

In the 1960's, well after the heyday of movies, there arose a movement for the serious study of the then still very popular motion picture medium. The purpose of this study was to elevate movies to a higher status of artistic achievement. It was a revisionist movement, sparked by the French appreciation of American genre filmmakers, such as Howard Hawks, Nicholas Ray, Samuel Fuller, and Douglas Sirk, whose movies were popular, but taken for granted, and whose names were all but unknown to the general American public whom these filmmakers so well served. If we were to take the output of these all but invisible "auteurs" seriously, the image of the whole medium would have to be upgraded in public esteem. The reactionary impulse from the other more established disciplines was to ask: Yes, but are movies Art?

Since then the question seems to have been answered to everyone's (even the most snobbish of scholars) satisfaction. The pleasure derived from the Saturday matinee was indeed one created of truth and beauty - a pleasure of an aesthetic (and also sociological, psychological, etc.) nature.

Television began as a by-product of movies, usurping the lower levels of the medium (the low-budget serial format), and thus helped push the movie product even more up the rungs of artistic recognition, by comparison. But now, television has been thriving for better than 25 years and needs no longer be afflicted with an inferiority complex as movies' unwanted bastard child. The documentary and public affairs aspects of broadcasting apart, television, as the logical extension of the American storytelling tradition, would now benefit from recognition of its potential (however rarely fulfilled) as a unique popular art form, worthy

of serious study. If television is not (or only rarely is) considered as art, it is because of the medium's well established reputation for second rate entertainment - not because of its nature or potential. It is time that we stopped assuming that TV rots the mind and started isolating how TV may aspire to aesthetic experience.

What is left with the viewer after a session of watching TV? Not individual images. The television screen is both too small and too poorly defined, compared to the cinema, to aspire to the formal grace of landscape or even the telling detail of portraiture. Perhaps television's greatest advantage over film - the immediacy of video - by its own nature is not a lasting quality. Video production does not tend to monumentalize, as film production does. Video better captures the fleetingness of life. The great moments of live video - such as the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald or a superhuman play in sports - become memorable not from their original life in time, but through instant replay and the analysis of motion slowed down into blurred frozen actions. If, in the first half of the century, movies worked to establish a lasting mythology of American culture, television, in the second half of the century, records the inevitable erosion and slipping away of that stability. Television exists in a continuum. It functions in the average American household as a time-passer - time spent that will not be remembered. Even if we wanted to, we could not keep up with the whole body of television production. There is more TV produced than there are hours in the day. We can only dip into the TV experience selectively and let the rest flow by.

Television sometimes seems most successful at its most mindless. It is the most passive of mediums, characterized by its modesty. If it attempts to create an aesthetic experience at all, it attempts a less intensified experience than movies, where such a high price is now associated with an experience that will last no longer than a single sitting - a period of about 1½ to 3 hours. What are memorable on television are more generalized experiences defined over a longer period of time - the way individuals or series premises come to grow on viewers through week-to-week exposure, or the growing impact that a serialized novel effects as episode after episode builds interest. These experiences represent longer than 3-hour commitments on the part of the viewer, over days, weeks, months or years. Thus less urgency is invested in any single time slot of such a medium. It is not as necessary, as it is in movies today, that a single episode of television self-promote its existence - that it be hype-able.

Television can afford to be a more laid-back medium, and, in this sense, may be better suited to the needs of the 1970's than moviemaking, which is now all but paralyzed creatively by the hysteria of high stakes, make-or-break, commercial roulette. While a single blockbuster movie might save (or, if a failure, sink) a studio, no single movie-of-the-week made for TV will produce more than a minor fluctuation in its host network's weekly ratings. Even if no one at all watches a TV movie, it will not lose money, as its sponsors have pre-paid for its airing. Unfortunately, of course, this relative fiscal "safety" of TV production tends to call for an unimaginative correlative safety in programming form and content in order to attract conservative minded sponsors.

In turn, it is this tradition of safe, mediocre programming that discourages the top creative people from more fully exploring the potentials of the television medium. This vicious circle of mediocrity, it would seem, need not be impenetrable. One imagines that if a "big name" writer, director, producer, or performer wanted to work in television, he or she might well be given a relatively free hand. Yet the second class reputation of television, its low-ceiling salary potential, and the generally unadventurous network programming and regulation, have to date failed to attract the more ambitious talents.

For less well known talents and newcomers, however, the situation of television production may offer a more reasonable atmosphere in which to work and develop. There is not the extreme pressure and accompanying self-consciousness that comes with the over-publicized moviemaking profession where one false move may destroy a career. Creatively speaking, television production takes place largely out of the spotlight.

If not in the very rigid 3-camera shooting procedures of sit-coms, where a director may be little more than a traffic cop, certainly in the single-camera dramatic series and movies-of-the-week, a television director has enough leeway to creatively practice his craft. It is often argued that tight TV production schedules allow no time for creativity. Yet the so-called assembly-line procedures of the movie studios in the 20's-40's were hardly less controlled, and creative people were still able to master their disciplines and produce meaningful work.

Television production today, in fact, seems in many ways parallel to that very fruitful 20's-40's period of studio moviemaking. One of the reasons movies ever had a Golden Age was because there

was so much moviemaking activity going on during the 20's-40's, so much healthy competition, such steady use made of creative talent, that the whole level of activity and the standards of acceptability were elevated in a relatively stable atmosphere. A promising actor or director could develop gradually over many years; there was not the panicked necessity of making high art or blockbuster commerciality in one's first outing. A similarly stable atmosphere exists in corporate-sponsored TV today. The demand for product is high and constant; and the competition of networks for higher ratings is conducive to a constant reevaluation of product and, the evidence of most sit-coms to the contrary, to a constant upgrading of the standards of acceptability.

Television has clearly supplanted movies as the mass medium that most reflects the way we see ourselves in America today. Television reacts quickly to changes in the American scene. The reaction time between the conception of a TV movie idea and its appearance on the tube can be much faster than in theatrical movies which seem to shy away from the most contemporary of events and issues, fearing perhaps that the fleetingness of these events and issues may render a movie dated before it even hits the screens. Television, however, is quick to turn headlines into melodramas: about teenaged alcoholics, wife-beating, liberated women, gay school teachers, and child abuse. Too often these exercises in instant sociology come off as mechanical, propagandistic, and lacking in insights. But, sometimes, such as in Joanne Woodward's portrayal of a middle-aged jogger in SEE HOW SHE RUNS, the results are moving and even inspiring.

Where television most clearly has the edge over movies, however, is in its recent discovery of the long format, multi-part novels-for-TV. This is truly a new form, of great aesthetic potential, and unique to TV in terms of commercial practicality. It was Griffith, in his 8-hour concept of INTOLERANCE, who first sensed that a longer format was needed to seriously tackle other than simple short-story narratives. But the problems in theatrically exhibiting movies of more than 3 hours in length have never been satisfactorily resolved; and serious filmmakers from Griffith to Bertolucci have been rigidly discouraged from making such expensive, unmarketable films. To solve this impasse, Roberto Rossellini, always decades ahead of his times, was the first major director to turn his back on the cinema in favor of the multi-part television format for his massive historical examinations of the evolution of human consciousness. The new form has now proven its effectiveness for everything from culturally edifying PBS adaptations to the most trashy of network exploitations. It is quickly rendering the old 1½ - 2 hour format obsolete.

Television need rot our minds no more or less than movies, comic books, theater, or pulp novels may have in the past. It is certainly the most readily accessible of all these media, but the passivity that it encourages on the part of the overly-leisured public need be no more insidious than other media. If people become overly-addicted to TV at the expense of other activities, is the medium to be blamed? Actually, recent reports indicate that TV viewing has declined slightly of late. If this means that the public is becoming more discriminating about what they watch, it should provoke change. If our more talented filmmakers could forget about becoming rich for a moment and think about the new possibilities of the television medium, the change could be an elevation of television to the status of popular art.

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