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BFI TELEVISION MONOGRAPH

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Richard Dyer

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# Light Entertainment

**RICHARD DYER**

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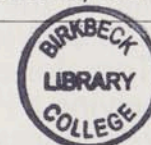
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1973

This study of an area much neglected by criticism investigates the various 'situations' of television light entertainment and the principal aesthetic strategies adopted by producers and directors in response to them. Richard Dyer's monograph relates the practice of TV light entertainment to the ideals of abundance, energy and community, and poses the question of how far it is able to live up to them.

### The Author

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## Foreword

One purpose of this series of monographs is to attempt to influence a situation in which television is much discussed in superficial ways, but given too little of the kind of serious attention that might found its study as a discipline in its own right. It also aims to meet the need of teachers at all levels for materials and guidance for coherent work in television studies. Debate about television has often been frustrated by a shortage of relevant information, material or ideas.

It is possible to discern four main, inter-related areas of work for television studies:

- the aesthetic practice of television (*i.e.* the production and interpretation of the sign or series of signs);
- the institutions and structures of television both on and behind the screen;
- the sociology of television, its place, function and 'effects' in society;
- the notion of communication in relation to television.

The *BFI Television Monographs* will be operative in all of these areas, while recognising a particular responsibility to produce work in the hitherto more neglected areas like aesthetics.



## Introduction

This is a study of light entertainment on British television. It starts from an examination of the notion of light entertainment and following on from that considers the nature of the television entertainment situation, what kind of aesthetic is needed for its analysis and some suggestions as to how we might set about understanding its place in contemporary society.

It is necessary first to delimit the scope of this study. 'Light entertainment' is the name of a department in the BBC and in the commercial companies, and covers a wide range of programmes—quiz games, comedy series, pop shows and variety. Of these I am concerned only with the last. That is, with programmes akin to show business, cabaret and musical comedy. Sometimes a musical interlude will be included in a comedy or quiz show and where this is so the musical number is part of the study: but the nature of the whole programme, the analysis of comedy and competition, raises critical problems far beyond our present concerns.

What kinds of show are we left with? I should explain first that I have limited myself, apart from occasional references, to shows transmitted between November 1970 and July 1971, and that, living in Birmingham, I have watched, of the independent networks, only ATV Midlands. (This means, of course, programmes transmitted by them, not just those they produce.)

The largest proportion of these shows are weekly series built around a star performer and guests—*Cilla*, *The Val Doonican Show*, *Gentry*, *The Rolf Harris Show*, *This is . . . Tom Jones*, *Vera Lynn*, *Rod McKuen*, *David Nixon's Magic Box*, *It's Cliff Richard*, *It's Tarbuck*, *The Andy Williams Show* and so on. In addition there are special one-off shows, organised according to the same principle of star plus guests—e.g. *Carol Channing's Mad English Tea Party*, *A Gift for Gracie*, *Petula*, *Raquel*, *An Evening with Burt Bacharach*.

There are other organising principles at work. Some shows approximate to revue—musical numbers and sketches side by side with no direct linking—*The Black and White Minstrel Show*, *The Goldiggers in London*, *What are you doing after the show?*, *The Coward Revue*. Others have a linkman or compere who introduces a string of items. This is particularly a Christmas formula—*Christmas Night with the Stars*, *Holiday Star Time*. It was also the formula of *The Melodies Linger On*, which in addition purported to be 'A History of Popular Song'. Shows are broadcast from outside—from music halls (*The Good Old Days*), ice rinks (*Champagne on Ice*), night clubs (*Christmas Eve at the Golden Garter*, *Royal Gala Cabaret*) as well as circuses, pantomimes, the occasional extract from a musical comedy or a Red Army Ensemble concert.



In addition there are several hybrids – the children's show *Junior Showtime*, the religious entertainment *Stars on Sunday*, entertainment competitions such as *Opportunity Knocks* and that unclassifiable biographical entertainment, *This is Your Life*.

I have tried as far as possible to keep my personal preferences at bay during analysis, but often one does not notice one's own biases. As a caution, therefore, I had better declare some of my tastes, which the reader can take into account in reading the text. I like very much Cilla Black, Jimmy Tarbuck, Carol Channing, Morecambe and Wise, Bruce Forsyth, Dusty Springfield and Gracie Fields. I loathe Rod McKuen, Derek Nimmo, Rolf Harris, David Frost, Lulu, Cliff Richard and Bob Monkhouse. Despite Andy Williams, I enjoyed *The Andy Williams Show* more than anything in the period covered, and Cilla almost as much. I can't bear *Stars on Sunday*. My choice clearly tends to favour the camp and the more definitely show biz, and to steer clear of the more 'domestic' and 'ordinary' performers and shows. This is only a matter of taste, of course, although it does seem to me that the vitality and intensity of camp and show biz, and the way that, in form and style if not in specifically expressed sentiments, it stands outside of the routine and conventional, is preferable to the dreary, conforming and phonily down-to-(middlebrow)-earth of the others.

This is not to suggest, of course, that, but for subjective feelings, the analysis is value-free. I have no commitment to that particular dream of the human sciences. But I have tried to proceed in as open a manner as possible, moving from defined theoretical premises to close analysis of actual programmes.

## 1 The Notion of Entertainment

Entertainment, show business, Variety are not terms that are normally much thought about. Indeed they are often the final point in a conversation: 'Well anyway I like it. It's good entertainment' – said defensively when you are praising an unfashionable film in intellectual circles; or else the tag, now a comic cliché, used in backstage musicals at crucial points in the plot: 'That's show business!' Nothing more needs to be said: we all share a commonsense notion of what entertainment is. Yet precisely because it is such a final or absolute notion, it is very hard to define.<sup>1</sup>

You can't get at it simply by listing examples. The song *That's entertainment!* by Dietz and Schwartz is a veritable compendium of what may be considered entertainment and lists, without any apparent sense of contradiction, *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex* alongside 'the clown with his pants falling down' and 'the lights on the lady in tights'. If all these things can be entertainment, then clearly entertainment is not so much a category of things as an attitude towards things.

We can best come to an understanding of what this attitude is by a series of negations.

Firstly, entertainment is not simply a way of describing something found equally in all societies at all times. Song and dance in tribal societies for instance is specifically tied to religious and utilitarian purposes, placating the gods or conjuring up rain.<sup>2</sup> The pageants and amusements of medieval Europe were part of the whole pattern of social life and built right into the organisation of the calendar, governed by the Church and tied to seasonal – hence, economic – festivals. Where in tribal society song and dance sought to have an effect on life, in medieval society it celebrated it in a systematically structured way. Our entertainment may, of course, do both these things, but it is not in any coherent way associated with serious metaphysical or ceremonial practice. On the other hand, it is different from the growth of amusements and diversions in courtly society. Unlike them, modern entertainment is not simply a way of staving off days of boredom for a leisured class nor is it simply an adjunct to social intercourse.

A key figure in the emergence of 'entertainment' is Molière, who in having to elaborate a defence of his plays developed a new definition of what the theatre should do.<sup>3</sup> The Church had attacked him for not edifying, the salons for his refusal to conform to the taste for polite divertissement and the critics for not obeying the rules of art. His defence was to deny that those concepts of what he should do were relevant to his real purpose, which was to provide pleasure – and the definition of *that* was to be decided by 'the people'. Against salons, church and critics Molière set the court (which at this time was characterised



by an impotent aristocracy and a newly recruited bourgeoisie who actually ran the country) and the gallery; against received elite opinion he asserted populism. In so doing, he severed art from entertainment – not, it is true, in his own practice but in theory. Entertainment became identified with what was not art, not serious, not refined. This distinction remains with us – art is what is edifying, elitist, refined, difficult, whilst entertainment is hedonistic, democratic, vulgar, easy. That the distinction is harmful, false to the best in both what is called art and what is called entertainment has often been commented upon.<sup>4</sup> But it remains one built into our education and, as we shall see, the decisions of television programmers.

Entertainment is also a part of 'leisure'. This is a specifically modern idea and is again best defined negatively, as is done, for instance, by Kenneth Roberts:

Leisure time can be defined as time that is not obligated, and leisure activities can be defined as activities that are non-obligatory. At work, a man's time is not his own and his behaviour is not responsive purely to his own whims. Outside work, there are certain duties that men are obliged, either by custom or law, to fulfil, such as the obligations that an individual has towards his family. When these obligations have been met, a man has 'free time' in which his behaviour is dictated by his own will and preference, and it is here that leisure is found.<sup>5</sup>

Leisure and entertainment are separate from and in opposition to work and domestic cares. In a functional analysis, leisure can be seen either as a way of compensating for the dreariness of work or else as the passivity attendant on industrial labour.<sup>6</sup> But the richness and variety of the actual forms of leisure suggest that leisure should also be seen as the creation of meaning in a world in which work and the daily round are characterised by drudgery, insistence and meaninglessness.

Entertainment is a specific aspect of this leisure. It is provided and it is paid for, and in this it is unlike talking, hobbies, sex and games. It derives in its characteristic form – the string of short items, with or without link man, the popular and vulgar reference, the implicit sexuality and open sentimentality – from the development of entertainment in the pubs and clubs patronised by the urban working-class.<sup>7</sup> This form has, of course, been fed by the continuing traditions of bourgeois amusement – operetta, musical comedy, parlour songs – but this has only tended to refine or embellish (and sometimes emasculate) the form, not to dominate it. Telescoping history in this way does, of course, miss out all sorts of nuance, but it does help us to grasp the specificity of the generalised contemporary notion, 'entertainment'.

If we now glance at a couple of official statements from BBC and ITV respectively we shall observe that this notion informs the thinking of these companies – not so much what they actually think or say, but what is implied in the sort of things they find it necessary to say publicly.

First, Tom Sloan's attempt to define light entertainment at a BBC lunchtime lecture:<sup>8</sup>

We have Drama and Features and Arts Features and General Features and

Documentaries and Talk and Current Affairs, to name but a few. But I believe that a great mass of people want to treat their television sets as a means of escape, and never more so than at the present time.

I remember one wet Sunday, in 1961, driving to Liverpool to see a new group called the Beatles give a concert for their fan club which we televised. For the first time in my life, I saw the industrial north of England, the rows of terraced houses, fronting on to the cobbled roads, glistening in the rain. The sheer ghastliness of it all was overpowering, but on the roof of every house, there was a television aerial. Antennae reaching for escape to another world. And, heaven knows, why not?

So my job is to organise a stream of output which is primarily intended to please and relax those who wish to receive it. In other words, to entertain.

As usual, we end up with that explain-all, 'to entertain', but before that we may note the careful distinction of entertainment from art and information, and the distinction in terms of escape from the horrors of life. We should note, too, the rather patronising tone of the man who provides entertainment for 'a great mass of people'. If we see entertainment from the point of view of the providers, then we are asking questions like, How do you distract people from the horrors of everyday life? what is strong enough to shut it out for a while? how do you bring a little sparkle into the drabness? and also, how can you get on their side, not alienate them with art or education? This is the peculiar inflection of the responsible voice in mass entertainment and must have an influence on any aesthetic approach we make to it.

An ITV pronouncement,<sup>9</sup> is equally revealing:

It is common to write as though comedy and light entertainment were much the same thing. It is true that they have a common objective—to provide relaxing\* entertainment. It is true too, that in a country in which there are remnants of a puritan tradition the two are still sometimes lumped together as though they belonged in some rather disreputable bargain-basement of broadcasting. Nothing could be further from the truth. No aspect of broadcasting calls for greater skills or harder work from producers, directors and performers than the business of earning laughs or mounting an exciting production number.

Here there is an explicitly apologetic note, as is frequent enough in pronouncements from ITV, vulnerable to the attack of commercial exploitation. Their first answer, interestingly enough, is to defend the criticism of puritanism by a puritanical insistence on work, professionalism. This notion, however, is superseded in the next paragraph by an even more powerful argument:

There is still a shortage of light entertainment programmes of the highest quality. But it would be wrong to exaggerate. Many programmes have given a great deal of pleasure to very many people.

\* Note that both extracts use this word almost involuntarily. Its implication of prior tension links entertainment directly with the stresses of work and life.



Populism has crept back, for the logic behind this is that as long as people enjoy it (or rather, as long as 'very many people' turn it on) it doesn't matter much what it's like.

Both these statements rely on a notion of entertainment such as has been sketched, but also reveal the peculiar quality of mass entertainment, provided by a specialist profession for people conceived of as an undifferentiated mass. Hence the philistinism and self-indulgence implicit in the notion are not tempered by the real vulgarity and consciousness of oppression of the people, but by the power of professional standards and the sensitivity of power to public opinion (both of which tend to temper vulgarity and indulgence in the name of responsibility) and more still by what producers think constitutes the entertainment needs of the working-class.

Television light entertainment is founded on a very specific idea of what entertainment is in a modern industrial society. We must now look at the aesthetic consequences of this.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For those familiar with them it will be evident that the following relies heavily on the work of Weber and Schutz, that entertainment is an 'ideal-type' or 'second degree common sense construct'. Anyone interested in this methodology should consult Weber: *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, New York, 1949, and Alfred Schutz: *Collected Papers*, Vol. 1, The Hague, 1967, especially part one.

<sup>2</sup> An example of the function of dance in a modern tribal society is suggested in *The Yoruba of Nigeria*, which is the second unit in the Humanities Foundation Course of the Open University.

<sup>3</sup> Molière's views on the theatre are to be found in various places, but most lengthily in *La Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes*.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*, Penguin, 1965.  
Hall and Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, Hutchinson, 1964

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Roberts, *Leisure*, Longman, 1970.

<sup>6</sup> There is a useful discussion of these views in H. L. Wilensky, 'Labor and Leisure: Intellectual Traditions' in *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Feb. 1962.

<sup>7</sup> A particularly interesting connection between the industrial experience and the actual form of entertainment is made by Albert F. McLean, Jr, in his book *American Vaudeville as Ritual*, University of Kentucky Press, 1965. Unfortunately McLean does not push this connection as far as he might.

<sup>8</sup> 11 December 1969. Published as a pamphlet by the BBC.

<sup>9</sup> Independent Television Authority, *Annual Report and Accounts*, 1969-70, HMSO, p. 15.

## 2 The Television Situation

The characteristic forms of television entertainment – the performer and audience, the string of acts, the interpolation of drama and song, etc. – derive from music-hall, variety, musical comedy and the musical film. Yet these forms are based in an entirely different situation from that of television, which is hence called upon to recreate or remodel them.

Let us start with some obvious, even banal differences. Previous live entertainments (and much television entertainment is still live, actually or in the sense of appearing to have been recorded as a continuous whole) have been seen in special places – theatres, bars, and so on, with an audience. What was going on was going on in the same place as the audience – the stage, the platform were there in the room with you. Television in contrast is watched at home, with a few people, even alone, and what is going on is going on somewhere else, is merely being transmitted to you. It is this last point that is important in any consideration of television, for producers<sup>1</sup> seem seldom able to make up their minds whether television is simply a means of broadcasting other material or is an artistic medium in its own right.

A further consequence of this gap between show and reception is that the performer and audience are no longer in an interaction situation. Since he cannot see the audience reaction, the performer cannot legitimately respond to it and this seriously affects the nature of what he is doing. His way out of this may be simply to use the audience in the studio, so that the viewer enjoys the relayed interaction. This is the kind of by-play that gives Kenneth Williams' compering for instance (*Meanwhile on BBC2 . . .*) its high points of humour. Alternatively, the performer may try to play on the response that his image is assumed to evoke and thus address himself to an idealised viewer – a strategy employed for instance by Val Doonican and Cilla Black, which will be examined more closely below.

However, not all television entertainment passes for live. The analogy then is more with film, the finished art object rather than the interaction situation (however vicarious or illusory). The problem here is that television is small, for most people black and white, usually pretty imperfect in reproductive qualities, and can be turned off at will. The musical film (and the odd film revue) depend greatly on spectacle, colour, space (for more imaginative movement), detail and climax, all of which are hard to provide with any impact on television. New ideas of what constitutes spectacle are called for.

Producers seem to conceive the situation in which they are working in three ways, as follows:



- (1) television is seen principally as relaying another show and the producer's concern is to find a means of reproducing it. This may be called *the outside broadcast situation*;
- (2) the programme can be oriented towards the home viewer, recognising that the communication is one-way but attempting to use this, possibly to convey the illusion of reciprocity. It is always recognised that the television camera and transmission are amongst the givens of the situation. This may be called *the home-oriented situation*;
- (3) the show may be self-sufficient, independent of all forms of interaction, in the way that a film, painting or piece of music is. Of course, like them, it intends a response, but this response is not part of the situation at the moment of creation. It is a response to a created object. This may be called *the object situation*.

### The outside broadcast situation

We must include here both outside broadcasts as they are traditionally thought of, from places outside the television studio – clubs, circuses, theatres – and also those from inside the studio, where a specially organised show is nonetheless relayed as *something going on in the studio*. The camera is not addressed, or only seldom, and the audience is part of the show.

The outside broadcast situation has so far been defined as being (in the way that the producers envisage the situation) simply relays of events, but, of course, the idea of television as an impersonal recording machine is utopian. Television cannot help but be a medium. Where you set up the cameras, which shots you select, their order and rhythm, these things are choices made by the producer (limited by technical considerations and budget only) which determine the interpretation of the show.

This may best be illustrated by comparing two circuses, both transmitted on Easter Monday 1971 – the Robert Brothers' Circus directed by Geoff Hall for Yorkshire Television, and Billy Smart's Circus, produced by Mary David for BBC1.<sup>2</sup> Both opened with a horse act – horses moving round and round the ring, turning at the crack of a whip or a change of music, rolling over and so on. For the Robert Brothers' circus there were cameras at various points round the ring, offering both long and medium shots. One shot followed another with little apparent need other than that of variety, except for close-ups of the horses' heads when they sat up and again when they lay down. For Billy Smart's the cameras were more mobile, and panning and travelling shots were frequent. The camera seemed to move in and out of the ring, at times to be in amongst the animals. At the end a camera inside the artistes' entrance showed the horses trotting off.

Before suggesting the difference of meaning in these two treatments, it may be well to consider them in the context of some differences of overall format. During the Robert Brothers' circus the audience was frequently seen, often in quite thoughtfully composed shots – travelling shots of children (envious? identifying? excited?) watching a tumbling act involving child members of the

audience; family groups, father and mother with children in front or on their knees; a little boy being fed ice cream; and some longer shots of sections of the audience. Their reactions were frequently shown, although mostly only after a particular trick or feat – one saw mostly applause and admiration rather than fear or excitement. During Billy Smart's the audience was seldom shown, except in long shots where it formed a backdrop to the act in progress. The audience was, however, involved in the clowns' act, being required to shout 'yes' and 'no' with the clowns and being at one point the location for their act. Where the audience was shown, it looked better-off than at the Robert Brothers'. The linking in both shows was also different. The Robert Brothers' had a commentator, Keith Macklin, who was usually shown between the acts and tended to stress certain 'traditional' qualities of the circus: its internationality, the preponderance of family acts, the passing on of secrets from one generation to another. Billy Smart's had no commentator and link material was provided by Francesco, a white-faced clown in traditional glitter knickerbockers and pointed hat. His introductions, addressed to the camera, were interrupted and complicated by two other clowns, Enrico and Ernesto.

It becomes clear that we have here two remarkably different programmes. It is true that the circuses themselves differed – the Robert Brothers' was a much smaller, cheaper affair than Billy Smart's. But the acts differed remarkably little in what they were – trampolinists here, tumblers there; sealions and elephants here, chimpanzees and tigers there; and Sebastian 'with his unique swinging trapeze act' in both. What really differed was the producer's *interpretation*. The Robert Brothers' circus came across as a routine Bank Holiday outside broadcast. It was the same thing all over again, validated by the notion of tradition. It was a family occasion. Billy Smart's on the other hand was presented as interesting in its own right, and as it were from the performers' point of view. With the shots inside the artistes' entrance, the close-ups (so that we saw reactions that we could not have seen had we been there), the presentation by a member of the company, and the camera's apparent involvement with the acts, the television show presented the circus itself as a *performance* rather than as a cosy family event.

The result of this difference of perspective was a completely different sense of what the acts were like. The two major animal acts in each circus – elephants in the Robert Brothers', tigers at Billy Smart's – came across differently over and above the associative qualities of the different animals – sentimentality with the former, danger with the latter. The elephants, shot as was everything else from several static camera positions, were seen dressed up as women. Neither the complexity or shape of the performance nor the reaction of the audience was shown, and it was possible to be distanced enough to find the spectacle pathetic – poor dumb animals dressed up as poor dumb chorus girls. The tigers on the other hand were shot in such a way that the bars of the cage were not visible, so that the picture was always close in on the act, and we could see the interplay of trainer and animal. This interplay was pinpointed as the central quality of the act rather than, say, wild life spectacle or audience fear.

The most interesting comparison of all is the treatment of the same act,



Sebastian. This act takes place on a single trapeze and consists of hand-standing on blocks on the swinging trapeze and building these blocks up one by one. It is not spectacular and graceful in the way that flying trapeze acts are, but it is obviously both difficult and dangerous. The first difference between the two presentations was simply that at Billy Smart's, Sebastian had more time and could therefore build his act up more before starting on the brick-building, which was its climax. More important, however, were differences in the television production. At Billy Smart's, cameras were placed high in the big top and low in the ring: shots of Sebastian from above and below showed the degree of swing of the trapeze, and so revealed the exciting and dangerous quality of what he was doing. There were no cameras so placed for the Robert Brothers, although there were cameras more or less on a level with him (if anything, slightly below). Shots were therefore medium distance and mostly with Sebastian swinging towards and away from the camera. This diminished in appearance the degree of swing, and thus diminished for the viewer the sense of awe and fear which the act seemed to inspire in the audience. It just looked like building bricks, whereas at Billy Smart's it looked like defying death.

It is important to stress that the simplicity or banality of the Yorkshire production does not mean that this was a more 'straight' presentation, less 'interpreted'. It means that the show itself was interpreted as being a routine, banal affair. Boredom is itself an attitude. Either because the circus called forth a less exciting response in the producer or because Hall is simply less sensitive to circuses than David, the Robert Brothers' circus, as a television show, came across as a routine *occasion*, whereas Billy Smart's came across as a (fairly exciting) *series of acts*. For all I know, Hall may have been more true to the event than David, but both were in any case taking opposite approaches to the material: one after (albeit dull) atmosphere, the other after performances.

It is this distinction that divides outside broadcasts. Let us take examples at each end of the scale (many programmes being attempts to do both).

*The Good Old Days* is a series directed for BBC1 by Bernie Colehan and consisting of a string of variety acts, linked by a chairman and performed in a music hall setting. Shots of the act alone are usually from slightly below stage level: we see them as it were from the audience's viewpoint. More often static shots show both audience and act. The show opens with the camera tracking over the audience to the stage, approaching the show via the audience. Long shots from high up on the side of the house show performer and audience. The runway between orchestra pit and audience allows the performer to get closer to the audience, and by putting the camera behind the performer we are taken close in on the interaction. We see the buxom lady singer cooing at the bewhiskered gentlemen; we see the comic out to shock the ladies. In addition, the frame often contains only members of the audience, who are all dressed in careful and deliberate period fashion. It is performer and audience – and particularly chairman – who are the show, not just performers.

Another example of an 'atmospheric' transmission is *Christmas Eve at the Golden Garter*, directed by Eric Prytherch for Granada from a Manchester night club. The acts here were performed on a small raised level, with audience close

in on three sides, a small band backing. The audience was nearly always in the picture; groups at tables, longshots over the audience to the performer, artistes entering between the tables, waiters serving, often crossing right in front of the cameras, a constant coming and going. Close-ups of the performers were, in fact, rare. The light source for the acts was usually a single spot or flood, and the composition showed it stabbing through the smoky atmosphere to the performer. The sound reproduction was the same as the club's – raucous, too loud, harsh. The audience were not so clearly delineated as in *The Good Old Days* but it was nonetheless the acts in that setting that mattered most: the whole hot steamy vulgar brassy atmosphere of the affluent working-class Northern club. At one point the programme went even further than this, recognising itself as a television broadcast. Johnny Hackett's patter act, full of Mancunian references, was played basically at the audience present, but also referred to the presence of the camera. Of course to the people at the club the camera was part of the situation. By referring to it he brought together all the dynamics of the situation.

At the other end of the scale, with the emphasis on the performance itself, is Mary David's Red Army Ensemble broadcast for BBC2. For this show the cameras' focus was mostly the edge of the stage and further on to the stage. The audience was very seldom seen: one or two random shots. One seldom saw all the stage, except occasionally from far back in the theatre when it was surrounded by darkness (the audience remains fully lit in *The Good Old Days*). More often one saw groups of performers or even only limbs, movements, one or two figures wholly with others going off the side of the frame. Thus in the fast tumbling Chumaky, what was emphasised was the speed, the dynamism, the ensemble interaction of the dancers. What was not evident was any overall choreographic pattern, but David probably rightly chose to recognise dynamism as one of the essential characteristics of the show and one which would certainly televise better than complex patterns which the size of the television screen could not convey adequately. The presentation could also emphasise certain aspects of individual performances: a kind of hand choreography of the drummer's in a number entitled 'Caucasian Rhythms', the fact that a soloist was on point during the closing 'Friendship Dance'. Again, the interaction of a soloist and chorus in a Russian folk song, 'The Mosquito' could also be shown by cutting from one to the other. The song was sung in Russian, but the close-ups showed the response of one section to another and so conveyed the ponderous humour of it. This kind of production implies a familiarity with the material and a sense of what is important about it artistically. I think David is probably right to pick out what she does, but I want to stress that her agency enters inevitably into the presentation and that she is, in fact, representing the Ensemble to us, in such a way that what she senses as its essential qualities are expressed in television terms. We are not seeing it as the audience sees it: strictly speaking that is impossible. We are seeing it as David sees it.

The outside broadcast situation then tends through the manner in which it is produced to stress either the atmosphere, the good time, of the whole occasion or else the actual qualities and spectacle of the performance. In this way, two



different conceptions as to what constitutes entertainment are expressed. One emphasises the warmth and spirit of coming together for a show as the essential delight of the experience; the other presents the amazing and dazzling splendour and skill as the heart of the pleasure. Different meanings within the aesthetics of entertainment are opened out.

### The home-oriented situation

There are few programmes in which performers, particularly in introductions and greetings, do not address the camera and therefore attempt to address the domestic audience. But few performers address the camera in the actual performance of their act: they either address no-one or else the unseen studio audience, which since it is unseen is for the domestic viewer only a kind of enlargement of her or himself. This is not surprising, since so very few entertainers are products of television itself: nearly all come from the variety stage and cabaret, or else from the recording studio. They come, that is, from situations where the live audience or else its absence provide primary definitions of the situation. This, together with the fact that most entertainment programmes are recorded, partially accounts for the small number of programmes which exploit the fact that, like radio, television is a live communication medium, rather like a one-way (video-) telephone.

It falls, with important exceptions, to performers whose career has been predominantly in professional broadcasting, often radio, to exploit this, and these are the announcers and linkmen whose presence is crucial to many programmes: Bob Monkhouse (*The Golden Shot*), Pete Murray (*The Melodies Linger On*), Hughie Green (*Opportunity Knocks*) and David Nixon (*Magic Box*).<sup>3</sup> Their ability to do this derives in part from the fact that their whole role consists of introductions and greetings, of link material, and that this role is one that has been developed in broadcasting until it is now a widely accepted convention. It rests upon a sense of addressing a mass individual. That is, it conceives of the audience as an undifferentiated mass, but also recognises that this mass is broken down in terms of reception into units the size of an individual or family group. It addresses the mike or the camera as if it were addressing one person (or group), but the tone does not (cannot) take into account the great range of attitudes that addressing different individuals actually occasions. The tone settled on is a kind of pally, blokeish, 'when you get down to it we're all the same' cheerfulness, well described by Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy*.<sup>4</sup> It's a cross between a kind of verbal elbow nudging and a cosy, cooing interest and concern for the mass individual addressed.

But it is possible even as a performer to begin to make contact with the home audience, and certain performers – Cilla Black, Val Doonican, Rolf Harris – have developed ways of doing this, making a distinctive use of television.

Cilla Black's show (*Cilla*, directed by Michael Hurll for BBC1, contains much that is not home oriented: the self-addressed solo numbers (as if in a recording studio), the production numbers, the oddly grand ending, with the star standing in silhouette, arms half-outstretched. But in two particulars, the show is very

aware that it is television. First, Cilla Black herself, in between songs and often during sketches, constantly stresses her nerves at being in the show, her excitement at being with these big stars, her loud uninhibited laughter – delight or nervousness? – her self-mockery. All this is addressed to the camera, so that we are invited to share the joke, the situation with her. The show also contains sequences in which Cilla tries to realise the system as a two-way communication: using a closed circuit television with a camera unit nearby, she addresses directly people watching in a shop window and then brings them into the studio, or else carries on a conversation with a group of schoolboys and then appears from the next room. Here is realised vicariously the possibility of actually being able to make contact with the television star who addresses herself to you.

Val Doonican draws heavily on the assumption that people like the Irish, children and romance; he is also one of the few people who actually sings his songs to the camera. His relaxed singing style involves no sense of theatrical production, the rocking chair gives the song a domestic setting, the songs themselves are arranged in the same easy way, slow enough to allow 'natural' phrasing. The style and the subject matter of the songs go together to create an ideally domestic lyricism. Val Doonican's shows (at least those for BBC1) are also unusual in that they go out live, which is often brought out (perhaps deliberately) by mix-ups over props, crashes off stage and, of course, the absence of edited sequences. By making the studio situation fully apparent, Val Doonican can effectively play upon the notion that the show is one half of an ongoing conversation. *This* is where I am, and I'm *now* at this moment singing to *you*.

Rolf Harris, too, constantly refers to the situation, to what he is doing – exhausted after a dance routine, het-up doing a painting. He is used by the BBC in many capacities other than his own show, which gives him a fund of matey acceptance to draw on. He also gathers together many of the strands of the men-as-buffoons imagery of the advertisements on ITV – in which he also appears from time to time. In a sense, of the three under discussion he is the most identified with television itself.

(To whatever extent a performer may orientate himself towards the domestic audience, as long as there is an audience in the studio he will to a certain extent inevitably respond to it and this will imperceptibly affect his act, especially if humour is involved. There is often a pull between the two audiences, which can be disconcerting.)

All these performers are popular with audiences and so perhaps their friendliness and generosity are responded to with something like the feeling that we reserve for people we know and like. At the same time, it does seem that the fact that you can't answer back, that you know that your response is never really registered by the performer, that you are just a mass individual, in the end undermines the fullness and warmth promised by the home-oriented situation.

### The object situation

In perhaps the majority of cases there is no direct referral in the shows to a present or a domestic audience. The show is a self-contained product.



The paradigm of this show (if we leave aside the comedy interludes) is *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (BBC1). The songs are all recorded in advance, which means that the dancing and miming have to be exact, unspontaneous and slickly professional. They are usually all three. There seems to be a limited repertoire of songs that recur again and again – the old minstrel numbers, the ballad standards, the cleaner music-hall songs and so on – and the texture of the harmonisation varies little from one number to the next. Indeed, there is as little variation of tempi as possible too, even the distance between a waltz and a march, or a slow and a fast number, being kept minimal. One song flows easily and imperceptibly into the next. The familiarity of the songs is complemented by the simplicity of the production. The overall quality is clean and smooth – costumes just pressed, dance floor just polished. Settings and costumes are of three types – (i) rudimentary iconographic referents to stock show business locales – Paris (a cut-out Eiffel Tower, café tables, advertisement pillars), Cockney London (market barrows, Pearly King costumes), Vienna (chandeliers, ballroom clothes), hill-billy country (check shirts, log cabins, straw hats); (ii) the anonymous show biz glitter set, diamanté leotards, steps which light up, the rococo of the show girls' headgear, the cyclorama with coloured lighting; and (iii), occasionally, the casual wear which became fashionable in the 'fifties and acceptable in the 'sixties – sweaters and slacks for the men, bright, simple patterned dresses for the women. There is minimal differentiation between performers. The girls either wear the same costumes or else different but arbitrarily assigned period or 'character' costumes; their make-up all shows the same conspicuous expertise associated with professional entertainers; the approach to their appearance is basically that of the conventional glamour syndrome of leotards, legs and permanent waves. The men all wear the same clothes and black-face make-up – (although this has been modified to allow some differentiation) – the producer George Inns says: '... apart from their singing, they (the men) are just a background for the pretty girls and costumes'.<sup>6</sup> The dancing is simple, effortless, in unison, deriving in style from both ballroom dancing and the chorus routine in the musical comedy, although both in an attenuated form. The camera work is unobtrusive, shots are from many angles so that there is little sense of the show being performed in one direction (*i.e.* as to an unseen audience – although one is heard). It is a self-enclosed world. The camera may emphasise choreographic shapes or create effects of perspective and pattern. The whole show is anonymous and highly organized, comparable stylistically (though less lavish or outrageous) with the dance numbers of Busby Berkeley. It fulfils the intentions of its producer – 'It's pure entertainment. . . . It is a show you can watch without having to make any efforts'.<sup>6</sup>

Few shows have achieved quite the same close-knit self-enclosed objectiveness of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, and shows like *The Goldiggers of London* and the Younger Generation in their various appearances do attempt minimally to project to the camera something like personality and expression. Objectiveness is easier to realise in dance routines; song numbers, especially solos, are more problematic.

It is still the case that the majority of songs are performed on an abstract set

with no visible audience and no appeal to the camera. Here come all those inserts of guest singers in comedy and other shows. In theory, we are watching the singer wrapped up in his or her song and its emotions, but, in practice, they are projecting somewhere, probably to the unseen studio audience. They perform outward in one direction, a fact that is emphasised by the camera work. In nearly every case, the studio appears to be set up as a stage – a three sided square which can be seen only through the fourth invisible side. The cameras are placed directly in front of or at an angle towards the performer, but always in a frontal or 'audience' position. This fact is overlaid by camera movements (which tend to be more fluid and changing in the BBC than in the ITV companies), but does not disguise the fact that although the singer has no visible audience, studio or domestic, he is in fact performing out to an audience (albeit only of technicians). Thus precisely what the situation is becomes problematic – apparently a mere presentation of a song, inconsistencies in production remind one of both the situation in the studio and of the fact of it being relayed into the home. The song becomes neither a statement (of personality or emotion), cut off from the flux of interaction, nor on the other hand in any clear sense an instance of interaction.

In this chapter we have been brought up repeatedly against contradictions, against situations in which what is being done has not been thought through but rather is allowed to fall between different stools. The first contradiction is between the fact that the camera is a recording instrument and the fact that it is none the less not the equivalent of the human eye, able, in fact, to record only a very limited part of anything, with the consequence that the use of television always involves interpretation by the producer (even when he is not aware of it). Thus although television may bring experiences to the people, it never does so in an unmediated form – television is never the people's medium, but always the producers'. Secondly, the transmission is one-way, where it often wants to be two-way, in interaction – a limitation not imposed by technology but by institutions and history.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, the transmission and the show itself are live, although at different times from each other – thus the vitality and spontaneity of the show and the immediacy of the transmission are not synchronised (with exceptions, of course). These contradictions within the medium itself, as it is at present set up, inevitably effect the success of television entertainment in realising its aims.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this study I use the term producer or director loosely, recognising the complexities of decision making in institutional structures such as television companies and in collective artistic practice such as television production. I mean to indicate simply the person or persons who make the decision under discussion. The term itself, producer or director, I choose following the particular programme's credits.

<sup>2</sup> Both programmes were probably recordings, although only the BBC show was so acknowledged.

<sup>3</sup> The particular appeal of David Nixon has been well caught by James Towler: 'There is something rather cosy about David Nixon. He has the approach of everyone's favourite uncle. His friendly informal manner gave (the show) a degree of modesty that was in itself something of a tonic', *The Stage and Television To-day*, 7/10/71.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Hoggart: *The Uses of Literacy*, Penguin, 1958. Chapter 6, pp. 169-205.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Ann Purser, *The Stage and Television To-day*, 11/12/69.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See Hans Magnus Enzensberger: 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media' in *New Left Review* 64, November-December 1970.

## 3 The Aesthetics of Escape

We have seen that television light entertainment defines its job in terms of providing escape, and that it has to do this in the specific situation that television provides.

But what exactly is this activity of providing escape? What are you really doing when you entertain someone? Show business operates in full awareness of the unpleasantness of most people's lives: it is built into its definition of its job that it must provide an alternative to the world of work and of general drudgery and depression. But in so orienting itself, it has to do something about that reality, it has to have an attitude towards it that will successfully deal with it – and success here means effectively taking people's minds off it. This is an aesthetic activity – offering a presentation that in one way or another so stills the insistences of everyday life that all that remains in the consciousness is delight. Entertainment knows three mechanisms for doing this – *obliteration*, *contrast* and *incorporation*.

### Obliteration

One way of dealing with unpleasantness is to refuse altogether to look in its direction, to obliterate it totally from consciousness. In entertainment terms this means creating images, a world, which is totally other than the real world, a completely fabricated, artificial, separate reality. This is in itself so fascinating, so entrancing that the real world slips from consciousness.

Obliteration is, in fact, only a tendency, or principle, and not something that is ever wholly realised in entertainment, for its only true form would be total abstraction – pretty coloured shapes and sounds such as are provided between shows in Nigel Kneale's play *The Year of the Sex Olympics* and which have no reference whatsoever to the appearances and harmonics of 'reality'. (Even this is problematic, since even shapes have import, or can be dated and so acquire the tone of that date.)

Nevertheless as a real tendency in show business it has history enough, as is exemplified by two celebrated figures – Florenz Ziegfeld and Busby Berkeley. Both created the kind of extravagant production in which everything – performers, sets, music – was subordinate to an overriding sense of spectacle, conceived on a massive scale and obeying in the two men different aesthetics. With Ziegfeld in his *Follies*, baroque triumphed, all the ch-chi and frills of the Folies Bergère adopted and magnified, taste and decadent taste turned into an outrageous and whole-heartedly fetichistic production. Berkeley, choreographer



of such films as *42nd Street* and *Goldiggers of 1933*, was more of a modernist – he loved precision dancing, geometric shapes, smooth fabrics and polished floors. But for both – and they worked together on occasion – the basic principle was the same, the subordination of everything to the effect of quantity, expenditure, lavishness, extravagance, to ‘conspicuous consumption’. This tradition, which has been kept alive in this country by such variety theatres as the London Palladium and by ice-shows, is, however, practically beyond the reach of television, where finances are limited and strictly controlled, and where anyway scale is hard to achieve. Yet the tradition remains in such shows as *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, where anonymity of performers and settings is demanded so as to achieve a completely smooth, pretty, undisturbing effect, quite other than reality.

Yet *The Black and White Minstrel Show* is an isolated success. Perhaps this is essentially because it has found a way of re-presenting an older form which was itself obliterative – the grand scale minstrel show (which both Ziegfeld and Berkeley were involved in at points in their career). Relying on the continued popularity of the songs, the familiarity of the dance routines and the complete anonymity of performers, it has eliminated qualities which in a sense break through to reality – songs with words you have to listen to, modern and ‘expressive’ dancing and personality, all three of which were not absent from such potentially obliterative shows as *The Goldiggers of London* and *The Younger Generation*.

This does not mean that *The Black and White Minstrel Show* has no values, no attitudes. As any black person will tell you, it is deeply dismissive of black people, reducing them to anonymity in an attenuated form of Sambo-ism. And one should add that it is very dismissive of women, too, with its parade of absurdly accoutred doll-like girls. Yet *The Black and White Minstrel Show* is not exactly racist or sexist, in the sense that it does not actually promote such feelings. Rather the fact that these attitudes are so deeply ingrained in English habits of thought allows them to form the basis of a show which is anonymous, abstract, thing-like and obliterative. We accept the show as easily and as easily as we ignore the complexity and challenging individuality of blacks and women.

If the obliterative mode is rare for complete shows, it is common enough on television in two more restricted forms: the spectacle of energy in dance routines and a particular way of treating the star in certain shows.

There is a range of dance styles in the history of television entertainment: the early days of the Tiller girls, the growth and decline of ‘expressive’ dancing, deriving in some measure from modern dance, and more recently the use of discothèque dancing, usually in numbers backing a star singer. These last numbers (in, for instance *This is . . . Tom Jones* or *The Des O'Connor Show*) are nearly always up-tempo, and in them one seldom has any sense of overall choreographic pattern or even of the dance line of individual performers. The camera pans swiftly across the dancers, or concentrates on the singer. What comes through forcibly is the energy put into the dancing, which the style itself catches in the fast-nodding head and broadly waving arms. Everything is fast

and, to use modern dance terminology, oppositional – the shapes formed tend to be angular, sharp, staccato, and the insistent, often rather unsubtle beat of the music reinforces the impression of mechanical vitality that the dancing demands. The dress is usually some exaggeration of supposed London disco styles, maybe using man-made fabrics, and often too, emphasising the body proportions of both men and women. The dancers express neither personality nor the song, but rather communicate an energy which burns through everything else.

The treatment of the star may be such as to express his ‘personality’, something which will be discussed under *incorporation*, but there is another proceeding in television shows which works, unintentionally sometimes, to cancel out any such thing. In this second case, the performer becomes an object, inert and inexpressive.

There are two ways in which this happens. First of all, let us look again at those inserts of guest singers discussed towards the end of the last chapter. One of the characteristics of these spots is a tradition of design that was established for television in the mid-fifties, and belongs very much to that period. It recalls the Festival of Britain and espresso bars. It is characterised by an insistence on bare polished floors, the use of cycloramas, and a fondness for abstract shapes, particularly overlapping and irregular rectangles for wall designs and abstract three-dimensional shapes in plastic or else taut rope or string, often hanging in the middle of a set. This set forms no obvious part of the settings used in the rest of the show and most such sequences are very obviously pre-recorded and inserted quite against the flow and style of the rest of the show. (This is particularly true when the show is a comedian’s – Stanley Baxter, Terry Scott and so on). So you find, say, Moira Anderson standing next to an enormous, eccentrically shaped loom hanging in the centre of the set, or else Petula Clark wandering around clean white ramps, past hanging plastic shapes. Often the camera will further draw attention to the design by shooting through the shapes, or looking down across them, and so on. The overall quality is a kind of antiseptic tattiness, which threatens to anaesthetise any personality that the performer might be projecting, so that, to take the same examples, Moira Anderson and Petula Clark only work as personalities in so far as either the camera keeps in close up or else we read into their performance what we know of them from other contexts. The performer is encapsulated in a wholly unreal environment, obliterating his or her connection with the real world.

A different approach is suggested by certain grand scale shows such as *The Engelbert Humperdinck Show*. Here the settings were enormous, recalling at times the sort of thing Busby Berkeley used to work with. The show transmitted Christmas 1969 was a particularly effective example – a huge set of steps, rising in peaks, with circular turrets (shaped rather like chess pawns) as decoration – enough like an Arabian nights fantasy to have a kind of density of its own, but not enough like one to start suggesting allegorical or psychic meanings. The show, which was edited very smoothly together, all took place on this one giant set, with props brought onto it for sketches, and dances choreographed on it. The guests were big star names – Tom Jones, Dionne Warwick – but because all they did was suddenly appear, to sing at the top of one of the flights of stairs



or else to exchange a few words with Humperdinck, they were all, Jones, Warwick and Humperdinck, less like performers and more like sacred creatures inhabiting this extraordinary glossy world. In fact, as a vision of stardom, it emphasised the performers, not for what they did, nor for what personality they projected, but simply as beings of an altogether different status to you and me, a different ontological category in fact.<sup>1</sup> The impact of personality – Jones's sexiness, Warwick's sophistication – was deadened, but the performers were none the less elevated as stars – not for what they do but for what they are. And how appropriate that at the centre of it all should be Engelbert Humperdinck, for he is a performer to whom the technique is ideally suited. His voice and manner are pleasant enough but unexceptional: it is his looks that have made him a star. In particular it is his face, half Italianate, half pop star à la Mick Jagger, upon which enthusiasm focuses. Despite the obvious sensuality and manliness of his face, with its heavy features, generous lips and large sideboards, it is essentially a passive virility. Humperdinck uses few facial expressions. His face is a paradigm of women's magazine sensual masculinity, but inert, resting there for the camera to capture. Humperdinck is thus an ideal performer for this kind of show, a pretty object with which to deck out pretty sets.

Such spectacle anaesthetises personality at the same time as it promotes luxuriance. The tone of the show is one of glamour, a world of plenty and delight. In its sumptuousness and the ease with which the stars inhabit this, it points to a fund, or a moment, of unchecked wealth. As against the acceptance world of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, so easily resting on dismissive habits of mind, and the vitality of the dance number, shows like Humperdinck's celebrate abundance and luxury to the point where sheer material quality dazzles out all else.

## Contrast

Where *obliteration* does not recognise the existence of the real world, *contrast* acknowledges it but against it celebrates the warmth of the immediate moment. Contrast is essentially a live mode – it is at work for instance in pub entertainment or in the Northern clubs, where the jokes are often deliberately drawn from the real concerns of the audience, where the songs give everyday experience vitality, dignity or simply recognition, and where the message of the compère is always: are you having a good time – aren't *we* together having a good time *now*?

Obviously television cannot exactly work like this – not at any rate as it is at present technically deployed, with no feedback from reception to producer except through the delayed formal channels of complaint, surveys, or inspired telephone calls. (And why should anyone phone up about an entertainment show?) But the warmth of this mode holds its appeal and television tries to recover it in various ways.

Perhaps the single most important way is the use of the audience. Often this is not so much *use* as simply *presence*. Television does not seem to feel able to dispense with an audience – even when not seen, one is heard; even when not

actually present, one is recorded in. The sound of an audience gives the show a sort of glow – the technology of television is felt to need this tempering note of human warmth. Perhaps, too, by not being seen, the audience feels to the domestic viewers more an extension of their situation, stand-ins for the millions of isolated viewers up and down the country. The necessity for an audience, the feeling of coldness and barrenness which its absence promotes, suggests the degree to which the togetherness and community that the contrast mode would assert is built into a primary sense of what entertainment should be like.

The audience can also be used, forming part of the total quality of the show. In the closing sequence of *This is . . . Tom Jones* for instance, where Jones performs on a floor lit from below and surrounded on three sides by stalls of women. Not only is the apparent hysteria evoked exciting and not only does the audience at times threaten (if perhaps implausibly) the continuation of the show by trying to drag Tom in amongst them, but he himself shows his awareness of the situation. The screaming that greets his hip-swinging for instance leads him to delay it, to ask "Are you ready?", and to grin 'wickedly' before going into the sexy routine. This we see through close-ups, and we also see and hear the audience excitement. We are looking in on an extraordinary event, a kind of happening (however contrived), from the outside: the audience is part of the show and affects what happens in it.

To effect the contrast mode, television makes frequent use of forms supposedly of themselves redolent of togetherness and warmth – music-hall, the circus, night clubs, minstrel shows. Either in outside broadcasts (see the section on this in the previous chapter) or in deliberate recreation and reference as in Charlie Drake's end-of-the-pier compendium *Slapstick and Old Lace* (ATV; dir. John Schulz-Conway) or the affectionate send-ups in *Cilla*, the good times of being together at a show are hopefully conveyed. By harking back to highly traditional forms developed supposedly before the advent of the mass media and commercial entertainment, a golden age of community is asserted, where people still got together in the closeness of enjoyment (and the enjoyment of closeness) against the alienation of the world.

There is a certain thinness in this inspiration, for if one traces back the forms one finds that circus, for instance, was really the first mass commercial entertainment, conceived in the late nineteenth century as a vast enterprise to capture the emergent working class; that the minstrel show *The Black and White Minstrels* is based upon is the Ziegfeld spectacular and not the original small-time touring shows, and that the music hall was a deeply ambiguous tradition, at once popular and manipulative.<sup>2</sup>

(It can happen that not just a form but a whole *era* is used in the contrast mode. The 'twenties for instance are evoked as a period in which community in entertainment was possible (despite its being one of the grimmest periods in actual history) – *The Goldiggers in London* often set numbers in it, so did *Cilla* sometimes, and Max Bygraves has built a whole show around it, its mystique and its absurdities (reincarnated in Aimi Macdonald). Any show has only to bring on girls in flapper dresses, have them charleston and swing their long beads for an instant atmosphere to be created.)



In all these instances, despite the interpretations, the television presentation appears straightforward. There are examples of shows, however, where the actual means of television may work to create a sense of atmosphere. This is done to a certain extent in *This is . . . Tom Jones*, with Jones running through the audience at the opening, spots deliberately glaring into the camera to correspond to the brash music and loud announcement. A kind of electrical dynamism. Most of the show is conventional, however, and a more interesting example is *The Andy Williams Show* (produced by Allen Blye and Chris Beard for CBS, and put out by BBC1). It consists of singers – Williams himself, a guest female, a guest pop group or soloist, and guest black singer or group –, a guest comedian and a small company of zany players who dress up as bears, bumble bees, tiny Austrian generals, living trees and so on, for short sketches or interruptions. Often these latter will sabotage a singer's number, pouring water over her or removing vital parts of the set or carrying out military manoeuvres behind him and so on. Nevertheless each singer does get one whole uninterrupted number to himself, performed in an appropriate set (*e.g.* Hawaiian Don Ho gets bamboo huts; silky voiced Peggy Lee gets a magic birdcage set; Ike and Tina Turner, hard soul singers, get flashy scaffolding, *etc.*) and Andy Williams gets several – two are performed on sets, one against a many-coloured backdrop (which, through a technical trick, can disappear to show Andy with his back to the audience) and one a platform with stairs leading up to it, suspended in a clouds and stars design; the rest are performed with the audience. This latter is set on huge moving tiers of seats – at the beginning of the show, as 'Moon River' in full string version glows aurally over the credits, Andy rushes on between the two tiers which then close lovingly in on him. At the end of the show, Andy picks women out of the audience to waltz a few bars of 'Moon River' with him. This opening and close, as well as other moments in the show, are shot from on high, showing the whole studio – lights, cameras, audience, performers. The fact of the show being in a television studio is never avoided. The sequence of songs, numbers and comedy, however, does not follow in a logical or even possible space-time continuum. The whole show jumps about using flash editing, repetitions, film running backwards and so on. The only stable element is Andy Williams, whom nothing undermines, and the whole effect of the editing and jumbling of items is to create a kind of romantic *Laugh In*, or even a love-in, but respectable and with delightful comedy. It is as if we are expected to believe, given Williams' image and the shots of him with the audience, that the atmosphere in the studio was that warm and zany, and that the re-editing is an attempt to re-create televisually the rhythm and mood of that good thing they had got going.

But the extent to which one goes on accepting this aesthetic illusion must vary from person to person. The curious thing about *The Andy Williams Show* is that precisely because of all this it ceases almost to be a contrast occasion after a while and becomes an object, a spectacle. Because the editing cuts across any development or projection by the performers themselves, because they are incorporated into the zaniness in sketches and invaded by it during their numbers, because that zaniness is itself so without bite, so without reference, so

predictable and unanarchic, and because the stable centre is Andy Williams, who is only one degree less anaesthetised by it than Humperdinck would be, the show can be seen more as a technological spectacle, in which all the elements are subordinate to the principle of the editing. The atmosphere ceases to be people together, and becomes a product – packaged togetherness.

There are two other ways, mostly unsuccessful, in which television entertainment can be in the contrast mode. First it can rely on the home-oriented situation, where a performer invites the viewer into the show. In the section on home-oriented shows we noted examples of performers sharing the actual business of entertaining with the viewers, emphasising the effort and excitement of the job. But these performers rely heavily upon the wide familiarity and popularity of the types that they embody. Moreover it requires a lot of commitment on the part of the viewer to make it work; the viewer has to be sufficiently involved with the image, sufficiently convinced of the performer's natural embodiment of the image for these shows, half performed in a self-enclosed set, not to seem perfunctory in their occasional references to 'the viewers at home'.

Most of the time what happens is just this – an occasional appeal to the viewer to 'join in' the fun the performers are having. Maggie Fitzgibbon, for instance, in her role as hostess and singer in ATV's *Holiday Star Time* (producer: David Bell), joined a jazz group for a number towards the end of the show. Jazz, in the peculiar English inflection given to its traditional form (performers were Reg Varney, Kenny Ball, Chris Barber and Acker Bilk) is perhaps another example of a tradition which seems redolent of warmth before it starts, both in its reference to the carefree darkies who created it and in its evocation of the 'fifties jazz cellars, the trad boom, C.N.D. and all that. Maggie Fitzgibbon added her own aggressive have-a-good-time tone to a rendition of 'Won't you come home, Bill Baily?', a typical amalgam of trad jazz and music hall song. After it she left the floor and appeared in front of another camera, saying to it (and hence to us), "Well, that was enormous fun!" We were invited to share the fun of that number with her, and yet only in passing, only as a nod to our presence. And, of course, in any creative sense we can take no part whatsoever in the show.

It is at precisely these moments of gesture towards togetherness of performer and viewer that the limitations of television seem most wretched. The need to assert a community of enjoyment remains powerful, and yet television's inability to do anything of the sort only heightens the sense of alienation which has given rise to the need in the first place. We need, however, to remember that television is only limited by the organisations that control it, which for one reason or another, do not wish to extend television's technical possibilities. As has frequently been pointed out in recent discussions,<sup>3</sup> all receivers are potentially transmitters. There is no technical reason why television should not be an instrument of community. The emptiness of gestures towards community are thus reminders of how inadequately television at present satisfies people's needs.

We can note finally and in passing a last form of contrast occasion, when the television show itself assumes the status of an important event in public life and thereby is invested with atmosphere. This happens only rarely, when a show



manages to become the focus for a particular cultural phenomenon. This *Ready Steady Go!* did for pop and *That Was The Week That Was* did for satire. Both shows stressed the here and now liveness of the occasion, cameras pressing through milling teenage dancers, the threat of the unexpected, libellous or obscene happening. Perhaps a glow passes over the memory when one speaks of these shows. At any rate, no shows at present have this status.

### Incorporation

*Obliteration* blots out the world and *contrast* asserts a community against it: *incorporation* tries to deny that the world is, after all, so bad. Incorporation takes elements of the real world (and ignores others) and so presents them as to assert these elements as positive qualities.

This is a fictive activity. It presents an image of the world, an alternative picture. In television this activity is seldom sustained, since television shows are so tied to a variety format – a complete picture is only possible in a narrative form such as a comedy sketch, a musical play or a dance number. Of these, the first is deliberately excluded from the present study, and the second is seldom part of television output, except in the form of film musicals or excerpts from stage shows running in London. When an original musical is put on – for instance, *No Trams to Lime Street* – it draws heavily, despite the freshness of that particular example, on conventions derived from film and stage. As for the third, dance numbers, they are used primarily in an obliterative fashion, although there is often an attempt to make some sort of statement at the same time. *The Goldiggers of London* gave each of the girls of the title a solo spot in successive weeks, attempting in some way to personalise them, and the whole format, with its trendiness and campness, its fashion magazine reference to (twentieth century) period styles, fitted the fashion for harking back to earlier decades of the century. Similarly the Younger Generation have clear ideological implications – clean, active, affluently dressed, cheeky without being rude, good natured, they fit admirably a syndrome summed up by such remarks as ‘Not all young people are long-haired drop-outs you know . . .’

Reconciling views of the world are brought into entertainment in two principal ways – through ‘personality’ and in the identification of a programme with a particular cultural milieu.

### Personality

In personality<sup>4</sup> a range of associations and values are drawn together to form a unique ‘symbolic cluster’, whose uniqueness and actuality is affirmed and legitimated by the fact that a performer is uncopiable and unreproducible. Performers are always real people, whose physiognomy, voice and manner, although they can be imitated, cannot be reproduced in an exact copy. This gives to both their public image and what they choose to express in their act an apparent validity – they actually *embody* their image and the values associated

with them, and do not merely state that these values are (or ‘would be’) good, delightful or whatever.

In terms of television, personality works in two ways, both necessary. The performer draws on his or her public image, upon the viewers’ previous knowledge of him. At the same time, he is supported, to varying degrees, by the actual production which can enforce or elaborate the image by iconographic referents, choice of material and so on.

Previous acquaintance with the performer is often essential to an appreciation of his particular appeal, and it seldom happens that the image derives solely, or even primarily, from television itself. With older performers this is quite obvious – Gracie Fields without Rochdale, Vera Lynn without the blitz, Bob Hope without Bing Crosby are to a large extent incomprehensible; but even younger performers rely greatly on the wider dimensions of their image as recorded in the press, in interviews, in recordings, advertisements and so on. (Rolf Harris’s championship of sweets and paint in television commercials, for instance, considerably reinforces his child-loving, man-about-the-house personality.)

Where this background is not left to do all the work, there are various ways in which the television production can emphasise or promote personality. It can do it in a fairly schematic way, carefully judging each item in a show for its contribution to the star’s image. *Presenting Keith Michell* (BBC1; producer Yvonne Littlewood) for instance was a veritable compendium of facets of Michell’s talent. If we take just the dance items, we had: a pas-de-deux with Elizabeth Seal in a rather faltering ‘fifties musical comedy style, following their singing ‘The Language of Love’; a courtly dance to songs of Henry VIII, breaking out of the formal style for Spanish, waltz, folksy English, mawkish tap and discothèque dancing interludes; ‘There is a garden’, a song danced in fey clothes and settings, using the kind of ‘mod’ choreography that characterises much of television’s current output – Michell as romantic matinée idol, as historical actor, as pretty boy. Since none of this was directed at an audience, studio or domestic, it worked very much as a statement about Keith Michell, a presentation of an interesting object.

At a less schematic level, the production can provide in relation to the image a ‘helpful’ point of departure and a generally ‘supportive’ context. Thus *Rod McKuen* (BBC2; producer: Stewart Morris), whose shows were first shown when he was not widely known in this country, placed him by an opening sequence showing him bounding through the countryside with a large shaggy dog, and provided him for the show itself with an open-plan, hessian-walled set and an Arran sweater, simple country-style luxury. Similarly a token sign in the production may suggest part of the harmonics of the image – Val Doonican’s rocking chair, the silhouette Mediterranean townscape for Nana Mouskouri – although still more production is anonymous, variations of the abstract style outlined above, throwing the stars back on the resources of their material and the reverberations of their image.

Potentially, too, the handling of the camera and lighting can aid the performer in his or her expressive task. Unfortunately this does not seem to happen very



often. In a programme produced by Nick Hunter for BBC1, Esther Ofarim sang favourite songs. Although this was recorded at the Octagon Theatre, Bolton, there was no sense of this and although the audience was visible Ofarim played neither to them nor to us, but to herself. It was the object situation. 'Go away from my window' began with close-ups of the string section and then the drum, before changing to a close-up of the singer. The lighting for this last consisted simply of a single spot on the face, casting 'effective' shadows, but the initial close-up was so close that one did not know where the light came from, one saw only the dramatically lit face. Of course, the shadows on the face did not of themselves mean anything, but in the context of the song, the arrangement for strings with soft drum, the build-up of images from instruments to face, the camera's composition implied both intensity and melancholy – the concentration of sharp light and dark contrasts, the metaphor of being in the shadows. The producer held this for the first verse of the song, and then for the second began to track back. Immediately much of this effect was lost, since one saw how it had been achieved. For the rest of the song the producer used tracking camera and superimposition of shots. At the moment of climax in the song, where Ofarim suggested the emotion by a sudden rush of syllables on a descending phrase, the producer cut from one shot to another, thus cutting into and blurring the dramatic effect that the performer herself was achieving. The song ended with a shot of the empty chair in which Ofarim had been singing.

Producers of such shows clearly have problems. There seems to be a conventional wisdom that a shot held too long is boring, oppressive even. Consequently there is a variety of shots, changing usually at the end of one verse and the beginning of another, but usually also changing more frequently as the song goes on. The BBC favours much use of moving camera and shots from above; the ITV companies use more static shots, with rather more arbitrary cutting from one to the other. Again, there seems to be a mistrust of the performer's ability to hold an audience, and in some ways this is understandable. Many singers do not build their act or their number up, with drama and humour, but present it in a straight manner, relying on looks and voice more than anything else – Mary Hopkins, Anita Harris, Nina, Vince Hill, etc. Producers have to be sensitive to those performers who need a shape given to their act and those others – Petula Clark, Tom Jones, Rod McKuen, Esther Ofarim, for instance – who shape their own act. It should be added that this question of shaping is a difficult one. The singers picked out so far all shape their material dramatically; but there are many whose shaping is more musical and this, too, requires sensitive handling (e.g. many of the American crooners – Bing Crosby, Andy Williams, Perry Como, etc.).

### Milieu

I use this term loosely to refer to groupings (or strata) in society which share attitudes to life, agree upon goals for living and usually take over or invent symbols and sometimes language for their specific outlook. It does not carry the sense of 'community', of close-knit and localised togetherness; milieux are

national or international, and they are not values one asserts for themselves but rather the contexts within which other values are jointly asserted.

Producers have a sense of what milieux exist and what they are like. By deliberately casting an entertainment programme in the mould of a particular milieu, television is at once conferring legitimacy on that milieu and its values by giving them mass public 'recognition' and is also asserting that it is real and positive enough to be found not merely interesting but *entertaining*.

A good example here is *It's Cliff Richard* (BBC1; producer: Michael Hurll), which is very clearly working with (or, *in the supposition of*) a particular kind of audience – adolescent, female, and more likely to be hooked by Radio One in its Tony Blackburn rather than its John Peel mood. Richard is carefully in fashion, nothing hippy in his dress but properly Carnaby Street and *Rave* magazine – the spirit of 'sixties 'mod', in fact. He is supported by the wilfully young and wide-eyed Una Stubbs and Hank Marvin, who, apart from playing the guitar, is resident comedian. His humour – in sketches aided by Richard and Stubbs – is a mixture of being harmlessly rude to his co-stars and of silliness (not to be confused with goonish or absurd humour, although some of the voices do derive from the *Goon Show* and some tricks, speeded-up camera and so on, do recall *Laugh-In*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus* and so on). There is no innuendo in the humour, and no comment. The show seems to rely very much on the adolescent mod world of the mid-sixties, when Richard and the Shadows were at the peak of their Top Twenty success; yet to judge by the pitch of the audience response, all girlish giggles and screams, the mixture seems to retain a fascination for the same age range as originally applauded Richard. In fact, the show relies heavily on the horizons of that particular adolescent world – pretty clothes just cheap enough to be bought from Saturday earnings, single play records rather than LPs, men who are sexy without the full implication of sexuality being made and humour which relies as much on nervous giggling as on any 'comic sense of the world'. I am not trying here to establish a sociological category off the top of my head, but to suggest the kind of world that *It's Cliff Richard* seems to see itself as placed within.

One of the most often used milieux in all show business is show business itself, and this peculiar self-referring quality marks a great number of shows. In various ways this is a reference to community – the community of the contrast occasion which stars have provided for people at other points in their career, the community of the profession itself, which is held to fascinate the public at least as much as its members, the community feeling of great names amongst each other. On this last point several critics have pointed out (notably the admirable James Towler in *The Stage*), that the number of performers involved in television entertainment is not all that great. The same stars recur again and again, guesting in each other's shows. There often seems to be an implicit elite society that is called upon for the shows, a set of performers guaranteed to turn up sooner or later in the series. One can be fairly sure that the following for instance will get a look in – Dusty Springfield, Nina, Bruce Forsyth, Derek Nimmo, Sacha Distel, Roy Castle, Sandie Shaw, Harry Secombe . . . the list tends to date, of course. This is not to say that new faces or unusual ones never appear. Some shows have



specialist tastes in the guests they invite: magicians of various sorts in *David Nixon's Magic Box*, commercial folk in *Rod McKuen* and *Gentry*, or the rather camp use of straight actors and older stars, as for instance Sir John Gielgud, Sir Ralph Richardson and Fred MacMurray in *Carol Channing's Mad English Tea Party*, Thora Hird and Stanley Holloway in *Cilla*, Donald O'Connor and Jane Powell in *This is . . . Tom Jones*, or Billy Eckstine and Rosemary Clooney in *The Andy Williams Show*. Jimmy Tarbuck seemed almost to have a policy of introducing new comedians on his show. Nonetheless, the concentration is on a relatively small group of stars, a factor which contributes to the peculiarly ingrown quality of much of the entertainment.

A clear example of this quality is *The Leslie Crowther Show* (London Weekend; directed and produced by William G. Stewart). One edition opened with Leslie Crowther coming on in dinner jacket to a backdrop of tinsel, singing 'Put on a happy face' and 'With a little help from my friends'. Here is the full convention of the opening number – the song itself snappy, with a life-assertive lyric, the setting bright and determinedly cheery, the dress one bespeaking the special occasion. He then introduced his guests – Nina, Sheila Bernette and Dickie Henderson – shaking hands with each, enthusing. Then, as they all stood there, Crowther said: 'How do we get off? – it's like a finale!' – that is, the joke now was actually about the dynamics of performance, the reference of the humour was to the show itself, to the business of being in the show. After they had walked off (a joke further depending on the audience's sense of what goes in show biz, since it is not usual just to walk off), Crowther told some jokes aimed at homosexuals, the working-class and trade unions. Guest spots and advertisements were followed by a Long John Silver sketch which again referred above all to show business, partly in the use of a trio of established Variety stage comics (Arthur English, Chic Murray, Albert Modley) and partly in playing upon people forgetting lines or 'corpsing' (laughing involuntarily on stage) – again centring the humour and the reference internally in the dynamics of acting out a sketch. After a song from Nina, Dickie Henderson was asked to do his walking imitations, because they had always delighted people in his Variety days; there followed a dance routine, with Henderson and Crowther paired with Sheila Bernette (diminutive) and Aletta Morrison (tall), the jokes being about the difficulty of dancing with girls the wrong size; another Nina number; and then the finale, the performers grouped around a piano, singing show business standards and making in-references to the profession. At every point the spirit of Variety was invoked, but this further internalised the preoccupation with the actual process of performing. In evoking Variety Crowther and company were invoking more than just a form – an attitude of mind, really, and a world.

What is striking about the incorporation mode is that, while it is all the time asserting and legitimating values, drawing on the reality of personality and the shared attitudes of cultural milieu, it nonetheless comes up with such thin imagery. This is especially the case with one of the most prevalent symbolic clusters upon which television draws (in personality and milieu) – Scottishism.

There is nearly always a Scots entertainer on at some point in the week –

Moir Anderson, Kenneth McKellar, Andy Stewart have their own series and guest on others, *Opportunity Knocks* often has a piper or Scottish dancing troop on, and the New Year celebrations occasion long programmes of studio Hogmanay parties. The emptiness of all this Tartanry, the jokes about sporrans and haggis, the whining bagpipes and accordion bands, the same old songs dragged out time and again ('My ain folk', 'My love is like a red, red rose', 'I belong to Glasgow', 'A Scottish Soldier', etc.) is easily mocked. It is one-dimensional imagery – tartan does not refer to a clan structure or loyalty but to itself; tartanry means nothing about Scotland but the production of multi-coloured cloth. But, as Tom Nairn has pointed out, this imagery has to be seen in the context of Scottish culture:

Sporranry, alcoholism, and the ludicrous appropriation of the remains of Scotland's Celtic fringe as a national symbol have been celebrated in a million emetic ballads. It is an image further blackened by a sickening militarism, the relic of Scotland's special role in the building up of British imperialism. (The significance of this is perhaps most easily comparable to that of ANZAC day rituals for Australia and New Zealand: societies afraid of their own marginality and provincialism seize on whatever they can as their indubitable contribution to world history, the proof of real identity.) Yet any judgement on this aspect of Scottish national consciousness ought to be softened by the recognition that these are the pathetic symbols of an inarticulate people unable to forge valid correlates of their different experience: the peculiar crudity of Tartanry only corresponds to the peculiarly intense alienation of the Scots on this level.<sup>5</sup>

What Nairn is pointing to here relates directly to the central contradictions of the incorporation mode. In the wider sense it is built upon a contradiction between itself and the tradition in which it is placed – it asserts the pleasantness of the world in the context of entertainment which relies upon and operates with an essential recognition that the world is unpleasant. But the contradiction is also between the mode and its sources – for it takes fantasies (of personality), hopes and goals (of milieu) and announces that these fantasies are real, these goals achieved. It is realising dreams, but using precisely the insubstantial material of dreams. It is confirming hopes, and yet grounding its affirmations in the confusion and desperation which give rise to the hopes. It is saying that because Tom Jones is real, then the dreams of virility are real too; that because Kenneth McKellar is real, then Scotland has identity and greatness. Where obliteration and contrast seek merely to convey the feeling of abundance, vitality and community, incorporation hopelessly tries to assert that personal and social desires are already realised or eminently realisable.

The kind of desperation and imaginative thinness of incorporation is well illustrated by a final example: Christmas.

Christmas is the peak period for television entertainment: more than for any other public holiday, television seems to feel Christmas demands entertainment shows. Where Easter or Whitsun merit maybe a circus and a show, Christmas, for three or four days, gets shows, pantomimes, ice extravaganzas, musicals,



circuses and all manner of entertainment programmes. For Christmas is, perhaps, the one really big festival that survives into present society.

The festival, an institutionalised occasion for public celebration, is not a feature of contemporary society. The increase of working hours with industrialisation encroached upon public holidays to such an extent that they had to be re-invented in line with banking procedures. At the same time, the growth in shift work, 'moonlighting' and female labour has tended to cut across community entertainments (except those that are snatched at the pub or on Saturday afternoons at football), leading to 'privatisation' in entertainment.<sup>6</sup> But Christmas has survived these developments and in its rhetoric holds forth the promise of ideals realised – the reunion of families and friends, the reminder of a meta-physical framework to our lives, even the bogus brotherhood of the Commonwealth rehearsed anew in the Queen's speech. Christmas, in fact, by being required to register the demands of community, charity, religion, political union and release from the year's work (and the bitter weather) is really being asked to do rather more than it can. And overlaid upon this is the flimsy apparatus of Christmas symbolism: cards, trees, Santa Claus, Bing Crosby and so on. Increasingly, however, what is urged is not that Christmas be celebrated as a festival, but that the Christmas symbols be bought and possessed, with the net result that their symbolic function decreases as they become desirable objects in their own right. Just as Christmas cards stand in for human contact, so in turn even that element of contact diminishes beside the desire to receive cards and the chore of sending them. Christmas dinner ceases to symbolise family reunion and becomes a good meal in its own right, preferably made up of ingredients advertised for weeks beforehand.

This puts television entertainment in an impossible position. It has nothing to sell viewers and only the increasingly empty symbols of Christmas with which to entertain them. At the same time Christmas is a festival and it is its business to register this, to promote the good times. Its chief resort is size, or rather numbers, the compendium show of big name acts strung together – *Christmas Night with the Stars*, *Holiday Star Time* – together with traditionalism in the form of various definitions of 'family entertainment' – *Disneyland*, pantomime, circus – and the inclusion in other shows of Christmas songs.

At Christmas 1970, Yorkshire Television, who with *Stars on Sunday* have cornered with breathtaking sycophancy the religious entertainment market, put on a show called *A Gift for Gracie*, a show which perfectly expresses the dilemma and compromise of television Christmas entertainment. Set, to quote the *TV Times*, in 'the entrance hall and grand staircase of an eighteenth century mansion', a version of the eighteenth century at once glossy and tatty, it showed Gracie Fields receiving guests, singing with them and preparing herself to settle down to the Queen's Christmas message. The show treated Gracie as the focal point for many clichés – the whole routinised Christmas iconography of tree, cards, cribs and so on were called upon for songs, jokes and prettiness; a knowledge of English show-business was needed for one to join in heralding the arrival of several comics of the old school; the infinitely sweet harmonics of the electric organ accompanied such songs as 'Little Donkey' and 'Bless This House', as

well as providing music for the fairy on the tree who came to life as a ballerina and went through her ballet paces in that style where ballet becomes kitsch; finally the singing families from *Stars on Sunday* were on hand. The assumption seemed to be that all this syrup would be palatable because it centred on Gracie, whose image is both pious and salty. Gracie Fields, royalist and religious, comes from the Northern working-class, and is always given a spot to do a comedy number, just to remind you. Here, perhaps, an intolerable burden was put upon her supposedly inexhaustible fund of good sense, for she had to assert both the no-nonsense vivacity of working-class entertainment and the validity of the Christmas and tinsel, showbiz and kitsch which centred upon her. The Christmas values had to be linked to a more vital tradition, a more down-to-earth personality (although itself at times liable to become a cypher), so that the promise of Christmas, both as religious and secular festival, which is a real hope in people's lives, was validated – at least for one more year.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I take this idea from Violette Morin: 'Les Olympiens' in *Communications* No. 2.

<sup>2</sup> For circuses see Cantor & Werthman eds.: *A History of Popular Culture*, Macmillan, New York, 1968. For minstrel shows: Marshall and Jean Stearns: *Jazz Dance*, Macmillan, New York, 1964. For music hall: Stuart Hall & Paddy Whannel: *The Popular Arts* op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Enzensberger op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed the nature of personality and stardom at greater length in 'The Meaning of Tom Jones' in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* Spring 1971 (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham).

<sup>5</sup> Tom Nairn: 'The Three Dreams of Scottish Nationalism' in *New Left Review* No. 49, May-June 1968.

<sup>6</sup> See next section.

## 4 Entertainment and Society

Shows are entertaining because they assert against the unpleasantness of reality certain hopes and ideals for humanity, because they give pleasure by making their audience feel what those ideals *would be like* were they realised.<sup>1</sup>

First of all, in the extravagant spectacular, entertainment creates a world of *abundance*, a world in which necessity and scarcity have been defeated. Crucial to the entertainment version of this world is the ease with which it is shown to be inhabited: it is a realm of material well-being which is maintained apparently without effort, without continual strain, without standing on the backs of other people. There may be behind the stars who move in this world a publicity tale of 'rags to riches', thus connecting the realisation of abundance with the life experience of the average person, but the actual presentation is absolute – what effortless well-being is like, and not how it is achieved.

Secondly, entertainment asserts the fact of human *energy* in the vitality of the dance number, the pow of the singing, the snap of the humour, the sparkle of the sexuality – so many showbiz clichés which none the less relate to a real life-assertive quality in the best of entertainment. Elken Allan has suggested that this quality is indeed – or should be – the major quality of entertainment, and in doing so ranges himself against the dominant entertainment ethos of relaxation – 'To me the purpose of light entertainment is . . . to stimulate people, to excite them, to move them, to make them want to *do* something, not just sit in their armchairs staring blissfully at the grey-lined screen smiling contentedly'.<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, the contrast mode of entertainment again and again seeks to create, for a moment, *community*, the sense of warm, close, human togetherness. Community is a romantic notion, as many sociologists have pointed out to writers entranced by the image of previous peasant or working-class cultures; but the fact that many people believe it could have existed at one time only gives force to the notion as an ideal. Whether or not community has ever been realised or is feasible, the desire to realise one's identity with one's fellows still exerts a powerful hold over people's hopes and imaginations.

The hold of these ideals need not necessarily be seen in terms of their being universals. Indeed, to understand their hold with any methodological rigour we need to return the purely immanent analysis above to the society which produces the shows and in the context of which they are watched.

The problem of this is that there are so few studies of the role the mass media play in people's lives which go beyond tabulating preferences. In this context, Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy*, so often misunderstood as a quasi-



Leavisite attack on the mass media, is a pioneer work, as Jean-Claude Passeron has recognised:

By drawing attention to the fact that the reception of a cultural message should not be disassociated from the social conditions in which it occurs and thus from the *ethos* which essentially characterises a social group, *The Uses of Literacy* proposes for further research a theoretical hypothesis far more to the point than the assumption which leads numerous psycho-sociologists to think that they can get at the true relationship between members of the working-class and their reading and entertainment by 'audience analysis', in which as a general rule they only succeed in getting their subjects to confess their own ideology of escapism or 'alienation'.<sup>3</sup>

The only sustained piece of research carried on at this level is Robert Merton's *Mass Persuasion*, a study of Kate Smith's war-bond drive. Although very much within the tradition of effects studies ('what do the media *do* to people?' as opposed to 'What do people do *with* the media?'), Merton, in order to account for Smith's enormous effectiveness in selling bonds, does have to consider both the values she represents and the values of the world into which her messages and persona come. This leads him to make some sweeping but extremely suggestive statements about the role of an entertainer like Smith in a society characterised, as he sees it, by 'anomie' – a feeling of powerlessness and lack of purpose, which is translated at an interpersonal level by a feeling, of which Smith's personality is a powerful denial, of 'a discrepancy between appearance and reality in the sphere of human relationships'.<sup>4</sup>

In the absence of such studies for our specific problem, we can only sketch out some possible relations between the shows and the complex of meaning, values and hopes in terms of which they are watched. We may do this by considering again the three central assertions of entertainment – abundance, energy and community – in terms of how far they make sense as a hope and a desire in contemporary society. If they are so ardently applauded, then it would not be unreasonable to suppose that they are applauded by people whose experience of the world tells them that the world is not characterised by these things.

And so it is. The dream of *abundance* goes into a society of great wealth distributed with increasing inequality, a society which possesses the technological means of defeating necessity but does not deploy them for general benefit. It goes moreover into a world which, as surrounding news programmes repeatedly tell us, is starving and desperately deprived. The assertion of human *energy* goes into a world devitalised and routinised, in which, as Henri Lefebvre has pointed out,<sup>5</sup> the drudgery of daily life makes ever more encroachment on the individual. The assertion of *community* goes directly into a world where community is lost and hard to achieve – one has only to think of various factors of modern living to sense this, even when one guards carefully against romanticising the concept: the breaking up of working-class communities in the insensitive and piecemeal transferral of families to new housing estates, the intense loneliness of high-rise flats, the increases in overtime and shift-work, and the tendency towards

atomisation and privatisation, centring all activity on the home and family, a family which unlike the traditional working-class family with its roots extended deep into the neighbourhood, is nuclear and separate.<sup>6</sup>

In these contexts the assertion of the right to abundance, energy and community becomes all the more meaningful. We need entertainment's affirmative, utopian expressions. The problem is that so much television entertainment sells out on the entertainment ideals.

The entertainment ideals are often compromised in the actual presentation. *Abundance* can be mere consumerism, tatty spectacle or, when it is truly sumptuous, presented as the exclusive appropriation of a star class, different in essence as well as existence from the audience. Dance rarely shows the promise of *energy* – when it is not listless and under-rehearsed, its energy and enthusiasm is usually mechanistic. *Community* is expressed by simple nostalgia for situations and forms that did not really embody ideal human togetherness. The deprivation of working-class culture, the snobbery and class distinction of the music hall, the phoney mateyness of the announcer's stance, lie behind and undermine the evocation of warm community. Entertainment's utopia is often insipid, tired, not meant.

Television entertainment also suffers particularly from the contradictions of the way that television is at present set up – a new medium utterly dependent on old entertainment forms; a recording medium which is also thereby a creative, interpretive medium; a live medium that is usually recorded; a means of communication that is only one way; a mass medium that is in no sense the creation of the masses but of an unusually idiosyncratic profession. With partial exceptions (Mary David, Michael Hurl, for instance), television does not seem to have attracted (as Hollywood did for the musical) a wealth of talented people who are prepared to think through the challenges and potentialities of television as a medium for entertainment. But even if it had, it is doubtful if all these contradictions could have been worked with. The imagination of Hurl in extending the communication potential of the system in *Cilla*, David's close attention to realising the excitement of circus and other performances often in the end seem to draw attention to the medium's present limitations rather than to dissolve them.

Television entertainment does not seem to have evolved forms which link the expression of the utopia of entertainment to the present situation of the audience, in such a way that you can see how the present can be transformed towards utopia. The work of Joan Littlewood or Peter Cheeseman in the theatre, of Stanley Donen or Bob Fosse in the cinema has no equivalent in television. The utopias are not rooted in the present and so remain at best nice but 'unrealisable' ideas.

The struggle for those involved in entertainment, as producers or critics, is to recognise and encourage entertainment which asserts the ideals of entertainment honestly and thorough-goingly, to fight for the transformation of the current structures of television production and to explore the possibility of creating entertainment which shows us not only what a better world would feel like but also shows us how we can set about creating it.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As students of art theory will recognise, the aesthetic position adopted in this monograph is essentially that of Suzanne Langer, to whom I, as well as anyone working in this field, owe a great debt. Her chief works are *Philosophy in a New Key*, Signet, 1951 and *Feeling and Form*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953.
- <sup>2</sup> Elken Allen: 'Philosophy for Light Entertainment' in *Contrast*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Winter 1964-5.
- <sup>3</sup> Jean-Claude Passeron: 'Introduction to the French edition of *The Uses of Literacy*' in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, op. cit.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert K. Merton: *Mass Persuasion*, Harper & Bros., New York, 1946.
- <sup>5</sup> Henry Lefebvre: *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1970.
- <sup>6</sup> For the concept of privatisation see Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer and Platt: *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, Cambridge University Press, 1969. Anthony Sampson in his *New Anatomy of Britain* also has, without using the word, some interesting remarks on this point. For the concepts of nuclear and extended family see, amongst many others, Willmott & Young: *Family and Kinship in East London*, Penguin, 1962, and E. Bott: *Family and Social Network*, Tavistock Publications, 1957.

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