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# TV & AMERICAN CULTURE

## FLAT AND HAPPY

BY TODD GITLIN

**T**oday, there is no getting away from the electronic hearthland. Commentators may routinely misinterpret one of the more widely circulated statistics about television—that the average household has a set *on* more than seven hours per day—to mean that the average person *watches* that amount. (It is no mere pedantic detail to note that a set being *on* does not mean that it is being *watched*.) But even the correct figure of four hours a day is nothing to trifle with. Television watching is second only to work as the primary activity, or inactivity, that Americans undertake during their waking hours. One sign of how thoroughly television has been assimilated, even among the more literate, is that it has become a sign of inverse snobbery to proclaim affection for a pet series. Whole generations of popular-culture scholars now unashamedly rhapsodize about the stellar qualities of their favored habits.

The nation has assimilated television. Has it, then, been assimilated *to* television? More to the point, is television now a dominant force in shaping the character of Americans? Many analysts have argued the affirmative,

even though they disagree on whether this is for the good. Television, it seems, has served as an instrument for the nationalization of American culture, furthering tolerance while eroding ethnocentrism and other forms of parochialism. For good reason did Edward R. Murrow choose to inaugurate the first coast-to-coast broadcast, on November 18, 1951, with a split screen showing the Statue of Liberty and the Golden Gate Bridge simultaneously.

**I**t was no small blow against white supremacy, during the 1950s and 1960s, to bring into the living rooms of white America images of the brutal treatment of blacks, nor for that matter, during the 1980s, to convey to a white audience that professional-class blacks such as Bill Cosby were effectively identical to their white counterparts. In *No Sense of Place* (1985), Joshua Meyrowitz argues that television has brought to public view the “backstage” of American social life, educating the public to see through appearances and cultivating a knowledgeable skepticism even while contributing to the spread of egalitarian sentiments. On the other hand,

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conservative critics such as Michael Medved and Richard Grenier suggest that television promotes adversarial attitudes, incites mindless rebellion, and cultivates a corrosive attitude toward social responsibility. The interesting thing is that both viewpoints presume that the impact of television is considerable, rather uniform, and, on balance, subversive of established authority.

The presumption in all these arguments is that television operates in a space left vacant by the demise of traditional authority. Some, such as George Gerbner, former dean of the Annenberg School of Communication, go so far as to call television a "religion." Others, more subtly, see television purveying identities, especially for the young, in a fluid, unsettled society where neither work, religion, nor family is stable or compelling enough to do the traditional job. Has an entire culture become, in the words of novelist William Gass, "nothing more than the darkening cross-hatch where the media intersect"? The smothering hypothesis, anticipated by novelist Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), has a dire appeal. It is easy to see why. Television not only looms large and loud in every private domain, its pervasiveness transcends that of all previous systems of communication.

Indeed, to call television a medium of communication misses much of the point. It is somewhat like calling a family a system of communication. Family therapists do so, but their descriptive power falls short of Tolstoy's. It might carry us somewhat further to say that television is a medium of cultural power. What happens on, or through, television—the images, topics, and styles that circulate through living rooms—does proceed from headquarters outward to take up a space in the national circuitry. But to speak of television as if it were nothing but a sequence of images is to miss a crucial feature

of the machinery, namely *how much of it there is and how easily it enters the house.*

To think of American life today without television taxes the imagination. One extraordinary social fact about television is that it is both ubiquitous and, on the scale of social goods, disappointing. Television has the virtues of being cheap and accessible, and does not require much engagement—it is therefore most popular among children, the old, the poor, and the less educated. Society's most powerless receive television as a consolation prize. Even many of these, and most other people most of the time, think watching it an activity not so much valuable in itself as preferable, perhaps, to other choices near at hand. Yet, in several social experiments, many people have refused large sums of money for volunteering to do without television for one month. But even these diehards, like most people, rank television low among their pleasures. It is an enjoyment that turns out to be not so enjoyable after all. *What are you doing? Nothing, just watching television. How was the program? OK. Watching television is something to do, but it is also and always just watching television.*

The low status of TV watching obscures, however, a deep truth about the peculiar place of television in American life. Consider that in most households the television set itself has prestige. True enough, as the price of low-end televisions came down and households acquired more than one, the large-screen console television lost some of its majesty. Still, especially in the households of the working class, and probably in the majority of American homes, the set remains a centerpiece of the living room—to judge from the framed photos, trophies, and other esteemed objects surveying the room from the top of the set—something of a conspicuous secular shrine. It takes up, one might say, prime space. In

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this respect, the TV is an extension of the piano that was, in earlier decades, a virtually mandatory certificate of status in the parlor of actual or aspiring middle-class families. Members of the working class buy console sets and display them proudly in their living rooms, while members of the professional class buy high-tech large screens for their living rooms, keeping their smaller, simpler sets sequestered, for private use, in their bedrooms.

In all these households television is, I suggest, more than an amusement bank, a national bulletin board, a repertory of images, an engine for ideas, a classification index, a faithful pet, or a tranquilizer. It is all of these, in some measure. But television's largest impact is probably as a school for manners, mores, and styles—for repertoires of speech and feeling, even for the externals and experiences of self-presentation that we call personality. This is not simply because television is powerful but also, and crucially, because other institutions are less so.

As work, family, and religion lose their capacity to adumbrate how a person is expected to behave, television takes up much of the slack. In the working world, for instance, the focus of employment has shifted during the 20th century from the craft itself ("I am a tailor") to the paycheck and the status ("I am an Assistant Grade II" or alternately "I am a working stiff"). Religious belief, while prevalent, is awkwardly coupled with the roles that most people act out in their daily lives, so that, even for most believers, "I am a Christian" is no longer a very clear badge of identity. More-

over, divorces, remarriages, stepparents, and live-in arrangements increasingly characterize family life, so that one (or one's subself) belongs to more than one family at a time. In this setting, where primary identities have slackened and people are members of many "clubs" at once, Americans look to popular culture for ways of identifying themselves. Consider, for example, the personal ads in local newspapers or magazines. Fifteen years ago you might have read, "Woody Allen seeks his Annie Hall"; today

it will more likely be, "L. A. Law type looking for Vanna White."

It is reasonable to suspect that, at the least, television teaches people how they should talk, look, and behave—which means, in some measure, that it teaches them how they should think, how they should feel, and how, perchance, they should dream. Ideologically minded critics of the Right (those writing for the editorial page of the *Wall Street Journal*, for example) or of the Left (Noam Chomsky, for example), obsessed with the power of ideas over benighted citizens, have distracted us from recognizing the deep-

est workings of television because their own rational bias impoverishes their social imagination. They cannot imagine that there might be any other reason for wrong-headed policies than the misinformation of influential publics.

In speaking of the cultural power of television, I am referring not simply to its impact on knowledge. For decades, researchers have published literally thousands of studies of the effects of watching television. As a result, many things can be said to be "known" about



*A "Saturday Night Live" skit from 1976 portrays Nixon and Kissinger as a pair of comical idiots. No public figure, many critics contend, emerges from TV exposure with his or her authority intact.*

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"the effects of television." But all the hard-nosed studies qualify as hard-nosed—and therefore receive funding—only insofar as their scope is limited to specific, measurable effects on distinct behaviors and conditions such as buying, voting, aggression, and sexual arousal; or, more ambitiously, on ideas, attitudes, perceptions, and the salience of particular concerns in people's minds. Indeed, the very notion of "effects" suggests the sort of before-and-after controlled experiment that can be done, or simulated, only when the effect under scrutiny is demarcated precisely.

**W**hat interests me are more elusive and arguably more important matters: the tone and temper of American culture. Intuitively, one senses that the transformations of television in the past half century are deeply implicated in the way Americans feel. Of course, all cultures change, none more than America's. (If we think of technological innovations alone, and make a rough estimate of the cultural changes that followed, it is hard to imagine any decade to compare with 1895-1905, which brought the automobile, the airplane, the motion picture, and radio.) But the forms of cultural change in recent decades are remarkable. Distinctions that were formerly sacrosanct—urban/suburban, northern/southern, public/private, national/local, naughty/nice—have blurred. To borrow Joshua Meyrowitz's terms, themselves borrowed from the late sociologist Erving Goffman, the frontstage world of formal American life is more tolerant—there is a growing degree of routine sexual and racial acceptance. Gay figures pass across the evening news without scandal; Oprah Winfrey, Arsenio Hall, and Whoopi Goldberg have their talk-show billings; suburban white teens thrill to African-American rappers. Meanwhile, the backstage world of ordinary relationships is nastier. From domestic battering to automatic cursing and the rudeness of motorists—note the decline in directional signaling over the last few decades—a harshness has settled into the texture of everyday life. It

seems to me that television has furthered these changes—without having, all by itself, devised or caused them.

I am struck, in particular, by the growth of "knowingness," a quality of self-conscious savvy that often passes for sophistication. Knowingness is not simply access to or a result of knowledge; knowingness is a state of mind in which any particular knowledge is less important than the feeling *that* one knows and the pleasure taken in the display of this feeling. Knowingness is the conviction that it is possible to be in the know; it is the demonstration that one hasn't been left behind, that one is hip, with it, cool. It is a mastery of techniques by which to reveal that one has left the side show and made it into the big tent. The opposite of knowingness is unabashed provincialism, naiveté, complacent straightforwardness. This provincialism and straightforwardness have been eroded within the American culture of recent decades—with the help of television.

Two generations ago, "simple people," morally straightforward types along with rural and other uneducated types, were amply represented on network television. There were the staunch, steady, plainspoken western figures of "Gunsmoke" and "Have Gun, Will Travel." There were the rural butts enacted endearingly by Red Skelton and the apparently artless working-class heroes of "The Honey-mooners." There were the unself-conscious rubes who served as Groucho Marx's foils on "You Bet Your Life" as well as their offensive racist equivalents on "Amos 'n' Andy." On all these shows, sophisticates got to show off by distinguishing themselves from buffoons. The conflict between the two often drove the plot.

**A**s late as the 1960s, despite the decline of the western, rural settings and folksy types were still on display in "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Green Acres," and "The Andy Griffith Show." As I explain in my book *Inside Prime Time* (1983), these shows were canceled in the early 1970s, despite their commercial success, when the incoming president of CBS made the

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decision to seek younger, more urban, more affluent viewers with "sophisticated" series such as "All in the Family," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," and "M\*A\*S\*H." Later in the 1970s, a few rural revivals succeeded: "The Waltons," "Little House on the Prairie," and "The Dukes of Hazzard." One running theme in many of these programs was that deviousness got its comeuppance at the hands of moral earnestness—though of course the comeuppance was never final, deviousness getting a new lease in the next installment.

But television's most affectionate renditions of plain folks in small-town America were delivered to the West Virginia hollows and Nebraska farms just as the hollows and farms were emptying out. The volunteers who troop onto the contest shows, quiz shows, and dating games today are vastly more media-savvy than the bumpkins who took their chances with Groucho on "You Bet Your Life" two generations ago. Today's hopeful contestants still submit to teasing, but unlike Groucho's foils, they can also tease back. They know how to banter without skipping a beat. They may still be shocked by Oprah's transsexual priest, Sally Jessy's teary molester, or Donahue's tortured immigrant, but boy, do they have a story for you, too. In the talk show studios as well, spectators in the live audience wear appraising looks. Ordinary fans may be thrilled by the presence, the sheer aura, of their stars, but they are also—as Yale sociologist Joshua Gamson shows in his forthcoming *Claims to Fame*—able to stand back and chat knowingly about the techniques with which publicists go about the business of manufacturing glamour and fame.

I do not want to suggest that television has merely replaced the plainspoken down-home characters and bucolic settings of the older shows. Literary critics, preoccupied with "text," have led cultural analysts to concentrate on representation—on the content of the programs. Many who criticize television criticize it because they take its representations as categorical and dislike the way various categories are represented. Thus conservatives have

argued that when businessmen are treated as "crooks, conmen, and clowns" (to quote the title of a probusiness pamphlet of the 1980s), they inspire public contempt for business; likewise feminists have argued that when a woman character is victimized by violent crime, the representation teaches women that their role is to play the victim. Such critics tend to assume of television the principle, *Monkey see, monkey do*, and they also assume, rather as in Stalinist Russia, that characters must be exemplary in the manner prescribed by the critic. But if television exercised influence simply by spurring emulation, the popular rural comedies of the early 1970s should have led to rural resettlement.

**T**he content of television is not simply one story after another. In fact, to think of television as nothing more than a sum of stories is like thinking of a lawn as nothing more than a sum of blades. The very significance of the units derives from their membership in the ensemble. As the British critic Raymond Williams pointed out, one remarkable thing about television is the sheer profusion of stories it delivers. No previous generation of human beings has been exposed to the multitude of narratives we have come to take for granted in our everyday lives. The impact of each one may be negligible, but it hardly follows that the impact of the totality is negligible. Moreover, the profusion of stories changes each component story. The stories exist in multiplicity: Their significance bleeds from one story into another.

Most people watch *television*, not discrete narrative units. The flow of television is both *rapid* and *interrupted*. A story begins with credits. A few minutes of story take place. The story is interrupted for commercials—probably more than one per commercial break. There may be previews of news bulletins, promotions, previews of other shows. The story resumes. There are more commercials, more announcements. The story resumes. And so on. At the hourly or half-hourly station break, there may be trailers for the following week's

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episode, trailers for shows later that night, announcements of coming events. As the remote control-equipped viewer "zaps" or "grazes" through dozens of cable channels at the touch of a button—to the delight of postmodernist theorists celebrating the recombinant culture of juxtaposition as an exercise of freedom—cacophony is in the nature of the pastiche. In the wonderful world of television, anything is compatible with anything else. The one continuity is discontinuity. The flow resembles that of a mountain stream, complete with white water, more than a slow, steady passage. Indeed, rapidity and interruption are cen-

Nights-worth of stories, and the meaning of any particular show has a shelf life of, usually, minutes. A viewer engages less with the content of one program than masters an attitude of superiority to them all. Rather than learn one subject well, he or she acquires a sophisticated repartee and light banter good for discussing anything and everything that comes up—a style in which, as noted before, to seem quick and knowing is more important than what one knows.

Obviously rapidity and interruption are not brand-new features of Western civilization. Television is a caricature of what, before television, was already a way of life. The ide-

**The private becomes the public: On daytime TV people confess their deepest secrets not to the priest but to the millions.**



tral to the sensory impression television leaves.

**T**he question then arises: What kind of social education, what type of character formation, occurs when there are so many stories and each one is constantly interrupted, is soon over, and flows immediately into an unrelated story that, in turn, is swallowed up by the next? In an earlier America, even the uneducated could know well, and reflect upon, a small stock of stories—in particular, the Bible and Shakespeare. Lincoln, largely unschooled, read Shakespeare deeply enough in his youth to be able to rank one soliloquy over another in a letter written two years before he died. By contrast, every evening television tells a Scheherazade's 1,001

als and sins it depicts are those of America's formulaic modernity. The picture may be sepiatic but the frame glitters. Thanks to slick visuals (known in Hollywood as "high production values") and crisp movement, glibness rules. Like the Sears catalogue performing its service in the outhouse, the commercials and network IDs and promos and news flashes emanate from the cosmopolis. Willy-nilly, the slick wrapping carries the tumult and velocity of a commercial version of urban life, the cornucopia of desire, the lure of consumable things and "lifestyles." Commercials don't simply announce the wonders of goods and the lives they promise, they also bring energy and novelty—news of what passes for fun, freedom, and security these days.

Television and its spin-offs have thus furthered what psychologist Martha Wolfenstein called in the 1940s America's "fun culture." The motto is Hey, No Problem! A bright happiness is more the equilibrium state on television than in any other cultural form at any other time in history. In commercials problems are easily surmounted or minimized—as in a child's world where difficulties can be left behind. It is no coincidence that in almost all family sitcoms (with the exception of "The Cosby Show"), the parents, especially fathers, are typically shown as slightly stuffy, misguided, or well-meaning bunglers who are set straight,

ads, is the premium style. TV's common currency consists of slogans and mockery. Situation comedies and morning shows are in particular obsessed with the jokey comeback. The put-down is the universal linkage among television's cast of live and recorded characters. A free-floating hostility mirrors, and also inspires, the equivalent conversational style among the young who grow up in this habitat.

As critic Mark Crispin Miller has observed, the knowingly snide attitude is so widespread and automatic that it deserves to be called "the hipness unto death." The promotion of David Letterman to CBS's 11:30 P.M.



at the end of 30 minutes, by their sons and daughters. Children Know Best.

On TV both children and adults speak with an unprecedented glibness. Thanks to the wonders of editing, no one on television is ever at a loss for words or photogenic signs of emotion. Not even the bereaved parent asked "How do you feel?" about the death of a child is seen to hesitate. Hesitancy, silence, awkwardness are absent from TV's repertory of behaviors, except in sitcoms or made-for-TV movies where boy meets girl. Yet outside TV, awkwardness and hesitancy often characterize the beginning, and each further development, of interiority, of a person's internal life. On TV, however, speech is stripped down, designed to *move*. The one-liner, developed for

talk-show slot signals the ascendancy of this style. Relentless if superficial self-disclosure is one of the conventions of television today. The audience is simultaneously alerted to the contrivance, transported behind the scenes, and pleased by both—and by the possibility of enjoying both. It is obvious how this plays in "Saturday Night Live," but more surprising to see how it plays in "straight" commercials and programs designed for people one would not commonly think of as sophisticates. In one commercial of the 1980s, a man in a white coat looks you in the eye and says, "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV." The audience is expected to recognize him as a soap-opera actor. (He goes on to say that other people also think they can "play doctor" and as a result

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may take the wrong medicine. He has come to sell the right one.) There followed the "Joe Isuzu" series, in which a huckster makes outrageous claims about Isuzu automobiles: They get 100 miles per gallon, they cost \$99.98, and so on, while subtitles provide the truth. Consider further the business news and gossip of "Entertainment Tonight," along with its knockoffs on CNN, MTV, and the local news, and the canny entertainment sections of today's newspapers, making the audience privy to Hollywood marketing calculations, casting tactics, career moves, and box-office figures. We are invited to understand Hollywood not only as a machine for dreams but as a game through which we, the spectators, are dreamed of—a game whose success or failure we are also invited to inspect.

**T**hrough this relentless inspection, character is dissected, torn apart. Indeed, character—based upon self-mastery, moral resolve, learning or understanding, and quiet or heroic action—is reduced to personality, impression management, the attractions of body and mannerism. Here again, television is not inventing but perfecting already long-standing trends in our social life. In *Within the Context of No Context* (1981), George Trow traces the changing nature of American magazine covers to show how character has been supplanted by personality. The typical faces on the cover of *Time* and *Life* through the 1930s and '40s—faces of people such as Roosevelt and Churchill and Hitler, who were famous, for better or worse, for what they achieved or brought about in public life—eventually gave way to personalities (Madonna would be a contemporary example) who are famous mainly for being famous.

The equivalent process operates in our thinking (and feeling) about politics. Coverage and conversation are dominated, first, by a focus on personality, and second, by the inside analysis of the stratagems of campaigns and governance. Politicians concluded that the arts of governance are less

fateful than acts of spin control—and as television observes the spin, reporting thus feeds cynicism. The audience is flattered that it is superior to the corruption, dishonesty, and hypocrisy of public servants. The viewer has been brought into the know. He or she is treated as an inside-dopester, savvy to spin doctors, speech writers, electorate-pleasing "positioning," and all manner of practical calculations. In one sense, what is going on is democratic unmasking: Let the politicians be put on notice that they are hired hands! In another sense, at least under present circumstances, the cynicism that has become so widespread in politics is more likely to generate withdrawal than political engagement. The increased voter turnout in the 1992 general election, in which Ross Perot served as a third-party side-show attraction, may only be an interruption in the otherwise long-term decline in the size of the electorate.

The glibness, relentless pace, sloganeering, and shrinking attention spans of private life filter into television, via the selective antennae of the television-industrial complexes of Hollywood and New York, only to be reinforced there, like a rocket that accelerates by swinging close to Earth, using its gravitational pull to swing free of that same gravitational pull. The free-floating nastiness of sitcom existence may well be cultivating an equivalent show of popular sentiment, so that the endless put-downs of popular comedy penetrate the rest of everyday life. Take your own brief survey of bumper stickers (Florida's "We don't care how you do it up North"), of slang (e.g., *drop-dead* as an adjective meaning "stunning," as in "She has a drop-dead body" or "Our paints are available in 36 drop-dead colors"), and of T-shirts ("I'M NOT DEAF, I'M JUST IGNORING YOU"; "OUT OF MY WAY, BITCH"), which then recycle, especially via the Fox network's youth-oriented shows, into the popular domain.

In summary: *Television has nationalized American culture and made it more knowing.* This conclusion may seem to fly in the face of pre-



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dictions that television's homogenizing days are waning. On the surfaces of culture, distinctions do multiply. Basic cable service now enters 62 percent of American homes, bringing an average of 30 channels. What the postnetwork cable channels offering popular music, home shopping, evangelical Christianity, African-American music, and Spanish-language soap operas have in common is that they thrive on undiminished enthusiasm for breathless, slick entertainment. Advances in interactive technology will probably not divert from these main tendencies; they will render more efficient the services that people already use—banking, video games, commercial movies, quiz shows. Pride in the national cornucopia will become a cornerstone of the orthodox American identity. White bread has already ceased to be the symbol of national unity. It has been supplanted by the new standard supermarket shelf of 72 different loaves, each bland in its own way. TV programs that would truly widen the spectrum—as far as character types and kinds of approved behaviors presented—are nearly as unlikely in the post-cable cornucopia as they were on the Big Three networks. For a series about, say, a gay couple disturbed about restrictions on military service or a devout Catholic family worried about the increasing materialism of daily life, a viewer, remote control in hand, will zap through his or her 30 channels in vain.

**M**ake no mistake. The uniformities in present-day American style are not simply the creatures of television or of corporate culture more generally. They build, in turn, on cultural uniformities already observed in the early 1830s by Alexis de Tocqueville, who pointed out, long before Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Roseanne, or MTV, that America's cultural products

substitute the representation of motion and sensation for that of sentiment and thought. . . . Style will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose, almost always vehement and bold. . . . There will be more wit than erudition, more imagination than profundity; and literary performances will bear marks of an untutored and rude vigor of thought, frequently of great variety and singular fecundity.

In such passages where Tocqueville describes the arts in America, and where he predicts that surface and motion will replace the exploration of the soul, he appears almost to be anticipating the development of a democratic "art" like television. Tocqueville often speculated about what could hold together a country of such disparate regions and so many varieties of people. Not even he could have dreamed, however, of this slick and all-knowing personality—this glib persona fostered by television, which undermines all authority and is adaptable to every class and ethnicity—that would become, as it were, *the* American citizen, the glue that in its peculiar way unites the country.

One hardly needs to read Tocqueville to surmise that, regardless of the channel or brand name, the odds are that the rule of the slick, the glib, and the cute will prevail. The once-over-lightly glibness of American culture prevails not only on television but in the movies and magazines, among sports announcers and talk-show hosts, in the jargons of politics and psychotherapy alike. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that America's culture of comfort and convenience, of the quick fix and fast relief, of mass-manufactured labels of individuality, has acquired in television a useful technology to reduce the range of colors in the spectrum of life to a bleached center glittering with sequins in many dropped-dead colors.