

My Favorite Wasteland

The case against TV used to be a slam-dunk: guilty as charged by reason of inanity. The inanity still abounds—it wouldn't be TV otherwise—but so do a lot of other qualities that often make the couch in the den a fitter habitation for an adult than the stadium seat in a multiplex.

by James Morris

Nearly 50 years ago, when television was in its first flush decade of popularity, Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II wrote an original musical for CBS. On a Sunday evening in March 1957, some 107 million Americans tuned in to a live broadcast of *Cinderella*. The number is astonishing. The U.S. population at the time was around 170 million. So more than 60 percent of the country watched, and was ready on Monday morning for a national conversation about Julie Andrews. The equivalent for today's population would be an audience of 180 million. The Super Bowl, TV's most-watched event, this year drew about 86 million; *American Idol* averages some 28 million.

It's inconceivable that 180 million Americans could agree on anything nowadays, let alone on what entertains them. That's why individual entertainment units have become essential personal accessories, along with tiny phones for our tiny conversations, little cameras and computers, and a portable water supply. (When archaeologists come to sift the dust of our lapsed civilization several millennia hence, will they credit our worship of personal hydration?)

We're not just in a different age from the age of *Cinderella*; we're in a different nation. The common culture is a panoply of cultures and segmented markets, and our cultural glue might as well be oat-

meal. TV has hit an especially bad patch since the big networks discovered reality, or rather, since they discovered reality TV, which is to real life as Kool-Aid is to champagne. The conventions of the genre are as predictable as the phases of a celebrity marriage—bonding, betrayal, tears, humiliation, outrage, separation, moving on—and the ritual sameness of the programs, no matter what their setting or circumstance, extends to the smallest details. For example, you're certain to hear "Oh my god!" many, many times. The words are a reality-show mantra, variously spaced and inflected: "Oh . . . my . . . god!" or "Ohmygod" or "Oh my GOD!" They test the limits of participants' rhetorical powers, expressing joy, outrage, shock, surprise, horror, hope, astonishment in the face of, say, a remodeled child or home or bosom.

Reality TV's appeal is aggressively voyeuristic. The shows satisfy an entire alphabet of market tastes, even as they measure a half-century of startling social transformation. No emotion is too private, no sentiment too inane, to be expressed. And yet, having become a nation of performers, always half-alert to the possible presence of a camera and always ready for a close-up, America contains an endless supply of individuals willing to lend themselves to the games and to what is often, by any traditional measure, public humiliation. The Cinderellas of our time are the



When Julie Andrews and the cast of Cinderella performed for a TV audience of more than 100 million viewers in 1957, they did so live—no tape, no retakes—and had just one chance to get things right.

bachelorettes who get to hook up with their princes in a hot tub on TV; if a glass slipper is involved, it probably signals a foot fetish.

Of course, TV has always been mostly awful. “Boob tube” did not begin as an anatomical observation. The myth persists of a Golden Age of Television in the 1950s, but the blurry surviving kinescoped evidence yields a baser metal. Way back in May 1961, Newton Minow, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, called TV “a vast wasteland.” Well, the landscape is a lot vaster 44 years later, and still wasted, but how could it not be? TV never stops any more; there’s just too much of it. In the late 1940s, a station played “The Star Spangled Banner” by 10 p.m. and signed off for the night. The citizenry rested—or read or did their bit for the baby boom. There’s not enough talent even in today’s fame-crazed United States to keep TV interesting *all* the time. Remember: Most books are not worth read-

ing either. And not every play took a prize in old Athens; the relatively few that survive by no means represent the lot that did not.



Yet even after you concede the worst about broadcast TV, there’s a case to be made that, on many evenings, an intelligent adult is better off spending an hour or two in front of a TV set than in a movie theater. That’s all the more true if you’re foolish enough to reach the theater by the announced starting time of the movie. You’ve been captured for 15 or 20 minutes of *Clockwork Orange*-ish saturation in loud, out-of-focus commercials and previews that warn you off months of movies to come. Why have human rights groups not made a fuss?

Hollywood wonders why fewer people go to the movies these days. Movies with no claim on an adult’s attention are the main reason; they come mostly from industrial

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Hollywood, but “courageous” independent filmmakers share the blame. Independent filmmakers are never less than “courageous”; the word attaches to them like a Homeric epithet, as “honest” does to their work. But small and honest can be as much an ordeal as Hollywood’s fat and false.

Need more reasons to stay home? You could probably find them sitting in the row behind you. Many members of the contemporary movie audience, only marginally socialized, would have made a misanthrope of Gandhi; they undermine every argument for intelligent design in the universe. And don’t forget to factor in the fused odors of nachos, chicken strips, and that yellow wash for the popcorn.

Grownsups who do choose to remain at home with the remote—and I often count myself among them, not a TV enthusiast exactly, but certainly a sympathist—have no reason to apologize. TV can now teach Hollywood something about smarts, which would once have been unthinkable. And the amazing thing is that movies lose out even when they’re not up against the toughest competition TV has to offer: those gold- and silver-standard cable shows such as *The Sopranos*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Deadwood*, *Entourage*, *The Wire*, and *The Shield*, and all the upscale science, nature, and history programming. Keep that fare from the competition—along with sporting events, which are regularly TV’s glory.

And bench bronze-standard daytime TV, beginning with those morning talk shows on which anchors and anchoresses, by turns chirpy and grave, get to say, “Up next, starvation in Africa and the rundown on new running shoes”; or (a kind of signature moment for the Katies and Dianes), “I know this must be a difficult time for you, Mrs. Patsy, but how did you feel when you learned that . . .” (here insert the indignity of the day) “your husband is polygamous?” “your daughter is a terrorist?” “your son was decapitated?” During these interrogations, crowds of Americans outside the TV studio windows, giddy at

the prospect of being picked out by a camera, jump to be seen and scream to be heard. Perform.

No afternoon soaps either, or four-square wisdom from big Dr. Phil, who’s tough as nails but not as sharp. No Oprah or Supreme Court long shot Judge Judy. Out, too, are those nighttime news and exposé shows presided over by reporters who barge into homes and businesses and build new support for the Second Amendment; no *60 Minutes*, with its venerable cast swapping memories of the Taft White House; no hard-hitting series tackling the sorts of topics that cause seismic shifts in Stone Phillips’s chin: “Chariots of Doom: Is Your Child’s Stroller Ready to Go Off-Road?”; “Losing Hair, Losing Heart.”

Keep PBS on the sidelines as well, where increasingly it has kept itself. The recent talk about political bias at the network was a distraction from the real scandal: the desperation of pledge week (weeks? months?) programming. Problem: How do you charm the dollars from an aging audience that you’ve decided is mired in reminiscence? Solution: Woo them with old bits of Broadway and with the pop sights and sounds of their mid-20th-century youth. The stations appear to be inching toward a Village People reunion. Oh for those former rows of grim-faced clog dancers and tenors at dog’s-ear frequencies! Oh even for Yanni! But if the glory days are mostly past, who can fail to appreciate the *Antiques Roadshow* phenomenon and the virulent but oh-so-genteel (PBSish) materialism at its root? Is this a great country or what? Even our junk is precious. “Rinse out the chamber pot, Henry! It has a rendezvous with destiny.”

What else can be cut from the competition? Well, I’ve never warmed to *The West Wing*, that glib, glittering consolation prize to Democrats. And three other current prime-time shows of wide appeal—*Alias*, *Lost*, and *Desperate Housewives*—seem to me good reasons to join a book club. All three subscribe to a jerk-the-audience-around ethic of plot development that will sanction any twist, no matter how baroque

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or illogical. *Lost* is the worst of them, in part because it's so humorless and so insistent on being about something, though what, exactly, remains a mystery. *Alias* was fun when it was new a few years back and kept its sexy leading lady (part-time killer spy, part-time honors graduate student) running down foreign corridors in an assortment of bustiers; it stumbled later when it tried to pass off mind-numbing incoherence as mind-tickling complexity. At least *Housewives* has a sense of humor. But it's hopped up on the quirky, and the habit already shows signs of getting out of hand. Wisteria Lane could relocate to Twin Peaks.

Last to go are all those popular legal/forensic/tell-tale-pubic-hair procedurals that traffic in the most sensational matter under the guise of a public-service documentary realism. Their specification of body parts and bodily fluids is always clinically dispassionate; their discussion of a catalog of sexual perversions is professional grade. "Nothing prurient here, ma'am; we're just doing our job. It's a dirty job, but . . . I mean, it's not *dirty* dirty. . . ." Right. There was a time when the sun never set on the British Empire; so now does it shine always on a *Law and Order*. Addicts of these series may yet insist on a *Law and Order DMV* and a *CSI: Charlottesville*.



When all that good stuff has to sit out the competition, what's left in the wasteland of broadcast TV to keep a discriminating adult from the multiplex? More in the course of a week than you might think. I'm



On the reality-TV show Fear Factor, the environment even for celebrity contestants such as Donnie Osmond is often grubby.

partial to eight shows in particular, and I could easily name several more. As it happens, six of the eight are on much-maligned Fox. But hold the laurel. Fox is also the network on which a line of midgets competed with an elephant to see who could pull a jet plane down an airport runway faster. (For those ashamed to ask: the elephant.)

Everybody Loves Raymond left the air this past spring, after nine seasons, for eternal life in syndication heaven. It still merits the present tense. At its frequent best it's the very model of a situation comedy—that is to say, of a comedy of situations. It finds the radiating comic possibilities in the offhand gestures of family life. The talk on most situation comedies is nothing like real talk. The shows are hit-and-miss, and miss-and-miss, gag machines, spitting their wit like tennis ball dispensers. The process is as relentless as the



The witty scripts for TV's Gilmore Girls make Lauren Graham and Alexis Bledel a smart, hip, and loving mother-and-daughter team, in a droll Connecticut town somewhere between Hartford and Brigadoon.

launch and lockdown of an Augustan couplet, though Alexander Pope never did *Friends*. *Raymond* is different, so well written and acted, so perfectly pitched, that even the silences, especially the silences, are hilarious. It makes comedy look easy.

Arrested Development is also a situation comedy about a family, the upscale but downward-spiraling Bluths, and it's like nothing else on TV. The show thrives on fierce, absurdist whimsy and elliptical narrative, recalling the Richard Lester-directed Beatles movies of the 1960s. It's that good and that funny, comic to the core, with scripts that know how to bring that core to the surface. The members of the House of Bluth, joined in a roundelay of ethical, emotional, and sexual dysfunction, could tutor the House of Atreus in bad behavior, so this is a family show not for family viewing. It lurches along giddily, at a take-no-prisoners pace, till the narrator says, "On the next *Arrested Development*"—and introduces scenes that will not appear again.

The *Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* feature cartoon families who share the luxury of not aging while the world around them keeps steadily up to date. U.S. presidents come and go; the Simpsons and the

Hills endure, and react as their eternally fixed and familiar selves to everything current the writers throw at them. About *The Simpsons* there's little left to say after all these years. Sometimes it's as good as ever, shrewd and irreverent about American cultural and religious pieties (God does cameos), and sometimes it's way off stride. Homer's idiocy has long since run its comic course, yet the writers insist on rediscovering it. You keep hoping that they'll renounce their lazy, scattershot ways and return to form. And because you keep hoping, you keep watching.

King of the Hill dates from 1997, but it's never had the breakout success it deserves, which may be a good thing. Fame hasn't gone to its head, as happened with *The Simpsons*. (Fox routinely sacrifices *Hill* on Sunday evenings to the gods of interminable football games.) The series has stayed steadily on track and low-key hilarious, at once a send-up and an affirmation of red-state America values. The Hill family of Arlen, Texas, may shop at the big-box Mega-Lo Mart, but they're TV royalty: levelheaded patriarch Hank (the anti-Homer Simpson), purveyor of propane and propane accessories; his wife, Peggy, a substitute high school teacher, sometimes of Spanish, who

has to wing it after *hola*; and their ample, affable, and fitfully adolescent 13-year-old son, Bobby, of Tom Landry Middle School. Good people all, who deserve a more compliant world.

24 now has four seasons under its ammunition belt, and each one has taken audiences through a single day in the life of federal counterterrorism agent Jack Bauer, for whom mayhem is mother's milk. The gimmick is that the single day is presented in the real time of 24 sequential hour-long episodes. There's always a digital clock ticking, and it's usually attached to a bomb. The show is like every cliffhanging Saturday matinee serial of long ago—but reimaged to be high-tech, relevant, breathless, and brutal. During this past season's "day," Muslim terrorists, their cells scattered across the United States, tried to kill millions of Americans by melting down the nation's nuclear reactors and then leveling Los Angeles with a nuclear missile. That's after they've had Air Force One shot down with the president and his son on board. (For good measure, a subplot threatened to take America to war with China.) *24* has an irresistible narrative pull. It knows how to tell a story—indeed, to tell many stories at once. Take note, George Lucas. And civil servants might note the ease with which employees at Jack's federal agency are yanked from their desks to be tortured in a back room if they're suspected of disloyalty. One such employee, who's mighty peeved after she's roughed up by mistake, demands a two-pay-grade promotion. She's reprimanded for asking during a national emergency.

On *Gilmore Girls*, a sassy and glamorous single mom in the perfect Connecticut town (the kind with annual harvest and Revolutionary War festivals) is raising a sassy and glamorous daughter, who's also, yes, her best friend and, after several prep school seasons, a Yalie. No way around it: This is a show about relationships—familial, collegial, romantic. Wait, put down that remote! There are no wittier scripts on TV. The dialogue is saturated in American pop-cultural savvy and is usually delivered at a speed that recalls Hollywood's headlong comedies of the 1930s. Along with

love, affection, Yale, and the charms of a boutique New England inn, *Gilmore Girls* celebrates intelligence.

The OC (that's Orange County, California, for the uninitiated) has come a long way since its launch a couple of years ago as a teenage sex-and-sand soaper. The original tone was set when a snotty rich kid punched the hero from the wrong side of the tracks and sneered over his fallen body, "Welcome to the OC, bitch!" But it wasn't long before the two were friends, as can happen when creative types decide to "take things in a different direction." The folks behind *The OC* discovered the virtues of sly, self-aware scripts; gave rich, troubled parents equal time with their troubled teens; looked kindly even on the wicked; and made all the seaside philandering rather sweet—because, when you come right down to it, nothing's more important than family and friends and a fabulous pool house. The sex and the ocean will keep the show from ever being confused with *Gilmore Girls*, and though several of *The OC*'s twentysomething high school students could probably spell Yale, none of them is likely to end up there.

House was new last season—a hospital drama with an eponymous antihero, the curmudgeonly middle-aged diagnostician Dr. Gregory House. He's wounded, physically



Beer and backyard wisdom are daily staples for Hank Hill and pals on Fox's King of the Hill.

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(bum leg) and emotionally, and he's so rude that friends and relatives of patients regularly try to deck him. But damn, the man is brilliant. He and his crack team of put-upon younger diagnosticians trade delirious barages of medical lingo—often at *Gilmore Girls* speed—in the course of using an arsenal of tests and invasive procedures to identify the baffling disease of the week. *House* is a show with many close-your-eyes moments for non-medical staff viewers. Needles are sunk like oil rigs, and you're never sure what part of a patient may extrude. There are also inside-the-body special effects that allow a piece of plaque, for example, to travel from an artery to the brain and hit like a meteor. When you're not saying "Ouch," you're wondering, "Would Blue Cross pay for any of this?"



What I admire most about these shows, and most deplore about contemporary movies, is the quality of the scripts. The TV series are devised and written by smart people who seem to be allowed to let their intelligence show. Yes, the individual and ensemble performances on several of the series are superb, but would the actors be as good as they are if they were miming the action? TV shows are designed for the small screen and cannot rely, as movies do, on visual and aural effects to distract audiences. If what's being said on TV isn't interesting, why bother to watch? Television is rigorous, right down to the confinement of hour or half-hour time slots, further reduced by commercials. There's no room for the narrative bloat that inflates so many Hollywood movies from their natural party-balloon size to Thanksgiving-parade dimensions.

For all the physical confines of the TV medium, there *is* one kind of spaciousness available to it, and that's temporal. A successful TV series persists over any number of seasons, and week by week, season by season, its characters evolve into more substantial figures than a movie's typical one-offs, who exist only between the studio's logo at the start and the end credits' stately crawl toward naming the crew's caterer. TV characters trail increasingly full but always open-ended per-

sonal histories, like friends or neighbors of long standing. Their lives and circumstances achieve a cumulative familiarity, in which viewers are invested. And the familiar comes to exert a comfortable pull, which yields to a what-happens-next curiosity.

Of course, friendships sour, and against once-favored neighbors you may end up pulling the shades. If time is the friend of the best TV series, it can also turn hostile. Even the most imaginative shows may have trouble sustaining the qualities that initially drew you to them. They try too hard and succumb to excess. Remember how embarrassing Kramer's behavior eventually became on *Seinfeld*? The line between antic and deranged should be an iridescent highway stripe, yet the *Seinfeld* writers kept swerving into oncoming traffic. Some shows—not *Seinfeld*—have just a couple of terrific seasons in them, and success is their undoing: It extends their life and thins their blood. Even the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the entertainment of choice in their day, had only 24 books apiece, and when Virgil reworked the two of them into the *Aeneid*, he reduced the total to 12.



There are snobs about TV who won't admit that it's ever worth their time; they have a set but can't remember where they keep it. And there are the hooked, for whom the lit screen is the glow to their lives. Mostly, there are in-betweeners, who pick and choose. Can you join their ranks and still respect yourself in the morning? I think you can, though you may find yourself razzed by skeptics. Make no mistake: The faith of the TV sympathist will be tested, even by friends: "Hey, can you join us tonight for a movie? *Great Lakes Line Dance*. Top honors at Sundance [uh-oh]. Toast of Telluride [strike two]. Rocked Toronto [game over]. A Duluth teenager reconciles his two sets of feuding same-sex parents and gets a killer college-admissions essay out of the experience. Turns down Harvard for Bard." The weak will temporize: "Wish I could, but my stomach's upset and I'm going to bed early." A true believer owns up: "Sorry, I can't. God's smiting Homer on *The Simpsons* tonight. So. Duluth. Wow. Enjoy." □