TV WITHOUT TEARS—Outline of a socialist approach to popular television

Daniel Ben-Horin

* Reprinted, with editing, from Socialist Revolution, No. 35 (Sept-Oct), 1977.

High Art vs. Mass Art

The basic outlines of the confrontation between high and mass culture are familiar. But the left’s stance in this arena deserves closer examination. In terms of conscious ideology, the left displays a supportive attitude toward “people’s culture” (toward Leadbelly’s blues, say, or “primitive” art). However, below this tendency an elitist vision holds sway, and popular TV feels the full glare of this vision.

A majority of those on the left, and an overwhelming majority of those who have assumed the roles of theoreticians and strategists, have strong links to that segment of society which can be called the intelligentsia. Unlike others, leftists tend to avoid expressing their individualism through the accumulation of material property. Is it surprising, then, that a tendency appears toward the accumulation of non-material - i.e., intellectual, emotional, or spiritual - property? As leftists become immersed in Buddhism or bioenergetics, they tend to relax their leftism. In contrast, immersion in intellectuality leads not only to reinforcement of political commitment, but to preservation of intellectual property against all threats.

The left has been friendly to new media only to the extent that these media can be converted to intellectual currency. Dylan was swell until he went electric. Mass cinema is suspect unless it can be reinterpreted in such a way that a special angle of appreciation is reserved for those with the proper intellectual lexicon. And TV, particularly popular TV, must shiver in the shadows until Cahiers de TV elucidates the arcane merits of the “Situation Comedy Noire”. For the moment, popular TV receives the ostracism it deserves for having “[done] away completely with the ‘intellectual property’ and liquidate[ing] the ‘heritage’, that is to say, the class-specific handing on of non-material capital”.(1)
Mao has referred to bourgeois roots causing communist artists to fail to understand "the rich lively language of the masses" and therefore to end up "hero[es] with no place to display [their] prowess". (2) Something very much along those lines has occurred between the left and popular TV. (True, TV is an imposed, and not a natural, mass language, but in the United States the situation is: "TV spoken here".) Those on the left holding a bias against the intransigent anti-intellectualism and "massness" of popular TV are all too often unconscious of their stance or of its psychosocial origins. As an example, the author of an article in *Jump Cut*, a socialist cinema review, entitled "Video at the Crossroads", could only discuss the medium insofar as it approached an acceptable high art form - art cinema. Naturally, he found video rather lacking. His choice of video's principal fault was far more revealing of the bias mentioned than of video: "Video has its disadvantages...the biggest drawback of all is that video is easy - easy to use and easy to abuse". (3)

A middle ground exists between class-linked banishment of TV and uncritical idealization of the medium. The left has yet to find that ground.

**Manipulation Theory and Its Offspring**

The left's basic perception of TV has been that it operates in a manipulative manner. In this section, I will introduce manipulation theory and then move to a description of four approaches that stem from this theory. A critical analysis of the theory and its related approaches will be presented later.

**Manipulation Theory.** From liberal TV professionals to Marxist theoreticians, the same basic portrait of TV emerges: the people who control programming manipulate viewers into an acceptance of both the status quo and personal passivity. The manipulators are sometimes seen as operating willfully, sometimes as unconsciously reflecting the class interests of the corporate moguls who interchangeably occupy the directorates of the major media and industries of the United States (and the world).

Herbert Schiller, in *The Mind Managers* (and the earlier *Mass Communications and American Empire*) provides the fullest exposition of manipulation theory. The first paragraph of *The Mind Managers* stands as a basic definition of manipulation:

"American media managers create, process, refine and preside over the circulation of images and information which determine our beliefs and attitudes and, ultimately, our behavior. When they deliberately produce messages that do not correspond to the realities of social existence, the media managers become mind managers. Messages that intentionally create a false sense of reality and produce a consciousness that cannot comprehend or willfully rejects the actual conditions of life, personal or social, are manipulative messages."

Several pages later Schiller makes clear that manipulation does not depend upon conspiracy or even conscious intent but is, rather,

embedded in the unquestioned but fundamental socioeconomic arrangements that first determine, and then are reinforced by, property ownership, division of labor, sex roles, the organization of production, and the distribution of income. These arrangements, established and legitimized over a very long time, have their own dynamics and produce their own \textquoteleft inevitability'.

**Manipulation occurs through the inculcation of five basic myths, Individualism and Personal Choice, Neutrality (of institutions), Unchanging Human Nature, Absence of Social Conflict and Media Pluralism.**

**Manipulation theory** provides the underpinning for a variety of stances toward TV, stances that on the surface appear to share little common ground but do share the assumption that TV is primarily a causal agent - a creator of perceptions, a manipulator.

Within the manipulation theory, there is no distinctly socialist perspective; rather, socialists' contributions have melded with those of radicals and liberals (often under the proud, many-shades-of-gray banner of social science research). Consequently, in the
Content Analysis. “Content analysis” focuses on the social and political aspects of TV programming (as distinct from quality of acting, etc.). Typically, content analysis has concentrated on news programming, since that is the area wherein TV most directly treats social and political themes. In recent years, however, a broader content analysis has emerged; leftist critics have turned their attention to the sexism, racism, and other socializing influences within entertainment programming. A component of this broader analysis has been an increasing willingness to consider popular TV on its viewers’ terms. From the New Yorker to Socialist Revolution, a “new TV journalism” is discussing Mary Hartman and Mary Tyler Moore as they appear to the people who watch them. By contrast, traditional criticism of popular programming (cf. daily newspapers review columns) has featured intellectuals of liberal leanings directly or coyly comparing TV shows to movies or plays they have enjoyed. Invariably, critics from this “film manque” school have found TV shows wanting.

Content analysis has served as a bulwark of manipulation theory by supplying innumerable examples of televised distortion of the “truth”. Whether a critic lambastes a news program for lying about Vietnam or a children’s TV show for overemphasizing violence, there is a common critical premise - simultaneously stemming from and feeding back into manipulation theory - that TV’s prime role is pulling its puppet-like viewers’ consciousness strings.

Documentary Production. Liberals have used their access to broadcast TV to introduce “relevance” to popular programming, to produce an occasional special of arguably progressive content, to shape network news into a liberal mold, and to introduce high-art elements into the TV aesthetic.

Out-of-the-closet socialists, by contrast, have been excluded by the broadcast industry, except when liberals make available an “Open Studio” slot on public television, or hire socialists as consultants on liberal-controlled specials. The only recourse consistently open to socialists concerned about the development of alternative TV content has been independent video.

The major thrust of leftist video work has been toward the production of alternative “specials”, programs in a documentary format, with an explicit ideological content. Distribution of these alternative specials poses severe problems. Most often, the only distribution available is through special showing by the videomaker.

Many leftist videomakers are unconcerned with the mass appeal of their material and produce tapes of interest to specific audiences, such as training tapes and consciousness-raising tapes. Commonly, these tapes are shown as part of an organizing effort in the field addressed by the tape. The documentary production approach is tied to manipulation theory in essentially the same way as the content analysis approach. Once again, TV’s role is isolated as a purveyor of influential messages. By producing “truer” messages, leftists seek to adapt TV’s manipulative mechanics to a higher end.

Positive Formal Analysis (Technological Optimism/McLuhanism). This form of intervention bears an ambiguous relationship to both manipulation theory and the left as a whole. In its purest aspect - as expressed in McLuhan’s concepts of the “global village” and “retribalization” - this approach runs directly counter to historical materialism. But there is a strand of leftist thought that retrieves elements of McLuhanism and uses these elements as a sort of fallback position, an almost ineffable grounds for optimism. This optimistic strand analyzes TV’s form and finds it manipulative and oppressive in the present, but with a profound liberating potential.

Gene Youngblood, in his book Expanded Cinema, expresses both the dismay over present technology and the hope for future technology. First the dismay, which is rooted in manipulation theory:

Commercial entertainment works against art, exploits the alienation and
boredom of the public, by perpetuating a system of conditioned response to formulas. Commercial entertainment not only isn't creative, it actually destroys the audience's ability to appreciate and participate in the creative process.

But the culture that produces this repugnant commercialism has created a Frankenstein:

A culture is dead when its myths have been exposed. Television reveals the observed, the observer, the process of observing. There can be no secrets in the Paleocybernetic Age.... Television extends global man throughout the ecological biosphere twenty-four hours a day. By moving into outer space, television reveals new dimensions of inner space, new aspects of man's perception and the results of that perception.(8)

The interventionist tactics that flow from this analysis essentially involve mastery of the technology. Art and experiment video, to the extent that the artists and videofreex involved conceive of themselves as acting politically, would be the prime example.(7)

**Negative Formal Analysis (Inverse McLuhanism).** This tendency directly extends manipulation theory's emphasis upon the links between TV's form of transmission and viewers' passive mode of reception. The contention is that TV's form is intrinsically reactionary: the tactic suggested is to find some way of circumventing or suppressing TV.

This tactic is most easily accomplished on a private level. Hence the common stance on the left: "I can't stand TV, haven't watched a show since I was eight, wouldn't have the thing in the house, don't you have something better to do than watch that stuff? etc."

This strategy obviously presents some problems. At least one exponent of this analysis does not shrink from these difficulties and forthrightly calls for the abolition of TV:

*No revolution of values is possible through media because commitment to media itself is the overriding counter-revolutionary fact... The first step is to allow the possibility of even imagining being free of television. The operating paradigm now is that TV is here to stay. Like cars. But is that necessarily true...?*

Through a combination of a grassroots personal choice movement, abetted by "an ad campaign for the abandonment of television" and the compiling of a "legal constitutional case against television", the author goes on to envision the beast's elimination.(8)

**Critique of Manipulation Theory and Related Approaches**

The preceding section is not a complete categorization of attitudes and approaches to TV on the left. Clearly, overlap between categories exists. Further, I have passed over the considerable left-liberal impetus toward regulation (increased or reinterpreted) of TV. I have also neglected that portion of leftist TV analysis which confines itself to description while more or less frankly awaiting the development of a political organization or movement that can operate effectively within the TV arena (e.g., a socialist party that can operate a network). The reason for both omissions is that the relevant arguments are extensive and go beyond the domain of TV. Is it realistic to expect a capitalist government to regulate itself meaningfully? Should party building receive primary emphasis at this historical juncture? Both questions require extended discussions which this article cannot hope to encompass. I will limit myself to suggesting that regulation-oriented maneuvers should be seen as tactics, not strategy; and that the development of socialist organizations should be viewed as a concomitant of cultural practice, not as a precondition for that practice.

Criticism of manipulation theory should not obscure the valuable contributions made by the theory and its derivatives, such as: heightened awareness of the manipulative operation of TV; pressure on TV to produce occasional progressive programming; heightened awareness of psychological demographics (through analysis of popular programming) and of the effects of broadcast TV's form; and development of technical expertise in video.

Important though these contributions are, they have not formed a strategic approach. Certainly it is true that the absence of an
organized major socialist movement poses a serious obstacle to the formulation of a coherent strategy in any area - housing as much as TV. But more than an organizational vacuum is at the root of the left’s TV incoherence.

The basic premise of manipulation theory itself undermines strategic understanding of TV. We can understand this premise if we first ask the key questions facing socialists in a society ruled by monopoly capital: Why do people accept capitalism, an economic and social order whose original basis - the limited availability of political freedom and material necessities - no longer exists? Why do workers under capitalism seem inclined to accept their exploitation? In answer, manipulation theory points at the stream of false data and passivity-inducing techniques that flows between transmitters and receivers. Bombarded by evocations of the glory of dry underarms, the receivers presumably are forced to turn to one or another of the deodorants advertised. Bombarded by “tough cop” images, the viewers are forced to discount the First Amendment. But from where does this “force” derive? Manipulation theory does not tell us.

Manipulation theory overconcentrates on transmission at the expense of receiving - on the mind managers at the expense of the “managed” minds. Liberal manipulation theorists think manipulation is the fault of the people who run TV. Socialist theorists blame the people who run the country. But the conclusion is the same: “Kids who have never heard real laughter”(9) suffer from a disease that TV causes. The dialectical relationship between transmitters and receivers is obscured and the relationship of the entire viewing experience to the entire configuration of American life - and the potential for change inherent in that relationship - is lost. Immersion in manipulation theory leads to the conclusion, “So capitalism is a lousy system which obviously looks after its own interests”. And then nothing - distance, defeatism, despair.(10) A starting point becomes a conclusion.

Enzensberger’s 1962 essay called “The Industrialization of the Mind” expresses this central criticism of manipulation theory:

Consciousness, however false,- can be induced and reproduced by industrial means, but it cannot be industrially produced. It is a “social product” made up by people; its origin is the dialogue. No industrial process can replace the persons who generate it....The mind industry is monstrous and difficult to understand because it does not, strictly speaking, produce anything. It is an intermediary, engaged only in
production's secondary and tertiary derivatives, in transmission and infiltration....

The mind industry can take on anything, digest it, reproduce it, and pour it out....It is capable of turning any idea into a slogan and any work of the imagination into a hit. This is its overwhelming power, yet it is also its most vulnerable spot; it thrives on a stuff which it cannot manufacture by itself. It depends on the very substance it must fear most, and must suppress what it feeds on: the creative productivity of people. (11)

Reduced to its essence, manipulation theory is a copy theory of knowledge. TV is certainly riddled with manipulative aspects, but to overemphasize those aspects mistakes the symptom for the cause, and thereby obscures the possibilities for dealing with the situation as a whole. As Richard Lichtman notes,

it is one of the deepest deficiencies of any copy theory of knowledge that it cannot account for what is copied. For it regards consciousness as passive, much as wax is passive in receiving any imprint that is pressed upon it....Knowledge is always an active construction as well as a receptivity to the world. An interpretation must be made; the "given" is always a "taken". (12)

Lichtman goes on to criticize the notion that people work unconsciously and then are induced to become falsely conscious of the nature of their work (and their lives and their society) by superstructural institutions outside of work. Rather, the fabric of work is stitched together with the development of consciousness. Neither Marx’s famous dictum that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”, nor Gramsci’s concept of ideological hegemony are contradicted by the suggestion that under the particular conditions of contemporary society, consciousness production has become an integral part of the base of production. This notion of interpenetration adds a vital element to manipulation theory by providing a way to understand why objective conditions have often not resulted in subjective rejection of exploitation. As Lichtman writes:

As contemporary capitalism advances and the “base” and “superstructure” come more and more to interpenetrate each other, the forms of mystification provided through the superstructure become more vital to the continued reproduction of the economic structure itself....One way to revitalize the classic relationship between base and superstructure is to trace the relationship between the mystification of consciousness as it occurs in the fetishism of production and the manner in which consciousness is malformed in the remaining social institutions. (13)

How, exactly, is consciousness malformed in an institution such as TV? Angrily rejecting the networks’ and Madison Avenue’s self-serving cry of “We’re only giving the people what they want”, manipulation theory produces an equally mechanical slogan: “TV (and/or advertising) creates needs”. But the malformation is far more complex than such a slogan indicates. The act of TV-watching, of avid TV-watching, has a point of origin in the consciousness - in the wants and even the needs - of the viewers. Certainly, another point of origin is in the (perceived and intuited) interests of the ruling class. Understanding of both points of origin is necessary to deal strategically with the domain. Popular TV conducts real needs into artificial channels. I’ll discuss this channeling further below - let us turn now to a critical consideration of the manipulation theory - linked approaches outlined in the previous section.

Content Analysis. The absence of consideration of TV’s form diminishes the value of much content analysis. For example, critiques of network news often lend themselves to the conclusion that “enlightened” writers and anchorpersons would remedy the situation. This conclusion ignores the needs met and effects caused by fragmented, immediacy-ridden TV news - of whatever ideological stripe.

More subtle examples of content analysis often consider popular programming (i.e., implicitly ideological programming) and often consider formal elements. Much of this work provides valuable descriptive and analytic data. But whether the analysis
conveys a sense of personal relationship to TV and the people who watch it or a kind of “critic doing his or her job” detachment, the constant is the omission of any suggestion that the people who watch popular TV might own the capability to affect significantly what they watch. This analytical hopelessness (regarding the possibility of actually working with TV) resembles the passivity that the act of TV-watching supposedly induces.

**Documentary Production.** Again, failure to deal with TV’s formal components is a crucial omission, demonstrated by independent videomakers’ tropism toward public affairs programming. These shows, if they have the great good fortune to achieve any significant exposure, fall into a category whose very name - “specials” - indicates it lies outside the mainstream of TV viewing. Revealed here is a failure to understand the needs TV addresses through its popular (ordinary) programming, a failure to understand TV’s formal relationship to society as a whole.

As liberal broadcast personnel and socialist independents exploit their opportunities to produce “better” - aesthetically richer, ideologically purer - content, they become bogged down in tactical considerations and lose sight of the bigger picture, of strategy. Those working within the bowels of the culture industry are particularly susceptible.

The general problem, of course, is to operate within capitalist society without accepting that society’s standards. A particularly poignant example of this double bind appeared in an interview in *Toward Revolutionary Art* with Lester Cole, the screenwriter and member of the “Hollywood Ten”. Cole refers to a film called *White Dawn* as honest, good, and “revealing of imperialist aggression”. Then he adds, “So if *White Dawn* fails to make a profit, the producers are going to scratch pretty hard to get backing for their next. And this has a corrosive effect; they may find it so difficult to get backing they’ll choose a more ‘acceptable’ subject next time”. It is clearly necessary to find ways of greasing the financial wheels of oppositional cultural work, but it is a mistake to build strategy around the expectation that the system will finance its own exposure. To paraphrase Gil Scott-Heron, “the Revolution will not make a profit” (though it may well be televised).

**Positive Formal Analysis (Technological Optimism/McLuhanism).** The objection to this approach is essentially the same as the objection to McLuhan and other technological exceptionalists. Either one believes that there is a class struggle or one doesn’t. Either technological advance occurs within a dialectic which can and must be historically understood and worked with, or technology completely transcends the society that produces it and moulds that society in its own image. Tom Nairn puts it well:

To anyone who can extricate himself from the McLuhanite trance for a few seconds, it is reasonably clear that the existing global village was created by European imperialism, not by television; that it is not a “village” but a cruel class society tearing humanity in two....That we could live in a “global village”....is another and different point. The potential of the electric media is, in fact, in contradiction with a great deal of the actual social world. And the actual, historical and social grasp of the meaning of such media depends more than anything else upon seeing the contradiction.

McLuhan’s mythical history and sociology consists precisely in evading such contradictions. And, by this evasion, what is lost is the very idea of a historical understanding of social phenomena....This is not merely unscholarly. It is an attack upon....the work of generations to demystify our consciousness and confront our own reality.(14)

In short, artists and other independent videomakers who consider themselves leftists but limit their practice to technological proliferation are limiting either their political practice or their artwork. There is room for technological experimentation (indeed, a crying need for it), but investment in technical advance without a conscious political framework is a sure prescription for co-optation and irrelevance.(15) The practice of “casting your media upon the (capitalist) waters” results only in waterlogged media.
Negative Formal Analysis (Inverse McLuhanism). This approach is so mired down in disgusted examination of TV’s invidious form that it ignores the needs TV meets. As noted above, this approach has contributed to our understanding of TV’s formal effects, but when negative formal analysis extends either to boasts of private ostracism of TV or to calls for public renunciation of the monster, it becomes irrelevant or worse insofar as it alienates TV watchers. A compulsion to preserve intellectual property values is all too apparent here.

Strategy: Foundations

The elements necessary to formulate and implement a socialist TV strategy are already present in this society. They include, first, the widespread public acknowledgment of TV’s power. Any high-art bias notwithstanding, the barriers to serious consideration of TV’s effects and strategic potential are being removed. In a sense, the various critical messages about TV have combined into one: “TV is not a hula hoop: it’s not going away”. The left is going to find it more and more difficult to decline work in the TV arena.

A second element of a strategy involves the character of the present political period. Specific struggles abound, but it seems clear that the left is undergoing a kind of protracted identity crisis in the wake of the ending of the Vietnam war, the overthrow of the Nixon totem, and the dispersal of the new left. Though “obvious” calls to action (End the War!) are lacking, people are adjusting to the reality of a long struggle, and priorities are shifting. Recent organizational activity on the left suggests that socialists are becoming willing to recognize that the “spectacle” of American life extends from the factory floor to the home TV screen, and that meaningful politics must encompass all aspects of society without placing artificial barriers between “productive” workplace experience and the diverse experiences of everyday life.(16)

A third element in the development of a strategy has been noted by Enzensberger:

With the aid of systems theory, a discipline which is part of bourgeois science....it can be demonstrated that a linked series of communications....to the degree that it exceeds a certain critical size, can no longer be centrally controlled....This basic leakiness of stochastic (i.e., random) systems....demands a monitor that is bigger than the system itself.(17)

The ruling class can certainly co-opt the electronic revolution, but the ruling class did not plan that revolution. A great deal of flux is apparent, and the left can either respond creatively to that flux or (as has typically been the case) be swept away by it. Imminent advances in mass-marketed TV technology indicate some of the possibilities.*

A fourth element of the strategy involves recognizing the existence of a constituency as eager to transmit as to receive. “Breaker, breaker”, the signal of CB radio, is neatly symbolic, for CB represents nothing less than a breaking of the transmitter-receiver lock-step that capitalism has imposed upon the use of electronic media. Historically, electronic transmission has been the domain of a privileged few, operating from communications industry bastions removed from the public view. One could write a letter to the editor or make a home movie, but the electronic bananas were out of reach; nor could one make home TV or (popular) home radio. The closest one could come was radio phone-in shows, those eerie testimonies to humans’ need to communicate, regardless of what and to whom.

A million songs down the road, the truckers decided they would rather bypass the middlepeople, and the CB phenomenon geared up. Since then, CB has traveled a long way. Now, people sit at home nights making small talk over their $100-plus CB setups.

* Video discs, analogous in functioning and price to audio discs, are virtually upon us. The immediate results of these trends will not necessarily be heartening, if untold millions convert their “leisure” into gluttonous consumption of Hollywood escape films, rock concerts, and hard-core pornography. But increased passivity isn’t the only option. The independent distribution route which is likely to result from the development of disc technology could truly revolutionize TV-watching (to offer just one optimistic scenario). A good starting point for understanding the possibilities of video proliferation is Anthony Reveaux, “New Technologies for the Demystification of Cinema”, Film Quarterly, 1974.
Ironically, they not only ignore their own TVs, but often foul up their neighbors' reception in the process.) What they say may not be all that compelling to an eavesdropper, but it's their small talk, not Mary Tyler Moore's.

Also, TV's constituency is open to new types of content. True as it is to note the similarities among popular TV shows of the past twenty years, it is a mistake to conclude that nothing in popular TV has changed during that span. A fundamental cynicism has crept into many of the country's favorite shows - from "Kojak" to "Mary Hartman". M. J. Arlen argues persuasively that the common denominator in Norman Lear's string of successful comedies is an amorphous, non-stimulus-related anger. Sanford and Archie are just basically furious; the "provocations" they suffer are merely convenient story pegs and are recognized by viewers as such. (18) From this perspective, these modern cholerics are a far cry from (or a significant development of) Ralph Cramden's (Jackie Gleason's) attempts - usually unsuccessful - to be confident and happy. Analogously, a show like "MASH", with its theme of "making the best of a bad situation", is significantly different from the "it's a great life if you get the breaks" theme of "Sergeant Bilko" or the "we shall overcome" doggedness of the sixties' "Hogan's Heroes".

Finally, the artists and videofreex who have explored TV's technological frontiers represent a resource for the left, to the extent that they are formally, if not consciously, in opposition to capitalist TV.

Strategy: An Approach

The following approach rests on two basic premises. First, TV is central to the reproduction of consciousness in this country; thus the left must develop a strategy for working with TV. (19) Second, socialist media workers must stop asking to be judged exclusively in terms of their media's internal content, but must accept the context of overall political effect. Socialists must begin thinking in terms of cultural strategy rather than in terms of isolated cultural productions. Leftist cultural workers...
typically invest themselves mightily in their individual cultural works - and then leave it up to the "movement" to make whatever use it pleases of these works. The movement being as inchoate as it is, this "use" is usually non-existent or minimal, and the cultural workers bemoan their wasted or unappreciated effort. What leftist cultural workers do not typically do is invest themselves as thoroughly in organizational commitment as they do in their cultural work. Some avowedly leftist cultural workers even persist in accepting the "art for art's sake" capitalist myth, without recognizing that a truly oppositional cultural strategy must encompass both content and form, motive and effect. Thus, a progressive film whose distributors accept the logic of marketplace economics legitimates in its form (of distribution) the very system its content attacks. Understanding the trade-off involved requires coherent political analysis. But such an analysis is rarely possessed by those leftist cultural workers who eschew organizational contamination of their individualist purity - and thereby ensure that their work will never truly transcend and oppose the bourgeois air it breathes.

Other leftist cultural workers retreat into propaganda-producing collectives, emerging occasionally with cultural offering in hand, but declining to function as more than propagandists. Fruchter points out the problem with this approach: "Almost all propaganda work is a way of doing political work without directly facing or confronting a constituency."(20)

Socialist cultural workers must cut through the false dichotomy that defines the options as only individualism ("artistic integrity") or stifling socialist realism. They must find a middle ground that permits varied and daring forms of creative expression within a commitment to understanding the total effects of cultural productions. They must accept the responsibility for these effects, a responsibility that will tend to force cultural workers out of the comfortable individualistic reservation that capitalism has allocated to its creative spirits.

All of this is not to say that socialist cultural workers should bear the burden alone. Socialist organizations are all too vulnerable to the questions R. G. Davis poses: "How come you don't have any cultural theory? How come you have an organization and no cultural line? How come you have a cultural theory which is reactionary? How come you have a cultural theory which is limited to agitation and propaganda?"(21)

A socialist TV strategy might involve the following steps:

**Step 1: Understand the Needs People Bring to the TV-watching Experience.** To understand what people think, feel, and fantasize about, and to analyze the relationship of these thoughts, feelings, and fantasies to TV-present and TV-future, could be an overwhelming task.

But there is no real reason to be overwhelmed. Socialists have hardly been guilty of under-analysis of psychological currents. The task, then, is for socialist groups to begin converting this data (and data provided by one's own everyday life) into a currency acceptable to the First National Bank of Consciousness Reproduction, i.e., popular TV.

For example, a body of socialist analysis concerns the psychosocial evolution of the nuclear family.(22) This analysis argues that at the present time workers - particularly male workers - are in the untenable position of submerging their individuality at the workplace in the mistaken belief/hope that they will thus "earn" the right to assert individuality and authority at home, within the family. What does a man - for example - enmeshed in the contradiction seek when he follows the capitalist way of washing away one's problems in "leisure time"? What types of TV images and themes would be responsive both to his need to feel entertained and to his need to understand and surmount his problems?† Other areas for

† Can these needs coexist? There is a left tendency to define “consciousness-raising” as something which only happens in situations explicitly labeled as “consciousness-raising”, and detached from everyday life. Stanley Aronowitz (in False Promises [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974]) describes this tendency well: "It is as if working class people lived in a different world of economic necessity...Factory workers and Black people obviously are unable to afford the luxury of self-examination and can only be 'reached' with bread and butter appeals, according to this view".
investigation would be class and historical analyses of TV audiences. The aim here is to begin filling in the blank that currently exists on the far side of the manipulation equation (the “manipulated”).

Step 2: Understand the Sources of TV’s Appeal and the Overlap between That Appeal and People’s Needs. Why do people watch TV rather than go to the movies or talk to each other? Why do people watch one show and not another, one private eye and not another? What are the purposes of, and needs served by, serial formats and stereotyped characterizations? Socialist groups could watch and discuss popular TV in terms of the insights gained through Step 1 and in terms of the considerable content and formal analysis that has already been performed on TV. Eventually, the group could begin to distinguish between the potentially progressive elements of current popular TV (specifically, the most popular current TV) and the reactionary elements. “The Waltons”, for example, presents an idealized family life as the “solution” to the problems of Depression-era America (and, by implication, of today’s depressed America). Clearly, this idealization is reactionary. But, on another level, the program reaffirms the possibility of enduring personal bonds; socialist popular TV could affirm that possibility while linking the affirmation with the establishment of a different social order. As Enzensberger writes:

The attractive power of mass consumption is based not on the dictates of false needs, but on the falsification and exploitation of quite real and legitimate ones without which the parasitic process of advertising would be redundant. A socialist movement ought not to denounce these needs, but take them seriously, investigate them, and make them more politically productive. (23)

The task here is to distinguish between the explicit roles portrayed in popular TV characterizations (Kojak as cop; Fonzie as juvenile delinquent) and the “existential” stances of these characters (Kojak as warm cynic; Fonzie as small but tough, bad but good, homely but sexy, totally lacking self-doubt). What needs are met through identification with these stances? What elements of these stances are potentially progressive? (24) Analogously, the “common sense” notion that serials and their stereotypes are purely reactionary may prove specious. (25)

Step 3: Write and Produce Scripts (through which “the social laws under which people are acting spring into light”; (26) and which meet the entertainment criteria that people bring to the act of TV-watching). This step is best introduced through a series of questions: What do people expect when they sit down in front of a TV? What tried-and-true elements of popular TV can be integrated into socialist programming? What elements of the American experience are not being dealt with by current popular TV? How can social laws be illuminated in a format that satisfies people’s TV-expectations?

These four questions are intertwined; to answer even three misses the point, but to answer all four offers a marvelous opportunity. These (too simple) answers are a starting point:

- People expect to be entertained.

- Affirmation of the worth of human relationships is one popular element of current programming that could be integrated into socialist programming.

- Current programming does not deal with the contradictions between the ideal of the nuclear family and the societal pressures upon nuclear families. (A case can be made that numerous shows - “All in the Family” springs to mind - deal in a comic manner with this contradiction, and “Mary Hartman” deals with it in a cynical, hopeless manner, but no serious treatment has appeared. I would argue that this omission exists because the contradiction is too central to capitalism, not because it is impossible - or even difficult - to treat the contradiction in terms that would meet entertainment expectations.)

- A serial “family” show could affirm human relationships while demonstrating that this affirmation occurs despite, rather than because of, the current relationship of families to society.

Consider the following working hypothesis: Many, if not most, of the popular TV elements which viewers experience as
“real”, “exciting”, “dramatic”, and “involving”, are precisely those elements which refer to the circumstances and pressures of everyday life. In addition to these elements, popular TV offers an additional set of elements that have little relation to everyday life and are, in fact, intended to offer an escape. In this latter category would be included the bulk of the comic and adventuristic content elements of popular TV, as well as formal elements (fragmentation, commodification, and passification).

The question facing socialists is: How much of the second, “escapist”, category is necessary for entertaining TV? Or, to put it another way: Can entertaining programs be developed that offer release by unfolding the possibilities for change latent in everyday reality?

I suspect that the last questions can be answered affirmatively. A fascinating article by Theresa Mack in *Televisions* (27) entitled “Real-Live Soap Opera: Kids Produce Themselves”, describes how a group of grade-school girls wrote and produced an engrossing soap opera called “How to Live without a Father”, which dealt with a divorce.

The thrust of Mack’s article accords with my own brief experience in a script-writing group composed mainly of “non-writers”: real-life themes, plots and dialogue are dormant within ourselves. Or, to put it another way, the situations we live out and the comments we make every day are certainly different from the “entertaining” situations and dialogue TV presents to us, but are not intrinsically less interesting. On the contrary! Consider the type of joke a TV character would make about an unsatisfactory boss: “He’s so stingy that he makes his wife sew his wallet shut each morning” (canned laughter). Consider the kind of jokes people actually make about unsatisfactory employers. More savage and bitter than TV jokes? Of course. Less funny? Hardly.

In general, there is an unexplored vein of workplace — including housework — culture. Similarly ripe for depiction is the gulf between people’s conscious ideology (what they think they believe) and the ideological implications of people’s culture (how people actually act). Further, for those of us who have spent a significant amount of time in front of the tube, the “tricks” of TV serial construction are close to second nature. People with professional writing and directing skills can aid with plot ideas and construction techniques, but the raw material is widely present.**

**A suggested theme for a socialist serial: A nuclear family in which the husband is on unemployment and the wife is working. The husband’s (and children’s) basic stance is of “liberated” magnanimity towards the wife’s plight. They are full of willingness to cook, clean, etc. Dramatic tension stems from the fact that “understanding is not enough”: no amount of niceties can outweigh the fact that the woman works in a job she hates and has to bring that alienated experience back to the family. In other words, tension (and humor) derive from the contradiction between expectations about the ameliorative power of good will and the reality of the negative power of the alienating work experience.

Step 4: Integration of Popular TV Work within a Political Movement. The earlier this step occurs the better; I have listed it last only because it depends on the involvement of a large number of people, while the earlier steps could be accomplished by small groups.

The content changes discussed under the first three steps must be seen in relation to TV's current and potential form. What good is socialist programming if no one sees it? Further, if socialist programming is (somehow) offered to a mass audience, but in the same physically and emotionally isolating format utilized by commercial TV, what is gained? Clearly, changes in TV's
content must be accompanied by a change in form, but this latter change can occur only through TV work by socialist political organizations.

It is up to the left - and that can only mean organizations on the left - to accept the challenge of exploring the potential that lies in this direction. Socialist videomakers who combine technological experimentation, creative innovation, and an active effort at demystification (equipment sharing, teaching) can help catalyze a popular renewal of TV.

Some amplification seems useful here. The "conk out" escapist attitude toward TV is certainly widespread, and the fact that TV provides significant entertainment return for minimal energy investment in your own home can hardly be ignored. On the other hand, it is a common observation (backed up by surveys of viewers' evaluation of TV's trustworthiness, etc.) that many people watch TV without loving it. It's around, it's more attractive than whatever's in second place, but it's not ideal, would seem a fair assessment of a common attitude.

There is something inherent in the leisure-time situation under capitalism that is neatly suited to home entertainment. I would also suggest that the left's basic approach to people's use of the leisure time is: don't be mesmerized - organize. In other words, the left ignores the appetites people bring to leisure time and instead offers activities which are highly active, often arduous, emotionally involving - in short, activities that are the opposite of what people typically do with their leisure.

What if the alternative weren't so radically different. What if people had a middle choice between watching "Little House on the Prairie" and going to a meeting about rent control? What if there were a neighbourhood meeting that featured alternative, engrossing, TV in a relaxed atmosphere? What if the meeting had a hands-on-hardware component, and was publicized as an activity for the entire family - thereby dealing with such problems as child care and children's TV fare? In short, what if there were a social occasion - a regular social occasion - that the sponsoring political organization could gradually orient toward political activity from a base of shared perception, shared geography, and shared leisure experience?

I believe the steps I have outlined are possible, but my basic argument is for a process - one that does not exist now - whereby socialist cultural workers would commit themselves to strategic politics, and socialist organizations would make commitments to cultural politics at this period.

TV viewing, as it now occurs, is the ultimate bourgeois entertainment. It is conducive to total separation of work and leisure, productive activity and nonrebellious passivity. To address popular TV seriously is to attack this split, and to perform a crucial task in building a socialist movement.

Developing a cultural strategy involving both the form and content of popular TV is an arduous process. Can the left afford any more delay?

†† The national anxiety over children's TV represents a kind of apotheosis of manipulation theory. Responding to the popular concern about children's TV are establishment leaders and their media who say, in effect: "Yes, you're right, children's TV is bad. In fact, it's the main thing that's bad - with children, with all of us, with America." This diabolism, of course, deflects attention from root causes, from the nature of a society which would permit its children to be huckstered to while the sun shone and their parents make a living (or slept on Saturday morning). See "What TV Does to Kids", the cover story of Newsweek, 21 February 1977, which states, "It would be preposterous, of course, to suggest that television alone is responsible for everything that is wrong with America's young", after six pages of suggesting exactly that.

REFERENCES

5. *The Journal of Communications* 24 (1974) contains a number of analyses of these influences.


7. For those interested in further exploration of this area, I suggest the Winter 1976 issue of *La Mamelle* (video issue: available for $2.00 from P.O. Box 3123, San Francisco, CA 94119). Eleanor Antin’s remarks (pp. 22-23) are of particular interest for their uncharacteristic emphasis on “narrative and more narrative”. Also see: David Antin, “Television: Video’s Frightful Parent, Part I”, *Artforum*, December 1975.


9. Larry Gelbart (writer and co-producer of “MASH”), quoted in “You Should See What You’re Missing”, excerpts from PBS show of same name printed in *In These Times*, 29 November 1976.

10. In *The Mind Managers*, p. 6, Schiller writes, “It should be noted that this familiarity [with the mechanics of mind management] can, under certain auspices, be harmful to your (mental) health”. (Schiller’s parenthesized “mental”.) Imagine the same statement being made about familiarity with the mechanics of the Vietnam war. As Enzensberger (“Constituents of the Theory of the Media”) notes, “Subjectively speaking, behind the tendency to go on the defensive lies a sense of impotence…. The manipulation thesis also serves to exculpate oneself. To cast the enemy in the role of the devil is to conceal the weakness and lack of perspective in one’s own agitation”.

11. This essay is also contained in *The Consciousness Industry*.


13. Ibid., p. 64.


15. Political activists who bank on “media exposure” are just as vulnerable to co-optation as are apolitical McLuhanoids. In an excellent piece in *Liberation*, May 1971, called “Movement Propaganda and the Culture of the Spectacle”, Norman Fruchter argues that the new left’s strategy of “using” the media meant that “a new set of potentially troublesome opponents had consented to appear as performers”. Also see: Todd Gitlin, “Spotlights and Shadows: Television and the Culture of Politics”, *College English*, April 1977.


17. Enzensberger, “Theory of the Media”.


A wealth of research literature testifies to the dominance of TV as a cultural form. The Committee on Children’s Television, 1511 Masonic Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94117, has a library containing much of this literature, and also makes a good selection of articles on the subject available by mail at nominal cost.

20. Fruchter, “Movement Propaganda”.


23. Enzensberger, “Theory of the Media”.


25. The dismissal of serials is well-challenged by Fred E. H. Schroeder (“Video Aesthetics and Serial Art”) and T. W. Adorno (“Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture”), both of whose essays may be found in Newcomb, ed., *Television: The Critical View*.
