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William Boddy

Fifties Television

The Industry and Its Critics

*For my mother
and the memory of my father*

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Early Film Programming in Television

The most basic questions about television—the formats and aesthetic forms of programs, the responsibility for program production, the structures of distribution and sponsorship—were subject to both aesthetic speculation and commercial conflict in the first half-decade of the medium. If by the mid-1950s critics spoke with increasing assurance of the fundamental artistic strengths of the medium, it was due in part to their sense of growing prosperity and stability in the television industry. By the end of the decade, however, the critics' hopes for a harmony of aesthetics and market forces in commercial television had turned into a cynicism characteristic of more contemporary attitudes toward television. An understanding of the current precarious position of television in American intellectual life would profit from an appreciation of the earlier hopes of critics of television, as well as the historical reasons for the unmaking of those hopes.

The early years of television witnessed considerable speculation about the appropriate forms and sources of television programming, speculation informed by wider social and cultural attitudes toward contemporary culture and business life. Like the early debates over television advertising, many of the arguments over the appropriate forms of television programming, especially between live and film programming, were poised between the competing models of radio and the motion pictures. John Western wrote in the *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1939: "About the only point on which program authorities are in agreement is

the belief that film will fill a major portion of telecasting hours. Estimates range from forty to more than ninety percent."¹

Parallel to the contemporary trade debates over television advertising, some commentators argued that the situation of the television audience in the private home made full-length theatrical films unsuitable for television. C. J. Hylander and Robert Hardy, Jr., in the 1941 *Introduction to Television* argued that television and motion pictures dealt with essentially different products because the television audience could not be expected to stay at home for long programs. Western agreed, arguing that "Most critics of television programs agree that the one-hour dramatic program is too long for in-the-home entertainment."²

There was also early concern that the economics of advertiser-supported television broadcasting to the home could not support the program costs of Hollywood-style film entertainment. Bernard Smith in *Harper's* in 1948 offered some possible consolation for such fears: "People will look at and listen to television programs for the same reason that they now listen to the radio: the television set is placed where it will form a part of the living habits of the American people. They will accept a much poorer level of entertainment in their own homes than they will demand if they have to leave the house or apartment to attend a public performance."³

Notwithstanding such hopes for diminished expectations on the part of the television audience, many observers believed that the per-minute program costs of even low-budget Hollywood material would be too expensive for the television market. A 1940 book on television argued that "The expense to be faced is almost terrifying. Translated into terms of running time on the screen, a motion-picture play may cost from \$1,000 to \$35,000 a minute, with \$1,000 representing about the worst that the public will tolerate. If we are to have every day a new television comedy and tragedy lasting an hour and a half, the studio incurs an outlay that dwarfs anything with which producers are familiar."⁴

NBC President Lenox R. Lohr voiced similar fears in 1940: "any plan for recording programs with standard movie-studio techniques and equipment appears doomed to failure, since the figures indicate that the hope of bringing costs within practical limits is rather remote. If, by new methods, costs could be cut to even one-tenth their present amount, they would still be excessive for television purposes until a very large

audience had been built up." A private research report on television in 1948 endorsed the common belief that programs should be limited to thirty minutes in length, argued that television's intimacy precluded both feature films and full-length theatrical works, and predicted that television would revive vaudeville and variety formats.⁵

Another problem foreseen in film programs for television was the expectation that the reuse of film material would have limited audience appeal and commercial value. Western wrote that "Rarely does a moviegoer see a film more than once. There is no reason to believe that the looker will consent to see a telecine transmission more frequently. Afterwards, the film must be relegated to the vaults." Lohr shared similar doubts over the viability of film reruns, arguing in 1940: "It appears to be inadvisable to broadcast most programs more than once. On the second broadcast, the audience is likely to become hypercritical and to lose interest."⁶

Traditional historical accounts need to be revised that suggest a mutual lack of interest and collaboration between the film industry and the television networks in the early years of the TV industry. Despite doubts about the viability of either feature films or original film programming in the early years of the medium, the major Hollywood studios followed events in the television industry very closely. Beginning in the late 1930s, motion picture studios became active in television research and manufacturing and made significant investments in television production companies, broadcasting stations, and networks. In the 1940s, Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Warner Brothers were active in the development of theater television. As early as 1936, Warner Brothers bought a 65 percent interest in Trans-American Television and Broadcasting Company, a production firm. By 1944, Paramount owned and operated television stations in Los Angeles and Chicago; controlled a theater-television firm, American Scophony; held a 29 percent interest in the DuMont Television Network; and controlled significant patents on the television cathode-ray tube. Paramount executive Paul Raibourn sat on the boards of Scophony and DuMont Television Network. By 1951, Paramount was syndicating film and live programs from its Los Angeles station to forty-three stations.⁷

Several major studios expressed interest in producing original material for television in the 1940s, at the same time RCA was showing its in-

terest in producing or purchasing film material for the medium. The radio manufacturer, eager to consolidate its interests in VHF television to discourage the threatened shift of television to the UHF band, approached the major studios in the mid-1940s for production commitments. In 1944, Arthur Levey, president of American Scophony, wrote that RCA warned that studios that did not enter productions deals would be cut out of the market when the network made its own arrangements. Levey called for studio unity in the face of what he saw as an RCA attempt to play one producer against another, arguing that Hollywood was in a strong bargaining position with its experience in visual communication, its control of talent and story material, and the potential of more than six thousand movie theaters available for conversion to theater television. In December 1944, *Television* magazine reported that RCA was looking for telefilm production deals with major studios, and that the company warned it would turn to independent producers if frustrated.⁸

Several studios in the 1940s declared an interest in producing programming for television. In 1944, the head of RKO Television Corporation told *Television* that his firm was interested not only in theater television, but also in producing and packaging material for broadcast television. In 1948, *Fortune* reported that RKO was "ready to produce film for television as soon as sponsors and agencies decide what they want." George Shupert, director of commercial television development for Paramount, in August 1949 saw "a new Klondike" for telefilm producers.⁹

There clearly was a market for film programming in the early years of television. For the new station operator, film programming was attractive not only because it was cheap to acquire but also because it required few technical facilities and personnel compared to live programming. "Some new stations do seventy-five percent or more of their programming on film," William I. Kaufman and Robert C. Colodzin reported in 1950. Furthermore, as Shupert noted, film represented the only medium with which to reach all forty-seven television markets, less than half of which were served with coaxial cable.¹⁰

While both Columbia Pictures and Universal-International set up subsidiary telefilm production units in the early 1950s, most of the television plans of the major studios remained unrealized. Some of the problems for the studios resulted from actions of the FCC. Because the

advertising revenues in the early years of television were too small to support original production by the major Hollywood studios, and were less than the value of theatrical rerelease of existing features, the studios investigated the alternate means of exploitation of theater television and pay television. In these two services the FCC consistently moved against the studio interests, refusing allocations or assignments for either service throughout the 1950s. Paramount, one of the studios moving most aggressively into television, held out the longest for the alternative systems, in the meantime withholding talent and material from broadcast television. In the spring of 1950, the FCC issued a warning to the Hollywood motion picture studios against withholding product and talent from broadcast television, in what motion picture exhibitors denounced as "a bullying statement."¹¹

The studios had reasons to be cautious about supplying programming for the new medium in addition to the still-unfavorable economics of television program fees. Although the first of the federal antitrust consent decrees separating the major Hollywood studios from their theater chains was signed by Paramount in 1948, divorcement at all the studios was not completed until 1959; in the meantime, the still-integrated companies feared injury to their exhibition business by release of their feature films to television or by a precipitous move to telefilm production. At the same time, threats of theater owners to boycott the theatrical product of studios that moved too emphatically into television inhibited some producers; the telefilm units of both Columbia and Universal-International, for example, used casts and crews separate from theatrical production in part to insulate the studio from such reprisals.¹²

These constraints on the major Hollywood studios did not deter smaller independent producers from entering the telefilm business. Independent producers William Pine and William Thomas set up a telefilm company, Telecom Incorporated, in 1944. In 1946, *Television* reported "new companies forming every day" to supply television stations. In 1948, the largest packager and syndicator of radio programs in the country, Frederick W. Ziv, entered telefilm production, and Jerry Fairbanks, Jr. became the first Hollywood producer to make a series sale to television with "The Public Prosecutor" to NBC. By 1951, "hundreds" of new firms were producing telefilms, led by independents such as Fairbanks, Hal Roach, Jr., Walter Wagner, and Bing Crosby Productions. These independent producers either packaged existing features films

for television ("Hopalong Cassidy" was an early success) or produced original material for television (such as the telefilm series "Roy Rogers"). The sound stages and backlots of Hollywood's "Poverty Row" of B-film production companies and some of the major studios were rented out to independent telefilm producers. In spite of this activity, in 1952 there were only twelve substantial telefilm companies, among them Crosby, Fairbanks, Roach, Motion-Picture TV Center, Flying-A Production (Roy Rogers), General Service Studios, and Frank Wisbar Productions.¹³

Producing telefilm was an unstable business with special challenges facing early participants. The television networks were regarded as hostile to film programming, fearing it would loosen the network's arrangements with sponsors and affiliates by encouraging station managers to make independent deals with advertisers and film producers. Because networks controlled the most valuable prime-time positions available for programming, syndicators of independent telefilms had to settle for fewer markets and less desirable time periods, both of which meant much smaller advertising revenues and license fees compared with network-supplied programming. Furthermore, distribution costs in placing telefilm programs in independent stations were high, requiring a national sales force with the attendant imperative of supplying enough product to obtain efficiencies of scale. Telefilm producers also complained that advertising agencies were hostile to film programming; as *Newsweek* explained: "Television had after all grown up in New York in the care of executives who neither knew nor cared about film techniques, an ignorance encouraged by advertising men unwilling to shift East Coast power to Hollywood and dubious of receiving their fifteen percent cut on shows turned out by movie magnates."¹⁴

Commercial banks, accustomed to dealing with theatrical motion picture producers, were reluctant to lend to independent telefilm producers; not until 1952 were commercial banks willing to discuss telefilm financing, according to *Television*. The field was also very competitive: in 1951, *The Saturday Evening Post* pointed to a pool of two hundred unpurchased pilots produced for \$10,000 each. *Time* in 1954 wrote that of five hundred telefilm firms recently established in Hollywood, only forty-six survived and only six made substantial profits. In 1951, *Television* warned that it was difficult for independent producers to make a telefilm series sale without at least thirteen completed episodes; in

1952, it reported that some sponsors demanded twenty-six episodes in the can, requiring a speculative investment by the producer of \$500,000. Finally, without a network sale, producers could not expect to recoup their investment in less than two or three years.¹⁵

Few feature films of any vintage from the major studios were available to television before 1955, and the available American theatrical films tended to be low-budget and from minor studios. Another reason feature films were held in low esteem in early television is suggested in a 1950 *Sponsor* article, "How to Use TV Films Effectively," which advised station managers and sponsors how to edit feature films for television use: "Far from ruining a picture, expert editing can make it even better for TV. Obviously, twenty-five minutes hacked indiscriminately from any film will leave viewers confused and annoyed. How do you snip out thirty percent of a carefully made product and have it make sense? First eliminate all dark scenes that won't show up on a TV tube, and then all the long shots in which distant objects get lost."¹⁶

There was also criticism within Hollywood of much of the early film programming for television. In 1952, *Newsweek* quoted Fairbanks's complaints about the gold-rush atmosphere of the telefilm industry where "everyone who could buy or borrow a little drugstore movie camera announced himself as a TV-Film producer." The magazine went on to describe the scene in Hollywood:

Movie actors financed "pilot" shows which paraded their aging charms—and which got no closer to the small screen than an advertising agency's shipping room. Assistant directors and senior office boys from the movie studios made the transcontinental trek to New York, carrying bags full of scripts and shooting schedules and announced they were "Hollywood producers. . . ." [T]he Hollywood hills became littered with dead and dying telefilm creators. Some of the casualties were long-time motion-picture executives temporarily "at liberty" who announced that they were available to bring their tremendous "know-how" into TV films, "just for the experience." One guess on the number of pilot films turned out in Hollywood: 2,000.¹⁷

Sponsor magazine wrote in 1953 of the unhappy experiences of many advertising agencies that came to Hollywood for early television film programs: "These top agencies somehow got the idea that they had bought what constituted Hollywood. . . . They found out that what they had bought in the main were a lot of out of work producers, directors,

and writers—not the real genius that had made Hollywood a world byword in entertainment.”¹⁸

Faced with the speculative investment and slow payback of telefilm production, most producers specialized in the low-budget, mostly action-adventure genres, including the Western, crime and mystery, science-fiction, and situation comedy. With a few exceptions, anthology drama, which was becoming an increasingly important part of the networks' live programming from New York in the early 1950s, was not represented in Hollywood telefilm. Frederick Ziv explained the reasoning behind his launch of “The Cisco Kid,” the first television series sold by his company: “It was obvious to all of us who had our fingers on the pulse of the American public that they wanted escapist entertainment. . . . We did not do highbrow material. We did material that would appeal to the broadest segment of the public. And they became the big purchasers of television sets. And as they bought television sets, the beer sponsors began to go on television. And the beer sponsors, for the most part, wanted to reach the truck and taxi driver, the average man and woman. They were not interested in that small segment that wanted opera, ballet or symphony.”¹⁹

Furthermore, the small budgets of independently syndicated telefilms were modest even by the standards of Poverty Row studios. *Business Week*, in a 1951 article, “Hollywood Cameras Grind Out Film Fare for TV,” described the routine at Louis B. Snader's Telescriptions studios: sixty-minute films were completed on shooting schedules of one and one-half to three days; thirty-minute telefilms reached TV stations five days after shooting was completed; and single performers would shoot seven short television films in a morning and five more in an afternoon of a single day. Roach's telefilm studios by 1954 were consuming more film stock than MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Warner Brothers studios combined, with a highly rationalized production process and a staff of thirty writers: “It's like the auto business,” Roach told *Time*. Ziv recalled that “In the early days of television, we had to produce these things cheap. There's just no question about it, and cheap is the word. Not inexpensive, but cheap.”²⁰

Given these financial constraints and management attitudes, it was little wonder among most television critics of the early 1950s that film programs in general enjoyed a poor reputation compared to network-supplied live programs. Schedules of early television stations, both

network affiliates and independents, contained a good deal of both kinds of programming. Researcher George Bauer wrote that for the typical independent station, even in a large television market, “[a]bout sixty percent of its programs are on film which are cheaper than live shows and which it shows up to six times each.” Kaufman and Colodzin complained of the role of film programming in most program schedules: “Most of the feature films presently shown seem to have been scraped from the cutting room or dragged unwilling from their musty cinema tombs. They range in quality from mediocre to extremely bad. They have, however, the unquestionable attraction of being cheap.”²¹

The comparison of film versus live program formats became the central element in the highly prescriptive critical discourse of television's Golden Age. Critics seized on weaknesses of the cheap, genre-based thirty-minute telefilms, comparing them to the big-budget sixty-minute network spectacles and dramas to support claims of television as an essentially live medium. The aesthetic opposition of film and live programming in the writings of television critics in the 1950s inevitably mingled with more general attitudes toward the motion picture industry, New York versus California as production centers, the value of differing dramatic styles, and arguments over television's freedom from commercial censorship. A common thread through the positions of most prominent critics on these issues was the role of the television networks in safeguarding artistic quality in the medium.

As widely reported in the trade press, the television networks were publicly cool to film programming in the early 1950s, fearful that affiliates would make independent deals with producers of film programming and sell time directly to sponsors, cutting out the network entirely. The self-interest on the part of the networks was often cloaked in the endemic anti-Hollywood rhetoric of the time. In 1956, Bauer cited “early network exponents of live television” who argued: “When Hollywood gets its hands on anything, mediocrity immediately reigns. The Hollywood touch. . . .” *Time* magazine in 1954 quoted NBC Vice President John K. West on film programming: “Keep it the hell off the networks.”²²

Radio and film actress Lucille Ball was approached by CBS to develop a comedy series for the 1951 television season, and when Ball insisted on doing the series on film, the network sold back its interest in the idea to the actress.²³ CBS Vice President Harry Ackerman explained the net-

work's attitude: "We are primarily in the live TV business. We definitely wanted to shoot 'I Love Lucy' live. But the sponsor made us go to film. You can say that we went into the film business at the whim of the sponsor."²⁴

In *The History of Broadcasting in the United States*, Erik Barnouw wrote that in 1953 "in spite of 'I Love Lucy,' the dominance of live production was expected to continue. David Sarnoff of RCA was said to be determined that it should; so was William Paley of CBS." The defense of live drama by the leaders of CBS and NBC was undoubtedly encouraging to those critics who argued for the special place of live drama in television. In a 1952 *New York Times* article, "A Plea for Live Video," Jack Gould, probably 1950s' television's most influential daily critic, wrote at length against the use of Hollywood telefilm by the networks: "The decision of television to put many of its programs on film has turned out to be the colossal boner of the year. On every count—technically and qualitatively—the films cannot compare with 'live' shows and they are hurting video, not helping it. . . . There is simply no substitute for the intangible excitement and sense of anticipation that is inherent in the performance that takes place at the moment one is watching. . . . To regard the medium as merely a variation on the neighborhood picture house is to misunderstand the medium." Gould called the growing use of film in network schedules "a step backwards," and denounced the "dog-eared films that Hollywood is turning out for television, the pedestrian little half-hour quickies that are cluttering up the facilities of even the best of networks."²⁵

The opposition between live and film programming was often couched in network versus Hollywood terms by critics and by the networks themselves. As Gilbert Seldes wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1956, "It is ungrateful to bring up such things, but the lack of pungent characters, of the excitement of discovery, all trace back to the principle of playing it safe by imitating whatever has been successful. This is the cynical method of Hollywood, which did more than television to keep the people away from movie houses." Television writer Rod Serling spoke for many writers and critics when he argued in 1957:

It is . . . unquestionable that in the golden days of live television's ascendancy its filmed counterparts on the West Coast were pretty much uninspired, formulated, hackneyed assembly-line products that could boast fast production and fast profit, but little strain in the cre-

ative process. Whatever memorable television moments exist were contributed by live shows. Whatever techniques were developed that were television's own are live techniques. Whatever preoccupation there was with quality and with the endless struggle against sponsors' dicta, fears and endless interference existed in New York and Chicago—not in Los Angeles.²⁶

Serling's language was echoed in private and public statements by network executives. The *New Yorker* quoted a 1953 memorandum from the head of NBC, Pat Weaver, to his programming staff: "movies and radio point the horrible path that looms before us. . . . The conformity and carbon copy boys are hard at work. This is not satisfactory. Television must be the shining center of the home."²⁷

The networks' anti-Hollywood rhetoric reached a peak in 1955-56 in response to complaints from telefilm producers and others that network treatment of affiliates and advertisers had the effect of unfairly discriminating against independent program producers. In hearings before the Senate Commerce Committee, network representatives presented the issue as one of defending television programming from the corrupting influence of Hollywood. An NBC submission argued that the independent program producers in fact represented a lobby of Hollywood film interests eager to unload a flood of telefilms and features on television:

It was the networks which developed the facilities and skills and undertook the financial risks of building a national television service—not the film-come-latelys or the promoters with Hollywood backlogs in their portfolios. While the networks were chalking up annual losses of millions of dollars to develop the new medium, the film interests withheld their product from it, and turned to television only after it had been built by others. [If network commercial practices were restricted] the accumulated product in Hollywood's vaults—most of it musty and out-dated—would hit television with the impact of a tidal wave. The American public would literally drown in a celluloid sea.²⁸

By the mid-1950s, however, the anti-film rhetoric of the networks was seriously at odds with their own programming practices, by then less a statement of principled program philosophy than a handy public shield against competitive and regulatory threats. In any event, the networks in the mid-1950s found it useful to enlist the rhetoric of critical defenders

of live television for their own commercial battles. The informal alliance of the early and mid-1950s between television critics and the major networks helped set the tone of public discussion of the medium in the age of live drama. The dissolution of the alliance in the second half of the decade provoked bitterness and recriminations in a critical community that felt betrayed by a medium and its commercial leaders.

The opposition of the Hollywood telefilm with the networks' live programs was only one element in the critics' hierarchy of dramatic programming of the early 1950s. The complex criteria—live versus film, the drama of character versus that of plot, an aesthetic of theatrical naturalism versus Hollywood genre and spectacle, anthology versus continuing character series, sixty-minute versus thirty-minute programs, the television writer as legitimate playwright versus motion picture studio employee—all operated to reinforce the opposition between the networks and Hollywood. The critics' prescriptive hierarchies were argued simultaneously as products of inductive practical criticism and of deductive reasoning following from the fundamental aesthetic strengths and demands of the television medium. Together, the two forms of argument produced widely held and sharply defined assertions about television's proper program forms, assertions that defined artistic achievement in the Golden Age of television.

NOTES

1. John Western, "Television Girds for Battle," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 3 (October 1939): 557. Philip Kerby, in his 1939 *Victory of Television* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1939) predicted that radio-style networks would not be economically feasible in television because of the prohibitive expense of telephone long lines. Instead, he predicted, "telestars" would tour the nation to perform on local live television shows, and the bulk of programming would be circulated on film, making television the largest consumer of Hollywood film (p. 58). Radio inventor Lee DeForest in *Television Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Dial Press, 1942) likewise argued that high interconnection costs made it doubtful that permanent national television networks would ever be feasible and foresaw instead a market of syndicated film programs, chiefly produced by Hollywood (p. 36).

2. C. J. Hylander and Robert Harding, Jr., *An Introduction to Television* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 201; Western, "Television Girds for Battle," p. 559.

3. Bernard B. Smith, "Television—There Ought to Be a Law," *Harper's*, September 1948, p. 37.

4. "1939—Television Year," *Business Week*, December 31, 1938, p. 27; the president of NBC, Merlin Aylesworth, told *Broadcasting* in 1936: "Television will never be a competitor to the regular screen. They will not televise feature pictures produced expressly for the purpose of a single television broadcast because of the enormous sums required for production. Imagine any advertiser spending \$500,000 to broadcast a production of 'Little Women'!" Merlin Aylesworth, "Radio Is Movies' Best Friend," *Broadcasting*, August 1, 1936, p. 9, cited in Alan David Larson, "Integration and Attempted Integration Between the Motion-Picture and Television Industries Through 1956," Ph.D. diss., Ohio University, 1979, p. 130; John Porterfield and Kay Reynolds, eds., *We Present Television* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1940), p. 29.

5. Lenox R. Lohr, *Television Broadcasting: Production, Economics, Technique* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1940), p. 101; Curtis Publishing Company, *The Television Industry* (Philadelphia: Curtis Publishing, 1948), p. 23. In 1948, *Fortune* expressed skepticism that Hollywood filmmaking would ever be viable for television, arguing that quality films would remain prohibitively costly. "Television! Boom!" *Fortune*, May 1948, p. 197.

6. Western, "Television Girds for Battle," p. 558; Lohr, *Television Broadcasting*, p. 5.

7. For a discussion of early involvement of the motion-picture industry in television, see "1939—Television Year," p. 30; Douglas Gomery, "Failed Opportunities: The Integration of the U.S. Motion Picture and Television Industries," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9 (Summer 1983): 219-28; "Box Office's Job," *Business Week*, June 17, 1944, p. 94; "California as a Program Source," *Television*, April 1951, p. 38; William Lafferty, "Television Film and Hollywood: The Beginnings," in *Columbia Pictures Television: The Studio and the Creative Process* (New York: Museum of Broadcasting, 1987), pp. 7-15.

8. Arthur Levey, "Who Will Control Television?," *Television*, Spring 1944, pp. 25-26; complicating negotiations over telefilm production was the jockeying over theater television between RCA and the motion picture industry. "What About Hollywood?," *Television*, December 1944, p. 5.

9. "Box Office's Job," p. 94; "Television! Boom!" p. 196; George Shupert, "Film for Television," *Television*, August 1949, p. 22.

10. William I. Kaufman and Robert S. Colodzin, *Your Career in Television* (New York: Merlin Press, 1950), p. 41; Shupert, "Film for Television," p. 22.

11. Milton MacKaye, "The Big Brawl: Hollywood vs. Television," *The Saturday Evening Post*, January 26, 1952, part 2, p. 121.

12. Amy Schnapper, "The Distribution of Theatrical Feature Films to Televi-

sion," Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1975, p. 25; MacKaye, "The Big Brawl," part 2, p. 121.

13. For a discussion of the role of independent telefilm producers in early television, see Stanley R. Lane, "Films as a Source of Programming," *Television*, May 1946, p. 14; "California as a Program Source," p. 38; Frederick Kugel, "The Economics of Film," *Television*, July 1951, p. 45; "Film vs. Live Shows," *Time*, March 29, 1954, p. 77; MacKaye, "The Big Brawl," part 2, p. 119. For an account of conditions in the early telefilm industry from the president of a production firm, see Everett Crosby, "Film Package Syndication for Television," in Irving Settel and Norman Glenn, *Television Advertising and Production Handbook* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1953), pp. 302-25.

14. Kugel, "Economics of Films," p. 13; "Filmed TV," *Newsweek*, February 12, 1951, p. 78; also see "California as a Program Source," p. 38.

15. For accounts of the financial situation of early telefilm producers, see MacKaye, "The Big Brawl," part 2, pp. 119-20; "Syndicated Film," *Television*, July 1952, p. 27; "Film vs. Live Shows," p. 78; in July 1951, *Television* reported that the Bank of America and a few other commercial banks were now "willing to discuss" telefilm financing, see Kugel, "The Economics of Film," p. 13.

16. "How to Use TV Films Effectively," *Sponsor*, June 19, 1950, p. 33.

17. "Film for '52," *Newsweek*, August 11, 1952, p. 137; Bob Chandler compared the early telefilm industry with the "wild and woolly" early years of the motion picture industry in "TV Films: An Updated Version of Freewheeling Picture Pioneers," *Variety*, January 4, 1956, p. 9, quoted in Helen B. Schaffer, "Movie-TV Competition," *Editorial Research Reports*, January 18, 1957, p. 54.

18. "Have TV Show Costs Reached Their Ceiling?," *Sponsor*, September 21, 1953, p. 106.

19. Interview with Frederick Ziv, quoted in Morleen Getz Rouse, "A History of the F. W. Ziv Radio and Television Syndication Companies, 1930-1960," Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1976, p. 119.

20. "Hollywood Cameras Grind Out Film Fare for TV," *Business Week*, November 24, 1951, p. 125; "Film vs. Live Shows," p. 78; Ziv is quoted in Rouse, "A History of the F. W. Ziv Radio," p. 79.

21. George Bauer, *Government Regulation of Television* (New York: New York University Graduate School of Public Administration and Social Service, 1956), p. 38. Gilbert Seldes reported in the summer of 1948 that of the ninety-four hours of local live programming presented on New York City stations, more than 50 percent was devoted to sports. One reason for the early reliance on live remote broadcasts by local stations was that such programming was inexpensive, but another motivation may have been demographic: a 1949 NBC survey revealed that 14 percent of its audience watched television in bars. Gilbert

Seldes, "Television: The Golden Hope," *Atlantic*, March 1949, p. 35; National Broadcasting Company, *NBC Television Profile April 1950* (New York: National Broadcasting Company, 1950), collection of the NBC Research Library, New York; Kaufman and Colodzin, *Your Career in Television*, p. 42.

22. On the economics of network attitudes toward telefilm, see Kugel, "Economics of Film," p. 13; "TV and Film: Marriage of Necessity," *Business Week*, August 15, 1953; "Film vs. Live Shows," pp. 77-78; Bauer, *Government Regulation*, p. 96.

23. Max Wilk, *The Golden Age of Television: Notes from the Survivors* (New York: Delacorte, 1976), p. 251.

24. "Film vs. Live Shows," p. 78; in her dissertation on television syndication, Barbara Moore concluded that through 1952, "[w]ith the exception of a few shows, networks still seemed wedded to the idea of live programming." Barbara Ann Moore, "Syndication of First-Run Television Programming: Its Development and Current Status," Ph.D. diss., Ohio University, 1979, p. 16.

25. Erik Barnouw, *The History of Broadcasting in the United States*, vol. 3: *The Image Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 21; Jack Gould, "A Plea for Live Video," *New York Times*, December 7, 1952, sec. 2, p. 17; in 1956, Gilbert Seldes contrasted the enlightened networks to the greedy station operator and film packager: "It is known that the first TV station ever to operate in the black from the day it went on the air began to transmit before the coaxial cable reached it and the owners, making a tidy fortune out of old movies, looked with distaste to the day when public demand for created programs would force them to join a network." Gilbert Seldes, *The Public Arts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. 180.

26. Gilbert Seldes, "A Clinical Analysis of TV," *New York Times Magazine*, November 23, 1954, p. 60; Rod Serling, "TV in the Flesh vs. TV in the Can," *New York Times Magazine*, November 24, 1957, p. 49.

27. James Whiteside, "The Communicator I: Athens Starts Pouring In," *The New Yorker*, October 16, 1954, pp. 58, 60.

28. National Broadcasting Company, *Statement of Facts*, reprinted in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, *The Television Inquiry*, vol. 4: *Network Practices, Hearings before the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, Senate*, 84th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1956), p. 2279; also see Val Adams, "Network Accuses Film Syndicators," *New York Times*, May 28, 1956, p. 51.

Live Television: Program Formats and Critical Hierarchies

Aesthetic distinctions offered by television critics in the early 1950s were often argued on essentialist grounds. Gilbert Seldes's 1952 *Writing for Television* was typical: "On the controversy on the merits of live and filmed television programs, it is possible to hold that one is better or cheaper or more effective than the other, but it is not possible to maintain that they are identical. Common experience tells us that two things produced by different means, under different material and psychological conditions, will probably not be the same."¹

According to many early writers on television, the essential technological feature of television versus the motion picture was the electronic medium's capacity to convey a simultaneous distant performance visually. In this regard, the medium was a unique synthesis of the immediacy of the live theatrical performance, the space-conquering powers of radio, and the visual strategies of the motion picture. In 1956, Jack Gould wrote of live television: "Alone of the mass media, it removes from an audience's consciousness the factors of time and distance. . . . Live television . . . bridges the gap instantly and unites the individual at home with the event afar. The viewer has a chance to be in two places at once. Physically, he may be at his own hearthside but intellectually, and above all, emotionally, he is at the cameraman's side." The critical feature of live television, according to Gould, is that "both the player in the studios and the audience at home have an intrinsic awareness of being in each other's presence." Seldes described this metaphysic of presence in live television: "The essence of television

techniques is their contribution to the sense of immediacy. . . . The tension that suffuses the atmosphere of a live production is a special thing to which audiences respond; they feel that what they see and hear is happening in the present and therefore more real than anything taken and cut and dried which has the feel of the past."²

The opposition between film's "feel of the past" and the immediacy of live television created different putative audience paradigms for film and live programs, in which viewers of a live performance were seen as more highly involved than those of film programs. Gould argued in his 1952 article, "A Plea for Live Video," that film programs on television "lack that intangible sense of depth and trueness which the wizardry of science did impart to 'live' TV. . . . The lasting magic of television is that it employs a mechanical means to achieve an unmechanical end." The polemical linking of technological immediacy to more metaphysical notions of authenticity, depth, and truth reached an apotheosis in Gould's 1956 essay, where he excoriated "the ridiculous conceit of film perfectionists who think they can be better than life itself. . . . In their blind pursuit of artificial perfectionism, the TV film producers compromise the one vital element that endows the home screen with its own intangible excitement: humanness. Their error is to try to tinker with reality, to improve upon it to a point where it is no longer real. In so doing, they break the link between human and human. The viewer loses his sense of being a partner and instead becomes a spectator. It is the difference between being with somebody and looking at somebody."³

The linking of a technological essentialism in the service of a implicit liberal humanism can also be seen in a 1952 text by Edward Barry Roberts, script editor for "Armstrong Circle Theatre": "More than prose, more than the stage, more than motion pictures—oh, so much more than radio—television, with its immediacy, gets to the heart of the matter, to the essence of the character, to the depicting of the human being who is *there*, as if under a microscope, for our private contemplation, for our approval, our rejection, our love, our hate, our bond of brotherhood recognized." Television script editor Ann Howard Bailey in 1953 described the unique capabilities of the television camera for dramatic storytelling and concluded: "As the television writer learns to look within himself and those around him for the eternal and infinitely variable human conflicts, he will learn how the television camera can serve as the scalpel with which to lay bare the human heart and spirit."⁴

If the metaphysics of presence was one element of the ontology of television argued by early television critics, another was the medium's practical situation of production and reception. William I. Kaufman and Robert S. Colodzin argued in 1950: "Unlike both the movies and the theatre, television does not play to the mass audience . . . it plays to a group of perhaps five or six people at a time." The intimacy of the viewing group had implications for television dramaturgy, directing techniques, and performance style. Kaufman and Colodzin explained that "Emphasis must be on quick character development, on revealing close-ups which make the lift of an eyebrow or the flash of a smile more important than the sweep of an army. Dialogue must be carefully written and sincere in tone because of the intimacy of the audience and the actors and the constant scrutiny of the main characters of the play by an audience which is practically 'on top of' the performers."⁵

Writer Donald Curtis elaborated on the special demands on the television performer in a 1952 essay: "The actor in television must visualize the conditions under which his performance is being viewed. He is coming into a home and joining an intimate family group which averages from two to six persons. There is no place for acting here. He must 'be' what he represents. . . . The television camera goes inside of an actor's mind and soul, and sends the receiving set exactly what it sees there."⁶

Broadcast critic Charles Siepmann in 1950 saw in television drama the development of a new performance style, "not, as in the film, predominantly physical, but psychological—both sight and sound serving to give overt support to the covert expression of the mind." In an introduction to a collection of television plays, William Bluem observed that "In some ways TV is the penultimate technological extension of the naturalistic drama and its rejection of romantic superficiality in favor of the inner revelation of human character. The entire theatrical movement towards realism in acting and staging seems to culminate upon the small screen, where it can work out its own absolutes of form and style."⁷

Like the prescriptions on performance style in television, commentary on television staging and direction found a rationale for theatrical naturalism in the concrete production and viewing circumstances of the medium. As Seldes explained, "Every television program is in a sense an invasion; you turn on your television set and someone comes into your

living room, and you tune in one station or another according to whom you want in your room at any particular moment."⁸

The early literature on television production constantly emphasized the necessity for naturalist performances, frequent close-ups, and simplified, naturalistic staging. A 1945 CBS publication explained that "because viewers express a natural wish to 'get a good look' at a character, producers should whenever possible use close-ups to introduce all characters on a program." In a 1946 article in *Television*, ABC executive Harvey Marlowe argued that television drama had no need for elaborate sets and that 80 percent of the typical television play would be shot in close-up. In 1950, Kaufman and Colodzin advised would-be television playwrights that "[a] good television script must be simple to produce," with sets that are "few and inexpensive." The cast "should be limited to a small number of characters," and "[s]pecial effects should be avoided in instances where simpler methods would be just as dramatic." An example of a rigorous application of the reductive design of television's theatrical naturalism was Albert McCleery's "Cameo Theatre," in which a small cast sat on stools on an arena stage without scenery, costumes, or props. In his *Best Television Plays 1950-51*, Kaufman called the McCleery program "pure television."⁹

For the TV playwright as well, the special properties of the television medium seemed to support a new kind of dramatic realism. Paddy Chayefsky wrote in 1955 that "lyrical writing, impressionistic writing and abstract and expressionistic writing are appalling in television whereas they might be gauged exciting in the theatre." In his contribution to the 1952 anthology, *How to Write and Direct for Television*, Chayefsky elaborated:

In television, there is practically nothing too subtle or delicate that you cannot examine with your camera. The camera allows us a degree of intimacy that can never be achieved on stage. Realism in the theatre is a stylized business; what one achieves is really the effect of realism. In television, you can be literally and freely real. The scenes can be played as if the actors were unaware of their audience. The dialogue can sound as if it had been wiretapped. . . . The writer has a whole new, untouched area of drama in which to poke about. He can write about the simplest things, the smallest incidents, as long as they have dramatic significance.¹⁰

Television's ability to bring intimate details of a performance to its audience, along with the practical constraints of staging live television drama, also led the critics to suggest the most appropriate forms of dramatic structure for the medium. For Erik Barnouw, the structural principles of early live drama on television meant that "The structure of these plays related to circumstances under which they were produced." As a result there emerged "plays of tight structure, attacking a story close to its climax—very different from the loose, multi-scene structure of film."¹¹

Barnouw's juxtaposition of the dramatic structures of film and television was widely echoed in the early television literature. The same distinction was often cast in terms which opposed the drama of character to the drama of plot. Edward Barry Roberts argued in 1952, for example, that "the new playwriting inescapably is founded on character. . . . The most successful 'live' television plays, therefore, would seem to be those which do not have much plot." Another script editor advised would-be television writers in 1953: "Live TV is limited in scope: that is, it cannot depend upon broad panorama, colossal montages, or the thrill of the hunt or chase to help the limping script. Literally, the 'words are the thing,' and in nine out of ten TV shows, the climax depends upon what the characters say rather than what they do."¹²

Seldes argued that television's technological immediacy gave the medium an "overwhelming feel of reality": "The result is that television can render character supremely well and it is not theoretical or idealistic but very practical to say that it should not abandon its prime quality." Seldes wrote that until 1952, television drama seemed to be following the theatrical model of a drama of character over one of plot, but warned that "This may not always be true of television drama because *the conditions in which television is received make it a prime medium for communicating character*, but as a lot of TV drama is being made in Hollywood by people in the Hollywood tradition, the struggle for character drama may be a bitter one." Like the essentialist rationale for naturalism in staging and acting in television, Seldes's defense of character drama derived from the technological and phenomenological premises of the medium: the casual environment and attitude of viewers at home detracted from the effectiveness of complicated plot structures, he argued.

Beyond the criteria of live versus film and character versus plot, critics also placed the unique teleplay of the anthology series above works in the continuing series and dramatic serial. Seldes called the sixty-minute original teleplay in an anthology series the "top of the prestige pyramid of all television drama." The critic identified in the sixty-minute original teleplay "something like a new dramatic form . . . slowly emerging," and in a 1956 look at the first ten years of television programming Seldes found "the most honorable accomplishments of television . . . in the hour-long play. . . ."¹³

The thirty-minute program was consistently compared unfavorably to the hour-long dramatic program on television. In 1955, Don Sharpe of Four Star Productions compared the thirty-minute and sixty-minute programs in an article in *Television* and concluded that "The half-hour dramatization is primarily a stunt and frequently a trick." For Sharpe, "The viewer of the hour program is satisfied to sit and wait for something to happen, as he would in the legitimate theatre." But on the other hand, argued Sharpe, "unless a thirty-minute show develops an almost immediate impact . . . there is a good chance that many viewers will switch channels or take the pooch for a stroll." Vance Bourjaily wrote in *Harper's* that "the half-hour show is too brief, and it is interrupted by a commercial too soon after it begins, to be anything but a hook, a gimmick, and a resolution." Jack Gould argued that "the half-hour program with the middle commercial inevitably puts a premium on the contrived plot and on action for its own sake. . . . there can be almost no characterization and the emphasis is more on stereotypes than on real people."¹⁴

In sum, most prominent television critics of the early 1950s denigrated the program forms and dramatic values they associated with Hollywood in favor of those they linked with the New York-based television networks. The opposition is nowhere more stark than in the critical perception of the differing roles for the television writer in the two contexts. Like the critical debates over the aesthetic proclivities of the two media, the image of the writer was colored by long-standing cultural attitudes toward the motion picture industry. In the context of pre-auteurist American film criticism, individual contributions by writers or directors in the Hollywood studio system tended to be devalued by sociological or belletrist accounts of Hollywood as a monolithic dream factory where faceless contract writers toiled in confining genres at the

whim of autocratic and philistine moguls. The image of the serious writer in Hollywood in mid-century American literature and popular criticism was that of a figure compromising or renouncing the autonomy and artistic possibilities available in other literary forms. These general cultural attitudes toward the writer in Hollywood played an important part in setting a tone for the debates over television program forms in the 1950s.

Broadcast writer and critic Goodman Ace in a 1952 article, "The Forgotten Men of TV," characterized the expectations of writers in Hollywood telefilms by citing an unattributed quotation from Lucille Ball regarding the writers' contribution to "I Love Lucy": "We never see them. We never discuss anything with them. After two readings we get on our feet and throw the scripts away." A 1954 article, "Writer Is a Dirty Word," described Ace's trip to Hollywood, where, he wrote, "for the most part, television writers, especially comedy writers, are considered a necessary but evil part of the TV set-up."¹⁵

The employment situation and critical reputation of the writer in live television drama were very different, although it took some time before the TV writer earned the prominence associated with most accounts of television's Golden Age. An article in the premier issue of *Television* in 1944, for example, lamented that "The program end of television has been an arid wasteland, almost devoid of imagination, showmanship, and (what is equally important) any indications of a knowledge of the nature of television. . . . The big bottleneck will be in good writers and directors, artists and executives with imagination and showmanship who understand their medium." In May 1947 an article in the magazine was still complaining: "Capable actors are available, good original scripts are not. . . . Perhaps it would be better for television to forego dramatic production unless top scripts are available, for television will only suffer in comparison to other media when mediocre productions are staged."¹⁶

The manager of NBC's Script Department wrote in 1948: "Television's primary need is for material, and the one who provides that material in a suitable form may be said to be one of the most important, if not *the* most important, person in the television picture—the writer." Charles Underhill, head of CBS television programming, in 1950 wrote succinctly of the television programmer: "Greatest need: material. Solution: uncover young writers, woo Hollywood and Broadway writers."

Variety concluded that the development of writing talent suited "specifically for TV looms as the most necessary ingredient for programming in 1950."¹⁷

Seldes described the new market for television scripts: "For writers, the turning point in television came somewhere in the early spring of 1951." The number of Writers Guild of America members reported working in television grew from 45 in February 1951 to 110 by the end of that year. In 1952, Edward Barry Roberts, an NBC script editor, wrote: "The centers of production are swarming with would-be television writers. The competition is killing, although paradoxically there aren't enough really good writers to supply the demand. . . . Yet it is only through good writing that television will grow, and fulfill its potential destiny as the most fascinating and the most important means ever known of communicating information, entertainment and education. . . . We are all waiting hopefully and impatiently for the television artist-playwrights to appear."¹⁸

The title "artist-playwright" attached to the work of the writer in live television drama suggests the importance and prestige frequently associated with the new craft. In a June 1952 episode of the ABC public-affairs program "Horizons," entitled "The Future of Television Drama," producer Alex Segal argued that "I think TV eventually, if given time to develop, if not rushed, and if not sidetracked, will do the wonderful thing we always wished for, that of bringing the legitimate theatre into the home in its final stage." Most TV critics and many of the other creative personnel in television saw the writer at the center of television drama. In 1952, Herbert Spencer Sussan, a CBS producer-director called the writer "truly the creative artist" in television and described the work of the TV director as "akin to the director of a symphony orchestra, fusing many elements into harmonious unity." Chayefsky later recalled how the prestige associated with TV writing could ignite the career of a young writer of live drama of the mid-1950s: "Right at that time, it was a writer's medium. Think of all those shows that were done in New York—'Philco,' 'Studio One,' 'Kraft Television Theatre,' 'Robert Montgomery Presents,' 'U.S. Steel Hour'—all those other weekly half-hour shows, perfect for writers. If you could come in at the right time and do something that caught on, it was the beginning of a career." Indeed, the best known writers of television drama—Paddy

Chayefsky, Rod Serling, Reginald Rose, Horton Foote, Robert Alan Aurthur—came not from established careers in the motion picture industry but achieved first public notice through their work in television.¹⁹

The prominence and prestige accorded to writers in live television drama—TV's new artist-playwrights—were often contrasted with the plight of writers working in feature films and filmed television. In 1957, Serling compared the role of the writer in live and filmed television:

Probably most fundamental in any discussion of the differences between live and filmed television is the attitude reserved for their creators. It is rare in Hollywood that a filmed show will make anything but a perfunctory reference to its author. Hollywood television took a leaf out of the notebook of the motion pictures and shoved its authors into a professional Siberia. The writer of the filmed television play was never and is not now an identifiable name in terms of the audience.

This is in sharp contrast to the New York live television writer who has been granted an identity, an importance and a respect second only to the legitimate playwright. For this reason, it is rare that a "live" playwright will write for filmed shows, despite that fact that, in the long run, the half-hour film may bring him almost ten times the total price of the live script.²⁰

Writers of live television drama often maintained a significant degree of control over their material. Television writer Ernest Kinoy looked back at the position of the television writer in the mid-1950s:

The general practice in live television of this time was to accept the notion of the writer as the original instigator-creator of a particular play. . . . This was picked up from Broadway, where the author is considered the man who has produced the work, who has done the thing which is going to be presented. Therefore, you would, in most cases, continue with it in a relatively respected position, along through the rehearsals to the final presentation on the air. And your opinion was sought and listened to with varying degrees of attention. But as a pattern, the writer was considered to belong with his property until it was finally presented.²¹

In addition to a measure of control from the completed script through the production process, the live television writer was accorded a position by critics and the public closer to that of the legitimate playwright than the Hollywood contract-writer. Gore Vidal, who wrote seventy

television plays over a two-year period in the mid-1950s, recalled a few years later: "If you did a good show on 'Philco,' you would walk down the street the next morning and hear people talking about your play." In an interview in the *New York Times* in 1956, thirty-one-year-old Serling pointed to television's appeal to a writer interested in social commentary: "I think that of all the entertainment media, TV lends itself most beautifully to presenting a controversy. You can just take a part of the problem, and, using just a small number of people, get your point across."²²

Serling is perhaps the best example of a young writer who achieved prominence through a series of live drama scripts in the mid-1950s. His first major teleplay, "Patterns," was hailed by the *New York Times* as "one of the high points in the television medium's evolution," and was repeated in live performance on "Kraft Television Theatre," the first time a live drama was restaged for the medium. Within two weeks after the airing of "Patterns," Serling told an interviewer: "I received twenty-three firm offers for television writing assignments. I received three motion picture offers for screenplay assignments. I had fourteen requests for interviews from leading magazines and newspapers. I had two offers of lunch from Broadway producers. I had two offers to discuss novels with publishers."²³

Serling won a Peabody Award in 1956 and Emmy awards for his television plays in 1955, 1956, and 1957. *Vogue* magazine described the writer in 1957 as a "revved-up, good-looking playwright of thirty-two," and *Cosmopolitan* profiled Serling in 1958 as the most conspicuous member of "a new class of millionaire writers in America." Serling's sudden success and visibility in the popular press was only one indication of the cultural position of the television writer and the original television play in the era of live drama. New York television critic John Crosby wrote in a 1973 recollection:

Does TV generate that kind of excitement any more? Certainly not over the author of a TV play. In the 1950s everyone was *interested* in TV—the educated and the featherbrains alike. It was new and we were very innocent. . . . I remember walking into "21," a fairly sophisticated beanery, one day in the 1950s and finding the whole restaurant buzzing with talk about another Rod Serling play, "Requiem for a Heavyweight" The important thing was that "Requiem" set the whole town talking in much the same way Al Jolson used to do when he'd walk out on the stage of the Winter Garden and knock 'em

dead in the 1920s. Television was *the* medium of the moment and it attracted all the brilliant young kids. . . .²⁴

The TV writer, then, stood at the center of the artistic promise of live television drama, and many playwrights became widely reported commentators on the medium and its programming in the rest of the decade. For many television critics in the 1950s, the television playwright symbolized the medium's commitment to the live format and to the dramatic forms to which they were fiercely attached. The rising debate within the industry and in the popular press over the role of the television writer in the 1950s therefore becomes one marker of a shift in general cultural attitudes toward the medium. Television writers were at once the objects of, and often acute commentators upon, the enormous changes in commercial television in the second half of the 1950s.

NOTES

1. Gilbert Seldes, *Writing for Television* (New York: Doubleday, 1952), p. 30.
2. Jack Gould, "'Live' TV vs. 'Canned,'" *New York Times Magazine*, February 5, 1956, p. 27; Seldes, *Writing for Television*, p. 32.
3. Jack Gould, "A Plea for Live Video," *New York Times*, December 7, 1952, Gould, "'Live' TV," p. 34.
4. Edward Barry Roberts, "Writing for Television," in *The Best Television Plays, 1950-1951*, ed. William I. Kaufman (New York: Hastings House, 1952), p. 296, emphasis in original; Ann Howard Bailey, "Writing the TV Dramatic Show," in Irving Settler and Norman Glenn, *Television Advertising and Production Handbook* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1953), p. 226.
5. William I. Kaufman and Robert Colodzin, *Your Career in Television* (New York: Merlin Press, 1950), p. 62.
6. Donald Curtis, "The Actor in Television," in *The Best Television Plays, 1950-1951*, ed. Kaufman, pp. 319-20.
7. Charles Siepmann, *Radio, Television and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 357; William Bluem and Roger Manvell, eds., *TV: The Creative Experience: A Survey of Anglo-American Progress* (New York: Hastings House, 1967), p. 17.
8. Seldes, *Writing for Television*, p. 79. Seldes continued: "In a dramatic program you are inviting a group of people to live a portion of their lives with you. The closer their lives come to the tenor of the lives of yourself and your friends, the more the invasion has taken on the nature of a visit; the characters must be with you without reservation and without pressure, so that in the end you can move from your living room into their lives."
9. Columbia Broadcasting System, *Television Audience Research* (New York: Columbia Broadcasting System, 1945), p. 7; Harvey Marlowe, "Drama's Place in Television," *Television*, March 1946, p. 17; Kaufman and Colodzin, *Your Career in Television*, p. 61; Kaufman, ed., *The Best Television Plays, 1950-1951*, p. 263.
10. Paddy Chayefsky, "Good Theatre in Television," *ibid.*, p. 45.
11. Erik Barnouw, *The History of Broadcasting in the United States*, vol. 3: *The Image Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 31.
12. Roberts, "Writing for Television," pp. 296-97; Bailey, "Writing the TV Dramatic Show," p. 214.
13. Seldes, *Writing for Television*, 1952, pp. 105, 138, 148, 151, 152, emphasis in original; Gilbert Seldes, "A Clinical Analysis of TV," *New York Times Magazine*, November 23, 1954, p. 55.
14. Don Sharpe, "TV Film: Will Economics Stifle Creativity?," *Television*, April 1955, p. 39; Vance Bourjaily, "The Lost Art of Writing for Television," *Harper's*, October 1959, p. 152; Jack Gould, "Half-Act Drama," *New York Times*, February 10, 1952, sec. 2, p. 13.
15. Goodman Ace, *The Book of Little Knowledge: More Than You Want to Know About Television* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), pp. 8, 18.
16. "Programming," *Television*, Spring 1944, p. 21; "Programming," *Television*, May 1947, p. 31.
17. Richard P. McDough, "Television Writing Problems," in *Television Production Problems*, ed. John F. Royal (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948), p. 28; "The Programmers," *Television*, February 1950, p. 14; "Video's '50 Accent on Writing," *Variety*, December 21, 1949, p. 27.
18. Seldes, *Writing for Television*, p. 9; Milton MacKaye, "The Big Brawl: Hollywood vs. Television," *The Saturday Evening Post*, January 26, 1952, Part 2, p. 119; Roberts, "Writing for Television," p. 300.
19. Alex Segal, "The Future of Television Drama," "Horizons," June 6, 1952, collection of the Museum of Broadcasting, New York; Herbert Spencer Sussan, "The Voice Behind the Cameras," in *The Best Television Plays, 1950-1951*, ed. Kaufman, p. 302; Max Wilk, *The Golden Age of Television: Notes from the Survivors* (New York: Delacorte, 1976), p. 132.
20. Rod Serling, "TV in the Flesh vs. TV in the Can," *New York Times Magazine*, November 24, 1957, pp. 52, 54.
21. U.S. Federal Communications Commission, Office of Network Study, *Second Interim Report: Television Program Procurement, Part II* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), p. 630.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 626; Vidal went on: "It was a strange feeling . . . you have this

audience, and writers—at least my kind of writer—wants as large an audience as he can possibly get, to do as much damage as they can to the things they think stand in want of correction to society.” Rod Serling, interview with J. P. Shanley, *New York Times*, April 22, 1956, sec. 2, p. 13.

23. The original reaction to “Patterns,” its restaging, and play’s effect on Serling’s career are discussed in J. P. Shanley, “Notes on ‘Patterns’ and a Familiar Face,” *New York Times*, February 6, 1955, sec. 2, p. 15. Rod Serling, *Patterns* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 30.

24. “People Are Talking About,” *Vogue*, April 1, 1957, p. 138; T. F. James, “The Millionaire Class of Young Writers,” *Cosmopolitan*, August 1958, p. 40; John Crosby, “It Was New and We Were Very Innocent,” *TV Guide*, September 22, 1973, p. 6.

6

The False Dawn of a Golden Age

The debates in the 1950s over suitable program forms for television and over freedom of expression for writers in the medium were inseparable from the fundamental question of who would control television programming: the networks or the broadcast sponsors and their advertising agencies. As in the contemporary debates over live versus film programming, the commercial battles over program control often were couched in terms of the public interest, program aesthetics, or similar high-minded goals. In addition, the lessons of the network radio industry of the 1930s had a complex and powerful effect upon the debates as well as upon the outcomes of commercial battles within the young television industry.

While RCA was launching its public relations campaign for the immediate development of postwar VHF television and approaching the Hollywood studios for early telefilm production deals, it also encouraged advertisers and advertising agencies to enter commercial television. One RCA official told a group of advertising executives in 1944 that agencies risked their 15 percent commissions if they failed to move promptly into television, warning them that sponsors might instead negotiate directly with program producers. The RCA official lamented what he described as a “lack of interest in the agency in the business of television.” A 1949 U.S. Commerce Department report also noted the reluctance of many advertising agencies to enter television; given the still-small television audience and meager advertiser billings, the medium was generally unprofitable for agencies faced with the high

costs of servicing clients. Echoing RCA officials, the premier issue of *Sponsor* in 1946 urged agencies to experiment in the still-unprofitable medium in order to gain prestige, experience in programming, and the privileges of early arrival. Chief among these privileges was a "time franchise," the control by the agency of a particular time slot in the network program schedule for its client. One TV station manager explained in 1953: "A good time spot is a property to protect and hold. Some advertisers have spent years getting outstanding spots on the air, changing from relatively poor positions to better ones as they become available."¹

Although the networks encouraged advertising agencies to move into the new medium, they were also fearful of repeating the pattern of network radio of the 1930s, when the agencies gained substantial control over network prime-time programming. Advertising executive Fairfax M. Cone later explained that the networks had lost programming control to advertising agencies in radio before World War II, "and they were determined not to let the same thing happen in TV." An article in *Televi-er* in 1945, noting network opposition to outside program production, concluded, "who'll produce television is still any man's guess."²

Despite network wishes to retain program control in the new medium, the first few years of network television were marked by high levels of direct sponsor involvement in the production and the scheduling of programming. An advertising executive told the FCC's Office of Network Study in 1960: "In the beginning television was completely in the hands of advertising agencies like ours. That was essential to all programs because there was no money allocated for television and the advertising agency controlled the advertising monies of the country." The networks typically delegated program direction to an agency-employed director who instructed the network technical director and crew. In 1947, *Sponsor* reported a shift in program production from the networks to advertising agencies despite network wishes because of a shortage of network personnel to keep up with expanding television schedules. *Television* reported in 1949 that five of the ten most popular television programs were produced in-house by a single advertising agency, Young and Rubicam.³

After the FCC's rejection of the CBS UHF proposal in 1947, television advertising advanced rapidly: in November 1947, *Television* proclaimed television a serious advertising medium, no longer simply

representing "a chance to experiment."⁴ In spite of the FCC freeze on applications for station construction from 1948-52, television audiences grew quickly, and with increased circulation came higher time charges for television sponsors and a change in relations between networks and advertisers.

By 1950, the networks were attempting to regain program control. Frank Stanton at CBS argued that the key to successful network operation in television would lie in control of popular programs, not in affiliate transmitter power or coverage, as was the case in network radio. The desire of CBS to produce and schedule its own prime-time programming was explained in its 1950 *Annual Report*: "[P]rograms that have been developed by CBS are owned by CBS; they can be scheduled at times that are best for their own maximum growth; and once established, they can be held at strategic points throughout the week's schedule, in time-periods that then become 'anchor-points' in the winning of a great network audience. Carefully placed throughout the schedule, these anchor-points naturally attract other audience-seeking programs."⁵

There were similar moves at NBC. In 1954, NBC network head Pat Weaver described the situation when he became network chief at the end of 1949, determined to take programming control away from the agencies: "The programming just had no direction. Programs landed next to each other by mere chance with each agency building its own show in a way that was aimed at nothing more than keeping its client happy. There was no planned relationship of one program and another or to the competition, and no particular attempt to create a lasting pattern for the people at home."⁶

In a January 1950 article, "Packaging Returns to the Networks," *Sponsor* discerned a trend from agency-controlled to network-controlled shows. The network not only gained greater control over its program schedule in order to create block programming (a succession of programs designed to maximize program adjacencies and audience flow over a single evening) and counterprogramming (strong or complementary programs matched against those of another network in the same time slot), but also ensured long-term network talent commitments to a successful series or performer. Advantages for advertisers moving out of direct program production and licensing, according to *Sponsor*, included the stability of an established program with a ratings history and the possibility of favored status from the network in program scheduling

and promotion. Another incentive for sponsors to abandon program production were the steeply rising costs of the medium. An article in *Sponsor* in 1949 explained that television audiences were growing so rapidly that costs-per-thousand (the sponsor's cost of reaching a thousand viewers) were actually declining, but in the early 1950s time and production charges for sponsors rose even more sharply, encouraging sponsors and agencies to shift the risks of program development to independent packagers and the networks. A 1952 *Sponsor* article reported that the networks were curtailing their previous subsidies of program production costs; the result was sharply higher sponsor charges. The end of the FCC station freeze in 1952 also led to increased time charges for the much-enlarged roster of network affiliates sold to the sponsor.⁷ All these economic forces encouraged the concentration of program control in the hands of the networks in the mid-1950s.

Network attempts to wrest program control from sponsors and agencies in the 1950s generally cast the advertiser in selfish pursuit of the lowest cost-per-thousand in contrast to the broader interests of the network, including "balanced" programming over the entire television schedule. This opposition between narrow-minded sponsors and enlightened networks began in the era of network radio before World War II, when programming was split between the "sponsored" programs supplied directly by advertising agencies and the "sustaining" or unsponsored programs produced by the networks. In the 1950s' battles over program control in television, the networks could therefore enlist earlier dissatisfaction with radio broadcasting. Like the arguments of network executives against film programming, network attempts to assert control over television programming were often couched in public-interest terms. And like the debates over television aesthetics and film programming, the battles between the networks and the agencies over program control made for some curious bedfellows and much subsequent bitterness.

Much of the rhetoric in the early debates over the control of television programming is a legacy of the widespread criticism of network radio in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1945, Ira Hirshman, vice president of Metropolitan Television, told a conference on radio and business: "I hope we will have the self-control and the sense of standards to start television on a better path than that on which oral radio was started. . . . The way that radio has . . . aimed at the least common de-

nominator . . . is something which is not a compliment to our people."⁸

The FCC's interest in the question of program control was initiated by the chain broadcasting investigations of the late 1930s, which culminated in the famous "Blue Book" of 1946, *Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees*. The "Blue Book" underscored the disparity between the mass-appeal sponsored programs and the unsponsored sustaining programs offered by the radio networks. Sustaining programming, according to the "Blue Book," had five features serving the public interest: 1) sustaining programs provided balance to the broadcast schedule, supplementing the soap operas and popular music programs that gained the highest ratings and readiest commercial sponsors; 2) they allowed for the broadcast of programs which by their controversial or sensitive nature were unsuitable for sponsorship; 3) they supplied cultural programming for minority audiences; 4) they provided limited broadcast access for non-profit and civic organizations; and 5) they made possible artistic and dramatic experimentation shielded from the pressures of short-run ratings and commercial considerations of the commercial sponsor. The rhetorical opposition between the censorious sponsor in single-minded pursuit of maximum audience versus the more enlightened, artistically innovative network is suggested in the language of the "Blue Book": "If broadcasting is to explore new fields, . . . it is clear that the sustaining program must . . . have the fullest scope, undeterred by the need for immediate financial success or the imposition on writers of restraints deriving from the natural, but limiting, preoccupations of the sponsor."⁹

The commission found network radio dominated by a small group of large sponsors and advertising agencies that produced or licensed programs and negotiated with networks for air time. In the view of the FCC, these sponsors had a natural fear of offending any members of their audience. The "Blue Book" noted that "Procter and Gamble, probably the largest sponsor in American broadcasting, has been described as having a policy never to offend a single listener." The FCC report quoted the president of the American Tobacco Company, another major network radio advertiser, about his company's programming philosophy: "We are commercial and we cannot afford to be anything else. I don't have the right to spend the stockholders' money just to entertain the public."¹⁰

The control of radio programming by advertising agencies, according

to the "Blue Book," caused widespread frustration among radio writers. The report quoted a 1945 *Variety* article that described a growing exodus of writers dissatisfied with the commercial constraints of the radio medium: "Radio script writers are turning in increasing numbers to the legitimate field . . . as long as radio remains more or less a 'duplicating machine' without encouraging creative expression and without establishing an identity of its own, it's inevitable that the guy who has something to say will seek other outlets." With this evidence in mind, the FCC encouraged the networks to assert greater control over radio schedules to advance the public interest values associated with the network's sustaining programs. The "Blue Book" concluded that "The concept of a well-rounded structure can obviously not be maintained if the decision is left wholly or preponderantly in the hands of advertisers in search of a market, each concerned with his particular half hour, rather than in the hands of stations and networks responsible under the statute for overall program balance in the public interest."¹¹

There was ready evidence of the fear of controversy among early advertisers in television. Edward Barry Roberts advised would-be television writers in 1952: "The sponsor will lay down the policy of what can be written about, or, at least, what he is willing to pay for on his program." A 1951 article in *Sponsor* elaborated on the advertiser's role in monitoring program content: "Censorship is integral to the critical purpose of creating good will, pleasant association, popular feelings of gratitude. In the logic of the marketplace and the business man's accenting of the positive, the commercial side of American radio favors the gay, amusing, harmless, neutral and avoids the sharp, acid, hateful. Typically, the business man chooses to reflect and echo public taste as commonly interpreted. In so choosing, he plainly censors the opposite values, has no association with political, artistic or literary avant garde."¹²

Even the large "institutional" advertisers of television's early years kept a close eye on potentially troublesome program content. An example is "Theatre Guild of the Air," sponsored on radio since 1935 and brought to television in 1953 by the U.S. Steel Company. According to an article in *Sponsor* in 1955, the purpose of the program for the advertiser was straightforward: to raise the company's public image from its poor reputation in the 1930s. Hired by U.S. Steel as a public relations advisor, advertising man Bruce Barton told the company: "You are being advertised whether you like it or not, because people talk about you. The

only channel to the public which you can control is the one you pay for." *Sponsor* reported that "U.S. Steel believes it must have absolute control if the public relations purpose is to be properly fulfilled," and noted that the company directly oversaw all aspects of "Theatre Guild of the Air," selecting scripts, supervising casting, and attending rehearsals. The company's preference, the magazine explained, was "for stories with power but outside controversial areas. . . . Company and agency deplore writer tendencies to be grim, look for endings with a lift." *Sponsor* concluded: "The client is never further away than the sponsor's booth, right down to show time."¹³

There were also external pressures on the television sponsor to "avoid association with political, artistic or literary avant garde" in its programs. Most significant and sustained was the systematic political censorship and blacklisting of television personnel objectionable to the organized, anticommunist Right. Inspired by earlier congressional investigations in Hollywood and the increasingly anticommunist mood of the country, political blacklisting in television began in earnest in 1950 with the publication by a small right-wing organization of *Red Channels: The Report on the Communist Influence in Radio and Television*. The targets of the report were not only Communist party members in the broadcast industry, but also what *Red Channels* called the "dupes" and "innocents" among the "so-called 'intellectual' classes." The report singled out several network-produced dramatic anthologies and explained: "Dramatic programs are occasionally used for Communist propaganda purposes. . . . Several commercially sponsored dramatic series are used as sounding boards, particularly with reference to current issues on which the Party is critically interested: 'academic freedom,' 'civil rights,' 'peace,' the 'H-bomb,' etc. These and other subjects, perfectly legitimate in themselves, are cleverly exploited in dramatic treatments which point up current Communist goals."¹⁴

Jack Gould said in 1961 that *Red Channels* "set off the most shocking panic I've ever seen in my life." An important ally to the *Red Channels* group was Syracuse grocer Lawrence Johnson, who led a campaign against CBS's dramatic anthology series "Danger" by threatening its sponsor, Block Drugs, with the prospect of red-baiting displays next to the company's products on Johnson's supermarket shelves. The politically offending actors were removed from the program. Johnson's tactics of pressuring the television sponsor were effective because, as the

historian Erik Barnouw pointed out, "Products sold through supermarkets accounted for more than 60 percent of broadcast revenue. Manufacturers of such products were especially vulnerable to pressures that threatened their place on supermarket shelves."¹⁵

Another early case establishing the power of the political blacklist in television was examined in a three-part article, "The Truth About *Red Channels*," in *Sponsor* in 1951. Actress Jean Muir was removed from a popular program by sponsor General Foods after right-wing pressure; admitting it made no efforts to investigate the validity of the accusations against Muir, the sponsor argued that the presence of charges itself was sufficient justification for her dismissal: "Using her would have been akin to sending out a poor salesman in an area where the salesman was disliked," General Foods explained.¹⁶

These early and well-publicized blacklisting cases convinced many industry observers that television sponsors were unreasonably sensitive to such organized pressure groups, and some expressed faith that network organizations would be in a stronger position to resist such pressures. Max Wilk wrote in 1951: "When the sponsor stays on his side of the curtain, currently the door to the studio, and allows his producers, directors and writers to function unhampered by his amateur opinions, television drama will improve overnight." Paddy Chayefsky wrote in the introduction to his published television plays in 1955 that "The advertising agencies are interested only in selling their client's products, and they do not want dramas that will disturb potential customers. This limits the choice of material markedly. You cannot write about adultery, abortion, the social values of our times, or almost anything that relates to adult reality. . . . Downbeat-type drama is almost as taboo as politically controversial stories."¹⁷

Throughout the red-baiting and blacklisting that marked the television industry during the 1950s, the networks generally succeeded in presenting themselves as victims of, or at worst, reluctant partners in, program censorship and restrictive employment practices. Pat Weaver told a group of Dartmouth students on a 1955 NBC program, "Youth Wants to Know":

[T]he basic management groups in large part are very conservative and . . . do not wish to associate the sale of their product with anything controversial. . . . I know that we had trouble in getting certain shows accepted by certain clients who took a line that we thought was not

even liberal. . . . Those of us who run communications know that America is based on the sanctity of dissent, that anything which pressures for uniformity or conformity is a block that is building a wall that ends our whole way of life. I think generally speaking . . . the attitude of management is one for dissent and for the unpopular idea and for the use of controversial issues.¹⁸

In addition to pressure from the organized Right, the live drama and variety programs produced in New York by the networks were targets of more general complaints in the early years of television. Many of the complaints were couched in issues of program taste, often opposing the "big city" sensibility of the networks' New York programming to the standards of the rest of the country. The friction goes back even before commercial television operations were underway. Due to commercial television's abortive prewar start and its subsequent suspension during the war, the only television broadcast service through the mid-1940s came from a handful of New York stations. Lee DeForest in his 1942 *Television Today and Tomorrow* decried this dependence on New York as a laboratory for early television programming: New Yorkers, according to DeForest, were "too sophisticated to become television-minded." Nevertheless, DeForest optimistically predicted that the success of television would cause a reinvigoration of family ties, spark an exodus from the large cities in a massive suburban migration, and lead to "the gradual razing of these ridiculous structures," the urban skyscrapers.⁹ In a less speculative manner, the complaints of other critics about network-produced, New York-based programming revealed a similar antiurban animus. A 1951 article in *Sponsor* warned: "Off color jokes, swish routines, city humor hits the small towns and suburbs with unpleasant impact, focusing reaction upon certain entertainers—and their sponsors." A 1955 book, *Television Program Production*, by Carroll O'Meara, complained:

What is acceptable to broad-minded night club audiences in Manhattan, Hollywood, or Las Vegas is rarely apt to be fare for admission in homes in any city or town. . . . Jaded and liquored celebrants in a night club will accept as sophisticated humor and wit what is actually nothing but smut. . . . What many entertainers fail to realize, actually, is that the areas containing the bistros, night spots and bright lights are only a minute segment of America. And yet, somehow, they insist on broadcasting to the entire nation comic and other material which is

definitely not acceptable in the average American home. . . . Our nation consists of 160 million citizens, most of whom live in small towns, go to church on Sunday, attempt to bring up their children decently, and do not regard burlesque shows as the ultimate in theatre.²¹

Frequent targets for early moral critics of television were the mystery and crime anthology dramas, lead by "Lights Out," "Danger," and "Suspense"; the genre's popularity reached a high point in 1950, when it constituted approximately 50 percent of prime-time programming. Concern over the purported violence and amorality of the programs paralleled censorship campaigns in the comic book industry and a general preoccupation with the threat of juvenile delinquency. Controversy over violent crime shows and other "objectionable" television programs became more pointed, however, in 1951 when a Democratic representative from Arkansas, Ezekial Candler Gathings, called for a Commerce subcommittee probe of "offensive and undesirable radio and television programs." Before the start of the subcommittee's hearings in June 1952, the television industry quickly put together a manual of censorship called the Television Code. *Television* in November 1951 welcomed the prospective code in hopes of preempting federal intervention, and an article in *Sponsor*, entitled "TV's Hottest Problem: Public Relations," called for a concerted public relations campaign by the industry in its "battle for respectability."²²

Representative Gathings said during the hearings: "There is such a thing as leaning too heavily upon the constitutional free speech provision. . . . The radio voice and television screen and voice is [sic] a visitor; it comes into your home." While Gathings admitted that his original target in the House resolution was violent crime programming, other complaints against New York network programming were also raised during the hearings, including offensive comedy routines and revealing necklines during variety programs. The subcommittee's report of December 1952 commended the Television Code's effect on crime programs and television comedy, and Gathings noted with satisfaction during the hearings that "the necklines of dresses are higher since the Code was put into effect."²³

If the programming most associated with the networks in early television stirred criticism from political and social conservatives, the attacks encouraged many television critics and writers to defend the networks and their socially relevant, naturalistic live dramas from New York even

more strongly. Various developments—the frustrations of radio writers over sponsor censorship in 1930s' radio, the widespread caution among early television sponsors, the political panic set off by *Red Channels*, and the conservative criticism of "big city" network programs—led many writers and critics in the 1950s to look to the networks as the only guardians of program balance, artistic innovation, and social relevance in dramatic television.

Just as network leaders appropriated TV critics' aesthetic rhetoric celebrating live television for their commercial contests with program producers, the networks enlisted uneasiness over advertiser censorship in their battles with sponsors and advertising agencies. Pat Weaver, who had been in charge of advertising for the same conservative American Tobacco Company quoted in the FCC's "Blue Book," described his first actions as director of NBC television programming in 1949: "I brought in some of the top ad-agency programming men to help me at NBC and I told them, 'Look, we ruined radio. Let's not let it happen to television. Let's stage our own programs and just sell advertising time to the agencies.'" Weaver said in 1955 that while radio had been dominated by a few large sponsors and ad agencies, television was too important a sales medium to allow the same thing to happen.²⁴

Weaver's career at NBC from 1949 to 1956 is identified with the network "spectacular," a large-budget, network-produced, specially scheduled live program of sixty minutes or more. The network spectaculars were generally popular with New York television critics; in 1956, Jack Gould wrote that the network spectacular "probably represents the medium's most significant single asset: its capacity to be extraordinarily good. The bookish snobs who have tried to concoct an intellectual superiority out of a righteous refusal to watch television will have to find a more persuasive dodge." Besides displaying the network's ability to assemble talent and display production values beyond those of most other television programming, the spectacular was also a network strategy to gain leverage over the television sponsor in two ways. The spectacular broke with the radio model of sponsorship by entailing a production budget few television advertisers could consider for single sponsorship. Instead, advertisers were invited as "participating" sponsors, sharing total time and production costs on a per-insertion basis, with the advertiser buying a simple insertion without direct involvement in the "editorial" content. Both the sponsor and the advertising agency were cut off from direct programming roles, leading *Sponsor* to

ask in the title of a 1954 article, "Are Agencies Earning Their Fifteen Percent on Network TV Shows?" Weaver's extension of the new advertising form, which he called "magazine advertising," was resisted by many television advertisers who resented the loss of program control, sponsor identification, and the ability to reach a targeted audience and by those who feared diminished commercial effectiveness due to advertising "clutter." The case for magazine advertising was strongest at Weaver's NBC (where it was first introduced in the early-morning "Today" show) because NBC, with more affiliates and higher time charges than the other networks, feared the loss of small advertisers to ABC and DuMont networks.²⁵

Few of the network spectaculars could be defended on a strict cost-per-thousand basis because they were rarely rating smashes. Instead, an NBC producer told *The New Yorker* that the spectacular operated "like a loss-leader in a chain grocery to gain traffic. Pat [Weaver] knows how to build up a network audience." Weaver told the magazine that if programming were left up to the sponsor and advertising agency, the result would be the lowest-cost programming, which would hurt the entire television industry, especially RCA's set sales. In an interview in 1955, Weaver said that although the network spectaculars were not profitable in relation to advertiser time sales, "[t]hey are paying off as far as the television industry is concerned, as far as the trade press, as far as the selling of television sets," arguing that the spectaculars convinced hesitant consumers to purchase receivers. Weaver explained his programming philosophy to the FCC's Office of Network Study in 1960: "Everyone in the country who is able to reach a television set, big enough or physically capacitated to do it, should be viewing enough to be influenced by the medium."²⁶

In a 1953 staff memorandum, Weaver outlined his strategy for attracting the "light viewer" to television: "We must get the show that gets the most talk in the coming season, that wins the Peabody award, that enables me to keep carrying the fight to the intellectuals who misunderstand our mass-media development, and that can be profitably sold without affecting any of our present business." Weaver's ability to evoke the high-minded public relations value of network programming with one eye firmly set on the bottom line earned him his characterization in the industry, according to *Newsweek*, as television's "humanist huckster." A talent agent told *The New Yorker* in 1954 of Weaver: "Program-

wise, the guy is terrific, longhairwise, he's great too. With Pat you can think big even about a cooking show."²⁷

NBC's Weaver was the most extreme example of the networks' ability to evoke (and in Weaver's case, hyperbolize) the rhetoric of television reformers and critics in the service of network campaigns in the economy of 1950s commercial television. Max Wilk quoted Weaver on NBC's programming strategy of the early 1950s: "In that grand design, entertainment was used to get the people to watch the realism and to get caught by it, but the end would be that we would inform them, enrich them enlighten them, to liberate them from tribal primitive belief patterns."²⁸

When Pat Weaver left NBC in 1956, *Sponsor* wrote that "his departure marked 'the formal period to an epoch of television: The era when big ideas and big programming budgets were imperative to speeding up set sales and getting TV as an advertising medium off the ground.'" However, NBC was eager to reassure those concerned at Weaver's resignation that NBC's programming philosophy was unchanged. Martin Meyer, writing in *Harper's* on Weaver's departure from the network, optimistically noted that "NBC is dedicated to live broadcasting as the true benefit and unique opportunity of television."²⁹

The networks frequently linked the public values of program balance and freedom of expression in the medium to the continued prosperity of the network organizations, which would permit them to support special programming and to shield the television writer from the pressures of the commercial sponsor. Pat Weaver in 1955 asserted that because of early unequal revenues of stations and networks in television: "The stations are very profitable and the networks are not. . . it has been our plan with our affiliates from the beginning to try to . . . set up patterns whereby the networks had more strength and more prosperity in order to do things that ought to be done with special programming."³⁰

In 1957, NBC executive Roger Kennedy warned of "the marks of caution's strangling hand" in television programming, but saw hope in "greater 'producer control,' insulated by purposeful network protection from agency and client interference." The key for creative freedom, Kennedy argued, was the network's commercial advantage in negotiations with sponsors: "Prosperity poured its surplus into advertising budgets; network time was sold out; and sponsors were happy to buy what they could, on the network's or station's terms."³¹

In 1955 and 1956, several observers of the industry were optimistic about the prospects for continued diversity and experimentation in television programming, especially in the field of live television drama. George Wolf, in *Advertising Agency Magazine*, called the 1955-56 season "the most heralded year in the brief history of the medium," after earlier promising that the season "would be head and shoulders above anything yet seen in the medium." Wolf wrote that critics Jack Gould and John Crosby, "astute observers of the television scene . . . see in the new programming pattern the strengthening of the entire television medium."³²

In 1956 CBS announced the launching of television's first ninety-minute live dramatic anthology program, "Playhouse 90," voted in a 1970 *Variety* poll of television editors as the greatest network television series of all time. Gore Vidal in 1956 compared the "youth and enthusiasm" of the television medium for writers to the "bored cynicism" of Hollywood and the "rapacity and bad temper" of Broadway, and concluded: "All things considered, I suspect the golden age for the dramatist is at hand." In a similar vein, Rod Serling introduced a collection of his television plays in 1957 with this judgment of the medium: "Television today remains a study in imperfection. . . . Radio was around for twenty odd years before it . . . ultimately wrote out a finis to its potential. Television hasn't exhausted its potential or altogether found its niche. But in the area of drama it has already far surpassed that of its sister medium."³³

The optimistic predictions by critics and writers in the mid-1950s would soon prove woefully misplaced. As CBS executive Charles Underhill told the FCC just a few years later: "The golden age of television was a golden age only in that it enabled us to learn, to experiment, to develop, to be ready to go into the golden age which 'Playhouse 90' began to tap and which was cut off, and which really marked the demise of good, live drama." In the opening pages of *The Great Time-Killer* (1962), former television writer Harold Mehling lamented: "Remember how great television used to be? Remember how television excited people, and how people *talked* about it. . . . The outstanding difference between television in the early 1950s and the early 1960s is that the young model, while light-years from perfection, showed promise of attaining decency. Today, grown-up television shows certainty of becoming a major national scandal."³⁴

The behavior of the networks in the late 1950s was a bitter revelation for the partisans of live drama who had considered the networks permanent allies in "the struggle for character drama" on television. It is this disillusionment that produced the tone of betrayal and hyperbole in the rising complaints of writers and critics in the late 1950s. If the years between television's Golden Age and the "vast wasteland" are few in number, they measure a traumatic reeducation for many in the ways of commercial television.

NOTES

1. Beyond its manufacturing, network, and station operation interests in television, RCA pressed hard for the rapid exploitation of television on the VHF band in order to protect its patent position in that portion of the spectrum. In the same speech, the RCA executive urged agencies to get an early start in television and criticized those in advertising who counseled holding back until the medium attained significant circulation: "Everyone knows that to keep post-war employment at a desirable level we must increase consumer demand by fifty percent. As advertisers, it is your responsibility to create this demand. The job will be tough and you'll need the best tools you can get," Richard H. Hooper, "Television—The Post-war Sales Tool," speech to the Federated Advertising Clubs of Chicago, December 7, 1944, n.p.; U.S. Department of Commerce, *Television as an Advertising Medium* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1949), p. 9; Robert M. Reuschle, "Choosing the Right TV Station for Your Product," in Irving Settel and Norman Glenn, *Television Advertising and Production Handbook* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1953), p. 25.

2. Fairfax M. Cone, *With All Its Faults: A Candid Account of Forty Years in Advertising* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), p. 262; "Who Will Produce TV?," *Televiiser*, Spring 1945, p. 9.

3. U.S. Federal Communications Commission, Office of Network Study, *Interim Report: Responsibility for Broadcast Matter*, Docket no. 12782 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 164. In 1980, Richard W. Jencks, a former counsel for CBS, wrote that continuing the practice of network radio, the early years of television programming remained in the hands of advertising agencies, which negotiated with networks for specific time slots for programs that agencies brought in, Richard W. Jencks, "How Network Television Programming Decisions Are Made," in *Network Television and the Public Interest*, ed. Michael Botein and David M. Rice (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1980), p. 37; network-sponsor production relations are described in "TV-FM-FAX," *Sponsor*, November 1947, p. 36, and "Sponsor-Agency-Station: Who Is

Responsible for What in TV?," *Sponsor*, January 1948, p. 53; *Television*, February 1949, p. 4.

4. *Television*, November 1947, p. 6.

5. "Lining Up for TV's Big Battle," *Business Week*, March 10, 1956, p. 66; Columbia Broadcasting System, *Annual Report*, for year ending December 30, 1950 (New York: Columbia Broadcasting System, 1951), p. 5. For material on the development of packaged programs at CBS, see "Revolutionizing Radio: CBS Wants to Buy ABC and Hytron," *Business Week*, May 12, 1951, p. 21; "CBS Steals the Show," *Fortune*, July 1953, p. 82; "CBS to Build World's Largest Video Plant," *Broadcasting*, February 23, 1948, p. 14; "One Round to CBS," *Business Week*, September 3, 1949, p. 24.

6. James Whiteside. "The Communicator II: What About the Gratitude Factor?," *The New Yorker*, October 23, 1954, p. 67.

7. "Packaging Returns to the Networks," *Sponsor*, January 16, 1950, p. 58; "TV Costs: Sponsor Pays More, Gets More," *Sponsor*, April 25, 1949, p. 58; "Is the Programming Subsidy Era Over in Network TV?" *Sponsor*, September 8, 1952, p. 83; "Post-Freeze TV: What Advertisers Ask About It," *Sponsor*, June 2, 1952, p. 70.

8. John Gray Peatman, ed., *Radio and Business 1945: Proceedings of the First Annual Conference on Radio and Business* (New York: City College of New York, 1945), p. 130.

9. U.S., Federal Communications Commission, *Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946), p. 17.

10. On Procter and Gamble's advertising policies in network radio, see "FCC's Durr, Others Wonder Whether Radio Knows What the People Want," *Variety*, June 20, 1945, p. 30 quoted in FCC, *Public Service Responsibility*, 1946, p. 17. The president of Procter and Gamble remarked: "Taking 100 percent as the total radio value, we give 90 percent to commercials, to what's said about the product, and we give 10 percent to the show. . . . The last thing I could afford to do is to offend the public."

11. "FCC's Durr, Others Wonder Whether Radio Knows What the People Want," p. 30 quoted in FCC, *Public Service Responsibility*, 1946, p. 17.

12. Edward Barry Roberts, "Writing for Television," in *The Best Television Plays, 1950-1951*, ed. William I. Kaufman (New York: Hastings House, 1952), p. 296; "Be Careful on the Air," *Sponsor*, September 10, 1951, p. 30.

13. "U.S. Steel Makes Friends While It Sells," *Sponsor*, April 4, 1955, pp. 39, 90, 91.

14. American Business Consultants, *Red Channels: The Report on the Communist Influence in Radio and Television* (New York: American Business Consultants, 1950), p. 2.

15. Jack Gould, *Television* interview by Donald McDonald (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1961), p. 49; Erik Bar-nouw, *The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 49.

16. "The Truth About Red Channels," *Sponsor*, October 8, 1951, p. 76.

17. Max Wilk, "Writing for Television," *Theatre Arts*, February 1951, p. 49; Paddy Chayefsky, *Television Plays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), p. 131.

18. Pat Weaver, appearance on "Youth Wants to Know," NBC television, June 5, 1955, collection of the NBC Records Administration Library, New York.

19. DeForest, *Television Today and Tomorrow* (New York: Dial Press, 1942), pp. 36, 355.

20. "Be Careful on the Air, Part II," *Sponsor*, September 24, 1951, p. 37.

21. Carroll O'Meara, *Television Program Production* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), p. 328, emphasis in original.

22. Commentary on the controversies over television crime and horror programs is found in "Mysteries: They Love 'em on TV," *Sponsor*, October 23, 1950, p. 32; Charles Winick, *Taste and the Censor in Television* (New York: Fund for the Republic, 1959), p. 4; Fred Kugel, "Thank You Senator Benton and Mr. Rubicam!," *Television*, November 1951, p. 11; "TV's Hottest Problem: Public Relations," *Sponsor*, June 16, 1952, p. 27.

23. U.S. Congress, House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, *Investigation of Radio and Television Programs, Report by the Communications Subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce*, 82nd Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952), pp. 2, 3.

24. Quoted in Stan Opatowsky, *TV: The Big Picture* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961), p. 41. Bernard B. Smith argued that sponsor control of 1930s radio programming stood as a warning for those who hoped television would fulfill its public service responsibilities and artistic potential. Smith called for network program control in order to shield the writer from the sponsor's narrow commercial pressures. Bernard B. Smith, "Television—There Ought to be a Law," *Harper's*, September 1948, p. 40; "Weaver Scans the Way Ahead," *Broadcasting-Telecasting*, February 28, 1955, pp. 38-39.

25. Jack Gould, "Television Today—A Critic's Appraisal," *New York Times Magazine*, April 8, 1956, p. 12; Albert J. Jaffe, "Are Agencies Earning Their Fifteen Percent on Network TV Shows?," *Sponsor*, October 18, 1954, p. 29. For Weaver's comments on the spectacular, see "The Communicator," p. 69; Richard Austin Smith, "TV: The Coming Showdown," *Fortune*, September 1954, p. 164.

26. U.S., Federal Communications Commission, Office of Network Study,

Second Interim Report: Television Program Procurement, Part II (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965), p. 559.

27. For a discussion of Weaver's programming philosophy, see Herman Land, "The Spectacular: An Interim Report," *Sponsor*, November 15, 1954, p. 31; Whiteside, "The Communicator," part 2, pp. 37, 67, 71; "Weaver Scans the Way Ahead," pp. 40, 42; "Stars, Spectaculars—and Uplift?," *Newsweek*, July 18, 1955, p. 49; Weaver told Martin Mayer in 1956: "I don't think any people can understand strategic thinking in television unless they are essentially broadcast-trained people. . . . Nowadays, going to the movies on a regular basis is actually a minority experience in American society. I think this is because of Hollywood's strategic approach in opposition to that of the advertising-trained men who look at all America as their total market, because they must do so when they deal with popular brands." Martin Meyer, "TV's Lords of Creation," *Harper's*, November 1956, p. 2.

28. Wilk, "Writing for Television," p. 241; Weaver told *Television* magazine that "the grand design of television . . . is to create an aristocracy of the people, the proletariat of privilege," cited in U.S. Congress, Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, *The Television Inquiry*, vol. 4: *Network Practices, Hearings before the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce*, 84th Cong., 2d sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1956), p. 40.

29. *Sponsor*, September 17, 1956, p. 1, emphasis in original; Mayer, "TV's Lords of Creation," p. 32.

30. "Weaver Scans the Way Ahead," p. 40.

31. Roger Kennedy, "Programming Content and Quality," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 22 (Autumn 1957): 542, 543.

32. George Wolf, "New TV Programming Pattern," *Advertising Agency Magazine*, June 24, 1955, p. 27; George Wolf, "TV Program Outlook Bright as New Big Season Opens," *Advertising Agency Magazine*, October 28, 1955, p. 22. Wolf concluded his article with "That tube in the living room never looked brighter than today."

33. Richard Averson and David Manning White, eds., *Electronic Drama: Television Plays of the 1960s* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), p.xiii; Gore Vidal, "Notes on Television," *The Writer*, March 1957, p. 34; Rod Serling, *Patterns* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 11.

34. FCC, *Second Interim Report*, p. 575; Harold Mehling, *The Great Time-Killer* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1962), pp. 11-12.

PART THREE

Programs and Power: Networks, Sponsors, and the Rise of Film Programming