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Conceptualizing Culture As Commodity: The Problem of Television

EILEEN R. MEEHAN

☐—*Critical inquiries into television generally focus either on the industrial organization of television or the symbolic world of television. In this way, scholars have addressed television partially, leaving unexplored the connections between the symbolic and the economic which together constitute television as a contradictory institution. By integrating these two approaches, however, scholars can theorize television as simultaneously a commodity and an artifact, presenting ideology and culture, that is manufactured and created for consumption and interpretation by an audience and publics. Using these five categories of analysis, scholars can better serve the public by providing information illuminating these relations.*

CRITICAL INQUIRIES into television tend to fall into two broad categories. On the one hand, academics study corporate rivalries, production processes, technical innovation, and governmental pressures to reveal the material constraints that constitute the industrial environment of television. On the other, scholars explicate the interplay of audio, video, and narrative elements to uncover the modern mythos, symbolic representations, and ideologies that constitute American culture. On the one hand, companies struggle for profit, market control, and growth. On the other, members of the culture cast up and celebrate their Weltanschauung. On the one hand, political economy, on the other, cultural studies and—to add another handy cliche—never the twain shall meet.

Yet, the twain does meet. This is due, I believe, to the nature of television itself; television is not reducible solely to manufacture nor to artifact. Rather, television is a complex combination of industry and artistry. This is not an essentialist claim, but instead a recognition that the term television embraces a range of social practices bounded by material constraints. And this range of social practices places television within both the economic base and the ideological superstructure. As part of the base, television is characterized by relations of production that are typical of capitalism. Labor is appropriated, surplus value is extracted, commodities are circulated, and profits are expropriated by capitalists. From this perspective, there is little difference between the manufacture of television and the manufacture of shoes. However, when television is treated as part of the superstructure, the differences between these two commodities become obvious. Drawing from the cul-

Ms. Meehan is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies, University of Iowa.

tural fund and the conventions of realism, television presents selected images, worldviews, symbols, myths, truth claims, values, and visions. This representation of social life, especially with its seeming immediacy and intimacy, has great potential as a disseminator of dominant ideology and as a cultivator of hegemony. To capture this duality in mass culture production, analysts have used such terms as "dream factory" (Powdermaker, 1950), "consciousness industry" (Enzensberger, 1974), "industrialized folklore" (McLuhan, 1969). Drawing on Marxist theory, I use the terms "contradiction" and "contradictory institution" (Bottomore, Harris, Kiernan, & Miliband, 1983) to emphasize the fundamental nature of this rift between our experience of television as industry and as culture, which tends to be reflected in our analyses of television as base and as superstructure.

From this recognition, then, one must rethink television as constituted in contradiction as both culture industry and industrial culture. Television is always and simultaneously an artifact and a commodity that is both created and manufactured; television always and simultaneously presents a vision for interpretation and an ideology for consumption to a viewership that is always and simultaneously a public celebrating meaning and an audience produced for sale in the marketplace. Only by embracing these dualities can we explicate the contradictory fact of television.

As members of a scholarly community, our academic responsibility is clear. We must construct the most adequate understanding of empirical phenomena that our methods, theories, and creativities will allow. To do that, we must engage the phenomenon at its most basic level. For television, that requires an acceptance of the economic as determinate since, in our culture, television is first and foremost a business. Yet, while we recognize that economics set the parameters, we must also recognize that television is a very peculiar sort of industry—a culture industry that reprocesses the symbolic "stuff" from which dreams and ideologies are made. In the remainder of this paper, I will argue for a reconstruction of television scholarship based on an integration of political economy and cultural studies. To do this, I will first analyze the economic constraints on the television industry with special attention to how these constraints serve as both an impetus for, and a limitation on, innovation in national television. Next, I will contextualize the question of representation within the intersection of culture and ideology as bounded by economics. From this synthesis, I will derive five conceptual categories for the study of television as both a culture industry and an industrial culture. But, I should add that these categories have already been presaged in these introductory remarks. Finally, I will argue that such a synthesis is crucial if we are to fulfill our larger public responsibility—a responsibility that requires a full, holistic account of television to guide progressive intervention and practice. So, let us start with the first analytic moment, that is, with television as a culture industry.

TELEVISION AS CULTURE INDUSTRY

In advanced capitalist countries, the creation of cultural artifacts is primarily an economic activity subject to the bounds of profitability, cost efficiency, oligopoly, and interpenetrating industries. Processes of production and distribution tend to be centralized, rationalized, and routinized, clearly placing such activities within the term "culture industry." As the major form of industrially produced and mass distributed culture, television attracts critical scrutiny as *the* exemplar of modern capitalism's industrialization of culture. However, not all televisual products are merely carbon copies; variation and innovation in form does occur (Ettema & Whitney, 1982). Similarly, not every televisual text simply and solely celebrates the dominant ideology that legitimates capitalism. The guidelines for alternative or even oppositional readings of the text may be found embedded in the televisual text itself (Fiske, 1985; Hall, 1982; Morley, 1980; Smith, 1985; Williams, 1977). The problem here is to account for creativity, innovation, and variation through an analysis of economic structures, structures which include such features as corporate rivalry within closed markets, rationalization of production, etc. My analysis of industrial structure, then, will suggest that the very structure mitigates for bursts of innovation and creativity just as surely as it mandates duplication and imitation. To illuminate this dynamic, let us consider some of the relationships that directly surround the distribution and production of first-run, prime time commercial television series.

At the macroscopic level, television is a multilayered industry embedded in the information/entertainment sector of the economy. As such, television involves manufacturers of electronic equipment, companies that control distribution technologies (broadcast, cable, microwave, satellite, etc.), the national advertising industry comprised by agencies and manufacturers, the ratings industry, the national television industry proper, and a multiplicity of trade associations serving various configurations of these constituencies. While all of these elements have had varying degrees of influence over programming at different times, the most significant for current series production seems first to be the structure of the national industry and then its links to the advertising and ratings industries (Barnouw, 1966, 1968, 1970, 1978; Bergreen, 1980; Cantor, 1971; Ewen, 1976; Meehan, 1983; Mosco, 1979). For our purposes, the national television industry includes networks, stations, and producers, although here we will focus primarily on networks and producers.

The national industry has long been marked by centralization and, since 1972, has been constituted by a series of closed markets dominated by a handful of firms. In distribution, the three networks control the market, each vying with the other two for dominance in the ratings. Ratings measure the networks' productivity, that is, the networks' ability to attract the right sort of audience in cost efficient groups for sale to advertisers. As such, ratings are the tangible "proof" that the networks' intangible commodity—the audience—exists. Given the inherent conflict of interests between buyer/seller over audience prices, the measurement of productivity is the purview of a separate, yet intertwined, ratings industry. Significantly, the production of national television ratings is generally dominated by a single firm. In economic terms, this monopoly is eminently rational since advertisers and networks require the same sorts of information in order to transact business. Thus, the commodity audience comes to be defined by the dominant rating firm's methodology. And that methodology is itself a function of economic pressures including cost efficiency and profitability of ratings production, corporate tactics used to gain and maintain monopoly status, manipulation of discontinuities in demand for ratings, etc. This renders the sample audience a true commodity produced by the major ratings firm for sale to advertisers and networks, a commodity used by these purchasers to gauge the success of networks' schedules, to set prices for audiences, and to measure the success of individual programs (Cantor, 1980; Livant, 1979; Meehan, 1984; Murdock, 1978; Smythe, 1977). At this macroscopic level, then, is a closed market within which networks, national advertisers, and the dominant ratings firms pursue their own, particular interests. The intersection of these three industries sets up the networks' central problematics: how to exercise influence within this closed market and how to acquire programming that will attract the commodity audience. It is the latter problem that we will analyze here.

Since 1972, the production of television programming has been the purview of three types of companies (i.e., independent production companies, production companies that work with motion picture studios, and the studios themselves [Cantor, 1980; Guback & Dombkowski, 1976]). Prior to 1972, program production had been vertically integrated into the networks, which then discriminated against independent production in favor of programs owned by the networks themselves. However, State intervention at the level of anti-trust action forced divestiture of these internal production units, ostensibly leaving the marketplace open to free competition. Indeed, in this seeming intersection between the studios producing films, the independent filmmakers, and the independent companies producing television series, one might well expect the rough and tumble competition so dear to ideologists of the free market.

Precisely the contrary happened. Just as distribution has been oligopolized by the three networks, so too has production been oligopolized by a small number of program producers selected by the networks from the larger pool of available producers. As Cantor (1980) points out, the numbers of producers in both groups has remained quite stable over the years (4 or 5 companies selected from 20), despite the exit and entry of particular firms. Thus producers vie for inclusion in that inner circle. Inclusion, exclusion, and expulsion are matters of network fiat and these decisions are based on the probability/ability of a firm's product to deliver ratings (i.e., to produce the appropriate audience in the right numbers for the general advertisers that patronize network television). Here the producing firm is caught in a web of relationships where network decisions based on advertiser demand and the current market definition of the audience constrain the manufacture of programs.

The effect of these relationships for programming is significant indeed. In periods when the ratings sample is relatively stable, networks act rationally in the marketplace by selecting programs that imitate formats proven successful in attracting the commodity audience. At times of partial or total turnover in the ratings sample, networks act rationally when they either select programs that are innovative in ways which "ought" to appeal to the new commodity audience, or imitate innovations that have proven their appeal, or select programs that combine a "tried and true" format with some unusual twist. In fact, all of these tactics were used by the networks in their attempts to cope with the first, major overhaul of the A. C. Nielsen Company's sample completed in 1970—a year dubbed by industry pundits as the Year of Relevance—with varying degrees of success (Barnouw, 1975; Brown, 1971; Meehan, 1983).

Complicating this, however, is the networks' rivalry. Within the oligopoly, each network attempts not only to sell audiences, but also to differentiate itself from its rivals. Networks advertise themselves to both viewers and advertisers by promoting an image of the network to cultivate brand loyalty. Occasionally this means acting in a manner that in the short term appears economically irrational—for example, scheduling an innovative series or an expensive special or a serious documentary that includes controversial material. Both innovation and duplication can serve as tactics by which the networks negotiate their economic environment. In the structure of transindustrial relationships, then, lies the first structural impetus for creativity and constraint on that creativity in the manufacture of television programming.

The second set of structural factors becomes apparent by shifting the level of analysis to the relationships between networks and production companies. Like the networks, production companies operate in a series of economic relationships which include self-promotion as well as rivalry. But while networks' transindustrial relationships are between co-equals, production companies are directly subordinated in their industrial relationships with networks. Despite divestiture, networks exercise considerable control, albeit indirect, over program production. Most typically a network selects an idea and then selects a production company to develop that concept. Companies within the inner circle of producers are clearly favored by this practice, which also tends to stereotype certain companies as producers of particular types of shows. This encourages a division of labor within the oligopoly of producers with some companies manufacturing liberal sit-coms, others concentrating on drive-and-shoot shows, and so on. Thus, processes of product development are rationalized by the oligopoly and this rationalization encourages rote manufacture, imitation, and variation rather than bold creativity.

Significantly, producers may foster this practice themselves to both rationalize their own production processes and to carve out and control a niche within the oligopoly. Obviously this can be a mixed blessing as network demand for particular kinds of program product does fluctuate and companies too narrowly identified with a type of product may fall out of the oligopoly when network demand for that product fades. On the other hand, the division of labor does serve the producers' by differentiating their product from those of their rivals and by narrowing the already narrow competition within the inner circle by basing rivalry on generic specialization. Interestingly, this division of labor provides a structural impetus for auteurism in television production, thus encouraging a particular kind of creativity, which has been well documented in auteurist film studies and which has increasingly attracted the attention of television critics.

But as pointed out above, the business environment surrounding television production is by no means stable. Not only does the sample audience change, but intangibles like audience taste and willingness to endure overly familiar programs also change. Joining these factors is the networks' own need for self-promotion as well as the occasional need for more innovative programming. Finally, the struggle to achieve or maintain membership in the oligopoly should foster some innovative production by firms. These drives towards change are balanced, however, by drives that may be as strong or even stronger. For just as the network seeks out some innovation, so too it attempts to streamline the process of idea development by contracting with producers that specialize in a generic form. Similarly, just as producing firms attempt to capture trends, they also try to capture profitable genres. Thus innovation and imitation, variation and duplication are founded on an economic structure that facilitates alternating cycles of rote manufacture and bounded creativity.

INNOVATION: ECONOMIC CONTEXT FOR CULTURE

But how does such bounded creativity occur? Within the constraints of oligopoly and intertwined industries, how do new visions, meanings, images, subjects, etc., get incorporated into televisual products? While structural analysis identifies the economic dynamics that support innovation, such analysis does not explain the possibility of innovation. For the orthodox political economist, this is where culture rears its ugly head. To account for innovation, we need a theory of culture. But, beyond this, we need a theory of culture to account both for congruence and slippage between the dominant ideology and televisual representations.

Now, obviously, limitations of space preclude the exposition of a full-blown theory of culture, particularly of one that is contextualized within the economic. Instead, I will reference the work of such cultural scholars as Williams (1980), Hall (1980), and the Birmingham School, materialist theorists such as Marx (1972, 1981), Gramsci (1973), and Althusser (1970), anthropologists such as Geertz (1973), Wallace (1970), Harris (1968), and Burridge (1969). From this general point of reference, I will then sketch the main features of a culture theory that are relevant to this project.

In this conception, culture is both relations of diversity and shared webs of meaning. Culture exists as a fund of meanings, images, understandings, etc., which human collectivities construct within the constraints of social structure, economic structure, concrete experience, socialization, overdetermination and random error. These are the material bases upon which culture is reared. In most cultures, the first constraint is set by division of labor based on gender. In capitalist cultures, the second constraint is set by the hierarchical structure of class. In this capitalist culture, further constraints are introduced by an array of socioeconomic categories that discriminate among people according to region, dialect or linguistic group, race ethnicity, sexual preference, age grade, and so on. In the dynamic of division, we see structures that support both sharedness and diversity as each individual is socially constructed and simultaneously self-constructed across shared categories in ways that are both predictable and surprising, patterned and unique.

Now, given the hierarchical and exploitative economic structure of capitalism, relations among identified collectivities revolve around issues of legitimation, domination, and control. In the cultural arena, this means a struggle to legitimate collective systems of interpretation and understanding, that is, to legitimate ideologies. But just as relations between ideologies are in process, so too are the ideologies themselves as collectivities reinterpret, revise, re-present, and re-create the expression of their experiences. Hence, the ability of the capitalist class to legitimate its ideology as the rational, commonsensical view of the world is not so much a *fait accompli* as a continuing attempt to reinterpret the world and to gain privilege for that interpretation against the continuously changing array of alternative, oppositional, and emerging ideologies. And this constant shifting on the cultural scene, especially in tandem with economic supports for innovation, surfaces in television. Thus television becomes both a culture industry and an industrial culture.

CONCEPTUALIZING TELEVISION AS DUALITIES IN CONTRADICTION

This brings us full circle to the problem of conceptualizing culture as commodity, to the central problem presented by television. Precisely because of the dynamics that structure both the national television industry and the cultural fund, televisual programs do present meanings, characterizations, images, etc., that neither simply nor directly reflect the dominant ideology. Indeed, embedded within the televisual text may lie the guidelines for alternative or even oppositional readings of that program. For, while the selection of elements from the cultural fund is limited by the requirements of everyday business, the cultural fund remains broader than the dominant ideology. Also, economic drives for innovation, variation, and auteurism encourage producers to sift through the constantly shifting cultural fund for trends, gimmicks, and novelties. In some cases, producing companies simply abstract images, themes, etc., for reworking within terms of the dominant ideology. This rather instrumental use of culture is matched by a "humanistic" use where firms draw on the cultural and subcultural memberships of their employees to generate more innovative, "authentic," and ambiguous representations—in the hope that these innovations can be routinized in terms of production, that they can attract the commodity audience, that they can differentiate the firm and limit competition. As an industrial project, the production of culture is limited by the profitability and cost efficiency of bold innovation, of rote manufacture.

The important element here is the lived duality of this process. For just as producers are always and simultaneously making a commodity containing the most accessible content—that is, the dominant ideology—so too are producers constructing a cultural artifact whose ability to resonate with different collectivities depends on a combination of elements from the cultural fund. And these collectivities, these publics "read" the televisual text in a multiplicity of ways, sometimes consuming the text within the dominant ideology, sometimes re-coding the text entirely, sometimes mixing elements of dominant, alternative, oppositional, or emerging ideologies. But even as these publics grapple with the televisual text, some of us are abstracted for processing and sale as the commodity audience. Even as we find elements of oppositional ideologies within the artifact, producers may be planning to capitalize on those elements as a key to a new and profitable generic form of production. By counter-posing the dynamics between industrial culture and culture industry, we begin to unravel the complex layering of contradictory dualities that constitute television.

The problem of television, then, is how to capture these dualities and lay bare their interconnections. Solving this analytic difficulty requires a synthesis of both cultural and political economic studies of television precisely because television is both an industrial process and a cultural process. As a small step towards that necessary synthesis, I offer the five analytic categories that have guided this analysis for your consideration: manufacture/creation, commodity/artifact, ideology/culture, consumption/interpretation, audience/publics. In each dualism, I have priviledged the economic term in deference to the fact that television is primarily a business enterprise in this country. Yet, for a holistic understanding of television, a political economist can not afford to lose sight of the cultural dynamics of television—just as the culturalist can not afford to overlook the economic base upon which televisual representations are constructed. Indeed, the time seems particularly apt for such a synthesis given the controversies raised by the Althusserian circle in both political economy and cultural studies. In the former, Althusserian structuralism has been reinterpreted to emphasize notions of indeterminancy and progressive intervention in an attempt to balance the tendency to depict capitalism in closed, functionalist terms (Mosco, 1982; Schiller, 1977). Ironically, in cultural studies, Althusserian analyses of ideological apparati and the overdetermined subject have sparked heated denunciations over functionalist readings of the relationship between impersonal social structure and individual consciousness (Thompson, 1980).

This "ferment in the field" bodes well for a synthesis of political economy and cultural studies that would more fully integrate notions of human creativity, class struggle, ideology, and impersonal social structures. Such a synthesis might best be facilitated by organizing the process of synthesis around a concrete instance. I suggest the contradictory institution of television, particularly because an adequate theorization and study of television requires the integration of these critical approaches; this much we owe to our community of scholars and to the academy.

But there is more at stake here. Television is not simply an academic subject. The relative precision or imprecision of academic knowledge about television can have an impact on the publics, on public debate over television programming, and on policy. Until an adequate integration of economic and cultural critique are widely available, until each of the dualities and their interconnections are traced, the policy remains uninformed and—perhaps worse—stereotyped as the ignorant, slack-jawed mass of consumers who are themselves solely responsible for the proliferation of stultifying televisual products. While political economy correctly locates the boundaries of action within the economic structure of the industry, cultural studies reminds us that we—not some amorphous mob but we the folks—are the mass of consumers and that we live, create, and interpret culture. While political economy reminds us of the limitations of individuals and collectivities in the face of large scale, impersonal structures, cultural studies reminds us that we have created these structures through time and we can surely tear them down. Now is the time for academicians on both sides of critical communications to join together, to accept the challenge of our academic and our public responsibilities. □

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