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TELEVISED AMERICA: THE PRESENCE OF TELEVISION IN  
JOHN UPDIKE'S *RABBIT, RUN* AND *RABBIT REDUX*

por

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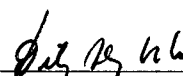
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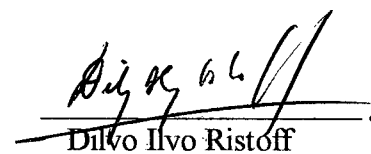


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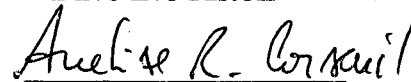


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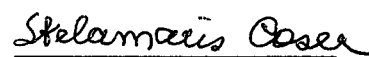
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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife Fabiana, my son Lucas, my mother Maria and my two brothers Rogério and Cristiano whose support definitely made possible the conception of this work

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ABSTRACT

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Supervising Professor: Dilvo I. Ristoff

The basic premise of this dissertation is to investigate Updike's appropriation of television in *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux*. The assumption is that television makes evident the process of discovery of Middle America as a discourse which becomes marked as a specific category from one decade to another. Television plays a significant role in this process as it is responsible for making *Rabbit, Run* an a-political text and *Rabbit Redux* a political one. It is through this politicization of the texts that the creation of Middle America effectively takes place. In the analysis, I also tried to examine the paradox of placing Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom as an epitome of Middle America itself as neither the term or the character satisfy the exigencies that such categorization requires.

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## RESUMO

TELEVISED AMERICA: THE PRESENCE OF TELEVISION  
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A premissa básica desta dissertação é a análise da apropriação da televisão por Updike em *Rabbit, Run* e *Rabbit Redux*. A hipótese é de que a televisão torna evidente o processo de descoberta da América Média como um discurso que se torna marcado como uma categoria específica de uma década para outra. A televisão possui um papel significativo neste processo já que ela é responsável por tornar *Rabbit, Run* um texto político e *Rabbit Redux* um texto político. É através desta politicização dos textos que a criação da América Média se torna possível. Em minha análise, tento também examinar o paradoxo de situar Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom com um símbolo da própria América Média levando em consideração que nem o termo nem a personagem satisfazem as exigências que tal categorização requer.

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## Introduction

On the surface, Updike's *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux* describe a cultural shift in which 'Middle America', identified by the novels' protagonist Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom, moves from a position of center to margin. This shift is epitomized by Updike's intentional portrayal of Rabbit as the white protestant middle class male that feels entitled to inhabit the center of the world during the 1950s, and at great pains, realizes that such privilege is being questioned during the politically agitated 1960s. Historically, these two decades mark a disruption in American society as the normally known 'tranquilized Eisenhower years' are replaced by the 'turbulent Nixon years'. This disruption is authenticated by the loss of power that white America undergoes parallel to the progressive visibility of minority groups such as African-Americans, Feminists and University students which no longer approve of their disempowered condition as a voiceless party. Thus, the basic shift from one decade to another is political; the exterior enemy represented by Communism is supplanted by the enemy within and then America suffers a profound crisis of identity which results, in the late sixties, in a re-alignment of gender, class and most importantly, race positions. This is the historical backdrop in which the narratives of *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux* are meant to represent through the white conservative consciousness of Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom.

Invariably linked to 'Middle America' and once directly referred to as the silent majority by his wife Janice, Rabbit has been described as a sort of an American Everyman. On a regular basis, Rabbit is credited by most critics to be the representation of America itself, and thus his personal narrative becomes emblematic of a larger cultural context as



his story is meant to mirror the story of his group. However, the same critics that so easily (and so rapidly) label Rabbit as an icon of his nation, fail to see the various ideological implications which such labelling carry out. Hardly ever there is any explanation of how this process of representation effectively proceeds. What critics very often do not realize is that Rabbit is capable of resisting the new directions advocated by marginal groups (this way his narrative approximates the discourse of 'Middle America'), but paradoxically, he sees the need to invite these same individuals to inhabit his home (this way his narrative distances him from 'Middle America'). In other words, Rabbit might surprisingly invite the people he considers his most dreadful enemies for a closer contact, but he unmistakably resists this same proximity as he knows that too much contact makes him vulnerable. The problem with the bulk of criticism on Updike's Rabbit series is that in fact Rabbit never changes and thus critics rush in their portrayal of the character as the white America, or 'Middle America', or even as the indisputable representative of the so-called silent majority disregarding, for instances, that Rabbit does feel fascinated by the black body in the late 1960s. As such, I believe that the portrayal of Rabbit as an American Middle might be, after all, the right interpretation for Updike's character (at least having in mind the numberless analyses on the tetralogy), however, I also believe that these same analyses lack a deeper investigation which once effected might cast Rabbit's middleness problematic.

One element which contributes decisively to the connection of Rabbit to an American middleness is his attachment to television. In fact, television does wield a hegemonic role in both novels because of its ubiquitous and influential presence. From the innumerable references to mass media throughout the two novels, television is the agency most

appropriated revealing that its presence is definitely emblematic of the cultural environment Rabbit is meant to represent. The movement from center to margin which Rabbit and by extension, 'Middle America', experience from one decade to another is definitely related to the presence of this medium as one of its main purposes is to establish the 1950s as a visible a-political decade via an intentional absence of topical news (in fact there is no TV newsbroadcast throughout *Rabbit, Run*) and the 1960s as a visible political decade via a profuse inclusion of political newsbroadcast which, as Joyce B. Markle has argued, intersperses the novel like a refrain. From this perspective, the absence/inclusion of politics from one novel to another is intrinsically connected to the presence of television as it is definitely appropriated to determine the cultural movement from the "tranquilized Eisenhower years" as a decade indifferent to questions of power, to the "turbulent Nixon years" as a decade thoroughly plunged into ideological issues.

Television also establishes the 1950s as an a-political decade through other expedients as well. For example, one recurrent element which definitely marks the story is a Disney TV program named *The Mickey Mouse club*. The influence of this program over the narrative and particularly on the life of Rabbit and Janice is absolutely significant. Some critics have argued that in *Rabbit, Run* "one of Harry's most important spiritual mentors...is a figure from a Disney television show" (Kielland-Lund 89). It is the quixotic messages presented by Jimmy, one character from this program, that clearly influence Rabbit in his romantic searches for a lost individuality and irresponsible escapades from Janice. The overwhelming Disney becomes a hindrance for the visibility of other issues which also affected the decade but are made invisible through the total absence of newsbroadcast.

Historically, the tranquil Eisenhower years hid a violent narrative of racial and political segregation, women's confinement, cultural and social apathy within a national state engrossed by the profits of a recently finished war. The 1950s is the moment of the American national wealth which resulted in a boom of consumerism; from the newly invented television set to kitchen appliances designed for the modern housewife (modern but always housewife). It is, as Rabbit thinks, a 'vitaconomy' made of enemies such as Walt Disney and MagiPeel Peeler Companies, "admitting it's all pretending but, what the hell, making it all likeable. We're all in it together. Pretending makes the world go round. The base of our economy" (10). Both institutions possess a markedly relevance for the portrayal of this decade as Updike had envisioned it. On the outskirts of this vitaconomy nurtured by MagiPeel Peelers and Walt Disney, however, there were colored people fighting for a voice and respect within an essentially monocultural nation. The racial question was a serious event already in the early 1950s. Just as an illustration, in 1954, the American Supreme Court had passed a decision that it was no longer necessary for colored people to attend separate schools from white people. This decision led to taking some children by bus to different schools in order to mix blacks and whites. Such act was known as the *Brown vs Board of Education of Topeka*. Furthermore, the civil rights movement which represents a constant reference in *Rabbit Redux* started in 1955 by Martin Luther King. Although these issues might have obviously spilt onto television news, they actually never appear on the narrative as newsbroadcasts are blatantly circumvented by the characters (particularly Janice) who prefer to watch Mickey mouse and silly auditorium shows.

As a consequence, the total absence of newsbroadcast evidences the cultural apathy which the American white middle-class (although in the last two final novels Rabbit becomes high class) man during the politically amorphous 1950s was cast. The American nation, as portrayed in *Rabbit, Run*, is a world in which politics and other more pressing issues were kept on the threshold, they are never allowed to come inside. Likely, when contrasting the two novels, the idea seems to be that the presence of colored people and unsatisfied housewives were able to inhabit only the margins of Rabbit's consciousness at this period, however, a decade later, the margins would pop up into visibility, frightening Harry and claiming for their rights. In this context, television is the element which becomes essential as it is used to definitely determine what is allowed to become visible and what invisible. Indeed, the right place of television in the two novels is a complex one. In the first narrative, television evidences the cultural apathy of the decade by hiding political issues behind the overwhelming presence of Disney, in *Rabbit Redux* it does simply the opposite - it evidences a culturally disquieted nation through a constant exposition of war protests, racial riots and women's demonstrations despite infusing politics in nearly all other programs showed.

One interesting example of how television programs become politicised and thus used to characterize the two novels is found in the absence of The Lone Ranger in *Rabbit, Run* and its inclusion in *Rabbit Redux*. According to Chadwick Allen<sup>ii</sup>:

The popular Lone Ranger television series, which for Americans and for increasing numbers of international television viewers immortalized Clayton Moore and Jay Silverheels as the quintessential Lone Ranger and Tonto pair, first aired in 1949. In the mid-1950s its viewing audience was estimated at over 33 million; the Lone Ranger's creators claimed it had the highest national audience rating of any western program. The television series filmed original programming until 1957, a total of 221 episodes (182 black and white, 39 color); reruns aired consistently into the 1960s. Following the success of the television series,

in 1956 and 1958 Moore and Silverheels starred in *two financially successful* Lone Ranger feature films (610). [emphasis added]

Obviously, the absence of the Lone Ranger during the 1950s is related to the invisibility of political issues which clearly evidences the unconcern to questions of power. The Lone Ranger himself, as Allen puts it, changes his narrative according to the political agenda of the time he is re-assessed. As Allen argues: "The vast majority of Lone Ranger texts produced in the 1940s and 1950s assert a strongly symbiotic relationship between Indian and White. Certain stereotypes are promoted in the Lone Ranger and Tonto's division of labor, however, and the White Ranger and Indian Tonto are, in some respects, positioned in the traditional western roles of male and female - the male more active, the female more passive - perhaps as a traditional husband and wife 'team'". The same relation ascribed to the Ranger-Tonto pair might be connected to Rabbit and Janice in *Rabbit, Run*. As Updike never questions this traditional husband and wife relation in the novel, although he does touch on it in *Rabbit Redux*, it seems that it was actually not necessary to include the Ranger in the story. As we get to the highly political 1960s, we have then the marked presence of the masked avenger and in that moment Tonto is replaced by a negro; as Rabbit declares: "Not Sammy Davis junior, but another TV-negro" (*Redux* 66). From this perspective, the absence and inclusion of the Lone Ranger is far from being a gratuitous act. It serves the purpose to represent, through television, the political agenda of its decade. We may thus argue that, the Lone Ranger works as a reference for a change in the cultural environment which so definitely characterizes the two novels so clearly.

Another significant element in the appropriation of television to characterize the two novels as the former alienated to political issues, the latter highly ideological is its

influence upon Rabbit and Janice. In the first novel, television is definitely associated with Janice who is characterized as an essentially TV-maniac wife. Such addiction to television irritates Rabbit who ends up fleeing from her right at the start of the novel to live for two months with a prostitute named Ruth. During his stay with Ruth, Rabbit cannot fend off the image of the TV turned on when remembering Janice. In fact, Rabbit makes a clear association of television-Janice-hopelessness-death. Television becomes for the protagonist one tangible object which could justify his flight from marriage responsibilities. Doubtlessly, because of Rabbit's characterization as an essentially energized man searching for an ideal, hard-to-find individuality; a first rate life (as he normally states) within a second-rate world of blasting televisions, sloppy homes and drunken wives, the main character invariably hates the overwhelming presence of television in his private burrow. However, ironically, in the late 1960s, Rabbit becomes de-energized by the new culture which sexualizes Janice (as now she is the one to fetch a lover), robs him of his job (due to the implantation of off-set machines in his workplace) and eventually forces him to live in a lonely house with a son to take care. As such, surprisingly, television becomes in *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit's new wife. This shift is definitely connected to the cultural move from one decade to another, making television the pivot of such shift.

As it was stated in the beginning of this chapter, critics invariably fail to include ideology in their interpretations and associations of Rabbit with 'Middle America'. However, the presence of television has not been overlooked by the welter of critics who so far have produced a vast body of analyses on the Rabbit books. Early criticism on *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux* attests for the marked presence of this medium even

though practically all of these investigations tended to focus on philosophical issues such as religion, philosophy and mythology. The new insight appears only after the publication in 1988 of Dilvo I. Ristoff's *Updike's America: The Presence of Contemporary American History in John Updike's Rabbit Trilogy*<sup>iii</sup> whose main concern was with the role of history within the (then) Rabbit trilogy. One definite upgrading posed by Ristoff was his taking Rabbit as a historical artifact, thus much of Harry's evolving through time comprises America's historical and cultural changes as well. According to Ristoff, Rabbit becomes an individual who finds himself caught within a maze which is history. Ristoff posits Harry as one who does not dispose of the elements of history for the purpose of realizing his own intentions; rather, it is history that utilizes Rabbit as just another element for imposing order on the world. In other words, the contingencies of history are the determinants of Harry's actions and, by extension, of his inner conflicts. This means that Harry never confronts the world directly, but always indirectly, approximately, as mediated by the social text. As the author asserts:

This conceptualization of the novels makes the forces of history, in their selection and transformation by the popular media - a fiction which Updike reselected and refictionalized - a *conditio sine qua non* for the novel's existence. It also makes the novels, at the same time, infinitely creative, since the stories' articulation perforce requires the social text in its constant state of mutability and conflict with the protagonist. Rabbit's exposure to and reading of these conflicts, as well as his ways of coping with them, is what the Rabbit trilogy is all about. And it is through this exposure and through these conflicts that Updike's America is revealed to us (08).

The passage evidences the significance that "the popular media" possesses in its articulation of "the forces of history" which definitely brand Rabbit's personal narrative. Indubitably, when looking at the Rabbit books from the nineties, one becomes certain that

Updike's main concern was to produce a chronicle of four decades of American cultural history. Ristoff had advanced this interpretation by stating that "the story's articulation performs requires the social text in its constant state of mutability and conflict with the protagonist" to come to life. It is this tension between Rabbit and a changing society which makes the novels so much creative and culturally meaningful. Ristoff's analysis attempts to point out the importance of taking Rabbit less as an individual in total control of his environment but more in conflict with it so much so that he portrays the protagonist as always "out-of-step" with his culture. In fact, Rabbit is always looking back - during the 1950s he resents the married life with Janice and keeps remembering his golden time as a highschool basketball hero, in the 1960s he resents his newly disempowered condition as a white man longing for a power he has just lost for minority groups constantly present on the media. As such, throughout the tetralogy, Rabbit suffers from what Renato Rosaldo has named as "imperialist nostalgia", a "mourning for what one has destroyed." <sup>iv</sup> As a result, by imbuing Rabbit's personal narrative with much of the cultural transformations which took place in America during these years, Updike constructs a character that, as critic James A. Schiff has argued, "functions as an Everyman who serves, in body and soul, as a metaphor for America itself...Furthermore, Rabbit's personal history reflects American cultural history" (29). From this perspective, the Rabbit books are much about Rabbit as they are about his nation; to separate the two becomes somewhat an impossible task.

It is within this context that the appropriation of television becomes a natural element, so to speak, responsible for the close-knit connection between Rabbit and America. As I said, almost all critics of the Rabbit series say, at least in passing, that



Updike's hero is "representative" of the "ordinary" American. Most ignore how issues such as race, class and gender are implicated in the assignation of the "ordinary", and with the exception of Ristoff and Markle, these critics rarely qualify "American" with "white". Ristoff argues, for example, that Rabbit must be taken as the representative of the Middle American Radical, generally named as MARS, "one who can no longer bear the contradictions between a life which he believes is possible to be lived, because it WAS lived, and the life which he in actuality has to live" (33). In this way, by including ideology in his interpretation of Rabbit, Ristoff clearly associates television in *Rabbit, Run* with a "voice which stresses individuality within the acceptable boundaries of the authoritarian conformity which characterizes the decade." (17) Furthermore, Updike's decision in having Rabbit watch and listen to specific pieces of news and television programs is not a gratuitous act for:

it serves the purpose of adding representativeness and realism to the hero's mind and actions by making him share the concerns of a rather anonymous voice which speaks not only to him but to a whole community of citizens. And a voice which speaks to a whole community can hardly be said to be purely whimsical. Instead, one would expect it to have a common semantic repertoire and some meaningful message or concern to share with a larger American audience (41).

And it is this common semantic repertoire shared by a larger American audience and the selection of programs which Rabbit watches and listens to that definitely make the stories representative of the cultural transformations the novels are meant to depict. Indeed, according to the first two Rabbit books, the American society does undergo a crucial change from one decade to another, and essential to this change is the appropriation of television, making power relations in the 1950s blatantly invisible and, in the 1960s totally visible.

Another important study on the presence of television within the Rabbit series is Stacey Olster's *Rabbit Rerun: Updike's Replay of Popular Culture in Rabbit at Rest* and the reason for its being so significant for this work is because Olster focuses her analysis on the role of popular culture (particularly television) all along the four novels. According to the author:

The only periods of America's past in which he [Rabbit] can immerse himself thoroughly are those which he himself has lived. Likewise, for all his ranting about global events and crises in American foreign policy, the concerns that touch him personally are contained more in the popular than the political, specifically, within those same artifacts of popular culture to which his own heart has responded (46).

Although Olster clearly declares that the concerns that touch Rabbit personally are contained more in the popular than the political, she does argue that this same popular culture is emblematic of a cultural decadence which accompanies the main character throughout his personal trajectory: "That the America of the Rabbit novels has seen steady decline is no secret to any reader of Updike's works". Furthermore, Harry's sense of history is definitely connected to the experiences he has lived. That's the reason of his remembrances of radio programs in the sixties, old movie palaces in the seventies and the cast of Mickey Mouse club in the eighties. Popular culture does impinge on the protagonist's life and provide not only a testimony of a social decadence but also a vivid sense of time. By remembering all these moments Harry senses his aging process and the manner his culture has changed. By the time Rabbit reaches middle age this apprehension of decline becomes more visible as the country of which he is a reflection seems to be the same wherever one goes. And as Olster asks: "Why should it seem very different...when shopping malls screen the same movies and television sets broadcast the same shows,

when, in short, the communication networks in America not only avoid divisiveness but actually promotes homogeneity?"(47).

Likely, because her investigation was limited to the article form, the author did not have sufficient space for a deeper analysis on the tetralogy of which forced her to focus on the last book of the series. As a consequence, Olster did not realize how disruptive the media (especially television) becomes in *Rabbit Redux*. Still, the conspicuous presence of this medium makes her reflect on a number of issues related to this decline of the American Empire:

From those first scenes of Janice staring at its flickering 'blank radiance' of particles in 1959, Updike has been attuned to the power that television can wield. His later works compound power with presence. Whether as news source in *Rabbit Redux* (for the Vietnam War, SDS riots, the trial of the Chicago Eight, the moon shot) or news promoter in *Rabbit is Rich* (Iranians outside the Teheran U.S. Embassy, that 'cocky little' Pope on his way to Yankee Stadium, the plucky Dalai Lama doing the talk show circuit), whether as white noise (Ma Springer's Pennsylvania hometown companion) or silent chaperon (for Harry and Janice, Harry and Jill, Harry and Pru), television remains ubiquitous (51).

The quotation reveals that television actually evolves during the four decades the tetralogy is meant to depict. Although the medium (together with other artifacts of popular culture) might be invariably linked to a certain societal decadence, Olster also indicates that there is no fast judgement when dealing with mass culture. Particularly in the case of television which had changed Rabbit's attitude "from early contempt in *Rabbit, Run* to an incorporation of it as a veritable lifeline" (52). In fact, as we are going to see, television does evolve into a conductor of information "between Harry and the outside world", making him question his own attitude towards new ideas coming from minority groups in the sixties. Yet, Olster identifies some quite interesting points associated with the conspicuous presence of the medium in the narrative. The first one is her argument that

the expanding presence of television symbolizes the replacement of Communist threat during the 50s and 60s to Japanese invasion in the 70s and 80s. For Olster, America's supremacy is finally overthrown by the Japanese money which starts to sell to the American people not only television sets (as the two Sonnies Harry acquires in *Rabbit is Rich*), but also cars, music and films by the late eighties.

The second one is her connection of television to what she freely names as a "diminished sense of expansiveness" (54). Television is related to this issue in two ways: First, Harry and Janice belong to a generation that has learned to perceive the world using the movie screen as a customary referent for "their original code for conduct"(53). With the passing of time, the tendency is for reduced images and therefore the world gradually starts to come into Harry's home in a 20" size rather than in cinema scope: "Yet with the continual thrust for the smallest a trend he cannot reverse, the media with which he gauges the expansive get progressively smaller in turn. He thinks of films when the trend is toward television, he thinks of television when the trend is to video", that's the reason Ristoff's assertion that Rabbit is always "out-of-step" with his culture becomes so true and besides, "this shift in prominence from one media to another has ramifications with respect to America's grandiosity itself"(55). In other words, the diminishing of the screen from movie palaces to "SONY's meager inches" (54) represents a metaphor Olster links to a social and cultural decadence of America.

The other way in which television is also linked to this "diminished sense of expansiveness" is Harry's approach to the medium as a referent for his country's search for new frontiers: "Nowhere is his resistance displayed more clearly than in the media with which he measures America's pursuit of new frontiers"(54). Such pursuit includes women

and black movements, the Vietnam war, the Pope visiting America (a Protestant country) and the moonshot with all the space exploration involved. These compose invariably the TV news which make Rabbit state during the late eighties about the *Challenger* disaster: “And wasn’t that the disgrace of the decade, sending that poor New Hampshire schoolteacher and that frizzy-haired Jewish girl, not to mention the men, one of them black and another Oriental, all like some Hollywood cross-section of America, up to be blown into bits on television a minute later?”(Rest 458). Besides, the feeling of being hooked to television information afford Rabbit with a cold detachment of the news he sees, “like everything else on the news, you get bored, it gets to seem a gimmick, just like all those TV time-outs in football”(Rest 489). Such detachment only happens gradually in *Rabbit is Rich* and it is definitely present in the last novel. As Olster limited her analysis to *Rabbit at Rest* she is surely certain in arguing that television is responsible for a thorough commodification of human emotions. Rabbit, in the late eighties, no longer feel threatened by the media as the danger that minorities posed to his disempowered condition in the late sixties is turned into commodities as they become easy entertainment exhibited in television programs and radio songs. The idea Updike wants to get across is that after the re-alignment of race, gender and class positions in *Rabbit Redux*, minorities are taken over by the media and lose their power to decenter white America. There is no escape, everything becomes eventually incorporated by corporate America and turned into submissive pastime.

Apart from these two previous authors, a few critics have discussed the appropriation of television in the Rabbit books. One example can be found in the collection of essays on *Rabbit, Run* published in 1993 under the title “New Essays on *Rabbit, Run*.” From the

four essays edited in the book, three bear some relevance for the present discussion. Erik Kielland - Lund's "The Americanness of *Rabbit, Run*: A Transatlantic View" is one investigation which tries to point out what exactly makes *Rabbit, Run* such an epitome of American life. The author concludes that Updike's second novel mirrors America for the narrative is structured on the following issues: individualism, capitalism, religion, sports, car, alcohol and television. Besides, what makes the novel highly appealing for an European mind is the fact that it presents a reference and "a means of communication"(Lund 77) for a continent which lacks an identity. So much so that the author feels startled to realize that looking at *Rabbit, Run* from the perspective of the nineties he sees how much his own continent has become "Americanized."

One of his arguments is that Europeans constantly feel bombarded by a multitude of images of American life not only through Hollywood or the radio but increasingly through television programs such as soap operas, sitcoms and news coverage. Therefore, the popularity of certain American authors is intrinsically related to his ability to create in fiction an environment which might possibly and very realistically describe the particulars of an American reality. According to Lund: "Many reviewers praised Updike's ability to convey not just the surface textures of the nation's experience, but also the deeper thematic and mythical substructures that define his characters and their struggles in universal terms"(78). These substructures are grounded on the ubiquitous use of many products of popular culture. Not only the newscasts but also the songs and TV programs that Harry consumes provide the reader with useful cultural directions. According to the essay, the presence of TV in the narrative assumes a leading role for "Harry's most important spiritual mentor...is a figure from a Disney television show"(89). The ministers

Eccles and Kruppenbach are not able to replace Jimmy the Mouseketeer with his direct message of how the only way to achieve happiness is by developing the individual's inner talents. This circumstance leads the author to state that Harry's rebellions become feeble as they are in reality played out by "the conventional culture of the Eisenhower fifties, when television for the first time became the dominant medium of communication and perception"(89). Also quoting Ristoff, Kielland-Lund adds that such situation contributes to amplify the dialectics of the narrative and television stands at the very center of it. As such, by asserting that the electronic media might possibly replace religion or that a Disney television show might adequately provide individuals with sufficient self-knowledge of themselves (which might as well lead them to take immature actions) the importance that television possesses in the story is brought up once more.

The second essay which also touches on the issue of television is Philip Stevik's "The Full Range Of Updike's Prose". As the title indicates the author's main concern is with prose and he actually provides a general appraisal of it. Television is analyzed on two distinct chapters: one allocated for the visual power of Updike's writing which Stevik states as being "quite basically and literally eye-centered"(41), the other assigned for the study of a thematic concern Stevik names "the comforts of home" (50). Beginning with the first chapter, the author asserts that Updike, from the very outset, was greatly influenced by the visual arts as he had overtaken a course on the subject and later became an art critic himself. This experience is mainly responsible for the "imagination" of *Rabbit, Run* which the author recognizes as being "relentlessly and ingeniously visual". After providing a lavish series of examples in which Updike's prose becomes so vast and sophisticated in terms of the visual element, Stevik mentions that in some moments "there

are those acts of observation that are rendered intelligible by comparison to watching television”(41). However, Stevik doesn't continue on the issue of how television could actually be able to provide a different type of visual narration or in what specific ways television could interfere on Updike's vision of reality. He merely ends with the following assertion: “It is hard to think of another writer, however, who builds into the visual experience of narrative the full range of visual modalities from something like the eye of the analytical cubist to something like the eye of the passive but transfixed watcher of television”(42).

The second part in which television is mentioned has barely anything related to the previous analysis. The thematic concern, freely named by Stevik as “the comforts of home”, indicates an aspect of Updike's prose which is already widely accepted: Updike's devotion to his birthplace and childhood memories. Television, according to the essay, is another component, along with the street names and radio songs, that contributes to this recurrent theme in Updike. These elements, although their main objective is to make Rabbit feel at home and at peace, are also capable to provide Rabbit with the realization that he comes from a small town and because of that, his place is “small-minded, turned in on itself, a maze without exit, a trap, a cul de sac”. It is not surprising to notice that this way, Stevik is also unable to circumvent the issue that television in *Rabbit, Run* is essentially an ambiguous subject. In this particular example, the medium is responsible for providing Rabbit with peacefulness and at the same time with anxiety. As the author puts it: “Rabbit never articulates this endless ambivalence and there is no narrative voice to do so”(50).



The third and last essay which touches on the issue of how popular culture is appropriated by Updike to provide a vivid sense of time is Sanford Pinsker's "Restlessness in the 1950s: What Made Rabbit Run?". In my opinion, the essay lingers a bit to get to its main point of placing Updike as a genuine writer of the 1950s by the portrayal of Rabbit as "one [who] could get into one's car and go - that is, if the 'one' in question were a male"(68). The author gives emphasis to the fact that the 1950s were a period braided with conformity and rebelliousness. In other words, while "mainstream America muddled through the decade wearing white bucks and watching 'Leave It to Beaver'" on the telly, intellectual America (particularly those authors connected to New York) were spawning such nonconforming writers such as Jack Kerouac, Salinger, Norman Mailer, Robert Lowell and obviously John Updike. However, these anti-establishment writers did not really change much of their nation as "folks" were definitely more interested in "buying their first lawnmowers and television sets" (54). According to the critic, the only significant change was brought a decade later by Bob Dylan, there is, only when popular culture starts to sell to the masses the ideas which were suppressed during the 1950s and thus, only then, a disruption effectively takes place. In this manner, Pinsker's essay clearly approaches the main thesis of this present analysis as he attempts to evidence that the a-political 1950s were in fact a crucial motivator for the totally political 1960s.

These are basically the texts which somehow touch on the issue of television (even if in a more general level) and that contributed for the present dissertation. Again, it is necessary to add, that none of these writers really pursued the theme of the characterization of Rabbit as 'Middle America' with the deserved attention. Nearly all of

them rapidly associates Rabbit as an American Everyman, however they hardly ever associate Rabbit with 'white America' or reserve some part of their text for a discussion on the various issues in which such labelling brings along . Therefore, the basic attempt here is to investigate how television becomes definitely emblematic of this association of Rabbit with 'white America' as well as how the medium becomes representative of a cultural shift which marks the two decades fictionalized in *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux*. It is only through such perusal, I believe, that a richer interpretation of the Rabbit novels comes to life. It is time now for an investigation of the first novel.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture. 1992.

<sup>ii</sup> Allen, Chadwick. *Hero with Two Faces: The Lone Ranger As Treaty Discourse*. *American Literature*. vol 68. sep 1996.

<sup>iii</sup> All Ristoff's quotations are from *Updike's America: The Presence of Contemporary American History in John Updike's Rabbit Trilogy*.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted in Chadwick Allen's *Hero with Two Faces: The Lone Ranger As Treaty Discourse*. *American Literature*. vol 68. sept 1996. pp 612.

## CHAPTER II

### Television in *Rabbit, Run*

In the first novel of the tetralogy Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom feels terribly unsatisfied. After having completed twenty-six years old and three years of marriage with Janice, an ordinary married life can no longer offer him the same freedom and pleasures which his recent single years did. Because of this, Rabbit suffers throughout the novel a nostalgia for a past time in which he had freedom and space. One event which braids his present regret of being married with a wife and son was his glorious days of Highschool Basketball championship in Brewer when he hit two records in two consecutive years. All along *Rabbit, Run* Rabbit will remember this time and make use of it to justify his most irresponsible actions towards his failed marriage. However, the significance of such naive glorious days are so meaningful for the protagonist that right at the start of the novel, a nostalgic scene takes place involving Rabbit and three kids playing basketball on a desolate alley. Rabbit, in an impetus, forces his way into the game under the dubious eyes of the kids who feared he might be a pervert. For Rabbit, that was a chance to re-live the days when, as he usually states, he did a first rate thing. However, in 1959, the last run of Eisenhower's eight-year administration, Rabbit feels sure his life has turned into a net, a cul de sac. As the critic Kielland-Lund puts it: "this nostalgia is part of a larger pattern, where the mediocrity of his present life with Janice is juxtaposed to his happy memories of childhood with Mim and his athletic achievements"(79).

The present mediocrity of Rabbit's life stems from the domestic entrapment in which his marriage has definitely become. There are two basic elements which afflict Rabbit

chiefly, Janice's drunkenness and sloppiness with the house and the blasting, ever-present, a hundred and forty-nine dollar television set. Right after playing basketball with the kids, Harry arrives at his home and then Updike offers his first scene of Rabbit's family life:

The door is locked. In fitting the little key into the lock his hand trembles, pulsing with unusual exertion, and the metal scratches. But when he opens the door he sees his wife sitting in an armchair with an old-fashioned, watching television turned down low.

'You're here,' he says. 'What's the door locked for?'

She looks to one side of him with vague dark eyes reddened by the friction of watching.

'It just locked itself.' (08)

This is Updike's portrayal of middle class American family as defined by the 1950s and which Rabbit and Janice are supposed to represent. Clearly, there is a contrast between the husband and wife: the husband more active and alive, the wife passive and nearly dead due to her addiction to television. From the beginning the passage makes clear that Rabbit does not find solace when arriving home. Moments before "fitting the little key into the lock" he had felt a customary rotten smell in the vestibule of his two-store building "that he can never identify; sometimes it seems cabbage cooking, sometimes the furnace's rusty breath, sometimes something soft decaying in the walls". His own apartment has locked him out; he is estranged from it. There is an intentional play on the issue of alienation: Harry is alienated from his house as the door is locked for his entrance, Janice is alienated from Harry as her addiction to television impedes any communication with him and finally, television alienates both by its constant reference to Disney and absence of newscast (Janice, as the most alienated character, turns off the set at the moment that the news "tries to come on").

The passage also evidences Janice's deadness by her portrayal as the typical couch potato with the aggravating additional feature of the glass of vodka on her hand. She is the

decadent hopeless drunken wife who has lost all the energy to re-build her marriage and identity after a troublesome and precipitated union; she married Rabbit because she was pregnant. Her inertia is accentuated by the description of her eyes “reddened by the friction of watching”. It is mostly due to her addiction that Rabbit watches television. In fact, it is clear that the medium endangers Rabbit’s energized masculinity so much so that he sees television not only as a possible threat to his surges for individuality but also as a threat to his married life. Rabbit’s associations of his life with traps, nets and cul de sacs are mostly due to the overwhelming presence of TV which seems to epitomize such entrapment.

Such situation could not be otherwise as the cultural scenario of the decade definitely favored the male and subdued the female. In the following novel, this situation will reverse completely. However, the narrative of *Rabbit, Run* favors male power as it is practically limited to Rabbit’s point-of-view<sup>1</sup>. The fact that Janice spends most of her time inside the house taking care of her son, sousing herself and watching TV represents another aspect of the 1950s which was the imprisonment of the women to the domestic world. Janice does not have a voice in the narrative; she watches more than acts. She is portrayed as a totally de-energized woman who only watches TV. Furthermore, she is locked inside a passivity that makes her characterization a motive of immense discontentment for Rabbit who is, in the present story, totally energized and, most of the time, contrary to television. In this way, the televised medium functions as the element which determines this contrast. As a consequence, Janice’s addiction to alcohol and silly TV shows (and by extension, Rabbit’s addiction to these shows as well) represent the cultural apathy in which American middles cast their lives in the a-political Eisenhower years.

Essential to the presence of television “turned down low” in front of inebriated Janice is the tension in which the couple is cast. The medium also adds up to Rabbit’s first run from home. As Kielland-Lund argues: “Unlike Janice, Rabbit has an instinctive sense of being cut out for something very different from his current life that makes it impossible for him not to run when the walls of respectable ordinariness start to close in on him” (80). One element which Kielland-Lund forgets in his insightful article is that Rabbit has the rights of feeling hopeless, stressed with the marriage and eventually leaving Janice because the culture of the time allowed it to happen. It was acceptable for men to feel cornered by the walls of society and of marriage’s responsibilities and as a consequence flee from home. According to critic Sanford Pinsker, even literary male writers were celebrating men’s power as the only solution one had to escape from the paralyzed status quo as the decade had it. Such works as Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* published in 1956, Jack Kerouac’s *On The Road* published in 1957 and finally Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies* published in 1959, the year of the narrative of *Rabbit, Run* which was published in 1960, were all advocating the possibilities one had to just get into a car or train and simply go, since this one was a male, of course. Pinsker makes very clear that individualism during this decade was intrinsically connected to male power and that both Updike and Lowell (as the critic definitely highlights the importance of *Life Studies* for the period) used different agencies (the former used the novel, the latter used poetry) to describe how much rebelliousness and hopelessness were hidden behind those prim frontyards and innocent television shows.

Although *Rabbit, Run* focus on Harry’s discontentment with the wrong ways his life has turned to and hardly ever Updike offers Janice’s perspective on the marriage affair, the narrative evidences the disempowered condition of women and the privileged condition of

men through Rabbit and Janice's dependence to TV. The fact that Janice is invariably portrayed as the classical TV-maniac wife does not mean that Rabbit never watches the medium. Both of them possess different degrees of addiction to television. And, it seems, different approaches as well. Television for Janice is a companion for her long solitary hours at home with Nelson. It is also important to remember that she is about to have another child, this time a baby-girl. Perhaps, one might argue, her physical condition determined her passive relationship not only with television but also with life. This might be so, however, the fact that she is characterized as the typical couch potato who watches television but does not think about what it is being presented clearly evidences the contrast between her and Rabbit. What becomes visible is that Janice does not have a pragmatic purpose for life. Her dependence to television attests for the deadness of her spirit and in one moment in the narrative television does become death itself, functioning as a metaphorical grim reaper who has come to make Janice drown her newly born baby.

Very different from Janice is Rabbit's relationship with the medium. He watches television always wanting to "learn something ...helpful in his own line of work" (Run 09). It seems that Rabbit has a pragmatic approach to life, but in fact he does not really know what to expect from it. His seemingly pragmatism hides a naive belief that life possesses a practical meaning. And that living with TV-maniac Janice he would never be able to attain it. What distinguishes the couple is that Harry at least possesses some energy which presses him onward whereas Janice possesses none. The programs showed on the telly are watched by either Rabbit and Janice, but it is Rabbit who develops some responses to what he sees. In this manner, television enhances the contrast between energized Rabbit and de-energized Janice so much so that in *Rabbit, Run*, energized masculinity means life



whereas de-energized femininity means death. Therefore, Rabbit cannot include television in his world (although he does watch it now and then) because the medium is much associated with passivity, femininity and deadness. It definitely endangers his desperate and directionless searches for a functional purpose of life.

The previous quotation from the novel is the first of a series of examples in which the contrast between agile Rabbit and dead Janice is displayed. A second moment comes right next when Rabbit finally gets into his house and the following scene takes place:

Carefully he unfolds his coat and goes to the closet with it and takes out a wire hanger. The closet is in the living room and the door only opens half-way, since the television set is in front of it. He is careful not to kick the wire, which is plugged into a socket on the other side of the door. One time Janice, who is especially clumsy when pregnant or drunk, got the wire wrapped around her foot and nearly pulled the set, a hundred and forty-nine dollars, down *smash* on the floor. Luckily he got to it while it was still rocking in the metal cradle and before Janice began kicking out in one of her panics. (Run 08)

Already in the first line, Harry's deftness is evidenced by the use of the adverb 'carefully' and also by his patience to take out a wire hanger from the closet for putting his coat away. Besides, the narrator discloses an interesting feature of Rabbit's home which cannot be suppressed. Namely, the TV set is placed right in front of the living room door obstructing the entrance way. In this manner, everytime Harry comes from work he has to be careful enough, when getting into his house, not to slam the door onto the set. Besides that, the television is placed in front of the door and its cable crosses all the way to get plugged on a socket, on the other side of the room, on a wall. No doubt one, either Janice or Harry, would end up eventually stumbling on it. It appears that both wanted the set to be right there as if it unconsciously meant that possibly anytime they could use it to discharge their most bitter feelings at each other. In other words, the position of the television, the manner in which it stands right in the midway of Janice and Harry reveal

how debilitated and shallow they have been conducting their relationship; the manner they have arranged the furniture in their house might be read as an indication of their inability to resolve the smallest family impasses. Through the voice of an ambiguous narrator, it is indicated that Janice is the one to be blamed for almost smashing the set down to the floor. An appliance which cost a hundred and forty-nine dollars for Harry's meager pockets. No preoccupation with her pregnancy or the reasons why she was drunk are articulated by Harry, who only worries about the set. As the passage is described, up to its end, one has the image of an agile Harry, thrusting himself into the air, right in the nick of time, to prevent a catastrophe from happening.

There is no question that *Rabbit, Run* produces a severe commentary on the way artifacts of mass production influence and dictate one's life. The novel is suffused not only with the overwhelming television but also with references to cars, radio, household appliances, highways, pocketbooks and so forth. According to Ristoff, "The car economy, along with its freeways and its consequent suburbs, shopping centers, drive-ins, parking lots, and gas stations, affects Rabbit directly as it did most Americans of the time, and Rabbit does show some temporary signs of unhappiness" (88:p67). At a certain degree, if Pinsker and Ristoff are right, Rabbit might be taken as one who feels diminished by this all together "gadget world" and, as one of Kerouac or Ginsberg's characters, he might be aspiring for a pastoral life outside the oppressive urban landscape. Such interpretation might also shed some light on the reasons why Rabbit flees from Janice, who was too much exposed to television, and resolves to live for almost three months with Ruth, who did not have a television and seemed not to be so jeopardized by mass production (although she does read pocketbooks!). Besides, it is important to remember that Updike

makes Rabbit a sales man; although he has just got the job for four weeks, he is a MagiPeel Peeler sales representative who has to demonstrate kitchen gadgets “in several five-and-dime stores around Brewer” (Run 09). As Ristoff argues:

Rabbit's frustrations have to do with the gadgets and with his lack of qualifications for life within the economic system. As a basketball player he had his valuable skill to sell and he could persuade Tothero to “buy” it. As a gadget salesman he cannot, as easily, bend the system to his advantage, for what he sells, even if people buy it, never ceases to be somewhat superfluous, a superfluosity which extends itself from producer to consumer, leaving Harry with the unpleasant feeling that he is operating as a mediating link between these two poles of waste. That he never manages to rationalize his feelings and engage them in a calculated social reaction only demonstrates Updike's intention to preserve his middle-ness. (66)

Yet the portrayal of Rabbit's middle-ness becomes the more emblematic due to Updike's intentional appropriation of particular television shows which by themselves reveal much of the type of life Middle America lived in the 1950s. Also, it is obvious that the major significant achievement with these television shows is that they enable Updike to provide a veritable picture of a typical family scene during this decade in which television for the first time becomes the most sought and popular mass production artifact in America. The 1950s are known in mass communication studies to be the time of the TV-boom. In this manner, Rabbit and Janice are the very baby-boomers from such TV-decade. One of these programs is Disney's *The Mouseketeer* which definitely causes an impression on Rabbit's mind to the point of contributing to his first escapade from Janice. Quite clearly, Disney remains a permanent presence in the narrative as Rabbit uses some of the sentences he had cleverly seized from the show to answer back Episcopalian minister Jack Eccles's questions about his first flight from home. Furthermore, the intentional choice for having Disney and avoid programs such as newscasts, talk shows, documentaries and political spots<sup>ii</sup> possesses a markedly meaningful presence in the story.

The Disney television show has four direct references in the text and one indirect reference when Harry uses what he hears in the program with Episcopal minister Jack Eccles. The first of these direct references appears right at the outset of the novel as Rabbit arrives home and involves himself in a silly quarrel with Janice about her leaving the car at her mother's and Nelson at his mother's. The quarrel is suddenly interrupted by *The Mouseketeer* program. Attentively Rabbit and Janice stop their silly brawl and become mesmerized by the TV:

The big Mouseketeer has appeared. Jimmy, a grown man who wears circular black ears. Rabbit watches him attentively; he respects him. He expects to learn something from him helpful in his own line of work, which is demonstrating a kitchen gadget in several five-and-dime stores around Brewer. He's had the job for four weeks. 'Proverbs, proverbs, they're so true,' Jimmy sings, strumming his Mouseguitar. 'proverbs tell us what to do: proverbs help us all to *bee* - better - Mouse-ke-teers...' Know thyself, a wise old Greek once said. Know Thyself. Now what does this mean, boys and girls? It means, be what you are. Don't try to be Sally or Johnny or Fred next door; be yourself. God doesn't want a tree to be a waterfall, or a flower to be a stone. God gives to each one of us a special talent... God wants some of us to become artists, some of us to become firemen and doctors and trapeze artists. And He gives to each of us the special talents to become these things, *provided we work to develop them*. We must work, boys and girls. So: Know Thyself. Learn to understand your talents, and then work to develop them. That's the way to be happy.' He pinches his mouth together and winks. (Run 10)

From the outset, although Janice and Rabbit stop quarreling to watch the program, it is clear that Rabbit is the one who becomes mesmerized by the Disney figure. Behind Rabbit's attentive gaze at Jimmy there is the clear allusion to the power and influence which Disney characters (particularly the mighty mouse) had upon ordinary Americans at the time<sup>iii</sup>. As Kielland-Lund puts it: "It is hardly accidental that one of Harry's most important spiritual mentors in the novel is a figure from a Disney television show" (89). Yet, a detailed interpretation is given by Ristoff who highlights the significance of "the Mouseketeer's synonymization of 'know thyself' and 'be yourself'" (70). As Ristoff puts it: "The synonymization makes Rabbit perceive himself as unique, as an individual, as

different from others, and he begins placing greater and greater value on his individuality” to the point of abandoning Janice and Nelson for Ruth. As we are going to see later, irresponsible husband flights were so normal in the fifties that they become easy entertainment for desolate and hopeless housewives (like Janice) through television shows as well.

As Ristoff stands out the “outburst of individuality triggered by Jimmy, the big Mouseketeer, generates, if not self-knowledge, then at least some self-realization of the quality of his [Rabbit’s] life”. And Rabbit does realize that a life with Janice was “unbearable”, that television, ironically, occupied too much time and space, that, on the whole, his married life was “the same as being dead” (Run 101). In other words, Rabbit’s middle-classness becomes jeopardized by the same elements which produced it. Through a Disney program he perceives how second-rate his life with Janice was and he eventually chooses the easiest way out. I agree with Ristoff who argues that “in this temporary refusal to join the masses, a nice piece of social criticism” is produced, but that “his reaction against TV is again not that of a conscious objector, only another spasm which the system will soon manage to control”(71). Again there is a play on the notion of alienation as television is clearly known to be one effective tool for societal control which makes the medium never to be in a position of making its audience insurrect against the system. Obviously, one would expect the very opposite. As Ristoff puts it:

it is remarkable and ironic that Harry’s explosion of individuality should be generated by the very medium which by its nature brings sameness to the country. This choice of having a collective medium, the same which the establishment utilizes for commercial advertising and its political propaganda, produce a distorted anti-establishment view stresses perhaps the strength of the system and its capacity to tolerate minor deviations. (71)

However, the fact that Rabbit's middleness is put at stake by his "refusal to join the masses" after watching a Disney television show is definitely significant for the customary assignation of Rabbit as an epitome of Middle America. His simultaneous acceptance and refusal of television adds up to the complexity of his character and how difficult an analogy of character with environment becomes when one wants to suggest that Rabbit's actions mirror in many ways the actions of the social group he belongs to.

Furthermore, the assignation of Disney as a "spiritual mentor" or as "the great communicator"<sup>iv</sup>, so to speak, of *Rabbit, Run* highlights the lack of political concern which clearly braids the novel. Just as a preview, ten years later, in *Rabbit Redux*, Disney will be replaced by NASA evidencing the notably political nature of the narrative. However, the distinctive aspect of *Rabbit, Run* is determined by its total lack of a political concern which emphasizes the complete detachment of the characters to the events taking place on the public sphere. As I mentioned in the introduction, the 1950s are a period in which important public events are taking place and are being reported by the media but, amazingly, Rabbit and Janice never ponder about them. As critic Sanford Pinsker argues, although there were those intellectuals who really wanted to speak up against the cultural paralysis in which the decade was immersed, mainstream America of the 1950s "muddled on, barely paying attention to squabbles that seem to matter far more than buying their first lawnmower and television set" (55).

I think that we have to deconstruct the question and understand that a lack of politics is by itself highly political. It is a presence which is constituted by its very absence. It reveals a great emphasis that society placed on individual enterprises leaving group issues totally untouched. It also evidences white America's hegemony and its diverse and

seductive means to maintain society unconcerned to disturbing public events (such as the segregation of black people) and mesmerized by the advancements of consumerism. It is within this context in which Updike's appropriation of Disney television shows speak so loud. Disney means traditional and conservative values. Its overwhelming presence throughout *Rabbit, Run* is representative of the society which gave it sovereignty.

When Jimmy's positive messages end the narrator discloses an interesting response given by Rabbit. Jimmy ends his messages pinching his mouth and winking which makes Rabbit ponder:

That was good. Rabbit tries it, pinching the mouth together and then the wink, getting the audience out front with you against some enemy behind, Walt Disney or the MagiPeel Peeler Company, admitting it's all pretending but, what the hell, making it likeable. We're all in it together. Pretending makes the world go round. The base of our economy. Vitaconomy, the modern housewife's password, the one-word expression for economizing vitamins by the MagiPeel Method.

Janice gets up and turns off the set when the six-o'clock news tries to come on. The little hard star left by the current slowly dies. (Run 10)

Rabbit's thoughts reveal that the character is clever enough to comprehend that Disney and the MagiPeel Peeler Company are the very engines of the economy. According to Rabbit's insight, these two companies represent the society of which he is merely another component. Jimmy is linked to the housewives and their search for cheaper kitchen products. It is, most of all, an economy which lives through pretending and because of this, a very feeble system. Rabbit proves such feebleness right next when he resolves to leave Janice. In this manner, Rabbit's perception that he is a part of this appearance based society only leads him to take a very impotent form of insurrection as he eventually ends up with another pregnant woman. As Ristoff argues: "That Rabbit's contentions with the system are teleguided demonstrates the extent to which his life is not really his. His

disagreements with the establishment are cosmetic rather than structural, and it should be no surprise to find Rabbit ten years later with an American flag stuck to his car..."(71). In other words, Rabbit's disagreements towards his culture becomes emblematic of his characterization as an American Everyman as all of his anger is a produce from television.

One element which stands out in the passage just quoted is the fact that right after watching the show, Janice gets up and turns off the set at the moment that the news is about to start. Although it is obviously a very fast moment, the lines somehow summarize the whole idea that in *Rabbit, Run* the characters never watch other than silly programs. It also adds up to the characterization of Janice as the most alienated character in the novel as she is the one who actually circumvents the news. It is in these lines that the polarization of the energized husband and the de-energized wife becomes the more evident. Even though, all through the tetralogy, narration is fundamentally centered on Harry and hardly ever there is any drive into Janice's consciousness, the contrast which these lines establish is clear: Rabbit is portrayed as the one who is able to look into the television show whereas Janice, already high on liquor, simply watches it carelessly.

The other program which resembles Disney's *The Mouseketeer* is one auditorium show called *Queen For A Day* as it is also connected to Janice's addiction and alienation. Besides, it is important to highlight that Rabbit only watches these shows because Janice was watching them first. The *Queen For A Day* scene takes place right after Janice gives birth to Rebecca and, inside the hospital room, she meets Rabbit after more than two months of separation:

'I love you', she says. 'Do you have a quarter?'  
'I guess. I'll look. What do you want it for?'



'If you put a quarter in that' - she points toward a small television set on a high stand, so patients can see it over the foot of their beds - 'it'll play for an hour. There's a silly program on at two that Mother and I got to watching when I was home'. So for thirty minutes he sits by her bed watching some crew-cut M.C. tease a lot of elderly women from Akron, Ohio and Okland, California. The idea is all these women have tragedies they tell about and then get money according to how much applause there is, but by the time the M.C. gets done delivering commercials and kidding them about their grandchildren and their girlish haid-dos there isn't much room for tragedy left. Rabbit keeps thinking that the M.C., who has that way of a Jew of pronouncing very distinctly, no matter how fast the words, is going to start plugging the MagiPeel Peeler but the product doesn't seem to have hit the big time yet. It isn't too bad a show, a pair of peroxide twins with twitchy tails push the women around to various microphones and booths and applause areas. It even makes for a kind of peace: he and Janice holds hands (175/176).

Again there is a clear contrast between the two characters. Even being at the hospital and eager to see her husband, Janice does not think twice and prefer to watch the telly rather than talking. As Ristoff argues: "For most part, it seems that Rabbit resents the medium, realizing perhaps that his video-maniac wife finds it more interesting than him...Communication between them is barely possible, and television, instead of offering a common source for discussion actually generates conflicts. In fact, television seems to be at the very center of their quarrels"(69). The same way that Disney's *The Mouseketeer* hampered communication, *Queen For A Day* does not allow the couple to talk about their problems. Furthermore, the same pattern is repeated as Rabbit is the one who produces some responses to the show. Janice just watches it to fill some empty time whereas Rabbit seems to have a pragmatic view over the program. Such view is stressed by his thinking that the company he works for would be mentioned by the M.C. amidst the welter of commercials which fills the show. The program also casts some other similarities over Rabbit's life as it deals with family tragedies and unimportant husband flights; events which will turn into money depending on how much tragic and audience response they eventually get.

Furthermore, there is a clear connection between the show and the decade. As Rabbit cleverly contemplates, in this profit centered world, there isn't much room for real tragedies left as even human emotions are turned into big money for easy entertainment. As it was previously stated, mainstream America of the 1950 was too lethargic and alienated for any consideration over the problems which afflicted the underdogs of the nation and yet, through television's banalization of human emotions, American citizens learned how to become inconsiderate to public events. Yet, such detachment of Middle America from the public realm is due not to the television set in particular but to the programs which Updike chose to fictionalize and to be emblematic of the period. It is because of these programs that a clear picture of the decade becomes delineated. Both Disney and the auditorium show represent the power that television wielded over middle-class America which refused (as Janice) to spend some time in front of the set watching the news.

Ristoff is one critic who have given more attention on how much television is overwhelming not only within Rabbit's life but also within the entire narrative of *Rabbit*,

*Run*:

The impact of television on Rabbit's life in *Rabbit, Run* is also enormous. There is hardly a page in the novel which does not contain a direct or indirect reference to it. The medium invades Rabbit's home and Rabbit's mind, entertaining, preaching, and selling. Television is an integral part of the novel's intrigue, for Rabbit's mind, despite his momentary rebellions, finds there its matrix. He walks around Brewer with distorted television messages in his mind the same way Leopold Bloom walks around Dublin turning his advertising jingles in his head" (1988;p69)

Yet, a definite picture of television in the novel stands as a highly ambivalent one. The characterization of Rabbit as one desperately seeking for life amidst a seemingly dead environment does not in any form comprise the televised medium. Rabbit, in fact, must run

from it as television endangers his energetic spasms of rebellion against the inert status quo. However, the character must be read as the very produce of such system. The equation Rabbit-Disney-Freedom reveals the ingenuousness of the main character who truly believed he could get freedom within a close-knit society whose values favored marriage, family life, religion and most of all, appearances. It is clear that television is a producer of alienation. Nevertheless, the complexity of it all resides on Rabbit's perception of his wife's alienation, but no realization that he is also alienated by the medium. Rabbit never reaches anywhere in the story. His run from Janice and TV does not end in an objective purpose. Finally, Updike in fact emphasizes the process of running than a result; it is the process which is more important not the solution.

However, in the present narrative, Rabbit does run from Janice and television. A decade later, Janice runs from Rabbit and television. This difference tells much about the two books as about the decades portrayed. Furthermore, the association of television with dead Janice becomes distinct during the bathtub scene. Briefly, the scene marks the re-encounter of the couple who after some months of separation were going to spend their first night together. At the beginning everything worked out fine; Harry had moved in with Nelson and took good care of the house and was trying his best not to get into trouble with his wife. However, during the night, Harry tries to have sex with Janice. The attempt, which for Harry was a natural desire, a form to say to his wife that he still loved, seemed disgusting and shameful for Janice as she couldn't forget that up to that very moment Harry had lived with a prostitute. As a result, she doesn't let him have his way. Infuriated, he runs away from her for the second time in the story.

Around four in the morning, she gets up and realizes that Harry hasn't returned. Immediately she feels her whole life like a heavy weight over her shoulders and she feels she cannot hold it. The social world of her mother and her mother's neighbours frightens her terribly, making her drink whisky from the very early morning. Gradually, she begins to sense a different presence in the house: "she tries to walk boldly into the kitchen with no clothes on like a whore but the sense of somebody watching her, which began when she stood at the window and made her milk flow, is too strong" (Run 206). This other person is probably death for she looks around her living room and everything looks broken-down; "the mouldy brown armchair", "the mottled walls", "the pasty ceiling" and the pattern on the wallpaper which looks "hateful". But then when "she turns her face away" and focuses her attention to the TV she sees "the calm green globe of the dead". Obviously, this other presence in the room could only be represented by the television as the medium is certainly connected to the idea of the watcher, just as in George Orwell's *1984* which used the TV as the big brother, a form of state control that could see everything and therefore command people's actions. In the present passage, television watches minutely all the movements performed by Janice. The scene resembles a horror movie such as Spielberg's *Poltergeist* in which the television is responsible to turn into a gate linking real life with the afterlife:

She goes to the television set and the band of light that suddenly flares in the green rectangular sparks joy in her breast but it's still too early, the light is just a specking senseless brightness and the sound is nothing but static. As she sits there watching the blank radiance a feeling of some other person standing behind her makes her snap her head around several times. She is very quick about it but there is always a space she can't see which the other person could dodge into if he's there. It's the television has called him into the room when she turns off the set she starts to cry immediately." (207)

It's definitely a highly tense moment which Updike builds so ingeniously, especially when he makes use of television to represent the modern version of the Grim Reaper. Janice had been accustomed along the years to rely solely on the companionship of TV and now the set seems to look at her, showing the dimension of her disgrace. As we can see, the medium primarily offers her some form of joy but because it is still too early in the morning there's no program on the screen just a "senseless brightness" and a static sound. The image of death. A spirit that is projected by the television onto the wall that alarms her several times, making her turn the head to check if there's really someone at her back. The sense that death is close at hand is evidenced when she finally turns off the set and starts to cry: "she sits there with her face in her hands, her tears crawling out between her fingers and her sobs shaking through the apartment...she wants to wake somebody; she is sick of being alone" (207). The television set does not offer her companionship any longer just a morbid omen.

This last scene proves the connection of Janice-television-death. The appropriation of the medium serves the purpose to create a substantial distinction between Harry and Janice. As it was stated, Harry is much linked to life whereas Janice to death. In between them, there is television which actualizes the distinction. The irony of this triangle resides on the change happening in the following novel. Janice will be replaced by Rabbit and Janice herself will give way to 13-year-old Nelson and two fugitives: a black man and a young white girl. In this manner, the triangle will turn into a quartet and binding all of them together there is television which permeates the novel with newsbroadcasts and sitcoms. The fifties as viewed by Updike, who wrote the novel in the present tense, reveals his personal interpretation of the years and a man who sensed that his country was not

much involved with politics. What he saw was a total lack of politics which in the novel is represented by Janice's turning off the set when the news is about to begin. Both characters feel empty in a world which was unable to fulfill their lives even amidst a welter of innovations (from media to household appliances). Disney, television and MagiPeel Peelers did not work the way Harry had envisioned and thus they end up worsening the characters' lives rather than helping. *Rabbit, Run* stands out to be one impressive survey on the way society is affected by the media and wide-spread consumerism. It is also a probe into culture evidencing the values, thoughts and attitudes which braid one decade. Although one might argue that the division of each novel into a decade is by far arbitrary, one cannot neglect that each Rabbit novel produces a meaningful document of how American society has changed through the years.

At the heart of Rabbit's changes television stands as one important element to be investigated. The following novel, *Rabbit Redux*, is also an impressive study on the changes that affected American society (particularly Middle America) during the turbulent Nixon years. One more time television occupies a privileged place as Updike uses it much more times to the point of nearly including it in every scene. This we are going to investigate in the following chapter.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> It is obvious that the whole tetralogy limits to third person narration, mainly through the point-of-view of its protagonist. It is then through this choice of narration that a shift on the American culture is mostly perceived. In *Rabbit Redux*, for instance, Rabbit's indignation to his losing power mirrors the process of decentralization in which his nation is undergoing.

<sup>ii</sup> President Eisenhower is credited to the first president to use the TV for political campaign. For more details see McNair.

<sup>iii</sup> Elizabeth A. Lawrence makes an interesting analysis of how influential Mickey Mouse has been to the American society since its creation in 1928. Lawrence makes use of biological surveys to ground her theses that some animals have the power to neotonize human beings. Neotony, according to the author, "refers to a condition in which there is retention of youthful characteristics in the adult form" and that "human beings represent a neotonous species because we retain into maturity certain traits which were originally juvenile features of other primates - our close ancestors" (67). Quoting Charles Darwin, Lawrence also reveals that when domesticating our animals and wiping off their most natural traits in order that they become pets, there is, in the process, an unconscious selective pressure which often results in neotonization. Making reference to what she calls Lorenz's schema, she asserts that "a high and slightly bulging forehead, large brain case in proportion to the face, big eyes, rounded cheeks, and short, stubby limbs calls forth an adult nurturing response to such a 'lovable' object, moving people to feelings of tenderness".

The point is that since the creation of Mickey Mouse in 1928, the most famous rodent world over has become severely neotonized. When he first appeared on movie cartoons his behaviour and traits suggested a more aggressive and nasty character. Over the years, parallel to the increase of his popularity, his shape became gradually less offensive by the shortening of his nose and the new roundness of his head and ears. Today if we take a close look we perceive that actually Mickey Mouse is three circles put together. A shape that stimulates love and care, contrary for example to Felix, The Cat who is "full of angles and sharp points" (68). This changing of shape over the years was intentional. It reveals that Disney cartoonists knew what they should do to attract the American mind, who would never consciously be able to grasp the significance of the whole process. In the Mickey Mouse club program showed on television, the youngsters would wear Mickey ears, the object that according to Lawrence "[has] indeed, taken on a wider symbolic meaning - standing now even for the process of becoming juvenile". To sum up Mickey's place in the American culture, something is indeed lacking: maturity. As Lawrence writes: "By making our pet and cartoon animals into perpetual children who never grow old, we undoubtedly come to identify ourselves with their juvenile state. Thus they serve to rejuvenate us and to protect us from the reality of old age and the ensuing death that we deny" (70)

<sup>iv</sup> The use of the term "the great communicator" comes from Brian McNair's *An Introduction to Political Communication* in which he refers to Ronald Reagan as the great communicator; and to Ristoff's corrections to my work in which he makes use of the term in a similar way.

## CHAPTER III

### Television in Rabbit Redux

A number of events have happened during the last ten years making the restless Harry evolve into a quiet and extremely conservative citizen, one who worships his country as God. His restlessness and surge for individuality have diminished considerably to the point of nullity and now at thirty-six he has migrated from an irresponsible job-hopper to a disciplined typist at the local paper called *The Verity Press*. The job was arranged by his father, Mr. Agstrom, and both men work together and confabulate daily about their corresponding wives: One on the verge of death, the other, for the first time in life, **having** an affair with another man. Parallel to Harry's disordered private life, America is also going through a period of internal dissensions brought about by minority groups such as black people, women and university students protesting all across the country. The sixties are widely known to be one period of national unrest not only within the American continent but also nearly world over; it is a moment in which politics becomes the scuttlebutt of the day. Because of this political unrest, *Rabbit Redux* becomes by far the most topical text of the entire tetralogy so much so that it is possible to draw a correspondence linking *Rabbit*, *Run*, *Rabbit is Rich* and *Rabbit at Rest* in terms of their mild political concern whereas in *Rabbit Redux* the television is responsible for including politics in nearly every page of the novel. As Schiff argues: "Though the novel at times reads like Updike's private debate with American sixties liberalism, one must concede the author is attempting to depict a historical period in which Americans were more politically vocal and involved"(42). Furthermore, although Rabbit does not "think about politics" as



he declares “that’s one of ...[his] Goddam precious rights, not to think about politics” (Run 44), the novel might be read, on the surface, as the story of these two discourses: the public versus the private and the many ways both of them interact.

Because of *Rabbit Redux*’s overt political concern it became clear after its publication that Updike was earnestly concerned with demonstrating, through Rabbit’s life, a chronicle of the changes that have been taking place in America culture since the end of the second world war. With this novel the public realm marks its invasion within private life and thus it is no longer possible to separate the two. The channel through which the invasion takes place is the TV setting everything that happens on the outside in the inside. Critical reviews of the novel invariably refer to this interpolation of public into private with rather unfavorable commentaries. According to Schiff *Rabbit Redux* is the most problematic and bizarre, and it has elicited the most polarized response, ranging from ‘Updike’s weakest novel’ to ‘the best American novel in the decade’<sup>1</sup>, and this is because of the “increased use of American politics [which] was viewed as either a brilliant maneuver that demonstrates how public affairs impinge upon one man’s personal life, or a superficial gesture that allows the public realm to overpower and diminish the lives of Updike’s characters” (41). In fact, it is rather difficult not to view Rabbit as representing white middle-class America and the three new characters: Charles Stavros (a Greek salesman who has an affair with Janice), Jill Pendleton (a white minor who flees home and has an affair with Rabbit) and Hubert “Skeeter” Johnson (a young black Vietnam veteran who moves into Rabbit’s home) as each one also representing a minority group as showed on the TV.

The situation becomes even more representative when Harry, Nelson, Jill and Skeeter end up living together under the same roof and engage themselves into long night educational readings and marijuana trips. As a consequence, Harry's home becomes, in this manner, the symbol of 1969 American counter-culture itself. His house, which later gets burned down, is meant to stand as America and the people who live in it to represent each minority group as broadcast by TV. In this manner, the two characters who become Rabbit's tenants and educational companions for some months are interesting elements for analysis as they seem to stem directly from television newscasts. As Schiff argues: "Updike's strategy with Jill and Skeeter is to bring the headlines of the 1960s into Rabbit's living room; as he states. 'This was an era when we lived by television, and those two just came in off the set into Rabbit's lap'"<sup>ii</sup> (43). Moreover, even being direct characters from television each has a particular approach to the medium: Jill totally hates it whereas Skeeter acts more like Rabbit himself and becomes passively addicted to it.

Therefore, television invades Rabbit's life in *Rabbit Redux* more than in any other Rabbit novel. As Schiff asks himself: "What happens to the white middle-class family when the black revolutionary from television moves in?"<sup>(45)</sup>. Ristoff also thinks similarly, he argues that : "*Rabbit Redux* is essentially a novel transcribed from TV, and that the "invasion" of Skeeter and Jill into Rabbit's home happened through TV rather than as factual events"<sup>iii</sup> [emphasis added]. As such, if we assume both characters as direct products from television newscasts we are also determining at least two points: first, the public sphere stands as one powerful element as it is personified into Jill and Skeeter and second, television becomes even more conspicuous now than it was in the previous novel. Just to illustrate, from the thirty-three references in *Rabbit, Run* the medium's presence in *Redux*

increases to ninety. Not only is its powerful influence determined by the personification of newscasts into Jill and Skeeter, but also by the recurrent appropriation of a welter of news such as: the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) riots, Apollo 11's moon exploration, Vietnam war, black and woman militancies.

One similarity between *Rabbit Redux* and its predecessor is that in both texts television is appropriated to work as an allegory of the decades each novel portrays. In *Rabbit, Run* television was used to hide political issues and emphasize a cultural apathy represented by, at least, overwhelming Disney. In *Rabbit Redux* television performs just the opposite and it is used to make political issues totally visible evidencing a cultural dynamics. This change in the appropriation of television has significant bearings to the assignment of not only *Rabbit Redux* but also all the tetralogy as narratives whose basic aim is to attempt to produce a fiction which stands as close to present day life as possible<sup>iv</sup>. Updike definitely believes that everyday life is influenced by mass media products and that much of how people perform their actions within society has to incorporate the media. From this perspective, *Rabbit Redux* becomes a splendid study of the interpolation of mass media artifacts within private life. And it is these two poles which makes Rabbit's life tick.

Therefore, the appropriation of television possesses significant implications for the narrative as it casts Rabbit into a disempowered position. According to Steinman and Fox:

Whenever there is a major revolution or change in the power structure of some aspect of society, the outs, the insurgents, the underdogs always become the center of attention and receive the major share of publicity. Thus, in the United States, the activities of racial minorities and youthful rebels are given center stage, while their adversaries, the white, middle-class, middle-age establishment, sink into the shadows. (9)

The previous quotation was taken from a book written in 1974, a period during which America had already undergone a process of decentering. The narrative of *Rabbit Redux*, though, is set in 1969, a time during which this process of decentering was still on its most critical moments. For Steiman and Fox, this crisis stems from a massive realignment of racial positions; as stated in the quotation, the 'forgotten' Americans are in fact white Americans who have lost a voice during this turbulent decade and painstakingly become a symbol spoken by others (black people and liberated women), but not themselves speaking any longer. Sometimes imagined as middle-class, sometimes as working-class, the class composition of the so-called "forgotten Americans" was remarkably flexible, and the meanings of that class position were even more self-contradictory.

According to Sally Robinson: "The category 'Middle America' becomes increasingly visible following the election of Richard Nixon in 1968" (333). It becomes visible not as "a secure and self-evidently normative standard of American identity but as a beleaguered and disenfranchised group whose rights have become trampled upon" by the coming to visibility of minority groups "whose demands have silenced the majority". In other words, the presence of racial disturbances and youthful rebels on television makes the presence of white America gradually limited on the news. Thus, its new position as an invisible presence. At the same time, because of this invisible presence, white America becomes visible as the silent majority; as a group who ironically now lacks a voice on the media concerning national and local affairs. Sally Robinson also argues that the catch-all term Middle America was a fabrication by the media "as countless magazine articles, news program, and books announce a crisis in American normativity". From this perspective, there is a paradoxical issue on this interpretation for if the term Middle America was a

fabrication by the media as an ultimate attempt “to remedy the proclaimed invisibility of these ordinary Americans” (335) as the same media was showing the visibility of minority groups, there is then an attempt to give voice to this silent majority. As Janice alludes to Rabbit while talking to her lover Charles Stavros: “He’s silent majority...but he keeps making noise”(49). Discussions of the silent majority paradoxically have the effect of making white men newly visible as a specific category of American identity.

Broadly speaking what defines Middle America in this period is a sense that these people have lost what was rightfully theirs. During the course of the story Rabbit also loses everything which gave him control: wife, house and job. In this manner, both Rabbit and Middle America experience a deep alienation from a social system which, by rights, they ought to dominate. Part of this lost entitlement is the power to represent America *per se*, and to determine the terms of American normativity. As Sally Robinson argues: “The homogeneity of the category ‘Middle America’ is dependent upon the erasure of class and gender differences, and, thus, Middle America comes to mean a unified and dissatisfied white America”(336). Still, the assignation of Rabbit as Middle America becomes problematic as the term in fact speaks nothing and is prone to a number of questions: does it include women? white women? housewife women? white middle class men? the working white class? the white elite? The only certainty is that white America becomes unified as a group only through its contrast to other groups which seem more related. Groups such as African-Americans and Feminists. It is only through this contrast that a homogeneity of the category Middle America becomes possible. That’s the reason why the assignation of Rabbit as Middle America or as silent majority becomes problematic as according to Sally

Robinson, these terms were invented as an attempt to make up for the lack of media coverages of white people. She argues that:

white men are reacting against their perception that their central position in American culture has been usurped...the 'common men' are no longer seen in the most respectable novels or movies. They rarely appear on television, and their values are not to be found in most popular songs (347).

This is what afflicts Rabbit mostly in this novel. After a decade Rabbit, who now is only known by his first name Harry, has become conservative, racist, a faithful nationalist and totally addicted to television. His country is now moving too fast for his apprehension "with Vietnam, social protests, race riots, sexual freedom, and increased drug use" constantly displayed on TV (Schiff 42). Besides, ironically, Janice and Harry assume opposite roles to those they played a decade before. The new Rabbit now sees his masculinity completely de-energized and feminized by his new characteristic as a domestic man. This Rabbit is a man who can't walk, never mind run, and he appears to have lost the impulse for individuality that defined him in the previous novel. Moreover, he spends nearly all of his time watching television. Thus, he has moved from a position of action to total inertia.

One reason for such transformation is the newly energized (and sexualized) Janice who leaves him right at the start of the novel to live with Greek salesman Charles Stavros. The new Janice finds echoes on the women's liberation movement which took place during the early sixties. And because of this freshly acquire single life, television becomes Rabbit's new wife, so to speak. The TV then works in the direction of revealing Rabbit's impotence in the face of a world that seems to have stripped him of his privilege as a white male so much prevalent in *Rabbit, Run* and therefore sets the stage for a painful attempt to

recuperate his lost privilege and a valid identity. Through television Rabbit realizes Middle America is attempting to come to terms with the various minority groups which constitute the nation and like America Rabbit resolves to do the same.

In reality, I borrow the expression valid identity from Janice who at the very day when she finally decides to move away from Rabbit and into Charlie's apartment she leaves the following note: "It is the year nineteen sixty-nine and there's no reason for two mature people to smother each other to death simply out of inertia. I'm searching for a valid identity and I suggest you do the same" (*Redux* 95). Rabbit's perception that he also must procure a valid identity threatens his construction of an ideal America and his habitual privileged position within it. Very gradually and at great pains Rabbit realizes that this time he is in a disempowered position and as many critics have argued, Updike represents Rabbit as primarily passive.

His newly acquired passivity is epitomized by the long hours spent watching television. Very different to its role in the previous novel, television works in the direction of promoting life. Through TV Rabbit feels startled to realize that he is the one who has become inert; dead. The medium constantly evidences the process of national transformation in which America is undergoing. In this manner, television has the power to decenter Rabbit and move him to the margins, replacing Middle America by a horde of people that Rabbit usually takes to be his enemies. The significant change now is that Rabbit, ironically, welcomes these enemies, and with them entertains the possibility that his ideal construction of America is no longer secure in a culture which had made white men visible and visibly lacking power.

Through the increased visibility of people of color, women and youthful rebels on television Rabbit is forced to think about his own visibility as a white man. Such visibility brings with it a loss of power and extreme anxiety. Rabbit gradually realizes by watching television that the only way he has to recuperate his lost power is through the incorporation of minority groups he sees as his enemies. That's why during the course of the narrative he lodges first Jill, who is a representative of the youthful rebels Rabbit clearly opposes, and second, Skeeter who is the representation of the black movement in its most radical aspects and whose existence Rabbit flagrantly detests. As Schiff has argued, these both characters are direct produces from television; they were the means through which Updike devised to make evident how pervasive and influential television news were to Middle America. As the news on TV, both characters invade Rabbit's home.

Yet, it is necessary to state that in *Rabbit Redux* such a recuperation of the male power through the incorporation of the other never gets off the ground. Even though Jill and Skeeter contribute to recharge and re-energized Rabbit's identity, by the end of the novel we see Rabbit moving backwards instead of forwards. In other words, after having lost the wife, the house, his young lover, his black tenant and thus everything which worked to his recuperation of a lost individuality, Rabbit moves back to his parent's house and returns to his childhood bedroom and dressing like a schoolboy he spends much of his time thinking about abstract women he can hardly identify and masturbating. Yet, as it was highlighted, a number of events have changed Rabbit's life and forced him to think about his existence and the people's existence that surround him for the first time in his life. Rabbit's personal search for meanings has to get involved with these events and it is chiefly through such involvement that he is able to re-charge and re-energize his identity. To limit the scope of



the present dissertation the events which will be investigated are: the overwhelming NASA and the black movement. It also must be known that all of these issues have already been examined carefully by a number of different critics and for this reason, the primary purpose of this study is to perceive in what circumstances the medium of TV is essential to Rabbit's search through the media.

#### THE REPLACEMENT OF DISNEY FOR NASA

As it was stated in the previous chapter, the a-political characteristic of the fifties is mainly represented by the overwhelming presence of Disney. Ten year afterwards, a great change takes place in America, making the continent become involved deeply into political debates and disruptive societal transformations. Because of this, it is not gratuitous that Disney is hardly mentioned in *Rabbit Redux*. Instead, the controlling metaphor for the entire narrative is represented by NASA. Various critics have pointed out the significant implications which such change has brought about to the story and on a regular basis the notion that technology represents a dead end is emphasized. One quite interesting irony is that no doubt the moon exploration definitely represents the great American kick-off for the establishment of its unbreakable hegemony world over. The two white Americans which landed on the moon and planted the American flag on its soil established for once the power that white America wielded over the other Americas (Africans and a welter of other immigrants). Yet, the enterprise did not have the expected response on Rabbit who is able to perceive that there is no need in sending people to the moon while the earth needs to be cared for. All through the narrative such ironic feature of the moon enterprise is made explicit by Updike in a number of moments.

The novel begins with the moon blastoff which Rabbit and his father watch in a bar appropriately named Phoenix. The analogy between the title of the novel and the bar's name is also obvious. According to Ristoff, Redux means return to health after a disease and thus the indication that Rabbit will eventually raise from the dead is made clear. Ironically, parallel to the Apollo 11's enterprise to the moon and the ensuing technological advances<sup>v</sup>, Rabbit sees himself unemployed for the same reasons: the *Verity Press*, the local paper Rabbit works for, eventually dismisses him due to the new implantation of off-set machines in the printing process which brings about a shortening of the staff. From the very beginning then Updike evidences that technology will possess a negative aspect. At the day of Apollo 11's take-off, that is, on July 16 in 1969, both father and son enter the Phoenix to have the one customary drink before heading each to their respective homes. Inside the bar they watch the take-off on a television:

The bar television is running, with the sound turned off. For the twentieth time that day the rocket blasts off, the numbers pouring backwards in tenths of seconds faster than the eye until zero is reached: then the white boiling beneath the tall kettle, the lifting so slow it seems certain to tip, the swift diminishment into a retreating speck, a jiggling star. The men dark along the bar murmur among themselves. They have not been lifted, they are left here (Redux 12).

As Ristoff argues: "The feat which unites Americans also seems to separate them from each other or, at least, it stresses the differences which exist between them" (82). The prevailing metaphor in the passage is one of separation. According to Joyce B. Markle the television with the sound turned off is a constant metaphor Updike uses for separation. In the passage, the theme of separation makes clear who are to be left stranded and who are to be included in this promising voyage towards the moon. Obviously, the number of people who are not travelling is much bigger than the ones actually on board. As Ristoff

stresses: "Updike's suggestion...that the common man should not expect much from this American 'adventure'...also shows the existing capital and labor conflicts, which never receive much foreground attention, but which Updike cannot help referring to at least". As it was mentioned, the blastoff foreshadows some difficult problems Rabbit will have in his job. Although the point of view is obviously Rabbit's, the narrator intervenes in the last two sentences with the forewarning that technology might eventually become direly disappointing. Throughout the rest of the novel, anytime that the Apollo 11 is mentioned there is a certain devaluation of expectancy, making clear that Updike's central conception towards the moon exploration in particular and technology in general is one of harsh criticism.

In the previous quotation, such criticism is made evident by the description of the men inside the bar. They are "dark" and here the adjective does not denote color but connote desolation and unhappiness. Besides, instead of an expected spirit of euphoria towards the take-off, they simply "murmur among themselves" which again indicates desolation. Joyce B. Markle adds that technology in *Rabbit Redux* "symbolizes dehumanization, mechanization, emptiness"(56). This indication of emptiness is also felt in the atmosphere of the bar with the television set placed at one corner, its sound turned down low, the men sousing themselves on a fast binge before going home.

When Rabbit finally arrives home he finds his son Nelson totally mesmerized by the telly watching the take-off. In fact, Nelson is the only character in the story who witnesses Apollo 11 with a different outlook. Throughout the narrative the impact of war news as well as the space flight is so enormous in his life that he is the only one really eager to watch *2001- A Space Odissey* at the movies and keeps mentioning films he saw on the

tube which showed powerful machines such as airplanes and military boats. However, Rabbit's point-of-view is one of skepticism, at dinner time, after having gobbled two TV-dinners with Nelson he turns on the TV and watches the news, a habit he has acquired through the years:

The six o'clock news is all about space, all about emptiness: some bald man plays with little toys to show the docking and undocking maneuvers, and then a panel talks about the significance of this for the next five hundred years. They keep mentioning Columbus but as far as Rabbit can see it is the exact opposite: Columbus flew blind and hit at something, these guys see exactly where they're aiming and it's a big round nothing (24).

The TV news about the space exploration again does not entice any response of euphoria or at least any curiosity on the part of the protagonist. In fact, Rabbit shows some derision watching the news; for instance, the scientist with his tools trying to explain to the laymen how the whole experience will be performed is described as a "bald man" playing "with [his] little toys". The NASA panel is also mocked in their persistence in trying to make clear the enormous significance of the moon flight project. However, Rabbit is clever and skeptical enough not to buy easily the analogy the panel renders to Christopher Columbus. In his mind, the space exploration is quite the opposite from the 15th century sea-voyages and besides, he does not perceive the modern attempt as a positive experience. The universe for Rabbit is a "big round nothing" whereas the seas provided legitimate elements to be discovered.

More on the personal level, one event which must not be forgotten is the fact that Janice leaves Rabbit at the very day of the Apollo 11's take-off. As such, the blastoff also "enhance[s] the development of the conflicts between Rabbit and Janice" (Ristoff 83). Schiff also makes the same connection: "the split between Janice and Harry parallels the

separation of the Apollo 11 rocket, which divides into command and lunar modules. Like the two separated crafts, Harry and Janice move through space, orbit, and follow a path toward eventual reunion, redocking”(44). One character who directly criticizes technology is Janice’s lover, Charles Stavros. For him technology is just not sexy and he does not see the point in watching a movie like *2001-A Space Odyssey*. However, when Janice resolves to offer a showdown to Rabbit about her affair with Stavros, the married couple resolve to finish a period of almost ten years of mutual celibacy, for since the death of baby Rebecca Harry had given up sex in the marriage, and acting as two young lovers, they drop on the floor of their living-room and make love with the TV on without sound, just the images “to help them see when darkness comes”(65). It is interesting to see again the use of television with the sound turned off as a metaphor for separation as in the next morning Janice really decides to leave home and move into Charles’ apartment. Nonetheless, the sex scene in front of the television screen is a fascinating moment in the story for it is imbued not only with dramatic force but also with ingenious plastic art. In other words, the images showed on the screen while the couple make love are reflected in their bodies producing a fascinating blend of real sex with TV images. Furthermore, these are the same images displayed on the TV throughout the entire narrative, namely: “module models pantomiming flight, of riot troops standing before smashed supermarkets, of a rowboat landing in Florida...of situation comedies and western melodramas, of great grey momentary faces unstable as quicksilver...”(65). The references to war, violence, desolation, empty capitalism and easy emotions are clear. The television works as a mirror of the couple’s emotions by showing them what is going on in their country. Their private life resembles a lot the public sphere being displayed and therefore, in this passage Updike

one more time makes clear reference to one recurrent theme in the novel which is the interpolation of the private with the public.

Besides, the overall mood here is one of desolation and despair; by mixing these two realms together Updike reveals not only how mechanical and barren the sex being performed by Rabbit and Janice has eventually turned out, but also how deplorable the whole American nation has evolved to:

Her body a stretch of powdery sand, her mouth a loose black hole, her eyes holes with sparks in them, his own body a barren landscape lit by bombardment, silently exploding images no gentler than Janice's playful ghostly touches, that pass through him and do him no harm (65).

The movement become tainted by the images sent from the TV. Their bodies become inhuman and resemble the scenes showed on the screen. Janice's mouth is described as "a loose black hole", a metaphor already linked to the space exploration and meant to indicate emptiness and nothingness. Her eyes are "holes with sparks in them" showing evil and apprehension of misfortune. Rabbit's body becomes barren like the televised landscape after bombardment and the finger touches of his wife are explosions which do not harm him. There are too much coldness and lack of pain in the way they have sex. Everything seems pre-programmed as a television sex scene and thus their attempt at reconciliation through sex evolves into an abstraction, a representation of the real thing which no longer exists. The end of it could not be more depressing: "straddling his thighs, her cunt revealed by the flickering touch of the television to be lopsidedly agape, she bows her head, her hair tickling his belly, and drops cold tears, starpricks, upon the slack flesh that has failed her". Janice is the only one to perceive that their cause was lost. There was no possibility of continuation as Rabbit was too much of a detached person to sympathize

with her pain. She wanted someone who watched less and acted more; someone who was a real person, not a phantom-like creature recently thrown out from an emotionless television screen.

One element which critic Schiff calls attention to and with which I agree is that “despite the contrast between Harry’s stagnant life and the glorious ascent of the astronauts, there are similarities”(77). And the similarity is the search for new frontiers in which Rabbit is forced to endeavor at the moment he sees himself without Janice. Both Rabbit and America are then launched on an enterprise for personal discoveries , “like the astronauts, Harry is going on a trip”. Quoting Updike, Schiff argues that: “In *Rabbit Redux*, the trip to the moon is the central metaphor. ‘Trip’ in Sixties parlance meant an inner journey of some strangeness; the little apple-green house in Penn Villas plays host to space invaders - a middle-class runaway and a black rhetorician”<sup>vi</sup>, the two television characters. By comparison, both enterprises attempt to expand their limitations; the astronauts are trying to expand America’s control between earth and the universe, and Rabbit is trying to expand his limited knowledge about himself and his country.

However, the sensation to start a new life is not at all pleasant as the very day of the moon landing Rabbit and son watch the event in Mr. Angstrom’s house. The passage once again evidences the desolation of both adventures (Harry’s and America’s) in the sense that when watching the landing Rabbit cannot really understand the great significance of it: “At last it happens. The real event. Or is it? A television camera on the leg of the module comes on: an abstraction appears on the screen”. The play on the words “abstraction” and “real event” reveals that Rabbit does not see any advantage to the whole enterprise with so much desolation on earth. Even though Rabbit represents white America, he does not

possesses the astronaut's success. In fact, Rabbit is forced, from this very day, to live as a single father with son. Somehow he does not belong to the usual pattern of the white middle-class man. Some critics believe that white anger is closely related to the new impoverishment of the white middle-class parallel to the ascension of some members of minority groups such as African-Americans, immigrants and women. These have also invaded the media by the end of the sixties which caused more anger to the white middle-class. Moreover, the government also had a share on these turbulent times due to the increased financial aids Richard Nixon devoted to the welfare of minorities. In other words, white America was feeling orphan and revolted, ironically, against the government, in innumerable protests against the minority protests as a form to recuperate their lost rights<sup>vii</sup>.

The moon landing on TV accentuates Rabbit's desolation. It also puts forward his inability to comprehend the 'real event' of being left alone. Everything seems to conspire against him, even the solitary companion of television. When his mother reaches his neck for a little comfort he utters one highly allusive sentence in the book: " 'I don't know, Mom', he abruptly admits, 'I know it's happened, but I don't feel anything yet' " (90). As Ristoff comments: "The historic event, public in nature, has become private and allegorical"(84). Rabbit knows that the moon landing (or Janice's landing on another man's bed) has happened, but he is still unable to comprehend it. As Schiff argues: "The line...testifies to his deadness, his inability to be lifted"(45).



## BLACK PEOPLE ON TV

Nothing irritates Rabbit more than the increasing unwanted presence of black people in the city of Brewer. Not only is his job full of them but also the buses and television programs seem to uncover for him a reality he much wanted not to see. His hostility to black people becomes manifest already at the very start of the novel when he is led by Janice into a Greek restaurant and coincidentally, the couple runs into Charles Stavros whom Rabbit, at this moment, suspects is having an affair with his wife. During a heated conversation Rabbit says the following to Stavros about black people on television: "I don't follow this racist rap. You can't turn on television now without some black face spitting at you. Everybody from Nixon down is sitting up nights trying to figure out how to make 'em all rich without putting 'em to the trouble of doing any work" (46). Such detestable remark on colored people reveals that Rabbit does not have the slightest concern towards this group and feels quite comfortable at being openly racist. In fact, he is sure this is the right way to think as in his mind he would never question the fact that black people are still extremely enslaved in the sixties. Moreover, the American society is, for the first time in history, trying to solve this most painful wound: racism. Historically, we know that this period was a time of black militancy and that all over the country racial disturbances took place. The so-called black riots evolved to their highest peak in 1967 and resulted in the death of one of their most important leaders Martin Luther King, a year after, in Memphis, Tennessee (Hart 495). Despite all the disturbances and protests for civil

rights constantly showed on television, Rabbit does not change his character very much and thus remains conservative and racist throughout the Rabbit novels. However, interestingly enough, it is in the present narrative that the protagonist shows more of his racism and ironically, gets more involved with blacks. One is Buchanan, who works with him in the printing shop, and the other is Skeeter, who represents an antithesis of Rabbit and also a kaleidoscope of a number of black militants. Nevertheless, in no other moment in the tetralogy will Rabbit get involved with black people (Jackson 444).

Yet, due to the constant presence of black people on television, in his job and inside the local buses, Rabbit gradually begins to worry more about their lives and at a certain extent feel fascinated over the black body. This gradual change in Rabbit's behavior is worked chiefly through television programs that touch on racism, preparing the protagonist for a real confrontation with a black man later in the story. His anger towards African-Americans develops into a nearly sexual intercourse with Skeeter, the black man whom Rabbit houses for some months. Sally Robinson argues that "Updike's construction of whiteness requires proximity to, not distance from, blackness"(344). And as it was previously stated, the world of the Rabbit novels is overwhelmingly white which is to say furtively almost obsessed with race. In *Rabbit Redux* this obsession with race is mostly expressed through body manifestations and through an investigation of the differences between whiteness and blackness. This process is a result of the historical environment which provided possibilities for this to happen. Through the constant presence of black people on television (either through talk shows or news) Rabbit is forced to think about them and then develops an intense curiosity towards the black body.

However, even if Rabbit becomes sexually attracted to the black body and nearly has sexual intercourse with Skeeter, he knows that any actual relation to blackness makes him defenseless and vulnerable. Rabbit is able to invite Skeeter to his house and at the same time resists any closer contact with him. On a deeper level, Rabbit does develop some homosexual attractions to Skeeter and this makes him feel too exposed. Yet, such proximity evidences Updike's idea that the only solution for white America is through the incorporation of African-America. That's the reason why Rabbit's middleness becomes one more time problematic as different from the white people in his neighborhood he actually lodges a black man and develops some relation to him.

Television also takes on an important role concerning racism as it is responsible for the increased visibility of women and people of color in Rabbit's world, forcing him to think about his own visibility as an embodied white man. Such visibility brings with it a loss of power as it makes whiteness visible in relation to blackness, and in this momentary visibility, whiteness shows itself to be bland, unfinished, unformed as the following passage reveals:

Physically. Skeeter fascinates Rabbit. The lustrous pallor of the tongue and palms and the soles of the feet, left out of the sun. Or a different kind of skin? White palms never tan either. The peculiar glinting lustre of his skin. The something so very finely turned and finished in the face, reflecting light at a dozen polished points: in comparison white faces are blobs: putty still drying. The curious greased grace of his gestures, rapid and watchful as a lizard's motions, free of mammalian fat. Skeeter in his house feels like a finely made electric toy; Harry wants to touch him but is afraid he will get a shock (221).

There is, in the passage, the usual white fetishizing towards blackness, but it is important to remember that Rabbit had been too much prejudiced towards colored people when

watching them on television. The first moment occurs when Rabbit sees a program at the bar and when he arrives home the same program is on:

The one that French kissed the M.C. is off now and a colored couple is guessing. Pale, but definitely colored. That's ok. let 'em guess. win and shriek with the rest of us. Better than sniping from rooftops. Still, he wonders how that black bride would be. Big lips. suck you right off. the men slow as Jesus. long as whips. takes everything to get them up. in there forever. that's why white women need them. white men too quick about it. have to get on with the job. making America great (21).

Here Rabbit expresses his belief in the traditional myth of black sexual superiority. He does not see blacks as human, but as sexual performers. A few pages before he had wondered about a newspaper article which stated that black people were superior to white, "...the newest men. In some ways tougher, in some ways more delicate. Certainly dumber..." (17), now black superiority amounts to sexual ability. In all other respects however black people remain inferior so much so that Harry feels commiserate with the presence of the couple on the program. Furthermore, in his imagination, black people are usually related to disorder and violence. Inside the local bus he had wondered why black people talk so loud, frightening the rigid Dutch housewives on their way home with their bags full of groceries.

Another moment related to television and racism happens when Rabbit and Nelson watch a TV skit about the Lone Ranger. In the passage, Rabbit begins to feel curious about black history. Later in the narrative, the long night readings with Skeeter will come back to this topic as much of the texts were about American civil war black leaders. The questions he asks himself while watching the skit are representative of his personal search for a re-energization. Rabbit feels he has to comprehend black history because by

understanding he gains back his control. As it was stated in the first chapter, the Lone Ranger's presence in *Rabbit Redux* is political. According to Andrew S. Horton, the Lone Ranger and his faithful Indian assistant Tonto first appeared as a Detroit radio program in 1933 and became as early as 1940 a million-dollar business spread over five media: radio, movies, comic strips, comic books and novels. Horton emphasizes that the great force of the masked avenger in relation to other mythic heroes such as Superman, Bat Man and Tarzan resides on the fact that he is a true American cowboy seen in terms of the old West; "the West of fiction and Hollywood where life is reduced to the readily identifiable forces of good and evil", a West that never really existed. Furthermore, outer space, bat caves and Africa give their characters "the air of being too 'un-American' to attract the following the Lone Ranger has commanded"(571). However, the Ranger's appeal might be paradoxical in the sense that at the same time that he defends white bourgeois traditions such as marriage, the home and womanhood., he is not married himself and has no home.

The present televised and derided Lone Ranger has to adapt to the circumstances and thus in the place of an Indian Tonto, Updike makes reference to a black man "not Sammy Davis Jr. but another TV Negro" (25) and, because of this change, it is no longer possible to see the program with the same naive eyes of one decade ago. The Lone Ranger in *Rabbit Redux* is definitely a political issue and makes reference to a number of problems in the narrative: from racism to Rabbit's recent cuckolded life. The evening that both father and son watch the program is the day which Janice claims she will be working overnight for her father, a used car dealer, while she is actually having an affair with the Greek-American salesman, Charles Stavros, who also works at the lot. According to the program, Carol Burnett, who plays the Ranger's wife, is complaining to Gomer Pyle, the

Lone Ranger himself, about his repetitive unconcern towards her who “hate housework, hates her lonely life” and instead of his paying attention to her feelings the only thing he truly does is to disappear “in a cloud of dust with a hearty ‘Heigh-Ho, Silver’”. On the other hand, Daniel Boone is brought into comparison by Burnett who says that unlike the Ranger, Boone keeps bringing his wife beautiful furs while the only thing she can extract from her husband is a silver bullet.

Her bitterness and anger have some room for Tonto as well as she comments to the Ranger: “Him. Why must we always keep having him to dinner? He never has us back.” The irony of the program resides on the element of betrayal as without the Ranger’s notice, Carol Burnett and the black Tonto exchange some sexual liaisons. First, when Burnett shows her anger toward the constant presence of the black man with her husband which makes him immediately tell her that if she ever “comes to his teepee, she would be kidnapped by seven or eight braves”; an intimidation that Burnett finds quite attractive. Second, at the very end of the program, when she threatens the Ranger to choose between her or Tonto and gets discarded, surprisingly while the hero leaves through one door to attend another call for help, Tonto comes right through the other and kisses and hugs Burnett. The program then ends with her saying : “I’ve always been interested in Indian Affairs”.

Rabbit laughs at the end of the show but this time he realizes he does not actually understand Tonto quite well, a thought that somehow disturbs him:

The Lone Ranger is a white man. so law and order on the range will work to his benefit. but what about Tonto? A Judas to his race, the more disinterested and lonely and heroic figure of virtue. When did he get his pay-off? Why was he faithful to the masked stranger? In the days of the war one never asked.

Tonto was simply on 'the side of right'. It seemed a correct dream then, red and white together red loving white as naturally as stripes in the flag. Where has 'the side of right gone?' (26).

Rabbit's perception that he knows nothing about Tonto prepares him for the confrontation with Skeeter. Tonto stands for everything that is non-white, i.e. non-American, and for the first time in life Rabbit becomes interested on those who dwell in the outskirts of his country. Actually, Rabbit lives through the narrative a constant attack by these marginal groups: Charles Stavros is a Greek-American, Skeeter as well as Buchanan and the people from *Jimbo's lounge* are all of them black. It must be remembered that the circumstances are inevitable and television constantly reminds Rabbit that this is what is taking place outside. Minority groups are repeatedly on the news broadcast, making their way into Harry's home as if the marches he sees on the telly might break the screen and invade his living-room.

The Lone Ranger program is not funny for Harry any longer for other reasons as well: the wife-stealing theme is an ironic parody to Janice's affair with Greek salesman Stavros and as Horton argues: "the similarity between the skit and Rabbit's life, casts Rabbit in the role of the Ranger, for better or for worse". What disturbs Rabbit deeply is the fact that Tonto is even more alienated from his society than the Ranger to the white people. As he thinks: "A Judas to his race, the more disinterested and lonely and heroic figure of virtue"(26). Harry easily identifies himself to the Ranger but it is Tonto who makes him think about his own position in society. It is through the contrast between white and black that Rabbit is able to produce some understanding of white hegemony, a thought which no doubt if it doesn't change him significantly at least increases his perspective for life. The black Tonto presented by the television sitcom encompasses all minorities and Rabbit

feels uneasy to realize he never thought of these people as individuals. Tonto has always been taken for granted as the Ranger's faithful assistant, as a black servant in a white man's home. As Rabbit ponders, "it seemed a correct dream then" as natural as the stripes in the American flag. The irony of it all is that the American flag was being torn open during the sixties and so the correct dream now becomes a heavy nightmare.

The appropriation of NASA and the black movement via television evidences the infiltrating aspect of the public realm into private life. As consequence, private life becomes forcedly political and then the debates change from individualism to collectivism. Throughout *Rabbit Redux*, Updike's middle Americans both wallows in the wounds to their white privileges and luxuriates in recuperation of those privileges. The television, ironically, definitely works to decenter Rabbit from his comfortable position as a white man and even moves him to the margins. The significant and paradoxical aspect in the characterization of Rabbit is his easy invitation of the forces which most afflict his life. Although by the end of the narrative we see Rabbit moving backwards instead of forwards, the turmoil which the sixties represented to him cannot be so fast forgotten. Ten years later Rabbit will regain his control and resume to his white identity, untouched by blackness. In fact, his only contact to blackness limits to songs he hears on his car radio. All in all the influence of the media (particularly television) within his world remains ubiquitous and reveals that Rabbit is far more complex than any assignation to any particular group or class.



## Notes

<sup>i</sup> The reference for "Updike's weakest novel" is from George Hunt's *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980 [167]), for "the best American novel in the decade" the quotation is from John Heidenry's article "The Best American Novel in the Decade" (*Commonwealth* 95 [7 January 1972]: 332).

<sup>ii</sup> Schiff quoting John Updike from George Hunt's *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things*.

<sup>iii</sup> This quotation is from Ristoff's comments on my work.

<sup>iv</sup> Of course the idea of realism has already been criticized by a welter of different scholars and at a certain point it seems quite far-fetched to use the term these days; however, the term neo-realism applied to Updike's tetralogy has been suggested by critic Stacey Olster herself on a message she sent me.

<sup>v</sup> In 1961 the first US suborbital space flight had taken place and a year after the first private communications satellite was launched (Hart 496).

<sup>vi</sup> The quotation Schiff refers to is from Updike, Introduction to *Rabbit Angstrom*, xvi.

<sup>vii</sup> for a detailed analysis of how white supremacy finds untold ways to always remain benefited see Sally Robinson.

## Conclusion

The basic premise of my investigation of Updike's appropriation of television in *Rabbit, Run* and *Rabbit Redux* is to make evident the process of discovery of Middle America as a discourse which becomes marked as a specific category from one decade to another. Television plays a significant role in this process as it is responsible for making *Rabbit, Run* an a-political text and *Rabbit Redux* a political one. Updike's strategy is to place television as one functional channel linking Rabbit and Janice to the outside world. Furthermore, each character possesses their own meaningful approach to the medium. It is in this context that television becomes highly representative and can be read as an effective instrument for the construction of Middle America. Yet, to what degree Rabbit might be taken as representing Middle America itself is a complex discussion.

In my analysis I tried to highlight the complexity of establishing Rabbit as an American Everyman (as many critics so rushedly do) through his interaction with TV and the responses which such interaction produces. It is my point that television encourages Rabbit's search for freedom and change in *Rabbit, Run* and, in *Rabbit Redux*, the medium contributes to Rabbit's personal attempt for re-charging his identity. Essential to this process is the characterization of television which in the first novel it represents alienation whereas in the second, it represents political awareness. As it can be seen, the irony of this interpretation is that television as an alienating tool works as promoter of freedom for Rabbit in the 1950s, however, in the sixties, television accentuates Rabbit's passiveness and disempowerment by showing that other people are also trying to get some rights as well.

Television works as an alienating tool in *Rabbit, Run* chiefly through Updike's intentional appropriation of Disney's shows. The Disney figure solely responsible for this process is the mighty mouse which pervades the novel through one very famous program called *The Mickey Mouse Club*. Disney's overwhelming presence is intentional and it has the function of accentuating the decade as one period which promoted conformity and false tranquility. Such representation becomes crucial when Updike creates the triangle formed by Janice, Rabbit and the TV. Both Janice and Rabbit become alienated by television but in different ways: Janice is basically portrayed as the classical couch potato who does not do anything else but only watches TV. She does not think, hardly ever talks, drinks too much and is closely connected to deadness; on the other hand, Rabbit watches television but naively believes in the messages of freedom advocated by Mickey impersonator *Jimmy the Mouseketeer*. It is because of Rabbit's lack of articulation that he flees home trusting that there is, in real life, freedom enough to be lived.

Disney's presence also determines the decade as one a-political period through its recurrent references making the characters circumvent news and become, apparently, totally unconcerned with what happens to other people on the community. From this perspective, Disney stresses liberal individualism and puts social collectivism in the background. The ideas advocated through *Jimmy the Mouseketeer* are braided with the liberal American conventional motto of success achieved through individual enterprises. The actor impersonating Mickey Mouse emphasizes the power that the individual possesses to change one's mediocre life. The interesting aspect of his messages is that he uses God as primary source for the teachings he renders. As a Protestant man himself,

Rabbit feels startled and awed by Jimmy and naively believes that the big mouse was speaking the real truth and worse, speaking directly to him.

Through Disney, television becomes allegorical of the fifties and must be read as a hindrance for questions of power which never pop up in the narrative. The only moment which Updike uses newsbroadcasts happens during Rabbit's first flight from home in his car when he turns on the radio and listens to news bulletin:

On the radio he hears 'No Other Arms, No Other Lips', 'Stagger Lee', a commercial for Rayko Clear Plastic Seat Covers, 'If I Didn't Care' by Connie Francis, a commercial for Radio-Controlled Garage Door Operators, 'I Ran All the Way Home Just to Say I'm Sorry', 'That Old Feeling' by Mel Torme, a commercial for Big Screen Westinghouse TV Set with One-Finger Automatic Tuning, 'needle-sharp pictures a nose away from the screen', 'The Italian Cowboy Song', 'Yep' by Duane Eddy, a commercial for Papermate Pens, 'Almost Grown', a commercial for Tame Cream Rinse, 'Let's Stroll', news (President Eisenhower and Prime Minister Harold Macmillian began a series of talks in Gettysburg, Tibetans battle Chinese Communists in Lhasa, the whereabouts of the Dalai Lama, spiritual ruler of this remote and backward land, are unknown, a \$250,000 trust fund has been left to a Park Avenue maid, Spring scheduled to arrive tomorrow)... (Run 27)

This is the only moment in which Updike uses news in the story. It is definitely intriguing that television never presents any newsbroadcast. Furthermore, even the radio news is compressed into a welter of moronic songs and commercials. The interpretation that this peculiar characteristic of *Rabbit, Run* possesses is that Updike wanted to make clear this was not an age for political debates. Even though there were political turmoils taking place on the public sphere, these same events never infiltrate the story. Furthermore, it is quite clear through the inclusion of a number of commercials that the fifties lived the affluence of a nation recently made wealth due to the Second World War.

In the following novel, television will lose its status as a hindrance for political awareness and then turn into a promoter of ideology. It also diminishes Rabbit's scope for movement. Through the new inclusion of newsbroadcast, television makes white America

markedly visible through the intense coverages of minority groups on its programs. In this manner, Rabbit becomes conscious of his position as a white man in society and begins to ask questions which he had never before thought of asking. The outcome of this process is that television, ironically, has the authority to de-center Rabbit and place him at the margins. As it was stated before, during this era, all media vehicles, companies which were run by white men, struggled together for the invention of the term 'silent majority' or 'Middle America' as a form to, at least, reserve some space for the angry white men in their footages. For the first time in history, white hegemonic Americans become categorized as a specific group which faces in this period a loss of power and thus launch in a series of battles to recuperate their rights.

According to Sally Robinson, the cultural change which takes place in America during the sixties is primarily racial. It is a consequence of two events: Firstly, there was indeed an enormous preoccupation by the part of Richard Nixon to provide financial aid to black people living in complete poverty and secondly, the increased exposition of people of color on television programs, supplanting white characters for black ones. These two issues together corroborated for the production of what the author names 'white anxiety'. This white anxiety is much a procure for white heroes to sing their songs. Therefore, it is not gratuitous that Rabbit spends much part of the narrative in companion with black characters. Even being openly racist, Rabbit realizes that the only way for achieving success now is through the incorporation of collective ideals ( as his own President was advocating); a condition which Rabbit had to learn painstakingly to accept.

The change of Disney for NASA also reveals that a deep re-structuring within the American consciousness is happening. Even if NASA represents white hegemony, there is

no question that it also produces political debates. Rabbit cleverly realizes that there is something wrong in sending American pilots to the moon and the oblique images of the landing on television makes him feel more diminished and solitary. He tries to understand the whole enterprise as he tries to understand the meaning of Vietnam. He senses that America is being attacked by all sides (within and without) and thus embarks on a personal journey of knowing himself and the people that constantly interact with him.

Looking at these two novels as parts of a process, they become intricately related. Both texts reflect and feed the growing crisis in American culture and they do so by foregrounding the dilemmas of visibility and invisibility around which the construct Middle America is formed. Essential to this dilemma is the characterization of Harry 'Rabbit' Angstrom as the faithful representation of Middle America itself. From one decade to another Updike writes about the facilities of being a middle-class man in the sixties and the anxieties which the same man faces in the sixties. Yet, I think that the author goes further to suggest that what had once been an unquestioned privilege has turned into a liability. In this context, it is quite difficult any classification of Rabbit as Middle America as the term per se does not respond many questions. It is not clear who, after all, are the members of such group. Are they only white men? What class? The elite, middle-class or the hard hats? Does this group include white women? Housewives? Students?

Updike makes quite clear through his placing Rabbit, Skeeter and Jill together that the only manner for classifying Middle America is through its contrast to other groups which seem more related. Groups such as African-Americans, University students, Feminists and immigrants. It is only through such contrast that Rabbit becomes Middle. Yet, a final classification of Rabbit (at least in *Rabbit Redux*) as the silent majority becomes

problematic as the character learns through television that he had to change his attitudes and ideas concerning those people who dwell on the outskirts of his (consciousness ?) country.

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