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BOOK REVIEW

Joel O. Powell

Demographic Vistas: Television in American Culture, by David Marc. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984. 214 pp.

WHEN TELEVISION AND the stuff we see on it weasels into academic discourse it is abused, shunned, ignored, reduced to the critical object of audience surveys, held responsible for maintaining urban stupor, and ultimately rejected as unfit for cultured and educated commentary. David Marc is disturbed by this. For him, television is the most effective purveyor of language, image, and narrative in American culture and more than warrants a critical analysis. In *Demographic Vistas*, he invites us to view an analysis of his past and present with television and to share an excursion into the flow of dreams that television has produced.

In its short history television has defined itself as a comic medium. It has almost always presented orderly life episodes. It does not threaten us. Marc brings to this comic medium the contentions that its formal properties can be investigated, that it should be studied in its "modes of theatricality," and that *auteur* and genre particulars provide a line of inquiry into television's place in culture. The critical discourse which reveals cultural themes rests on a series of formal or structuralist analyses that are influenced by such as Barthes, Frye, and most conspicuously John Cawelti. The history of television in America becomes a history of prime-time shows and three-network-cultural hegemony that ends with old TV stereotypes being appropriated and ridiculed by sardonic boom babies.

Marc's formal analyses are quite thorough and energetic. Sometimes they are insightful. But in his eagerness to reveal the cohesion of TV themes and his structuralist taxonomies, some of his comments become inane. Sample this:

Magic is both the cause and the antidote to the much-feared curse of zaniness. . . . Though a bandleader himself, Ricky simply forbids Lucy from pursuing a show business career. Darren is an even crueller sexist. He constantly expects Samantha to entertain his business contacts at home but forbids her to use her magical powers. Though she can prepare an elegant banquet with a spell (usually one heroic couplet) and twitch of her nose, he forces

her to slave over a hot stove all day for no other purpose than to satisfy his incorrigibly puritanical "principles."

Still, this kind of comment can be gripping because it vindicates the things that we have heard and said (but never took the time to write down) over a joint or a margarita. This is the appeal of formal analysis: scripts can be seen as closed systems and analyzed as if they stand on their own. The only relations in need of explanation are those which connect the themes of one script to another, so we can get high, turn on the tube, and instantly produce catalysis. Unfortunately, when worn out by his prolonged prime-time vigil and the fragmented quality of his subject matter, Marc slap-happily conjugates such items as *The Beverly Hillbillies* and the environmental movement or *Saturday Night Live* spoofs and the Greeks' journey to Hades.

A discussion of television in culture, even a structuralist discussion, should be responsible to the social actors, the modes of production, the impact of audiences on television scripts, the confluence of factors that make the forms of prime-time television presentations. Instead, we get from Marc over a hundred pages of descriptive history that never transcends the strictures of *auteur* and genre analysis. The foolishness that results is a picture of a monolithic American Consciousness as a repository for TV archetypes. We could compare this book to Todd Gitlin's *Inside Prime Time*, which is full of genre descriptions but still manages to treat the incestuous relations of corporations, the problems of demographic knowledge, and the ideal and economic considerations of the social actors who decide what shows will appear on television. Gitlin's infinitely preferable book is actually about television in American culture.

In *Demographic Vistas*, Marc does not connect television to the living world, nor does he link his formal analyses with concepts central to his history. Demographic knowledge is not treated as a social variable, but as a backdrop assumption of television producers who are apparently masters of applied semiotics. Culture is something he refuses to define or "deal with in any theoretical way." We are, however, witness to a brawling gang of metaphors. Television is "America's jester," a "biopsy from the body politic," a "Rorschach test of the American personality," and finally a "crisis of consciousness." The "fast-food smorgasbord of American culture" renders the television viewer a "rough number, a jerking knee in the voodoo poetry of Madison Avenue." And these two-fisted images do us no service because there are no conceptual distinctions for them to defend.

Marc's sins are compounded when we find that these freely-floating formal analyses are only vehicles for his personal aesthetic. We read that *I Love Lucy* was richer and more profound when Lucy fought with her immigrant husband rather than with her banker. We find that *Saturday Night Live* was funnier before Belushi fled, that *The Blues Brothers* was a poor movie, and that Woody Allen was the only American comic equipped to make the pilgrim-

age to the big screen. What has been committed to print in this book are the kinds of statements we would not suffer from the guy behind us in the cafeteria line. We don't want these aesthetic opinions, and they do nothing to illuminate the problem of television in culture.

Marc's perspective on television history is allied with the weakest constituents of structuralism and fails to carry a significant contribution to cultural or aesthetic vision. His popular aesthetic is gratuitous and silly. His first effort at a history of television is a failure. But as television continues to change us into a nation of viewers, as it shapes our cultural images and we assign meanings to those images, we will feel a desperate need for scholars such as Marc to generate and sustain a critical dialogue which reaches beneath the surface of those images. When we close *Demographic Vistas*, we will be left hoping that David Marc will someday really write a book about television and culture.