Visualizing the World in 3-D

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The Sharper Image: A Closer Look at HDTV

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How TV Shapes Public Understanding of Science

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This is a special issue of *Television Quarterly*, dedicated to Emilie Jacobson Jacobi, editor Fritz Jacobi’s wife of 48 years, who passed away in April 2010. She was 85 years old and still working as a senior vice-president of Curtis Brown, Ltd., the literary agency she joined almost immediately after graduating from Radcliffe College in 1946.
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In the natural world there are two broad categories of mammals: hunters and the hunted. The former group includes species with eyes placed on the front of the head such as birds of prey, large and small cats, and human beings. Such visual stereopsis provides optimal depth perception as the slight divergence between optical pathways allows creatures such as homo sapiens to hit a rapidly moving target with an arrow or a rock. The perception of depth in self-defense, as well as hunting, has contributed to the evolution and propagation of our species. Blindness in one eye results in a loss of depth perception as the remaining functional eye provides accurate visual information, but the brain lacks the required binocular detail to create a sense of depth. I would argue that one reason that we enjoy seeing the world in three dimensions is that our sense of depth perception has fundamentally contributed to our survival and success as a species.

The creation of photography in France by Niépce in the 1820s and advanced by Daguerre in the early 1830s was followed by the development of twin-lens cameras that could take stereoscopic images that mimicked the
optical convergence of the human eye. When dual images taken with these cameras were placed side by side in a stereoscopic viewer that separated the perspective of each eye, the result was a magical perception of depth. 3-D stereoscopic viewers with black-and-white images of tourist sites such as Niagara Falls and the Brooklyn Bridge were very popular in the U.S. in the late 1800s. One of the most widely-adopted 3-D viewers was invented by American novelist and poet Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. (Figure 1).

Readers may recall their first look into a View-Master® toy (Figure 2) and the entrancing look at cartoon characters in vivid 3-D, or seeing color images of tourist sights such as the Grand Canyon that replicated a sense of depth that a 2-D postcard could not convey. Millions of children worldwide have experienced vivid color 3-D imagery thanks to the humble View-Master toy. Humans enjoy seeing things in 3-D, either with our own eyes or via technology that converts 2-D imagery into three – and we especially enjoy 3-D images that move.

3-D Film and Television Technology

There are two basic types of 3-D technology used for motion media displays: active and passive. Passive systems rely on anaglyphic 3-D displays that present right eye and left eye information in the same frame and utilize inexpensive eyewear (often simple cardboard) with plastic “lenses” of red and cyan/blue or amber and blue. Passive technologies such as the ColorCode 3-D system allowed home television viewers such as the Obama family to view commercials in 3-D during the 2009 Super Bowl football game (Figure 3). The ColorCode amber lens admits color information for one eye and the blue lens admits monochrome depth information for the other – the brain links the imagery together to create the televised 3-D illusion. Anaglyphic passive 3-D technology was used with other recent telecasts including the memorial segment honoring Michael Jackson during the 2010 GRAMMY® awards.
Active 3-D systems used for theatrical projection and television displays utilize two primary methods to create the illusion for viewers of seeing 2-D imagery in three dimensions: polarized projection (or display) and active-shutter “eclipse” technology. The first method involves the use of glasses with polarized lenses that deliver alternating right-eye and left-eye visual information (Figure 4). The RealD system has been widely used for the theatrical projection of recent 3-D films such as Avatar (2009), Clash of the Titans (2010) and Despicable Me (2010). 3-D motion pictures are projected in theaters as digital images using a RealD polarizer device placed in front of the projector. The circular polarization system delivers alternating right-eye, left-eye visual information at 48 frames per second (24 left, 24 right) with each frame being repeated in a burst of three (to limit flicker) for an effective frame rate of 144 per second. Newer 3-D motion pictures require digital projection systems, which until recently has limited the number of available theater screens for their presentation. Sony estimated that 7,000 U.S. movie theaters would have digital projection systems by the end of 2010. One negative aspect of polarized systems is that the dark glasses reduce image brightness for viewers, so theater owners have increased the brightness of projection systems to compensate for this drawback.

Vizio announced in 2010 that it was developing a home television that would utilize inexpensive polarized glasses for viewing televised 3-D programming. While the polarized Vizio 3-D televisions may cost more than those sold by other 3-D manufacturers, the glasses would cost much less ($5 versus $150 per pair for active-shutter models). This technology will allow Vizio to provide numerous pairs of polarized glasses with their 3-D displays and they may prove popular with larger families and viewers who host viewing parties for major sports events.
Active-shutter “Eclipse” 3-D Television Technology

In the summer of 2010, customers could stroll into a Sony retail store, don a special pair of electronic glasses, and watch World Cup matches in high-definition 3-D. Viewers were watching a new 3-D video technology that uses an “alternate frame” television display wirelessly synchronized with battery-powered “active-shutter” eyewear. 3-D “eclipse” display systems developed by Panasonic, Sony, LG, Toshiba, and Samsung are capable of presenting color visual information at 120 frames per second – 60 for the left eye and 60 for the right eye, wirelessly synchronized with an LCD “shutter” built into the electronic glasses. As right eye information is presented on screen, the electronic shutter on the right eye side of the glasses opens long enough for the visual information to be passed to the viewer in 1/120th of a second. The rapid refresh rate of the system creates a vivid sense of three-dimensional realism for the viewer and is similar to the 144 frames per second rate of the RealD polarizing system used in movie theaters. Taking the glasses off makes the television image looks blurry and out-of-focus as the brain can no longer decode the rapidly alternating right and left images on screen (similar again to digital 3-D projection in a theater). With the glasses on, the rapid alternation of synchronized images may alleviate the discomfort experienced by viewers of out-of-synch 3-D motion pictures in the 1950s and 60s.

The use of alternating frames to present 3-D visual information is not a new technology. Inventors Laurens Hammond and William Cassidy introduced their 3-D Teleview system at the Selwyn Theater in New York City in 1922 which utilized a viewer in front of each patron which was synchronized with alternating left-eye and right-eye film frames (Figures 5 and 6). Dual projectors were used to present right

Figure 5 – Teleview patrons watch a 3-D film as seen in an artist’s rendering of the system in use at the Selwyn Theater in New York City in 1922.

Figure 6 – The Teleview personal viewer with its synchronized shutter system.
and left eye visual information and a rotating shutter in the patron’s viewer allowed only one eye at a time to see the projected film. Filmgoers who looked around the viewer would see double images on screen, but looking through it produced the illusion of 3-D moving images. To reduce the flicker on screen caused by alternating images projected at 16 fps, the inventors printed each frame three times, a system similar to that used by present-day RealD 3-D projection technology. Unfortunately for Hammond and Cassidy, the poor content of their 3-D travelogues and features could not compensate for the novelty of three-dimensional images and the show closed after 24 days. What is unique about the Teleview system and recently developed electronic “eclipse” video systems is that they each display right-eye and left-eye frames in alternate order and use a shutter in front of the viewer to control the flow of visual 3-D information.

3-D Video Production

Television manufacturers are confronted with a problem similar to the introduction of digital television: how to motivate consumers to purchase a new 3-D television set when there is limited 3-D content available for them to see? One solution that worked for the digital television transition after 2000 is being tried again by manufacturers: underwriting the production of live and recorded programming in 3-D. To this end, both Panasonic and Sony are sponsoring the creation of 3-D television content that highlights the unique visual attributes of 3-D imagery. Manufacturers are expected by broadcast executives to underwrite the additional expense of simul-casting these events in 3-D if they wish to showcase the technology to stimulate television set sales.

Panasonic is sponsoring DirecTV’s creation of three satellite-delivered 3-D channels in 2010 and several networks, including CBS, NBC, Discovery, and Fox Sports, will provide programs for these channels. Sony is underwriting ESPN’s telecasts of 85 live sporting events in 3-D in 2010, including the World Cup soccer matches in South Africa. ESPN has created a special channel for their 3-D telecasts that is carried by cable and satellite program providers, but the channel is dark when there is no 3-D content available. Sports programming may be an ideal genre to highlight the attributes of 3-D television. While high-angle wide shots may look similar in 2-D and 3-D, lower-angle shots of a soccer ball slamming into a goal or a football spiraling toward a receiver in the end zone are dramatic in 3-D. In April 2010, ESPN worked with CBS to televise the Masters golf tournament in 3-D, which was then cablecast by Comcast and streamed in 3-D by IBM on the Masters.com website. Viewers of sports events in 2-D will be seeing more of the odd-looking, twin-lens 3-D television cameras on the sidelines in the future as networks experiment with the technology.

A key factor that may influence consumer adoption of 3-D television is that several U.S. television networks are planning to distribute content using “frame-compatible” anaglyphic technology. This technology would allow home viewers or those watching in public places to wear inexpensive polarized glasses instead of the expensive active-shutter glasses required for high-end eclipse models. It appears that in the near term (2010-2012) most viewers of televised live 3-D content will watch with polarized glasses.
The other type of content that may drive 3-D television set sales in the near term are 3-D movies. The so-called “golden age” of 3-D movies occurred in the early 1950s with mixed results due to the fundamental limitations of the anaglyphic and polarized projection technologies of that era. Many 3-D film viewers in the 1950s complained of headaches and visual problems induced by out-of-sync right-eye and left-eye visual information and the use of poor-quality projection systems. A new golden era has developed for 3-D films since 2000, especially for animated films. It has also been a golden era for film studios and theater owners in terms of box office revenue. Film studios would like to expand that revenue stream by distributing 3-D films on Blu-ray disks for home viewing. The studios need to tread carefully as they would like to replicate the dramatic effect of 3-D films when viewed in a darkened theater, but not make it so powerful on a television set that viewers will decide to skip theatrical presentations and wait until the film is released on disk. This balancing act may be fruitless as home displays become ever larger, brighter, and sharper with the advent of new LED-LCD and plasma 3-D television technologies.

There has been a dramatic increase in blockbuster hits produced or reformatted in 3-D, with James Cameron’s Avatar leading the way as the first motion picture to gross more than $2 billion worldwide. Avatar is a digital video production shot with 3-D cameras that mimic human binocular vision (Figures 7 and 8). The principles of 3-D image capture and display are fundamentally the same as those explored by Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1860 with his stereoscope. The addition of electronic recording technologies has enabled the creation of virtual worlds and characters that would likely render Holmes speechless if he could observe two cameras in a rig or with twin-lens cameras that mimic human binocular vision (Figures 7 and 8). The principles of 3-D image capture and display are fundamentally the same as those explored by Oliver Wendell Holmes in 1860 with his stereoscope. The addition of electronic recording technologies has enabled the creation of virtual worlds and characters that would likely render Holmes speechless if he could observe...
how 3-D imagery has evolved over the intervening 150 years.

More than one hundred film titles will be available on 3-D on Blu-ray disks by 2011 and a VHS/Beta-style format war with 3-D media appears unlikely as most movie studios have agreed to use a modified Blu-ray standard for 3-D film distribution. The sale of movies on disk or for telecast to home audiences is a significant source of revenue for film studios. Twentieth Century Fox is estimated to have received between $25 and $35 million from the FX cable network in 2010 for the first telecast rights to the film Avatar (in 2-D and 3-D versions).

The Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) conducted a consumer survey in 2009 in conjunction with USC’s Entertainment and Technology Center and found that, of consumers considering a purchase of a 3-D DTV in the next three years, 33 percent said would use it to for viewing 3-D television shows, while 65 percent indicated that they wanted to watch 3-D movies. This may reflect that there is more 3-D movie content available today than television shows, but manufacturers are aware that the desire to watch 3-D movie blockbusters at home may be a key factor in driving set sales.

3-D Display Costs and Sales Projections

Hardware costs are a key factor for consumers considering 3-D television adoption (e.g., for the display and the required electronic glasses for active-shutter systems). Panasonic’s 50-inch 3-D plasma television is presently available for $2,400 (with one pair of glasses) – double the cost of their 2-D plasma display of similar size. Sony’s 60-inch LED-LCD 3-D television is $4,500 with four pairs of electronic glasses included. Samsung’s 46-inch 3-D model retails for $2,600 and their 3-D Blu-ray player is $400, a premium price when conventional players cost $100-150. The special electronic glasses are $150 each – and most 3-D televisions include only a single pair with the purchase. Consumers will need to purchase additional sets of electronic glasses for family and friends. One other issue – the technologies used for...
the active-shutter 3-D displays differ, so that electronic glasses purchased for use with a Sony LCD 3-D set will not work with a Panasonic plasma 3-D model.

Another key metric in assessing consumer acceptance of this new technology will be the number of 3-D-capable displays sold in 2010 and 2011. In 2009, Chris Chinnock of Insight Media predicted 28 to 40 million “3-D capable” televisions in US homes by 2012 and Alfred Poor of GigaOM Network predicted 46 million 3-D sets sold by 2013. Both were optimistic estimates given the relatively slow adoption of DTV sets in the U.S. – a government-mandated conversion. Analysts at Gartner estimate that it might take five to ten years for 3-D display technology to catch on with consumers, an estimate that is in line with adoption rates at present.

Consumer Feedback
In the summer of 2010, the Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing (CTAM) commissioned the Nielsen Company to conduct a study of consumer reaction to 3-D TV technology. Using Sony’s 3-D Experience Lab at the CBS Vision TV City in Las Vegas, Nielsen researchers asked 425 randomly selected individuals to take a pretest survey assessing their familiarity with 3D technology, then had groups of 12-15 participants watch a 30-minute compilation of 3-D sports, documentaries, and segments of a feature film in a theater setting. This was followed by another survey that assessed their immediate reactions to the 3-D viewing experience. Nielsen also conducted 12 focus groups of three to five participants who watched 3-D programming in a living room setting to gather qualitative data on the simulated home 3-D viewing experience. The findings from the study are enlightening as this is the first large-scale research project that involved actual 3-D television viewing in both theatrical and simulated home settings. While a majority (57 percent) of the participants felt that 3-D television technology was more immersive than 2-D, 77 percent indicated that they felt it was better suited for watching sports or movies than everyday viewing, and just 29 percent indicated they would consider buying a 3-D display in the subsequent 12 months.

The key factors they said would inhibit them from being an early adopter of 3-D television technology: the cost of the displays and related hardware (68 percent), not enough television programming available in 3-D (57 percent), and having to wear special glasses for 3-D viewing (57 percent). Neilsen researchers were surprised at the level of participant dissatisfaction with the need to wear special eyewear to watch 3-D programming as 86 percent thought it would “constrain their multitasking activities” and 46 percent said that they found the special glasses “uncomfortable.”

Frank Stagliano of Nielsen said that, based on the findings in this study, consumers will likely have a “wait and see” attitude toward 3-D television and that “in fact, purchase interest for a 3DTV set among those planning to buy a new TV in the next 12 months decreased after seeing a demonstration of the technology, experiencing the glasses, and learning more about the product costs.” (emphasis added)

The price premium for 3-D displays, electronic glasses, and Blu-ray players will have to be reduced before consumers adopt it widely. Sony stated in September of 2010 that the company
plans to include 3-D capability in all its 40-inch or larger digital televisions in 2011 – integration of this type will likely reduce the price premium. Manufacturers will also need to continue to underwrite the 3-D production and simulcast of major sporting events and other programming that will attract audiences to the spectacular imagery of 3-D television. U.S. broadcasters have just spent millions of dollars over the past two decades converting their faculties for digital television production and transmission and are unlikely to produce much 3-D content without a subsidy by manufacturers for doing so, especially if initial audiences are relatively small.

While active-shutter technology is visually impressive in terms of delivering flicker-free, sharp, colorful 3-D imagery, there may be a significant market for alternative display systems such as that proposed by Vizio that use lower-cost polarized glasses. The burden of proof will be on Vizio to demonstrate that its 3-D televisions can display program content with the clarity of competing “eclipse” technologies.

The CTAM-Nielsen study confirms the unresolved question of whether television viewers will be comfortable wearing 3-D glasses for extended periods of time. While viewers will tolerate the glasses for the 90-120 minutes it takes to watch a feature film in a theater, they may be less likely to do so for an entire day or evening of 3-D television program viewing. Survey participants indicated that the eyewear may also inhibit their ability to multitask – a common viewer activity as past research has shown. Research is underway in labs around the world for a glasses-free solution to 3-D viewing, but at present all successful 3-D television systems require that viewers wear glasses to separate right-eye and left-eye visual information.

The push for consumer adoption of 3-D television technology is being driven by display manufacturers and 3-D content producers. The U.S. marketplace for large flat-panel HDTV displays is saturated and manufacturers see 3-D as a new television technology that can command premium prices. They are willing to assist in underwriting the significant production costs of creating 3-D programming to promote television sales. Hollywood movie studios have had great success with 3-D features in the past five years and are seeking home audiences for these films. Viewers who paid premium prices to see 3-D versions of their favorite films in theaters may be motivated to create a mini-IMAX 3-D television theater in their homes. One factor that early adopters may have to contend with is having enough pairs of special glasses for all their new friends who plan to stop by and watch the Super Bowl in 3-D.

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Imagine: Bush is in the White House, the Middle East is a war-zone, a major economic downturn has hurt millions, the budget deficit is at an all-time high, and polls indicate that the country is poised to elect its first self-proclaimed Black president.

Ah, 1992. When the world was a simpler place.

As historians will remind us, before Bill Clinton could secure that spot as Commander in Chief, he would have to face George H. W. Bush in a televised debate—a debate in which Bush would famously call for a “nation closer to The Waltons than The Simpsons,” clearly aligning himself with the former and his saxophone-playing, boxer-wearing, non-inhaling opponent with the latter. Bush, it turns out, had completely misjudged the tenor of the culture, not to mention missed the point of one of the most intelligent and entertaining shows on the air at the time. And Clinton, spurred on by a don’t-have-a-cow-man self-assurance and a complex cultural...
awareness that included a sense of his own participation in the construction of his media image, would go on to embrace a postmodern definition of the notion of truth (let’s just say it depends on what your definition of “is” is) and to enjoy—really enjoy—eight years in the White House.

That’s 12 fewer years of enjoyment than *The Simpsons* has given us so far today. As the show prepares for its twenty-first season on FOX, it is just as relevant, just as politically provocative, and just as funny as it has ever been. And this is due, in part, to the show’s own self-assurance, its cultural awareness and realization of its own place in that culture, and its embracing of a postmodern notion of comedic truth.

Ah, 2008. When the simpler people seemed to be running the world, but little else had yet changed.

What made *The Simpsons* different two decades ago was a philosophic and aesthetic sense that rejected modernist norms. While it is dangerous to put strict chronological tags on the eras of classical, modern, and postmodern art, we can at least admit that a good deal of the late-twentieth-century was marked by modernist attempts to transcend classical art. Picasso’s fractured figure stands in perfect line not only with Cézanne’s multiple-perspective still-life but with all of the classical portraits of centuries past. In those faces with eyes and ears and mouths placed every-which-way, Picasso called into question the possibility of a stable subject, a coherent identity, and a single vantage point for the artist and spectator. And so, a show such as *Saturday Night Live* similarly—and often just as brilliantly—became a comment on the possibility of past, classical notions of comedy, calling into question the possibility of a naive joke on network TV, an innocent family sketch in a sitcom or variety show, a universal expectation about what constitutes humor. The modernist era is the era of irony and satire, the moment at which we seem to have lost our innocence and can never return to *The Waltons*. But there is a problem.

Modern art thinks that it can escape the culture that it is critiquing (and thus its own status as art), look down on that culture, satirize it from a place outside, and freely twist it for our amusement. The postmodernist realizes that there is no escaping the culture, no “view from nowhere” or vantage point from which to look down, no possibility of satirical twists since satire always involves a false assumption that one can rise above what is being satirized. Postmodern art, that is, admits its own enmeshment in the culture—something modernity tries to deny—and consequently celebrates its own complicity in its production.

Postmodern art not only admits that it, too, is supported by a traditional edifice of culture, assumptions, and beliefs, but even goes so far as to draw attention to that edifice, to point to its own mode of production and the foundational preconceptions from which it cannot escape. Try as it might to overcome them and ignore them, modern art still has a subject, still has assumptions, still makes demands that force artist and audience into roles. A painting about how there is no such thing as a subject necessarily still has a subject: the idea that there is no such thing as a subject.

Postmodernity is *post-* in the sense that it admits this, admits that the hopes of the modernist were unfounded. There is no progress, no linear narrative taking us anyplace, no possibility of rising...
above. We are doomed never to rise. Enter Homer Simpson.

Bill Cosby once criticized *The Simpsons* for having as its main protagonist a child who is allowed by his parents to be proud to be an underachiever, suggesting, even, that the show’s creator, Matt Groening, do an episode about “why Bart doesn’t want to do his homework.” What Cosby, Bush the Elder and so many others have failed to see is that *The Simpsons* has always been something postmodernly different. It is not an attempt to paint a picture of the idealized American family, nor is it an attempt to offer a satire of the picture of the idealized American family. It is, instead, a satire on that satire. *The Simpsons* is satire, and thus an impossibility. It is a reflection on the media construction of what constitutes the American family, the American town and the American sitcom. And in admitting that it itself is still just another television show (just another media construction and thus a reflection), it acknowledges the impossibility of its task. And this frees us up to laugh in an age in which we have irrevocably lost our innocence.

*The Simpsons*, for instance, has mastered the use of post-irony. Irony is an attempt to use language in a particularly modernist way. It takes a straightforward declaration and puts a spin on it. But irony and its ironic cohorts—sarcasm, cynicism, satire, and ridicule—are impossible in a world in which irony itself is the norm.

It is akin to German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s worst nightmare come true. Kant considered lying to be immoral, for instance, because if it were to become universalized as a natural law—if everyone were to lie all of the time—lying would become impossible. His reasoning is utterly logical, if utterly unfunny. Lying rests on an assumption of truth, argues Kant. I can only get away with lying to you when you expect that my statements in general are true. If everyone were to lie all of the time, then there would no longer be any general expectation of truth. With no expectation of truth, lying becomes impossible. Thus, universalizing lying makes lying impossible. It is logically contradictory and, for Kant, it is therefore immoral.

Now imagine instead that everyone meant everything they said ironically, that every utterance dripped with sarcasm. Kant never considered this. He never had teenagers. Or cable. But the problem with universalizing irony is a problem Kant would have recognized. How could one tell the ironic from the unironic statement any longer in a world where irony has become the norm? With the distinction gone, true irony becomes impossible: there is no straight discourse left to rise above in a mocking way, no squares of which to make fun.
Such Kantian analysis is (as promised) not very funny. *The Simpsons*, luckily, makes the same point and pulls it off humorously. Consider, for instance, the episode in which Homer joins a traveling rock festival as a sideshow performer who gets shot in the stomach with a cannonball (“Homerpalooza” [19 May 1996]). At first, Homer’s act is popular, but as the tour wears on, its hip status is in doubt. Two young concert-goers thus have the following exchange:

First Teenager: [deadpan] Oh, here comes that cannonball guy. He’s cool.
Second Teenager: Are you being sarcastic, dude?
First Teenager: I don’t even know anymore.

The traditionalist is unaware of (or unwilling to admit) his or her role in creating culture. The modernist attempts to mock culture by being above it and satirizing. The postmodernist concedes our collective submersion in the culture.

A sophisticated realization about language is in play here. The classicist would express dislike by claiming “I don’t like the cannonball guy.” Each word would be thought to denote straightforwardly an object or relation. The modernist would adopt a naive ironic tone and express dislike by claiming “Oh, I like the cannonball guy” or “He’s cool” in a sarcastic manner. The modernist realizes that simple denotation is insufficient for a full theory of language, that context can convey meaning, that tone can alter the trajectory of the words so that they mean something more than that at which they were first pointed. Jean-Paul Sartre thus famously claimed that language is *elliptical*: it always means more than what it says. But while this is an improvement, it is still based on an assumption that one can identify context or tone as simply as one can identify the referent of a word. It is based on the belief that straightforward discourse is itself the base, the norm, the value- and context-free null point from which one can then go off and add context in order to change meaning. The postmodernist rejects the stable, value-free norm in all of its mythical incarnations. The postmodernist realizes that context is everywhere, that it is fluid, and that once irony has become the mode of discourse in a culture, irony then becomes impossible. Consequently, claims such as “I like him” or “I don’t like him” or “Oh, he’s cool” have no necessary relation to whether or not I actually like the cannonball guy. We cannot rise above the language; we are implicated in it. When sarcasm is presented as truth there can no longer be any sarcasm. Or truth. *The Simpsons* realizes this, and turns our postmodern situation into the self-referential punchline.

In a more metaphorical way, this is the same lesson Moe learns when he tries to update his bar with a postmodern theme (“Homer the Moe” [9 November 2001]). Lenny asks Moe what all of the new eye images on paintings and video screens represent in the bar. Unable to come up with an answer to his own question, Lenny concludes that they must just represent eyes. Moe tries to explain the new decorating theme to his oblivious friends, correcting them about
what the images represent, maintaining, inevitably, that they cannot be said necessarily to represent anything. “It’s po-mo!,” Moe says to blank stares. “Postmodern?” Blanker stares. “O.K., weird for the sake of weird?”

When *The Simpsons* first premiered, it was clear that something different was going on. The first season brought an opening credit couch gag in which the characters of the show ran off the edge of the film and then had to run back on. The edifice was literally exposed as the show called attention to the fact that it was just a show—and an animated one at that. Indeed, such a joke is only possible within an *animated* sitcom, and *The Simpsons* proudly uses its own medium to point out how its own medium cannot be escaped and should not be overlooked. In later years, as the show grew in popularity, *Simpsons* merchandise began to saturate the market. Rather than pretend that it could mock a capitalist culture from above while also still raking in a profit, the show flaunted its complicity at every turn, making clear that none of us, itself included, is pure enough to cast the first stone at the next anti-WTO rally. *Simpsons* brand t-shirts and other merchandise were regularly mocked on the show; and by 2003, when pointing out such corporate merchandising in our culture had nearly become passé because it was so prevalent, *The Simpsons* dedicated its special three hundredth episode to the theme. Here, in “Barting Over” [16 February 2003], when Bart and Lisa discover a videotape of a commercial Bart did as a baby for a product to cure “baby’s bad breath,” Bart is surprised. “I don’t remember ever being in a commercial,” he says, further claiming that it was clearly an act of exploitation. Then Bart takes out a Butterfinger candy bar, opens it up, and takes a bite in silence.

As recently as the 2007-08 season’s Emmy-nominated “Eternal Moonshine of the Simpson Mind” [16 December 2007] this acknowledgment of the show’s enmeshment continues—and continues to grow in nuance. In what proved to be a standout from season nineteen, Homer is trying to recover a lost memory from the night before, worried that he might have done something terrible to Marge. As he enters his own consciousness, his life flashes by on passing TV screens, each containing a still from a previous episode of the show as if to remind him—and us—that Homer’s life *exists* only as episodes of a show. Later, his life is seen as a Youtube video (in the style of Noah Kalina’s “Noah takes a photo of himself every day for six years”)—still on video, still mediated by contemporary media. Indeed, the entire episode itself is indebted to two movies, “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind” and “The Game,” and manages to reference both without satirizing either. And just to make it clear that we are watching an animated work of fiction and cannot escape the expectations and restraints of that medium, “Eternal Moonshine...” opens in the same way that the animated movie “Ice Age” opened, with a stylized little squirrel struggling, hopelessly, to get an acorn. Until, in *The Simpsons*’ version, groundskeeper Willie beats him to it.

The traditionalist is unaware of (or unwilling to admit) his or her role in creating culture. The modernist attempts to mock culture by being above it and satirizing it, still refusing to admit any role within it. The postmodernist concedes our collective submersion...
in the culture and brings this to the fore. It is, in the end, the only free way in which to laugh these days, for we are all caught up in the simultaneous reflection and creation of culture; we all know that The Simpsons animated movie was about generating profit and The Simpsons television series is the same; we are all participating in weird for weird’s sake.

Like David Letterman, the members of Monty Python, and the late-great Andy Kaufman, The Simpsons belongs to a class of comedy that separates it from the its peers. To ask what comes next, what comes after postmodern comedy, is not a legitimate question. It’s the modernist, after all, who believes in a linear narrative, historical progress, and one moment necessarily leading to another. What comes next for The Simpsons is a twenty-first season. And for us—us, the U.S., we who are a collective television nation far closer to The Simpsons than The Waltons—comes the laughter, the expectation of anything coming next at all, and the weird yet joyous possibility of I-don’t-even-know-anymore.

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From the *The Twilight Zone* in the 1950s to *The Sopranos*’ concluding episode in 2007, and to the present moment, dream sequences have been used with great frequency to advance television narratives and reveal insight into characters in nearly every major U.S. television series ever made. The frequency of dream sequences in television is so great that we have chosen—as did Freud—to focus on case studies. Just a few U.S. television series with notable dream sequences over the first 60 years of U.S. television are: *Ally McBeal, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Cheers, Dallas, Family Ties,* *Golden Girls, Happy Days, M*A*S*H, Moonlighting, Mork and Mindy, Newhart, Night Court, Star Trek, Star Trek the Next Generation, The Simpsons, SpongeBob SquarePants, St. Elsewhere.* We will look at *The Sopranos, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, M*A*S*H,* and *The Twilight Zone.*

**The Sopranos**

In the first episode of *The Sopranos,* the HBO original drama series, we learn quite a lot, in condensed and idealized fashion, about how a patient in therapy might work with his therapist on what a critical dream means and how it might explain: in
the case of Tony Soprano—why he is passing out for no apparent reason, in this extended scene from his first visit with Dr. Melfi. Like so many other dreams in television, the dream is a narrative device. In the case of *The Sopranos*, it is critical to the exposition of everything that will come later: what psychodynamic psychotherapy is, how it can rely on dreams and looks at the unconscious, why Tony is in therapy in the first place, and so much more.

“I had a semester and a half of college, so I understand Freud. I understand therapy, as a concept. But in my world it, does not go down!”
- Anthony John “Tony” Soprano, Sr., at his first appointment with psychiatrist, Jennifer Melfi, M.D.

*The Sopranos* opened its eight seasons with an unforgettable first episode and a dream sequence. Tony Soprano, head of the New Jersey Mafia, lives with his wife and two children in a mansion with a large pool. One day, a flock of ducks with ducklings alights in the pool and splashes about. Tony, prepared for a morning swim, is so delighted to be near the ducks that he enters the water without even taking off his bathrobe. He calls his alienated teenage children out to see the ducks, and they are totally disinterested, thinking their father is a fool who is re-experiencing his childhood, as he may be.

That afternoon, Tony is barbequing for a family picnic by the pool, where the ducks are still swimming. The ducks begin to fly away, and the enormous cigar that Tony is smoking begins to dangle from his mouth and an expression of distress comes over his face. The cigar falls onto the grill, where a can of lighter fluid has just turned over. Tony stumbles backwards as he loses consciousness and ends up face down, prone on the ground. A moment later the grill explodes, a portent of things to come.

Tony’s next-door neighbor, Dr. Cusamono, refers him to a female psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, who asks him why he had an anxiety attack. Tony won’t admit to it and dismisses the idea. He is embarrassed to be in psychotherapy and knows that it is risky for him, as a Mafia Don, to be in therapy, should the information leak out. The therapist asks over and over if he is depressed, and he keeps shrugging, but she can tell he is depressed. He finally admits that he has been depressed “since the ducks left.”

Dr. Melfi: What about ducks?
Tony: God damn ducks!
Dr. Melfi: What is it about those ducks that meant so much to you?
Tony: I don’t know; it was a trip having those wild creatures coming into my pool.
Dr. Melfi: Little babies. She smiles broadly.
Tony: I was sad to see them go. He begins to cry and is embarrassed to do so.
Dr. Melfi: Sweetly, while smiling supportively. When those ducks gave birth to those babies, they became a family.
Tony: You’re right, there’s a link. I’m afraid I’m going to lose my family. Like I lost the ducks. That’s what I’m full of dread about. It’s always with me.

David Chase, the creator of *The Sopranos*, has told numerous interviewers that he has spent considerable time in psychotherapy,
that his friend is betraying him, and it makes him ill... and his subconscious erupts like that and gives him the information.”

Eight years after its beginning, the Sopranos comes to its dramatic, inconclusive, and highly controversial conclusion. Over the course of a few minutes, Tony and his family arrive one at a time at a diner for a family dinner—first Tony, then his wife, followed by his son, and then finally his daughter. As the family enters, and during the short period they are together in the diner’s booth, deciding what to order, the camera view scans the restaurant’s patrons, stopping occasionally, giving certain individuals an air of suspicion. The camera work and editing have led the audience to the edge of its seats, as the family is like “sitting ducks” at the table. And then, out of nowhere, the screen goes black, and at the same instance, the powerful chorus to Journey’s song “Don’t Stop Believing” comes up at full volume.

The long-running series suddenly screeches to a full stop, and we never know if Tony’s initial dread that he would lose his family—or his own
life—is realized. So from the first visit with Dr. Melfi to this concluding scene, we have come full circle in Tony's Odyssey. And so we see, as we will see in many other television series, that dreams offer an extraordinarily effective means by which to explore character, foreshadow—in this case, the entire series—and provide narrative order for the storytelling.

**Dreams, A Freudian Primer**

Over one hundred years ago, Sigmund Freud concluded that dreams constituted the royal road to the unconscious. Dreams are not what they appear to be. They speak in a special language that Freud decoded in his masterwork, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, first published in German in November 1899 as *Die Traumdeutung*. Freud surmised that dreams require deep interpretation that can inform the structures and processes of the unconscious. Here is how Freud describes his work in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

“In the following pages, I shall demonstrate that there is a psychological technique which makes it possible to interpret dreams, and that on the application of this technique, every dream will reveal itself as a psychological structure, full of significance, and one which may be assigned to a specific place in the psychic activities of the waking state. Further, I shall endeavor to elucidate the processes which underlie the strangeness and obscurity of dreams, and to deduce from these processes the nature of the psychic forces whose conflict or co-operation is responsible for our dreams.”

Freud draws on ancient Roman and Grecian Oedipal dreams and myths, one reported by Julius Caesar himself. Here, the dream interpreters saw Caesar's dream of intercourse with his mother as very favorable, as it meant that Caesar would take possession of the earth (Mother Earth). Otto Rank, who is credited with assisting on some of Freud’s work, had some of his writings from 1910 and 1911 incorporated in later editions of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The Oracle’s interpretation given to the Tarquins, according to Rank, is as well known as Caesar's Oedipal dream. Here the prophecy was that the conquest of Rome would fall to he who should first kiss his mother.

Authors of classic literary works are handled in a footnote, where Freud draws on a work by James Sully (1893). In his essay “The Dream as a Revelation”: “Dreams are not the utter nonsense that they have been said to be by such authorities as Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton. The chaotic aggregations of our night-fancy have a significance and communicate new knowledge.”

**Buffy the Vampire Slayer**

The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series ran from 1996 to 2003. It aired in more than 20 countries and still has online fan groups in many of these same nations.

During the fourth season, the creator of the program, Joss Whedon, learned from fan websites from around the world that the season was not being well received. Fans were actively complaining that the episodes and even the season as a whole seemed scattered. There seemed to be a mutual agreement that there was not an overarching storyline. Whedon concluded that he needed to do something to tie up the loose ends in the final episode of the
season and bring a sense of closure for fans, while simultaneously setting up issues for the next season.

And so he used the narrative device of each of the main characters experiencing a vivid dream that would provide him with the narrative thread that the audience (and he) wanted. The season finale was aptly entitled “Restless.” The episode starts with The Scooby Gang--comprised of Buffy; Giles, Buffy’s Watcher (mentor); Willow, a witch; and Xander, who has no super powers—at Buffy’s house, relaxing and watching movies. They all end up falling asleep and experiencing frightening nightmares that are being controlled by a menacing figure that is out for their demise.

On the DVD of this episode, Whedon provides commentary on how he wrote the episode. He clearly knows what happens in dreams and how they are often experienced. He is more than likely familiar with Freud’s dream work. He knows that dreams are transitory. In dreams, things are not what they appear to be. Time and place are highly malleable. Characters and story can go from place to place and connect to one another in ways that they shouldn't, or couldn't, but for in a dream.

For Whedon, “It’s about combining the totally surreal with the totally mundane.” And so it is throughout this episode. It’s as if Whedon had The Interpretation of Dreams open on his desk as he wrote. He reports free-associating on each character for the writing of each scene. Each character’s dream is a journey, and each character study involves what each of the characters has gone through in previous episodes. There is also a self-examination that takes place in each of the four scenes, or acts, of the season finale.

For Whedon, that is what “Restless” is about: “the journey of life,” a journey through each character’s psyche enabled by the narrative device of a dream. And as in Freudian dream interpretation, each character’s dream provides a window into the individual’s unconscious. Each character’s dream ends with the First Slayer, the very first slayer in the line, in the process of killing them in a horrific manner. This frightening figure “goes from dream to dream so there is some connective tissue.” “It then became an issue of basically writing poetry, basically free-associating… beyond that there was no structure.”

“I walk. I talk. I shop. I sneeze. I’m gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There’s trees in the desert since you moved out, and I don’t sleep on a bed of bones.”

- Buffy to the First Slayer

Only when Buffy encounters the Final Slayer in the final act do we learn the character’s identity as “the first” Slayer. Says Whedon, “I wanted to set up the coming year. I wanted to set up the idea of what it means to be a slayer.” The original slayer reveals her identity to Buffy, because it is Buffy who she is truly out to get. It has been tradition that the Slayers work alone, and the Final Slayer is incensed that Buffy has friends who help her.

When finally confronted with the Final Slayer after pursuing her, Buffy realizes that she is just having a dream, and she can control the situation if she wants to. Buffy tells the Final Slayer in her stereotype-breaking heroine way, “I
walk. I talk. I shop. I sneeze. I’m gonna be a fireman when the floods roll back. There’s trees in the desert since you moved out, and I don’t sleep on a bed of bones.”

Buffy and the Final Slayer begin to fight violently, but all the while Buffy is telling the Final Slayer she is going to wake up. They end up back in Buffy’s living room where her friends are still asleep. She tells the Final Slayer, who seems to finally understand that she does not hold any power over Buffy:

“It’s over, okay? I’m going to ignore you, and you’re going to go away. You’re really gonna have to get over the whole… primal power thing. You’re not the source of me. Also, in terms of hair care, you really wanna say, what kind of impression am I making in the workplace? ‘Cause…“

And Buffy wakes up with a start, and the three friends wake up as well. For Buffy, the dream permits her, and the audience, to look at her own archetypal past and feel reassured about the Scooby Gang’s future.

Typology Explanation

Not only did both of the episodes from Buffy the Vampire Slayer and The Sopranos rely heavily on dream sequences, but they were also both highly abstract and required outside explanation. In the case of “The Sopranos” it is Verbal, because he is retelling the dreams to Dr. Melfi. However, in “Restless” the dream is occurring while we are watching it. And in this case, it is Buffy who ends up interpreting the Abstract dreams she and her friends are experiencing.

By separating the dreams in this taxonomy, it begins to give more insight into the nuances that go into the creation of these television episodes and, to a greater extent, into the whole series themselves. An episode each from the pioneering television shows M*A*S*H and The Twilight Zone show how their program creators used dream sequences to advance their narratives through a more literal construct.

M*A*S*H

In “Dreams,” the 22nd episode of season 8 of M*A*S*H, first broadcast on February 18, 1980, seven main characters of the highly rated series steal away for catnaps, exhausted after performing several hours of surgery from a non-stop influx of incoming casualties.

The M*A*S*H television show was based on the 1970 film, MASH, directed by Robert Altman, and in turn the film was based on the 1968 novel MASH: A Novel About Three Army Doctors, written by Richard Hooker. All three incarnations of the M*A*S*H franchise were based in Korea during the Korean War (1950-1953). However, the similarities between the Korean War and the Vietnam War (1959-1975), which occurred during most of the M*A*S*H era, were uncanny.

Importantly, M*A*S*H was a tragic comedy that, like a dream, also cloaked a bitter and terrible truth. So do the seven dreams in “Dreams” cloak the fact, until each dream ends, that none of the characters can escape the war zone. None of them can go home to their families. And in the case of the first dream, had by Major Margaret J. “Hot Lips” Houlihan, there is even more that escapes their grasp.

After leaving surgery, a weary Houlihan returns to her tent and collapses on her bunk. Her dream begins immediately, and she is sitting
up wearing a white wedding gown and veil. She steps outside of her tent and begins running across a field, possibly in Korea, into the arms of a striking man in a tuxedo—presumably her newly married husband. They fall upon a brass bed and begin passionately embracing, still in the middle of the field. Suddenly, Army troops begin to march by in formation. Houlihan’s dream husband gets up out of bed and marches off with the troops. She looks shocked.

Houlihan looks back at the bed, and a soldier is lying there with a bandaged, traumatic head wound. She now looks extremely perplexed. As she rises out of the bed and begins to step back, she now sees that there are three bloodied and bandaged soldiers on the bed. As the camera pans back farther and farther, we see that the front of Houlihan’s gown and her hands are covered in blood. The dream is over, and the scene cuts to Corporal Maxwell Klinger barging into the Operating Room shouting, “Abdominal wound, where do you want him?”

Repression and denial of every form are rampant in our species according to Freud. This not only goes for individuals, but for all organizations, societies, and cultures as well. We see all of this reified in this single “Dreams” episode of M*A*S*H.

As with the cloaking of Korea for Vietnam, comedy—like dreams—serves as a mask, but in theater, film, and television it permits creators to get at a deeper, more frightening truth than otherwise can be faced about war and death. Freud tells us this in Jokes and Their Relation To the Unconscious. As William Shakespeare wrote in King Lear, “Jesters do oft prove prophets.” And this is surely true.

The final vignette of “Dreams” is that of lead character Captain Benjamin “Hawkeye” Pierce. The stream of wounded has subsided, and several of the characters are sitting around a table in the dining tent. Pierce decides to fall asleep at the table instead of returning to his tent. He is “awakened” in his dream by an older physician, doubtlessly one of his surgical residency professors, asking how he would reattach a limb.

Pierce looks flummoxed and doesn’t have an answer for the questioner, who now has a disapproving glare. The physician asks for Pierce’s left arm, and he detaches a mannequin arm and gives it to the physician, who in turn tosses it into an offscreen lake. Then the physician asks for Pierce’s right arm, and it too is thrown unceremoniously into the lake.

Pierce then finds himself afloat in a rowboat with no arms, aimlessly drifting past several limbs floating in the water. The final cut is Pierce walking up to a wounded child on a gurney. He is handed a scalpel, as the sound of approaching helicopters is
heard, and he looks up and screams “No!” This initially appears to be a reaction to what’s going on in Pierce’s dream, but more than likely it is a segue element, for Pierce awakes to everyone rushing out of the tent to attend to the incoming wounded that are brought in by helicopter.

For the final scene of “Dreams,” we see the seven characters that have had dreams sitting around a table in the dining tent. They are all declaring and/or agreeing on what a grueling past couple of days they have been through. Most of them rise up to go back to their tents to finally get some well-deserved sleep.

Major Charles Winchester III then utters from Shakespeare’s famous *Hamlet* soliloquy, “To sleep, perchance to dream.” And to that, everyone agreeably sits back down, and they start pouring cups of coffee while the credits begin to roll. The joke here is that Hamlet was not referring to going to sleep, but to going to death, and if he were to dream in death, would the eternal dream be good—or bad? “Ay, there’s the rub.”

*The Twilight Zone*

Here to an entire episode was influenced by Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* soliloquy. On November 27, 1959, *The Twilight Zone* episode “Perchance to Dream” aired. Though the episode appears to be a relatively simple story, it does come with an interesting revelation in the end.

Edward Hall, a man who looks exhausted and a bit disheveled, goes to see Dr. Eliot Rathmann, a psychiatrist, at the recommendation of his medical doctor. Upon entering his office, Rathmann sees that Hall is distressed and urges him to lie down on his session couch. Hall appears to immediately fall asleep. He wakes with a start and leaps up off of the couch. He begins to tell Rathmann the story of why he is “the tiredest man in the world.” He explains that he has not slept for 87 hours. Hall is convinced that if he falls asleep, he will never wake.

After recollecting his perceived predicament, there is a nod to Freud that is anything but subtle. Hall tells Dr. Rathmann that he was expecting something different from him—an explicate reference to the stereotypical public perception of the Freudian psychoanalyst. Rathmann replies, “Like an old man with a white beard and a German accent?” As he says this, Rathmann and Hall frame a shot of a bust of Freud that’s sitting on a credenza behind them. Rathmann adds, “That’s what everyone expects, and they’re always disappointed.”

Hall goes on to explain that he has been having a series of episodic dreams where he is at an amusement park, and a beautiful “woman of his dreams,” named Maya, leads him to various attractions that prove to be extremely exhilarating. Hall is convinced that Maya is doing this to exacerbate his rheumatic heart condition and eventually kill him. Hall’s dream really achieves a Literal sense from the fact that both he and Maya admit to each other that it is Hall’s dream that they are both in. After one instance of Maya insisting on going into the Fun House, Hall asks jokingly as he acquiesces, “How can I argue with a dream?”

There seems to be the same trepidation with Hall that befalls Hamlet. In Hall’s case, there is a literal interpretation that he is applying to his dreams—he could give in and have a great time, or he could give in and
meet his death. It’s a razor’s edge that he walks on. Over time, it appears that Hall’s anxiety about dying is what will end up killing him.

Hall recounts some more of his dreams to Rathmann, but decides that the session is not getting either of them anywhere, so he starts to leave the office. This time we see Rathmann’s secretary from the front and she is Maya, the woman from his dreams. This pushes Hall literally over the edge. He takes a running leap through the window in Rathmann’s office and plunges several stories to his death.

Or does he? Ay, there’s the twist. The camera pans back to Rathmann, who gets out of his chair and calls his secretary in. The camera then pulls back to reveal that Hall is still lying on the couch. Dead. We discover that everything that occurred once Hall lay down and fell asleep happened to him in his dreams. Apparently, it was his dream suicide that provided his wish fulfillment. It doesn’t get any more Freudian than that.

The episode ends with this narration:

“They say a dream takes only a second or so, and yet in that second a man can live a lifetime. He can suffer and die, and who’s to say which is the greater reality: the one we know or the one in dreams, between heaven, the sky, the earth—and in The Twilight Zone.”

Conclusion

It has been 110 years since the publication of Sigmund Freud’s seminal work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and along with it the development of psychotherapy dream interpretation. During this time, there has been a vast amount of research on how the human brain functions, and this has provided a greater understanding of the development of dreams and their function as well. Much of what has been discovered goes against Freud’s early theories; however, his pioneering development of psychotherapy still plays a vital role for modern psychotherapists. It is also important to note that, though Freud’s theories into the unconscious with respect to dream interpretation may be debated, he still has a powerful effect on other areas of society such as the arts and, as we have analyzed, the creation of television content. It is from the imagination and dreams of the writers of these series that the characters are conceived who leave an indelible impression on our minds.

This essay is based on an invited lecture given at the Freud Museum, Vienna, Austria, June 29, 2009. John V. Pavlik is professor and chair of the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers University, and director of the Journalism Resources Institute at Rutgers. Robert Kubey is professor of Journalism and Media Studies, and director of the Center for Media Studies at Rutgers. Franklin Bridges is a Ph.D. student at the School of Communication and Information at Rutgers.
It’s only been a decade since the first HDTV sets went on sale in this country. But in that relatively short period of time, a revolution in the “experience” of television has taken place. TV has quite literally shifted its focus. Not only is the once grainy, low resolution picture suddenly as clear as a window, not only is the low-fidelity sound now deep and enveloping, but in many ways the nature of watching TV itself has altered. The casual, if constantly-on, companionship and background noise that television provided over the last fifty years is dramatically changing. Thanks to its large, glittering wide screen and its jewel-like display, HDTV is once again returning television to its prominence as the centerpiece, the electronic altar as it were, of the modern American home.

Interestingly, the changes wrought by HDTV seem to fly in the face of prevailing consumer trends during the last three decades or so of television technology. Time and again, TV audiences have demonstrated a
profound indifference to the quality of their sets’ video and audio capabilities. The battle between Sony’s Betamax vs. JVC’s VHS was won not because the latter offered a better viewing experience (it didn’t) but because it provided greater recording capacity (with corresponding lower resolution). The opportunity to improve the VHS picture via Super VHS never caught on. Stereo TV’s higher fidelity, which required hookup to home stereo systems, was largely ignored. So too was the picture upgrade available through component cables on DVD players and cable boxes.

What forces helped HDTV triumph and attract millions of viewers willing to pay substantial amounts of money to suddenly re-experience a medium which had been a part of their lives for half a century? Some of the answers, I think, lie in HDTV’s historical roots in previous visual technologies.

When motion pictures were first introduced in the last years of the 19th century, the public was presented with a wide variety of material, ranging from vaudeville acts to male-oriented specialties (such as boxers and showgirls) to visits to foreign locales to documentaries (both real and re-created). The triumph of fictional formats was a decade away and in this era of “the cinema of attractions” (to use historian Tom Gunning’s term) lay an important notion of what type of entertainment would consistently attract audiences to new display technologies ever since—sheer spectacle. Early film viewers’ delight in movement and speed and the exotic would be matched each time the industry launched a new mode of presentation, whether talking pictures (which showcased musical numbers, tapping feet, and the gunfire of gangsters), color (the epic sweep of Gone with the Wind or the fantasy of The Wizard of Oz), wide-screen (the biblical pageantry of The Robe), 3-D (the flinging spears of Bwana Devil), or the far-flung nature documentaries shot in Imax.

When television was introduced to the American public in the late 1930s (and then re-introduced after the hiatus of World War II), it obviously couldn’t match the size and power of the big screen. But it could offer something just as enticing and vivid—the quality of “live-ness.” Early television celebrated its ability to take viewers to events and present programming in real time, permitting the medium to serve as a literal “window to the world.” Spectacle was just as important a selling point as it had been for film, but here the notion was on electronic connected-ness to both the familiar and the foreign, from the vaudeville shenanigans of Milton Berle (who fueled the demand for home-set purchases) to the baseball diamond of Yankee Stadium to the aerial flights of Mary Martin in Peter Pan.

By the mid-1950s, the TV set occupied a privileged place in the American living room, leading to both furniture and domestic re-arrangements. The gradual expansion in screen size and the introduction of color (which started a whole new era of display programming to showcase the beauty of its over-saturated palette) gave the medium even greater prominence as the visual centerpiece of family life. But a curious phenomenon emerged in the decades to come—as set prices dropped and lifestyles changed, the primacy of the communal living room experience declined. cheaper TVs meant each room could have its own device, leading not only to fractured
families but also to the increase of smaller, more portable screens, usually of lower quality. Television became a ubiquitous appliance, a countertop device as common and inexpensive as a toaster.

The introduction of HDTV starting in the late 1990s and its dramatic growth over the last few years (HD is now available in 31 percent of American homes, up seven percent alone since January 2008) helped reverse some of these “diminishing” trends and returned the medium to its central role in the electronic household. Many viewers, in fact, responding to the ever-expanding availabilities of large screen sizes and the accompanying array of surround sound speakers, abandoned the family living room altogether to install special home theaters, complete with rows of seats and custom-designed lighting.

But unlike earlier versions of home cinemas dedicated to DVD playback in the 1990s, the HDTV viewing environment was more than just an effort to recreate a high-priced screening room. It was also a place to experience the vividness and razor-sharp clarity of HD programming, with shows that in many ways recalled the strong elements of spectacle and display that characterized both film and TV in their earliest days.

Perhaps no program demonstrated this more “clearly” than Discovery HD Theater’s Sunrise Earth, which premiered in 2004. Documentary filmmaker David Conover defied all of the rules of conventional nature series—there was no narration, no conflict, no plot, no lessons. As Conover explained,
“I wanted to give people a greater degree of license to explore on their own and not be walked through it.” Recognizing the illuminating qualities of HD (its crystalline detail, its heightened depth of field, its enlarged frame size, its brilliant range of colors), Conover went to remote locations and simply filmed the sunrise over the course of several hours. The results were mesmerizing, especially when combined with HDTV’s 5.1 surround-sound capabilities. Conover’s belief in “experiential TV” opened the doors to a new HD aesthetic emphasizing pictorialism and live pacing, an aesthetic surprisingly similar in form and practice to the types of travel documentaries made in the first decade of cinema.

The innovative approach of *Sunrise Earth* was typical of the HD Theater network (as it is now known), which pioneered the notion that HD technology was its own best attraction. Since its launch in June 2002, the network has specialized in the kind of visually arresting programming custom made for viewers (largely male) eager to showcase their expensive new set’s technical possibilities. Whether it was ravishing nature series such as *Planet Earth* or its numerous programs devoted to almost hypnotic celebrations of gleaming American machinery, HD Theater presented its audience with an endless bounty of high definition material that often seemed suitable for framing.

HDTV’s richly detailed images and enveloping screen size was the perfect environment as well for displaying a key staple of television’s early sense of “live-ness” and direct masculine appeal—sports. Just like the late 1940s, when high testosterone shows like wrestling, boxing, and roller derbies blared from sets in local taverns, one of the first over-the-air HD programs was ABC’s telecast of Superbowl XXXIV in January 2000—a broadcast doubtless watched in hundreds of HD-equipped bars around the country. The intoxicating allure of HD sports, where every blade of AstroTurf and every face in the crowd was clearly visible, not only forced broadcast and cable networks to upgrade their operations (at considerable expense), but also led to a similar movement among (largely male) consumers to take the plunge for a new HD set (at considerable expense) once they had enviously viewed a high definition football game at their neighbors’.

The “wow” factor of HDTV, the sense that once you’ve watched an HD sports or nature show, you’ve simply got to buy a set, can’t be underestimated as a primary inducement in the technology’s growth. Far more than the introduction of color TV, VCRs or DVDs, HDTV’s sharp improvements to the home-viewing experience are instantly apparent to consumers in appliance showrooms. Virtually every type of programming simply looks better in HD, from morning chat fests to game shows to sitcoms, cop shows and late-night comedy, leading many HDTV viewers, like their early-adopter TV counterparts in the late 1940s and early 1950s, to watch just about anything as long as it’s in high definition.

What isn’t so clear to novice consumers of HD is the types of problems they’re likely to encounter with their high-priced purchase. Similar to a new computer, HDTV is not simply a matter of “turning-on-the-switch” and watching the magic begin. Its complicated set-up demands advanced planning and skill, which
may explain the not-so-surprising fact that of the 35 million homes with HDTVs, only 20 million are actually getting an HD picture. Typically a new cable or satellite HD receiver must be ordered and a special HDMI cable must be purchased to connect the box to the set. But once the installation is complete, the enhanced imagery and sound are well worth the effort.

There’s no question that innovative networks like HD Theater and ESPN-HD and PBS will continue to explore and expand the potential and the power of HDTV to provide viewers with a riveting visual experience—after all, HD has become their virtual signature. But as the novelty inevitably fades, HDTV will most likely follow the course of previous new technologies and come to be taken for granted. The majority of prime-time broadcast network programming is already in HD and despite its greater clarity and richness now seems a routine part of the television landscape. Most major cable networks have also made the switch to an HD version, often with minimal upgrades (such as increased news banners on the left and right sides of the frame on CNN-HD and FoxNews-HD) or sometimes disastrously (as in the unwatchable “stretched” versions of standard definition shows shown on TBS-HD or HGTV-TV).

Ironically, the challenges for home television in the future will come not from full wall-size screens or 3-D (both inevitable), but from the continuing flurry towards miniaturization and total portable access. In the already dawning age of always available cellphone and Ipod TV, will anyone really care to watch life-size images in dedicated media rooms, no matter how vividly detailed and lifelike they appear?

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Television and Science
How the Media Shape the Public’s Understanding Of Crucial New Developments

By Mary L. Nucci and Robert Kubey

Television plays a critical role in the public's understanding of new developments in science. Once they leave formal education, most Americans rely on television to keep them informed about science and technology.

An important case in point is the genetic modification of foods, which has been touted as having the potential to increase food yield, enhance the nutritional value of foodstuffs and decrease the use of pesticides in agricultural practice. Yet despite the fact that concerns have been raised about the potentially harmful effects of genetically modified food on human health and the environment, the American public to a great degree remains unaware of the scope and extent of the products of this technology.

Between 1980 and 2003 genetically modified foods were first introduced to the American public (the first genetically modified whole-food product, the Flavr Savr tomato, reached store shelves in 1994), and achieved controversial status due to the accidental contamination of taco shells with an unapproved genetically modified corn. Typically for any technology, this period from concept to market would be the time when the public would first become aware of the development through media coverage, and from that media coverage would subsequently develop an opinion of the technology.

In the U.S., television news serves as the primary source of science content for most Americans. Although viewership of network television has declined due to the Internet and cable-news shows, the evening news shows broadcast on ABC, CBS and NBC still account for an average nightly audience of more than 25 million viewers.

An examination of the networks’ news coverage of genetically modified foods between 1980 and 2003 found that during the time frame when the technology moved from lab to consumer, there were only 169 stories on genetically modified food on the three broadcast news networks. During these 23 years news coverage on the subject was spotty and incomplete. Most of the 169 articles were on CBS News (94 stories), with ABC reporting half as often (46 stories) and NBC only one-third as often (29 stories). In 1984, 1985, 1986, and 1990 only CBS aired any stories about the technology.

CBS’s dominance in news coverage was explained during our interviews with CBS executive producer Jim Murphy, producer Sally Garner...
and reporter Wyatt Andrews. These interviews illuminated the importance of a production team interested and committed to reporting on an issue for its regular inclusion in news coverage. Garner and Andrews were able to maintain consistent coverage of genetic modification because of the latitude of executive producer Jim Murphy. As Wyatt Andrews commented, “first of all it’s food, and people eat that. I think people are fascinated by that. And second, it is the technological frontier. Marry that to food and he [Murphy] sees it as a no-brainer. He just thinks the audience is going to be interested when people are messing with your food.”

Yet in spite of CBS’ greater coverage, assuming an average of 10 stories per show over the 23-year period, these 169 stories represent less than one percent of all stories presented on the three networks during that time frame, and is likely the main reason that the American public has little or no conception of the technology of genetically modified food. On average, there was less than one story a month on a technology during the time in which it moved from laboratory to the consumer’s plate. This stands in sharp contrast to the vocal and active public debate around genetically modified food taking place in the media in Europe during the same time; this really drove the sentiment against genetically modified food throughout Europe.

Reporting increased around the approval on the Flavr Savr tomato in 1994, but then died down until 1999 and the controversy as to whether Monarch butterflies might be killed by eating pollen from genetically modified corn. Considered a watershed moment in the rise in social activism against genetically modified foods, the Monarch butterfly issue had a direct effect on media coverage which was further compounded by the discovery in 2000 that taco shells were contaminated with a genetically modified corn intended exclusively for cattle feed. Over one-quarter of all the network stories from the thirteen years examined aired that year. Slightly less than half of all stories on genetically modified food aired between 1999 and 2001.

Within these stories, 66 percent included one or more on-camera experts or “talking heads” that rendered opinion or reported facts or both. These experts represented a wide variety of institutions and organizations, but the three most frequently used experts for all networks were food industry representatives, activists and scientists. The combination of industry/scientist, which often represents the same viewpoint on genetic engineering, dominated as spokespersons during the time frame studied. Activists, typically representing an alternate viewpoint, were used as experts much less frequently, while government agencies that could rightly be seen to have some role in the development of genetically modified food, including the United States Department of Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Institutes of Health were present as experts less than one percent of the total.

Experts’ comments about genetic engineering were more positive from 1980 to 1990 than in the following decade. This is in line with the increasing concerns over time about genetically modified food both in the U.S. and overseas. Industry, scientists and government tended to be more
positive than activists and the public, while farmers and farm associations were essentially evenly divided in their support for the technology. The Food and Drug Administration, the key regulatory agency in the United States overseeing genetically modified food issues, presented an overwhelmingly positive perspective on the technology.

However, within each category of experts there was no overall unified stance towards the technology. Industry representatives were six times as likely to speak positively about genetically modified food as negatively; scientists were only twice as likely to have a positive perspective. Experts categorized as activists were more than 10 times likely to voice a negative opinion on genetically modified food. The public perspective was also decidedly negative, with four times as many public voices opposing genetically modified food.

Although the networks were strongly similar in coverage patterns over the years examined, which was shown in previous research, differences in coverage indicated distinct emphases in focus. Critical examination of one event illustrates these differences. On April 5, 2000, both ABC and CBS ran a story about the National Research Council report on genetically modified food which was generally positive towards the technology. ABC’s story mentioned that the report called for tighter government monitoring that should set some of the concerns about genetically modified food to rest. CBS was substantially more critical, with anchor Dan Rather introducing the report with the statement that “future gene-altered crops need to be checked for possible threats to other plants” and adding that “critics of gene-altered foods don’t like the study’s main finding or the scientists who’ve made it.”

Fewer than half of all Americans had heard that human food had been accidentally contaminated by genetically modified foods approved only for animal feed and that pollen from genetically modified corn was shown to kill Monarch butterfly larvae.

The day before the National Research Council report ABC ran a story on Monsanto, a company with one of the largest stakes in genetically modified food in which Hendrik Verfaillie, President of Monsanto Company, announced that they would release proprietary scientific information about genetically modified rice to “facilitate and encourage basic research to improve rice and other crops.” Neither CBS nor NBC carried the story. One element in ABC’s report was most striking. Following the report, the late Peter Jennings commented, “One of the biggest companies in genetically altered foods, Monsanto, said today it would give away valuable research on the genetic structure of rice which could lead to new strains of healthier strains of rice that would be more resistant to disease. No company has ever disclosed so much genetic information about a single crop.” This very favorably worded statement about the value of Monsanto’s release of data presented a positive impression of Monsanto and genetically modified food.

ABC may well have chosen to run the Monsanto story because they thought it had important news value, while a skeptic might wonder if
Monsanto had better public relations contacts with ABC than at the other networks. ABC news has received many millions of dollars in advertising from Archers Daniel Midland (ADM), a company that also has considerable interests in the success of genetically modified food. And there have been a variety of controversial arrangements between ABC and ADM that have been documented and made their own news over the years. No record can be found regarding ADM providing advertising revenue to CBS or NBC, but they do provide PBS’s News Hour and NPR news with millions of dollars annually.

Regardless, over the time frame studied, genetically modified food appeared to be a non-issue for the three evening news shows, which did not see fit to detail the technology and its implications in a manner that would elevate its importance as an issue for the American public. This may in part be due to newsroom practices in which agricultural reporting has been biased towards a business or economic focus, and not on scientific or investigative reporting.

The possible impact of this lack of coverage can be seen in the results of a public opinion poll from the Food Policy Institute at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. That study showed that in a survey of Americans’ knowledge and attitudes towards genetically modified food, in 2003 only 19 percent of Americans were able to recall a event or news story related to genetically modified food. A follow-up study in 2004 found that significantly fewer than half of all Americans had heard that human food had been accidentally contaminated with genetically modified foods approved only for animal feed, and that pollen from genetically modified corn was shown to kill Monarch butterfly larvae in the laboratory.

Critically, these results indicate that for a subject as ubiquitous and pervasive as food (that is, everyone needs to eat), the lack of coverage may be of concern for other less all-encompassing technological issues. If the technology about food is not covered by the American press, what does this imply about the potential for coverage of technologies with less relevance to a majority of the population? As the knowledge that Americans possess tends to be driven mostly by the degree to which it is covered by the media, and the American public is still reliant primarily on television for information on science and technology, the paucity of coverage of genetic modification highlights concerns for the ability of the public to make sound and rational decisions regarding this technology or any other developing technology.

As a mass medium, television has the greatest likelihood of influencing public opinion about science and scientists. As a mass medium, television has perhaps the greatest likelihood of influencing public opinion about science and scientists. In this first study of television news coverage of genetically modified food, it can be seen that over the 23 years of the study, coverage was sporadic and light except for the very infrequent crisis event. One network, CBS, dominated coverage, yet it appears that each of the networks treats the issue quite similarly in terms of its use of on-air experts, critics and supporters of genetically modified food.
Although media coverage can result in the development of long-standing perspectives, coverage as spotty as seen in this 23-year time frame would likely have little effect on an individual’s support or opposition to genetically modified foods; in fact, since 2001 the American public’s support for genetically modified foods has remained flat, while opposition has declined.

Although the data on the relationship of television use to the public’s support for science is unclear, this research points to concerns with this medium effectively serving as the primary source for developments in science and technology for the American public. This concern may be moot with the growing reliance on the Internet as the source for specific science and technology information. However, these results should support a call for strengthening the dissemination of science and technology on television.

This essay is based on an article by the same authors published in Science Communication, Vol. 29, 2008. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect official positions or policies of the USDA, the Food Policy Institute or Rutgers University. Mary Nucci is a Research Analyst at the Food Policy Institute, and Ph.D. candidate at the School of Communication, Information and Library Studies at Rutgers. Robert Kubey is professor of Journalism and Media Studies, and director of the Center for Media Studies at Rutgers.
We are now eight years into the new millennium, and digital technology has totally revolutionized technology and communication. The last century seems so analog, where television and radio programs were be physical objects. Now, as Marx predicted, but not of media, all that was once solid melts into air. Our media universe is nothing but digital bits of information, stored on a hard frame. But scholars, trying to make sense of these radical changes are still creating tangible books, using linear text to navigate the new media terrain.

Old academic textbooks are being updated, but most fail to do justice to the disruptive quality of digital media. Several scholars are delving into these latest developments, seeking to illuminate popular media culture on its own terms. Reality television...
and user-generated video are two new forms that are being analyzed for their transformative impact on society. Two recent books suggest ways in which historians are grappling with the confusing present. One form of programming has proliferated, as everything is going digital. Better Living through Reality TV is an audacious book, which seeks to give a perspective to the most dreaded of contemporary programming, reality. The authors, Laurie Ouellette of University of Minnesota and James Hay of University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana, see reality programming as a major force in contemporary society, helping viewers transform their individual lives. Their subtitle, “Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship,” suggests that these self-help and lifestyle programs should be put in a larger historical context, where the public has questioned the efficacy of government and has become devoted to the care of the single self.

Ouellette and Hay relate the rise of reality shows to the privatization of many government services that began in the eighties. The message of personal responsibility and self-empowerment from politicians of varying stripes from Presidents Reagan to Clinton to Bush, has carried over into shows and channels that instruct viewers on how to live. The authors define reality shows rather broadly, encompassing any series that offers strategies of self-help to viewers, from personal relationships to house repairs. This definition embraces not only such series as Dr. Phil and Judge Judy, but entire cable networks devoted to lifestyle instruction, including the Food Network, the Learning Channel, and Fit TV. Ouellette and Hay claim that these shows, along with support from their Internet sites, help create self-governing citizens, focused on personal accountability and self-esteem.

Better Living through Reality TV looks at the manifold ways that non-scripted programming help makeover and reinvent the average citizen. The authors demonstrate how beauty shows offer a self-improvement that extends into the workplace. The subtext of such shows as Extreme Makeover and What Not to Wear is that a fashion sense is crucial to both personal and professional success. Ouellette and Hay relate the appeal of these shows to disruptions in the workplace where today’s graduates are encouraged to continually retool themselves with such skills as “self-renovation,” “impression management” and “total transformation.” Makeover TV takes on the anxieties of the marketplaces, but provides “tenuous resources for navigating the impossibility of the task.”

Instead of condescending to reality television, the authors want to examine both the appeal and paradoxes of these often-denigrated shows. By outlining the broader economic and political contexts, reality television does not seem an aberration, but an outgrowth of our 24/7 media-saturated society. The authors pay tribute to John Hartley, who has been one of the leading scholars advocating a critical engagement with popular television. Hartley has just written a new book, Television Truths, which seeks to examine the dimensions of our “mediasphere,” a term he coined ten years ago to emphasize the global an ed pervasive impact of especially television.
Hartley is the author of fifteen books and is distinguished professor at Queensland University of Technology in Australia. His work has been very influential in the academy with few historians having such a commanding knowledge of television around the world. References to American, European, and Australian TV abound. Harley considers contemporary television a “philosophy of the popular” and his book is structured around essential philosophical arguments. He wants to understand such deep questions as has television evolved aesthetically, how the medium transmits knowledge, and what is a citizen in an era of interactive multimedia.

Before he delves into such debates, Hartley explains how the search for meaning has changed over centuries. Hartley realizes that the university is no longer the provider of knowledge. In this global era, the individuals exercise their own choices, “carrying their own self-control mechanisms and navigating the means and media of meaning.” The journey from the “expert,” whether it is publisher or professor to the “me” has major implications in the new economy and creativity.

Both Better Living through Reality TV and Television Truths are dense and arcane at times, each invoking Michel Foucault and his theories on the technology of the self. The books are obviously written for an academic audience, but both carry messages that should be integrated into our daily conversation about the media. The authors recognize that media is evolving much more rapidly than our thinking about it.

Ron Simon is curator of television and radio at the Paley Center for Media, where he has produced exhibitions and seminars on every kind of programming, from cultural to reality TV.
Now available in paperback, *Audition* is a remarkably revealing book that contains a great deal of personal, and even private, information. It might well be retitled *Barbara Walters Tells All!* Readers will learn about Walters’ unhappy and insecure childhood, her seldom-present show-business father, her mentally challenged and constantly sheltered older sister Jackie, her three former husbands, her strange platonic friendship with Roy Cohn, her adopted daughter also named Jackie, her million-dollar contract with ABC, her various affairs, including one with Massachusetts Senator Edward Brooke and much more.

Many of the people Walters discusses are deceased and this may be why this memoir was written so late in her career. It’s much easier to talk about individuals who are no longer living and who won’t be hurt or embarrassed by a less than flattering portrayal.

The book title *Audition* reveals the author’s insecurity: she felt she had to audition – and face the risk of rejection – for most of the positions in her career. Walters describes her first major job in network television as one of eight writers (and the only female writer) on the *Today* show.

“All I wanted was to do whatever I was asked to do so I wouldn’t be replaced by some other female writer. I just wanted to keep my job.”

“For the next twenty years, thirty years, maybe even forty, I would feel the same way. No matter how high my profile became, how many awards I received, or how much money I made, my fear was that it could all be taken away from me. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to link that fear to my father’s roller-coaster career,
or my mother’s constant anxiety, or my sister’s needs. I have, as I’ve said, always felt I was auditioning, either for the next job or to make sure that I hold on to the one I had."

The first quarter of this autobiography is both a confessional and a whine – see how tough life has been for me; see the obstacles I’ve had to overcome. The remainder and more interesting portions of the book describe the remarkable personalities the author has encountered and the interviews she has conducted over the last forty years. Over 700 of these names – from King Abdullah of Jordan to Catherine Zeta-Jones – are printed on the book’s front and back inside covers and fly leafs.

Most of the chapters on interviews consist of groupings; for example, “Garland, Capote, Rose Kennedy, and Princess Grace” or “Presidents and First Ladies: Forty Years Inside the White House.” Some of Walters’ subjects were interviewed multiple times over a span of years.

In a separate chapter, Walters describes a series of interviews with Fidel Castro and the personal friendship that developed between them. The first interview, a five-hour marathon, was edited into a one-hour news special *Fidel Castro Speaks* that helped build Walters’ career as a roving anchor for ABC News, although she also received hundreds of letters from Cuban-Americans furious that Castro had been given such prominent airtime. Two years later, when Castro visited New York for a speech before the United Nations, Walters was Castro’s guest at a dinner party at the Cuban Mission. The two remained in contact but 25 years would pass before Castro agreed to another interview and Walters traveled to Cuba for the occasion. During this 2002 visit, Walters asked Castro why he was wearing a business suit instead of his trademark military uniform.

“Barbara, precisely in order to seduce you and for you to be kind to me, to have pity on me,” he joked. “You have more questions than the U.S. Air Force has missiles.”

Walters’ memoir is chock-full of similar stories and anecdotes. She describes some of her more demanding interviewees, including Katherine Hepburn, who insisted that Walters must bring chocolates with each visit. It was Hepburn, Walters notes, who left her with an odd inheritance. During an interview, Hepburn noted that she had become a “sort of a thing … like a tree.” Walters was quick to ask: “What kind of a tree are you?” Hepburn replied “a white oak” and stretched her arms to simulate the branches. Every since that interview, Walters has been ridiculed by Johnny Carson among others for asking the silly “tree question.”

An appearance on the *Tonight* show gave Walters the opportunity to ask her chief tormentor what kind of a tree he was. Carson replied: “A tumbleweed.”

The hardest chapter to write, notes Walters, was the one about her own daughter Jackie, who became drug addicted as an adolescent. Walters describes in some detail her daughter’s rebellious behavior, her association with a small gang of “tough-looking” boys and later with a drug-addicted girlfriend, and her run-away disappearance during which she hitchhiked across the country. Eventually, the sister of the man Jackie was hitchhiking with called Walters and told her where Jackie was
staying. Walters telephoned Jackie and agreed to send her money and an airline ticket. Instead, Walters sent a “transport counselor” who escorted Jackie to a residential school for troubled teens. Jackie gradually adjusted to her new environment and, three years later, was able to graduate and begin a new life. She chose not to return to New York, however, and eventually established a small residential outdoor therapy program for girls patterned after the one that she attended.

“I am more proud of my daughter than I can possibly express,” says Walters. “She is a beautiful, delightful, funny woman. She marches to her own drummer. It may not be my music, but I guess, in a way, I marched to my own drummer and it wasn’t necessarily Jackie’s music.”

One of the most sensitive chapters in the book deals with Monica Lewinsky. Walters notes that her interview with Monica “was the most-watched news Special in television history. It was the biggest “get” of my career.” The author gives a full account of the circumstances leading to Lewinsky’s encounter with President Clinton, her betrayal by Linda Tripp (the person she thought was her confidant), and her daylong interrogation by six members of Special Prosecutor Ken Starr’s staff who threatened Monica with 27 years in prison for perjury, witness tampering and obstruction of justice. Walters does an excellent job of describing the legal meat grinder in which Monica was caught and her ineffective lawyer who was “spending much of his time on camera helping to feed the media’s insatiable appetite for the story.”

Monica, who by this time had accumulated over a million dollars in legal bills, was besieged with offers involving huge sums of money from various media for exclusive interviews, book deals and product endorsements. Walters, however, worked for ABC News, where network policies forbid monetary payment for news interviews. Walters describes in some detail how she convinced Monica that it would be to her own best interest to give Walters the interview. Over a month later, Monica agreed to do her first interview with ABC.

“To take the high road,” as Walters noted, “and turn down millions of dollars in order to prove her credibility was a great act of courage. I don’t think Monica ever got full credit for that.” Walters then spent months preparing for the interview including reading hundreds of pages of transcripts as well as The Starr Report, grand-jury testimony and various speeches that President Clinton had made. She compiled over 200 questions for the interview before paring them down to a more usable number. The actual interview lasted over four and a half hours prior to editing and the resulting transcript ran to 150 pages.

Walters’ final question to Monica was, “What will you tell your children when you have them?” Monica replied simply, “Mommy made a big mistake.”

Walters clearly likes Monica, describes her as warm and funny, and notes that ten years have passed since Monica Lewinsky’s story broke. She reports Monica’s activities during that period and her difficulty obtaining a job, a husband, and family. Walters closes this most poignant chapter by quoting Washington Post columnist
Richard Cohen who wrote: … “Where is the guy brave enough, strong enough, admirable enough to take [Monica Lewinsky] as his wife. To say to the world that he loves this woman even if she will always be an asterisk in American history? I hope there is such a guy out there. It would be nice. It would be fair.”

Barbara Walters holds a unique place in the history of American television. It is doubtful that we will ever see another “Barbara Walters,” but the current model is still active as a producer of The View and as an interviewer par excellence of periodic television specials.

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The Office and Philosophy: Scenes from the Unexamined Life

J. Jeremy Wisnewsky, ed.
Wiley-Blackwell
(328 pages, $18.95)

By David Marc

Offices are nothing new to television comedy. They have been primary settings for workplace sitcoms from Private Secretary starring Ann Sothern (CBS, 1953-57) to Just Shoot Me and 30 Rock, and they have gotten even more screen time as “go to” locales, used to provide relief from the visual stasis and dialog monotony of sitcom living rooms (e.g., Bewitched, The Mary Tyler Moore Show). But as familiar as it is to American viewers, the office has rarely been given much scrutiny in TV comedy. This is unfortunate, as office life is the summary condition of labor for millions of information-age workers. The Office (NBC, 2005-) goes a long way in making up for that. If desk work was once believed to be a progressive step forward from the backbreaking physical labor that was saddled upon the mass of humanity, the office portrayed on this series seems more like the scene of a sadistic psychological crime. While backs are not likely to break in the quasi-ergonomic chairs of the Scranton bureau of the Dunder-Mifflin Paper Company, the same assumption cannot be made for the human spirit.

Adapted for U.S. audiences by Greg Daniels from the British original by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, The Office is a painfully funny look at work life in the “developed” countries. If drawing a Scranton pay check at one time meant risking black-lung disease in the coal mines, it now means suffering on the surface under the personality dysfunctions of Michael Scott (Steve Carell), an office manager who compulsively and relentlessly acts out puerile power fantasies as if he were conveying tips for success from a Dale Carnegie course. Dwight (Rainn Wilson), his sycophantic second in command, is more diabolically aggressive than Michael in his thoughts, but lacks the social skills necessary for gaining power, and this is why Michael is so comfortable to have him as assistant manager. Jim (John Krasinski) has the cheekbones to take charge of an office in a television comedy, but he lacks a concept of heroism any broader than
achieving sexual satisfaction, and so must remain subordinate to dorks. The prospects of the women characters are even less optimistic. The youthful verve and personality of the receptionist, Pam (Jenna Fischer), decays across the episodes, with the specter of Phyllis (Phyllis Smith), an aging all-fetch/no-kvetch “assistant” haunting her and the viewer. Collectively, The Office workers spend the bulk of their waking lives pushing blank paper, literally and figuratively, producing little more than anxiety for themselves and each other.

This material, covered in the theater during the 1950s by congruent themes in such plays as Samuel Beckett’s Endgame and Arthur Miller’s The Death of a Salesman, is refreshing territory for television. Even so, thoughtful viewers might wonder how a vision of overwhelming nihilism, mitigated by moments of personal humiliation, managed to get past the gatekeepers and make it into the network feed. After a decade of reality programming, perhaps a yearning was detected in the focus groups for the pleasures of social realism in prime-time comic drama. Maybe the subversive tensions that energize The Office are appealing to a new generation of info proles laboring in the terminal pods of 21st century data farms, or perhaps there is a special sexual dimension a world where the mating ritual is confined to a vending machine area.

These and several dozen other theories are explored with varying degrees of skill in The Office and Philosophy, an anthology of critical essays from Blackwell-Wiley’s Philosophy and Pop Culture Series, which has already burned its brand of academic scrutiny on South Park, Battlestar Galactica and The Island. Wisnewski, who also edited The Family Guy and Philosophy for this series, has organized The Office collection as a mixture of essays about the original UK series, the American adaptation, and both. In a prefatory note, Wisnewski anticipates backlash from British readers who will “grind teeth...and shake fists” over the inordinate attention given to a “cheap American knock-off” and he predicts Americans will become confused when they read essays about one of “their” shows that has characters they’ve never heard of. “Get used to it,” he writes, warning that more versions of The Office are in the works, including Le Bureau (France), La Job (Quebec), and Stromberg (Germany). Nonetheless, the editor ignores the obvious complaint of pre-global television viewers who may find themselves more angry than confused when they discover they have paid full price for a book on a subject they are only partially familiar with.

Some of the essays attempt to relate The Office directly to the work of philosophers, including Aristotle, Sartre, Beaudrillard, Kant, and, of course, Marx. Against all odds, Michael Bray’s “Laughter Between Distraction and Awakening: Marxist Themes in the Office” is the most compelling, offering a comparison of concepts of class in the U.K. and U.S. through examining the two versions. Bray finds the American characters in the worst possible position in this regard. While denying the existence of class in deference to a democratic worldview, the Americans tend to define personal success by their imagined progress toward a class above them and by feelings of hostility or pity...
for a class beneath them. “The middle is everywhere,” he writes.

The denial of class by people obsessed with it is a form of self-deception, and this, in its many forms, is the most prominent theme of the critics who write about The Office in this book. Moreover, self-deception is the richest source of the jokes and gags that make The Office such a lively comedy. In this regard, Stefanie Rocknak takes a look at Pam and Jim, the two most credible sexual beings among the regulars; Randall M. Jensen tackles the walking warehouse of Greek-named psychological disorders that is Dwight; and Jonathan Evans and Peter Murphy, a tag-team of junior faculty from the University of Indianapolis philosophy department, wrestle with the question of whether or not Michael believes that he is an ethical person. An endorsement from Chris Doherty, Mayor of (real-life) Scranton, appears on the back cover, a potent reminder that there is no such thing as bad publicity.

David Marc is the author of six books, 14 chapters for critical anthologies and textbooks and some 300 articles for reference works, periodicals and journals examining the cultural impact of television, film, radio and other media. He retired in 2006 from a 22-year teaching career, including positions at the Annenberg School at U.S.C. and the Newhouse School at Syracuse University, to focus on editing and writing activities. His sixth book, Our Movie Houses: A History of Film and Cinematic Innovation in Central New York (Syracuse University Press, 2008), co-authored with Norman Keim, was named “Outstanding Book of the Year” by the Theatre Historical Society of America.