



Whence, and Whither, Rabbitears

I lived without a television for 20 years, but this isn't a story of courage in the face of unbelievable hardship, or the triumph of the human spirit. Rabbitears exists because I was given a tv last year. It was an old black and white that only got one channel and lost sound if the knob wasn't set just right. Months later it went further on the fritz and someone else gave me color.

It isn't that I never had a chance to have my own tv before. Every time I mentioned my tubeless state, someone would offer their old set, with exclamations of pity. And I'd have to explain how I kept myself video-free on purpose, from a dark suspicion that if I had television I'd waste what little of my time I then spent usefully, sucked into the diabolical cathode trance. "Oh," they'd say, "at first, but you'll get over that in a couple of weeks, when the novelty wears off."

It's been twelve months now.

I watch at least two hours each workday, less or more on weekends, depending on whether the movies are Little House on the Prairie and The Fly, or Streets of Fire and Brazil. I've stopped reading mysteries (I'd about run out of authors I liked anyway), and in winter when I can't afford to heat the whole apartment, I spend 90% of my at-home time in the bedroom. Where the tv is.

It started with Star Trek. I was writing a K/S story and needed background and a firmer grip on character. And so the fateful set was lugged to the third floor, set up on my Dad's old Army Air Force footlocker and plugged in. Reception was excellent -- on the one channel I happened to need. None of the other channels came in.

Perfect.

I couldn't get hooked doing just one channel.

No need to recount the sordid slide -- the tale of a couch potato's progress is all too familiar in this age of addiction.

It was what I had known in my heart all those years: I like tv.

And I take tv seriously. I don't watch it for the plot; I watch it for the acting and the production and the script and the neat little bits (and the cute guys, there is no Art without Eros) and then I want to talk about it.

One thing you learn very quickly is that no one wants to hear you talk about tv.

No one gets excited about tv.

It's like trying to talk about science fiction before you discovered fandom.

But now I've got you where I want you, captive in my fanzine, and I'm going to talk about tv, nyahahaha.

The Lost Years: 1969-1988

One thing I ought to get clear -- I don't know anything about movies, tv, or Hollywood in the usual sense. Ask me to pick Cary Grant out of a line-up, or name the latest "10" starlet or Michael Jackson video, right away I'm out of my depth. Shows swept the nation -- I was oblivious. I've never seen a single episode of Fantasy Island. I watched a Love Boat during a house-sitting stint because David Cassidy was on it -- he'd cut his hair, lost his anorexic beauty, and was still a perfectly decent actor, and that's ALL I remember about the show. I'd never seen Happy Days till my sluggish brain managed to integrate the fact that Scott Baio had been on it, and I started recently to turn on and tune in to America's once #1 show only 15 years after everyone else.

So, my enthusiasms may seem naive and untutored and dated. My first tv's lone channel was the one that did only reruns and movies and later the Fox weekend shows, and I have remained loyal to it -- it's still the best reception on the little color box. Some things I'd like to watch, like Night Court, conflict with stuff I'm currently researching; I keep meaning to watch Roseanne, but Channel 5 has these

lines of little colored sparkles seiving up across the screen...

So You Want to Write for a Fanzine of Television Commentary

So Rabbitears is going to be a little different from tv criticism in daily papers or academic journals -- it won't be just hot new shows or leisured assessment of classic series. If you want to participate in Rabbitears you can write about any show you want.

Another way it's going to be different is I won't accept killer reviews. I've been asked "But you can trash a show that's really bad, right?" Uh-uh.

For one thing, something you hate you aren't likely to watch more than once. And you can't watch one episode out of up to ten years of a series and have anything like an intelligent critical response to the show as a whole, any more than you could read two pages of a novel and pronounce on its overall worth. Some very badly written books are delights and immortal; some very well-written books are garbage. The best series have stupid episodes; the best episodes, strung together in nightly reruns, may reveal tedious sameness; the worst shows may have one enduring character. You won't know any of that unless you give your attention.

One also has to identify what the show is. Too many reviewers are ready to dismiss a show because of its genre, often without even realizing that is what they are doing. If it's a light comedy by intent, it's misguided to complain that it isn't M*A*S*H. If it's action-adventure, there's little value in criticizing it in terms of sober drama. You have to be willing to be passive to what the show is, to know if it does what it does well or ill.

That's why Rabbitears will prefer comment from people who like or at least respect what they are critiquing. I have written a killer review or two in my time, and I can tell you one thing about them: they're easy. They're fun, they may sometimes be justified, and they're hard to resist when you've read one too many ghodawful sexist books or seen one too many movies butcher decent novels. But whatever can be said in its defense, it is so easy to be clever while you're cruel. It's one thing to do it with the classics, whose dead authors can't suffer from your superficiality, it's another to shiv living creators who certainly, if they're in television, combat odds you know not of to just get the damn thing on the air every week.

If much tv is dimwitted, it's because making a tv show is almost impossibly difficult to do. Reviewers, of whom I have been one, don't have that excuse. Conscientious reviewing is not easy, no, but the one slavering unlettered editor that is generally all that stands between a critic and publication is nothing -- NOTHING -- to what faces a creative person seeking access to national television.

First of all, she'll probably have to meet the standards of taste and integrity set by the networks, and it's not easy for everyone to hunker down like that, especially us older folks with arthritis. Limbo, Limbo...

But once you've done your grovelling and got the writing in, the point at which a reviewer's work is over, the producer's task is hardly started. She deals with the billion details of the people (including finding and hiring them), the written word, the photographic image, equipment, props and costume, makeup, rewrites, music, sound, sets, locations, effects, stock shots, money money money and then you do the edit. Meanwhile wrapping up the previous episode and already well into the next.

You don't say a show is good just because it was difficult to do -- indeed, that trend in music appreciation has always galled me -- but neither need you always run roughshod over someone who, however unsuccessfully, just did an appalling amount of work. The compulsion to use critique as protest is innate in all critics, and many of us find it more interesting to discuss what went wrong and why than what went right in a work, and that probably has evolutionary value. The venting of outrage, particularly considering the amount of money squandered in film enterprises, can sometimes seem a duty. For now, at least, it is a duty Rabbitears will forego.

There is, of course, always the prospect of effecting actual change by other means than inducing apoplexy in your reviewees. Samuel R. Delany's review of Star Wars (Cosmos, Vol. 1, #4) is a model of how to catch more flies with honey. While

it's not required that you be that kind, look deep as you can and bring interesting ideas rather than flip platitudes to your critique. I've used "Hollywood" as a swear-word and likely will continue to do so, but Rabbitears will adopt as a motto the advice of a motorcycle racer who told his lover his way of avoiding crack-ups in the pack. He said, "Look where you want to go, not where you don't want to go."

Besides, people already complain a lot elsewhere about the low quality of tv. I donno, I agree and disagree. On the one hand, you better have at least TRIED to write a comic or dramatic script before you kvetch about how bad all the shows are; on the other hand, television writers are showered with silver and gold for their services, like 18 grand for 60 pages that have a lot of white space and for that pay they ought to be good.

On the third hand, or maybe prehensile tail, part of what any writer gets paid for is to remain stoic as her work is rent and mangled by savage hordes of editors, and tv writers get this in spades. A very low percentage of what you see on the tube may be the actual words of the credited writer. With television, you can only make a wild guess at who to applaud or condemn about anything. The producer may have rewritten a pedestrian script into a jewel and get no writer credit; or destroyed a sensitive and unique idea and take no blame. So many people are involved in setting up a shot that praising or dumping on a director or cinematographer for a show's looks may or may not be valid. Sure I can tell a McEveety from a Daniels ST, but I do it by the fighting -- and who was really responsible for that?

So a lot of the ranting and raving about tv ends up hitting the wrong targets anyway.

Another reason to avoid scurrilous remarks is that I'll quite likely send Rabbitears to the show you're commenting on. Don't let it disconcert you -- if you waver about saying something you fear is too forward, hell, go ahead and say it. But if you hesitate to put a comment on record because you suspect it of being mean and glib -- by all means, refrain. To give you a rule of thumb, please observe a limit of one snide remark per 10 manuscript pages.

What else should you do to write for Rabbitears? Well, write what excites you, not just what you think a critic ought to write about or notice, and try to keep it true. It's amazing how easy it is to write down something perfectly false without realizing it; something that comes out of a wish to appear to know what you don't; or from having a crush on a group of words; or from being afraid to say what you do know. I do it all the time. The thing to do is go back and get rid of that line and put in what should have been there instead (maybe nothing). Don't be afraid to love the sound of your own voice -- there's no decent writer who doesn't -- and let it play; but when you step off the edge into thin air, turn around like Wile E. Coyote and walk back.

Great advice, just don't look too much to my work for example. Look to Cheryl Cline, if I can ever get her to send me an article. Cheryl almost never goes right off the rails, whereas...I'll confess it just once: one way or another, beautiful guys influence about everything I write. As Moms Mabley put it so eloquently, "Young boys...is my weakness." They breathe through everything, the original meaning of "inspiration". No less valid and no more so than another motive force, but susceptible to a kind of Rapture of the Deep if you submerge too long. Now Cheryl has an eye for the guys, but she comes up for air a lot and she has discipline. We are talking bibliographies. We're talking rock encyclopedias. Ones she wrote, not ones she refers to. Cheryl Cline is a scholar as well as a connoisseur, and my advice if you want to write for a prestigious periodical like Rabbitears is to read everything of hers you can get your hands on, and think about how she does it. (My advice is the same even if you'd sink to the ignoble likes of Rolling Stone or The New Yorker, that throw crude lucre at you, putative recompense for your art.)

Perfervism

Another Rabbitears feature is that I may have to do a lot of the writing myself, which will make it hard to conceal that my writing can be a little...expansive. So

I've decided to call the way I write a school of thought. See, if you make it a school of thought, you can do whatever you want and nobody quite dares to claim you're merely an idiot. Thus, Rabbitears emerges from and will proselytize for a new critical school I'm going to call perfervism because in our school it is okay to wax enthusiastic and even lyrical -- perfervism contends that to do anything else is, indeed, to grow false to oneself and one's art and one's audience. (Schools have to contend this last bit. Don't worry, it's just a formality. You can write for Rabbitears in any style you want, except reviewerese, please.)

Perfervism repudiates the concept of objectivity in criticism (or anything else) as a pernicious myth designed to (a) privilege texts that just don't deserve it and (b) suck the life out of language.

Perfervism demands that politics and passion be integrated up-front into the critical endeavor.

Perfervists delight in looking from all angles -- sometimes to the extent of self-contradiction.

Perfervism holds that if you digress far enough you may just find yourself at the heart of things. Essays written in the perfervist mode will not necessarily "re-view" the show. They will not necessarily stick to "the point". In fact some of them might be said to describe a hyperbolic orbit all around Robin Hood's barn. Because perfervists maintain that getting there is practically all of the fun.

Perfervism, in my humble opinion, is the best darn school of critical thought to come down the pike since the Romantics.

Okay, consider yourself served with a manifesto.

Politics

I said before that I take television seriously. Let me clarify that. I take the art of television seriously. The admitted fictions. Nothing -- nothing -- that purports to be true on television do I believe or hold a goat's worth of respect for. Anyone who has ever been involved however glancingly with the way American tv handles "truth", and yet Believes, is of the damned, a willing fool, a mark, a boob and an Eloi. I refuse to watch the shit. No matter how aware you are little units of disinformation still wriggle into your psyche, like African river parasites that blind and paralyze.

You detect a semi-maniacal note of ambivalence. I love tv and I despise and loathe it. I love its creativity, hate its miasmal lying, see the two as opposing lines, opposing groups of people, in the medium. Anything that's such a huge node of money in a capitalist economy is by definition corrupt, yet tv has its own redemption at its heart -- the creators, the story-tellers, that are its means of existence. Because it's a funny thing about fiction: the way you get better and better at making up stories is by telling more and more of the truth.

If I were to deal much with "factual" programming, Rabbitears would become one long scream of rage, and I'd need a less bucolic title, say something along the lines of NUKE THE FUCKERS!

While the politics of a fiction program may suck the cosmic vacuum cleaner, at least it's presented as fiction. Such a show can be cumbersome to analyze, because the political content is not aboveboard; and basic political analysis isn't always what interests a critic about a fictional show. For instance I know that a program that presents police as warm, caring, sensitive individuals may conceivably clash with the life experiences of one or more of my readers (did I put that delicately enough, do you think?); that just wasn't what I wanted to talk about in this issue's 21 Jump Street article. Valid it may be, but... Look, we may think royalty is a crook, yet still love King Lear and fairy-tales. Because we sense neither is really about royalty, and in the same way a cop show certainly isn't literally about cops. King Lear is about the tragedy of being an egoistic jerk, fairy-tales are about survival, and cop shows are about...well, I'm not sure yet what cop shows are about, but it isn't lawnorder. I think it may be (hold onto your hats) love. Hey it surprised me too when I looked at the structure, and noticed the show isn't over till

the cop lays hands on the criminal and takes him back to the lockup to keep. Primitive? Oh yeah. To where I don't even feel any sex there, more bringing erring, no-time-to-be-for-you momandad back where they belong.

Anyway while on one level 21 Jump Street can be seen as part of the veil of obfuscation that allows four cops to kick the shit out of a guy in the alley back of my house, in another way it just has nothing to do with it. I doubt there's a female in the United States who spots a local patrolman girdled in creaky leather and gets even the slightest reverberation of the response she feels when Tom Hanson looks up through his aerodynamically unsound hair. Alternate universes are real, here, now, and we all live in them. The political aspects of a show as complex as this one could be analyzed at book length, it won't suffice to say "It's a cop show, it must be reactionary." There are moments, not where you might think and not in its grander gestures, when this show tells the truth.

If I seem to use the terms "politics" and "truth" interchangeably, it's that, in communication, politics is simply a matter of how close to the truth a communication comes. In the case of television, where such distances are measured in parsecs, it ought to be possible to pay Rabbitears readers the compliment of assuming they grasp the fundamental stance of the medium and that any slipping around, under, or through that reactionary monolith represents herculean work on the part of production companies. It's rarely done overtly any more, and half the fun of television now is detecting how liberal writers and producers scam the networks.

The commonest scam going is "I am but a flyweight witless sitcom, you don't want to eat me, wait for my big brother the hour-long action/drama." And the action/drama trots over the bridge saying "I am but a little meaningless adventure and melodrama, you don't want to eat me, wait for my big brother the three-hour mini-series." And the mini-series turning out to be nothing but suitable gormless bullshit, the network troll sinks back appeased. Till along comes a Smothers Brothers or a Married...with Children in its suit of lights to drag everything into an open arena a while.

The game is all of a piece. Beginners can go read The Glass Teat and The Other Glass Teat and get oriented. Rabbitears isn't conceived as an introduction to tv, more a serconzine of reasonable good will reacting ruminatively and at random to spikes of positive stimuli on the tube.

Why Bother?

In one way, a critic always stays in a safe spot. You're sitting back eating an apple and pointing out where the fence needs more whitewash, and 99 times out of a hundred you've put nothing out there that shows you could do better.

But if you have any sensitivity at all, you realize your critique might make you look like a dope. You're putting yourself out there too, by responding, especially from the position of consumer who's never done that kind of work at all. Writing, I can talk about, I've been doing it since I was eight, you can disagree with me but you can't intimidate me. But a 99.9 verbal SAT score will cut no ice with, say, photographers. Musicians. Actors. Directors. They do things I can't do. And they fascinate the hell out of me. Also scare me. When did anybody ever pay me \$50,000 for two weeks of my time? I mean -- we're talking about the grown-ups here.

So we're doing something terrifying, in public. How come?
One, criticism is a basic urge, like sex or reading -- half the time you've done it before you realize; two, I love tv and I want to find other people who want to talk about it. If we're naive in our view of the art, well, at least we are uninfluenced by the either the heat of the art's creation or the chill of fiscal willies. I hope you, yes you, will write about tv you watch. If you don't think you have a lot to say, well, short is cool. Keep in mind the two main Rabbitears criteria: for writing -- (1) do not bend, fold, spindle or mutilate the shows you write about and (2) write what you think and feel. If these two criteria seem mutually exclusive, I'm not saying don't criticize, just don't use critique as a platform from which to exhibit the rapier keenness of your wit, the acidity of your tongue, and the successful sublimation of your sadism. Art and graphics would be a boon, or send me your legal expertise (can I print photos of tv stars without paying?) And now: the zine.

The End in View

Early in 1987, Ron Leavitt and Michael G. Moye sat edgily in a conference room filled with executives of the fledgling Fox Broadcasting Co.* Paul Lenburg, executive vice-president of the market-research firm ASI, addressed the group (about) Married... with Children, the bold, half-hour sitcom Leavitt and Moye had created for the Fox network.

"What I would suggest is to make these people obviously love each other. Show that they care more about their children. And make these children a little less weird. Then you might have something there."

Leavitt listened carefully. "You know," he replied, "you're the reason why television sucks."

My hero.

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It has long been my contention that whatever you think of its morality, "the end justifies the means" is a ridiculous philosophical position to get yourself into, because you cannot know the end of ANY action, large or small, exquisite or gonzo, selfless or reaganera. The U.S. Supreme Court judges knew, when they first ruled that obscene means could be justified by socially redeeming ends, that they were begging the question of free speech. Like too many Americans, the Supremes wouldn't have touched the real issue with a ten-foot gavel. Evasion has become our most identifying national characteristic.

Evasion is the art of not saying that which will disturb. Evasion is the policy of not allowing the disturbing thing to be said by others. Evasion is the law which pretends to decide on the legality of a statement by determining its "value".

Value to which people, where, and when? Do we presume to know what archeologists, historians, museums, liberation armies might find priceless in 200 years? 1,000? I have this crazy idea that fanzines are going to be among the most precious possessions of all the above groups, someday, these things we make and send out into the mail for love. I doubt there's a court would agree, or care.

You either have free speech or you don't. Currently, we don't -- not everywhere, not all the time, not for all of us. The Right is snipping away at our fringes, avoiding the quick flesh that will make us kick hard, taking a bit here, a bit there, from places supposedly we'll never miss; when the edges close in, we'll have retreated from them, to smaller definitions of what's central, what's important, what's crucial to protect. The snips?

* Howard Polskin, TV Guide, July 29, 1989

Art in America is a 98-pound weakling. The Right kicks sand in its face with impunity. Last February the National Endowment for the Arts was constrained to send a notice to all recipients of its grants. About drugs.

NEA grant recipients aren't to use them. Neither are their employees. If an NEA grant recipient finds out an employee does use drugs -- presumably whether the NEA pays that employee's salary or not -- the recipient must "sanction" the employee. They don't say whether that means firing, docking a paycheck, keelhauling or the Death of a Thousand Paper Cuts. The recipient must also notify the NEA that they have found a user in their midst. If they don't want to sanction the user, then they must show proof that the user has "satisfactorily" completed a substance abuse rehabilitation program.

All this for a lousy fifty grand.

Wherever will they find art organizations willing to accept mere money in return for narcing on their member artists?

Gosh, I can't imagine. Unless at the Corcoran Gallery (formerly "of Art", now "of the Expedient").

Just as the first modern nation to recognize gay marriage (Denmark -- the law takes effect this October) makes another baby-step toward sexual sanity, the United States takes a giant leap back with the suppression of the late Robert Mapplethorpe's photography exhibition at the Corcoran in Washington DC. 108 members of Congress, incited by Texas Republican Dick Armey (isn't it exquisite? Isn't it the PERFECT name?), objected not to the Corcoran showing it but to the NEA funding it, through the University of Pennsylvania. That was enough to blanch faces and livers at the museum, however, and they cancelled the exhibition.

The Senate has just blacklisted two arts organizations that produced work they didn't like; the NEA isn't allowed to give them money for five years, and had its own budget cut by the amount it already gave them. One is the Institute of Contemporary Art, for organizing the Mapplethorpe exhibit. Senator Jesse Helms, fearless spokesperson for the minority made up of rich white Christian males in America, has capitalized on the flap by his proposed law that the NEA may not fund anything anyone might find indecent. Whether or not the law passes, the NEA has already become garbage, tainted money no self-respecting artist would accept (right?), by agreeing to act as Vice Squad to the arts.

Drugs are always a handy red herring, and damn if they haven't been investigating rock and roll, but sex always borders so on anarchy, is so little controllable for profit except by repression of sexual acts and knowledge, that it remains the most popular target for legislative feeding frenzy.

The snips are being taken out of sex on all fronts. New abortion decisions, deliberate AIDS underfunding, legal forays against various types of consensual sex, legal lethargy in confronting forced sex, tighter control of cable television, arguments over whether the word "condom" should be allowed on tv...

If a museum suffers cardiac arrest every time its funding is even remotely threatened, if the NEA can pass on its own fear to the artists it funds, who will preserve and protect what isn't even recognized as art? Who will stand up for the right of broadcast artists to present their work without little black stars pasted over its tits?

The only ones who can do it are the very ones who have been steamrollered again and again till they are very, very tired...almost too tired to stand up. You. Me. The American Left, if you can say that with a straight face... The rabble that's become unrousable -- in large part because of American media's own incorrigible evasion and pathological lying, which passes its malaise to the masses.

And what objections, what arguments could affect decision-makers to whom art in and of itself is valueless?

I don't know, but if we use the philistines' Redeeming Social Value as our argument in the defense of sexual art, we weaken our position in two ways. First, we have accepted their definition of sexual art as something which needs to be "redeemed"; second, we have accepted their proposition that social value is a constant that can be judged.

The message we must convey is that we value the freedom of the artist and the right of free speech, and see no principle of logic or justice whereby that freedom or that right must be abrogated merely because the art may be viewed and the speech heard by millions rather than hundreds at one time.

If we repeat this simple principle enough, it may come to have meaning even in the eyes of network executives and politicians.

The cause is no way ignoble. The evasions involved in suppressing the sexual statement are those same evasions used to suppress the politically dangerous statement -- frequently they are the same statement, as with the left-wing goofing of the Smothers Brothers. The happy-family sitcom and wholesome action adventure, unleavened, become the disinformation of entertainment. The wholly artificial separation of the "noble" non-sexual issues from the less worthy sexual issues is the very crux upon which has rested the huge weight of sexual oppression during the millenia of recorded history. And, believe it, that sexual oppression is the major source of craziness on this planet. There's no way to untangle rights and freedoms one from another, no way to prioritize them and put the "trivial" ones off till the important ones have been gained, without in fact trivializing the entire concept of liberty. The only freedom that's real is the uncut version.

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It is not to the advantage of those in power to allow the development, in those who submit to this power, of lofty thoughts or of close friendships or attachments, which are the usual outcome of love.

Plato, Symposium

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"The End in View" will be an ongoing column on censorship and related issues in television. Readers are invited to submit guest columns on aspects of censorship that interest them.

WHY I LIKE TO WATCH OTHER PEOPLE WORK

by Terry A. Garey

I always have. But it isn't just the motions, like our cat Dudley who would watch Ctein spot prints by the hour, his eyes going back and forth like one of those tick-tock cat clocks. We babysat an iguana once, and Dudley would watch the creature breathe in and out.

No, for me it's different. I like to watch competent people accomplish work. (Yes, Ctein knows how to spot prints to beat the band, and the iguana was one hell of a good breather, but you see what I mean.) I always loved watching my father when he did odd jobs around the house, even though it meant that I grew up with the conviction that holding boards was a complicated, exacting business and that knowing which screwdriver was which was at least as important as nuclear physics.

On TV these days, I can watch all sorts of people doing all sorts of things, whether it's This Old House, Julia Child, The Frugal Gourmet, or Hands, an Irish production that shows up on the Discovery Channel every now and then. Norm Abrams of This Old House is my hero, with his big broad thumbs and broad belly. Norm always knows which kind of nail to use and why, he always knows how to test for dry rot, and he quietly does his work, only getting a little excited when he gets to use a new power tool. The host of the show grandstands around and leads the homeowners through their paces, but Norm gets stuff done. He does a good job, despises waste and clutter, takes his time when he needs to, and explains the practical end of carpentry with a love of simple beauty and a job well done that warms me to the marrow. To watch Norm balance on a board in order to get

some shingles on right, ignoring vanity and gravity, thrills me more than any leaping pair of male thighs on MTV possibly can. After all, when Norm is done, someone has their windows on straight and plumb; when MTV is done all that's left is sweaty spandex.

Julia Child was my first hero, though. I could watch reruns of her gaily dismembering a chicken over and over again. I will never cook a pot of tripe unless I am forced to by starvation, but I'll watch Julia do it: gluing the piece of pastry over the hole in the baking jar to seal in the aromas.

It isn't the tripe I'm watching, it's Child, who loves what she does and loves explaining what she does. She is parodied by comedians quite often because of her subject matter and her rather ungainly person and easily mocked voice, but they always miss the point. The point isn't that she's tall and plain and near-sighted and sort of hoots when she talks (they also portray her as fat, which she isn't), the point is that she loves food, she loves cooking it in a particular way, and she loves showing other people how to do it. She's passionate. She's not a snob. She teaches how to do peasant dishes much more often than she teaches how to do haute cuisine. She shows the audience the ugliest fish imaginable and treats it with respect and affection. It has given its life for her and she's going to make sure it isn't wasted. Using her own body as illustration, she points out which joints from the steer are the best, and why. She makes little jokes and ironic sallies as she cooks, strewing flour about the place and squinting at the prompter without her glasses to see how much time is left. She rends dead lobsters with her bare hands, and hacks into artichokes with determination and aplomb. Her deserts are usually a bit funny looking, but I don't care that she can't make perfect cream swirls and chocolate leaves. I care that she cares, that she does her best, and I love her obvious satisfaction at the end of every show, when she presents the items she has made on a nicely set table, bringing civilization out of the chaos of nature. Julia Child is my hero, and my own cooking, even in times of poverty, has been the better for it.

Hands is an Irish series that has run three or so times on The Discovery Channel, a cable TV channel that runs nature programs, documentaries and the like. I discovered it by accident and was enthralled. Someone somewhere and somehow decided to do this series on the old hand skills that are fast disappearing in Ireland and other parts of the world: shoemaking, tailoring, spinning, candle-making, the making of bridles and saddles. Each half-hour show depicts, with beautiful photography and sensible commentary, real people making real items. The shoemaker explains his trade, showing how he chooses the leather, who does what part of the operation in his shop, explaining how the old handpowered tools work, and even how they are made, what the materials are, where they come from, where they are used, and how the shoe goes together. We see a pair of shoes made from start to finish. We see the piles of hides, the linen thread, the old pots of polish and glue, and old experts and the newer journeymen (and journeywomen), and we watch their hands cut and slice, stitch, trim, nail and glue, pull, fit, tug, polish and produce a pair of shoes that will last for a long, long time, and cause no one who made them even a second of embarrassment.

I watch an old man make a violin, an old woman explain why she's pouring kerosene on wool before she spins it, and he talks about his youth in the shipping industry and she remembers how she knitted stockings and sweaters for her husband and eight children for forty years.

I watch chandlers hand-dipping wax for the candles for the churches, and hear them comment that most people can't afford the beeswax ones much any more. I watch a tailor whip-stitch a lapel into submission and mark across hand woven tweed with a stubby piece of chalk so he can cut the line later when he gets to that bit. I watched in fascination as he measured his client and guided his choice of material so that the cloth was suited to the coat, as it were.

Part of me keeps saying, oh well, these modern days, but the beauty of it makes me proud, somehow, and makes me want to attack my next project, whatever it

is, with all the attention and skill I can offer it.

So that's why I love to watch other people work. I wish there was more stuff on TV like those programs. I want to know how the world works. I want to know about the auto workers in Buenos Aires, and the wine makers in Italy, the clerks and bookbinders of India, the dancers in Sri Lanka, the farmers in Britain and the women who sweep the streets in Russia. I want to know more about the people in China, Africa, Pakistan and Kansas, and what they eat, how they make their living, how they raise their kids.

It beats knowing if Cindy will finally get Jeff to raise the ancient voodoo curse he cursed her with when he gave her Margy's underwear by accident because Vince had amnesia and couldn't get to the hospital on time to see Lorina give birth to a two headed calf, thus revealing the truth about old Mr. Sims and the new nurse in the urgent care ward and their illegitimate son who is secretly an artist who sculpts gladiolas in butter and sells them to keep his stepmother in the style to which she is not accustomed and who is really his grandmother except that she walked out on his grandfather years ago who had remarried and didn't know anything about the curse. Or the gladiolas. But they never show him making the gladiolas. If they did, I might watch.



Best Insults Heard on TV This Year

There's a rip in your marble bag.

Happy Days

It's time to check into the rubber Ramada.

Silver Spoons

These guys have a few lights out in the old marquee.

Happy Days

He's got parts on order that are never coming in.

My Secret Identity

Do you have an embezzler in your memory bank?

Charles in Charge

His carnival left town without him.

Happy Days



On the Jazz

Mythologies arise about the shows one never watches. Everyone knows the "draw" of Charlie's Angels was vacuous bathing beauties (I've never seen it). Everyone knows only morons watched Lost in Space (I liked it). Everyone knows the only attraction of The A-Team was mindless violence.

I started seeing A-Team reruns because it was stripped on Channel 29 just before Star Trek. I grew intrigued, fascinated, and finally delighted. It became evident that The A-Team was "about" shoot-em-up solutions to problems only in the sense that a sitcom is "about" American family life. The family or pseudofamily setting provides the sitcom a subliminally surreal frame on which to hang its absurdity. Traditional to the sitcom has been the fantasy episode, usually framed as a dream, in which the absurdity takes wing, leaving the "realistic" (and someday we must talk about that) element far behind. Gilligan becomes a secret agent whose enemies communicate through tiny tv screens in powder-compacts and soup ladles. Charles becomes the Fairy Godfather, Don Charles-o, languidly stroking a stuffed toy and allowing Buddy to kiss his hand. Fonzie is lured to a Frankenstein's castle to have his "cool" drained and transferred to his uncool double, Dougie, truly one of the great scenes of television comedy.

What I began to be convinced of is that The A-Team's weekly premise is, in a sense, this fantasy episode, removed from the quotidian frame. The central awareness of The A-Team, and the source of its audience appeal, is absurdity.

That there were those who discussed the neat car crashes and stunt falls and cobbled weaponry with enthusiasm I do not doubt, just as there are those who believe the characters on Dallas or The Young and the Restless are real. (A poll among Danish school children revealed that their least-favorite American was J.R. Adults were distressed, which is probably about what the kids intended.) But plenty of shows used similar elements without lasting five seasons. What kept people coming back after years of the formula -- and few popular shows ever stuck so religiously to their formulas as this one did, to the point of once again underlining absurdity -- was a twofold charm, first the major fundamental absurdities of the premise, and second what I'll call the show's parenthetical writing -- the stuff in the show that was "beside the point", that did not lead directly to the climax, or contribute to the basic plot -- in other words, that part of a show's writing that makes it unique.

First, the premise.

Ostensibly a right-wing crowd-pleaser, the program features lots of equipment dear to the heart of the N.R.A. and from time to time the Team's adversary will be The Communist Menace in exotic locales. The Team is composed of Vietnam commandos, a select group chosen for many "impossible" missions. Their troubles and the series start when they are accused of robbing the Bank of Hanoi for personal gain, four days after the war ended. Well, they did rob the Bank of Hanoi, but only under orders. The officer who ordered the robbery having been killed meanwhile back at their base, no one believes them. They are convicted, sentenced, and jailed. And, of course, being nobody but the best at this sort of thing, immediately escape and take up careers as illicit military mercenaries -- the A-Team, righting wrong by means of gunplay and two-fisted action. It's enough to warm the cockles of a Republican's heart.

But zoom in a bit on the actual structure of the premise: the group exists as outlaws evading the U.S. military; the U.S. secret service kidnaps and black-mails them; they frequently oppose local government abuses including crooked police, and -- this is the real kicker -- help underdogs defeat corrupt big business. (Please recall that in the 60s and early 70s prime-time depiction of big business in an unfavorable light was a strict network no-no. For instance, and happily in this case, "The Trouble with Tribbles" had to be rewritten to make Klingons -- rather than agribiz interests -- the villains.) I've long suspected underlying structures like these are way more influential with viewers/readers than superficial plot-lines. The core message of The A-Team is "You have the right to resist the United States government". Mere Dixiecrat/Libertarianism? Maybe, but in a later Cannell/Hasburgh series (21 Jump Street) a hard-core American communist -- a sympathetic character -- is given a chance to speak a pretty unanswerable denunciation of U.S. race and class exploitation.

The A-Team's zestful preference for anarchy and armed revolution over government and accomodation is at bottom more startlingly reminiscent of the (alas, far less ept) 60s-70s underground than of the era's police and military putsches. The surface message is a safe-sounding one, but it is undercut at every turn by these undeniable parallels.

Further undercutting is accomplished by the second major factor in the premise, namely, the criminal, lunatic, artistic and racial minoritization of the heroic centerpiece. At first glance nice WASP boys with a sidekick token, the Team is rapidly disclosed to be of extremely fringey composition indeed. The characters are:

Sgt. Bosco Baracus

Mr. T. did a wonderful job in the menacing character of B.A. (it stands for "Bad Attitude" -- supposedly), who, when not clunking villains' heads together like cocoanuts or creating Sherman tanks out of schoolbuses, works in a day-care center and has a pathological fear of flying. It's interesting the way Mr. T. integrates the sometimes contradictory aspects of the character into a convincing seamless whole -- rather akin to the problem presented by the role of Fonzie on Happy Days. For example, B.A. is also the show's major fashion statement.

Capt. H.M. "Howling Mad" Murdock

Dwight Schultz reached heights of genius in his portrayal of the schizophrenic flying ace, who is only about 25% in touch with reality. Resident in the locked wards of a VA mental hospital, Murdock escapes regularly to participate in A-Team gigs. Each show presents him in a different persona with its own bizarre obsession, often a tender concern for the sensibilities of some plant, walnut, or stuffed lobster. B.A. objects rudely to these fantasies, but the others incorporate each new lunacy into their acceptance of Murdock. The vision of the hyper-competent madman is not new to American screens, but it isn't usually posited that the character is in fact clinically insane rather than just marching to the beat of a different drummer. Nor do those who perceive such a character's loon side usually make up her staunchest supporters, or vice versa. That Murdock's drummer is located significantly outside the orbit of Neptune is clear to the A-Team, but has no effect on their implicit faith in him. His madness is, in fact, treated much like any other handicap on modern tv, though less reverently. Only the straight folks, like General Stockwell, ever assume that H.M. is faking it; scenes of Murdock playing by himself like a child, in his own imaginary universe, and once or twice struggling hard to "maintain" when things depend on him, let the audience know his madness is no ploy. Murdock's lability is actually an asset to the Team, as he can assume any role, even the suave and debonaire, with utter conviction -- he is (for instance) Frank Sinatra, the Range Rider, or a chicken scratching in the dust of the road.

Lt. Templeton "Face" Peck

Dirk Benedict plays the Team's pretty con-man, product of an orphanage who somewhere along the line learned to pick pockets and locks, and talk anyone, including dates, into or out of anything -- temporarily. Though not showcased so lavishly as Schultz, Benedict gets to take on plenty of subtler role changes. He appears to do some of his own stunts and is an astonishingly good actor. In one of the crowning moments of the series, piqued that Murdock has taken over his role as the smooth ladies' man, Face assumes Murdock's own "Howling Mad" persona. The duple transformation is mind-boggling -- one of those rare times when television allows its audience to glimpse what it means to be an actor, rather than a character.

Col. John "Hannibal" Smith

George Peppard is wonderfully steady and consistent as the brash leader, cigar clamped in his gleaming teeth, whose real ambition is to be a great actor. Since he naturally can't afford to show his face on screen, his roles consist of sensitive portrayals of lagoon monsters, giant lizards, and dancing bears.

I defy anyone, after this description, to perceive the show as taking itself seriously. It is not so much an ancestor of Rambo as it is a descendant of Solo and Kuryakin. Indeed, Robert Vaughn is ultimately brought into the cast as a top secret service type who dragoons the A-Team to perform a certain number of government suicide missions in return for a full pardon. With Vaughn in such a role, the obvious prank must have been irresistible. Sure enough, David McCallum guested, in "The Say Uncle Affair", as Vaughn's Russian-accented former CIA partner. The whole episode is done perfectly straight-faced, but is rife with knockout-gas emitting wristwatches, elaborate torture apparatus, and subtle camera and sound signatures from U.N.C.L.E. days, as well as outright quotes. Most effective, for me, was the moment when Vaughn, still absolutely in cold and thin-lipped character, picked up a phone and said, "Open Channel D." I'd forgotten all about that line, but it must have been imprinted on the DNA level, because I screamed and fell over laughing. For the benefit of those too young to remember The Man and The Girl this is also the episode with the priceless Sinatra routine from Dwight Schultz, as he's admitted to the mental hospital that is the T.H.R.U.S.H. -- er, Chinese -- HQ.

They had a lot of other fun. David Hemmings directed some episodes, and appeared in small roles. Later Dirk Benedict's character almost succeeds in being elected to an exclusive country club under the assumed name Ashley Hemmings ("Ashley" after another A-Team production person).

The same episode spoofed the compulsory car-chase scene without which no show was ever made. In this scene, one of the villains' vehicles always runs up a concealed ramp, turns over in the air, crashes and burns/does not burn. At the country club, this entire routine was enacted with golf carts. What startled me to attention was that it was not openly "played for laughs": the joke was all in the dramatic camera angles (up past the racing wheels, etc.), the four-wheel-drift turns, and (yes) the ultimate zoom off the concealed ramp, the flip, the crash. If you didn't find those things in and of themselves a bit peculiar, in a context of golf carts, you were entirely free to take the sequence as just another action-packed confrontation.

I take it back: actually, there was one story that developed almost entirely inside a restaurant. In that one, you only hear the car crash as it occurs off-screen.

I'd noticed that in most episodes, every victim of a fall, crash, explosion or fusillade is pointedly shown getting up or out -- we're assured no one has been really hurt. I figured it was to keep their body-count down for Family Viewing hours, but actually, it is essential to the plausibility of the whole premise. We could not buy a gang of four roaming the countryside offing scores of bad guys

without becoming the objects of the most intensive manhunt in U.S. history, instead of just the crabby attentions of Colonels Lynch and Decker, who almost catch them most weeks. Nor, of course, could we like them nearly as well. The extended scenes of nobody getting sliced in half by five minutes of machinegun fire are eerily like the surreal last scene of If, but they generally manage to work well enough.

In this restaurant show, though, Face is shot in the stomach at close range. I think the departure was intended to bring home a point, because it was handled so as to demonstrate what bad damage to a body entails -- insofar as that's possible in one hour of prime time "adventure". Acting and directing in the moments after the shooting were really extraordinary, a far cry from the hoary Hollywood alternatives of bravely clenched jaw or quick, graceful demise (both in close-up). Others also deserve credit, the writers for example. I'm interested by such scenes as I suspect Americans, saturated with Hollywood Quick Clean Kills (or recoveries), are awesomely ignorant of the realities of violence and trauma, and need to see something -- anything -- that counteracts that high gloss. You wouldn't instinctively look to The A-Team for an antidote -- nor would you normally find it. But for whatever reason, the series produced this one moment I found a truthful and insightful comment on its own copper-jacketed fantasia.

The tone of this incident is an example of what I mean by parenthetical writing, but it's about the only one I can think of that used the show's talents for a serious dramatic statement. As a rule, the show's flesh, on its skeleton of "Action", was comedic.

Only someone with the cranial capacity of a newt could appreciate the cartoon-strip antics of the A-Teamers.

Harry F. Waters, Newsweek (March 12, 1984)

Newsweek should talk! And writing sniffily of "cartoon-strip antics" in this age of Garry Trudeau, Berke Breathed, Nicole Hollander et al. is fairly anencephalic in its own right. But my main objections to the slick disdain of this kind of writing are those set out in the introduction to this zine. With this living example at hand, you may better grasp what it is I want to avert and why. Ideally the commentator should be doing a pas de deux with the program, a responsive interpenetration of attention and stimulus, evoking reactions to the show's deepest content as well as its superficial appearances. Typical reviewers write in haste to a deadline, ricochet off traditional salencies, and hope their editors don't have to cut 2½ column inches somewhere. The temptation to slide into Harry F. Waters style babble is extreme.

The A-Team in fact, aside from its obvious gag lines, used a kind of comedy you don't get often on American television, a subtle self-parody that I believe much of its audience did pick up on and still does. U.N.C.L.E. and Batman come to mind as antecedents, but both existed in an overt fantasy frame that set them explicitly apart from reality. The A-Team has no such frame. Yet its format is as ritualized as any dynamic-duo-in-bondage cliffhanger.

The core ritual scene of The A-Team is the one where every week the bad guys lock them in a garage or warehouse for a couple of hours before The Boss arrives to finish them off. No lockup worth its salt on the show is without its steel plates, forklift, and oxyacetylene torch out of which to construct assorted superweapons and an armored car. The process is always carefully photographed over A-Team theme music, relieving the writer of about five minutes of dialog. The returning villains are ambushed, speedily overwhelmed by these homemade munitions, and turned over to local authorities.

You can't do this week after week without getting up to mischief. An episode that epitomized the attitude that so often prevailed on the show finally had the A-Team locked up in a -- toy warehouse. The Team's surprise attack here consisted

of a re-creation of the battle of the dolls from Babes in Toyland. Dunt-da -- da-da-da-DUNT-da-da -- remember the music? If you'd seen the movie you recognized it, if not it was just the A-Team doing their thing, as villains succumbed to dive-bombing model planes and toy ordnance.

Channel 29 has been resting the show so I can't quote any examples of how dialog worked to establish its crazed aspect, but the exchanges among the characters were continually just enough off-kilter to underline that for them, their work was an art form, something they did for the fun of outmaneuvering opponents more than for income. In beating the bad guys they were "on the jazz", turned on by skirting the edge of apocalypse much as, I suspect, their creators were in pushing the limits of what action-adventure could do. Sometimes the limits were artistic; sometimes purely practical, as with their inventive euphemisms for words they weren't allowed to say, preeminent among them the inspired "mudsucker", which manages to suggest both "motherfucker" and "cocksucker" -- and be used exactly as they would be -- without technical injury to delicate ears. I believe it was this show that so popularized the short form "sucker" that even my mother, in her 60s, took to remarking grimly on "that sucker" in B.A.'s very intonations, of course blissfully unaware of the term's true origins and implications.

The A-Team doesn't read as though it set out to satirize its genre, exactly; more that its creators' own sense of fun proved irrepressible in the face of such a series concept. And it was this, the element of true creativity in the show, that created its audience. It invited the viewer to share a slightly cosmic amusement at a version of heroism that has never existed on this earth and never will, but that many people would like to believe in, even if they laugh at themselves for it. If the core appeal of the cop show is a metaphor for enforcing parental love, the metaphor presented by The A-Team would be of a more adolescent level. The A-Team has no desire to hang onto the villains, merely to clear them out of the way so as to achieve success and go on with their own lives. It is they who have been locked up, and they must break out. This they accomplish with a great deal more gentleness than is typical of the vigilante genre movie. These are the heroes for those with a sense of humor about their situation rather than those so deeply and uncomprehendingly wounded that only the annihilation of their enemy seems sufficient to end the torment. Like comic book superheroes, The Lone Ranger, and Robin Hood, the A-Team uses force but does not kill.

Were I to take the crabby approach, I could emphasize that the very lack of consequences to their firefights and crashes contributes to the dangerous dream Americans exist in. But frankly the show delights me more than it appalls me, and for my money delight is the greatest treasure one human being can give to another. I guess my point really is to remind myself as well as others that the superficial appraisal and knee-jerk reaction to the mere premise of a show won't cut it. And next time I pronounce upon the nature of a show I've never seen (except for "non-fiction", I still maintain That's Different) bop me on the nose with a copy of this article.

There was a desperate need to be liked. At school, if a teacher came down on me for something, it broke my heart. I would get so choked up, I couldn't talk. One of the things I remember discovering that was so wonderful about acting, was that these situations couldn't happen to you. You had the control of knowing the dialogue had been designed, so you were never at the mercy of whether or not you were going to be able to express yourself in a terrible moment. You could prepare for it... A safely controlled environment wherein you knew exactly what was going to happen to you.

WHITE FLASH

Like it says in the introduction, Rabbitears intends to play nice and avoid the easy target of television's jugular. But there are things about tv that drive you up the wall. Write and I'll put them in this column. The title, White Flash, derives from my own hatred of a technique of advertising and movies now slipping into the body of programming as well.

I call it the white flash. I know there's got to be a technical term for it, but I don't give a damn. Nor do I care how they do it, since knowing won't enable me to Molotov all the facilities they do it with. As to why they do it, I have my theories, and they're sinister.

What's a white flash? It's some frames of pure white blinding light inserted at a cut, often accompanied by some sort of sound effect or heavy beat in a music background. It's also a deliberate glare or reflection off say a car in an ad, that creates the same flash effect only more localized -- sometimes these are engineered via special effects, sometimes genuine light reflections blasting out a spot of the film. Among the worst white flash offenders currently are ads for U.S. Swim and Fitness, Ban Roll-On, Roos, Nike, Reebok (what is it about shoes..?) Circus, Geo, the 1989 Fox network ad, the promo for Booker (alas), and the hideous new opening credits for Open House (née Duet).

Some people don't even consciously notice a white flash (I told you it was going to get sinister). These are undoubtedly the people the technique is aimed at. Especially in this day of the remote-control zap, when no one in their right mind leaves the escalated sound on during ads, the white flash is designed to draw your eye to the screen, and in the case of glare, to a particular area of the screen. In movies or programs, it's used to give an effect of speed or chromeplated modernity, or as the core of all explosion and gunfire effects.

Related horrors are the fritzing tv screen introduced into a picture (particularly popular in futuristic control rooms etc., where apparently video technology has slipped so far backward that human beings who, in our time, would kick the set and turn it off in disgust, in their time are willing to suffer the seizure-inducing flicker day after eight-hour day), strobing light (those goddamned overhead fans, or the excruciating cliché of the flashing police car light, sometimes reflected off everyone's faces or sometimes actually moved into the frame and parked there for endless minutes), the flashlight deliberately swung right at the camera, interminable scenes of flashbulbs going off. The same ghastliness can also be achieved by what Wolf Rilla once called "hysterical cutting", which since then has escalated to the maniacal, using rapid alternation between shots with different light values. Part of all this is directors and cinematographers showing off fancy film that will take a white flash and still yield a picture.

They're Young, They're Moussed,

They're 21 Jump Street's

PEACH FUZZ

A Perfervist Dallies with the Idea of a TV Show

If you never let out a tremulous little sigh when Johnny Depp put the scarf around his neck, you may not even know what show this article is about.

There is a profound ghettoization of programs structured to appeal deeply to women. A show like Charlie's Angels has only to appear on the screen to become part of the American collective awareness. You may never have seen it, but you know it's a showcase for what is usually referred to as a "bevy" of starlets. It's never mentioned with respect, but it's known even by those without a tv to their names.

There is no term for a male starlet. There are whole industries -- notably the fan magazine and pop music industries -- heavily or entirely dependent upon their existence, yet no word exists to define them. You can put jiggle into a show, but what is it you put in when the sex object has only vestigial breasts? It isn't beefcake, which implies slabs of muscle; it's something softer and prettier, and there are a couple of producers in Hollywood who know exactly what it is, but I wonder if even they have a word for it. Once the young men become famous you can call them "heartthrobs" or "idols", but what are they till then -- what are they in and of themselves without reference to their effect on an audience?

A theoretical standpoint relying on an oversimplification of the Sapier-Whorf hypothesis contends that you cannot think about what you cannot name. Certainly not having a term for something makes it harder to discuss, but that you can conceptualize without words has been proven, if only by the amount of time girls and women spend thinking about this nameless category of beauty. This article may illustrate my dispute with the hypothesis, in that while I intend to let us all think about whatever-it-is, I have no intention of trying to name it. Without knowing what Sapier-Whorf linguists would allow in the way of parameters, it's not Tarzan; it is Bomba the Jungle Boy. It's not Douglas Fairbanks; it is Sabu. (Hey, it wasn't invented last year.) In D.C. Comics, not Superman: AquaTad. Not even the Fonz, but definitely Chachi. Got it? Sure you do.

Yet there's no name for it. There's no term for the guys whose stock in trade it is. Critics talk about them in terms of their fans, usually: specifically, how gullible, mindless and contemptible the fans must be. Notice where this is the case, the fans are depicted as female. The various interchangeable Angels are not put down in terms of contemptible young boys jacking off to (say) Farrah Fawcett-Majors fantasies; no, in these cases, the critics generously attribute a

show's vacuity directly to its stars' "mere" looks. By an amazing coincidence, either way the female half of the equation is the primary cause and target of reviewer disdain.

It may give heart to Sapier-Whorf adherents that no one seems to look directly at the male role in the star-fan interaction. However, what is probably at work here, really, is not the lack of a term for it but men's Cloak of Invisibility. Men do; women are done to. Men see; women are seen. You don't even notice usually that when you supposedly turn the telescope around the other way, *SHAZAM!*, the man is gone and a woman is standing there looking baffled. Why was it possible to brainwash American P.O.W.s in Korea? Well, because American mothers... Why do black men exhibit X behavior? Well, because black women... It's almost impossible to get a good look at the little sidewinders in their natural habitat, which may explain our ogling them so closely once they're pinned to the tv screen, who knows. Anyway, what we've got is a big critically unexplored space labeled Here There Be Dragons, and a lot of male-type viewers who've never seen 21 Jump Street.

Or Charles in Charge.

Or Silver Spoons.

Now, the immediate assumption on some people's parts is going to be that by linking these three shows together I am belittling 21 Jump Street.

Why?

While you are thinking out answers to that one (there will be a quiz) here's a precis of the series for non-devotees. 21 Jump Street, a former chapel, is headquarters to a unit of exceptionally young-looking police academy graduates who infiltrate high schools, gangs, fraternities, even a Youth Authority prison. These 80s lieutenants bear no resemblance to Jack Webb.

They are:

Tom Hanson (Johnny Depp)

A super-competent, moralistic and rather heartless cop, Hanson started out straight but without explanation gradually evolved from suits to artfully torn jeans. Depp's is that intriguing beauty that never photographs the same way twice and may even disappear altogether, leaving him looking downright plain. Instead of finding this a trial, the show's producers and directors seem to take delight in exploring its possibilities; Depp has been made up as everything from an heiress's fiancé to a dowdy Latino hood in a hairnet.

Douglas Penhall (Peter DeLuise)

Hanson's partner, a well meaning, tender-hearted working-class **gay**, who all the same thinks showing his badge to the kids he busts is "the best part". Currently the physical type called in some circles a "teddy bear", like many actors DeLuise is reportedly unhappy with the effect of sound-stage confinement on his weight. I can sure sympathize, but it adds texture to the show if you ask me. The most soulful eyes since Ringo Starr assist him in his empathic scenes.

Judy Hoffs (Holly Robinson)

Heavily featured only in "women's stuff" shows (teenage pregnancy, sexual harassment, seducing male crooks), Hoffs otherwise gets to run around yelling "Freeze!" just like the guys, but as with most female tv "regulars", her individuality and quirks are neglected by the writers.

Harry Ioki (Dustin Nguyen)

A Vietnamese refugee who pretended to be Japanese-American to get onto the force. Featured about as often as Hoffs, and in the same vein ("This job calls for a woman/a Vietnamese"), he has a much more defined character: highly correct, money-oriented,

politically conservative yet with enough yuppie consciousness to find his male colleagues sexist. I feel he gets twice as gorgeous in black leather, but I may be biased. For those interested: Nguyen also appeared in a long-ago A-Team episode.

Dennis Booker (Richard Grieco)

A raving beauty brought in to start the 88/89 season off with a brisk ratings jump. Booker throws himself into every undercover role without for an instant losing sight of who he is and why he's there. Strictly orthodox about law and police regulations, he's Bohemian enough in his driving, housekeeping, attitude and personal associates to get on colleagues' nerves.

I missed a lot of early shows, so I can't be sure about Hoffs, but of the above guys not one reached 17 without losing his father (only Booker to divorce); two are complete orphans. The boys' lovers and friends would also be well advised to keep their insurance policies paid up.

Overseeing this fatherless lot is a Freudian ideal of fatherhood, Captain Adam Fuller. Steven Williams is convincing as the ex-Army career cop, amiable but poised to kick butts as called for. He's divorced, a natty dresser, always a little distanced and unmistakably the boss.

Janitor Sal "Blowfish" Banducci is played by an old high-school friend of Johnny Depp's, Sal Jenco. According to legend, the two south-Florida boys lived together a couple of weeks in Jenco's 1967 Impala before Depp dropped out of school for good and left home, at 16. Jenco road-managed Depp's band and later, on a visit to Vancouver where the show is filmed, was given a part on the strength of his ability to blow out his cheeks. Like a fish. The role grew, perhaps because Jenco demonstrates marked acting talent. Sal is the only "regular" who's married and has kids.

The show gives a lot of work to young actors, even a clutch of minority actors from time to time. It can't have the advantage of the veterans that graced, say, The A-Team with such bloody brilliance -- one of the show's execs said kindly, "We don't ask the kids to do anything too hard." But nothing about acting in a weekly tv series is easy, and that comment was from the first season; since then the actors have ventured into deeper waters. Steven Williams of course is older, and, I think, awfully good. Sal Jenco just seems born to act. DeLuise's computer nerd and Depp's Ed Norton delighted me, sucker that I am for transformations, but I don't trust my amateur judgement enough to say that this or that young star is "a good actor". Johnny Depp, for example -- could be he's blinded me with, um, science. Since actors can collapse from brilliant in one role to negligible in the next, one concludes that care and intelligence in the direction they receive can make virtually anyone get by on film, and that a non-expert would have to study them in different parts to estimate their skill at all. Dustin Nguyen's A-Team role I only remember feeling was cornily written; Depp's part in the giant cast of Platoon was so inconspicuous, and that in Private Resort so carelessly shot and directed, that I don't feel I've really seen him in other roles (haven't been able to get myself, a VCR, a tape of Nightmare on Elm Street and someone to tell me when to open my eyes together in one room yet). I look forward to seeing what he does in Cry-Baby, but when I heard it was a musical my heart misgave me. There is absolutely nothing more difficult to bring off. (Ghosh some lovely movies (Allan Moyle's Times Square...) have foundered on their music.) Anyway, every actor on Jump Street certainly tries for better than average, and though it's had a few unscintillating episodes, this is far from being a clunky show coasting along on its male pulchritude. It looks good (except the blasted white flashes in the opening credits), sounds good (pray tv never notices the new fad for lousy sound in movies), is shot and edited with the kind of loving touch one recognizes in certain classic shows from the past, and uses "art" techniques without making a big deal about it. Peter Bernstein's music is often lovely and the selections from other people's

quite moving. The writing on many episodes is what I am most aware of, though, as outstanding. I am not so impressed by the tackling of Controversial Issues -- could we expect anything else on a network owned by Rupert Murdoch? -- as by the little things that happen in the background. Or what purports to be the background: in fact, these atmospheric "details" are what make or break a show artistically.

"What's a Section Eight?"

"It's that thing Klinger was always trying to get."

"Oh."

Lines like these, thrown away during a low-speed chase (on foot, through deep snow) tell us who the characters are more than any Climactic Revelation ever does. Hey, they know M*A*S*H. They take M*A*S*H for granted as a part of their lives. It places them in their time and their culture. It's a signal-flag of humor and intelligence in a show's producers. The first season of Charles in Charge was scaled for way higher IQs than network execs can believe in; the show was axed after a year and by the time it was resurrected the original family for whom college student Charles (Scott Baio) did live-in childcare had dispersed. But while it lasted, things happened like a 12-year-old science fiction fan turning coldly from a dumb grown-up and diagnosing, "He's dead, Jim." I was an addict from that instant. The show still runs rings around most comedies for contemporary snapcracklepop.

And like 21 Jump Street, it's surprisingly high-fiber. There are a lot of sex jokes and even, *nom de dieu*, gay jokes. Something strange and wonderful is going on in entertainment for the young, and 21 Jump Street was by no means its first harbinger. But Jump Street has taken it further, and brought it out of the fantasy-oriented realm of comedy to the more representational slant of drama, where things are less likely to be talked about than to be shown.

Sexual romance is a particularly valid "background" topic for a show whose core image is that of the beautiful boy. The subliminal sexual awareness is a constant, and bringing it out on the surface a laudable move. Not all the motives behind this may be pure -- for instance the hope of attracting that theoretical segment of audience that tunes in to anything steamy. Whoever's in charge of Jump Street's come-ons has never heard of truth in advertising; these little trailers promise the most outlandish stuff -- one entirely comic episode was heralded by the following text, intercut with solemn script lines like "You're under suspension" and spoken over the show's dramatic beating-heart ad signature: "Something is happening to Johnny Depp. Something unexpected. Something uncontrollable. Something passionate. Something powerful. The Jump Street you never thought you'd see." Ba-doom. Two of their generic ads feature Richard Grieco and an unidentified woman getting down in the shower, a scene that has never appeared and with luck never will in any Jump Street episode. Maybe it's left over from his year-long stint on One Life to Live.

Another ulterior motive these days for introducing active sex lives into shows is to prove that no matter how pretty they are by god our boys are straight. (Any woman will tell you the best-looking guys are gay. I have a theory about this (you knew that), that it has to do with people's subtle reactions to beautiful children, but another time.) Hence Charles's frenetic girl-chasing, unsurpassed in modern television except maybe by his best friend Buddy's. Hence the lovely Chachi's early rejections by the girls he hit on -- right, sure, they all had undiagnosed astigmatism, to them he looked like an El Greco.

21 Jump Street tippytoes ingeniously around the word "gay". Gay men are regularly featured, but in such a way that unless you've reached the age of reason in these things you won't catch on: when the boy with hemophilia and AIDS turns out not to have hemophilia at all, when Randy brings Penhall a rose on his breakfast tray, when Michael Des Barres plays a drama teacher -- it's all done with mirrors, but it's there. (Predictably, the closest thing to a lesbian in the episodes I've seen has been Hoffs's anonymous phone caller.) Why is it there? Only because the writers want it to be. A cop show could run forever without

alluding to the Kingdom of Faerie -- though come to think of it the second open reference to homosexuality I ever saw on national tv was on Kojak. (The first, believe it or not, was on The Monkees.)*

Jump Street's gentle but relentless insistence on the existence of what's taboo earned my approval. But it's another "background" aspect that makes the show unique, something I only fully realized when I tried to write a script for it. These cops just are not "characters", in the old sense. In art classes I used to be good at likenesses, and I can usually catch, on paper, the way tv characters talk, the way they move, how they'll react to any given situation. With my Jump Street attempt I simply had no idea what anyone would say next. The actors' characteristic movements and expressions were no problem, it was the writing. Bright sparkling dialog is bad enough, but at least you know "Okay, insert witty repartee at Point Y" -- if man-talk is hard, you can make a note to find a more macho version of what you know the guy will say. But when you simply don't know how the character will react, or what form the reaction will express itself in, it means you're up against something rare -- a whole different level of writing. Oh there are episodes -- "Nemesis", "Next Victim" and "A Big Disease with a Little Name", for example -- that are self-contained, story-oriented driving scripts with straightforward use of a character to carry out a design; but the more typical Jump Street can have almost a vignette approach, in which characters react in ways that are outside normal tv structure.

The unpredictability gives interesting dimensions to the characters, but it is a two-edged sword. It's in relationships that character is most clearly defined in drama, and Jump Street relationships are pursued at a cautious pace. Their "continuing stories" are mercifully low-profile -- lovers' comings and goings, Penhall's and Ioki's brief attempt at rooming together, Booker's struggle to give up cigarets. (Hoffs has no continuing story -- women, of course, don't have lives the way men do.) The complexity of characterization can occasionally come across as no characterization at all; as carelessness. When Richard Grieco was brought in to play Booker, it was an experiment. For his debut on the third-season premiere, advertised approximately every 15 minutes throughout the preceding month, he was carefully photographed to look like God's own Christmas present to women and his character was given a rousing lift-off by Hanson's instant hostility. Viewer response was galvanic. They decided to keep him. But they got a little offhand. They stopped bothering to photograph him so gorgeously, and much more important, they dropped the whole relationship with Hanson as if it had never been. This lack of follow-through in relationships could mean the show won't pay off big in syndication. Episodes are topical; they may not seem relevant five years down the line. And while one pretty face was enough to launch a thousand syndication hours of The Partridge Family, it's not clear that this will be the case for an hour-long, highly contemporary drama, even one with as much style and class as Jump Street. Not that I've any wish for the relationships to slosh into melodrama. The low-key way they do it now is really neat, I just wonder if there should be better continuity, a little deeper awareness of dynamics established in past shows.

Probably the most fully realized character is Douglas Penhall, tender-hearted social clutz. Maybe because, though pretty, he isn't to be preserved inviolate as Everywoman's heartthrob, his individuality is more thoughtfully nurtured by the writers. We see more of his homelife, his family background (though at least

* "They're both three-dollar bills," was Kojak's actually rather charming realization about a cop's son and an older gangster. "Deck the Halls", with its line "Don we now our gay apparel", was sung in a Monkees Christmas show. On the word "gay", a shot of the Monkees in drag was flashed on the screen. I was electrified and delighted. And yes, that was indeed pre-Stonewall. Execrated by every "serious" critic, that show, I'm here to tell you, was a weekly shot of O₂ for millions of smothering rural girls.

once that was just a priceless opportunity to stuff the cast with DeLuises, a wonderful episode), his idiosyncrasies. He begins to assume a consistent reality, while Hanson, stunning as he is, will have traits brought forward in one episode but never further developed. Okay up to a point, when you want a complex character not easily defined by a few gestures or catchphrases. But it can give an experimental, groping sort of feel after a while -- all too recognizable in Star Trek: The Next Generation and other post-Hill Street Blues shows searching for a way back from soap-opera format. Compromise structure frequently takes the form of plot/subplot. Sometimes the sense is that these subplots are written to distract from vin ordinaire A-stories and give everybody parts, even if the parts might be described as "those zany, lovable Jump Street narcs are at it again!" Meanwhile, characters may simply be left to fend for themselves. ST:TNG's Commander Riker till very recently epitomized the major character who's just sort of there -- ready to eat worms or get laid or Register Jealousy as required, but without a soul to call his own. (Too bad they chickened out on having a gay crew member, I think Jonathan Frakes could have handled it.)

Hanson's character was never so neglected as that; we do know his compassion has to be jump-started by heavy personal involvement; he's physically skillful, perfectionistic, serious, unsophisticated; he communicates straightforwardly yet he will go to great lengths to conceal his feelings if expressing them would make him look like "the bad guy" -- he absolutely cannot deal with guilt or error, in himself or in others. But these traits are all vague and elastic enough to allow the character tremendous latitude. This is useful, and Hanson is kept recognizable from week to week by Johnny Depp's intensity, and basically it's not a problem.

The problem lies in the characters' isolation from one another. Say what you will, it's relationships within a program that give it lasting popularity. Maybe that's why it's easier for a comedy to survive -- relationships are its subject. Tv relationships have changed a lot in 20 years, from the opening up of the concept of character. Nowhere does this show as clearly as in the two generations of Star Trek. The trinary star of Kirk, Spock and McCoy, with the various satellite characters, made a dependable set-piece of profound appeal. The relationships developed rapidly over a few episodes, then parts were carefully written to reinforce, via familiar jokes and irritations, what had been established. In contrast, two years into the series The Next Generation still suffers weekly heaves and spasms of character/relationship development that are then tossed aside by the committee writing the next script. A few "characters", in the old sense, survive the cataclysm, notably Brent Spiner's brilliant Data and the charismatic Captain. For the most part, the actors are given very little help from the scripts in maintaining themselves as individuals or elements of relationships. With the advantages of syndication rather than network pressures and of an audience built up through 22 years by Star Trek, TNG does not have to solve these problems to survive. It may need to solve them, however, if it is ever going to make money in reruns. Characters and relationships so open that they are at the mercy of every new plot leave little for an audience to return to.

Jump Street's problem is not nearly so acute. Fine things have been done and I certainly wouldn't want to see the characters' freedom curtailed too much. The fear of building on previous episodes is justifiable, for it is fear of altering whatever intangible has made a show popular. Jump Street's "intangible", of course, is beautiful guys in superior scripts. The credited writers -- Blakeney, Nuss, Truby, Ashford, Morgan, Wong and Kirschbaum, with occasional others -- turn out rich and exceptional work. And everyone seems to have a sure grasp of what a hot Hanson story has to be and exactly how to make Depp beautiful for the screen. And that, after all, is the core of 21 Jump Street.

It is traditional among critics to adopt a condescending attitude toward "mere" attractiveness in younger actors. But visual entertainment industries rely on very little else, and I am not convinced the erotic element gains in nobility by sinking further beneath the surface of the product. Female actors are supposed to

retain youth-oriented sexual appeal as long as they can -- and be taken less seriously for it. Young sexy male actors, on the other hand, outright annoy male critics; their audience is too blatantly female, they are therefore undignified. The derogation of Eros and consequent positioning of the erotic among "women's concerns" is a necessity in patriarchal culture. To be completely erotically aware is very often to be overwhelmed, vulnerable and passive to one's own perception of beauty (visual, tactile, auditory, whatever). Such responses are inconsistent with the invulnerability required in a ruling class, so the responses are denigrated and scorned, even claimed to be unnatural in ruling class members. Beautiful young male stars are cast specifically to evoke such "undignified" responses from female audiences, and are, therefore, themselves tainted with the erotic devaluation. It's all embarrassing, and desperately close to what any sensible patriarch keeps hidden.

Of course men do respond to gorgeous women stars, but the archetypal overt male reaction is one of acquisitiveness, not devotion. They are supposed to use, not adore. Erotic adoration is considered "sick" -- something only the sick subspecies Woman can get away with. When men engage in the peculiar self-mockery of displays of "purely" sexual attraction, for one another's benefit, the statement being made is not "I am attracted to that woman" but in fact "I am not attracted to that woman except in a very safe, unfeeling way". To have sex with a particularly beautiful woman, according to this code, is supposed to involve about as much passion as successfully riding a particularly difficult bronco or acquiring really ritzi wheels. After the hero of Five Easy Pieces fucks a woman he rises up and blazoned across his t-shirt is his emotion: "Triumph". Triumph, not bliss. Comically, in this posture the very reason that sex is so desirable to begin with -- its luxuriance of sensation through every dimension of being -- is denied. It becomes merely a ritual chant that men like sex a lot; some questioners have found that in fact they don't like sex much at all, and no wonder. What's left to like? Of course, not all men bother with the image, particularly since the demise of the draft, and not all men who express the attitude really incorporate it into their feelings. It can actually be used as a shy way of expressing the worshipful Eros response, so strong in some it must be expressed, even if with a lie. But this outward acquiescence to the mores of macho still reinforces the destructive pattern of not showing one's true feeling. In contrast, there was a startling moment on Charles in Charge when Charles met his favorite female movie star. He was excited and delirious. When she wanted to spend more time with him, Charles pressed his fists together over his heart, curled away from her on the couch and laughed -- totally blown away with unbelieving, heavenly delight. It's a movement difficult to describe (like most in English, dammit) but you would recognize it instantly from clips of girls in the presence of the Beatles, and Scott Baio will have had ample opportunity to observe the gesture in his own fans. He performs it perfectly, and you are brought to the realization that males are never depicted doing this.

When we see large audiences of boys swooning over female rock stars, then and only then will we know patriarchy is dead. The denial and actual suppression of full erotic response is an excellent indice of the existence of this culturally acknowledged ruling class. There is no free lunch: to gain and maintain ascendancy over other beings, much must be sacrificed. The human potential for receptivity and comprehension is the first thing to go. The famous "women's intuition", for example, is nothing more than a normal human ability to recognize repeating patterns; but it is an ability dependent upon attentive observation of social signals, and to preserve its own self-esteem no ruling class can afford to be aware on this level -- it is the level on which the suffering and anger of others is perceived and attributed most acutely. Thus we have a whole realm of normal perception and analysis labeled female and therefore nonexistent and/or supernatural.

To maintain patriarchy, men must actively shun this type of perception if they are to deal on a day-to-day basis with women; to maintain white supremacy, whites who are to deal with blacks daily must shun it; and so on. Receptivity to erotic stimulus, then, is only one among many forms of receptivity in which the patriarchal

male is (generally speaking) defective, but it is one whose role has been somewhat overlooked. There is a tendency even among feminist theorists to regard the typically female erotic response to human beauty as abnormal -- a result of low self-esteem -- and the male pattern as therefore nearer the human ideal. This is an assumption I question. The lack of erotic -- as opposed to specifically sexual -- response in patriarchal man is his induced deficiency of veneration (Latin venerari, to worship, reverence, from venus, veneris, love). Without this response, something quintessentially human is missing from a person's character, and I believe it to be one of patriarchy's more serious mutilations.

One observable result is the weird critical lacuna around these young and beautiful male actors. It is as if their work is done in the midst of a maelstrom, on the one hand, of adulation, and a vacuum, on the other, of analytical response. Of course this is true to a great extent of all television actors; for such a core part of our culture, tv gets very little critical notice, partly because it is seen not as art but as a giant advertising scam. But unless serious and accessible critical response exists, it is natural that the only "critical" input into program decisions will be the ad dollar. Now it may be that these guys just don't grant interviews. But in the years of its existence Charles in Charge has been noticed by one, count them, one, mainstream mass market article, a dismissive review in TV Guide.^{*} Only after three seasons of Jump Street did a major mainstream story appear on Johnny Depp -- in the June 26, 1989 issue of US; People has yet to do a story on the nation's "hottest" young male tv star. One gets the impression even the US piece is publicity for Depp's upcoming John Waters film, not acknowledgement of the work that has made him famous among half the population.

And this is just the pop journals. The assumption is that no serious critical attention can be paid to the work of young sex symbols. I fail to see why, since most of the older actors are simply older sex symbols. Okay, maybe you'd feel foolish wasting critical attention on someone who vanished after a 13-week flash in the Hollywood pan. But Johnny Depp has done four feature films, a couple of appearances on series, a cable movie and three years of Jump Street in the barely five years since he first tackled acting. Since 1977 Scott Baio's been a regular on five prime-time series, two of which he starred in, has done three movies that I know of plus three tv movies, six drama "specials" and tons more tv -- the guy is a veteran, in his twenties. His co-star, Willie Aames, apart from other work, has been a regular on four series, one of which lasted five seasons. These are not the track records of losers, but you'll search in vain for a murmur of critical response to their work.

The only aspect of such boys' and men's work that is ever seriously discussed is the nefariousness of their use to attract viewers (i.e., buyers). The marketing of human beauty should certainly not be exempt from analysis and criticism. But is that within us which allows us to be manipulated by this means necessarily a deplorable characteristic? The distrust of positive response to beauty is a Puritan trait. Look around at what the distrust has done to our landscape, and give second thought to the nature of our susceptibility to that which "merely" massages the senses. "Beauty comes from within" of course doesn't mean nice people are automatically hot numbers, or vice versa. But it does refer to those aspects of beauty called charisma, which are not skin deep but emanate from the personality -- facial expression and body language, for example. When we respond to human beauty we participate in a rather more complex esthetic activity than is often acknowledged. Buying and selling may seem to negate the entire meaning of the experience. Yet from artist to audience direct linkage exists. If personal

* For my purposes, "mainstream" is defined as a non-teen, non-trade publication available in the Minneapolis Public Library or the University of Minnesota libraries.

beauty helps to forge that link, it should be examined as an aspect of the art.

The theoretical purpose of television is to lull victims into a consumeristic trance, but passage of time provides a rather striking addendum: the sponsors of Star Trek are already forgotten; in a hundred years they may no longer exist, while the Legend and its authors move into immortality. "That which survives" is certainly that which opposed most inalterably interference from the picayune. With attention fixed on the interior and eternal goal of art, a television production, like a novel, a comic book, a painting, a rock song or a play, may outmaneuver the most galling limitations of its form and time, and it may be that inconspicuous shows have as good a chance of managing this as big, powerful ones.

Maybe we should be grateful for the critical gap; lack of print scrutiny is one reason these "unimportant" shows get away with as much as they do, like science fiction in the 50s, which passed far beneath HUAC's notice with countless visions of universal sharing and even gay stories like "The World Well Lost" -- stuff that would have blacklisted a Hollywood writer faster'n you could say "gutless moguls".

If, as seems exasperatingly likely, we are soon to endure another such era, the semi-occulted fanzine may be not just the only, but the best and safest place for sustained discussion of such programs.

Okay, here comes the quiz: What do Silver Spoons, Charles in Charge, and 21 Jump Street have in common? Ans.: Good writing, good acting, superficial Reagan-era morality with underlying 60s humanism, and cute guys. And what's wrong with that? Ans.: Nothing. If you got a problem with it, they you got a problem, anyone who can watch 10 middle-to-late episodes of Silver Spoons without becoming a Joel Higgins fan might as well not bother with tv, it's not their thing. And C-in-C is one of the classic comedies of tv history. Mark my words. They'll be watching it on the first voyage to Mars. They'll be watching it on the goddam Enterprise. I'll have more to say about all three in future issues (you knew that) -- meanwhile, other opinions are always solicited.

Later That Same Era...

The richness of a show is seen as waste in television, where "spread it thin" is a watchword: the less you give the viewer per ad dollar, the more, in theory, you have made for yourself. But though proliferating channels do provide syndication markets for even the most dismal barf, the big money is still reserved for the best shows. In other words, it profiteth you not at all if you gain the fast buck and forfeit your residuals. Barring acts of nnetwork, a good product will make more money, over time, than a bad one.

My admonitions come too late. That there's to be a 21 Jump Street spin-off titled Booker tells you all you need to know.

Damn. That full-bodied oomph Richard Grieco unleashed amid the chapel gang, giving their relationships more power or more potential, is to be dragged out of the show like the stinger out of a bee. Not that Grieco "made" the show; but his character cast the comparatively naive youngsters into a far more interesting perspective. At last they had a dissenting view to bounce off of. Over half the interesting third-season scripts featured Booker clashing with Jump Street personnel in some way. Provincial, for the most part pragmatic, however individual the other male cops might be, their personalities all contrasted with Booker's worldly intuition. Now they're going to yank this part, and stick it out on its own somewhere to try and grow new limbs, and my guess is both shows will feel spindly.

Real life: is it wishing Richard Grieco ill not to want him starring in his own show this year? Would it have been wishing Leonard Nimoy ill in 1967 not to want to see the premier of Spock?

Well, too late. Some writers will likely migrate with Grieco, another threat to Jump Street's viability. With Johnny Depp reputedly not thrilled to be sentenced to television, a fifth season's peach fuzz may be too much to count on, so perhaps it's best to take to the lifeboats while one can. It's just that, you may have

noticed, I kind of liked it. Oh hell, I lived for Sunday night, but what I mean is, I actually thought the show was interesting too, the things it tried for, the boundaries it nudged in language and lifestyle, there was even an intellectual interest in the way male beauty was so blatantly central and so canted toward a female esthetic. I wanted to write for this show, I felt we had something to say to each other.

And the thing is: I can't imagine writing a Jump Street without Booker.

Actually, the whole subject of writing for Jump Street gets painful.

See...I had this wonderful script idea. Bits of it were written on blue 3x5 cards in lunch hours or after work. I didn't know if they'd dare to use it -- it involved male prostitutes who were being beaten up, and Hanson and the others going out and posing as hustlers. It was really coming together, when Jump Street ran "Blinded by the Thousand Points of Light". The first thing the teaser did was establish that runaways who were male prostitutes were being beaten up, and Hanson and the others were posing as hustlers. It aired Corflu weekend. The shock took a while to sink in. My story was about a completely different aspect of hustling, the plot was entirely different, its esthetics and politics were nothing like those of the show they aired, but there was no way they'd want another script on that topic. My lovely story was useless.

After a couple of weeks paralysis eased: maybe I could scavenge something. There were a lot of interesting nuclei: in my story, Hanson, among others, hadn't wanted to do this particular job, until Booker was attacked and hospitalized by the villains, who turn out to be, in fact, two cops. Little sprouts of possibility were just opening their first leaves when Jump Street showed "Lōc'd Out". It was a gang investigation that Hanson, among others, didn't want to do until Ioki was attacked and hospitalized by minions of the villains, who turned out to be, in fact, two cops.

Sadly, I put a rubber band around my thick stack of 3x5 cards. I was clearly doing something right, but I was doing it too late. Of course there had been this other idea, months back. It had potential as one of the Group Therapy episodes where everyone reveals secrets from their pasts. Suddenly it merged with an old screenplay idea and several true-life incidents into a madly exciting theme. A key factor, of course, would be Booker. Booker's mysteriously dissenting views on the subject would carefully lead up to the emotional revelation that would turn the whole story around.

Two nights later Denny Lien, who gets the newspaper, knowing my rapacity for JS info, phoned to tell me the show was moving to a new night next season. In its old time slot there'd be a spin-off, he said, called Booker.

My life passed before my eyes.

Well, no. My first reaction actually was the esthetic one outlined above, the frustrated disappointment that they were vitiating Jump Street. Shows you where my priorities lie, or maybe my mind just doesn't work too fast. Only later did I realize the wuthering void this would leave in my third-time's-the-charm, surefire can't-lose script idea, for which a few blue cards had already accumulated. The concept just wouldn't make as much sense if anyone but Booker did it.

I don't know. Without Booker, it's like there's no upper level at Jump Street. The kids are left with a set of conventional rules and a no-nonsense father figure, but no moral instinct. Hoffs and Penhall will be compassionately troubled, Ioki will be uprightly hostile, Hanson will as always have to be strapped forcibly into someone else's shoes to get any insight into their plight at all. The element of moral sophistication that Booker represented is impossible to replace. But mainly, Booker catalyzed something of the relationships that the show had been lacking -- he was a character they had to react to.

Who is Booker, what is he, that all the fans commend him? Fair, for sure, wise, in context, hardly holy. The writing on his character is confused, but all agree he's a wiseass, genuinely tough, and "political" in the sense we fondly remember from the 60s. Not radical -- he has some idea only card-carrying Ku Kluxers can be

termed "racists" -- but aware of class issues. Booker is such a good cop he has 79 days of sick leave accrued, which, in "Blu Flu", allows him to become a union firebrand for striking police rank and file -- though, come to think of it, if I ever had a job where I could build up 79 days of sick leave in only three years, I'm not sure I'd feel that pressing a need to strike, but anyway. (He also incites the downtrodden workers by evoking a grim picture of their salaries sinking to \$100 a day. Yeah, sometimes you definitely have to ask yourself what these writers are up to.) In "Woolly Bullies" the cops reminisce on bullying they suffered, with flashbacks using child actors. Penhall was pushed around for years. Captain Fuller was a teenage nerd, butt of the hip crowd. Hanson got punched out daily by a girl named Maureen. After a couple of these tales of woe, Booker the cool admits he too encountered a "lunch money goon". The flashback rolls.. Little Booker, in his miniature black leather jacket, crosses the schoolyard, is accosted by a much bigger kid, and hauls off and flattens him with one magnificent right.

"That's it?" ask the others, as well they may. That's it. On a sedater level, Booker is the Fonz: tough and cool from the cradle. Likewise a heavy user in the sex department. In place of Fonzie's tenderness, however, he has passion. It sweats off him in everything he does. If they ever actually use that shower scene, he's certainly the only character (mind I said character, not actor -- Johnny Depp, to name only one, has shown, in a few seconds (right, the kiss) of Private Resort, that he could handle an R rating with no trouble at all) who might bring it off. All this added that je n' sais quoi de zing they're now going to take back.

Depressing.

You could, of course, do a two-part episode with half on Booker and half on Jump Street, mingling him back into the cast a while. No doubt this is already in the works for next fall's premieres (no, I'm not being bitter; it just seems inevitable to launch the spin-off, as Hanson actually going to prison could be postulated for this spring's finale, when Johnny Depp contracted out of five 89/90 episodes in order to work on a film; now that Booker has been announced, I can't believe they'll start the season without Depp, but a very clever and gutsy move it would have been, although the episode it got set up in ("Lōc'd Out Part II (Partners)") -- much as it pains me to say this about a Blakeney/Nuss script -- screwed up beyond repair in its final third) but I mean sometime later on in the season.

It won't be the same, though. They'll probably soften the Booker character down to mush, straighten his bedroom drapes and give him a secretary. Remember what the Brits did to Lovejoy, gag gag?

Should I have more faith?

The relations of art and wealth have always been intimate; but the motion picture, our century's major art form, obtrudes profit motive into the heart of esthetic decision-making, and simultaneously paralyzes creation into committee processes. Film is less possible than any other form of art to create alone, and its being the most expensive form outside monumental architecture introduces providers of money into that group mind. You don't make a major film or show and then sell it to some person of discriminating taste; you must sell it before you make it. In fact, you must sell it several times, and every buyer gets a say in the design, down to and including the loathly advertiser. They don't call this an art; it's known as "the industry". But the more muscular and wily denizens of Hollywood have occasionally managed to bring off something secretly artlike.

Jump Street has been a hidden little niche of wildcat creativity. The unprepossessing concept, the dismissable audience of girls, women, and gay boys and men tuning in unabashedly to enjoy intelligent photography of male beauty, and the upstart-crow nature of the whole Fox project have masked from scrutiny some of the most interesting parenthetical writing on tv today. The welcome accorded little off-beat moments and strokes of characterization has only intensified under Joan Carson, the producer who took over from Patrick Hasburgh. There is a maxim in vieille cuisine, never add water when you can add stock or wine. Before the deluge represented by the spin-off, this seemed to be the philosophy informing Jump Street production, rendering bolder piquancies and richer savors than the cathode chefs

normally offer. It helped that Fox at first gave its shows a little more slack than the nebbly-nose Big Brother networks of yore, so they were less likely to get cancelled before they'd settled down and shown what they could do, and more likely to get away with digressive explorations of their possibilities. Also naughty bits. 21 Jump Street uses more taboo words than perhaps any other current U.S. series. The show demands certain words be used if the suspenders of disbelief are not to let fall the pants of attention. At times it demands more than is allowable, resulting in quaint euphemisms by which you can map the still-denied half-dozen or so, e.g., it is okay to say ass, crap, or bitch, it's not okay to say prick, fuck, or shit, though you can say them on cable. Before John Truby's "Fathers and Sons", the episode I privately think of as The St. Valentine's Day Massacre, in which at least two and possibly three Jump Street girlfriends got their final walking papers, it was also okay for people of this age to be openly living with or sleeping with lovers, having complicated relationships outside what has been called television's "workplace family". I hope this doesn't mean Jump Street has bent the knee to the usual fundamentalist anachronisms writing form letters from church basements; the show kowtows regularly to the ikon of Reagan's War on Drugs -- i.e., the war on foreign imports and independents, god forbid it should interfere with the U.S. pharmaceutical companies and politicians who rake in the real profits -- but has broken entirely new ground for teenage programming in realistic and unsensational depiction of normal sex lives, and it would be gruesome to see this end. Perhaps it's just that Jump Street in general is hard on girlfriends; they tend to have about the same screen life expectancy as Starfleet Security officers. Not that they die, usually, just that the execs seem nervous about any woman playing opposite these dreamboats too long, and they write them out. But Jackie Garrett and Dorothy were wonderful, and I wish they'd be brought back. It's pretty unbelievable already that Garrett, of the D.A.'s office, has not turned up at Hanson's murder trial, eh? Follow-through, c'mon.

The many levels of subjunctivity on which the show operates do make delicate the issue of "adult" themes. The cops play high-school kids dealing with "real" high-school kids (who always look like legally adult actors) but in "reality" these cops are in their very early twenties. The series actors average a bit older again, operating on the two levels of star/image and actual person. Obviously the safe path would have been to avoid the cops' personal sexual relationships altogether, leaving "sex" as a topic to be dealt with strictly on the Controversial Issue level and one step removed (pregnancy and porn and prostitution) from the action. Instead, we get Penhall being thrown out of his own house after a quarrel with his POSSLO, Garrett telling Hanson at breakfast "I already helped you wake up -- twice", Ioki smitten and sleepy from a new affair, Booker, shirtless, fondled by an anonymous blonde while he answers his doorbell, and Hoffs being invited to skip breakfast by her secret squeeze -- who turns out to be married, the cad. We even get Penhall, finding himself naked in a strange bed, looking up at a gay man and saying, "Did we --?" If they've been spooked or ordered away from all this charming openness, it could explain the appearance in "High High" of a croggingly explicit metaphorical poem entitled "The Dog" -- a sort of "You think we have dirty minds? We'll show you dirty minds" revenge gesture. None of the Jump Street cops seem to be getting it on lately -- next season will show if this is inadvertent or craven.

Booker's approach to sex, like everything else about him, was different. When Judy Hoffs started getting obscene phone propositions from a female, she was disgusted; the other male cops leered and bid for a chance to listen in; Booker simply took the phone, answered matter of factly about what he would and would not do in bed, and ended up making a date. The thing really about Booker is that things that are a big deal to a lot of people -- sex, art, tidiness, possessions, respectability -- are not a big deal to him. His one nemesis (according to an episode of that name) is self-revelation.

Hm.

Digression #486.

The episode was originally written for Johnny Depp, who refused to act it. His

stated objections to the script were to its admittedly disturbing violent premise (Jump Street is singularly free of shootouts, car crashes, women screaming, etc.) In "Nemesis" the undercover officer comes on to a girl to find out which of her group of drug-user friends offered a suspected informant. Turns out it was her, and she kills herself when she finds out Booker is actually the narc. Depp felt that this was one of several third-season scripts that had become irresponsible to young viewers, in contrast to the first two years' social consciousness.

Some early shows, however, had aspects at least as dubious. Personally I was less than thrilled to see Hanson flirting with Xtianity, given the show's impressive audience, but there were others that might be more generally agreed upon as reprehensible. We call to the stand the episode entitled "Fear and Loathing with Russell Buckins", in which Hanson, on impulse, races a teenager at over 100 mph through city streets. When the boy crashes spectacularly, Hanson shows not even perfunctory interest in his critical hospital condition. Instead he runs off with high-school pal Russell Buckins to try (unsuccessfully) to prevent the marriage of Hanson's former sweetheart. At the end it is left up in the air whether Hanson did or did not have sex with her four hours before her wedding. What isn't left in doubt is that she and Buckins got it on shortly after high school, at which revelation Hanson accuses, "You had her!" -- this single archaic, exquisitely sexist turn of phrase delineating a conventional and pretty stomach-turning sexual and social history. It seems not to have struck a lot of people, including commercial fan magazines that describe him as a kindly big brother, that the basic personality outlined for Hanson has consistently been that of -- no other phrase quite conveys it -- a right bastard. Like most real-life bastards Hanson has his good points, but the fact that Johnny Depp looks like Johnny Depp gives everything Hanson does a whited-sepulchre air of virtue, unless the writers lean kind of hard on it. I'm more than fond of the character. The almost subliminal prick element gives him amazing depth because it goes so unstated. In real life, bastards don't think they are bastards. Only in art do they stand around twirling their mustachios and uttering their "Nya-ha-ha-ha"s aloud. Awareness of this informs a great deal of Jump Street writing/directing. Its busted young dope-dealers tend to roll their eyes and groan, rather than gnash their teeth and breathe threats of fiery vengeance. At worst, they run like hell. (How many busts do the producers of Cops have to attend, I wonder, before they get an arrestee whose child's scream causes him to make a move of protest for the cameras?)

Besides giving him dimension, Hanson's lack of ability to generalize his sympathies is a great device, entree into plot structures that would be perilously schmaltzy with a more tender character.

His distraught lover walks up to his desk at work.

She: You haven't been returning my calls.

He: You noticed.

Make one wrong move with Hanson and you're history. He fights mean, he has zero comprehension of socioeconomic disadvantage, he can't imagine someone hurting unless her personally sees them get hit. Booker nails him: "You're a pretty white boy with the world in his pocket. The system works for you, Tommy." It's subtle and mixed into that weird sweetness and innocence Johnny Depp projects over the part. I like it a lot, but Hanson's ambiguity runs a whole lot deeper than tv drama, or any other American artform, normally contends with. I suspect the tendency will be to accept him as a knight sans peur et sans reproche, nobly battling the forces of evil as embodied in a key of Maui Wowie. Children of the 60s may find this prospect glum. But children of the 80s can no doubt be trusted to feel their way out of the maze of adult deceit. The crucial concept, after all, is probably "battling the forces of evil" -- when your vision of evil changes, the moral precept that you must fight it still remains. The moral indoctrinators of the 50s never did understand that, and fortunately the type is incapable of learning from history, so the 90s may turn out more interesting than we expect.

In terms of undesirable influence I must say kids drag racing like Hanson seems

more likely than the kind of kids who'd watch 21 Jump Street going gunning for snitches before Home Room. Well, for whatever reason, "Nemesis" evidently didn't strike Richard Grieco as unconscionable. The two actors do seem to approach life differently. While Depp -- veteran of 15 rock bands -- refuses to put out a record during his Jump Street notoriety, Grieco has already appeared in an ad for sodapop, and did, after his first JS season, contemplate publishing a book of poems, but wisely decided to think about it a little longer. (Unless they're Keats or Rimbaud, the best friend a young poet has is the one thing Grieco can't get any more: obscurity.)

Whatever the merits of old vs. new episodes, the version of "Nemesis" that made it to the screen was certainly far more suitable for Booker than for Hanson. After all, Hanson's shortcomings are one with his self-righteousness; it's hard to believe he would demean himself by trifling with the affections of a high-school girl. Some things in the script integrate very well, however, with the sketchy Booker mythos: the self-containment, the fear of death, the guilt; the scenes at his mother's house and with the psychologist work so well that writers for the spin-off might be smart to have Grieco act opposite older women more often. Despite its own internal consistency and multi-layered writing, it does contain elements hard to reconcile with the previously established Booker sensitivity. However, other scripts have had equally incompatible visions of Booker, and the episode makes a nice showcase, opening up personality angles to explore in the new program (boo, hiss).

Hey, I may love the new show. It's just that the chemistry between Booker and everybody else was an entity in itself. Jump Street will not be as good without it. If I were the writer who'd created the Booker character and was seeing him snatched from this very effective position, I'd be royally steamed -- unless, of course, I were being royally paid as the spin-off's creator -- and discouraged. After all, Fox has four more nights and seven whole days to fill before it can become a real grownup network. Is there a point to writing well if all your best stuff is going to be sucked away into this olamic maw, leaving you to start over with the shreds and tatters of your once-proud series fluttering desolately in the wind? Well, is there?

Maybe they look at it as a challenge. And then, they all knew this job was dangerous when they took it -- the show has a built-in self-destruct mechanism, for as its stars age its premise will become more and more untenable. A final reason why you don't see much on the young and beautiful: you hardly have time to notice them before they're gone, grown up, evanesced into legend, dust with Antinous and James Dean, whatever their adult selves might be getting up to.

Ephemerality -- faced with them what films we must regret this past three years have not let Johnny Depp appear in... My favorite pipe dream: Depp as Arthur Rimbaud: soon impossible even to imagination as age separates him from the role. Johnny Depp in the rain on a French country road, Johnny Depp looking out over Paris after a night writing visionary poetry, Johnny Depp reeling along the Dickensian gutters of London with Verlaine --

Verlaine, aye there's the rub. U.S. filmmakers would make an unparalleled botch of it. Yes, I do see the difference between what tv is and all it and motion pictures in toto could be. I see it, it's what makes me care when one line, one gesture, lifts up out of the economic gray, like the limb of a beautiful dancer in the fog. When a show tries as hard, in as many ways, as 21 Jump Street, it deserves the best the combined attentions of august bodies of media critics can bring to it. What it gets, instead, is Rabbitears, of cheerful bias. Likely the most weighty television critique will only be done decades hence; and I suppose big bucks are considerable consolation for the lack of immediate critical recognition. Nevertheless, it's important that some kind of writing on undervalued productions be done now, if only to alert those future critics to what was. For as women in particular have good reason to know, looking back over our history, Doris Totten Chase in The Hand That Holds the Camera exaggerated hardly at all in her equivalent of the Sapier-Whorf hypothesis for filmmakers: "That which is not written about does not exist."

Rabbitears

A Fanzine of Television Commentary

Uttered and published by Mog Decarnin, 2020 Portland Ave. S. #3, Minneapolis, MN 55404, 612/625-0027, this 9th day of September, 1989. This is Rabbitears #1.

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Glossary of Fannish Terms

fan	science fiction fan
fannish	pertaining to science fiction fandom
fandom	the vast & loose community of science fiction fans
fanzine	science fiction fan publication virtually always distributed free of charge and not necessarily containing any mention of science fiction
fan magazine	commercial publication featuring photos of media stars
h	the extraneous aspirate changes meaning according to context. E.g., in "bheer" it connotes a certain reverence, in "ghod" irreverence/unbelief.
K/S	fan fiction in which Kirk and Spock are lovers
evial	evil as envisioned in silent-movie melodrama
sercon	serious and constructive, but rhymes with zircon
con	science fiction convention
Corflu	a small con for publishers & appreciators of fanzines, held each spring in a different city; the name is from the abbreviation for correction fluid, which is (good ghod, I never realized how many <u>layers</u> you have to go through before you strike Common Ground!) stuff you brush onto misco stencils to cover up an error.

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