a "coming of age" was meant to imply the maturation of a culture and social system that is capable of finding its own means of expression, and no longer beholden to the past, or to other (i.e. European) traditions.

Both authors captured what we might call, following Raymond Williams, the "structure or feeling" of the time. They articulated, through the recognition of the stultifying effects of the "Genteel Tradition" on the one hand, and through the notion of a "Coming-of-Age" of American culture on the other, the widely shared sense of cultural transformation then under way; they made it clear that in order to close the gap between cultural form and social reality, something would have to give way. By the twenties, even an eminently conservative critic such as J.E. Spingarn could not ignore the revolt that was brewing among what he referred to as the "Younger Generation;" nor could he simply condemn it outright. Despite his lament for the "past" and his concern over the indiscriminate rejection of that past in favour of what he thought of as a specious modernity, he still could not deny that the revolt had its legitimate basis in a set of prevailing cultural conditions that were fundamentally distinctive from the old-world values he himself had espoused:

The craving for "modernity" is the fruit of the spirit of revolt that has reigned in our literature for a dozen years. . . . [O]ur problem was in a sense different from the general problems of European

culture. It was necessary to destroy the academic dry rot that was undermining the creative and intellectual spirit of the nation. It was necessary to rid ourselves of the older American "moralism" in thought and taste and action. It was necessary to destroy, not discipline, character, morals, beauty, freedom, which are the groundworks of all that is noble in art as in life, but the sterile forms which were made to serve instead of these realities.³⁶

Thus, although unwilling to abandon the central characteristics that he identified as essential to culture -- those which were in fact the basis of the Genteel Tradition -- he nevertheless recognized that even if they were to persist as ideals, the form that they would take could no longer remain the same. Even if contemporary American culture was to preserve and share a continuity with the past, it could only do so through the incorporation of those elements which were unique to it; by virtue of its uniqueness, it would be compelled to take a form different from those that preceded it.

What both Santayana and Brooks managed to do, to the extent that they influenced even some conservative critics such as Spingarn, was to organize a certain desire into a form that resonated within the "Younger Generation" of cultural commentators that followed. Furthermore, they provided not simply an aesthetic critique, but a social one. As Robert Spiller suggests, the issue for Brooks "seemed to

³⁶ Joel Elias Spingarn, "The Younger Generation: A Manifesto," The Freeman 5 (June 7, 1922); reprinted in Creative Criticism and Other Essays (New York: Harcourt, 1931), 114-15.

be one of social ethics rather than of individual aesthetics. The road was at a fork: in one direction lay social participation and responsibility arrived at through realistic study and criticism and reform; in the other lay alienation and aesthetic detachment."³⁷ Alexander echoes this when he notes that for Brooks, criticism had to "become a vigorous social criticism, dedicated to building an organic civilization."³⁸ Brooks' "organic" approach, according to Alexander, was drawn from the romantic tradition of Herder and others, as well as from the Americans Emerson and Walt Whitman. Like the "environmentalism" of Hippolyte Taine and (later) the historian Frederick Jackson Turner,³⁹ it placed emphasis on the social circumstances out of which particular forms of art would emerge; art, for Brooks, "grew out of particular social environments -- the accumulated customs, traditions, and values of different people. Thus, by definition, criticism . . . must concern itself not only with artists and their work but with the broad context in which they strived to create."⁴⁰

³⁷ Spiller, "Literature and the Critics," 38.

³⁸ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 78.

³⁹ See, for instance, Frederick Jackson Turner, The Frontier in American History (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1947)

⁴⁰ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 36.

This attitude expressed itself in a transformation both in the function of criticism and in the form and function of cultural expression itself. As Spiller states "Between 1910 and 1915 [when both Santayana's and Brooks essays were published] there was a stir on all our literary fronts . . . A new generation of critics and scholars began to examine seriously for the first time their own literature and culture."⁴¹ As America's Coming-of-Age was intended to underline, critics "began to observe that a cultural inheritance of a primary and unique sort had been acquired unconsciously and they began to describe and evaluate it."⁴² Brooks, as Miles Orvell describes, "was picking up on a receptivity toward the street that had already been evident in the realists of the 1890s, but now, for Gilbert Seldes, e.e. cummings, and others, was becoming an even more important component of American civilization."⁴³

What had been previously ignored by the Genteel Tradition was now to become the central focus of the "younger generation" of critics: American culture and society itself. What Santayana and Brooks had explicitly suggested was that a genuine American culture existed and thrived immediately before the eyes of the critics, and it was up to the younger generation to discover it. What stood

⁴¹ Spiller, "Literature and the Critics," 36.

⁴² Denney, "Popular Culture," 167.

⁴³ Orvell, The Real Thing, 153.

in the way was evidently the Genteel Tradition, which, by perpetuating a narrow, elitist understanding of culture, had forfeited its claim to be representative. The emphasis on a gap between cultural dispositions and social actuality expressed a decreasing faith in the legitimacy of the Genteel Tradition to accurately represent American life. This in turn led to the rejection of imitative modes of cultural production and gave rise to a desire for the authentic. Within this concern for authenticity resided the demand for attention to be aimed toward quotidian culture and social life out of which it was presumed would emerge a new form of cultural expression that would somehow close the prevailing distance and produce a genuine national art that reflected the vitality of American culture. What was at stake in the revolt against the Genteel Tradition was this proximity to the 'real'. Against the "genteel literary critics of the period who were unwilling or unable to acknowledge the validity and vitality of a popular culture that was gaining strength in the last decades of the century," for the generation of cultural critics following Brooks and Santayana, "it was as if there was some defect in everyday reality that had to be remedied by the more authentic reality of the object to be consumed. The arts would attempt to remedy the defect of 'reality' in complex ways."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Ibid., 105, 145.

The Problem of the "Real" and Cultural Form

The most pressing problem, from the perspective of aesthetics at least, had to do with the question of the form of cultural expression itself. The newer generation of critics were faced with the problem of finding a way in which to appropriately express this new-found reality of the American vernacular. They therefore needed a new means of expression that would overcome the deficiencies which had been detected in the now outmoded forms of Genteel culture. If the modes of aesthetic production characteristic of the Genteel Tradition no longer sufficed to reflect the emerging national character, then the forms themselves would have to undergo transformation so that they might more effectively capture the emergent American spirit. In order to accomplish this transformation, however, the aesthetic itself would have to be transformed. Thus, it was not simply a matter of an adjustment in purely formal terms, but the outright rejection of one kind of communicative function in favour of another. Here the notion of a social critique and engagement comes to the forefront: as Matthew Baigell notes, by the 1930s "the American Scene marked the rejection of personal sensibility as a dominant attitude of communication, cognition, and spiritual evaluation. The imperatives of place, politics, social change, and history replaced individual consciousness as sources of artistic motivation," and, it can be added, the source of critical

dispositions as well.⁴⁵ This could be considered to be a direct outcome of Brooks' call for "social participation and responsibility arrived at through realistic study and criticism." The motivation for the American Scene painters, and for the Social Realists who emerged in the same decade can be traced back to this initial critical impulse. What was true of the American Scene painters could be held to also be the case in other media; and like the painters, the means by which to overcome the sense of moral and aesthetic detachment that had been the norm in the Genteel Tradition would be through realism.

The social awareness fostered through the critical effects of Brooks and his descendants generated the demand for a new content for works of art, appropriate to the new social-communicative function that art was to adopt. This in turn produced a formal problem, which was how to represent the real within the terms of the new communicative function. It is here that we can detect the social basis for the transformation of the aesthetic. Realism emerges as the result of this transformation in normative discourse concerning the cultural domain: it is the product of a social demand.

If the emergence of the realist aesthetic is a product of a discursive legitimation of the "real" over against the

⁴⁵ Matthew Baigell, The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s (New York: Praeger, 1974), 18.

idealism of the Genteel Tradition, and thus a product of normative social transformation, it nevertheless became a formal problem, in terms of how to go about appropriately representing the real that would become the content of the realist work and thereby conform to the imperatives and convictions of the emergent disposition toward social responsibility and engagement that was to characterise these works: "In the debates surrounding the advent of realism, with their self-conscious polemics and cultural battle cries, the problem of representation, and of fact and fiction, were argued keenly and with a full realization of the social and aesthetic ramifications of the issues."⁴⁶

The problem of form thus emerges simultaneously with a critical break with the imitative modes of literary production of the nineteenth century. This entailed breaking through an aesthetic based on illusion, and a movement toward the authentic and the real, which existed outside of the studio and in the tableaux vivants of quotidian life. At this point, the "fundamental premises of a literary representation were being profoundly questioned by writers . . . [who] were pushing the conventions of mimesis to the breaking point."⁴⁷ As Orvell goes on to say later, "Making the artwork real and making it new meant overhauling the language of description and breaking open

⁴⁶ Orvell, The Real Thing, 102.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

the closed forms of literature in a way that was consonant with the new facts of modern life."⁴⁸

What is most notable here is the simultaneous appearance of the modernist and realist impulse, organized around the problem of form. In order to restore "what was thought to have been taken away -- contact with reality," the nature of what constituted mimesis would by necessity have to undergo revision so that the "new language of description" would achieve greater proximity to the actual conditions of American social life and thereby fulfil the desire first expressed by Brooks and Santayana. This lack, at least according to Gilbert Seldes, would be overcome by shifting attention to popular culture. This shift, in which Seldes was following Santayana's advice to recognize the existence of a developing American culture heretofore ignored, was signalled by the publication of The Seven Lively Arts in 1924 which, according to Reuel Denney, was "the work that climaxed this generation's interest in the popular culture . . . then and now the classic in its field."⁴⁹ In this book, Seldes differentiates between what he called the "bogus arts" and a genuine expression of national character which was to be found in the popular cultural forms of the period. He argues (as he does later in regard to television) both for the legitimacy of popular

⁴⁸ Ibid., 241.

⁴⁹ Denney, "Popular Culture," 167.

culture against the "bogus arts" as debased forms of outmoded gentility, and for a correspondingly serious commitment to the criticism of popular art. Against the negative (and often religiously inspired) critiques of film, jazz, and vaudeville as corrupting of culture, Seldes responds by accusing the critics themselves of being corrupt, and out of touch with the achievements of American popular culture: "The cocktail drinkers may have been told a lot of nonsense about their position as arbiters of the arts; precisely the same nonsense is taught in our schools and preached by belated aesthetes to people whose claims are not a whit better."⁵⁰

Thus, by the early twenties, the popular had emerged critically as a contested site of genuine cultural expression, although after the mid-thirties, Seldes' call for the analysis of popular culture would not be seriously heeded again until the 1970s, following a reevaluation of the assumptions of the mass culture critique. According to Alexander,

his book was the principle manifestation of one of the most significant intellectual phenomena of the twenties: the growing critical discovery of the variegated forms of popular culture. Seldes was among the first to recognize the magnitude and portent of the creative outpouring that had taken place in the mass-consumption arts over the past several years.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Gilbert Seldes, The Seven Lively Arts (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1924), 106.

⁵¹ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 142.

For our purposes, it is important to note that the willingness to describe popular media as art, as in the case of the development of the television aesthetic, was consistent with the emergent understanding of culture as a continuum comprising all the practices of a given society: "Seldes' appreciative nod toward the 'lesser' arts was congruent with an anthropological relativism that saw dignity in all items of a culture."⁵² At this point, Seldes is nevertheless employing the term 'art' polemically, as for instance when he writes

I have used the word art throughout this book in connection with jazz and jazzy things; if anyone imagines that the word is belittled thereby and can no longer be adequate to the dignity of Leonardo or Shakespeare, I am sorry. I do not think I have given encouragement to "fatuous ignorance" by praising simple and unpretentious things at the expense of the fake and the faux bon.⁵³

Alexander suggests that such an attitude was a product of "two- and sometimes three-sided battles between surviving but still-vocal traditionalists, still strident romantic nationalists, and increasingly confident modernists. . . . clashes of critical opinion [that] enlivened the course

⁵² Delaney, "Popular Culture," 171. Alexander notes that, by the thirties, the term "popular arts" was meant to include "both the Herderian substratum of folk consciousness and Gilbert Seldes's consciously contrived seven lively arts." As he goes on to say, "Inasmuch as culture was a continuum, a whole, it was no more necessary to distinguish folk culture from commercialized expression than it was to distinguish those from the fine arts." Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 214.

⁵³ Seldes, Seven Lively Arts, 107.

American music, drama, visual art, architecture, and the increasingly pervasive and talked-about popular entertainments."⁵⁴ There was thus no possibility in this period (nor, it could be added, subsequently) that a claim for the authenticity of popular forms of cultural expression could be taken for granted critically (and politically), but rather that such a claim had to be staked out against the competing forces of intellectual formations and their dispositions toward the function and location of authentic cultural activity. The emergence of the popular as both a locus of an authentic (and indigenous) form of cultural and aesthetic expression and a site for critical analysis at this juncture is crucial in the sense that it subsequently underwrites the later attempts to legitimize television as an art form, in the face of a much more firmly entrenched negative disposition toward popular culture as espoused by the post-World War II modernists.

Attention has been drawn to Seldes' early work since it offers insight into the basis upon which the development of the later television aesthetic could be pursued legitimately, exploiting the legacy of a disposition developed in this early period that considered popular culture a form of authentic aesthetic expression. Since, as Alexander has pointed out, culture was considered as a continuum, and therefore mass or popular cultural products

⁵⁴ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 108.

were not differentiated from the "fine" arts, the same critical apparatus normally reserved for the analysis of high culture, and the terms of analysis that went along with it, could be equally applied to all forms of cultural expression. Indeed, Seldes in fact rejects the organization of artistic expression in hierarchical terms altogether as a barrier to the critical examination of the popular, through what he calls "the two most disagreeable words in the language: high- and low-brow;" he writes that "Pretence about these words and what they signify makes all understanding of the lively arts impossible."⁵⁵ As he goes on to suggest, however, these terms nevertheless represent real forms of experience, "a real distinction, two separate ways of apprehending the world," and thus stakes a claim for the legitimacy of the "low-brow" form of aesthetic reception, while at the same time recognizing how the terms themselves function ideologically to deny the validity of that experience.⁵⁶ This distinction "has prevented any just appreciation of the popular arts," and the lively arts "have therefore missed the corrective criticism given to the serious arts, receiving instead only abuse."⁵⁷

Ultimately, within the concern prevalent at the time for the identification of an American national culture,

⁵⁵ Seldes, Seven Lively Arts, 349-50.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 349.

Seldes makes the claim that he has discovered one, as Santayana hinted, right under everyone's noses. In order to see it, however, the critical gaze had to refocus its optic: "If we could for a moment stop wanting our artistic expression to be necessarily in the great arts -- it will be that in time -- we should gain infinitely."⁵⁸ What Seldes attempts here is to both make a claim for the popular, but also to argue for the engagement of the intellectual and cultural critic; that, given the scope of popular culture, it is incumbent upon the critic to overcome the prejudices toward popular culture and to intervene in the production process. On the one hand, he is echoing Brooks' call for the socially engaged critic, but he is also anticipating the engagement with the popular that will soon become characteristic of the intellectual activity in the nineteen-thirties. He further anticipates his own criticism, as well as that of others, which will become central to the construction of a television aesthetic. The conditions upon which such an aesthetic might emerge are, as can be readily seen, already organized around the issue of the legitimacy of popular culture versus high culture as it appeared in the nineteen-twenties. As has already been suggested, we can discern a backwards and forwards movement between positive and negative dispositions toward popular culture across the history of the first half of the twentieth century in the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 356.

United States; the attempt to legitimize television as an art form can be seen as one of a succession of attempts to legitimize popular culture expression beginning in the twenties. Thus, the idea of considering television as an aesthetic medium, which seems out of place set against the dominant cultural configuration organized around high modernism after the Second World War and the violently negative attitude toward popular culture central to that formation, can be understood when seen against the historical backdrop of the earlier struggles to carve out a place for the popular within the spectrum of cultural activity occurring on all fronts.

Developing a Realist Dramaturgy

It should be recalled that the time of Seldes' championship of popular culture and an indigenous American national culture was also the time of the "Lost Generation" and the exodus of many writers and artists (as well as critics) from the United States to Europe. The other prevalent form of radicalism was that which cultivated the theme of alienation and a breakdown in communication between the artist and society. Seldes' work is thus in most respects in marked contrast to the general retreat (both psychologically and literally) by cultural producers, who felt that American society had no place for culture, especially radical culture, which, they claimed, it did not understand nor want. However, by the late twenties and

early thirties, "The years of banishment were finally over and reconciliation had begun. The search for personal freedom and an abstract international culture was giving way to a spirit of commitment and a willingness to write about 'America'."⁵⁹

This shift in attitude is noted by Warren Susman, who writes that "In the 1930s, it might be argued, the self-conscious American intelligentsia set out to become 'an unlearned class,' to assimilate the culture of the 'people' into the inherited European tradition, perhaps especially those ideas and forms brought back from the long stays abroad in the 1920s."⁶⁰ As both Susman and Pells suggest, this was a two-way process, where many of the ideas gleaned from European modernism were brought into the orbit of American cultural production, but also where the artists themselves worked consciously toward reconciliation and assimilation with American popular culture. In a way, what became in the thirties the new "culture of commitment" manifested the re-emergence of the consensus that existed in the pre-war period and that would break apart again near the beginning of the Second World War.

⁵⁹ Richard Pells, Radical Visions and American Dreams: Culture and Social Thought in the Depression Years (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 158.

⁶⁰ Warren E. Susman, "The Culture of the Thirties," in Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century, 2nd ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 179.

What is particularly important in this period is the renewed commitment to realism. In order that we might further discern the origins of the dramaturgical theory that hides, so to speak, behind the discourse of the television aesthetic, the transformations of dramaturgical strategies in the nineteen-thirties will be traced out here, with attention to this commitment to realism as well as the commitment to popular culture-based work. From this, we can proceed to draw the outlines of the social commitments of early television dramas, that is, the basis for much of the critical attitudes toward what kinds of content should be represented on television, as well as the formal means by which this would be accomplished.

The shift toward a documentary form of realism in the thirties certainly had its antecedent in the "muckraking" tradition of journalism that preceded it, but the development of this form was clearly sharpened by the effects of the depression, which pushed American intellectuals toward a form of social radicalism that differed substantially from the aesthetic radicalism that had been pursued in the twenties under the sign of modernism. As Edward Abrahams notes, "intellectuals began redefining radicalism, linking its cultural concomitant to a dispassionate representation of the American Scene."⁶¹

⁶¹ Edward Abrahams, The Lyrical Left: Randolph Bourne, Alfred Stieglitz, and the Origins of Cultural Radicalism in America (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia,

This marked an era of political commitment that had profound aesthetic consequences. Much as the question of representation as it arose at the end of the nineteenth- and the early twentieth-century precipitated the emergence of realism as a doctrine pitted against the idealism of the Genteel Tradition, the renewed political commitment on the part of artists and intellectuals in the thirties resulted in the movement away from the aestheticism and formalism of abstract modernism toward a form of social realism. The communicative function of art once again would be oriented toward the representation of social conditions rather than the internal consciousness of the artist. This was accompanied by a sense of the possibility of the transformative power of art that could be accomplished through that communicative process.

Of course, this was not a complete transformation at the level of intellectual and artistic activity; as Pells remarks, "At various points in the early 1930s the opponents of proletarian culture all agreed that the intellectual should remain independent, that the subject matter of art transcended particular social or historical crises . . ."

"⁶² For a number of years, however, the formalists would take a back seat to the "ideological crusade" (of which art

1986), 206.

⁶² Pells, Radical Visions, 186.

would be a central vehicle) until their resurgence after the Second World War.

In the case of the theatre, as R.H. Gardner describes, this movement toward social representation was already well underway by the turn of the century, derived originally from the naturalism of Zola. However, the transformation from nineteenth-to twentieth-century drama is marked by the influence of both Freud and Marx, to the degree that "these two factors combined to create a new socio-psychological frame for the arts in general and drama in particular which, little by little, replaced the old tragi-religious frame of the past."⁶³ Dramaturgy at this juncture was concerned that the portrayal of characters on stage should correspond to life off of the stage, and that that life was the product of both psychological conditions working from within the psyche of the individual and a product of external socio-economic conditions. Certainly by the thirties, the latter had gained prominence, to the extent that "characterization was to be truthful, but the necessary details were to be drawn in broad strokes; otherwise character could distract from plot and social point."⁶⁴ As we shall see however, by the time of the advent of the television aesthetic, the

⁶³ R.H. Gardner, The Splintered Stage: The Decline of American Theatre (New York: MacMillan Company, 1965), 86.

⁶⁴ Ira A. Levine, Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research Press, 1985), 115.

central concern had shifted in favour of characterization and the psychology of the individual.

The radicals prior to the First World War "derived their dramaturgical principles from what they considered to be the artistic and significant drama of the past century, namely the realist bourgeois drama of European theory . . . they thus endorsed dramatic realism as the style most compatible with their political attitudes and most conducive to an objective dramatization of the inequities of their social environment."⁶⁵ This agrees with Gardner's description, and indicates the degree to which naturalism and illusionism was not seen as incompatible with social realist concerns. As Gardner also notes, this form of theatre also introduced new staging techniques, in the form of the box set, which replaced the non-realistic scenery of the theatre that preceded it.⁶⁶ The sense of realism, of bringing life to the stage, would be accomplished in part through accurate representation at the level of the mise-en-scène.

However, as Levine comments, after the First World War, realism was repudiated, on the Left at least, for a "revolutionary dramaturgy that would dispense with the forms as well as the content of bourgeois drama. Throughout most of the decade, the majority equated realism with bourgeois

⁶⁵ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁶ Gardner, Splintered Stage, 81, 137.

art and abandoned it in favor of new techniques that were intended to correspond to their revolutionary sentiments."⁶⁷ Even if motivated by specific political aims, it is clear that this form of theatre participated in the general repudiation of bourgeois values by the avant-garde in all media, and thus revolutionary theatre, as a vanguard practice, was consistent with the overall anti-naturalist trend characteristic of radical modernism in the twenties. As in the case of modernist cultural activity in general in the United States, "Their efforts signified a departure from the correlation between radicalism and realism that had been characteristic of prewar leftist theorizing," as it had been of cultural radicalism in general during that period.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, as Levine points out, "after nearly a decade devoted to experiment, then, the most successful protest plays of the late twenties ironically came to be written in a realistic style."⁶⁹

In part due to the successful public reception of realist dramas, and in part due to the shifting policy of accommodation between "disaffected" bourgeois artists and left-wing dramatists (toward what would become known as the "Popular Front"), there occurred a significant and "positive

⁶⁷ Levine, Left-Wing Dramatic Theory, 77-8.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 69.

reevaluation of realism as a dramatic method."⁷⁰ According to Levine, despite the fact that this occurred simultaneously with the appearance of the "socialist realism" doctrine in the Soviet Union, the American reevaluation of realism proceeded independently, though it shared the premise that "an accurate reflection of reality would inevitably mean presenting it in revolutionary terms."⁷¹ It was nevertheless claimed that left-wing realism differed in substance from bourgeois realism through the employment of the method adopted from Stanislavsky, which indicates that there was a decided Russian influence on the type of realism advocated by the left-wing.

This view is supported by Irving Wardle, who indicates that this influence was by no means limited to left-wing drama, and that the concatenation of an American naturalist tradition of acting with Continental influences is key to understanding the development of American drama:

The outside factor that contributed most to the success of Williams and Miller (not to mention such lesser playwrights as William Inge, Paddy Chayefsky, and Robert Anderson) was the high quality of American Naturalist acting. Although it was a specific national style, it derived from a foreign source and provides a classic example of America's repeated attempts to absorb transatlantic cultural models.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid., 108.

⁷¹ Ibid., 109.

⁷² Irving Wardle, "American Theatre Since 1945," in American Literature Since 1900, ed. Marcus Cuncliffe (London: Sphere Books, 1975), 212.

The difference, however, lay in the distinction "between the new 'revolutionary realism' and both bourgeois realism and naturalism."⁷³ Levine refers to John Gassner, one of the most preeminent drama critics and theorists of the period, and writes that "in the old realism he saw a despairing reflection of the status quo viewed as static and unchangeable. This he contrasted with the new realism's dynamic theory of history . . ."⁷⁴ To critics like Gassner, then, the naturalism of the contemporary commercial stage "was viewed as a distortion of reality" since the world it portrayed appeared to be fixed and immutable, and thus unaffected by the actions of its characters. Revolutionary realism, on the other hand, would offer the possibility of action through the examples of heroic conduct; "To this end the leftist theoreticians advocated the use of the affective techniques of realism and the dramatization of exemplary characters changing their lives and environment through their willpower and action."⁷⁵

⁷³ Levine, Left-Wing Dramatic Theory, 111.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 111-12.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 124.

Given the later criticism of television dramas,⁷⁶ it is conceivable that this form of realism was never adopted as a technique for use in television, and that the early television dramas remained "bourgeois" to the degree that social conditions were often portrayed as insurmountable. This withdrawal from revolutionary possibilities was certainly part of a later retrenchment brought about by political circumstances.⁷⁷

The seeds of the demise of revolutionary realism lay not only in the political conditions, however -- such as the accommodation politics of the Popular Front and the "consequences of the radical theatre movement's growing rapport with the middle class theatre"⁷⁸ -- but also within the movement itself. Despite the influences of figures like Piscator and Brecht and the break with

⁷⁶ As Seldes wrote in the fifties, "Three years after Marty had been hailed as a milestone in television, a good critic was complaining that all TV drama was about little people in small situations coming to no conclusions and without happiness in action or nobility in suffering." Seldes, Public Arts, 183. See chapter 5.

⁷⁷ "The teletheater was a product of the McCarthyism then haunting the industry's executive suites and impinging upon the lives of several creators. . . . The 'dead centrism' and uniformity-of-taste theories of television broadcasting clearly affected content. . . almost eliminating investigation of actual social conditions such as racial injustice, demagoguery, urban blight, suburban flight, and other depressing realities. The teletheater's structure implied an industry assumption that Americans . . . did not want to think about let alone look at those actual problems." Hey, "Marty," 117.

⁷⁸ Levine, Left-Wing Drama, 99.

verisimilitude contained within the epic theatre form that this implied, the most outstanding influence of all was Stanislavsky. Once Stanislavsky's system was "reborn" as the Method, "method schools . . . were springing up, and an increasing number of leading players . . . were making it a part of their normal professional equipment."⁷⁹ As David Morse notes, Stanislavsky's influence had the effect of concentrating the dramatic focus on individuals, and on the domestic quotidian scene: "There is a possibly surprising [given the emphasis on collectivism in the thirties] but quite unmistakable emphasis on the individual, on the small group, on the problems of day-to-day living. This tendency was reinforced by the influence on theatre directors of Stanislavsky, who placed more emphasis on character."⁸⁰ Unlike the drama of the early thirties, which favoured social conditions over character development, we can note here that the social emphasis of revolutionary realism begins to be displaced through the effects of a technique that the movement had itself championed.

What this indicates is the growing emphasis on psychology of character as opposed to the previous primacy given to the portrayal of social conditions; in Gardner's terms, out of the two main influences on American theatre in

⁷⁹ Wardle, "American Theatre," 212.

⁸⁰ David Morse, "American Theatre: The Age of O'Neill," in American Literature Since 1900, 68.

the twentieth-century -- Marx and Freud -- the emphasis on Marx that predominated in the early thirties was replaced by an emphasis on Freud toward the end of the thirties, as a product (in part) of the effect that the Method had on dramaturgical concerns. As Wardle suggests, this was wedded quite easily to the tradition of naturalistic acting already in existence in the United States. What this pointed toward was the emergence of "psychological realism" on the stage, and ultimately on television as well. It also marked the reconvergence of theatre with the some of the central characteristics of modernism.

As Edward Abrahams writes, early modernists "proposed new, in-depth psychological definitions of the self, [and] a transcendental and anti-rational conception of the universe."⁸¹ Given the influence of Freud brought out by Gardner, the idea of a coherent subject that lay at the basis of realist works of art had to undergo a substantial overhaul, much as the apparent coherence of the social needed to be pried away from its assumptions and reification through Marxist analysis. The idea that both were intelligible, as J.A. Ward writes, and that there was any consensus around human experience "within the accepted realist fabric of plausibility," began to be seen as itself unrealistic:

⁸¹ Abrahams, The Lyrical Left, 3.

Recent definers of the elusive or the metascientific dimension in realistic art have been stimulated by the modernist fascination with the irrational and artistic self, which refutes the implicit conception of the self required by the traditional (if never fully achieved) realistic works of art. From different directions many contemporary critics maintain that the idea of the human being that is essential in novels -- that is, in works of fiction assuming a coherent relation between man and an intelligible society -- is itself unrealistic.⁸²

The outcome of this repudiation of the possibility of agreement over the experience of the subject was that "realistic fiction inevitably developed into psychological fiction."⁸³ Ward thus emphasizes the degree to which the naturalism of the nineteenth-century breaks down in the face of the collapse of any consensus over the backdrop (both material and psychological) against which experience can be portrayed, and which leads to the emphasis on the psychology of character and the emergence of a psychologically-oriented literature.

At this juncture, the developing emphasis on psychology promoted through the motivational techniques employed in the Stanislavsky system was yoked together with the core of modernist preoccupation with the representation of the inner psychic conditions of the artist to produce a psychological realism that will dominate much of the arts in the United States from the outbreak of the Second World War onward. This ultimately becomes the basis of what was characterized

⁸² J.A. Ward, American Silences, 4.

⁸³ Ibid.

in the critical discourse of the television aesthetic as psychological realism.

Aesthetics and Postwar Politics

As Charles Alexander writes, social realism was passé by the end of the Second World War: "neither the limited revolutionary spirit of the early thirties nor the more widespread reaffirmative spirit of the last half of the decade was much in evidence;" rather,

The leading genre on Broadway was psychological drama, advanced especially in the intense, demanding plays of Tennessee Williams and later of Edward Albee. It was safer to concentrate on inner realities, however outlandish and grotesque they might be, in a period that saw repeated Congressional investigations of Communist influence in the arts and entertainment media and the general acceptance of the practice of blacklisting present or former radicals.⁸⁴

There is thus the suggestion that the bases for the explanation of the appearance of psychological realism cannot be wholly limited to purely aesthetic or cultural concerns. This is corroborated by Kenneth Hey, who claims that television drama content was mediated by the political limits circumscribed by McCarthyism.⁸⁵

Nevertheless, to suggest that the television aesthetic is equally reactionary and politically conservative (especially as it is portrayed when played off against the developments in radical modernism) is misleading. Hey, for

⁸⁴ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 262.

⁸⁵ See note 78.

instance, follows Martin Gottfried's historical analysis which divides the American theatre into two distinct factions: "right-" and "left-wing."⁸⁶ According to this schema, the left-wing represented the "artistic" side of things, where "the event and the conception took precedence over the message and the word," and the right-wing remained firmly within the naturalist tradition, concentrating on "plot and realism," and production values.⁸⁷ This, however, is directly contradicted by the analysis of left-wing dramatic theory provided by Levine, for instance, especially regarding the adoption of realist strategies by the left theatre movement. Further, Gottfried argues that his right-wing favoured the use of the Method, which as Levine and others have noted, was a technique originally exploited in the aid of revolutionary realism and the key marker of distinction between the leftist form of realism and bourgeois naturalism.

Hey rightly points out that the postwar dramas (both in the theatre and on television) retreated from the possibility of social action and tended toward "project[ing] a fatalistic if not cynical attitude toward human

⁸⁶ Martin Gottfried, A Theatre Divided: The Postwar American Stage (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967). I am suspicious of Hey's use of Gottfried, since even a cursory reading of the book reveals an alarming number of homophobic and anti-Semitic comments that render this text highly questionable as a source of historical information, except perhaps of Gottfried's own bigotry.

⁸⁷ Hey, "Marty," 101.

frailties."⁸⁸ He errs, however, when he suggests that "Television dramatists tended to accept right-wing interests in stage-as-reality and drama-as-character-study" as the product of an attitude of "tradition versus modernity."⁸⁹ In the first instance, this claim is grounded in the false distinction between right and left drawn from Gottfried. It is clear that the psychological realism espoused in the theatre after the Second World War is neither a pure product of the left nor the right, and that various elements constitutive of the postwar American dramaturgy are drawn from the entire spectrum of drama that preceded it, both in terms of politics and formal aesthetic strategies. Second, this complex concatenation of disparate elements drawn from modernist, naturalist, realist, leftist, etc., domains is also constitutive of the television aesthetic. It thus renders understanding of the television aesthetic incomprehensible, not to mention highly reductive, to call it "right-wing." There is no sense in which, given a reading of the historical evidence, realism could be considered the sole property of the right. The emergence of the television aesthetic has to be read against the backdrop of the reshaping of the constituent elements of realism that preceded it, rather than simply as a continuation of a (falsely construed) coherent tradition.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

It goes without saying that the limits placed on expression by the political climate after the war led to a kind of self-censorship that could be characterized as conservative.⁹⁰ With the spotlight focused on the entertainment industry, as well as the growing crisis of identity after the war, it is no surprise that the social contents of dramas withered and were replaced by introspection. This, however, was not limited by any means to the proponents of realism. Radical modernism itself, as was already noted, also retreated from social participation, into "abstention and withdrawal," as Wald has written in regard to the New York intellectuals of the forties, abetted by the rarefied aestheticism of the New Critics who strengthened their grip on the academic practice of cultural criticism during this time.⁹¹ Here we can detect the swing back toward internalist representation and a shift in the communicative function of art once again, which this time did not leave realism unaffected, as is demonstrated by the emphasis on the psychological and introspective dimensions.

⁹⁰ See, for example, Shelby Gordon, "Traitor to My Class," in Problems and Controversies in Television and Radio: Basic Readings, ed. Harry Skornia and Jack Kitson (Palo Alto: Pacific Books, 1959), 106.

⁹¹ Alan Wald, The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left From the 1930s to the 1980s (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1987), 220, 224.

CHAPTER 5
THE END OF ART

In 1956, Gilbert Seldes wrote that "three years after Marty had been hailed as a milestone, a good critic was complaining that all TV drama was about little people in small situations coming to no conclusions and without happiness in action or nobility in suffering."¹ This reaction to the contents of television psychodrama marked the beginning of the end of television as art. The "good critic" that Seldes mentioned was most likely Jack Gould who, in 1954, launched an assault on the psychological realism of the live teledrama. According to Gould, television was "spawning a bunch of psycho-neurotics who have found it more profitable to work off their frustrations on a typewriter than on a couch. . . . There's only one dominant theme on TV: life is hell."²

It appears that others agreed with Gould, and the programmes which constituted the basis of the television aesthetic rapidly disappeared from the television screen.

¹ Gilbert Seldes, The Public Arts (Simon and Schuster, 1956), 183.

² Quoted in Ralph Lewis Smith, A Study in the Professional Criticism of Broadcasting in the United States (New York: Arno Press 1979), 176.

What had been defined as the essence of television, and the evidence of its aesthetic worth, was now condemned. Psychological realism, largely "downbeat" in orientation, had apparently become intolerable for the critics. These dramas, although they persisted well into the sixties, were replaced for the most part by westerns, science-fiction, detective series, and situation comedies. Each of these genres, in different ways, marked the repudiation of a realist aesthetic (of either social or psychological emphasis) in favour of spectacle, fantasy, or melodrama. Even the detective series, though they were based on a new gritty realism of the urban landscape afforded by location shooting, were nevertheless preoccupied with the restoration of order to a chaotic social system. Where the live anthology dramas suggested ambiguity, intolerance, and inevitability, the newer genres emphasized mobility, consensus, and resolution. The implied fact within many of the live dramas that the social order perhaps worked against rather than facilitating class mobility, or that disorder lacked any meaningful resolution, clearly had an effect on critical attitudes toward the contents of television drama.

The growing critical dissatisfaction with the live dramas evidently provided an opening through which the sponsors and networks could negotiate a passage toward less controversial programming. Network practices, at least in terms of public relations, supported the production of

anthology dramas, given the critical acclaim with which they were met. The increasing hostility toward these programmes on the part of television critics, however, allowed changes to occur, once the critics began to react negatively. David Susskind, interviewing a group of television playwrights after the demise of live drama, asked whether it was true "that the dramas of 1953-55, which represented the kind of high point . . . contained the seeds of destruction because you writers didn't change the formal and thematic content of your dramas?"³ Although Robert Allen Aurthur conceded that this was true to an extent, David Shaw responded with the suggestion that "the critics have the habit of watching the live show. They leave the series and the Westerns and all that junk alone. . . . the critics themselves have helped to kill live television."⁴ This suggests that the negative focus on live dramas, and the absence of criticism directed toward other genres, allowed those other genres to flourish at the expense of live television drama.

However, as William Boddy has noted, "it seems unlikely that hostile reviews did more than reinforce more powerful influences in the industry unfavorable to live drama."⁵ This implies that the rough consensus organized around an

³ David Susskind, "What's Wrong With Television Drama?" Film Culture 19 (1959): 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵ William Boddy, Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois, 1990), 190.

aesthetic of television grounded in the practices of live drama was fragile at best and reflected the interests of only a small minority. Despite the winning of awards, the publication of best play anthologies, the presence of respected intellectual figures like Seldes and Charles Siepmann, as well as the major television playwrights of the period, the slightest hint of controversy appeared to be sufficient to precipitate the collapse of the television aesthetic as discourse and practice.

In the context of the rapid transformation of the industry from live anthologies to filmed continuing series, the process of interaction between writer and critic could not be sustained. As Boddy notes, the series were resistant to the conventions of television criticism that had been developed in the short period of the medium's commercial existence, and thus threatened the status that both the critics and television playwrights had achieved in relation to the live dramas.⁶ Sponsors and networks alike, frightened by the contentious issues surrounding the dramas, and reinforced by the attacks of the critics, migrated toward formulaic writing and censorship of potentially controversial material. One of the questions that has to be asked, then, is whether by attacking the contents of dramas, the critics effectively made themselves redundant and provided the opportunity for those hostile to live drama to

⁶ Ibid., 191, 192.

legitimize newer television practices on the basis of those critical attacks.

This question is partly clouded by the economic logics of the television industry itself. The short-term benefits of filmed half-hours with spot advertising clearly made the transition to this format highly attractive, especially in the absence of union agreements over residual payments.⁷ Much of the recent literature has stressed economic and structural factors as the explanation for the failure of the television aesthetic project, prompting a revision of the historical significance of this period. Innovations in live drama are considered as part of a network loss-leader strategy to gain audiences, which were to be abandoned once the requisite threshold of viewing audience numbers had been reached. This, however, does not go very far toward explaining the critics' own reaction to the contents of live dramas that they once praised, nor does it necessarily explain the withering away of social contents which appears to be concomitant with the shift in program formats. In other words, the transformation that occurred in both formats and contents -- contents which were central to the

⁷ "[A] live program, reproduced on film as a kinescope, can be used once within thirty days of the original performance and thereafter must be retired or destroyed unless special arrangements are made with all the unions concerned. Films made for television are not so restricted, and for a time were bonanzas to the producers, who had nothing additional to pay to actors or musicians or technical staff, no matter how often the pictures were shown." Gilbert Seldes, Public Arts, 184.

"formal" characteristics of the television aesthetic -- cannot be fully accounted for by the mere shift in the program formats themselves. Indeed, the horror expressed by the critics at the possibility of television moving to Hollywood clearly contains a symbolic as well as a material dimension, in which is contained a qualitative concern (and taste judgement) with regard to subject matter and treatment, not simply formal characteristics (although they are bound up together in the aesthetic discourse).

Particularly important in this questioning is the necessity to grasp the complex historical reasons for the complete demise of an aesthetic discourse of television. The lack of critical writing about television from an aesthetic perspective since this period (until quite recently) indicates in part that the critical formation whose interests lay with a specific form of television to which aesthetic value could be attributed lacked any power, as a formation, to sustain the viability of that project for any length of time. As well, given the absence of discussion of these critical discourses of television up until the most recent investigations, it is clear that this work was also unable in the intervening years to maintain any historical visibility whatsoever. Despite the apparent importance given over to the television critics during the period of television's early growth, it appeared to require little effort to reduce these champions of popular art to

silence. Given this, the collapse of the aesthetic discourse of television becomes equally as important as its emergence.

This discourse, understood to be a product of a formation of intellectuals and critics who shared a specific disposition toward television (and toward popular culture), stood in relation to other discourses and formations, whose interests lay in contesting the value of television and popular culture in general. The "more powerful interests" to which Boddy refers were not limited, as he suggests, simply to those "in the industry," but also included those in other competing critical, intellectual, and political formations. The pursuit of a television aesthetic was not simply contested by those with vested interests in the television industry, but also by those with competing conceptions of authenticity with regard to aesthetic production, and differing notions of the communicative function and social role of art. Those notions were intertwined with a particular set of political attitudes emerging in this period in which the social contents of television dramas had become highly problematic.

The television aesthetic as a discourse has also to be contextualized within a cultural milieu which was contesting the very idea of what might be called "aesthetic." The demise of the television aesthetic is therefore symptomatic of more than simply structural transformations in the

television industry itself, and part of a broader Kulturkampf occurring during the 1950s in which the idea of popular culture as a source of aesthetic merit was under severe strain. The idea of constructing a critical discourse of television that employed aesthetic terms and sought to identify television practices as forms of art evidently shattered under the weight of the mass culture critique, which rejected any claim that popular culture, especially television, could be art.

It is thus not enough to rest content with reading the demise of the aesthetic approach to television off of economic or structural transformations within the television industry, crucial though they may be in an historically accidental sense. Rather, both the emergence and collapse must be analyzed together within the context of competing conceptions of the popular and the function of art. These conceptions must also be linked to the political conditions within which they arose. It is in the nexus of this set of relations between discourses and dispositions, understood as formations of power cohering around investments in a view of social relations in general, that the emergence and demise of an aesthetic discourse of television has to be located.

The argument put forward here will be that the intellectual bias against popular culture, ever present in American cultural circles, began to reassert itself prior to the Second World War in the aftermath of the apparent

failure of the reform movement embodied in the New Deal and the almost complete collapse of socialist criticism signalled by the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression pact. This movement gained much strength by virtue of the war itself, where the popular was taken as the site of fascism and totalitarianism, against which, following the war, American intellectuals had to construct a bulwark to "protect" freedom and democratic values from the desires of the masses. In this context, the television aesthetic, concerned with the cultural legitimation of a popular medium, appears as an anachronism -- as indeed it was -- constituting the last vestige of populism and social reformism that was identified with the New Deal, which had already begun unravelling in the late 1930s.

The emergence of an aesthetic critique and a programmatic set of criteria for judging television in aesthetic terms merely illuminated the contours of a seam that appeared in the relatively chaotic period just after the Second World War. By the mid-fifties, however, intellectual and political forces had cohered to the extent that, discursively at least, the seam was sewn up tight.⁸ The elite intellectual consensus that emerged in the United States in the postwar period was clearly biased against

⁸ At least it appeared to be so superficially, although as shown below, the apparent consensus culture that emerged was rife with tension and contradiction that allowed some room for protest, but only at the cost of withdrawal from direct social engagement.

popular media as forms of aesthetic expression, and this view ultimately triumphed over the field of culture. Against this, the television aesthetic appears as a vestigial echo of the New Deal perspective on the relation between art and social reform which had all but evaporated by the fifties.

This chapter thus broadens our inquiry to include an examination of the political and cultural shifts in postwar American society, specifically within intellectual circles. The critical backlash to live television dramas will be outlined first, in relation to the teleplays against which they object. These critical discourses will then be read symptomatically in terms of the increasingly problematic status of the real, and hence its representation, insofar as those criticisms are directed toward both social and psychical contents of the teledramas and in relation to popular fiction in general.

The question of verisimilitude and its relation to actual social conditions is then examined through the reading of two key texts of this period, William Whyte Jr.'s The Organization Man and David Riesman's The Lonely Crowd. These two texts are analyzed in terms of the way they problematize popular culture through their readings of popular fiction. These works are seen to be typical of the liberal ressentiment of the period characterized by Daniel Bell as a form of romanticism peculiar to the mass culture

critique. This is prompted by the problematic status of the real as it appears in popular fiction, insofar as it refuses to idealize or sentimentalize social conditions, and the extent to which the contents of realist works are themselves a reminder of the failure of the liberal reform project.

The problematizing of realism and naturalism in sociological literature is then linked to a general repudiation of the aesthetic dimension of popular culture with the rise of the mass culture critique. This is seen as the product of a political shift away from a social orientation toward a preoccupation with individual well-being. In turn, this prompted a shift away from socially-oriented art, such as was characteristic of the documentary impulse of the thirties, to an emphasis on individual expression, in part due to the resurgence of the romantic elements of aesthetic modernism. The primacy given over to individual expression is itself viewed as a consequence of a conflicted social regime, particularly as it manifests itself in the contradiction between individuality and collective identity that was a feature of consensus culture. It is argued that the tension produced by this contradiction had significant implications for cultural production -- specifically the prohibition on social contents in art works and the severing of the relationship between the artwork and world. The resurgence of aesthetic modernism is taken to be the fullest expression of the crisis produced by cultural

contradictions, resulting in the repudiation of reformist and progressive politics, and its concomitant aesthetic forms in favour of an autonomous formalist aesthetics and reinstallation of aristocratic cultural dispositions.

The repudiation of the realist aesthetic, intimately linked with an outmoded political and cultural agenda, signals the end of television as art. The rejection of social contents, indeed any content at all, in "genuine" works of art negated the existence of aesthetic properties within popular cultural forms, and consequently in television. Although the television aesthetic shared some elements with the emergent modernism, the rise of formalist aesthetics, political and cultural conservatism, and the pervasive influence of the mass culture critique together constituted a force against which, despite sporadic attempts, popular culture could no longer be defended. The television aesthetic, based in a realism attached to a reform agenda, could thus not survive in a climate where not only industrial interests were arrayed against it, but where as well intellectual elites turned their backs on the aesthetic potential of television and popular culture in general.

The Critical Backlash

As Ralph Lewis Smith notes, the "cautious pleasure" exhibited by television critics toward the original dramas turned, by 1954, into "growing disaffection" with what

appeared to be a persistent emphasis on what Seldes had referred to as "little people in small situations."⁹ According to Smith, "apparently stories of the quiet anguish of ordinary people stunned by life ceased to move the critics."¹⁰ Smith refers specifically to Jack Gould and suggests, following Gould's argument, that the consistent use of "the lonely hero [who] is logically inarticulate" provided an excuse whereby the playwrights could avoid making a commitment to arriving at a satisfactory resolution to their teleplays, since (somewhat tautologically) the inarticulateness of the hero removed the need for articulateness on the part of the playwright. For Gould, this was an evasion of "creative responsibility" (Smith's phrase); by using a specific class figure consistently in their work, "There is no need for a dramatist to sweat out a scene that involves some reasoning, some resolution of a dilemma, some conflict, or as an extreme measure some interesting dialogue."¹¹

This critical backlash was not by any means restricted to Gould alone. In 1956 Robert Kass, for instance, indicted the entire genre of psychological drama on both the stage and television for its "unhealthy preoccupation with sex and

⁹ Smith, Professional Criticism, 176.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Gould, quoted in Smith, 176.

psychopathic misbehavior."¹² According to Kass, the "'sick' school of drama" was "almost exclusively concerned with psychoneurotics and deviates who suffer from assorted maladies of the soul and spirit." He bemoaned the absence of portrayals of "well-adjusted" individuals and, much like Gould, focused on what he identified as an obsession on the part of the television playwrights with "misfits" and "twisted introverts." Kass was, as he put it, mystified by the popularity of such misfits. Although criticizing this tendency from a moral rather than a creative perspective, Kass nevertheless notes the consistency with which the well-known playwrights (he mentions Chayefsky, Serling, and Reginald Rose) tended to utilize characters drawn, as he wrote, "from the lower regions of the Bronx," by which he presumably meant the lower-class fractions where deviation is endemic and uncontained, as opposed to those parts of New York City where the predominantly "well-adjusted" folk reside. At the bottom of Kass' critique, as much as Gould's, lurked a set of class fears, in which the possibility of contamination and disruption was foremost -- especially in Kass -- and which had touched off a diatribe that appears at second glance to be less about structural problems with the plays per se and more about the problem of class containment, expressed in a spatial trope that neatly

¹² Robert Kass, "Film and TV," Catholic World 182 (June, 1956): 225.

combined both the lower stratum of the body and the slum.¹³

Vance Bourjaily indicates that it was Gould's criticisms that prompted a general backlash against the original teleplays, of which Kass was but one example. As he recalled in 1959,

it was in his [Gould's] columns in the summer of 1955 that I became aware that a curious word was being popularized and attached in a derogatory way every Sunday to the Playhouse and others like it. The word was "psychodrama." With it you could tar not only the writer's experiments that had failed that summer . . . but, by implication, all their predecessors . . .¹⁴

It seems that this desire to rewrite opinion concerning what had only recently been the object of considerable critical approbation was resting just below the surface and, once made manifest by Gould, appeared to be taken up on a widespread scale. Bourjaily noted (with obvious consternation) that "the crusade against psychodrama was joined jubilantly by Variety and all the other trade journals."¹⁵ Thus the television psychological dramas which had been heralded early in the decade as the indicators of the emergence of a new form of art were by

¹³ For a discussion of the discursive usage of the symbolic relation between the lower body and social space, see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University, 1986), 144-45.

¹⁴ Vance Bourjaily, "The Lost Art of Writing for Television," Harper's Magazine 219 (October, 1959): 156.

¹⁵ Ibid.

mid-decade considered to be a decadent and retrogressive practice.

Gilbert Seldes also noted the consistency that pervaded not only the perspectives of the plays, but that appeared as well in the reactions of the critics. As he wrote of the plays themselves, many "arrived at a sad, if not tragic, ending" that was constitutive of a "predilection of these writers for this 'downbeat' effect," and which led, in the case of Playhouse 90, to the dismissal of Fred Coe as producer.¹⁶ It is clear, however, if taken in context, that Seldes himself did not view this effect as negative, and his praise for Marty in particular indicates that he viewed the resistance to what he called the "Cinderella tradition" of the happy ending as a strength rather than a weakness, and appropriate to the realist conventions that had emerged in the teleplays. He evidently shared the opinion expressed by Bourjaily that because the plays "were concerned with reality, they were seldom happy."¹⁷ That this was so was not adequate grounds for condemnation -- quite the opposite; the basis of the valorization of these plays was precisely their verisimilitude with regard to the representation of social conditions.

In regard to the television critics, Seldes notes that they were consistent in their praise for the original

¹⁶ Seldes, Public Arts, 183.

¹⁷ Bourjaily, "The Lost Art," 156.

teledramas, but at the same time consistently troubled by the apparent inability of these plays, as Gould argued, to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. The critics, according to Seldes, "added that a fine effect was lost because the play[s] petered out or failed to hold true to the course set at the start."¹⁸ For Seldes, however, this was not merely a problem of "the false happy ending," but had more to do with what Ring Lardner Jr. had labelled as the "Caine Mutiny effect" after the motion picture of the same name.

In that movie, based on Herman Wouk's novel, the sailors who (justifiably) rebel against a clearly incompetent commander are, in the end, punished for crimes of insubordination and disobedience. The film thus upholds the martial order despite the endangerment to the lives of the crew represented by the ineptitude of the commander, who is absolved of dereliction. In a framing of Lardner's term, Seldes offered his own description of this effect:

Essentially it consists of bringing into play a vast amount of sympathy for liberal or unconventional ideas and people, and then slapping the audience in the face for being sentimental idiots. . . . Whenever the individual rebels, succeeds, and seems to triumph, the last word goes to the established order -- or all words are drowned in soft music and everyone in tears.¹⁹

For Seldes, this tendency "correspond[ed] to something in the atmosphere" and could therefore be ascribed to the television dramas, but could not be said to originate with

¹⁸ Seldes, Public Arts, 193.

¹⁹ Ibid.

them; rather, this effect had to be understood as having its origins elsewhere, and therefore affecting all forms of popular cultural production. Evidently, then, the problematic conclusions typical of the original teledramas were more than simply the evasion of "creative responsibility" that Gould claimed they were.

What Seldes implies is that the liberal and the unconventional were simply not sanctioned as appropriate behaviours for the characters portrayed in these plays and, in the end, they appear to pay for their attempt to act in a manner contrary to the social order. At the same time, the audience was to be upbraided for imagining that any expression of individuality and difference would succeed against what Seldes called the "established order." This is quite emphatically a different reading of the meaning of the consistently unresolved endings to the teleplays than that offered by either Kass or Gould, and much more attuned to the conditions under which these plays were produced.

Both Gould and Kass exhibit the tendency to personalize the apparent "weaknesses" of these plays, without noting any significance in their own observation of the consistency with which the problems they detect in these plays occur. The lack of resolution which they foreground is ascribed to a particular set of writers who are accused of harbouring a particular prejudice with regard to their treatment. However, in doing so, they fail to make any sense of why

this should appear as consistently as it does; this recurrence is merely ascribed to a "predilection" which these writers seem to share. As Bourjaily suggests, this position was taken up uncritically and became the widespread basis for the condemnation of the genre within media industry circles. Seldes, on the other hand, appears to have recognized that it was the fact of consistency itself which was of particular importance and which points toward an entirely different conclusion, one which seeks an answer in the social circumstances which surround the production of these plays.

One might ask, therefore, whether this was so much a product of conscious choice or "evasion" on the part of the playwrights, or whether it was a consequence of what Paddy Chayefsky had announced as the impossibility of making sense of the larger historical dimensions as the fallout of the experience of the Second World War. Gould quite clearly recognized a consistency that ran through many of the original teleplays, but he failed to note that this consistency was not limited to the "inarticulate" hero alone. The sense of loss of control over the events that shaped one's life which were made manifest in Chayefsky's comments, and pointed toward the retreat into interior spaces in the face of history run amok, also surfaced in the teleplays where the hero was capable of formulating an understanding of his or her own situation, but appeared

nevertheless helpless. The problem was thus not simply the possibility of class disruption, but a pervasive sense of individual helplessness regarding the lack of options and lack of power which ran across class lines.

This is perhaps best exemplified in Rod Serling's Patterns, where the price of social mobility was the loss of self-control, and the necessity to trade individual beliefs for corporate values. In Patterns, the "hero" Fred Staples is far from inarticulate, holding a degree in engineering and a position as an executive in a large corporation. Rather than the working-class type such as the central character of Paddy Chayefsky's Marty -- toward which Gould's invective appears to be aimed -- Staples is positioned as middle- or upper-middle-class, educated, and therefore capable of articulating his condition. Indeed, the play seems to bear this out, as Staples recognizes that he himself is to a degree the author of his own dilemma, or at least apparently so.

In the play the youthful Staples realizes that he has been hired to replace an aging vice-president, Andy Sloane, whose 'humanistic' values (which Staples seems to share) are at odds with the pure calculus of business represented by the head of the corporation, Ramsey (whose coldness is perhaps exemplified by the fact that we never learn his first name). In the penultimate scene of Act Two, following a dinner party in the Staples' home, Fred learns that Ramsey

will force Sloane out of the corporation the following day, and that Staples will be acknowledged as his replacement. The mechanism to accomplish this will be a sleight of hand wherein Sloane's name will be stricken from a report co-written by him and Staples, so that Staples will receive all of the credit and Sloane will be humiliated. At the end of this scene, Staples accuses Fran, his wife, of misrepresenting his role in the authorship of the report Ramsey has just read in Staple's study. Fran, however, points out that Staples did not defend Sloane's participation in the report writing, and that his attack of conscience is therefore hypocritical:

FRAN: (Hotly) I didn't hear you tell Mr. Ramsey he was mistaken. I didn't hear any clear-cut defense of your bosom friend, Mr. Sloane. Don't rip out our lily-white banner and flaunt them in my face. If you don't want to be successful, tell that to Mr. Ramsey. He'll hand you a broom and you can check in every night at seven. But don't tell me. I'm sick to death of hearing it.

FRED: Fran, I don't want to argue.

FRAN: Neither do I. I just want you to answer me. Did you tell Mr. Ramsey that your wife was mistaken? Did you tell him you were taking bows you shouldn't be?

FRED: No. No, I didn't.

FRAN: Why, Fred?

FRED: Because . . . because I want to be a vice-president.

FRAN: I thank you for a straight and honest answer. I think we can both go to sleep now.

FRED: Tomorrow morning, in that meeting, in that conference room, he's going to whip Andy to death.

FRAN: (Handing him an ashtray) Help me clear up. We can talk about it in the morning. Besides, that's Mr. Ramsey's responsibility -- it's not yours.

FRED: It's mine too. Tonight . . . all along . . . and just by coming here -- I handed him the whip. Here's . . . here's to vice-president Staples! He finally made it.

(He flings the ashtray against the wall and stands there with his head down. Fran, white-faced, quietly walks over to him, touches his shoulder, then softly lays her head against him.)

FRAN: Oh, Fred . . . Freddy.²⁰

Many of the critics reacted strongly and negatively to the ending of the play. Sloane, who was suffering from the accumulated stress of living with his humane values, has died as a direct result of his humiliation at the hands of Ramsey. Staples, aware as is everyone else that Ramsey precipitated Sloane's death, nevertheless accepts the position of vice-president, despite his clear disgust with Ramsey's actions. The apparent identification on Staple's part throughout the play with Sloane's moralistic approach to business practices seems to warrant Staple's refusal of the position -- which, in the immediate aftermath of Sloane's death, it appears he will refuse. This would, in the terms set by the play, be both a noble gesture of solidarity with his dead colleague and a symbolic rejection of the business ethics practised by Ramsey. However, Staples chooses instead to accept the position of vice-

²⁰ Rod Serling, Patterns (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 74.

president, thereby seemingly abandoning his own ethical principles and violating what appears to be a common-sense choice between good and evil -- at least insofar as it is organized by the character structure of the play itself.

As Smith's discussion of Robert Lewis Shayon's reaction to the ending of the play indicates, this decision was difficult to accept given the clear-cut moral choice presented by the play:

[H]e lauds the medium for presenting Rod Serling's frank, powerful drama of life in the business jungle. But he is, nevertheless, stunned at the way "Patterns" damns the viciousness of competition at the executive level and then, in the last few moments, has the high-minded hero of the struggle agree with the villain that rugged competition alone is the way to self-fulfilment.²¹

What was most disturbing to the critics, then, was Staple's acceptance of the position and therefore his tacit sanction of the behaviour that led directly to Sloane's death. Yet, as is clear at the end of Act Two, Staples has already decided to accept the human cost of his own desire for success. With that in mind, it appears less disturbing that he takes the job in the end (since this is forecast in the middle of the play), and rather more disquieting that he is able, as the scene at the end of Act Two demonstrates, to articulate his desire for achievement at the expense of others. The critics seemed to have missed this foreshadowing of the climax. Although he weakly tries to

²¹ Smith, Professional Criticism, 179-80.

blame his wife for creating the situation in which he finds himself, it is clear that he is fully cognizant of his own ambition and aware of the consequences of the choices he is making.

This makes the inevitability of the conclusion that it forecasts even more problematic, since this case demonstrates that it is clearly not a problem limited to the working-class. What it suggests is that the matter of conformity is equally disturbing, and equally inevitable, for the middle-classes. The articulate "hero," as much as his (most often) inarticulate counterpart appears unable to escape the social conditions in which he or she is enmeshed. Staples knows what he is doing, but nevertheless is not helped by his ability to articulate his predicament, and is evidently unable to resist the "patterns" to which the title of the play clearly refers. Thus it appears that Gould's criticism, though it may be valid in specific instances, fails to address a shared experience that evidently crosses over class lines, social divisions, and urban spaces.

It is possible to detect, then, a different set of motives for the increasing critical distaste for live dramas. Although both Kass and Gould, and others, tended to limit their criticisms of the teleplays to ad hominem attacks, even a cursory reading indicates that their reactions harbour a deeper concern that is symptomatic of an anxiety provoked by the teleplays. As Seldes suggests, the

desire to diffuse the potentially disruptive effects of liberal criticism of the social order contained in these plays and in other fiction is indicative of a widespread need to reconfirm the emerging values of the new social order. Serling's play pretends to do this, but makes the cost so high as to provoke outrage, which was probably the point. What appears highly problematic is the possibility that it might be true.

The difficulty for the critics, then, was the consistent and persistent reiteration that the social may not be benevolent. That it may not be benevolent was one thing, but that this possibility should be continually reproduced within fiction was evidently intolerable. The difficulty that these plays presented for the critics was their proximity to the real, the reproduction of actual social conditions, rather than problems with the playwrights per se. Since, as will be discussed below, the social was itself during this period a site of contradiction and conflict, its reproduction within the realm of fiction became highly problematic. However, since the social was supposed to be benevolent, the problem must therefore lay, as Gould claimed, with the maladjustment of the writers themselves.

The Problem of the Real in Fiction

The extent to which popular fiction in general, and not only the television dramas, was a cause of concern can be

judged by the attention devoted to it in a number of the sociological texts of the fifties. In The Organization Man, William Whyte Jr. discusses various types of fictional heroes and their transformation during the decade following the Second World War. He makes the claim that the hero of popular fiction produced immediately after the war was preoccupied with spiritual values that often pitted urban lifestyles against the rural. Ironically, according to Whyte, the hero, having made his or her choice for good against evil, somehow manages to gain a life that is materially better than his "ulcerated" urban counterparts by moving to the countryside "where, presumably, he is now to find the real meaning of life. . . . [B]y puttering at a country newspaper and patronizing himself into a native, he evades any conflict, and in the process manages to live reasonably high off the hog."²² During the course of the decade between the end of the war and the publication of his book, Whyte indicates that what he referred to as the heroes' "sanctimonious materialism," previously obtained through the adoption of a bucolic lifestyle, had undergone a transformation, where the "heroes are now apt to stick around the market place" rather than rejecting the urban for the rural, but nevertheless able to have it both ways, taking the moral high ground and the job at the same time.

²² William Whyte Jr., The Organization Man (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday/Anchor Books, 1957), 278.

In Patterns, for instance, Whyte notes that "the hero doesn't mind work so much but he is similarly sanctimonious" as the previous heroic type was, in terms of the way he takes a moral stance against the "ruthless tactics of an industrial buccaneer."²³ As Whyte suggests, Staples saves his soul by giving Ramsey a "tongue-lashing," and having done so, is in a position to take the job with a clear conscience: "In a masterpiece of the have-your-cake-and-eat-it finale, he tells the boss he'll punch his face if he doesn't act right."²⁴ What is remarkable about Patterns for Whyte is that the right of individualism appears to be exercisable within the corporate regime; it appears possible, within the context of gentleman's agreement, to preserve intact one's self-worth while at the same time giving in to a repugnant form of ethical conduct.

For Whyte, Patterns marked an important shift in the relationship between hero and society in popular fiction. Unlike previous heroes who found themselves in conflict with their environment, the hero in this case is merely imagining that a conflict actually exists between his or her desire and the social order. In the past, the hero was required, at least superficially, to perform some action or sacrifice in order to resolve the conflict and justifiably receive a

²³ Ibid., 279.

²⁴ Ibid. What Whyte omits to mention, however, is that Ramsey reserves the same right to break Staples' jaw.

due reward. By this point, however, the fictional scene had evolved to the point where society is portrayed benevolently to the degree that any apparent conflict was an illusion fostered in the hero's own imagination. Thus,

since this means that the hero's troubles stem from a false image of life, the climax is easily resolved. The author simply tears the veil away. It was really okay all along only the hero didn't know it. Relieved, the hero learns the wisdom of accepting what probably would have happened anyway.²⁵

What has occurred then is a shift in which the hero is no longer the individual rebelling against or in conflict with society; rather, the hero has become society itself. This transformation detected by Whyte is similar to Seldes' description of the Caine Mutiny effect, where the liberalism of the hero is reorganized as a form of deviance from a society against which it is inappropriate to rebel -- since the society itself embodies goodness and benevolence; the desire for independence is both unnecessary and illusory.

This was an assumption which appeared by no means to be limited to popular fiction during this period; James Sloan Allen writes that "leading" intellectual, cultural, and political groups of the fifties considered that no fundamental conflicts of interest existed between them: "conflict in society is a marginal fact signifying superficial differences over means, not elemental differences over ends, incidental battles over ideas, not

²⁵ Ibid.

inevitable wars of interests."²⁶ It was, as Whyte claimed, within popular culture that any apparent contradictions were smoothed out; he points out, however, that "popular culture is not monolithic in this counselling of resignation, nor is the audience in accepting it."²⁷ He thus takes pains to emphasize that both popular fiction and everyday life are rife with contradiction, and thus there is no simple acceptance of the status quo tel quel; that "just as the executive confuses himself by paying homage to mutually incompatible precepts, so the audience still responds to themes directly contrary to the usual fare."²⁸ Nevertheless, despite what he refers to as "ambiguities and cross currents" within popular fiction, Whyte insists that "the dominant strain in popular culture does seem to be adjustment to the system."²⁹

This ambiguity is present within popular works to the extent that critical interpretation also remains ambiguous; as Whyte remarks, "on any one story critics could split long hairs as to whether the author was resolving for or against

²⁶ James Sloan Allen, The Romance of Commerce and Culture: Capitalism, Modernism, and the Chicago-Aspen Crusade for Cultural Reform (Chicago: University of Chicago: 1983), 256.

²⁷ Whyte, Organization Man, 285.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 286.

the system."³⁰ Patterns is a particularly good example of this. Despite the critical consternation with what seems to be an inappropriate conclusion, it is unclear whether this means Serling as the author has capitulated, as Shayon and other critics suggested, or whether the ending was intended to shock (as it clearly did) by implicitly claiming that maintenance of the status quo supersedes any specific instance of individual moral conflict. What can be seen from one perspective as a blatant capitulation to the ideological interests of capital can also be seen, from another perspective, as a radical critique of those interests.

This prompts -- in Whyte if not so obviously in the television critics -- a sentimental nostalgia for the heroic denials of a previous generation of fictional individualists. Whyte's desire for decisive action on the part of the hero leads him to accuse Patterns, and psychological realism in general, of being compromised by a veneer of verisimilitude and "by the flagrant plainness of their characters."³¹ This type of fiction, in which the "heroes and heroines . . . have been remarkably passive for some time," is juxtaposed with "good fairy tales [that] frankly tell the reader that he is about to enter the land

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 280.

of make-believe" where, presumably, wish-fulfilment can take place.

This attitude was shared by David Riesman who, in The Lonely Crowd, contrasts the eras of inner-directed and other-directed personalities by way of their respective representative fictional forms. Similarly to Whyte, he attacks realism -- which he connects with other-directedness -- on the basis of its lack of inspirational qualities and its tendency toward the acceptance of the status quo. This is compared unfavourably to the fiction associated with the inner-directed type:

In the era of inner-direction, stories of a similarly orientational cast often encouraged the reader to aspire to distant horizons, to play for big stakes; many such stories today strike us as escapist and sentimental. In contrast, the type of "realism" in modern magazine fiction is neither uplifting nor escapist. . . . [T]he assumption is made that a solution of conflict is available that involves neither risk nor hardship . . .³²

Despite the superficial disdain for the older form, it is evident that Riesman refers to the sentimental aspects with a wistful, if not outright, nostalgia for a popular fiction that would be "uplifting." With Whyte, Riesman clearly shares a fondness for the past, at least in terms of the pedagogical dimensions of its popular culture forms.³³

³² David Riesman, with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, The Lonely Crowd, abridged ed. (New Haven: Yale University, 1961), 152-3.

³³ As Reuel Denney notes, "the Genteel Tradition solved the problem by requiring the enjoyment of leisure to be as morally strenuous as work." The Astonished Muse (Chicago:

As Riesman suggests of his own examples, "we have seen little that would correspond to the unambiguous escapes of the inner-directed. Rather, we have seen popular culture used, often quite desperately, for training in group adjustment."³⁴ This particular form of attack on popular realist fiction for its ideological character contradicts the valorization of equally pedagogical and ideological dimensions of the earlier fiction to which Whyte and Riesman refer, and trivializes both. The criticism appears in the form of "an ideology of romantic protest against contemporary society," as Daniel Bell put it,³⁵ in which "every social critic has in mind some past golden age that he imagined was infinitely superior to the dismal present."³⁶ As Bell suggests, the theory of mass society, to which the attributes of passivity and conformity are ascribed -- key features of the criticism discussed here -- is not descriptive, nor diagnostic, but rather simply claims that it is bad, against which is juxtaposed an idealized past. The key term here is 'romantic': the instructive folk tale, the rugged individualism of fiction derived from the

University of Chicago, 1957), 252.

³⁴ Riesman, Lonely Crowd, 156-7.

³⁵ Daniel Bell, "The Theory of Mass Society: A Critique," Commentary 22 (1956): 83.

³⁶ Richard Pells, The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 202.

Puritan ethic is counterpoised with the bleak verisimilitude of current fiction and, in doing so, criticism takes on the character of romantic protest. The escapism that Riesman describes refers less to a characteristic of the fictional form and more to a nostalgic desire on the part of social critics and, it seems, television critics as well.

With this in mind, the emergence of a negative response to the "slice of life" realism takes on a much more complicated complexion. Bell's remark is suggestive here, certainly in the way that it characterizes such protest as lacking in insight. More important, however, is the claim that this protest is a type of ressentiment regarding contemporary society. It appears on the evidence that this attitude, found at the basis of the mass society critique, had penetrated into television criticism to the extent that the negative disposition toward the popular was being partially reproduced within the critical discourse of television itself, within a critical discourse that had been initially sustained by a positive disposition toward popular media.

Since the discursive construction of television as an art form was framed formally and with regard to content in terms of a realist aesthetic where the attributes of the medium were considered, ontologically speaking, closer to the real, the rejection of ambiguity in favour of a positive moral outcome, regardless of how 'unrealistic' that might

be, spelled the end of television as art. The aesthetic discourse of television was predicated upon, and indissolubly linked to, particular programmes -- psychological dramas -- which provided the conditions wherein an aesthetic discourse drawn from other "legitimate" sources (i.e. theatre) could find a purchase in combination with a critical attitude favourably disposed to popular media to produce a set of aesthetic criteria for television. Thus, to attack those programmes was to undermine the aesthetic worth of both those programmes and television itself. Furthermore, this was to lean toward a denial of the real, as it was supposedly rendered with a high degree of verisimilitude in those programmes, and therefore toward the spectacle of the motion picture, against which the dramas were originally counterpoised, an opposition from which they derived their aesthetic worth.

It is at this point that it is often contended that a shift in programme formats precipitated the end of the "Golden Age" of television art, since the aesthetic depended so much on the live anthology shows to defend its claim. However, it is not clear why this particular aesthetic of realism defended by the critics could not survive a shift in format in terms of length (from ninety minutes to one hour or from one hour to a half-hour) and in terms of medium (from live television to film). The whole-hearted adoption of this aesthetic by individuals in the production of

feature films -- Delbert Mann, Elia Kazan, Arthur Penn, for instance -- and the transformation of teleplays into feature films -- Patterns and the academy award-winning Marty (as well as the more recent Trip to Bountiful) -- stand as counter-examples to the claim that the aesthetic collapsed as a result of the shift in programming formats that accompanied the movement of the television industry from New York to Los Angeles. Although the transformation of the industry in the second half of the fifties cannot be ignored, by itself it cannot account for the critical disdain to which the dramas were subjected in the mid-fifties. In addition to structural shifts in the industry, the controversial status that the dramas obtained at this time must also be considered.³⁷

Even William Boddy, although disposed toward a structural and economic explanation for this charge, does note that "part of the appeal of television to some writers in the 50s was the attractiveness of television drama as a vehicle for social commentary."³⁸ That this was the case undoubtedly set the stage for the controversy that followed;

³⁷ This controversial status clearly had effects on industrial interests; as Erik Barnouw writes, "quite apart from the revulsion against lower-level settings and people, advertisers often felt uneasy about political implications. Such settings had a way of bringing economic problems to mind." Erik Barnouw, Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University, 1990), 163.

³⁸ William Boddy, "Entering the Twilight Zone," Screen 25 (1984): 100.

as noted earlier, the dramas often focused upon highly contentious class and racial conflicts. More important, however, was the reduction of these conflicts to the level of the family or the individual. In part, as Chayefsky's comments suggested, this transition in emphasis from the social to the individual was prompted by severe misgivings in the postwar period that arose around the possibility of social progress. In a profound shift in attitude amongst postwar liberals in particular, "Progress was viewed as an outmoded 'sentimental' concept;" as a consequence, "faith in human perfectibility was abandoned. Mankind was now viewed as essentially immoral and evil, especially in mass terms; the best that could be done in postwar America was to try to maintain some semblance of individual freedom."³⁹

In the dramas, however, even the individual did not provide a sanctuary of freedom from social forces. Rather, it was the extent to which these forces appeared immutable and unchangeable that was central to the themes of these plays, and therefore led directly to the sense of

³⁹ Erika Doss, Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), 335. Daniel Bell, reflecting on this period, refers to Reinhold Niebuhr, "who saw in such ghastly actions [of the war] the recurrent duplicity of human nature, of man as homo duplex, who in modern times seeks for self-infinity and ends in idolatry . . . Out of this came the fear of mass action, of emotion in politics, and of the politics of passions and hatreds." "Afterword 1988: The End of Ideology Revisited," in The End of Ideology (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1988), 415.

helplessness and lack of possibility that exemplified the attitudes of the "heroes" of these dramas. It also led directly to the critical backlash that we have observed, and to the resentment that arose from the fact that the individuals did not, in these portrayals, remain immune to the social forces which they had battled so successfully in earlier fiction.⁴⁰

The scandal represented by the ending of Patterns, for instance, is ultimately the scandal of the real. Regardless of how one chooses to interpret the ending, it always turns out the same way, and that fact was highly disturbing to the critics who clearly found it unacceptable. Patterns thus marks not only an important shift in the character of the hero, but also marks a turning point in the critical disposition toward realism. This is particularly noticeable in the way that the painful irony, if not truth, of Staples' predicament and choice is overlooked. The rather blatant ideological thrust of the play vis-à-vis conformity is transformed into an indictment of Serling. Rather than addressing the possible truth of Staples' failure to meet

⁴⁰ Unlike the live teleplays, the filmed series appeared to mark a shift toward the dramatic resolution of this anxiety: "television rarely invited the viewer to look for problems within himself. Problems came from the evil of other people, and were solved -- the television seemed to imply -- by confining or killing them. . . . It seemed to say that the American people, exasperated with their multiplying, unsolved problems, were looking for scapegoats, and that the television provided these in quantity." Barnouw, Tube of Plenty, 214.

the moral challenge, the critics seem to prefer to attack Serling's play for not catering to the desire for wish-fulfilment which rests just below the surface of the critical disapprobation.

The claim of ambiguity and lack of resolution against which was placed a model of heroic sacrifice thus rings false. It was not that the ambiguity was intolerable, as opposed to the clear cut moral decisions (and consequences) presented in earlier fiction derived from the Puritan ethic; rather, it was the unambiguous penetration of class or race, of society, into the lives of the individuals portrayed. Social and economic conditions placed limits on choice that threatened that sanctity of the individual, and therefore threatened what was taken to be the final refuge of freedom. As Richard Pells notes,

Both The Lonely Crowd and The Organization Man made clear the dominant values of the postwar intellectuals. By the 1950s, the quest for identity and self-fulfilment had become the central preoccupations. . . . If they could gain some measure of solitude within the confines of a mass society, they might achieve "autonomy" without a fundamental transformation of the political and economic order.⁴¹

It was therefore the reality of those portrayals -- television dramas as the scene of alienation par excellence -- that became increasingly difficult to tolerate. The question of conformity or, at minimum, a lack of mobility, became highly problematic in the way that message conflicted

⁴¹ Pells, The Liberal Mind, 246-7.

with an ideology of individual freedom, particularly when individual freedom appeared to be all that remained. Hence the character of protest that marked the reaction to Patterns, which dramatized this conflict.

Understanding the shift in liberal attitudes is thus crucial for making sense of the reaction against the anthology dramas. The volte-face of opinion with regard to the dramas is otherwise difficult to comprehend, since it appears to strike at the root of the very thing upon which the television aesthetic was propped. This, however, becomes more plausible against the backdrop of a decline in a progressivist and reformist disposition toward social development. As Boddy comments, the use of television drama as a vehicle for social commentary was organized around a particular agenda: "This linking of the dramaturgy of theatrical naturalism with an agenda of liberal reformism was also seen as distinct from the genre-based 'escapist' film series from Hollywood."⁴² To part from realism, then, was to reject the latter distinction, upon which the aesthetic claims of the television dramas were based. More important, though, was the concatenation of liberalism with a realist aesthetic in the name of reform. This was to reconfirm the role of art in the project of social reform that had been crucial to the reemergence of realism in the aftermath of the depression of the 1930s. However, by the

⁴² Boddy, "Twilight Zone," 100.

beginning of the Second World War, it became clear that this project was doomed; indeed, as Doss suggests, by the end of the war, liberalism had become a dead issue or at least, as Pells indicates, in the throes of its own "adjustment" to society.

What is surprising then is that this should be, as Boddy claims, a characteristic of the television dramas. It appears that they were, within the context of the failure of progressivism and socialism, entirely out of step with prevailing dispositions toward the role of representation in the movement toward social reform. If, as Doss claims, liberal reformism finally collapses with the onset of war, then it is not surprising that the television dramas, espousing an outmoded disposition with regard to the social function of art, should be attacked. Thus we arrive at a stage where regarding the collapse of the television aesthetic has to take into account both the transformation of attitudes concerning the communicative dimensions and social function of the work of art and the politics which informs those attitudes. If Boddy is correct in identifying the linkage between reform politics and realism, the erosion of the political dispositions out of which naturalism and realism emerge would plausibly result in a displacement of a realist aesthetic. The criticism directed at the original teleplays seems to bear this out, as well as the shift in

television programming strategies in the second half of the nineteen-fifties.

The outstanding question that remains is why these television dramas should have persisted in employing an aesthetic linked to an era that had passed and, furthermore, why the aesthetic criteria that emerged in the critical discourses examined here were organized around the same set of dispositions. Before addressing that question, however, it is appropriate first to examine the postwar cultural and political context in order to trace out the shift in attitude that produces the rejection of the aesthetic premises for naturalism and realism. An understanding of the transformation in aesthetic dispositions, and therefore, as a consequence, what comes to be identified as art, can then be employed to understand why popular culture, and television in particular, could no longer make a claim to being art.

Art Versus Mass Culture

Despite the assertions of the television critics and some commentators on popular culture, the status of television (as much as other popular culture forms) as art was by no means assured. Indeed, the expression, if not actuality, of the "public arts" or "popular arts" has withered away entirely, signifying that the discursive relationship between art and popular culture established in these phrases has ceased to exist. These expressions offer

evidence that the concatenation of art and the popular was much less problematic in the fifties. Many overlook, for instance, that the well-known anthology, Mass Culture, was subtitled The Popular Arts in America.⁴³ It is the emphasis on the former that has remained, at the expense of the latter. The idea that there could be an art that was also popular is a notion that, until recently, appeared quite out of place.

The anthology itself attempted to balance opinion regarding popular culture, and dissented from taking a unified position, as expressed at the outset by the opposing views of its two editors. Bernard Rosenberg suggested that "mass culture threatens not merely to cretinize our taste, but to brutalize our senses while paving the way to totalitarianism."⁴⁴ David Manning White, on the other hand, replied that the claim that "mass culture mongrelize[s] the sensitivities of the mass of Americans is not only a canard, but logically untrue;" White decries the attitude expressed by Rosenberg and others, insisting that "in closing their eyes to the significant contributions of the mass media, the detractors encourage the very banality

⁴³ Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957).

⁴⁴ Bernard Rosenberg, "Mass Culture in America," in Mass Culture, 5.

they purport to despise."⁴⁵ Thus White shares the sentiment expressed by Robert Shaw regarding the lack of critical attention given to television in particular, and shows himself to be an inheritor of the legacy of intellectual intervention into the popular promoted initially by Van Wyck Brooks and continued by Seldes.

However, with time, it appears that the tension carefully organized through the structure of this anthology has resolved itself rather undialectically in favour of a negative disposition toward popular culture, and toward mass media in particular. Although the idea of a popular art may have been more practical as a concept in the fifties, it still required persistent reassertion. For example, in 1950, returning to the examination of popular culture over a quarter of a century after publishing The Seven Lively Arts, Gilbert Seldes opened his new book by making the following claim:

Twenty-five years ago I made a proposal that seemed modest at the time: that popular entertainment could be accepted and criticized on the same basis as the fine arts. I have now come to believe that this proposal contained a serious error. . . . I made large assertions about these arts; what I regret now is my excessive modesty. For I have somewhat reluctantly been forced to the conclusion that our mass entertainments are, practically speaking, the great creative arts of our time.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ David Manning White, "Mass Culture in America: Another Point of View," in Mass Culture, 16.

⁴⁶ Gilbert Seldes, The Great Audience (New York: Viking Press, 1950), 3.

With this bold gesture, Seldes reaffirmed his original claim made in the nineteen-twenties for the centrality of popular culture practices within American culture as a whole, and reaffirmed their status as genuine forms of art. He notes, however, that "In the traditional sense they are seldom considered as arts and are condemned because they are uncreative."⁴⁷ Although he does not describe in any detail what this "traditional sense" of understanding about the work of art might be, it emerges clearly as the opposite of the mass entertainments which, as he describes, are "machine-made products, they repeat themselves endlessly, using a handful of contrived formulas for plot and stereotyped figures for characters;" and that, therefore, "our mass entertainments are compelled by their own nature to create works that can be promptly forgotten; the work of art as an imperishable object is totally foreign to them."⁴⁸ Thus it appears that Seldes' claim is somewhat contradictory, in that the concept of art to which he implicitly refers does not apply to the very objects he is championing as forms of art.

Seldes raises all of the negative attributes that critics of mass culture have employed in order to condemn the very object he considered the equal of the fine arts. It is evident that Seldes was not immune to the types of

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

"critique," or more properly taste judgements, of those opposed to the aesthetic legitimation of popular culture. However, despite the admission of the ephemerality of the products of popular culture, he nevertheless defends the need for study and criticism of the "popular arts," a proposition he defended in the twenties. This time, however, it is not a question of defending the status of popular culture as art -- this is now taken for granted⁴⁹ -- but rather the examination of its products in terms of their effects on the audience and on American culture in general: "The important thing to do is to 'situate' them in their social setting as well, along with education, political debate, propaganda, and all the other means of making us feel and think and act as we do."⁵⁰ Here Seldes is once again echoing Van Wyck Brooks' call for a socially engaged cultural criticism, a criticism which would move beyond the intellectual disdain for popular culture toward direct engagement with its impact on society. Unlike a purely formal aesthetic criticism, in this book Seldes shifts here not only toward the moral criticism that lay at the basis of Brooks' plea, but also toward a form of criticism that was to a large degree influenced by social science research into the effects of mass media that had

⁴⁹ "I think their place among the arts is now well established." Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

been developing momentum from the Second World War onward. It is clear that Seldes was influenced by, and adopted uncritically the claims of the recent sociological research regarding the effects of mass media on individuals. Despite the reassertion that popular culture forms were indeed art, this claim was mediated by increasing intellectual concerns at this time regarding the propagandistic effects of media exposure.

Six years later, however, in The Public Arts, Seldes renounced his "obsession" with effects research and the notion that "the mass media might be used to keep a complacent and perpetually immature."⁵¹ Although the matter of intellectual engagement with the popular was no less central, he rejected the presupposition of media effects research that the audience consisted of passive dupes. The 'problem' of mass entertainment versus popular art was neatly (if rather less than thoughtfully) reconciled by way of understanding mass media as simply the vehicle for the presentation of the forms of popular culture. In so doing, the popular art form delivered by a mass medium became what Seldes now called a "public" art. The public quality of such works demanded that the audience, the public to which such works were offered, respond to them with critical judgements.

⁵¹ Gilbert Seldes, The Public Arts (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), v.

As Seldes stated, the public arts is a "category of action, not of aesthetics."⁵² This is so by virtue of the fact that the public work of art calls forth a response from its audience: "in principle, [it] invites or requires an action on our part -- acceptance, criticism, rejection. And this is most conspicuously the case when the popular arts enter the phase of the public arts."⁵³ Although Seldes perhaps makes too rigid a distinction between aesthetic experience and moral judgement, the concept of the audience as the passive receptacle of mass media is nevertheless repudiated, and replaced with the idea of a public with the capacity for critical judgement.

The idea of a judging public, however, seems peculiarly out of place at this time. Many intellectuals and critics, especially those recent converts from socialism, were at this time highly suspicious of anything that hinted at egalitarianism or acceptance of public opinion, since for many the result of bowing to public pressure (pace Ortega) had been fascism (indeed, The Great Audience seemed to share this view). If anything, it appeared that most of the cultural community of the fifties preferred a form of enlightened despotism -- giving the public what it needed -- or a minimum, ensuring that "culture" was adequately shielded from what the public apparently wanted. Others

⁵² Ibid., 287.

⁵³ Ibid.

held a different opinion, in which the public was duped into believing it wanted what it was getting, and that the "Lords of Kitsch," as Dwight MacDonald called them, were responsible for the debasement of culture. Either way, the idea that the "public" possessed the capacity to judge was rendered highly problematic, if not considered to be non-existent.

This issue of judgement in relation to mass media and the status of the audience was a growing concern in the postwar period. In an essay written in 1948 about the function of mass media criticism, Paul Lazarsfeld commented that "the entire question of the judgement of mass media is wide open."⁵⁴ The problem for Lazarsfeld was the apparent absence of meaningful criteria by which the products of mass media might be judged. The criticism of mass media lacked a tradition, such as existed with literary and art criticism, that would legitimize the field: "criticism of the mass media is not recognized as a formal and legitimate field of intellectual endeavor."⁵⁵ This lack of tradition, according to Lazarsfeld, led to suspicion as to the motivations of the critics, and to "occasion[s] for nervous hysteria or bitter recrimination" on the part of those being

⁵⁴ Paul Lazarsfeld, "The Role of Criticism in the Management of Mass Media," Journalism Quarterly 25 (June 1948): 123.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 116.

criticized.⁵⁶ This was so despite the efforts of Seldes and others to legitimize the field of popular culture criticism during the previous quarter century.

The absence of a tradition, and consequently a set of standards of judgement, signalled a profound problem with regard to the criticism of mass media. In the case of literature and art, the tradition normalized the act of criticism as the corollary of the reception of works in those fields, and also provided a set of (presumably) stable criteria which could be deployed to analyze and criticize those works. However, for Lazarsfeld, the conventions of art and literary criticism could no longer be employed to criticize mass media because of the difference between the traditional products of culture and those of the mass media: "the criteria which literary criticism developed during the last century cannot be meaningfully applied to such a different type of art product."⁵⁷ It is not clear, however, why this "different type of art product" could not be addressed through the conventions of art criticism, since it was nevertheless called "art." In part, this appears to be the product of a distinction Lazarsfeld makes that is comparable to the distinction made by Seldes, which referred to the "public" nature of such works. Lazarsfeld refers explicitly (as Seldes does implicitly) to a classical

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 123.

conception of the function of the work of art: that "art should make man 'a better citizen in his community.'"⁵⁸ Thus, for Lazarsfeld, the criteria by which the work of art was at one time judged was quite straightforward, that is, in terms of the effect that it had upon the audience, and especially whether that effect could be considered salubrious or not in terms of its social consequences. It is not clear, however, whether Lazarsfeld means the capacity for judgement rests with the audience itself, as would be the case with the classical norm (and is the case in Seldes' construction), or whether in practice judgement would be made on behalf of the audience or public.

As Lazarsfeld points out in his short narration of the rise of modernity, historically this relationship between the work of art and its public had receded into the background and was replaced by an increasing emphasis on the relationship between the artist and his product, the cult of genius which emerged in romanticism. As Lazarsfeld aptly points out, the criterion of criticism applied to the works of art in this period, that is, "whether or not an art product was a true expression of a great personality," could not be so easily applied to the newer "products of mass art" which were "produced by a large number of people."⁵⁹ Thus, the kinds of criticism normally applied to the work of

⁵⁸ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 123.

art considered the product of an individual (possessing the bona fides of a professional artist) were no longer applicable to the work of mass art made by an organized pool of labour, since it could no longer be judged "according to its relationship with the artistic personality."⁶⁰

For Lazarsfeld, the solution to this dilemma lay with the "return to what the classicists considered an appropriate standard of criticism," that is, the effects of the work upon the audience. This manoeuvre, however, was fraught with danger, since any "appropriate" standard would be difficult to determine, given what Lazarsfeld termed "social and psychological differences" amongst members of the audience. It appears that a universal agreement on a standard cannot be reached, despite its desirability, as a result of these "differences," which one can only assume is a type of code for class divisions. Indeed, Lazarsfeld suggests that "With the development of industrial society, audiences became more and more sharply stratified," and that "different groups might be differently affected by an art product."⁶¹ This class division also signals the division between kinds of criticism -- one reserved for the products of high culture, and one for mass culture. Thus the classical norm, it would appear, would be applied only in the case of "those new products of mass art," and only in

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 122-23.

terms of their potential effects on the audiences most likely to be "differently affected" by the work.

It is clear then that the products of mass media could not be inserted within the burgeoning modernist "tradition" since, on the one hand, they were not the work of an individual artist and, on the other, that the audience for these products was different from the (once) unified audience for bona fide works of art. Against the idea that, according to Seldes, works of popular art were simply distributed through the channels of mass media, Lazarsfeld implicitly claims that the conditions of production and reception brought about by the advent of mass media themselves signal the need for an entirely different approach to criticism, in which the works presented through mass media can no longer be evaluated as art, given the terms of Lazarsfeld's argument. Lazarsfeld rules out the possibility of authorship (crucial to the privileging of the archology dramas as objects of aesthetic worth obtained through the emphasis on the playwright), and therefore the claim that television can be art; he also rules out the existence of an audience with the capacity to judge, due to its lack of unity, and therefore lack of agreement on the criteria for judgement with regard to aesthetic objects.

The question of taste, and therefore of judgement, loomed large. It was, however, as Seldes suggested, less a question of aesthetics than of action, of a politics if not

an ethics, and the mass media became in the 1950s the locus around which the politics of culture was gathered; as Lazarsfeld put it in his essay: "social critique of the mass media is nowadays often the form in which broad social issues are discussed."⁶²

In attempting to explain why the criticism of social conditions should be organized through the critique of mass media, Lazarsfeld suggests that this was the result of what the "liberals" felt was a betrayal of the social gains that were a product of their efforts; as he wrote, "They hoped that the increased time and money which they fought for would be channelized in directions and activities which interested them; instead it was drained off by the mass media."⁶³ Although opinion was divided in regard to the negative or positive effects of mass media, Lazarsfeld does point to the emergent phenomenon of the fifties in which "the mass media have become the *bête noire* of the liberals."⁶⁴ The anxiety that developed over the growth of the mass media, especially television, was not, however, much concerned with the audience, but rather was more preoccupied with the erosion of intellectual domination over culture.

⁶² Ibid., 119.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 118.

This discussion of social problems via a critique of popular media is symptomatic of the turning away from the previous optimism that regarded the popular as the site of emergence of a national American culture. It became evident in the fifties that what had once been celebrated as the creation of a culture that was the equal or better than its European counterpart was now to be deplored. As Warren Susman had written about this period, "old ideas were now seen as new threats. Mass culture: fearful writers now produced a series of major tracts about it. Interestingly enough, if one had bothered to look, one would have discovered that many of the same critics who attacked mass culture in the 1940s and 1950s were, in the teens and twenties, its greatest proponents."⁶⁵ The kind of optimism which greeted the emergence of popular forms in the twenties had clearly withered away by the 1950s, with the notable exception, it seems, of Gilbert Seldes. That it was fashionable by this time to be against popular culture was noted by Henry Rabassiere, who pointed out in 1957 that "the newest fashion in mass culture is to scorn mass culture. Everybody does nowadays; those who don't are either writing

⁶⁵ Warren Susman, with Edward Griffin, "Did Success Spoil the United States? Dual Representations in Postwar America," in Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War, ed. Cary May (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 24.

a book on mass culture or collect early jazz records."⁶⁶ Jazz, of course, was one of the indigenous American art forms that received much praise in the twenties and was considered evidence of the creativity and originality of American culture. The idea of collecting "early" jazz records is also suggestive in the way that it points toward a valorization of popular culture's past, over against a more problematic present.

Richard Pells suggests that "behind this new rhetoric and outlook lay a new set of values."⁶⁷ These new values were a repudiation of the collectivist and reformist politics of the twenties and thirties in favour of an emphasis on individual style and behaviour:

What the writers of the 1930s called "community," the postwar intelligentsia labelled "conformity." Cooperation now became "other-direction"; social consciousness had turned into "groupism"; solidarity with others implied an invasion of privacy; "collectivism" ushered in a "mass society"; ideology translated into imagery; economic exploitation yielded to bureaucratic manipulation; the radical activist was just another organization man.⁶⁸

This new set of values marked a shift away from social concerns toward a preoccupation with individuality, a transformation of concern from collective action to individual resistance. This in turn led to an emphasis on

⁶⁶ Henry Rabassiere, "In Defense of Television," in Mass Culture, 372.

⁶⁷ Pells, The Liberal Mind, 248.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 247.

marginality and difference. Part and parcel with this was the attitude that "Alienation was no longer a problem to be surmounted, but a virtue to be nourished."⁶⁹ Alienation did not mean, however, that one was distanced from the products of one's labour (something that was not in any case a common experience with regard to intellectual production), but rather the cultivation, as Pells remarks, of distance from other people. This attitude is reminiscent of the twenties, which, although a period of celebration of the popular arts in some quarters, was at the same time the decade of the "Lost Generation" who also repudiated the social values of their time and fled into the imaginary world of the expatriate. By this point in time, however, the exile was internal: both literally in terms of the withdrawal from social commitment, and figuratively, in terms of a retreat into the internal realm of the psyche. The idea of alienation was transformed from being a product of social forces into a problem of "buried disturbances in the individual psyche."⁷⁰ This new form of alienation was nevertheless still the consequence of social conditions; to the extent that "intellectuals' emphasis on private maladies rather than public shortcomings reflected their own sense of helplessness in the face of remote and omnipotent government structures," Pells, despite himself, indicates the degree to

⁶⁹ Ibid., 248.

⁷⁰ Leslie Fiedler, quoted in Pells, 190.

which alienation has to be regarded as a social phenomenon.⁷¹ Arguably, the search for identity and the call for the "individual to resist the pressures of conformity" was indeed a reaction against social forces that appeared unassailable and immutable.

The intense cultivation of the individual in the cultural sphere in the fifties was, in effect, a conscious cultivation of alienation, and a swing away from the social concerns that predominated in the previous decades. This was, in part, a product of the collapse of American socialism, and in part a reaction to the war itself. This in turn was part of a larger phenomenon in American culture that can be identified as an oscillation between the "polarities of social control and individual release evident in Progressive thought [that have] defined the contours of subsequent twentieth-century American social theory," and, it can be added, of cultural discourses and practices as well.⁷² What this means is that the resurgence of concern for individual well-being over social concerns is indicative of the shifting emphasis that has characterized intellectual dispositions throughout the century, both up until, and beyond the fifties. With regard to the fifties, once the possibility of social reform embodied in both Marxism and

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Richard King, The Party of Eros: Radical Social Thought and the Realm of Freedom (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1972), 30.

the New Deal appeared to be out of reach, "radical social theory ran aground. Many former radicals withdrew from public, political concerns."⁷³

Culturally, this resulted in an emphasis on the primacy of individual expression, and the withering away of the representation of social conditions that had been central to artistic forms in previous decades. Daniel Bell's characterization of the critique of mass society as a type of romanticism indicated the extent to which the trace elements of romantic protest marked the reassertion of individuality. Lazarsfeld's comments were also suggestive in the way that they juxtaposed critical values organized around the relation of the artist to his or her work that emerged in the romantic era with the works of mass media as the product of organized labour, and problematized the criticism of media because they did not conform to the idea of the artistic product as the unique expression of an individual.

These romantic tendencies suggest that the basis for the retreat into the psyche lay within the increasingly problematic status that the actuality of social conditions had obtained. The reaction to the use of techniques of verisimilitude to portray social conditions demonstrates the fear directed against social reformist elements in art; creating a space for oneself allowed the impression of

⁷³ Ibid.

criticism of the social, while leaving its institutions intact: "by castigating the media, writers might demonstrate their dislike for the quality of American life without having to challenge the nation's political or economic institutions as well."⁷⁴ This in turn affected the mode of representation: the rise of abstraction and the rejection of realism signalled the repudiation of the political values of reformism inherent in a socially engaged art or, more accurately, reflected the dismay at the collapse of reform politics and the recognition that there would be no "peace dividend" as America entrenched itself in the Cold War. The resurgence of modernism after the war, especially its spiritualist and formalist tendencies, was particularly lethal to the television aesthetic; when combined with the burgeoning critique of mass media, it was fatal. Of special significance was the outright condemnation of realism and naturalism, and the suspicion directed toward popular culture. The critical discourses of art in the postwar period rejected the claim that there was any relationship between popular culture and art, and worked toward the reinstallation of cultural elitism and the revival of the aristocratic dimension of the Genteel culture against which the modernists had originally revolted. It was within this context that concept of alienation developed its positive attributes, in terms of the differentiation between

⁷⁴ Pells, The Liberal Mind, 218.

"genuine" culture, held to be the sole province of a privileged few, and popular culture.

As Erika Doss writes, popular culture had already been characterized as anti-modernist and attacked on that basis in the twenties and thirties; however, in the postwar period, the denunciation of popular culture took on a new cast: "in the postwar era, [critics] denounced the popular arts in different terms altogether. The old criticism of regionalism as antimodernism was rekindled, but now it was increasingly linked to dangerous political and social trends."⁷⁵ The popular was linked with the emerging sociological concept of the mass, and since the war had proved that "the masses were irrational and dangerous," so too was any art connected with popular movements. Thus, as Doss notes, "by implication, any art linked to mass culture, such as realism, was also dangerous. The only art safe from the taint of kitsch was that which avoided infection from the public and politics."⁷⁶ Clearly, then, the general withdrawal amongst intellectuals was reproduced within the cultural field in terms of a refusal to relate art to social or political issues.

As Doss comments, "the underlying criterion" for the documentary style was ideologically motivated, to the extent that it "aimed at linking the American people with the

⁷⁵ Doss, Politics of Modernism, 253.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

unique aspects of their culture and thereby engendering national collectivity."⁷⁷ The documentary tradition and the proletarian novels which emerged in the political ferment of the thirties signalled the emergence of a relationship between art and social action in which (not for the first time) "American realism was linked to a political agenda."⁷⁸ However, after the war "all utopian and ideological systems were seen as acts of hubris which could only lead to disaster."⁷⁹ As a consequence of the perception of that linkage, the retreat from political engagement on the cultural front in the fifties resulted in the abandonment of realist aesthetics:

In the 1940s, when a new generation of seemingly apolitical artists began searching for their own means of personal and cultural expression, they avoided realist art like the plague. New Deal culture, originally lauded . . . as the return of republicanism, was dismissed by this generation (and the general public). So, too, was an art of social contract bounded in a representational style. In the 1940s facts were as suspicious as fiction; authentic art was abstract.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ibid., 270.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Richard King, Party of Eros, 47.

⁸⁰ Doss, Politics of Modernism, 270. As Alexander writes, "[b]y the late 1940s . . . the whole concept of a national art --an art supposedly grounded in the collective emotions of a historically identifiable people -- came to appear as at best a nineteenth-century eccentricity . . . The closely related proposition, that what intellectuals and artists did should contribute directly to social change, also fell into disrepute. Both the idea of a national culture and the idea of a socially purposeful art, according to the post-war consensus, expressed an inherent fallacy."

As well, since realism had in effect been coopted by both Stalin and Hitler, abstraction could be promoted alternatively as the sign of freedom of expression, and deployed as such in anti-fascist campaigns. The key feature in the repudiation of realism, however, was a shift in the internal politics of America itself: "that aesthetic conversion is intimately linked with a similar transition in American political culture."⁸¹ As Doss goes on to write, "the story of the shift from regionalism to abstraction is also the shift from the New Deal to the Cold War."

As described through her reading of Jackson Pollock, abstract art denied any reference to an external world, and developed a mode of communication that was distinct from the realist art which preceded it. The denial of external reference was an attempt to avoid social or political manipulation and acted as a protest against the banality of everyday culture. The contradiction between conformity and individuality that lurked within the culture of consensus prompted the retreat into the psychic realm; the inability to be simultaneously both uniquely individual and the same as everyone else fostered a crisis represented by the "tense instability" of Pollock's drips of paint. This mode of communication, organized around the expression of the

Charles Alexander, Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth Century America (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1980), 242.

⁸¹ Ibid., 312.

artist's inner turmoil, was a genuine attempt, despite its superficially apolitical stance, to indicate the possibility of an alternate form of consciousness (hence the romantic character of protest).

However, as Doss and others have recently pointed out, the elitist tendencies amongst postwar intellectuals and critics effectively isolated the revolutionary possibilities offered by this alternative consciousness by denying any reference to either the world or to artistic consciousness within these paintings, developing a discourse of l'art pour l'art, and thereby framing abstraction within a context of the formal development of visual art as an autonomous historical narrative. Abstract painting, rather than being a response to a particular set of social conditions and relations, was instead described as the culmination of the movement toward self-reflexiveness with regard to medium that was presumed to be taking place historically across the cultural domain. Referring specifically to Clement Greenberg's criticism, Robert Storr notes that "anywhere the strings of appropriation, invention, biography, or belief attached art to the world, Greenberg was ready to cut them clean, particularly when those strings lead directly to vernacular culture."⁸² Doss echoes this conclusion when

⁸² Robert Storr, "No Joy in Mudville: Greenberg's Modernism Then and Now," in Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High and Low, ed. Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 173.

she writes that both Greenberg's and Harold Rosenberg's desire "was to protect avant-garde art by freezing it in a no-man's-land of formalist experimentation ('flatness') and cultural patronage."⁸³ Much vitriol is poured by both Doss and Storr onto Greenberg, who has had to bear the blame for the direction of postwar art that in retrospect has come to seem highly problematic. However, Doss does note that Greenberg was in many ways merely echoing the sentiments of other intellectuals of the postwar period:

Greenberg's renunciation of popular culture was the product of a general intellectual backlash against the "masses" in the late thirties and especially the forties. . . . Intellectuals who had once trusted in the efficacy of collective reform, either liberal or leftist, now feared the growing political power of uprooted mass movements . . . [I]n the postwar era Hanna Arendt, Arthur Schlesinger, Daniel Bell, Janson, Greenberg, and Rosenberg came to denounce mass political and cultural movements openly.⁸⁴

The effect of this was to isolate radical art from the everyday and to restrict it to "the realm of elite taste and self-interest."⁸⁵ This was the message of Greenberg's essay "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," which sought to deny any reciprocal relation between work and world and therefore abandoned the communicative potential of art that realism attempted to exploit. Subsequently, other "authors extended the arguments made in Greenberg's essay . . . and rewrote

⁸³ Doss, Politics of Modernism, 386.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 376.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 373.

the history of America's socially directed prewar art. . . . [A]n aesthetic aimed at social reform and the development of a uniquely American cultural expression was now associated with deviant mass politics."⁸⁶ The connection of realism with fascism and totalitarianism signalled the abandonment of popular culture as the locus of reform; the connection between social action and aesthetic practice was completely abandoned. As Storr writes, "By usurping the American tradition of radical social criticism only to write it off as the preamble for a capricious and deterministic aestheticism . . . Greenberg denied subsequent generations of their true intellectual heritage."⁸⁷

Although this view may be true in hindsight, it fails to acknowledge that the transition to a formalist aesthetics and the repudiation of realism and socially engaged art emerged within a specific social and political context. Although the effects of his criticism must not be underrated, the idea that the emergence of an aesthetic would be the "capricious" act of one individual is to give far too much weight to Greenberg's agency. In particular, the collapse of "radical social criticism" itself as a viable practice has to be taken into account. The success of Greenberg's claims has to be considered in part the

⁸⁶ Ibid., 389.

⁸⁷ Storr, "Greenberg's Modernism," 161.

product of a climate in which others were prepared to give his ideas a positive reception.

On this score, Doss' argument is more successful by laying emphasis on social and political transformation as the key to understanding the dramatic shift in the aesthetic and in the representational practices of fine art. The link with fascism proved fatal to the realism (and nationalism) of the American Scene and the regionalist movement, and created the conditions wherein a high culture elite could be reinstalled that repudiated the idea of a socially-engaged art; the "connection of fascism and regionalist aesthetics sounded the death knell for socially oriented representational art in postwar America, and made way for the 'triumph' of abstract art."⁸⁸

As Charles Alexander writes, "the American Abstract Artists saw the avant-garde creator, not the proletarian, as the truly revolutionary agent in modern society. They called on artists to repudiate both Left social realism and the American Scene in favor of radical nonrepresentationalism."⁸⁹ The emergence of abstraction and the repudiation of the politics attached to realism indicate the degree to which a popular (and populist) aesthetic was no longer tenable. The idea of the "popular arts" had been transformed into debased forms of culture,

⁸⁸ Doss, Politics of Modernism, 391.

⁸⁹ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 267.

over against which was placed the idea of "genuine" art, the pure art of abstraction. As the political mood after the war condensed into the acceptance of the status quo as the price of freedom and abandoned the efforts of social criticism and social reform, direct social critique through realism was also abandoned.

CHAPTER 6
CRISIS, CONSENSUS, AND CONTRADICTION

With much bitterness at the collapse of the movement which he had helped to create, Thomas Hart Benton wrote in 1951 that

Immediately after it was recognized that Wood, Curry, and I were bringing American art out into a field where its meanings had to be socially intelligible to justify themselves and where aesthetic accomplishment would depend on an effective representation of cultural ideas, which were themselves generally comprehensible, the ivory tower boys and girls saw the danger to their presumptions and their protected positions. They rose with their supporting groups of artists and their high-browish disciples to destroy our menace.¹

Despite Benton's accurate description of the demise of an aesthetic oriented toward comprehensibility, he failed to recognize that cultural ideas themselves had changed, and therefore aesthetic strategies along with it. He did, however, acknowledge the emergence of a cultural elite that embodied attitudes toward culture that were hostile to those shared by the formation centred around Benton. Of significance is his perception that the work he stands behind represents a "menace" to the elite, particularly since the operating mode of this elite was crisis.

¹ Thomas Hart Benton, "What's Holding Back American Art?" Saturday Review, 15 December 1951, 10.

The extent to which a crisis within American culture is one of the hallmarks of the fifties is perhaps best exemplified by two major cultural symposia which bracketed the decade. In 1952, the Partisan Review, responding to what was perceived as the erosion of intellectual elites by mass culture and therefore producing a crisis for "radical" intellectuals, sponsored "Our Country and Our Culture." As the editors of the Partisan Review stated, "mass culture not only weakens the position of the artist and the intellectual profoundly by separating him from his natural audience, but it also removes the mass of people from the kind of art which might express their human and aesthetic needs."² As Lazarsfeld noted in 1948, the central figure through which the crisis of liberalism was represented was the mass media; it was blamed for the erosion of culture and the waning power of liberal and socialist intellectuals to have their agenda made good through appropriate models of identification. Much of the discussion in the symposium centred on paeans to a "faulty" democracy; expressions of anti-communism; what Philip Rahv called the "'embourgeoisement' of the American intelligentsia"; and repeated references to mass culture as weakening and polluting.

² "Editorial Statement," in "Our Country and Our Culture" Partisan Review 19 (1952): 285.

Likewise, in 1959, in Culture for the Millions?, a symposium at Columbia University, the participants reiterated the attack on mass media as the symbol of the degradation of American culture. The extent which the opinions expressed bore virtually no difference in disposition regarding popular culture from those expressed some years earlier in Partisan Review indicates how little had changed in the intervening period. However, while the Partisan Review symposium tended to concentrate on questions concerning the shift in "mood," as it was delicately put, and the emergence of "parvenu conservatives . . . who, having but lately discovered the pleasures of conformity, are now aggressively bent on combatting all dissent,"³ the discussants at Columbia had clearly overcome the distress at the collapse of socialism, and were preoccupied solely with the vilification of mass culture. The ambivalence expressed in the Partisan Review points of view, which evidently still harboured some hope for the toiling classes, had disappeared entirely. As Edward Shils bluntly put it: "I think we are confronting the real problem: why we don't like mass culture. This seems to be the issue. We don't like it. It is repulsive to us."⁴

³ Philip Rahv, in *Ibid.*, 308.

⁴ Edward Shils, "Panel Discussion: Ideals and Dangers of Mass Culture," in Culture for the Millions? Mass Media in Modern Society, ed. Norman Jacobs (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1959), 198-99.

As if this weren't enough in itself, Shils goes on to ask whether "we" -- presumably the intellectuals arrayed before him -- didn't like mass culture because of the taint of class of which it was expressive:

Is it partly because we don't like the working classes and the middle classes?

Some people dislike the working classes more than the middle classes, depending on their political backgrounds. But the real fact is that from an aesthetic and moral standpoint, the objects of mass culture are repulsive to us.⁵

Evidently, Shils and others had abandoned any pretence whatsoever to class solidarity, and concentrated on the reproduction of an intellectual elite which would "select an aesthetic viewpoint, a system of moral judgements which would be applicable to the products of mass culture." The shrill tone of this rhetoric is itself indicative of the class anxieties and pollution fears that haunted the intellectual reaction to the popular.

The strain of this discursive effort to shore up the intellectual barricades, however, is considerably more evident by this point: responding to the desire to protect the intellectual community from "brutal and mediocre culture," Shils stated that

to maintain itself, superior culture must maintain its own traditions and its own internal coherence. The progress of superior culture (and its continual self-renewal) require that traditions be sustained, however

⁵ Ibid., 199.

much they are revised or partially rejected at any time.⁶

Read closely, this sentence reveals its oxymoronic condition as it tries to reconcile modernist progressivism with the defence of its opposite: the maintenance of traditional culture. Furthermore, it ignores the crisis generated by the war which put a heavy strain on intellectual commitments to tradition. This is acknowledged in the presentation by Hanna Arendt, who reminded her audience that "the whole development of modern art started from and remained committed to a profound mistrust not only of cultural philistinism but also of the word culture itself," thus putting into question the very "tradition" Shils sought to protect.⁷ The participants in the Partisan Review symposium were able at least to recognize that the upheavals of the previous two decades prevented a return to the past, despite the transparent nostalgia for the Gilded Age amongst a number of the commentators. The only apparent strategy remaining, however, as Alan Wald notes of Rahv, was to define the "role of the vanguard intellectual in supraclass terms," where aesthetic modernism, as the counter-thrust to

⁶ Edward Shils, "Mass Society and Its Culture," in Culture for the Millions?, 24.

⁷ Hanna Arendt, "Society and Culture," in Culture for the Millions?, 45.

mass culture, "became a mechanism for negation, for abstention and withdrawal."⁸

What these two symposia do make clear is that way in which intellectuals demonized and consequently abandoned popular culture as a site of intervention. Precisely that which was optimistically thought to be able to be corrected with the advent of television -- the failure of intellectuals to intervene critically with regard to radio and other media -- occurred yet again with television. Instead of participating in and shaping the developmental process of television as Seldes and others had hoped, intellectuals for the most part abandoned television, and popular culture, altogether: "By and large, the intellectual detached himself from TV right from the start, and in doing so he has not only impoverished American culture by depriving the greatest medium of mass communication of his own talents, but he has cut himself off from the common experience of his countrymen."⁹

The sense of crisis was not, however, limited to the experience of intellectuals and cultural commentators alone, but was also constitutive of an emerging ruling bloc. As C.

⁸ Alan M. Wald, The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1987), 220.

⁹ Marya Mannes, "The Lost Tribe of Television," in The Eighth Art: Twenty-Three Views of Television Today, ed. John Cogley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 24.

Wright Mills wrote of this period, "the power elite is composed of political, economic, and military men, but this instituted elite is frequently in some tension: it comes together only on certain coinciding points and only on certain occasions of 'crisis'."¹⁰ Here we can see the extent to which the notion of crisis is central to the coalescence of political power during this period, as much as it is constitutive of the intellectual attack on mass culture in the cultural realm and with regard to aesthetic practices. Mills suggests that the emerging elites' interests are articulated together negatively through the perception of crisis: "they feel that they have somehow been tricked by liberalism, progressivism, radicalism, and they are a little frightened."¹¹ As a result, the political tendencies that had emerged in the thirties came under severe criticism, and were rejected in favour of what Mills called "the neo-Burkean defense of a traditional elite."¹² This elite formed in effect a new aristocracy, but one which was defined negatively, "holding it," as Mills writes, "as a latent assumption while talking about, not the elite, but 'the mass'."¹³ This new elite "attacked the politics of

¹⁰ C. Wright Mills, The Power Elite (New York: Oxford University, 1956), 276.

¹¹ Ibid., 326.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 330.

the New and Fair Deals; tried to rewrite the history of those administrations; and impugned the very biographies of those who took part in them."¹⁴ This was certainly how Benton must have felt. We can see, then, the degree to which the transformation in politics consisted in the concatenation of the reconstruction of a conservative cultural elite with the denigration of the "mass."

As Jackson Lears notes of the postwar era, however, "many alliances were tenuous at best. There were important differences among various groups in temperament, outlook, and interest."¹⁵ It is around the assumption of the existence of consensus that these contradictions and tensions emerge. According to Lears and others, because of this tenuousness, "The attempt to yolk together the cultural contradictions of capitalism began to break down during the 1960s."¹⁶ This is reiterated by James Sloan Allen, for instance, who argues that "consensus stands as a hallmark of the fifties." Although Allen notes that "The consensus theory was, to be sure, a little naïve; and it took considerable criticism from social thinkers and would-be revolutionaries in the sixties," he nevertheless claims that

¹⁴ Ibid., 332.

¹⁵ Jackson Lears, "A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society," in Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War, ed. Cary May (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), 53.

¹⁶ Ibid.

"it was more right than wrong."¹⁷ But as Erika Doss has pointed out, this notion of consensus was rife with contradiction, preeminently in the way Americans of the fifties were supposed to be conformists and at the same time highly individualistic:

While the front of unity and conformity, or consensus, was touted, Americans were also encouraged to act as individuals. As the one implied the negation of the other, as the cost of mass conformity was that of individuality, and vice-versa, both became perceived as false constructs; it was impossible to be both an authentic individual and a team player in postwar America.¹⁸

Under these conditions, many artists and intellectuals withdrew into individual consciousness as the only source of rebellion against orthodoxy, and produced much of the creative expression of the period, concentrated upon psychic states and conflicts, since discussion of social conflict had become a taboo subject. Interiorizing became a strategy through which the conflicting roles of individual and conformist could be avoided, as well as political commitments demanded by the ideology of the Cold War. As Doss writes, "By denying reference to an external world, abstract art seemingly avoided any possibility of political or social manipulation. . . . abstract works also conveyed a

¹⁷ James Sloan Allen, The Romance of Commerce and Culture: Capitalism, Modernism, and the Chicago-Aspen Crusade for Cultural Reform (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1983), 256.

¹⁸ Erika Doss, Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1991), 337.

desperate sense of the need for revolution, for the overthrow of authority."¹⁹ This suggests, aside from the fact that would-be revolutionaries are by no means only a phenomenon of the sixties as Allen suggests, that the idea of consensus is only one of outward appearances which masked the turmoil produced by the contradictions hidden underneath the veneer of consensus itself.

Another kind of orthodoxy has had a tendency to define historical attitudes which reconstitute and consolidate this apparent consensus at the level of intellectual activity. The notion of consensus in this case revolves around the idea of a convergence of interests between modernist tendencies and an altogether different political agenda. This is where another contradiction of sorts emerges: between elites characterized by a commitment to an aristocratic (or perhaps even despotic) modernism, whose chief attribute is the condemnation of the popular, and those critics committed to the analysis and participation in (and, potentially, reform of) popular culture. In fact, it could be argued that the emergence of elitist modernism marks a divergence of interests and the fracturing of the fragile consensus between artists and intellectuals and the proletariat which was achieved for a brief time in the thirties. Indeed, the intellectual disdain for the popular which developed momentum among the vanguard intellectuals

¹⁹ Ibid., 356.

and artists of the forties and fifties was a product of the revivification of the distinction between high and low culture which the intellectuals and artists of the thirties had attempted to overcome: "[Clement] Greenberg's reintroduction of the distinctions between high and low culture, which [Thomas Hart] Benton and other modernists had tried to overcome in the thirties, was echoed throughout the art press of the 1940s."²⁰ According to Andrew Ross, the reintroduction of these distinctions was, ironically, actually meant to serve the notion of consensus:

In these essays about popular culture by Fiedler, MacDonal, Shils, and others in the fifties, the concept of "class" makes a conditional return after its years in the intellectual wilderness. This time, however, class analysis returns not to draw attention to conflicts and contradictions, as had been the case in the thirties, but rather to serve a hegemonic moment in which a consensus was being established about the non-antagonistic coexistence of different political conceptions of the world. Cultural classes could exist as long as they kept to themselves.²¹

As Allen notes, the assumption which dominated one intellectual front was that conflict did not arise from a fundamental divergence of interests, but was, at most, merely a disagreement over the means to accomplish intellectual and political goals, or a misunderstanding of what those common interests were: thus "conflict in society is a marginal fact signifying superficial differences over

²⁰ Ibid., 388.

²¹ Andrew Ross, No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture (London: Routledge, 1989), 58.

means, not elemental differences over ends, incidental battles over ideas, not inevitable wars of interests. . . . no elemental and intractable conflicts of interest exist among the 'leading groups' of American society . . . there is only misunderstanding of what the common interests are."²² Indeed, it has been suggested that "critics of this celebrated consensus, whether from right of left, tended to be treated as psychological deviants suffering from such cliché ills as status anxiety or authoritarian personality."²³

It does not stand up to scrutiny, however, to say that all intellectuals and cultural critics shared the same interests. Ross is certainly unconvincing when he suggests that anything like peaceful coexistence between differing political conceptions was the hallmark of consensus in the fifties. Undoubtedly, a particular intellectual formation grouped, as Ross notes, around "the little magazines like Partisan Review, Politics, and Dissent,"²⁴ with their stylized Frankfurt School critique of mass culture and post-Marxist rejection of the popular, created an impression of consensus. One of the problems with this view, however, is that, although correct in as far as it goes, it suggests

²² Allen, Romance of Commerce, 256.

²³ Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, The Fifties: The Way We Really Were (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1975), 11.

²⁴ Ross, No Respect, 50.

that the unholy alliance between conservative mass culture criticism of the twenties and thirties (Ortega, Eliot, eg.) and the postwar American "left" crystallizing around the exiled Germans is expressive of a common front of vanguard intellectuals in the United States. While it does describe a relatively unified position among the intellectuals and cultural critics grouped around the house organs listed by Ross, opinion is clearly divided. Gilbert Seldes, for example, describes the origins of a very different formation, gathered initially around the Dial and Edmund Wilson at Vanity Fair, which from the twenties onward was concerned with the legitimation of American popular culture as an indigenous art form that could be defined in distinctly anti-European terms.²⁵

It was not that the concern with mass culture was any less important for this latter group -- Ross is probably correct to suggest that interest is almost universal -- but rather that progressive intellectuals and cultural commentators were not of one opinion over the nature and effects of mass media, which were nevertheless regarded by

²⁵ Gilbert Seldes, The Public Arts (New York: Simon and Schuster), 290-1. See also Charles Alexander, Here the Country Lies: Nationalism and the Arts in Twentieth Century America (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1980), 102, 111, 143. Ross also excludes the crucial fact of the emergence of neo-conservatism led by Frederick Hayek's Road To Serfdom, Peter Viereck's Conservatism Revisited, and Russel Kirk's The Conservative Mind, a formation very different from that of the post-Marxists grouped around the "little magazines" and cultural journals on which Ross concentrates.

most as the central agents in the new postwar social formation. At the core of the difference was the relationship between the avant-garde and modernism, which to some were equivalent and interchangeable terms. As Seldes notes of his and others championship of popular culture in the nineteen-twenties, "It was against the avant-garde and the intellectual and the sophisticated critic who were for everything modern, provided they could think of it in the framework of the fine arts."²⁶ Initially attacking the genteel conservative culture of nineteenth-century America, by the fifties, Seldes and others found themselves in opposition to a different group altogether, to whom they were clearly allied in terms of their positive view of modern development, but with whom they differed over the social location of those developments, and indeed over the larger social and cultural effects of developing modernity as a whole.

Respected cultural critics such as Seldes and Reuel Denney, who espoused reformist, New Deal-like attitudes toward popular culture, brought, as Charles Siepmann notes of Denney, "to television, as to mass media generally, the amused and tolerant perspective of a poet turned sociologist."²⁷ Furthermore, they provided "imaginative

²⁶ Ibid., 291.

²⁷ Charles Siepmann, "The Missing Literature of Television," in The Eighth Art: Twenty-Three Views of Television Today (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston),

speculation on the emergent culture of communication's golden age, and a tonic to the Kitsch school of thought about mass media represented by Dwight MacDonal and [Ernst] Van den Haag."²⁸ This was the case despite the attacks on such dispositions, as Mills noted. Against the notion of consensus, then, it can be argued that the criticism of television (and of mass media generally) that emerged in the forties and fifties was generally a version of one of two opposed perspectives: a wholly negative, condemnatory stance typical of the 'vanguard' modernists, and those who retained the reformist, New Dealer attitudes of the thirties and attempted to maintain the legacy of that project via critical intervention into popular media -- especially television, which provided the opportunity to get in on the ground floor, so to speak, and avoid the pitfalls to which radio appeared to have succumbed.

We therefore have to reconsider the notion of consensus, as least insofar as it applies to media criticism. Against a view that sees this consensus fracturing only with the emergence of the ironic stance taken with Pop Art in the sixties, the negative disposition toward television and popular culture in general prior to the sixties is not as monolithic as it may seem (if one were to judge from contemporary writers such as Ross and Sloan,

223.

²⁸ Ibid.

for instance), and we must regard the espousal of favourable attitudes toward popular culture, and television in particular, as a significant element of critical activity in the nineteen-forties and -fifties.²⁹

The Triumph of Modernism

The emergence of the television aesthetic has to be contextualized within the debate and tensions over the popular and the communicative function of art that is characteristic of the fifties. As Charles Alexander points out, "the history of Western culture in the twentieth century [has] become a progression away from nineteenth-century nationalistic and other kinds of constraints on both thought and creative expression."³⁰ Thus the historical understanding of the development of the arts in the twentieth-century sees that development as the triumph of modernism, or at least of vanguard modernism. However, "it was not at all clear that the story would turn out as it did -- that the future belonged to avant-garde modernism."³¹ That it has suggests the degree to which those tensions have been erased, and American cultural history reduced to the

²⁹ An example that has already been discussed is the anthology Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glenco, Ill: Free Press, 1957), which offers evidence of the degree to which opinion was divided over mass culture, from both sociological and aesthetic perspectives.

³⁰ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, xii.

³¹ Ibid.

narrative of the struggle for recognition of avant-garde modernism.

Alexander suggests that up until the 1930s at least, modernism and a national popular culture were not incompatible. The fact that they appeared to have become so by the forties is indicative of the way in which common interests initially directed at the destruction of the Genteel Tradition had diverged, especially around the question of the relationship between national culture and popular culture and the hostility directed toward a perceived parochialism that conflicted with the burgeoning "international style." Nevertheless, in the fifties, as Richard Pells notes, "not everyone was critical of the media."³² This was certainly the case with a number of the writers that have already been mentioned: Seldes, Denney, and even Riesman and Whyte. Despite the nostalgia exhibited by the latter two authors, "a few writers asserted that popular culture was no more dangerous today than it had been in the past."³³

Whyte, for instance, although noting the tendency of popular culture to be directed toward "adjustment," does suggest that the ambiguity he claimed to be characteristic of popular culture was present to the degree that it could

³² Richard Pells, The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 219.

³³ Ibid.

not be granted the power it was presumed to possess:

"Popular culture is not monolithic in this counselling of resignation, nor is the audience in accepting it."³⁴

Likewise, Riesman, who also claimed that the popular was oriented toward adjustment, proposed that it can be at the same time a liberating agent; in discussing motion pictures in particular, Riesman established what amounted to a reception aesthetics, long before it was formulated as such: "entertainers, in their media, out of their media, and in the never-never land between, exert a constant pressure on the accepted peer groups and suggest new modes of escape from them. . . . [T]he movies have multiplied the choices in styles of life and leisure available to the millions. . . . in many conventionally unexpected ways, [they] are liberating agents."³⁵ Indeed, he suggested that "such cultural commodities as movies and periodical literature have the potentiality of dissolving as well as reinforcing these group ties -- for instance, by creating imaginary peers with whom one can identify as against one's actual peers."³⁶ The ambivalent nature of aesthetic experience,

³⁴ William Whyte Jr., The Organization Man (Garden City: N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), 285.

³⁵ David Riesman, with Nathan Gazer and Reuel Denney, The Lonely Crowd, abridged ed. (New Haven: Yale University, 1961), 291.

³⁶ David Riesman, "Our Country, Our Culture," Partisan Review 19 (1952): 311. With regard to reception aesthetics, compare, for instance, Jauss' claim that "[a]s a communicative frame for possible action, the aesthetic

that is, that it can lead either toward the fracturing of norms or to their reinforcement, was clearly central to both of these authors, and thus the possibility of conformity was also central to their attitudes toward popular culture. Their own ambivalence with regard to the possible liberating dimension of popular culture was evidently a product of the awareness that it might also produce conformism.

Despite this ambivalence, Riesman underscored the communicative potential embodied in popular culture forms, and the way in which naturalism and realism provided the framework within which current conditions could be exploded, and a set of alternative possibilities explored. In other words, the possibility for identification, combined with a conception of an ideologically ambivalent aesthetic experience, offered an alternative view of mass culture that recognized both its possibilities and dangers simultaneously. The possibility that popular culture should be open to either liberation or conformism was evidently intolerable for the majority of the intellectual and cultural elite, who could not abide the ambiguity, and "who want[ed] the movies to tutor their audiences in all the

identification of spectator and listener who enjoy themselves in and through another's fate or uncommon model can pass on or create patterns of behaviour; it can also question or break through customary behavioral norms." Hans Robert Jauss, Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), 96.

pious virtues the home and school ha[d] failed to inculcate."³⁷

Against this ambiguity, the aesthetic modernism that emerged at this time withdrew from the possibility of identification altogether, through critical discourses -- if not actual practices -- that refused meaning. The response to the contradictory nature of consensus culture was to withdraw from the real, and from the ambiguous possibilities of realism. As Pells notes, "Gilbert Seldes, a long-time advocate of mass communications, extended this argument by reminding the critics that their modernist heroes had given up trying to speak to an audience."³⁸ Clearly, Seldes recognized the difficulties that a retreat from communication might potentially produce. It appears that the critiques of Storr and Doss ultimately vindicate Seldes' concerns, and that it was this refusal of meaning, and hence impossibility of identification, that was particularly problematic. For both of these authors, the failure of American modernism was to be located in the abandonment of the radical tradition of social criticism which the realist work of the thirties embodied; as Doss puts it, "rather than urging avant-garde artists with an interest in social reform to appropriate the tools of mass culture and manipulate and redefine that culture," critics such as Greenberg and

³⁷ Riesman, Lonely Crowd, 291.

³⁸ Pells, The Liberal Mind, 219-20.

Rosenberg constructed a discourse which acted as a prophylaxis against the possible contamination by the vernacular.³⁹ Thus the alternative consciousness offered by someone like Pollock was reduced to formal experiment; despite the "potent exhortations of alternative consciousness offered in their art," abstract expressionism was nevertheless "celebrated as a non-objective, intensely personalized, and especially apolitical form of aesthetic expression."⁴⁰ As Alan Wald notes of Philip Rahv at Partisan Review (to which Greenberg and Rosenberg were important contributors) "he had essentially transformed the Partisan Review into an organ of modernist high culture at the expense of other literary schools, most notably realism and naturalism."⁴¹ Thus the potential of a humanistically-oriented realist art was ultimately derailed, and often dismissed as sentimental bunk, as being on par with "the synthetic and sentimentalized art of Hollywood or the even lower depths to which television has reduced this art."⁴² As Doss writes of Ortega y Gasset, "Ortega made it clear that the best art for postwar America was an

³⁹ Doss, Politics of Modernism, 386.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 350, 364.

⁴¹ Wald, New York Intellectuals, 221.

⁴² Reinhold Niebuhr, "Our Country and Our Culture," Partisan Review 19 (1952): 303.

abstract art devoid of naturalistic elements that referred to the human condition."⁴³

There was, therefore, a wariness with regard to the possibilities of identification offered through realism and naturalism. The counter-thrust to the affirmative character of popular culture was to move toward a form of representation which was in effect non-communicative, and which abandoned, as Doss and Storr (and Seldes) claim, any attempt to address the social; or, if the claim was not entirely abandoned within aesthetic practices themselves, it was clearly rendered ineffective through the discursive reconstruction by the critics of the intentions present within modernist works.

The reasons for this are lodged within the crisis surrounding the collapse of reform and the suspicion with which popular movements came to be regarded. The alternative to fascism and totalitarianism as the ultimate product of collective action was to imagine, within consciousness itself, a space of freedom, unburdened by political realities. It is clear that these realities were not simply the burden of others -- in Germany or the Soviet Union, for instance -- but were also present within American society as well, in the oppressiveness and contradictions of conformity, and the ever-present anxiety produced by the Cold War and its McCarthyist chill. All that was left,

⁴³ Doss, Politics of Modernism, 378.

according to Rahv, was to "utilize the possibilities of individual and group succession from, and protest against, the dominant values of our time."⁴⁴ The continual reproduction of a state of crisis, even if only manufactured, generated a real crisis with regard to cultural production.

Popular culture represented a threat, as is demonstrably clear in the shrillness of the rhetoric that coloured the persistent and repeated condemnations. The sense of impending crisis was continually reproduced throughout the decade of the nineteen-fifties within the rhetoric of the intellectual stratum, in which mass culture was treated as a threat that loomed as a permanent sign of the immanent destruction of the intellectual class, if not society as a whole.

Arguably, however, this sense of crisis was not shared by all intellectuals and cultural commentators. As has already been noted, there were those who were not disposed to take up a negative position against popular culture. At minimum, this attitude expressed the opinion that popular culture had no more destructive effects on contemporary society than it had in the past, and that furthermore, there was no "Golden Age" in the past against which current culture could be unfavourably compared. The maximal version

⁴⁴ Philip Rahv, quoted in Wald, New York Intellectuals, 220.

suggested that popular culture embodied a set of aesthetic potentials that were left unexploited due either to intellectual disdain or apathy. The persistence of these views within the overwhelming concatenation of forces negatively disposed toward popular culture indicates that the conflict and debate with regard to the relations between levels of culture remained unresolved, and this in part accounts for the opening through which the aesthetic of television could briefly emerge, on the back of a cultural disposition that remained favourably inclined toward the reformist possibilities inherent in mass media.

This can be seen as possible only if one is attentive to the relationship between culture and social structure that does not view one as a function of the other. Although much of the preceding has suggested that the cultural sphere acted as a reflection of transformations occurring in the political realm, this development must nevertheless be viewed as uneven and often contradictory. As Daniel Bell has suggested,

A Functionalist or Marxist view sees these two either as integrated, with the value system regulating behaviour, or as a totality, in which the substructure of the material world "determines" the political, legal, and cultural orders. . . . In culture, however, there is no such principle of substitution: the portals of culture are either guarded by tradition or they swing wildly through syncretism. . . . Historically, the several realms may be joined loosely . . . but more

often, as today, they are in tension with one another.⁴⁵

Although Bell is referring to the late eighties, the argument seems equally applicable to the decade of the nineteen-fifties. The idea of tension is particularly relevant, as it appeared between advocates of popular culture and those aligned against it. However, the notion that the conditions of culture are either in a state of polarity that consists of monological tradition on the one hand, or uncontrolled syncretism on the other, appears limited. Specifically, the idea of syncretism would be better understood as a condition of dominance and remission, with the idea that certain formations would emerge as dominant at given historical moments, while others would be in abeyance. What this would suggest is that there would not be absolute syncretism, in the sense of a laissez-faire attitude toward all forms of cultural expression; rather, emphasis would be directed toward the privileging of certain practices over others.⁴⁶ This would be the case, for instance, as concerns the cultural practices that reflect the values characteristic of the formation to which both Mills and Lears refer to as emerging in the fifties.

⁴⁵ Daniel Bell, "Afterword 1988: The End of Ideology Revisited," in The End of Ideology, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1988), 413-14.

⁴⁶ This is discussed in the introduction with regard to Poulantzas' characterization of "social formations."

As Richard King has written, "the dialectic of individualism and search for community . . . has been one of the central themes of the American experiment," stretching from the utopian communitarian experiments and the transcendentalist movement of the nineteenth-century right down until today.⁴⁷ Taken together with Bell's construction of the relationship between culture and social structure, it can be argued that the tension between attitudes concerning popular culture are expressions of the unresolved character of this dialectic.

This accounts for the persistence of the reform-oriented politics which underlies the realism that was adopted in the teledramas of the early fifties. It is certainly the case, as has already been noted, that this aesthetic partook of the larger shift in this dialectical pattern, to the extent that the dramaturgy of the teleplays emphasized the psychological dimensions of character over the rendering of social conditions and relations, although these latter appeared implicitly in terms of the class and race coding with which the dramas were imbued. This was explained within the aesthetic discourse of television as a response to the formal constraints of the medium itself, but this was also seen to have been an effect of the transition from Marxian-influenced dramaturgy toward increasing

⁴⁷ Richard King, The Party of Eros: Radical Social Thought and the Realm of Freedom (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1972), 192.

preoccupation with Freudian concepts, especially in the theatre. This was also characteristic of the shift to a general preoccupation culturally with individualism as social-reformist tendencies, both politically and culturally, withered away in the face of the disastrous results of collectivist action occurring in other parts of the world.

As the taboo against direct social commentary and critique blanketed the cultural community, the result of a combination of the de-emphasis on community and the genuine fear induced by governmental inquiry, what little vestiges of the reformist impulse remained in the teledramas evaporated under pressure from networks, sponsors, and special interest groups alike. Popular media "of the era were not permitted to locate the motivations for turning toward Communism in economic or social conditions, since themes of class, race, injustice, and impoverishment contradicted the complacent ideology of the 1950s."⁴⁸ In regard to television, at least, the dialectical tension was temporarily resolved, or at least the liberal pretensions within the realist aesthetic were reworked into fantasy (as represented by the increased numbers of programmes in the science-fiction and western genres), where social and ethical dilemmas could be worked through safely. To an

⁴⁸ Stephen J. Whitfield, The Culture of the Cold War (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1991), 136.

extent, it might be argued that these values persisted within film noir and in the urban realism that emerged in some fifties motion pictures. The movement of prominent writers, directors, and producers from television to motion pictures or into the theatre is one indication that these values were, however, no longer tenable in television, where the possibility of the real invading the domestic sphere in fiction, as well as in actuality coverage, risked fracturing the ideological veneer of consensus culture.

The aesthetic possibilities of television thought to be merely awaiting exploitation were thus never encouraged. A general disdain for popular culture set the stage for the abandonment of the aesthetic potentials presumed to be augured by the creation of original teleplays and the anthology drama programmes. In the end, against the economistic approaches that cite the structural transformation of the television industry as cause for the end of the "Golden Age" of television, shifts in political attitudes and the reorganization of aesthetic dispositions have to be recognized as fundamental to the collapse of the television aesthetic, both as practice and discourse. The idea of a "loss leader" strategy may have some relevance here, and economic motives cannot be therefore dismissed entirely. As well, the emergence of spot advertising similarly might have had an effect on production to the extent that the negotiated nature of sponsored programmes

may have allowed more leeway for certain types of material. Both of these, however, must be linked motivationally to the social and cultural concerns that emerged during this same period.

"The repudiation of the aesthetic tenets of the Golden Age" as Boddy puts it, cannot therefore be simply ascribed to the restructuring of the television industry in the latter half of the fifties.⁴⁹ This restructuring process was occurring on a much larger scale with regard to American political and cultural dispositions, particularly amongst intellectual and ruling elites. The repudiation of aesthetic tenets that occurred within television was also taking place with regard to realism and naturalism across the entire cultural spectrum, making way for what became modernist high culture -- the result of an overall restructuring of cultural dispositions that took place during the fifties.

The Locus of the Authentic

The discourse of television as an aesthetic medium is thus inseparable from other aesthetic discourses (and indeed, if the connection with Adorno holds good, from philosophical and social discourses as well), predominantly concerned with medium on the one hand (expressing the formalist and essentialist preoccupations of the period),

⁴⁹ Boddy, Fifties Television, 188.

and with introspection as the central source of artistic expression, as well as with the question of authorship (hence the valorization of the television playwright in this period) as the key guarantors of aesthetic legitimacy. The aesthetic discourse of television emerges out of the same set of general conditions as mediate other forms of expression -- literature, the theatre, and (eventually) motion pictures -- conditions that were enabling, in the sense that the aesthetic discourse of television, as much as in other media, emerged out of a set of cultural concerns which themselves arose at this particular historical juncture.

A narrative of sorts has been mapped out that describes the trajectory of television discourses as beginning in a hybrid form that initially based their legitimacy primarily in the theatre as the source of television's aesthetic worth, and eventually worked toward the disclosure of the "specific form" of television through an ontological inquiry that would differentiate television from other media and provide the foundation for the emergence of an aesthetic specific to television as medium. Ironically, perhaps, the discussion of the specificity of television in aesthetic terms brings us full circle, since the impulse to determine the specificity of the television medium can be understood fully only by referring to the external, enabling conditions

which encourage this type of foundationalist discourse to be taken up.

Television's "difference" is in this manner also its similarity to general trends and concerns. These conditions allowed an aperture to open briefly through which could pass something we can call an aesthetic discourse of television. The television aesthetic emerges out of a particular set of historical conditions that involve place -- a specific geographic location -- that is in turn linked to a particular set of ideological values in which a cultural politics of difference plays an important role in providing a configuration within which an aesthetic discourse can be invoked. What this means is that the employment, or deployment, of an aesthetic discourse, in this case calling the television medium "art," is only possible under very specific (and one could add, historically unstable and unpredictable) conditions. This can be seen, for instance, in the evolution of both photography and film, where an initial period of artistic experimentation gave way to widespread commercialization and then led in turn to the privileging of certain practices in those media and the discursive repositioning of both within the aesthetic domain (auteurism, for example). A similar situation appears to be occurring with television; the lesson that needs to be drawn from this is that a given medium is neither an artistic medium by virtue of its "nature" as medium, nor is

it intrinsically excluded from being a vehicle for aesthetic expression on the same ground. This depends, rather, on the presence of a set of external conditions, a space of ideas in the form of an intellectual configuration that holds either a positive or negative disposition toward the aesthetic potentials of a given medium (or, more often, an attitude organized around what can be designated proper forms of aesthetic production), a disposition that grants or withholds, as it were, permission to characterize specific media in aesthetic terms. This disposition is most often expressed, and therefore readily identified, through judgements of what is considered authentic.

The question of authenticity as it refers to the historical development of a television aesthetic is particularly problematic given its emergence within an intellectual environment that appears generally hostile to popular culture, and especially hostile to the expansion of mass media such as television. This was already noted in the earlier discussion of the intellectual disdain toward such media that, as Smith indicated, effectively inhibited the development of broadcasting criticism. The emergence of a television aesthetic, however, suggests that intellectual opinion was fragmented. Clearly, as the examples examined indicate, a substantial amount of writing appeared that took television seriously enough to cultivate a set of aesthetic criteria for the medium, despite the persistence of negative

intellectual attitudes. At the same time, we have also seen the degree to which this aesthetic is reliant on some of the same principles that inform the gestures of more radical art in this period (such as the preoccupation with form), which is puzzling, given that the radical moves appear to arise from a bias that takes its opposition to popular culture forms as its starting point.

Gilbert Seldes, for instance, remarked that "When television comes to create its own style, its own way of telling a story, it will naturally draw on its essential nature. Unless it finds this way, television will remain half-grown. . . . When the essential character of man is left undeveloped, he has not fulfilled his destiny. And that is also true of an art."⁵⁰ Here we can see, as was noted in other instances, the linkage between the discovery of the essence of the television medium and its full expression as a form of art. What is particularly notable is the similarity between these comments and the writing of the American modernist par excellence, Clement Greenberg, whose theories of art derive in part from a wholly negative disposition toward popular culture. One cannot fail to notice the similarity between Greenberg's aesthetic of mature painting and Seldes' projection of a matured television. Greenberg states that the aim of self-criticism (which is precisely what Seldes is attempting) "is to

⁵⁰ Seldes, Public Arts, 192.

determine the irreducible working essence of art and the separate arts," that is, to discover the specificity of each medium.⁵¹ For Greenberg, the essence of painting is its material, the pigment and canvas; the development of painting is thus linked to an increasing awareness of its own materiality, leading in a smooth historical progression toward abstraction, since the illusion of space developed with the invention of perspective denies the essential properties of paint as well as the two-dimensional surface to which it is applied.⁵²

Similarly, Seldes is concerned with the essence of television,⁵³ and he begins to construct an aesthetic out of that essential material. Although he does not go so far as Greenberg in suggesting that this would lead to the replacement of content by pure form, he does make the claim that a television aesthetic will have to be sensitive to the specificity of its formal nature as medium, in precisely the same way as painting would have to be cognizant of its own nature as medium in Greenberg's schema. As Greenberg put it

⁵¹ Clement Greenberg, "After Abstract Expressionism," Art Post 6 (October, 1962): 30.

⁵² "[I]t has been established . . . that the irreducible essence of pictorial art consists in but two constitutive conventions or norms: flatness and the delimitation of flatness." Ibid., 30.

⁵³ For Seldes, in this particular instance, the essence is television's ability to be transmitted live: "The capacity of television to transmit without any intervening step will still remain unique, its identifying feature, the essence of its character."

in 1940, and which is later echoed in Seldes' language, "Purity in art consists in the acceptance, willing acceptance, of the limitations of the medium of the specific art. . . . It is by virtue of its medium that each art is unique and strictly itself."⁵⁴ In the same way as this represents the telos of painting for Greenberg, the "destiny" of television is also linked by Seldes to attention to its formal properties, without which television would remain undeveloped as an art form.

The same terms are thus put to work to describe altogether different media in which, in this brief reading of Greenberg, Seldes clearly follows the prescription that the formal specificity of all media must be determined as the starting point for their aesthetic. The aesthetic in both the case of television and painting is tied to a conception of progress and development that forecasts the historical fulfilment of the telos of the respective media in a deterministic and ineluctable fashion. Given this, it is difficult to prise these two discourses apart at the level of the constitutive elements from which an aesthetic can be elaborated, and one is left with only the different objects to which these discourses are directed. However, unlike Greenberg, to whom popular culture is anathema, Seldes sees no contradiction in making aesthetic claims

⁵⁴ Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," Partisan Review 7 (July/August, 1940): 305.

about television or other mass media. Therefore, if they share a similar conception of a modernist aesthetic, then the distinctions must lie elsewhere, which they are -- rooted, as suggested, in the differing attitudes toward authenticity.

Leo Lowenthal expresses in no uncertain terms an anti-media bias in his description of the relation between popular culture and art. What becomes evident is the degree to which the loss of authenticity is connected with technologies of reproduction, and consequently a withering away of "genuine" aesthetic experience:

The decline of the individual in the mechanized working processes of modern civilization brings about the emergence of mass culture, which replaces folk art or "high" art. A product of popular culture has none of the features of genuine art, but in all its media popular culture proves to have its own genuine characteristics: standardization, stereotypy, conservatism, mendacity, manipulated consumer goods.⁵⁵

The litany of salient features of popular culture, characterized ironically as "genuine," appear here, as they appear in numerous other essays of the period, as the outcome of a relationship between the emergence of technologically-mediated forms and the loss of authenticity. The emergence of mass culture is predicated upon the advent of "mechanized working processes" that in turn situate the

⁵⁵ Leo Lowenthal, "Historical Perspectives of Popular Culture," in Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glenco, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), 55.

"differences between popular culture and art" as the difference "between spurious gratification and a genuine experience as a step to greater individual fulfilment."⁵⁶

Lowenthal's essay makes manifest an opinion as to the effects that the technologies of mass media have in the negation of authentic aesthetic experience, and this clearly applies to television. Greenberg shares that opinion while Seldes clearly does not, yet they nevertheless share with each other essentially the same perspective on aesthetic modernism. The difference, then, would have to be located around the presumed effects of technology as written into the theory of mass culture as root cause. The de-individuation processes that are presumed to occur through the reception of technologically-mediated popular culture forms lead directly to the claim of a loss of authenticity, since the aesthetic demands (implicitly) that works of art be the unmediated product of unique individuals. The Kantian legacy of the aesthetics of genius permeates the positions of both Seldes and Greenberg, since both refer to

⁵⁶ Ibid., 51. Robert Allen has noted the way this distinction is fundamental to the concern that the lack of authentic experience gained through art would lead toward a breakdown of the social: "if, like MacDonalld and van den Haag, one assigns important epistemological and moral functions to art -- art helps us to know the world and fosters communication between individuals -- and if, as van den Haag puts it, a 'substitute gratification' has taken the place of art in the lives of the masses, then what has taken place is nothing less than the subversion of an important part of the social order." Speaking of Soap Operas (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1985), 18.

individual development as paramount (and, by extension, the development of a medium as the efforts of individuals), yet clearly the anti-technological bias does not infect Seldes.

Ultimately, it appears that the distinction has to be made in terms of the a priori of a technologically-mediated form being unable to lay claim to the status of art. In a sort of trickle-down effect, the radical critique offered by the Frankfurt School in the tradition of the counter-Enlightenment strengthens this hand by offering a theory of alienation that targets rationalization processes that militate against individual fulfillment. In doing so, it privileges the avant-garde work of art which is itself alienating, and therefore requires effort to assimilate, unlike the "spurious gratification" supposedly offered by the mass media.

This points to the underlying work ethic that is counterpoised with the experience of mass media. Authenticity and inauthenticity consistently appear in terms of active and passive responses to the work of art: as Greenberg states, "those who were formerly capable of enjoying and appreciating ambitious art and literature" are "now unwilling or unable to acquire an initiation."⁵⁷ Tyrone Guthrie, unimpressed with the quotidian orientation

⁵⁷ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), 101.

of television drama, suggests that "drama of any consequence cannot be assimilated without effort."⁵⁸ As Andrew Ross suggests, the modernist work of art would be "open, fragmented, and defamiliarizing," thus requiring effort.⁵⁹ Rather ironically, then, the flip side of alienation produced through the technological organization of popular culture production is the encounter with further alienation produced by the modernist work of art.

We could, nevertheless, see a parallel here as well, if we recall the way in which Chayefsky characterized television. The idea that television produces alienation, or is rather the medium best suited to represent alienation, suggests that its effects are not dissimilar to the presumed effects of the modernist work of art. However, unlike the modernist work, which accomplishes this through defamiliarization, television evidently achieves this effect through its opposite: the all-too-familiar. Indeed, as referred to earlier, the critical backlash produced by the effects of dramas portraying a social gone awry was in part responsible for the attenuation of realism in television.

In any case, the struggle over the locus of the authentic indicates the degree to which a particular disposition, in this case an anti-technological bias, determines what constitutes genuine, and hence aesthetic,

⁵⁸ Guthrie, "Theater and Television," 93.

⁵⁹ Andrew Ross, No Respect, 116.

experience, as opposed to the inauthentic experiences derived from mass media. Clearly, this bias is not derived from any of the formal characteristics of mass media themselves, but rather from a disposition formed toward mass media, which appears in the form of a taste judgement.

As regards television, the anti-representational bias that appears within sectors of the postwar culture configuration is clearly at odds with the residues of social and psychological realism that seep into television aesthetic discourses and practices. For many, representation was rendered profoundly problematic after the barbarities of the war were revealed, and the consequent installation of a fundamentally irrational conception of humanity that was at odds with realist conventions, which relied on a coherent relation between subject and society. This potentially accounts in part for the swing away from social realism, an effect of the impossibility of depicting a phenomenon that must have seemed unrepresentable, or perhaps simply all too real. In part, this transformation of representational strategies was also mediated by the hostility toward the image that lurks within the thought of the Frankfurt School and of those Jewish members of the intellectual elite that comprised the central figures of the "New York Intellectuals" who dominated much of postwar

cultural activity in the United States.⁶⁰ This hostility, not surprisingly, was directed at mass media, and at television in particular. In part, this was due to the fear of homogenization (and, ipso facto, fascism and totalitarianism), and in part due television's inheritance of naturalist modes of representation, which still held out the possibility of portraying the real, of actually being real. The possibility of rendering reality with any verisimilitude, given the fundamental irrationality of the social order, was for many cultural arbiters of this period a highly untenable proposition.

The concentration of the anthology dramas on a specific economic class fraction, the lower or lower-middle urban classes, exhibits a continuity with the documentary impulse that emerged in the early thirties in the United States, along with the rise of the proletariat novel, to which the television dramas are explicitly linked. Within this continuity we can detect the legacy, or at least the residues, of the reformist attitude espoused by the New Dealers, an attitude under attack by the growing movement of

⁶⁰ "Adorno, like Horkheimer, justified his refusal to spell out the utopian alternative to present-day society by reference to the Jewish prohibition on picturing God or paradise." Martin Jay, Adorno (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1984), 20. It is more than likely that this also mediated American positions, and would certainly account for the strong emphasis on abstraction in postwar visual art.

the "New Conservatism" in the immediate postwar period.⁶¹ The radicalism of the thirties, bound up as it was in a realism preoccupied with the rendering of the organization of social space, was displaced by another dimension of realism centred on the psyche. The new radicals -- the postwar American neo-avant-garde -- turned their backs on the world as a response to a political crisis that raised severe doubts as to the effectiveness of cultural interventions into a history run amok.

Here we can detect a synchronic dimension to the television aesthetic, to the extent that its central criteria were organized around the personal, focused on character and concerned with making manifest the inner psychic content of the individuals being portrayed. Despite the inheritance of, and continuity with, the naturalist modes of representation that go back to the turn of the century in American dramaturgy, the television aesthetic was clearly constructed within a particular historical moment in which its authors shared the same sensibility with more radical impulses, a kind of loose sensus communis, in which

⁶¹ As Miller and Nowak claim, "to fifties thinkers, then, populism, which had aimed at democratizing economics and politics, and McCarthyism, which aimed at destroying dissent, were nearly synonomous. Both represented a challenge to elitist leadership and gentlemanly compromise. The major impact of the McCarthyist hysteria on the intellectuals, therefore, was to create a fear of radicalism and to discredit the entire radical tradition. And this, of course, was what McCarthy had wanted anyway." The Fifties, 227.

particular ways of constructing an aesthetic emerged within television discourses in much the same way as they emerged in the same period in other areas of cultural production.

The questioning of the locus of authenticity, in regard to what constituted genuine aesthetic forms, marked a definitive shift in thinking after the war away from popular, and populist, forms of representation, toward a form of aestheticism which abandoned social content, in part as a result of the anguish produced through the emergence of fascism understood as a popular movement. Briefly, at least until the mid-fifties, the unresolved historical dialectical movement between representations of social conditions and emphasis on the internal psychic states of the artist that characterizes United States culture in the twentieth century remained in suspension; that is, caught momentarily in transition, where the television aesthetic, organized through a politics of populism, could for a short time coexist with the emerging cultural vanguard. That vanguard, whose seemingly misplaced political hopes had been dashed, were in the process of shifting toward a cultural conservatism that marked the reappearance of the Genteel cultural tradition. This transformation is most noticeable in the rejection of the quotidian, figured in a rising level of disgust directed toward the popular, and traded-in for a neo-Platonism concerned for the most part with "spiritual

values" and the reconstruction of social elites.⁶² These are the very same attitudes that were rejected by the realist vanguard of the early twentieth-century, who battled with their conservative genteel foes and (ironically) created the conditions for the birth of American modernism, which subsequently turned its back on the social.

Despite the intellectual disdain toward attempts to develop an aesthetic criticism of popular media since the early twenties, a critical literature organized around the search for a television aesthetic emerged in the late forties and early fifties. It is mediated by, and reflective of transformations occurring across the cultural field while, at the same time and at other levels, in historical tension with other cultural formations. This tension is perhaps best understood as a conflict between an emerging conservatism and the residues of an attitude of popular reform as the legacy of the thirties. The disappointment fostered by the full commercialization of radio clearly instigated the impulse for critical intervention at the beginning of television to ensure a balance between the interests of commerce and the interests

⁶² "[T]elevision, the newest mass media, became a symbol to these observers of an American ailment. In attacking television, however, liberals had difficulty disguising a disdain for the lives and tastes of average Americans. Their criticisms suggest that, indeed, by the late Fifties, mainstream liberalism had abandoned any claim to being the champion of the common man." James Baughman, "The National Purpose and the Newest Medium: Liberal Critics of Television, 1958-60," Mid-America 64 (1982): 41.

of art. To a certain degree, the critical responses provide evidence that this was achieved for a time in the anthology dramas. This reformism, however, has to be placed alongside the backlash against popular movements that characterizes emergent cultural dispositions in the United States after the Second World War. The attempt to make good on what appeared to be the aesthetic potentials of television was a final attempt to realize the expectations raised in the thirties around the effects of cultural intervention. The construction of a critical aesthetic discourse of television functions symbolically as a final effort to make the case for the social function of art, in the face of widespread retreat into a formalist and solipsistic aesthetics that abandoned the communicative possibilities of the "popular" arts.

A Backward Glance

If the twenties saw the emergence of a view of culture as a synchronic continuum, we might be well advised in this instance to take a similar view, since the television aesthetic can be seen as participating in cultural and aesthetic transformations that appear across the entire spectrum of cultural activity. The idea of a continuum allows us to move beyond the artificial differentiation between levels of culture, especially one which privileges particular forms of cultural expression at the expense of others. Part of the difficulty in understanding the

elements that are articulated together to develop a discourse of television aesthetics, as posed at the beginning, had to do with the way in which "foreign" elements (the example being the formalist dimension of television aesthetics), normally thought to be the preserve of American modernism, appeared within a discourse nominally concerned with realism, and usually construed as antithetical to modernist tendencies. The notion of a cultural continuum, along the spatial axis at least, suggests a means by which we might grasp the development of parallel concerns across the spectrum of cultural expression.

The idea of a cultural continuum is one kind of approach toward the possibility of explaining the relationship between the elements in different aesthetic discourses. Another is through the notion of crisis, particularly the idea of a crisis of representation as the product of political or social uncertainty. This is the point at which the question of form becomes paramount, since the crisis of representation is the direct result of a transformation of praxis, which must take on a form. As has been explained, just such a crisis of representation led to the transformation of cultural dispositions and practices in the United States at the turn of the century, which can be characterized as the rejection of idealism for an aesthetic of realism. However, this crisis produced not one, but two

forms: what has been referred to as realism, on the one hand, and modernism on the other. In this instance, two forms emerge as a solution to the crisis of representation which, as has been remarked, are subsequently in historical tension with each other. The fundamental insight here is the realization that the preoccupation with form is at bottom identical for both the realists and the modernists, and is organized around the search for the means by which imitation might be overcome and an authentic representation of the real might be best achieved. As the differentiation between the categories realism and modernism suggest, the particular solutions to the problem within these two tendencies, at least at the level of the form of representation itself, have taken historically divergent trajectories. However, it is important to grasp that the divergence at the level of the form of representation, and the consequent debate over what form cultural praxis will take (i.e. between naturalism and abstraction) belies a shared negative disposition toward Genteel culture and its imitative and illusionist dimensions. Most significantly, the debate over form obscures the fact that both modes of representation are "realist," in the sense that the search for the appropriate form of representation hinges on the desire for fidelity with the "real."⁶³ Once this is

⁶³ This would be, following the definition of "realism" provided in The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 7th ed. (1982), the "practice of regarding things in their true nature and

understood, the apparent antagonism between realism and modernism melts away. The "problem" of the real, or rather, the identification of the locus of the real in cultural terms is, as Orvell reminded us, as much a case of value and disposition as it is an ontological concern.⁶⁴ To a very great degree, the emphasis on the divergence between the American neo-avant-garde after World War II and the proponents of a realist approach (as emerges in the aesthetic of television) masks a set of common concerns that appeared in force at the beginning of the twentieth century. The apparent distinction between the aesthetic dispositions and practices stemming from an avant-gardist and naturalist perspectives is not so great as its surface appearances may indicate. Nevertheless, by the fifties the gulf had widened to the degree that a dispute arose over the form of aesthetic practices in relation to authenticity, as well as

dealing with them as they are, freedom from prejudice and convention," and "fidelity of representation." These definitions implicitly register the opposition to idealism which inhabits the impulse to reject the Genteel Tradition, especially as regards convention. Although the modernist tendency toward pure form may seem to be anti-realist, modernist cultural form is both mimetic (as Miles Orvell states: "breaking open the closed forms . . . in a way that was consonant with the new facts of modern life") and concerned with capturing the essence of the real, which ultimately arrives at the pure materiality of media themselves, or of consciousness itself.

⁶⁴ Miles Orvell, The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989), 151-2.

the function of those practices in relation to the social in general.

The outward manifestations of modernist practices, chiefly the promotion of abstractionism and the preoccupation with formal innovation is at first glance irreconcilable with more naturalistic approaches. However, it becomes clear as we trace backwards historically that at the core both modernist and realist dispositions share fundamentally the same values. In regard to the emergent modernism in American culture in the 1920s, Orvell suggests that this attention to the formal characteristics of the art work becomes the dominant concern within the cultural field. What Orvell overlooks, however, is the degree to which these concerns are shared by all cultural critics, and by no means limited only to those adherents of modernism and their concomitant desire to break through the structural constraints of traditional media.

Orvell does, nevertheless, point at the key concern that preoccupied all cultural criticism of the period: "contact with reality." Historically, the attention to the formal innovations occurring in all media leading toward abstraction has, over time, obscured the existence of this fundamental desire to make contact with the real. Thus, the degree to which, by the fifties, abstractionism and realism appear irreconcilable aesthetically is the product of an historical approach that considers the rise of avant-gardism

in American culture as an ineluctable, progressive process. This approach inevitably ignores the concurrent rise of a realist approach rooted in identical concerns over the apprehension of the real. However, there is no sense in which during the period addressed by Orvell -- the first two decades of this century -- the dominance of the avant-garde could be assumed to be assured. According to Charles Alexander for instance:

In the first place, forty or fifty years ago it was not at all clear that the story would turn out as it did -- that the future belonged to avant-garde modernism. Moreover, up to the 1930s, at least in the United States, modernist and romantic nationalist attitudes were by no means incompatible and were often complementary.⁶⁵

What Alexander refers to as "romantic nationalism" can be identified with tendencies in realism, such as the American Scene, that ultimately come into conflict with modernist dispositions.⁶⁶ As Alexander notes, the characteristic approach to cultural "progress" in the United States in the twentieth century ignores the fact that the divergence between cultural values is a late development, and that the

⁶⁵ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, xii.

⁶⁶ As Marshall van Deusen writes, "In Brooks and many of his followers, there was often an assumption that this liberation [from gentility] might be encouraged by recapturing the free spirit of 'romanticism', an attitude which seemed to them not incompatible with their sponsorship of 'realism'," thus indicating the strong identification of "romantic nationalism," as Alexander calls it, with a realist aesthetics. Marshall van Deusen, "Literary Criticism to 1965," in American Literature Since 1900, ed. Marcus Cuncliffe (London: Sphere Books, 1975; paperback ed. 1988), 152-3.

overriding concern for the real marks a shared set of interests. In effect, the romantic nationalists and the modernists were allies in terms of their preoccupation with the real, and their shared concerns united them in the battle against the dominance of what had become known as the Genteel Tradition of American culture.

This shared concern to 'get to the bottom' of things, to arrive at the authentic and actual, suggests one of the reasons why later television criticism attempts to develop an aesthetic that places emphasis on the formal constraints of the medium. It was noted above⁶⁷ that the television aesthetic shared a conception of essence as the key to the development of television as an aesthetic medium with the critics of radical modernism, and that the dichotomy between realist and modernist practices in the 1950s make accounting for this difficult. However, as Alexander notes, the positions of the modernists and the nationalist exponents of realism were not incompatible. In the first instance, they shared a mutual hostility toward the Genteel Tradition, and worked together to ensure its demise: "academic art, the mutual enemy of both realists and modernists, of both democratic nationalists and avant-gardists, would never again be able to dominate painting and sculpture," as well as other media.⁶⁸ Second, and more important, was the

⁶⁷ See also the discussion of form in chapter three.

⁶⁸ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 54.

desire to get at the essence of things, which ultimately resurfaces in regard to the development of a television aesthetic. Although the political and aesthetic differences between realist and modernist tendencies would ultimately force a split in American culture after the First World War, this often-overlooked similarity of both formal and ontological preoccupations provides a key means of identifying how the initial shared dispositions brought about by particular cultural and social conditions might reassert themselves under substantially altered conditions. Though both developments represent different responses to the same crisis, they ultimately share the same concern with the representation of the real.

These differing responses to the crisis of representation at the turn of the century, however, also introduced competing conceptions of the communicative function of art, and initiated the debate over the locus of the authentic representation of the real. As we know now, despite their shared dispositions, the gulf between the modernists and realists widened sharply. There are many complex reasons for this; one of the reasons for this divergence clearly arose from the conflict between the internationalism of the modernists and the realist preoccupation with national culture: "Modernism shared with the Genteel Tradition a basically elitist outlook and often a willingness to look to Europe for artistic inspiration and

leadership. Romantic nationalism shared the Genteel Tradition's belief in the improvability of mass taste and sensitivity and the public responsibility of the creative individual."⁶⁹ Furthermore, as Alexander implicitly suggests, modernism in its American manifestation maintained the separation between culture and everyday life, whereas the romantic nationalists were becoming increasingly interested in the developing popular culture of the United States. If certain dimensions of the Genteel Tradition influenced the development of American modernism, it appeared that other dimensions of the same tradition affected the nationalists, and in that sense it was as if the Genteel Tradition itself had been divided between the competing cultural movements:

To talk about art . . . -- as regenerative, restorative, ultimately didactic, as having some function beyond the disclosure of the creative artist's private reality -- was to perpetuate long-standing and interrelated aesthetic and moral assumptions. Such views had been basic to the Genteel Tradition, had also received powerful expression in the resurgent romantic nationalism of the pre-World War I period, and then had informed Left and Popular Front culture in the thirties.⁷⁰

What Alexander points to here is the way in which attitudes toward the function of art shaped different movements; moreover, he unconsciously underlines how the disposition regarding the social function of art can appear under

⁶⁹ Ibid., 70.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 245.

different guises within disparate political and social movements. As in the case of form that appears as a central motif in the apparently antithetical developments of modernist abstraction and realism, differing social and political tendencies, "progressive" or otherwise, adopted at different moments elements drawn from earlier developments in the cultural field. For instance (as Alexander also suggests), by the mid-thirties "in accordance with the new Popular Front strategy of alliances with 'progressive' capitalism, the party's cultural leaders even hailed literary patriotism, the new nationalism of Van Wyck Brooks, and the culture industry of Hollywood."⁷¹

This is one example wherein a progressive stance, normally thought to be occupied ideologically by the modernists, was organized around popular culture. This belies the later tendency to identify progressive movements with modernism and the "dubious attachment to high modernism as the salvation of the radical intellectual."⁷² As Alan Wald speculates, "this version of modernism may even have provided justification for a form of cultural elitism that served as a barrier to those who once wished to participate in the struggles of the oppressed classes."⁷³ Although Wald is referring specifically here to Philip Rahv and the

⁷¹ Wald, The New York Intellectuals, 80.

⁷² Ibid., 218.

⁷³ Ibid., 220.

turn away from realism and naturalism, as well as popular culture, on the part of intellectuals grouped around the Partisan Review in the forties, the negative disposition characteristic of elitist tendencies within the American high modernist cultural movement was clearly a legacy of the Genteel Tradition, in its most Puritan form, as the idealist negation and withdrawal from social participation.

In regard to the Genteel Tradition, though, the question of authenticity of cultural expression was reversed. Unlike later "high" modernism in the United States which hijacked the Frankfurt School's notion of withdrawal as the means by which to protect genuine cultural expression, the Genteel cultural tradition was attacked on the basis of its lack of correspondence with the actual culture of contemporary America, and therefore lacking authenticity. This marks the beginnings of the conflict over the nature and location, if you will, of the real. To refer once again to Orvell, this is as much a question of value as of ontology. The modernists, as we know from their subsequent development, would seek the real through the penetration into the formal and material properties of the media themselves, or would turn to the investigation of the unconscious. The romantic nationalists and realists, on the other hand, sought the real through the discovery of the authentic in the practices of everyday life, conducted through the broadening conception of art and culture

occurring in anthropology and, to some degree, in sociology as well.

After a brief period of consensus concerning the failure of the Genteel Tradition and its idealism to reflect the social and intellectual transformation at work in the United States, a conflict thus ensued over the locus of the authentic; as Alexander notes, "For the next twenty years and more, that dichotomy would largely determine the history of the American arts."⁷⁴ The later debates concerning the value of mass media, especially television, have their source in this schism. Much of the later concern over mass culture in the 1950s prompted by the influence of both the conservative critics such as Ortega e Gasset and the Frankfurt School's preoccupation with authentic aesthetic experience is a continuation of a debate whose basic terms had already been sketched-in by 1920. Most significant in regard to the dispositions formed toward television is the early aversion on the part of modernists toward popular culture. Here perhaps the persistence of the elitism characteristic of the Genteel Tradition is most marked, and the eventual "conquest," as it were, of the American cultural terrain by the 1950s could conceivably be held to be a sign that the Genteel Tradition never actually vanished.

⁷⁴ Alexander, Here the Country Lies, 70.

In any case, the modernist retreat into aestheticism (which by the 1930s would be led by the emerging school of "New Criticism")⁷⁵ marked the withdrawal from the social commitment and the interrelation between aesthetic and moral concerns that typified the reformist call issued by Van Wyck Brooks. What grew out of this movement away from social participation by the American avant-garde, on the one hand, and the increasing intellectual interest on the part of the romantic nationalists and realists in popular culture expression on the other, was a complex and often subtle dialectic that was to characterise American cultural development well into the 1950s, and, in fact, up until the present day. At its basis were the two poles of artistic motivation mentioned by Matthew Baigell: individual consciousness versus social conditions as the appropriate contents for the work of art.⁷⁶ This dialectic between the social and the individual is, and was, at the centre of the divergence between realist and naturalist tendencies and modernist strategies of cultural production, with accurate representation of the social the aim of the former, and individual expression the concern of the latter.

⁷⁵ See Robert E. Spiller, "Literature and the Critics," in American Perspectives: The American Self-Image in the Twentieth Century, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Eric Larrabee (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University, 1961), 56 ff.

⁷⁶ Matthew Baigell, The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930s (New York: Praeger, 1974), 18.

The extent to which this distinction can be considered dialectical in character stems from the historical movement back and forth between the two poles, a movement often inspired alternately by nationalist and internationalist trends. This was certainly the case with the critical reception of the American Scene painters, where "an explosive hostility to European modernism surfaced," and where "what had earlier been viewed as a contest between traditional and modernist styles very quickly became a battle between American and European art."⁷⁷ This type of reaction is characteristic of the more overt oscillation between the poles, where, as in this case, the realism and regionalism of the American Scene movement was often identified jingoistically as truly American, over against European modernist influences. The dialectic was, however, more subtle than mere jingoism versus cosmopolitanism, and was, beyond the nationalist component, at the core of the debate over the function of art.

This leads to a dialectical conception that emphasizes the tensions between the various political tendencies within American culture in the twentieth century. This makes the idea of a cultural continuum seem somewhat limited, since it appears to reduce culture to an underlying syncretism. Even though we have seen that different dispositions share certain attitudes, the conception of culture as continuum

⁷⁷ Ibid., 19.

implies a peaceful coexistence between different cultural domains, therefore seemingly erasing the tensions between differing conceptions of "authentic" culture. What a dialectical conception suggests is that cultural and intellectual formations with differing dispositions regarding the locus of authentic cultural expression are effectively in competition with each other and are in a struggle for cultural and political power -- the power to define that locus. The attempt has been made here to bring out the sense in which the internalist strategies of representation (that is, expressions of the consciousness of the artist) are held in historical tension with externalist strategies, which are concerned with representing social conditions, and oriented toward community. Here we could argue that the political intervenes directly into cultural expression and aesthetics, to the degree that the predominance of one form over the other at given historical junctures in the United States during the first half of this century appears to be determined by the (cultural) politics of a given moment. This can be related to a condition of crisis, as for example in the case of the Depression, which clearly reorganized the aesthetics of cultural production in general in terms of the temporary abandonment of formalist and abstractionist forms for socialist realism. It is also possible to suggest, given some of the evidence offered, that the transformation from social realism to psychological

realism is in part the product of shifting political conditions brought to bear on representational practices.

The cultural antecedents to the development and, ultimately, the emergence of the television aesthetic must be traced along all of these different dimensions. The historical analysis undertaken here is warranted to the extent that the television aesthetic, as sketched out in the preceding chapters, is a product of all three different conditions; that is to say that the internal organization of its discourse as a realist aesthetic discourse is at once the product of crisis -- the general crisis of representation, as well as in specific relation to the advent of television; mediated by and reflective of cultural moments understood as a continuum, in the sense of transformations occurring simultaneously across the cultural field (although they may be expressed in distinct ways); and in dialectical, historical tension with other cultural formations.

Once it is understood that the television aesthetic is all of these things at the same time, it becomes possible to grasp how the various elements that are discursively constitutive can be articulated together, despite the sense that some seem out of place. Without, however, pursuing the historical inquiry into the genealogy of those elements, their convergence at the conjuncture around 1950 cannot be understood at all, and attempts to understand the aesthetic

through vague terms such as right and left fails to do justice to the complexity of the historical development of aesthetic thought in the United States that precedes the advent of television. The television aesthetic is neither left nor right, as is often expressed in a binary thought that differentiates modernist and realist, or radical and conservative, along political lines that privilege the first term over the second, although its form can be understood as an expression of a cultural disposition toward the communicative function of art that competes with other dispositions and formations. Even this, however, belies the fact that competing formations may share some of the same aesthetic criteria, but that they may be stitched together with other ideas in such a way as to re-articulate them in a wholly different manner. In the last instance, what must be said about the television aesthetic (and potentially for all aesthetic dispositions) is that it is an impure discourse, which is to say that it does not stand in a discrete relation to other cultural discourses or aesthetic dispositions, but is, as much as they are, of their time.

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