

## **T***elevision as Ideology*

The treatment of the formal characteristics of television within the system of the culture industry should be supplemented by closer consideration of the specific contents of programs.<sup>1</sup> In any case the contents and the form of presentation are so complicitous with one another that each may vouch for the other. Abstracting from the form would be philistine vis-à-vis any work of art;<sup>2</sup> it would amount to measuring by its own standard a sphere that ignores aesthetic autonomy and replaces form with function and packaging. It is advisable to submit television scripts to content analysis because they can be read and studied repeatedly, whereas the performance itself flits by. The objection that the ephemeral phenomenon hardly produces all the potential effects defined by an analysis of the script may be answered with the observation that since those effects are to a large extent specifically designed for the unconscious, their power over the viewer presumably increases when they are perceived in a mode that just as nimbly eludes the control of his conscious ego. Furthermore, the characteristics under consideration here do not belong to one particular case or another, but rather to a general schema. They recur countless times. And in the meantime the planned effects have formed a sediment.

The material under study comes from thirty-four television shows of various genres and quality.<sup>3</sup> In order to obtain a representative sample with statistical validity for studies of this sort, it would have been neces-

sary to select the material strictly by random survey, whereas in the pilot study we had to settle for the scripts that had been made available to us. Nevertheless, because of the standardization of the entire production process as well as the uniformity of the evaluated scripts, it may be expected that an investigation organized along the lines of an American *content analysis*\* would add supplementary categories to those already developed but would not produce any fundamentally new results: the investigations by Dallas W. Smythe have made this supposition even more plausible.<sup>4</sup>

The material made available to us in Beverly Hills is probably above average. The study was limited to television dramas. These are similar to films in several respects, and incidentally, films make up a considerable part of the programs.<sup>5</sup> The main difference lies precisely in the brevity of the television dramas: most often they are a quarter-hour, at most a half-hour long. This affects the quality as well. Even the modest development of plot and character permitted in film is impossible: everything must be set up immediately. This supposedly technological necessity, itself dictated by the commercial system, favors the stereotypes and the ideological rigidity the industry in any case justifies on the basis of consideration for a juvenile or infantile public. These television dramas relate to films in a manner similar to the way detective novellas compare to detective novels: in both cases the formal shallowness serves an intellectual one. Aside from that one should not exaggerate the specific character of television productions for fear of contributing to the ideology. Their similarity to films attests to the unity of the culture industry: it hardly makes any difference where it is tackled.

Television dramas occupy a great deal of broadcasting time. The December 1951 edition of *Los Angeles Television* by Dallas W. Smythe and Angus Campbell, published by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, showed that dramas were the most common type of program. More than a quarter of all programs offered during any given week were reserved for such dramas "for adults." During evening hours, i.e., the prime broadcasting time, the figure grew to 34.5 percent. And this did not include television dramas for children.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, in New York the volume of television dramas climbed to 47 percent of the entire production. Since the element of social-psychological manipulation, which, incidentally, other types of programs do not lack, is most clearly manifested in these numerically significant programs, it seems completely legitimate to limit the pilot study to them.

In order to show how these programs affect their viewers, one must recall the all too familiar notion of the multilayered structure of aesthetic works: the fact that no work of art on its own communicates its actual

content unambiguously. Rather it is multilayered, cannot be nailed down, and unfolds only within a historical process. Independent of the analyses in Beverly Hills, Hans Weigel in Vienna showed that film, a product of commercial planning, does not have this complexity;<sup>7</sup> it is the same with television. But it would be too optimistic to believe that aesthetic complexity has been replaced by informational univocity. The multilayered structure, or rather, its degraded form, is refunctioned for the benefit of the producers.<sup>8</sup> They accept the legacy of aesthetic complexity by presupposing in the viewer several superimposed psychological layers, while at the same time trying to penetrate those layers in pursuit of a homogeneous and—according to the concepts of those in control—rational goal: the reinforcement of conformism in the viewer and the consolidation of the status quo. They tirelessly assail the spectators with open and hidden "messages." Perhaps the latter have priority in the programming because they are psychotechnically more effective.<sup>9</sup>

The heroine of a serialized television farce, which was awarded a prize by a teachers' association, is a young teacher. Not only does she earn a pitiful salary, she must constantly pay various fines imposed by the ridiculously pompous and authoritarian school principal. So she lacks money and goes hungry. The supposed humor consists in showing how she devises petty ruses to get invited to dinner by all her acquaintances but in the end always without success; by the way, it appears that the culture industry considers the mere mention of food already funny. The ambitions of the farce aim no higher than such humor and the slight sadism of the embarrassing situations in which the young woman finds herself: the sketch sells no idea. The hidden message lies wholly in the script's view of people, which seduces the audience into assuming the same attitude without realizing it. The heroine maintains so much good cheer and intellectual superiority that her pleasant qualities appear to be compensation for her wretched fate: the viewer is encouraged to identify with her. Every word she speaks is a joke. The farce says to the viewer: when you have humor, when you're good-natured, quick on the ball, and charming, then you don't need to get so worked up about your starvation wages; all the same, you remain what you are.

In another farce in the same series an eccentric old woman drafts a will for her cat and names as heirs a pair of schoolteachers from earlier shows in the series. The thought of the will seduces each heir into pretending that he knew the testator. The latter's name is Mr. Casey, consequently the heirs apparent do not know that the affair concerns a cat. No one admits never having seen his benefactor. Later it comes to light that the inheritance is worthless, nothing but cat's toys. But at the end it is discovered that the old lady hid a hundred dollar bill in each toy, and the

heirs have to root through the garbage in order to get at their money. The moral of the story, which should make the viewer laugh, is, first, the cheap and skeptical maxim that everyone is ready to cheat a bit if he believes that no one will find out, and at the same time the warning not to yield to such impulses, just as moralistic ideology counts on the fact that its partisans are always ready to go too far the moment no one is looking. However, what remains concealed under this is disdain for the universal daydream of a windfall inheritance from out of the blue. One must be realistic, maintain the ideology; whoever indulges in dreams arouses suspicion of being a lazybones, good-for-nothing, and a swindler. That this message is not "read into" the farce, as the apologetic argument runs, can be shown by the fact that similar themes perpetually recur; in one Wild West show, for instance, a character says: when a large inheritance is at stake, villainy is not far behind.

Such synthetic complexity functions only within a fixed frame of reference. When a television sketch is called "Dante's Inferno," and when the first scene takes place in a nightclub of the same name, where a man with his hat on sits at the bar and at some distance from him a woman with sunken eyes, too much make-up, and her legs crossed high orders herself another double cocktail, then the habitual television viewer knows that he can look forward to a murder. If he knew nothing more than the title "Dante's Inferno," perhaps he could be surprised, but he sees the show in the schema of "crime drama," where care is taken to insure that horrible acts of violence will occur. The woman perched on the barstool presumably will not be the principal criminal, but she will end up paying for her *déagé* lifestyle; the hero, who has not even appeared yet, will be rescued from a situation all human reason would conclude is hopeless. Certainly experienced viewers will not translate such shows directly into everyday life, but they are encouraged to construe their experiences just as rigidly and mechanically. They learn that crime is normal. What also contributes to this is the fact that the dime-store romanticism of heinous deeds shrouded in mystery is connected with the pedantic imitation of all the accessories of real life. If one of the characters were merely to dial a telephone number different from the one usually used in the series, then the station would receive indignant letters from the audience, who is ready to complacently entertain the fiction that a murderer is lurking on every corner. The pseudo-realism provided by the schema infuses empirical life with a false meaning, the duplicity of which viewers can scarcely see through because the nightclub looks exactly like the ones they know. Such a pseudo-realism reaches into the smallest detail and corrupts it. Even chance, ostensibly untouched by the schema, bears its mark, for it is conceived under the

abstract category "the accidental nature of everyday life"; nothing sounds more false than when television pretends to let people speak the way they usually do.

Let us choose at random some of the stereotypes operating within the schema and deriving their power from its power while at the same time constituting it; they attest to the total structure. A play treats a fascist dictator, half Mussolini, half Perón, at the moment of his downfall. Whether his fall is due to a popular uprising or a military revolt is just as little touched on by the plot as any other social or political aspect of the situation. Everything is private, the dictator nothing but a foolish scoundrel who mistreats his secretary and the crudely idealized figure of his wife; his opponent, a general, is the wife's former lover, although despite everything she remains loyal to her spouse. Finally the dictator's brutality forces her to flee, and the general saves her. The terrible moment of the horror story occurs when the guards protecting the dictator in his palace abandon him as soon as his magnificent wife is no longer at his side. Nothing of the objective dynamics of dictatorships enters the field of vision. One gets the impression that totalitarian states are the result of the character defects of ambitious politicians and that their fall is due to the noblesse of the personalities with whom the public identifies. An infantile personalization of politics is being pursued here. Certainly politics in the theater can only be undertaken at the level of individuals. But in this case it would be necessary to show what totalitarian systems do to the people who live under them, instead of showing the kitsch psychology of celebrated heroes and villains, whose power and greatness the viewer is supposed to respect even when the reward for their deeds is their downfall.

One of the favorite maxims of television humor is that the cute girl is always right. The heroine of a highly popular comic series is what Georg Legman called a *bitch heroine*\*, and would probably need to be labeled in German as "beast" [*Biest*].<sup>10</sup> She behaves toward her father in an indescribably cruel and inhuman way, and her behavior is of course immediately rationalized as "funny pranks." But nothing ever happens to her, and indeed, according to the operative logic, whatever befalls the principal characters in the shows should be accepted immediately by the viewers as an objective verdict. In another show from a series purporting to warn the public of swindlers, the cute girl is a criminal. Yet after the viewer is so taken by her in the opening scene, he must not be disappointed: sentenced to a long prison term, she is immediately pardoned and has every chance of marrying her victim, especially since she nevertheless found the opportunity to radiantly preserve her sexual purity. Shows of this sort unquestionably serve to reinforce the social acceptance

of parasitic behavior; a premium is placed on what psychoanalysis calls orality, the combination of dependency and aggressivity.

By no means is the psychoanalytic interpretation of cultural stereotypes too far-fetched: the short skits themselves flirt with psychoanalysis, in keeping with market trends. Sometimes the latent motives presumed by psychoanalysis come to the surface. Especially widespread is the stereotype of the artist as an abnormal weakling, unsuited for life and somewhat ridiculous, or an emotional cripple. Today's overaccentuated popular art appropriates all this: it glorifies the virile man, its image of the man of action, and insinuates that artists are in fact homosexual. One farce presents a young man who not only has to wear the ever popular mask of the fool, but moreover is supposed to be a poet, shy, and, as the jargon has it, "introverted." He is in love with a boy-crazy girl but is too shy to respond to her advances. In keeping with a favorite principle of the culture industry, the sex roles are reversed, the girl is active, the man on the defensive. The heroine of the piece, of course a different girl than the boy-crazy one, tells her friend of the foolish poet's infatuation. To the question, "Infatuated with whom?" she responds, "With a girl of course," and her friend replies, "What do you mean, of course? The last time he was in love with a turtle, and its name was Sam." The culture industry forgets its moralism as soon as it has the opportunity to make suggestive jokes about the image of the intellectual that it has fabricated itself. Through innumerable opportunities the schema of television cozies up to the international climate of anti-intellectualism.

But the perversion of truth, the ideological manipulation, is in no way limited merely to the realm of the irresponsibly anodyne or the cynically cunning. The sickness lies not in wicked individuals but in the system. That is why it also erodes whatever sets higher goals and aims at being respectable, to the extent that such ambitions are allowed. A script of serious intent contains the portrait of an actress. The plot attempts to show how the famous and successful young woman is cured of her narcissism, becomes a real person, and learns to do what she could not do before: love. She is brought to this conversion by a young and, for once, sympathetically portrayed intellectual—a dramatist who loves her. He writes a drama in which she plays the main role, and her inner confrontation with the role is supposed to act as a kind of psychotherapy, change her personality, and smooth out the difficulties between them. The role allows her to live out her manifest maliciousness as well as ultimately the noble impulses that, as the play assumes, are latently present in her. Whereas she scores a hit in keeping with the model of the *success story*\*, she has conflicts with the playwright, who functions as an amateur psychoanalyst, somewhat similar to the way amateur detectives

intercede. The conflicts are caused by her psychological "resistance." It comes to a severe clash after the premiere, when the actress, intoxicated by her own success, performs a hysterical, exhibitionistic scene before her friends. — She sends her young daughter away to be raised in a boarding school, because her career could be damaged were it known that she has a child of that age. The girl would like to return to her mother, but senses that she is not wanted. The daughter runs away from school and takes a rowboat out onto the stormy ocean. The heroine and the playwright hurry to her rescue. Again the actress behaves egocentrically, without the least consideration for anyone else. The playwright tames her. The girl is saved by valiant sailors, the heroine collapses, renounces her resistance, and decides to love. In the end she accepts her playwright and makes a kind of profession of general religious faith.

The pseudo-realism of the show is not so simple that it would smuggle into the public's consciousness such contraband as the idea that crime is something completely natural. Rather what is pseudo-realistic is the internal construction of the plot. The psychological process that is put on view is fraudulent—in a word, *phony*\*, for which there is utterly no equivalent in German. Psychoanalysis, or whatever type of psychotherapy involved, is reduced and reified in a way that not only expresses disdain for this type of praxis but changes its meaning into its very opposite. The dramaturgical necessity of concentrating lengthy and elaborate psychodynamic processes into a half-hour episode, a necessity the producers then use as a pretext, harmonizes all too well with the ideological distortion the show diligently cultivates. Supposedly profound changes in the individual and a relationship modeled on that between doctor and patient are reduced to rationalistic clichés and illustrated by simplistic and unambiguous actions. All sorts of character traits are tossed about without the decisive point ever appearing: the unconscious origin of those character traits. The heroine, the "patient," is from the very beginning lucidly self-aware. This displacement to the surface renders the entire ensuing psychological process puerile. The fundamental changes in people appear as though all anyone need do is confront their "problems" and trust the better insight of a confidant, and everything will be fine. Within the psychological routine and the "psychodrama" there still lurks the old pernicious idea of the taming of the shrew: that a sensitive and strong man overcomes the capricious unpredictability of an immature woman. The gesture toward psychological depth serves only to make stale patriarchal conceptions palatable to the spectators, who in the meantime have heard something about "complexes." Rather than the psychology of the heroine expressing itself concretely, the two protagonists chatter with each other about psychology. In flagrant contradiction to the entire mod-

ern understanding of the mind, psychology is transposed into the conscious ego. Nothing is indicated of the difficulties that a "phallic character" like that of the actress must seriously confront. Thus the television show presents to the viewer a distorted image of psychology. The viewer will expect exactly the opposite of psychology's intention, and the already widespread hostility toward effective self-reflection will intensify even more.

In particular, Freud's idea of "transference" is perverted. The amateur analyst has to be the lover of the heroine. His practiced distance, pseudo-realistically modeled after the analyst's technique, fuses with the culture industry's vulgar stereotype according to which the man must continually protect himself from the woman's seductive arts and conquers her only by rejecting them. The psychotherapist resembles the hypnotist, and the heroine resembles the cliché of the "split ego." Sometimes she is a noble, loving person, who represses her own feelings only because of certain unhappy experiences, and other times she is a hussy, pretentious and in love with herself but exaggerating her caprices far too much for one not to know from the outset that her inner loveliness will ultimately emerge. No wonder that under such conditions the cure progresses quickly. Hardly does the heroine begin to play the role of the selfless woman, with whom she is supposed to identify so as to find her so-called better ego, and already her friends realize that something is happening to her, that in her relationship to the role she is transforming herself. Any complicated childhood reminiscences are superfluous here. Whereas the show intimates how familiar it is with the latest breakthroughs in the soul's anatomy, it operates with completely rigid and static concepts. The people are what they are, and the changes that they undergo reveal only what was already inside them, their true "nature." Thus the show's hidden message stands in contradiction to its explicit message. On the surface it employs psychodynamic notions; in truth it preaches a conventional black-and-white psychology, according to which personalities are given once and for all; like physical characteristics, they cannot be modified but at most only uncovered.

This is not merely a case of erroneous scientific information, rather it goes to the very substance of the show. For the nature of the heroine, which should emerge when she becomes conscious of herself in the role, is nothing other than her *conscience*. Psychology presents the superego as a reaction formation to repressed impulses of the id, sexuality; yet here the id, the physical urges of the heroine as crudely illustrated in one scene, becomes an epiphenomenon, and it is the superego that is repressed. It may be acknowledged that psychologically such manifestations really exist: ambivalence between the instinctual and compulsive

aspects of character. But there is no question of ambivalence in the television show. It clings to the sentimental idea of a human being who is good at heart but hides her inner fragility beneath an armor of egotism. In the *scène à faire*, in which the two egos of the heroine struggle with each other while she gazes into a mirror, her unconscious is crudely equated with conventional morality and the repression of her instincts, rather than that the instincts themselves break free. It is only her conscious self that wants to disturb the peace. Thus what is practiced is "psychoanalysis in reverse" in the literal sense: the play glorifies the very defense mechanisms, the penetration and illumination of which is the goal of those analytical processes the television show claims to demonstrate. This alters the message. The viewer is apparently taught lessons such as that he should love, without having to worry about whether it can be taught—and that he should not think materialistically, whereas since Fontane's *Frau Jenny Treibel* the people who talk of ideals without restraint are the same people who think that money is more important than anything else.<sup>11</sup> But in truth what is drummed into the viewer is something completely different than these surely banal and dubious, but relatively innocuous, opinions. The piece amounts to the slandering of individuality and autonomy. One should "devote" oneself, and moreover less to love than to respect for what society and its ground rules expect. The capital sin the heroine is accused of is that she wants to be herself; she herself says as much. And that is precisely what cannot be allowed: she is taught *mores*\*, "broken," just as a horse is tamed. In his grand tirade against materialism, the strongest point her educator hurls at her is tellingly enough the concept of *power*. He extols to her the "necessity of spiritual values in a materialist world," yet he finds no more adequate expression for these "values" than that there is a power "greater than us and our petty, conceited ambition." Of all the ideas presented in the piece, power is the only one that is concretized: as brutal, physical force. When the heroine wants to jump into a boat in order to save her child, her spiritual provider slaps her across the face, completely in line with the Eisenbart tradition that claims to cure hysterical women by knocking some sense into them, since it's all just their imagination anyway.<sup>12</sup> In the end the heroine submissively declares that from now on she wants to improve and to believe. This is the proof of her transformation.

Nothing is more odious than the introduction and propagation of religion in the piece in the name of crude authority. The heroine's cure at the same time should convert her from the illusory world of the theater to reality; probably the woman who wrote the piece had picked up something of religious existentialism, of Kierkegaard's distinction between the aesthetic and ethical spheres. But in her hands all this becomes the

debased cultural goods of the upper estate.<sup>13</sup> She reduces the controversy between the moralist and the artist to the level where the latter, quite reasonably, refers to her *métier* and to the fact that she is just playing a role and is not really the person represented, and for this she receives a poor grade. However, the theologian Kierkegaard had demonstrated precisely the contrary in his important essay on the actress: that only a mature woman can interpret the role of a young girl, precisely because she does not resemble what she is personifying.<sup>14</sup> While the show ends with a pious gaze heavenward, it draws religion itself into the circle of conformism and convention. The actress discovers her religious feelings in the moment when her daughter is rescued, a bit like the saying that there are no atheists during artillery barrages. Ultimately the piece subverts its own message. Not only does it coarsely mix psychological diletantism with the praise of humility but the exhortation to faith at the end transforms this humility into a means used for psychological ends. The viewer is encouraged to practice religion because it is healthy for him: once you have a belief in "something," there is no more need to torture yourself with narcissism and hysteria. In fact, a figure in the show who is positively portrayed as a representative of religion says in a kind of sermon that one becomes "happy" when one ceases searching for happiness in oneself and for oneself. A worldly sentiment of happiness becomes the justification for transcendental faith. It would have been nice to hear Kierkegaard's voice in response to such a theology. Advertising for religion in the name of hygiene is blasphemous.

For all the crassness with which products of this sort display their inferiority and falsity, nonetheless they must be investigated and taken seriously despite their own intentions. For the culture industry is not at all disturbed by the idea that none of its creations are serious, that everything is simply merchandise and entertainment. Long ago it made this a part of its own ideology. Among the scripts analyzed, several consciously play at being kitsch, and they give the less naive viewer a knowing wink as though saying that they do not take themselves seriously, they are not that stupid; they take the viewer, as it were, into their confidence by flattering his intellectual vanity. But a shameful deed is made no better by denouncing itself as such; one must do the offense the honor it refuses itself and take it at its own word—the one that sinks into the viewers. There is here no danger of overloading the chosen examples, for each is a *pars pro toto* and not only allows but requires drawing conclusions about the entire system. In the face of the system's omnipotence detailed proposals for improvement have at once something ingenuous about them. The ideology is so happily fused with the specific gravity of the apparatus that every suggestion can be dismissed with the most reasonable expla-

nations, as naive, technically unproven, and impractical: the idiocy of the whole is built up out of nothing but healthy common sense. The possibility of remedying the situation through goodwill should not be overrated. The culture industry is so fundamentally entangled with powerful interests that even the most honest efforts in its sector could not get very far. With an inexhaustible arsenal of arguments the culture industry can justify or reason away what is obvious to everybody. The falsity and inferiority exert a magnetic attraction upon their defenders, and even the worst of them become far more astute than their intellectual capabilities would warrant when they look for arguments in favor of what they themselves in their heart of hearts know is profoundly untrue. The ideology creates its own ideologues, discussion, and points of view: in this way it has a good chance of staying alive. However, one should resist being driven into defeatism and being terrorized by that well-practiced demand for positive results, which usually only wants to thwart any change in the state of things. It is far more important, first of all, to raise consciousness about phenomena such as the ideological character of television, and that not only among those on the production side but also in the public. Precisely in Germany, where economic interests do not directly control the programming, there is some hope in trying to raise awareness.<sup>15</sup> If the ideology, which avails itself of a truly modest number of endlessly repeated ideas and tricks, were taken down a peg or two, then perhaps the public could develop an aversion to being led around by the nose, no matter how much the ideology gratifies the dispositions—themselves produced by the societal totality—of innumerable viewers. It would then be possible to imagine a kind of inoculation of the public against the ideology propagated by television and its related media. Of course, this idea would require far more extensive investigations, which would have to separate out and isolate social-psychological norms in television production. Instead of tracking down vulgar words and indecency like most organs of self-censorship, the producers would need to be vigilant and remove those provocations and stereotypes that, according to the judgment of a committee of responsible and independent sociologists, psychologists, and educators, result in the stultification, psychological crippling, and ideological disorientation of the public.<sup>16</sup> The investigation of such norms is not as utopian as it appears at first glance, because television as ideology is not the result of evil intentions, perhaps not even of the incompetence of those involved, but rather is imposed by demonic objective spirit. Through countless mechanisms it reaches all those involved in production. A very great number of them recognize, with aesthetic sensibility if not with theoretical conceptuality, just how rotten their product is and continue producing it solely because of economic