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*By defining television as an "environment of symbols," Gerbner and Gross raise questions that are congenial to and problematic for humanistic study. A difficulty arises when the "environment of symbols" must be interpreted. In their interpretation TV becomes a world "ruled" by violence. Other content factors must be interpreted in terms of this dominant symbol. More serious problems emerge when audience responses are interpreted in terms of these prior interpretations. The difficulties are caused in part by the use of a "transportation" model of communication in spite of a rhetoric that reflects a "ritual" model. Application of a ritual model to the world of TV content would require the location of television's symbols in a culture's history of symbolic construct, definition of the reorganization of these symbols in TV content, and careful analysis of how meanings are appropriated by audiences.*

## **ASSESSING THE VIOLENCE PROFILE STUDIES OF GERBNER AND GROSS A Humanistic Critique and Suggestion**

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Every nomenclature has its implications, leading us to such-and-such observations rather than such-and-such others. And in that sense even the most empirical of term-guided studies (and there can be no other kind) has a built-in deductive aspect, by turning our observations in one direction rather than some other. Hence, instead of telling ourselves that we can dodge this inevitable terministic limitation, shouldn't we begin by asking ourselves what kind of terms might best reveal the complexity of the problem? There is a sense in which all key terms are reductionist, being related to a subject in much the way that the title of a book is related to its contents. But there is a vast difference between nomenclature that over-simplifies and one that is, rather, like the glimpse into the possible details of a panorama.

—*Kenneth Burke, Dramatism and Development*

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More than any other research effort in the area of television studies the work of Gerbner and Gross and their associates sits squarely at the juncture of the social sciences and the humanities.<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is this better illustrated than in their article, "Living With Television: The Violence Profile" (1976),<sup>2</sup> and it is primarily to that discussion that this essay is addressed, though I will also take into account Gerbner's (1971) contribution in the collection of papers prepared for the U.S. Surgeon-General's report. There it is clear that the broad concern with violence might be defined in social scientific terms as a "social problem." But the definitions of what television is, how it works in American culture, and how culture itself works, are humanistic in nature. One might wish to quarrel with the inclusion of a view that is essentially anthropological in the domain of the humanities, but the particular approach to culture outlined by Gerbner and Gross places them in the humanistic camp among various anthropological positions.

In their analysis questions about *what* to study are framed in humanistic terms. Methods of quantitative measurement and analysis are applied to the fictional world of television. Interpretations of the data supplied by this description raise problems that are, again, essentially humanistic in nature. The television audience is approached with questions framed on the basis of these interpretations and, once again, statistical profiles are established about the relationship between the audience and the medium. Broad conclusions are drawn from these profiles and these conclusions have often been referred to in the complex process of policy formulation. This application of information gathered in such intricate procedures of definition, interpretation, and measurement makes the close examination of the studies all the more necessary. Some attention has been given to the methods and results of the quantitative portions of the studies and the definitions of categories of measurement. When that attention has resulted in negative commentary responses have been offered by Gerbner and Gross.<sup>3</sup>

The intention of this essay is to analyze from a humanistic point of view some of the basic assumptions, definitions, assertions, and arguments in the Violence Profile studies. I should say here that I focus on the Gerbner-Gross studies not only

because of their prominence, but because they have been open and forthright in their use of mixed methods of analysis and in their call for the development of new techniques of study appropriate for a new medium. Almost all social scientific studies are at times involved in complex interpretive issues, and many are far more veiled in these steps, or are unwilling to admit to the complexities involved. But the question, "What does it all *mean*?" is, essentially, a humanistic question. Gerbner and Gross have taught us that we shall have to be open to many methodologies in answering that question for television. Indeed, what their work often demonstrates is that rigid distinctions between humanistic and social scientific questions may be useless in this area. Though many of my own comments here are negative criticisms of their research, they are offered on the assumption, shared I think by Gerbner and Gross, that television shatters many of our disciplinary boundaries. The usual dismissal of the Annenberg projects as "body counts" or "numbers studies" are thoroughly insufficient whether offered by humanists or magazine journalists. There is no easy "us" or "them" approach. My goal here is to enrich the dialogue around television.

That Gerbner and Gross have a strong basis on which to converse with the humanistic disciplines is clear from their definition of television as an object of study.

The environment that sustains the most distinctive aspects of human existence is the environment of symbols. We learn, share, and act upon meanings derived from that environment. The first and longest lasting organization of the symbolic world was what we now call religion. Within its sacred scope, in earlier times, were the most essential processes of culture: art, science, technology, statecraft, and public story-telling.

Common rituals and mythologies are agencies of symbolic socialization and control. They demonstrate how society works by dramatizing its norms and values. They are essential parts of the general system of messages that cultivates prevailing outlooks (which is why we call it culture) and regulates social relationships. This system of messages, with its story-telling functions, makes people perceive as real and normal and right that which fits the established social order.

The institutional processes producing these message systems have become increasingly professionalized, industrialized, centralized, and specialized. Their principle locus shifted from handicraft

to mass production and from traditional religion to formal education, to the mass media of communication—particularly television [p. 173].

While there may be parts of this definition that are problematic, while in some cases there is a need for clarification, the general approach, the willingness to identify and discuss an "environment of symbols," is thoroughly congenial to the humanistic perspective.

From that perspective, from that part of it that has been involved with the study of television formulas rather than with the significance of individual programs, the most significant contribution of the Gerbner-Gross projects has been the careful mapping of television's social world. It is crucial to know the details of, rather than intuit patterns in, that world. For instance, our "sense" that there is a television "type" is made far more definite when we can point to the fact that "while only one in three male leads is shown as intending to or ever having been married, two of every three females are married or expect to marry in the story," or that "nearly half of all females are concentrated in the most sexually eligible young adult population, to which only one-fifth of males are assigned." We feel familiar with, and much more sure of generalizations based upon the observation that "children, adolescents, and old people together account for less than 15 percent of the total fictional populations" (p. 183). Similar statistical definition regarding employment patterns, types of activity, racial demography, and social class add up to a fictional world that is not in any sense a reflection of the statistical patterns of American society as television viewers experience it. Because of this work the specific content of that "environment of symbols" is made far more precise. Such careful work is rarely offered by humanists. Too often we have assumed that significant patterns observed and subjectively marked by trained analysts are equally obvious to viewers. We have asserted our own responses as generalizations. The Annenberg studies offer far more precise indications of the relationship of the "world" of TV fictions to the world of experience.

A strain on this synthesis of the humanities and the social sciences begins to develop, however, when it becomes necessary

to interpret this environment of symbols. That strain can be illustrated by focusing on a series of assumptions and assertions about how television works, how viewers perceive it, and what, finally, the symbols mean. Ultimately the strain is sufficient to cause us to return to the initial definition of "symbol" and "environment of symbols" and demand clarification in the use of these terms.

An early difficulty arises when we are told that "The substance of the consciousness cultivated by TV is not so much specific attitudes and opinions as more basic assumptions about the 'facts' of life and standards of judgment on which conclusions are based" (p. 175). I take this to mean that distinctions among programs are far less significant than similarities. On one level this could refer to the plots of individual television dramas in which we notice varying motivation for actions, individual responses to events, speeches or lines or small bits of reaction on the part of actors. On a different level the same judgment could be held against formulaic structures rather than pieces of content. Put concretely this distinction would suggest that it is far more significant that violent actions in westerns and detective formulas are seen as (for example) the actions of certain social types—white, middle-aged, males—than that one is a cowboy and the other a detective, or that one shoots a man in a ritualistic gun duel and the other in a dodging street battle. The implications are that all viewers are "getting" similar messages and that they get certain messages rather than others.

No evidence is offered for this most basic assumption, other than the observation that television viewing is nonselective. That is to say, "Individual tastes and program preferences are less important in determining viewing patterns than is the time a program is on. The nearly universal, nonselective, and habitual use of television fits the ritualistic pattern of its programming. You watch television as you might attend a church service, except that most people watch television more religiously" (p. 177). Without commenting on the possibility that this view of television and religion reflect an essentially Catholic as opposed to Protestant view, I would suggest that the leap from nonselective to nonperceptive is unwarranted. There is, so far as I know, no evidence to support the assumption that "specific attitudes and opinions" are less strongly cultivated by television than "facts' of life."

A similar problem emerges in a discussion of the aesthetic composition of television drama. Gerbner and Gross assert that

The realism of TV fiction hides its synthetic and functionally selective nature. The dominant stylistic convention of Western narrative art—novels, plays, films, TV dramas—is that of representational realism. However contrived television plots are, viewers assume that they take place against a backdrop of the world of television drama. It is also highly informative. That is, it offers to the unsuspecting viewer a continuous stream of “facts” and impressions about the way of the world, about the constancies and vagaries of human nature, and about the consequences of actions. The premise of realism is a Trojan horse which carries within it a highly selective, synthetic, and purposeful image of the facts of life [p. 178].

Many of the terms of this definition are exceptionally congenial to humanistic discussion. But the question again is, on what grounds do the authors assert that “Nothing impeaches the basic ‘reality’ of television drama.” The very quoted nature of “reality” and “facts” indicates that in the totality of the television world the *authors* do not consider these things as factual or real. They are significant, symbolic distortions whose meanings must be interpreted. Much hinges here on the assertion that the viewer is “unsuspecting.” The Trojan horse metaphor implies deceit and subversion. The additional suggestion is made that there may be in television “subtle patterns against whose influence we may all be somewhat defenseless” (p. 179) and that there are other “seductively persuasive” sorts of imagery there. These negative definitions, so crucial to the argument, rest on the unsupported assumptions that viewers are unsuspecting and do not perceive TV constructs as essentially fictional, that nothing impeaches the realistic base of television, and that perception is selective in this, rather than other, directions. Consequently, it is broad facts rather than specific meanings that are assumed to be getting through to the viewer.

Questions of televised violence must now enter our analysis for it is not merely any or all “basic assumptions about the ‘facts’ of life” that are most often raised about TV. The effects of violence have been the primary concern. Measurement of content has focused on violence portrayed on TV. In part, perhaps, that choice is historical, reflecting our society’s generalized concern with the

topic and its willingness to fund studies in this area. The Annenberg projects have, of course, been expanded, and it may be that some of the findings with regard to sex role stereotyping and other, broader social areas, will modify findings in this initial area of study. But procedures for discussing violence on television are beset with certain basic problems that go beyond the assumptions I have discussed so far. If the same or similar procedures are applied in other areas it is important that these problems be clearly identified.

The first, from the perspective of the humanist, is that of definition. In measuring violence on television Gerbner and Gross use "a clear cut and commonly understood definition,"

the overt expression of physical force against self or other, compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing [p. 184].

While this definition may be commonly understood by researchers and other citizens in the world of experience, the application of any stipulated, a priori, definition to a world of fiction is highly questionable. From the humanistic perspective it would be both more cautious and useful to try to determine a meaning of violence as it is understood by the characters themselves in the fictional world of television. One could then compare that definition with others, "commonly understood," in order to take the first interpretive step toward understanding the *meaning* of the symbolic distortion. Instead, Gerbner and Gross measure the incidence of violence as they have defined it, impute aesthetic and behavioral effects to the incidence so measured, and then interpret the world of television in light of that effect.

Let me be more specific by using figures averaged over the years 1967-1975. Nine hundred twenty-four programs, 630.2 hours, and 2649 leading characters were analyzed. 79.8% of the programs and 83.6% of the hours contained some violence as defined for the study. Measuring all hours there was an average of 7.4 violent episodes per hour. Of all leading characters 62.9% were involved in some violence, 10.2% were involved in some killing. Presumably it is on this basis, for I can determine no other that does not rest purely on interpretation (and if that is the case the substance of the interpretive process should be

presented rather than merely the conclusion), that Gerbner and Gross assert that television provides a "symbolic world *ruled largely by violence*" (p. 178; my emphasis). This is the effect of the incidence of violence as found in fictional television. Yet, it is a long and clearly unwarranted leap from the measured incidence of violence (or any other dramatic element for that matter) to the assertion that that dramatic world is "ruled" by the single, particular dramatic factor in which the researcher is most interested. What Gerbner and Gross seem to be saying, and I emphasize seem because it is not clear, is that we all see violence as more prominent than other aspects of television. The incidence of violence, it is implied, is the most important dramatically in that it governs all sorts of other fictional interactions. It is suggested that violence is more easily understood than attitudes toward it or the context in which it occurs. Such conclusions are obviously dependent upon the earlier assertion that we perceive facts rather than attitudes and opinions. As a consequence of this chain of reasoning, the implication goes, much of what we learn from television is learned in terms of this dominant symbol.

It is crucial that we understand here that violence, for Gerbner and Gross, is a symbol. Perhaps it would be better to say that violence is a metaphor that must be interpreted, for having demonstrated that violence is widely present in television fiction, the authors go on to tell us that fictional violence does not mean violence, in the sense that its primary effect is the stimulation of similar actions. Rather, "TV violence is a dramatic demonstration of power which communicates much about social norms and relationships, about goals and means, about winners and losers, about the risks of life and the price for transgressions of society's rules" (p. 178). Violence structures a world that places, types, and directs viewers.

Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation. Being buffeted by events and victimized by people denotes social impotence; ability to wrest events about, to act freely, boldly, and effectively is a mark of dramatic importance and social power. Values and forces come into play through characterization; good is a certain type of attractiveness, evil is a personality defect, and right is the might that wins. Plots weave a thread of causality into the fabric of dramatic ritual, as stock characters act out familiar parts and confirm preferred

notions of what's what, who's who, and who counts for what. The issue is rarely in doubt; the action is typically a game of social typing, group identification, skill, and power [p. 182].

It is at this point in their analysis that Gerbner and Gross offer their specific demographic outline of the television world and then go on to say that "Violence plays a key role in such a world. It is the simplest and cheapest dramatic means available to demonstrate the rules of the game of power" (p. 183). *That violence, on a statistical basis, plays a key role in the world of television fiction is self-evident. But the meaning of that world as presented by Gerbner and Gross in the interpretation offered above is highly debatable.* The generalization that violence is the "simplest and cheapest dramatic means available to demonstrate the rules of the game of power," is, equally, an interpretation and would hold only in terms of the prior interpretation of the meaning of the television world. Other interpretations of that world have been offered, and in those interpretations the meaning of violence, even in its documented incidence, is very different.<sup>4</sup> In those interpretations it is often impossible to assert that the world of fictional television is "ruled" by violence. This prior interpretation of the meaning of fictional structures in television seriously weakens the interpretation put forward by Gerbner and Gross with regard to the meaning of television content.

My suspicion, however, based in part on comments by Gerbner,<sup>5</sup> is that these interpretations of the fictional content of the world of television drama are less crucial for the validity of their studies than are their assumptions about and interpretation of the TV audiences' response to fictional content. To obtain this Gerbner and Gross have developed their techniques of "message system analysis" and "cultivation analysis."

We have begun that [message system] analysis with the most ubiquitous, translucent, and instructive part of television (or any cultural) fare, the dramatic programs (series, cartoons, movies on television) that populate and animate for most viewers the heartland of the symbolic world. Instead of guessing or assuming the contours and dynamics of that world, message system analysis maps its geography, demography, thematic and action structure, time and space dimensions, personality profiles, occupations and fates. Message system analysis yields the gross but clear terms of

location, action, and characterization discharged into the mainstream of community consciousness [182].

The complementary "cultivation analysis" is designed to determine "what, if anything, viewers absorb from living in the world of television." Here television messages are turned "into questions of social reality. To each of these questions there is a 'television answer,' which is like the way things appear in the world of television, and another and different answer which is biased in the opposite direction, closer to the way things are in the observable world" (p. 182). The results of these studies are well known. They indicate a difference in response by heavy and light television viewers even when other factors are held constant. The responses indicate that heavy viewers are more likely to select the "television answer" than the "observable world" answer. This information has been widely circulated as an indication of television's ability to distort perception and, by implication, behavior or choice of behaviors. My concern here is that these studies are skewed not in terms of their measuring procedures, but precisely in terms of interpretive and definitional assertions that I have cited above. *If we cannot assume that certain parts of the television message are more directly perceived and absorbed than others, or if the world of television is not interpreted as being "ruled by violence" then, very simply, one would ask different questions of the audience. In the Gerbner and Gross procedures the research model assumes and is based on the validity of the very interpretations and hypotheses that should be tested.*

Directly related to this problem of the type of question to be asked is the problem of the specific questions put to the audience. Certain of these questions contain prior interpretations of the meaning of their answers. Let me illustrate. The cultivation analysis shows that heavy viewers select the television answer to the question regarding the proportion of people employed in law enforcement. From this finding Gerbner and Gross report a next step in their analysis.

An exaggerated impression of the actual number of law enforcement workers seems to be a consequence of viewing television. Of greater concern, however, would be the cultivation of a con-

comitantly exaggerated demand for their services. The world of television drama is, above all, a violent one in which more than half of all characters are involved in some violence, at least one-tenth in some killing and in which over three-fourths of prime-time hours contain some violence. As we have suggested, the cultivation of fear and a sense of danger may well be a prime residue of the show of violence [pp. 192-193].

To test this assumption viewers were asked, "Can most people be trusted?" The television answer on the questionnaire, to which heavy viewers responded more frequently, was "Can't be too careful." I would suggest that for many respondents, whether heavy or light viewers, this last phrase does not *mean* that people cannot be trusted, nor that television produces an exaggerated demand for the services of law enforcement employees, nor that a residue of fear or sense of danger pervades their lives. The conclusion drawn from the data is once again a restatement of the premise designed to be tested.

Even more problematic are the responses to another question, "During any given week, what are your chances of being involved in some type of violence?" Again, heavy viewers selected the television answer. We know how the figure in the television answer is arrived at. But how many viewers in responding to the question are framing their responses in terms of violence defined as "the overt expression of physical force against self or other, compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing." The question for researchers is not how much violence might be available for personal involvement, but rather, what does violence *mean* to the respondent? What does "involvement" mean? if the respondent is thinking in terms of automobile accidents, how different is the measure? if the viewer counts as involvement the witnessing of an automobile accident on the expressway is the result affected? What if the respondent is counting as involvement the visiting of a hospitalized friend who has been injured in an industrial accident?

My point is that any attempt to determine "the way things are in the observable world" is equally, if not far more, problematic as determining meanings in fictional constructs. That determination requires just as much interpretation. The cultivation analysis, then, yields findings, often referred to in working toward policy

decisions, which are equally clear but of necessity *equally as gross* as the findings in the message system analysis. In summary, the conclusions hold only if the incidence of violence means what they say it means and is perceived as they say it is perceived. A deep and basic flaw in the Gerbner-Gross analysis is that they operate, at least in the definitions and reports of their findings, with a monosemic and univocal theory of symbols.

Many of these problems arise, I think, because implicit in this sort of analysis is a particular model of communication. It is a model that frequently leads to difficulties for humanistic approaches or for social scientific approaches heavily dependent on the hermeneutic exercise. The Gerbner and Gross studies appear at the first glance to adopt a different model of communication, one that is less problematic for these orientations. In their discussion of symbol, ritual, myth, and story they evoke what James Carey has referred to as a "ritual theory of communication." With such a perspective we observe

a process through which a shared culture is created, modified and transformed. The archetypal case of communication is ritual and mythology, for those who come at the problem from anthropology; art and literature, for those who come at the problem from literary criticism and history. A ritual view of communication is not directed toward the extension of messages in space, but the maintenance of society in time (even if Marxists are less than sanguine about this); not the act of imparting information or influence, but the creation, representation, and celebration of shared beliefs [1975: 177].

As I have said, much of the definition bears an apparent relationship to the stated assumptions of Gerbner and Gross. What is often unstated, however, relates far more directly to Carey's opposing category, a "transportation theory" in which communication is seen as "a process of transmitting messages at a distance for the purpose of control. The archetypal case of communication then is persuasion, attitude change, behavior modification, socialization through the transmission of information, influence, or conditioning" (p. 177).

In their own survey of television research paradigms Gerbner and Gross seem to reject models which focus on the transportation aspects of television. They reject the view that consequences can be presumed "without the prior investigation of

content, as the conventional research paradigms tend to do," and point out that the content studied "cannot be limited to isolated elements (e.g., news, commercials, specific programs)" (p. 180). They point to the weaknesses in the experimental method, weaknesses that cluster around the search for change as the only important indicator of influence. Their own view is that stability may be more important than change. They also rule out methodologies that focus on "exposure to one particular type of television programming," and point to errors in previous violence related research caused by ignoring the complex and systemic nature of the medium.

The definitions, procedures, and reports of results, however, place the Violence Profile work firmly in the "transportation theory" realm. The location of messages in a system is little different from locating them in specific programs or bits of programs if one is seeking and defining message effects. It leads to broader generalizations based on more heroic assumptions. Analytically, however, the difference is merely one of magnitude. Similarly, the cultivation of consciousness fits the transportation model as well as does the cultivation of specific behaviors, so long as it is cultivation and its effects that one is attempting to measure.

Among the most direct indications of this transportation view of television communication is the choice of metaphors for television and its processes in the culture. TV is "the central *arm* of American society. It is an *agency* of the established order." Aspects of the television world are *discharged* into the mainstream of community consciousness" (my emphasis).

This brings us to a central problem with transportation theories of communication. In using them one must eventually identify sender and receiver, and the criticisms, ultimately, are ideological ones. The critic does not agree with the message content or does not approve of its use. The attacks, explicit or implicit, are on groups or societies that propagate the flawed messages rather than on the medium. Alternatives are limited. One can change the sender or perhaps correct the social ill that is the "cause" of the message, e.g., eliminate racism so that racist messages will no longer be a "normal" aspect of the communication content. But there is no firm assurance that such a change will produce a "better" content even though it might be more agreeable to certain critics.

Gerbner and Gross are cautiously ambivalent in identifying the sources of television's problematic content. When TV is described as "the central arm of American society . . . an agency of the established order," it is unclear whether or not American society and the established order are to be seen as synonymous. Again, they suggest that "Once the industrial order has legitimized its rule, the primary function of its cultural arm becomes the reiteration of that legitimacy and the maintenance of established power and authority." Is the "industrial order" definable? Are they setting forth an "establishment theory?"

On the one hand that, or something like it, would seem to be the case, though it is a far more complex process than often depicted.

It is clear, at least to us, that deeply rooted sociocultural forces, rather than just obstinacy or profit-seeking, are at work. We have suggested earlier in this article, and have also developed elsewhere, that symbolic violence is a demonstration of power and an instrument of social control serving, on the whole, to reinforce and preserve the existing social order, even if at an ever increasing price in terms of pervasive fear and mistrust and of selective aggressiveness. That maintenance mechanism seems to work through cultivating a sense of danger, a differential calculus of the risks of life in different groups in the population [p. 189].

"Selective aggression" and "risks of life in different groups" clearly indicate that certain individuals and groups are more interested in maintaining the "existing social order" than others. But other comments indicate that such complicity is not always predictable in conventional terms of power or social status.

The world of television drama is a mixture of truth and falsehood, of accuracy and distortion. It is not the true world but an extension of the standardized images which we have been taught since childhood. The audience for which the message of television is primarily intended . . . is the great majority of middle-class citizens for whom America is a democracy (our leaders act in accordance with the desires of the people), for whom our economy is free, and for whom God is alive, white, and male [pp. 179-180].

Presumably, if this great majority already believes in the meanings expressed through television they too are interested in the main-

tenance of those meanings. Simple versions of this model of communication argue that television merely "mirrors" what is already there. The version here is more complex than that.

Gerbner and Gross are careful to point out that all societies have created such systems of socially constructed reality for similar purposes. To the degree that television is different (that is, to the degree that their research represents an analysis of the *medium*), it is in terms of uniformity and pervasiveness. "The institutional processes producing these message systems have become increasingly professionalized, industrialized, centralized, and specialized. Their principal locus shifted from handicraft to mass production and from traditional religion and formal education to the mass media of communication—particularly television" (p. 173). And again, "We assume, therefore, that TV's standardizing and legitimizing influence comes largely from its ability to streamline, amplify, ritualize and spread into hitherto isolated or protected subcultures, homes, nooks, and crannies of the land the conventional capsules of mass produced information and entertainment" (p. 181). I suggest here that such technological distinctions and innovations do not necessarily lead to an increase in the manipulative or exploitative power of the symbolic environment, though that interpretation is the most common one. Equally as plausible is that they merely increase the pervasiveness of the symbols. In either case, mass dissemination makes it all the more important to establish the meanings of the symbols as fully as possible.

The observation that much of the message content of television (or any other dominant symbol system) reflects what is established, what is already believed, and the observation that this new medium conveys those shared meanings to larger populations, are precisely the sorts of observation that indicate the weakness of transportation models as explanatory theories. They simply do not tell us very much about how such meanings operate. If, on the other hand, we accept the full significance of a ritual theory of communication rather than merely invoke the key terms—myth, ritual, story—we will study the communication process in very different terms, and, I believe, learn more. In concluding, then, I will suggest some alternative hypotheses and methods of study that emerge from the application of the ritual model to the study of television.

As I have tried to indicate, much of what Gerbner and Gross say about television supports the idea that such a ritual model is more appropriate. I believe that they are absolutely correct in arguing that television is the central symbol system in American culture. I also agree that television content confirms our received views and extends "standardized images which we have been taught since childhood." As they say, "The world of television drama is a mixture of truth and falsehood, of accuracy and distortion." A full understanding of the medium, then, must find ways of accounting for these mixtures of symbol and the resultant mixtures of meaning and experience. Such an understanding cannot afford to reduce such multiplicity of meaning to simple messages.

Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins sheds important light on the analytical processes necessary here in his discussion of the cultural role of advertisers, market researchers, and fashion designers. All, in his view, are "hucksters of the symbol." I think it quite possible to include television producers and sponsors in this list. The role of these professions, Sahlins argues, is not to create their products and symbols "de novo." Rather,

In the nervous system of the American economy, theirs is the synaptic function. It is their role to be sensitive to the latent correspondences in the cultural order whose conjunction in a product-symbol may spell mercantile success. Or perhaps more frequently theirs is to respond to the ceaseless reformulation of symbolic relations within the national social life. Such change proceeds, on one side, from constant revision of the economic grid, changes in the structure of production which impose new coordinates on other social relations. . . . On the other hand, reformulation of the symbolic correspondence may be initiated from the opposite direction: from events unfolding in the superstructural sphere—wars, a new radical movement, an increase in the divorce rate, a return to religion—such as alter the context of production. We think of these as a kind of cultural climate, just as we think of designers as plucking their ideas out of thin air. But the fashion expert does not make his collection out of whole cloth; like Levi-Strauss's famous bricoleur, he uses bits and pieces with an embedded significance, from a previous existence to create an object that works, which is to say that objectively synthesizes a relation between cultural categories, for in that lies its salability [1976: 217].

This description suggests at least a three step process in coming to a thorough, satisfactory understanding of television as

America's central symbol system. First we must recognize that the ideas and the symbols that express them on television are not "created" there. They have a history in American culture. They are "used" ideas and symbols, or, as Sahlins suggests, they have an "embedded significance." Research of the meaning of the symbols, then, must begin with the complex of previous meanings associated with such symbols. In concrete terms we will have to recognize the fact that for Americans "violence" has had many meanings and uses. It is not a concept that is easily defined. Symbolic analysis that takes this into account will begin with conventional "history of idea" work, though the focus on the symbolic nature of the ideas may add a dimension for some analysts that approaches a sort of "archeology of ideas."

The second step of the process is to examine the organization and expression of these ideas in the world of television. At this stage close analysis of program formulas, and even of individual programs may prove to be helpful. On one level this simply leads to the careful description of what violence means for the characters who populate the television fictions. On another level we will have to recognize the potential for different meanings of similar symbols when those symbols are combined in different forms and patterns, for possible changes in television forms and meanings over time, and for the modifying influence of the styles of individual producers and companies. The more complex understandings can then be related to the ideas as they exist outside of and before television.

The final, and most crucial, step in examining television from the vantage point of a ritual model of communication is the analysis of the audience. Here, of course, humanists have most to learn from social scientists. But we should all be open to the possibility that different members of the mass audience will attach different meanings to the same messages. Those meanings will emerge from individual and group systems of belief and meanings. They will change. We must recognize the possibility that violence will mean one thing to a viewer on one evening, something else on another evening. I do not believe that simple surveys can adequately gather such complex information. We will need to develop techniques for audience ethnography, for the collection of data on long-term bases, for understanding the variations of human response to art and entertainment. These or

similar methods can lead us to a fuller understanding of the complexities of our subject.

It should be clear from this sort of proposal that the Annenberg projects have been innovative ones. Their foresight to collect data on a systematic, long-term basis, to move out of the laboratory and away from the closed experimental model, will enable other researchers to avoid costly mistakes. Their material holds a wealth of information. The violence topic provides only one of many symbol clusters to be examined. As they move into new areas, and hopefully retrieve more, and more complex information from audiences, we should see whole new sets of questions and answers emerging to aid us in explaining television's role in our culture.

I do not wish to be misunderstood here. I am not attacking the "negative" findings of Gerbner and Gross. I am not asserting that by applying techniques built on a ritual model we will discover television to be the pure and gleaming center of a wholesome mass American culture. Societies can formulate rituals celebrating evil symbols and ideas; their fictional worlds can be constituted around both negative and positive meanings; they can maintain themselves around repression as well as liberation. But I think it more likely that most societies are radical mixtures of both. Symbol systems speak of both. Indeed, they speak of both simultaneously. Surely, in religious systems the fear of hell and the joy of salvation can operate together, perhaps in creative tension. Television is no less complex. I believe it more than likely that some members of the TV audience fear and resist change, and at the same time work to insure the equal rights of all people. My common sense tells me that it is possible to be afraid in city streets, and, at the same time, abhor the idea of a police state. I believe, finally, that television is fully as complex as the American "mind," the cultural force out of which it is created. It may be that all the messages of television speak with a single intent and are ruled by a single dominant symbol whose meaning is clear to a mass audience, or to that part of the audience heavily involved with those messages. But I have yet to see evidence sufficient to warrant such a reductive view of human experience in America.

## NOTES

1. I recognize the involvement of many individuals in the research supporting the published material I will be examining here. For purposes of convenience I will refer to the work as that of the principal authors.
2. All references are to this article and are indicated in the text by page number. Some of my analysis as presented here might be modified in light of the content of unpublished research reports. If that is the case I would welcome the publication of all pertinent material.
3. See the *Journal of Broadcasting* (Summer 1977) for an exchange of views on this topic.
4. Newcomb (1974, 1976); Cater and Adler (1975, 1976); Alley (1977); Real (1977).
5. Colloquium at the National Humanities Institute at the University of Chicago, May 1977.

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